

THE ANTI-SOCIAL NETWORK

THE NEW FRONT IN CHALLENGING SECTARIANISM

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The flag protests exposed a lot about Northern Ireland: the failure to politicise Loyalism, the staggering amount of disaffected unionists who feel left behind by their elected representatives and, most significantly, the terrifying presence of a small but motivated group of fundamentalists and zealots with the ability to bring areas of the country to a standstill. An interesting quirk of the protests, however, was the notable use, and misuse, of social media as a platform for organising, promoting and notifying the times and locations of events, protests and orchestrated violence; both for those who wished to avoid them and those who wished to take part.

The satirical website ‘Loyalists Against Democracy’ (or LAD) was established in the wake of the flag protests as self appointed arbitrator of the wealth of information, misinformation, viewpoints and counter-viewpoints from politicians, commentators, neo-liberals, pseudo-conservatives, religio-nationalist fundamentalists, armchair activists and keyboard warriors who took to social media to vent and rant; all apparently with very little thought or understanding of webspace as a public space. LAD scour social

media (primarily Facebook) for nakedly sectarian content and repost it on their own page (they have a Facebook, Twitter and a Blogger account) in order to shine a light on the sort of unthinking and illogical bigotry which is now coming to define a new strain of political ‘thought’ in Northern Ireland.

Their primary target to date has been the Facebook page of the Protestant Coalition, the ‘political party’ established in the wake of the flag protests by

an ex-member of the British National Party from Glasgow. This page was used during the worst moments of last December and January to organise and orchestrate the ‘peaceful protests’ which brought parts of Northern Ireland to a virtual standstill for almost two months. As well as this, they present an extremely worrying selective take on events; inflating figures, omitting details and sometimes being caught in outright lies.

For me, one of LAD’s defining moments was the discovery of what became known as ‘Pissbaby.’ A loyalist Facebook page reported that protesters had been pelted with urine filled water balloons from the nationalist Short Strand, posting a picture of a young child swaddled in the Union flag and obviously drenched. LAD did a bit of research and discovered that very same picture on the BBC news website listed as a picture taken at the Olympic Torch Relay. The shock and outrage at this obvious and deliberate piece of misinformation was replaced with hilarity as LAD turned

‘Pissbaby’ into a brand, creating a cartoon character which adorns t-shirts and mugs which can be purchased through the ‘LAD shap’ as well as forming the centrepiece for their logo (Parody of Esteem). This satire of an extremely worrying piece of misinformation ensures that ‘Pissbaby’ is now a big part of the social media zeitgeist (locally at least), putting this squalid little corner of the internet firmly in it’s place.

An interesting episode occurred in September of this year when the LAD Facebook page was repeatedly removed from the Facebook servers for breaching the websites community standards on ‘hate speech.’ It transpired that the ‘hate speech’ in question was reposted screenshots of comments made on the personal pages of members of the Protestant Coalition. It became increasingly clear as the page was removed, restarted and removed a total of eight times that there was a campaign of mass reporting of the page on behalf of the individuals involved.

While there was no clear link to the Protestant Coalition, there were several gloating posts put on their timeline clearly referencing LAD and their removal from the social media website. This from a political party who claims to uphold free speech and civil rights and who, when their own page was removed earlier in the year, sent a delegation down to Facebook HQ in Dublin to complain about their oppression at the hands of the ‘Republican controlled media.’

Despite this quite astonishing set of events, Loyalists Against Democracy prevails and still fights the good fight across the social media platforms. They continue to challenge the propaganda of the Protestant Coalition, but have also recently been outspoken against Health Minister Edwin Poots and the commemoration of Shankill bomber Thomas Begley; while also continuing to repost sectarian bigotry from around the internet in all its forms.

Long may LAD continue, ‘no surrender’ to sectarianism.