

CHAPTER XX

Ourselves Alone (but making connections): The social media strategies of Sinn Fein

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INTRODUCTION

Cyber enthusiasts such as O'Reilly (2005) have suggested that the 'architecture of participation' synonymous with social networking sites has the potential not only to reshape how citizens and political institutions interact with each other but also to lower the costs associated with collective action. However, empirical evidence from parties in the United Kingdom indicates that they may be wary of encouraging 'too much interactivity' via these online networks and are more likely to use social media sites for marketing purposes (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009). This chapter will add to the debate over the transformative potential of Web 2.0 by examining the social media strategies of Sinn Fein.ⁱ Formerly best known as the "political front" of the Provisional Irish Republican Army during the Northern Irish conflict (Richards, 2001:73), the party has achieved unprecedented electoral success north and south of the Irish border since the Belfast Agreement was signed in May 1998. The adoption of a political agenda that was similar to that of the Social and Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) was crucial in differentiating the party from the Provisional IRA and broadening its electoral

base (Bruce, 2001). Previous research indicates that Sinn Fein has used its online presence to articulate this position but provided limited opportunities for direct interaction with supporters on its website (Reilly, 2006, 2011). This study will consider the extent to which social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter have enabled the party to engage not only with their own supporters but also members of the unionist/loyalist community. The chapter will focus on what factors have influenced these social media strategies, the advice given to members who maintain an online presence, and how the party uses data gathered from these sites. It does so by reviewing the relevant literature on political parties and new media, providing an overview of the cyber campaigns of Northern Irish political parties and presenting the results from a semi-structured interview with a representative of the Sinn Fein communication team. Results indicate that Sinn Fein's social media strategies are developed by a small team that have responsibility for collecting data from these sites. Comments left on the Sinn Fein Facebook and Twitter pages demonstrate the limitations of these strategies as these Web users continue to hold zero-sum perceptions of Northern Irish politics.

Political parties and new media: The equalization vs. normalisation debate

The cyberoptimist perspective, first articulated by scholars such as Rheingold (1994) in the mid-nineties, suggested that the internet had the potential to 'level the playing field' between major and minor political parties, thus undermining unequal power

relations within societies. This 'multiplier effect' for marginal political actors and the use of electronic voting systems to enable 'Athenian-style' direct democracy were characterised as a panacea for low voter turnout in countries such as the United States (Budge, 1996; Corrado and Firestone, 1996). The optimists argued that online communicative spaces had the potential to facilitate the 'rational critical citizen discourse' associated with the Habermasian public sphere, with some studies suggesting an overall positive relationship between the use of the internet for information retrieval and political engagement (Dahlberg, 2001; Johnson and Kaye, 2003; Shah et al, 2001). There was also some evidence to support an association between website presence and higher vote share and a link between consumption of online political news and the likelihood of visiting candidate and party websites (Gibson and McAllister, 2006; Sudulich and Wall, 2010). However, a more sceptical interpretation of digital politics emerged in the form of the normalization thesis. While cyberpessimists argued that online interactions were likely to promote homophily that would stifle political debate and exacerbate divisions between social groups (Hill and Hughes, 1997; Sunstein; 2007), the 'normalizers' suggested that 'politics as usual' would be perpetuated by new media technologies (Margolis and Resnick, 2000). The larger and better-resourced parties were still likely to benefit the most from new media technologies due to their more professional websites and the higher levels of public interest in their campaigns compared to those of minor parties. Much of the research into the functionality of party websites in countries such as Australia, Germany, and the United Kingdom has offered support for this thesis (Gibson et al, 2008; Schweitzer, 2008). Furthermore, this strand of research suggested that most of

these parties used the internet to create 'brochureware' that provided policy information but provided little in the way of opportunities for citizens to become directly involved in the formation of these positions (Gibson, 2012; Jackson and Lilleker, 2009). The perceived loss of control and lack of resources were identified as two of the reasons why parties might be reluctant to provide more interactive features on their websites (Stromer-Galley, 2000).

The advent of the Web 2.0 era, the term used by theorists such as O'Reilly (2005) to describe the section of the World Wide Web that relies upon user-generated content, saw a renewed interest in the potential use of new media technologies to reconnect citizens to political institutions. Cyber enthusiasts argued that social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter challenged the agenda-setting function of the mass media by affording people the opportunity to access a 'networked public sphere' in which they could discuss issues of mutual interest (Benkler, 2007). As with Web 1.0, a pessimistic assessment of these online interactions has emerged that suggests that these 'new voices' are unlikely to be heard and political activism remains a minority interest amongst users of these sites (Sunstein, 2007; Hindman, 2009). Cross-national differences in terms of digital politics have also been linked to the resources available to individual parties and the institutional environment in which they operate (Kalnes, 2009; Lilleker et al, 2011). Hence, the e-campaign of US Presidential candidate Barack Obama during the 2008 US Presidential election embraced the 'always on' nature of social media to raise funds and enable both top-down and horizontal communication

with its supporters (Gibson, 2012). Bespoke sites such as MyBarackObama.com and social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter were used to disseminate information to supporters and also to enable them to initiate these activities themselves. There was also an unprecedented use of data gathered from visitors to these sites to tailor the campaign messages to voters, raising concerns about how this might violate the privacy of voters and perhaps even contribute towards a narrowing of political debate that excludes the interests of non-receptive audience members (Kreiss and Howard, 2010). This was in sharp contrast to the cautious experimentation with social media by UK political parties, who appear reluctant to allow two-way communication on sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Jackson and Lilleker (2009) found that these parties were using social media sites for marketing and promotional purposes rather than encouraging citizens to participate in their structures, a position identified as Web 1.5 rather than Web 2.0.

An overarching theme in the literature reviewed above has been that political parties will only incorporate Web 2.0 tools into their communication strategies if they perceive they will benefit from these changes (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009). This interplay between the demand and supply sides of digital politics highlights the deficiencies of the equalization/normalization dichotomy employed by researchers. The critique of this 'revolution frame' suggests that offline trends in terms of how parties focus their resources on so-called 'centre-ground' voters are reproduced online and questions whether it is appropriate to use features derived from theories of

deliberative democracy to evaluate the nature of online interactions (Davis, 2010; Freelon, 2010). The expectations surrounding the pace and scale of change in the Web 2.0 era may also be unrealistic. Wright (2012) argues that it may be too early to fully evaluate whether new media technologies have revolutionised politics and suggests that 'smaller, seemingly insignificant changes' in digital politics should not be overlooked (p.252). Building upon the Web 1.5 model, Chadwick (2007) asserts that political parties have adopted some of the digital network repertoires of collective action that originated from social movements in the 2000s, such as the creation of convergent forms of online citizen action and the building of 'sedimentary networks' of support (p.284). Much of the empirical evidence for this 'organisational hybridity' has been found in the United States, as demonstrated by the Obama campaign's use of community projects such as Organizing for America. Although UK parties have already established a significant presence on social media sites such as Facebook, the winding down of Conservative leader David Cameron's blog Webcameron in 2009 would appear to cast doubt upon the reproduction of Obama-style e-campaigning being implemented on the other side of the Atlantic (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009). This chapter presents an analysis of the factors that influence the social media strategies of Sinn Fein in order to provide new empirical evidence about the digital network repertoires of the only political party to operate in both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

The evolution of the Sinn Fein media strategy: 1969 - present

Sinn Fein emerged from the Northern Irish conflict (often referred to as the 'Troubles') as a party in transition from its previous role as a "political front" under the 'control' of the terrorist group the Provisional IRA into the largest Irish nationalist party in the region (Richards, 2001:73). The party was founded in January 1970 to act as the 'political voice' of the republican movement, which was committed to a campaign of 'armed struggle' to remove the British presence from Ireland (Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 2004). Sinn Fein Director of Publicity Danny Morrison coined the phrase 'the ballot box and the armalite' to describe this dual strategy of the republican movement which used both politics and physical force to achieve its long-held objective of a 32 county Irish Republic (McAllister, 2004). During the Troubles the party was subjected to extensive censorship on both sides of the border courtesy of legislation such as the UK Broadcasting Ban (1988), which prevented the news media from broadcasting the voices of Sinn Fein representatives including West Belfast MP Gerry Adams on television, and saw documentaries such as the BBC's 'Edge of the Union,' that featured future Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness heavily censored (for more, see Rolston and Miller, 1996). Independent Television was also under increasing pressure not to provide a platform for Sinn Fein and devoted only four minutes of its entire schedule in 1988 to interviews with party members (Moloney, 1991: 28). These restrictions were justified by then UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on the basis that the media should deny terrorists the 'oxygen of publicity' (Hoffman, 1998: 143). By way of response, Sinn Fein used its newspaper An Phoblacht/Republican News to publicise its own narrative justifying republican violence throughout the 1980s (Curtis, 1988). While the UK Broadcasting Ban would remain in place until just after the

Provisional IRA ceasefire in September 1994, the news media played an important role in the clarification of the Downing Street Declaration (1993) and the subsequent negotiations that led to the signing of the Belfast Agreement. Both the UK and Irish governments issued a series of press releases in relation to the Declaration that set out the terms by which political actors such as Sinn Fein could participate in the talks with the mainstream unionist and nationalist parties. Sinn Fein used its press releases to call for assurances that the announcement of the Provisional IRA ceasefire would guarantee their entry into the talks (Sparre, 2001).

This 'normalisation of relations' between Sinn Fein and the two governments in the mid-nineties saw the party receive daily news coverage as negotiations continued between the parties (Cooke, 2003: 83). Newspapers such as the Belfast Telegraph and the Irish News reflected popular support for the Agreement through their adoption of a 'peace frame' that bonded 'pro-Agreement' political representatives from both communities, differentiating Sinn Fein and the Progressive Unionist Party from the violence associated with dissident republican and loyalist terrorist organisations (Wolfsfeld, 2001). The lifting of restrictions upon media coverage due to the peace process also paved the way for Sinn Fein to frame itself as a culturally democratic party that was 'committed to democracy come what may' (Richards, 2001:83). The constructive ambiguity that underpinned the Agreement allowed party leader Gerry Adams to create a 'resistance discourse' heralding the peace process as a victory for the republican movement insofar as it had weakened the Union and fostered greater

cross-border cooperation (Filardo-Llamas, 2010; Hayward, 2010). However, another interpretation of the significant increase in the Sinn Fein vote share in Westminster Elections, rising from 13% in 1983 to 24% in 2005, was that the party has broadened its appeal through the adoption of a rights-based political agenda that was very similar to that of the largest nationalist party in the region, the SDLP (McGovern, 2004). Sinn Fein has also constantly stressed its central role in the peace process and promoted the republican movement as a key agent of change in the region (Filardo-Llamas, 2010).

Bruce (2001) asserts that it is the 'more aggressive' approach adopted by Sinn Fein which sets it apart from the SDLP (p.40). It remains the only party in favour of the reunification of Ireland to field candidates north and south of the border, as demonstrated by the election of Gerry Adams to the Dail in February 2011 and the ultimately unsuccessful Presidential campaign by Martin McGuinness a few months later.ⁱⁱ The party has also continued to poll better than the SDLP in local, national and European elections, winning 25.5% of the vote (five seats) in the 2010 Westminster Election compared to the SDLP's 16.5% (three seats) (McGrattan, 2011). The party also maintained its position as the leading Irish nationalist party in the Northern Ireland Assembly, with 29 Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and three ministerial portfolios, including the post of Deputy First Minister, compared to the SDLP's one ministerial post and 14 MLAs (ARK, 2012). One interpretation of this electoral success may be that Sinn Fein is winning support from moderate nationalist voters due to its rights-based agenda and its perceived effectiveness in government (Tonge, 2005). The

party may also be reaping the dividends from their highly disciplined and effective campaigning style, which has involved careful vote management to maximise the number of seats returned in recent Assembly Elections (Matthews, 2012). The development of a coherent communication strategy has also been critical to this electoral success. Spencer (2006) found that Sinn Fein adopted a very rigid and inflexible communication strategy that was designed to stifle internal dissent. The party was aware of the importance of responding immediately to criticism from political opponents and would issue as many as “three or four” press briefings each day to highlight the party’s rights-based agenda and its central role in the peace process (p.378). This study will assess the extent to which the party uses its social media presence to both respond to its opponents and articulate its political agenda.

The Internet and Northern Irish Politics

Recent statistics show that there is a relatively high internet penetration rate on both sides of the border, with 68% of the population in Northern Ireland having access to the internet compared to 65.8% in the Republic of Ireland (OfCom, 2009). However, people on both sides of the border appear cautious in their use of new media technologies with only a small minority reporting that they search for political information online (Sudulich, 2011; OfCom, 2010a; 2010b).ⁱⁱⁱ Media reports suggesting that young people who live near ‘peace walls,’ the barriers that divide Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods in inner-city areas in Belfast, have used social media sites

such as Bebo and Twitter to organise street riots may have presumably contributed towards the cultivation of these attitudes (Internet used to plan city riot, 2008; Ardoyne violence videos posted on Youtube, 2009). Although it was acknowledged that only a small minority of young people were engaging in these street riots, community workers appeared sceptical about the role of these sites in promoting positive intergroup contact in contested interface areas in north Belfast (Reilly, 2011a; 2012). Their preference for face-to-face communication would appear congruent with the website strategies of political parties in Northern Ireland. Previous research indicates that these parties prefer to recruit new members through their local branches rather than provide an online application form (Reilly, 2011b). Party websites tended to be used for top-down rather than two-way communication with minimal evidence to suggest that the internet was having an 'equalising effect' for minor parties. Sinn Fein appeared to have devoted more resources to its website development than the other parties, providing opportunities for visitors to donate resources, contact elected representatives, and watch videos of speeches made by Gerry Adams (Reilly, 2006; 2011).

The 2010 Westminster Election demonstrated how Sinn Fein has used the three main social media sites, Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube, to establish 'sedimentary' networks (Chadwick, 2007). The three-week campaign saw only a moderate increase in the number of supporters who subscribed to party content on these sites. The number of 'likes' for the Sinn Fein Ireland Facebook page increased from 2277 to 2322 during

this period and there was a slight increase in the number of viewers subscribing to the Youtube channel (from 826 to 846). Yet, this was still more than the combined total number of 'likes' for the Facebook pages of other parties (1575), and the Democratic Unionist Party was the only other party to have over 100 subscribers to its Youtube channel.^{iv} The party also had significantly more followers on Twitter than its rivals during this campaign (see Figure 1). While it is reasonable to assume that a large proportion of its 1624 followers on the 6th May were members of the party, this was still substantially higher than the rival SDLP (564) and the other parties that maintained an official Twitter feed during the election campaign.

Figure 1 Number of followers on Twitter for Northern Irish parties, April 2010

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Nevertheless, there have been some signs that social media sites are becoming an increasingly important platform for Northern Irish political institutions. Blogging sites such as Slugger O'Toole (<http://sluggerotoole.com>) have provided spaces in which key issues relating to conflict transformation such as the devolution of policing and justice powers have been discussed.^v The Northern Ireland Assembly was also the first legislature in the United Kingdom to hold a 'tweetup' in March 2011, inviting 80 users of the site including MLAs from all of the main parties to participate in this networking

event.^{vi} A recent report into Twitter usage in the Northern Ireland Assembly found that 67 MLAs (out of 108 in total) used Twitter on a regular basis. Although the Sinn Fein party feed had the highest number of followers (11321) and the representative for Fermanagh/South Tyrone Phil Flanagan was the most prolific 'tweep', only 13 of the party's 29 MLAs were on Twitter. The SDLP had the highest proportion of its MLAs active on Twitter (Stratagem, 2012).

Research Questions

Specifically, there were three research questions that emerged in relation to Sinn Fein's use of social media:

- 1) What factors have influenced the social media strategies adopted by Sinn Fein?
- 2) What guidelines, if any, are given to party members in relation to their use of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter?
- 3) What feedback has the party received from voters via these sites?

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study in order to allow for openness to unexpected findings. A semi-structured interview with a representative of the Sinn Fein communication team was arranged in September 2011 to investigate the above research questions.^{vii} This approach was congruent with a previous study of Sinn Fein's communication strategy that used this method (Spencer, 2006). It was agreed that the

representative would not be named in the study due to the potentially sensitive nature of this research, which would address issues relating to data captured from social media sites.

The interview schedule contained a number of questions relating to how the party developed its social media strategies and how it used data gathered from its Facebook, Twitter and Youtube pages. A qualitative thematic approach, based on the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), was used to analyse the interview data after transcription. Quotations are used to illustrate major themes that emerged from the interview.

Results and Discussion

Social media sites had enabled a series of changes to be made to Sinn Féin 'digital network repertoire.' Although user-generated content was not used to inform policy development, these data were fed back to politicians, particularly in relation to their media performances. The party also had a very clear policy on responding directly to its opponents on Twitter. The official feed would only be used to respond to users who had sent a tweet to the party:

I'd be inclined to say as little as possible, but that if you see a reference to a party member or a party position that you felt needed to be responded to or answered, then,

yeah, I would just try to get that answer out right away not only to the individual you are addressing but all their followers as well.

The social media strategies adopted by the party appeared to have emerged from a process of 'in-house' experimentation as it did not have the resources to pay an outside agency to assist with the design and maintenance of their various online portals. Therefore, it was left to the small group of volunteers who had been responsible for the development of the website to provide informal advice to the communication team about which social media sites might be of most use to the party. The communications team, which was said to have consisted of no more than a 'handful' of party activists during the period of data collection, did not use market research to inform their social media strategies. The interviewee claimed that the party had 'tried everything from Facebook, to Twitter, and Bebo' in order to find the sites that were most likely to engage voters both north and south of the border. This 'organic' process demonstrated the willingness of the party to engage with audiences on multiple social media sites, some of which had grown in popularity over the past five years while others had faded into relative obscurity. As the communication officer stated:

It almost overnight went from MySpace and Bebo to Facebook [...] to the point where we get no interest in Bebo or MySpace anymore

Facebook and Twitter were identified as the two sites that had allowed the party to 'engage most closely' with voters. This was based on the high volume of traffic through and the estimated number of followers (6-7,000) of the Sinn Fein Ireland Facebook and

Twitter pages. The former was viewed as being more important in the Republic of Ireland while the latter was seen as more influential during elections in Northern Ireland. The interviewee stated that the use of social media for political campaigning in Ireland was still 'in its infancy' but acknowledged that there were insufficient resources available to the communication team in order to enable them to 'trawl through websites' looking for ways to improve their social media strategies. Hence, the 'trial and error' associated with the party's use of social media sites would appear unavoidable. This was illustrated by the party's decision to use paid for advertising on Facebook during the Martin McGuinness Irish Presidential campaign in 2011. This strategy had proven particularly effective during the Irish General Election a few months earlier and the early signs were promising in relation to the number of people who had seen the McGuinness advertisement:

I think our ad went to a quarter of a million individuals, computer users, or Facebook users so that's an awful lot of exposure, but 80,000 of those users saw that one of their, at least one of their friends liked Sinn Fein or the Martin McGuinness ad and that is such an interesting dynamic that goes on there

It was hoped that a 'ripple effect' might be created whereby supporters would read party messages on social media sites and then send them on to other people. Future plans included the use of live video streaming to broadcast speeches made during the party conference (ard fheis) and further customisation of the Facebook page to move away from its 'generic look'. However, the interviewee acknowledged that the bulk of

political campaigning in both jurisdictions was still done 'on the ground'. The suggestion that elections could be won solely online was firmly rejected on the basis that Web users are not representative of the whole electorate, which is consistent with previous research into the website strategies of Northern Irish parties (Reilly, 2011).

Social media is optional rather than mandatory for party representatives

The communication officer confirmed that the party did not provide any training for members who wished to develop their own social media presence. Indeed, local representatives were able to exercise their own discretion in relation to which social media sites, if any, were used for their campaigns. Sinn Féin MLAs who did express an interest in using these tools could be provided with some 'generic party content' if requested, however this would often need to be individually customised:

A lot of them would take a steer from what we are providing to them [...] but they have to turn it into what's relevant to their own area

A 'very obvious age gap in the usage' of social media was said to be evident, with younger members often demonstrating higher levels of digital literacy compared to their older colleagues. Activists, such as Eoin Ó Broin, maintained blogs and used social media sites including Twitter to mobilise support for the party.^{viii} In contrast, many of the older politicians would employ staff to run their websites and provide updates on

sites such as Facebook and Twitter. For example, Martin McGuinness was to be accompanied by an aide, who was responsible for updating his official Twitter feed, during his Presidential campaign. It was clear that there was no expectation from the centre that all the party representatives would establish a digital footprint. In this way, the study helped explain why only half of Sinn Fein MLAs were using Twitter on a regular basis (Stratagem, 2012).

There were also no party guidelines in relation to the content posted by party members on social media sites. The potential negative consequences of this lack of regulation had been illustrated a week prior to the interview, with the Sinn Fein Minister for Culture, Arts of Leisure Caral Ni Chuilin forced to apologise for her use of expletives in a tweet describing former Irish Justice Minister Michael McDowell.^{ix} However, an emerging set of norms was apparent on Twitter, particularly amongst those older politicians and party officials who had experienced the ‘Troubles.’

But there would be a certain, I suppose a certain degree of security consciousness amongst us, amongst a certain generation I suppose, in terms of the data they put out there and make available.

One interpretation of this reluctance to post personal information online would be that it reflects the low levels of trust towards the internet reported by citizens on both sides of the border (OfCom 2010a). However, it might also be indicative of the persistent threat of dissident terrorist violence towards elected representatives in

Northern Ireland, and, in particular, those involved in efforts to address the causes of intercommunal violence in contested areas such as Belfast (Reilly, 2011a). Further research is needed in order to investigate these issues.

Social media sites do not appear to have broadened the electoral base of the party

The limited resources of the Sinn Fein communication team meant that there was no systematic process for gathering data from those who used their social media sites. The interviewee believed that a more scientific analysis of who visited these sites was necessary in order to develop future social media strategies. Nevertheless, 'in-house' research indicated that the overwhelming majority ('nearly 100 percent') of comments posted on the Sinn Fein Ireland Facebook page were supportive of the party, although it was acknowledged that this was probably because users have to 'like' the page in order to leave a comment. Those that did engage with these sites were considered to be 'political people' rather than those members of the public who had decided not to vote in recent elections. However, there was still a small minority of people who would post critical remarks on the page. A similar trend was reported in relation to the party channels on Twitter and Youtube. Sinn Fein tried to be 'as open as possible' on these sites by encouraging people to leave both positive and negative comments in relation to party policies in both jurisdictions. However, the party was forced to review all comments left on its Youtube channel due to the trolling of a 'sectarian element:'

We made a united decision and that was that everything would have to be approved before leaving it in the open platform. Now that doesn't mean to say if you trawled

through all 500 videos on the website that you wouldn't see very nasty or wrong comments on it

The communication worker believed that there was little evidence to suggest members of the unionist/loyalist community were using these sites to engage with the policies of the party. Political debate on these sites was not broadening out from discussion of the causes of the conflict to the 'bread and butter' issues discussed in the Stormont Assembly. The sectarian nature of many of these comments was perhaps to be expected given that Northern Ireland was still in a relatively early stage of conflict transformation, with some people yet to fully to engage with the powersharing institutions. There was also a perception that the anonymity offered by social media sites may have encouraged this activity:

That can be the problem with the likes of, you know, the anonymity that goes along with the internet, you can say and do things that you know, that they mightn't say or do if you were in a room with them, like hurtful things, abusive things or sectarian things

In this way, social media appeared to be reinforcing traditional patterns of engagement between the party, its supporters, and its opponents. Yet, the interviewee believed that the normalisation of politics in Northern Ireland would lead to social media sites becoming spaces in which 'policy conversations' between the party and members of the unionist/loyalist community would occur. This would only be achievable through sustained face-to-face communication between representatives of

both main communities. This was congruent with the findings of previous studies of the role of new media technologies in fostering positive intergroup contact in Northern Ireland (Reilly, 2012).

Conclusion

This study suggests that the social media strategies of the Sinn Fein have emerged from a process of 'in-house' experimentation. Those responsible for the development of these strategies are aware of the potential limitations of using the revolution/normalisation dichotomy to characterise digital politics. The interviewee had found no evidence to suggest that these sites were broadening the electoral base of the party. Those users who left comments on the Sinn Fein Facebook page tended to be supporters, with only a small but vocal minority using sectarian language to attack the party. There was also a lack guidance provided to party members in terms of how they should respond to criticism on these sites. By the very nature of their occupation communication officers might be expected to deny the existence of strict controls upon the use of social media by party members. Nonetheless, the evidence presented here suggests that the take-up of social media by party members is shaped by their willingness to experiment with technology. Consequently, older party activists had less of an incentive to engage with Twitter, as elections are still primarily won 'on the ground'. The younger party members were the most likely to use these tools based on their familiarity with sites such as Facebook. At the centre, limitations in terms of resources appear to be the biggest obstacle to the development of more sophisticated

social media strategies, such as the 'Obama-style' collection of data from users. The lack of resources was clearly a factor in the relative lack of control exerted by the central communication team upon the use of social media by elected representatives. There was no evidence of the widespread adoption of the campaigning techniques used by social movements, as hypothesised by Chadwick (2007). While the ways in which the party uses these sites to interact with members of the unionist/loyalist community may turn out to be more significant in the future, the reported sectarian interactions between Sinn Fein and its opponents in online spaces seem likely to persist until such time as normalised politics emerges in Northern Ireland.

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ⁱ Sinn Fein is an Irish language phrase meaning 'Ourselves Alone.'

ⁱⁱ The Dail is the lower house of the Irish Parliament. Martin McGuinness received 13.17% of the votes in the Irish Presidential election in October 2011. For more, see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-15526425> (viewed 10 September 2012).

ⁱⁱⁱ Results from the recent Irish National Election Study show that 69% of Irish citizens had not used the internet for political purposes and 43% felt that the internet was the least trusted medium. Similar trends emerge from recent OfCom reports that found that the use of the new media technologies for political information was very low and that 56 percent of Northern Irish parents of children aged 5-15 years old felt that the benefits of the internet did not outweigh the risks.

^{iv} The DUP had 111 subscribers to its Youtube channel on May 6 2010. It should be noted that this content could be accessed without a subscription. The number of views was not considered an accurate reflection of viewer engagement with this content given that it could be manipulated through repeat viewing. These figures are only illustrative of whether there were any significant changes in the number of people who accessed the content regularly.

^v Political analyst Mick Fealty formed slugger O'Toole in 2002. For more, see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/pda/2009/nov/24/c4-invests-in-political-blogger-slugger-otoole> (accessed 10 September 2012)

^{vi} This tweetup saw participants meet at the Stormont Parliament for an informal networking event, which was live-tweeted under the #niatweetup hashtag. For more, see Tweetup at NI Assembly, <http://archive.niassembly.gov.uk/roundup.htm> (accessed 10 September 2012)

^{vii} Ethics approval was obtained prior to contact being initiated with Sinn Fein via email.

^{viii} Eoin O’Broin is currently an activist and advisor to Pearse Doherty TD, Sinn Fein Finance spokesperson in the Republic of Ireland. For more, see his blog:
<http://eoinobroin.wordpress.com>

^{ix} The Minister apologised for using bad language in a tweet that addressed his appearance on an RTE programme in which he criticised Martin McGuinness for his previous involvement in the Provisional IRA. For more see Caral Ni Chuilin to ‘take care on twitter,’ Southampton News 21 September 2011, <http://www.southamptonwired.co.uk/news.php/187815-Caral-Ni-Chuilin-to-take-care-on-twitter> (viewed 10 October 2012).