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## **Reframing Online: Ulster Loyalists Imagine an American Audience**

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*This article examines one initiative aimed at taking advantage of new technologies to build new transnational connections between a political movement in the 'homeland' and a diaspora population in the United States. It analyzes an initiative by Ulster loyalists in Northern Ireland to mobilize Americans of Ulster Protestant descent in support of their cause, while simultaneously attempting to undermine the American support base of their Irish nationalist opponents. By contrast with Irish nationalists, Ulster loyalists have never had significant support networks in the United States. This attempt to mobilize a distant diaspora has met with little success. This article argues that loyalist understandings of their imagined audience in the United States are built on a misleading caricature of Irish-American support networks for Irish republicans. These misunderstandings direct loyalists towards a strategy that places undue weight on the role of homeland propaganda in converting shared ancestry into political support for ethnic compatriots in the 'homeland' to the neglect of more fundamental factors in the mobilization of transnational support networks. The article argues that new technologies are of minimal significance for the mobilization of transnational support networks on the basis of shared ancestry in the absence of other fundamental conditions for mobilization. However, the new technologies allow movements to learn more about distant and little-understood support pools. The reflexive character of online interaction is illustrated by the way in which at least some loyalists have begun to explore other bases for transnational co-operation.*

*Key Words: Internet mobilization, diaspora, Ireland*

The rapid diffusion of new communication technologies since the mid-1990s has been accompanied by the growth of new transnational activist networks. Particularly since the 'Battle of Seattle' in 1999, when anti-globalisation protesters made extensive use of new technologies, commentators have argued that the new technologies have facilitated deep and perhaps fundamental shifts in the nature of political mobilisation and collective action (Castells 2001; Donk, Loader, Nixon, and Rucht 2004; Garrett 2006; McCaughey and Ayers 2003; Webster 2001).

Much of the literature on new technologies and mobilisation focuses on transnational activism and it is widely argued that the new technologies provide a major opportunity to those seeking to emphasize the global as a scale of solidarity and activism. (Donk, Loader, Nixon, and Rucht 2004: 15; Schuler and Day 2004; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2002). Diaspora groups have long been involved in extensive transnational activist networks, particularly in connection with support for causes in the 'homeland'. The relationship between the Jewish diaspora and Israel, between Irish-Americans and the Northern Ireland conflict, and between Tamil emigrants and refugees and the cause of Tamil Eelam, are among the more prominent examples of strong and influential diaspora and emigrant networks that predate the new technologies. It is widely hypothesized that the new technologies will contribute to an intensification of such contacts, permitting diaspora and emigrant communities to remain strongly linked to 'homeland' politics on a daily basis and facilitating a closer involvement with 'homeland' politics than was possible before (see, for example, Chan 2005; Dahan and Sheffer 2001; Panagakos 2003; Parham 2004).

A developing body of case-studies on the relationship between new technologies and diaspora communities provides evidence of the importance of new technologies for the building of new relationships, the redefinition of collective identities through online interaction and the reshaping of relationships between diaspora and homeland (Ignacio 2005; Mallapragada 2006; Parker and Song 2006; Sökefeld 2002: 109; Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2005). But this research also emphasizes the challenge that multiple, decentred and constantly renegotiated representations of diasporic identity present to those who would seek to maintain homogenous and hegemonic conceptions of those identities (Graham and Khosravi 2002: 219 and 231; Orgad 2006; Parham 2004; Van Den Bos and Nell 2006: 205). Increased contact can increase awareness of contradictions and disagreements that call into question the character of a common ethnic identity. It can help to erode the sense of collective identity and common purpose that is crucial to ethnic mobilization.

This article analyses attempts by one ethno-national political movement to use the new technologies to mobilize transnational support networks, primarily by reconnecting with a scattered diaspora separated from the homeland both by distance and by a great wedge of time, and to weaken the transnational networks of their opponents by addressing the diasporic support base of those opponents.

### **The case-study**

The article analyses use of the new technologies by some loyalist activists in Northern Ireland to address a newly-available audience in the United States, in an attempt to build

new transnational support networks based on both ethnic and ideological grounds, beginning in the late 1990s.

Political competition in Northern Ireland has long been oriented towards the division between a Protestant majority supporting the continued political union between Northern Ireland and Great Britain and a Catholic minority in which there is strong and persistent support for the political reunification of Ireland. The term 'loyalist' has been used in recent decades to describe those whose support for the political union of Northern Ireland with Great Britain is more extreme than that of mainstream unionists, either in terms of their ultimate political aims or in terms of a willingness to use violence. In the terminology of the social movement literature Ulster loyalism is a 'counter-movement', devoted principally to opposing the aims of Irish republicanism and nationalism. It is usually placed on the right of the political spectrum but has always included significant tendencies that place themselves on the left of the spectrum (Graham 2004; McAuley 2005; Shirlow and McGovern 1997). The term is used in this article to encompass the broad, and splintered, political movement that rejected the power-sharing institutions of government in Northern Ireland established under the Belfast Agreement of 1998. During the late 1990's this rejectionist loyalism constituted a major strand of opinion within the Protestant majority of Northern Ireland's population, in legal political parties, grassroots organisations, illegal paramilitary organisations and politico-religious organisations such as the Orange Order. For most of the period dealt with in this article the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) was part of this rejectionist movement and many of the smaller loyalist groups saw the DUP as providing political direction. From 2003 onwards the DUP enjoyed the support of a majority of Protestant voters in Northern Ireland. When the

DUP agreed in 2007 to take part in these power-sharing arrangements alongside Irish republicans it created confusion and anger in the ranks of loyalists and dramatically eroded the support base of the rejectionist movement discussed in this article.

As the Internet became widely accessible in Britain and Ireland from the late 1990s onwards there was an intense burst of online activity by Ulster loyalists aimed at engaging with an American audience. By 2004 well over 270 Ulster loyalist websites had been established (Ó Dochartaigh 2004-07). One of the key themes in loyalist webspace was the fact that an international audience was newly available. The analysis in this article focuses on six loyalist websites that were devoted primarily or exclusively to addressing an American audience, and two others that devoted significant space to this audience (see appendix 1 below). It also draws on interviews and email contact with a number of those involved with these sites and with unionist political activists active online who were not involved in this initiative. It did not prove possible, however, to interview most of those responsible for these sites. The sensitivities around loyalist politics are such that many of those involved with these sites maintain anonymity and in some cases do not even provide email contact details. Attempts were made to find contact information for all of these sites and to contact all of those whose contact information could be obtained. Most of those contacted by email did not respond however. Part of the reason for this may simply be that sites are no longer being maintained and email accounts no longer being monitored.

The major Unionist parties do not use the new technologies to build transnational links to any great degree and the websites dealt with in this article are not associated with mainstream political parties but with small and sometimes very marginal organisations

and clusters of individuals. Nonetheless, they are firmly embedded in extensive grassroots loyalist networks and the web sites of many loyalist bands and local Orange Order lodges link approvingly to these sites, emphasizing their acceptance as part of a wider loyalist family.

### **Mobilisation potential and frame-bridging**

A key political effect of new information and communication technologies is to extend the mobilization potential of political movements. The new technologies increase the numbers of those who “can in theory be mobilized”, a movement's “recruitment reservoir” (Della Porta and Diani 1999:159) by the simple fact of facilitating regular and inexpensive contact with people who used to be difficult to reach. This effect is particularly significant for movements whose potential supporters are widely scattered, particularly to movements with small pockets of potential support scattered across the globe. Obvious beneficiaries of this effect are movements drawing on the support of scattered emigrant groups. Mobilization potential increases but it does not follow that this potential will be realised. Movements may not attempt to mobilize constituencies which are newly reachable and it may well be that the efforts they do make will be unsuccessful.

By facilitating dense, low-cost contact across the globe, the new technologies have increased the mobilization potential of Ulster loyalism by bringing potential new sources of ethnic and ideological support within broadcast range. Loyalists can now make their message cheaply and rapidly available in far-away states with significant populations of Ulster Protestant descent. While Ulster loyalists enjoy ongoing, if weak ties, to those of Ulster Protestant descent in former British Commonwealth states such as



Canada through institutions such as the Orange Order, loyalists have had very little contact with the much larger population of Ulster Protestant descent in the United States. Loyalist attempts to build new support networks have consequently focused on the United States, conceived as a vast untapped reservoir of potential ethnic solidarity. This has prompted efforts to reframe the cause of Ulster loyalism in a way that will appeal to this newly available audience.

The concept of framing has been developed extensively in social movement theory under the heading of “collective action frames”, a term used for the framing processes of social movements (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1992; Zald 1996). Tarrow writes that “The culture of collective action is built on frames and emotions oriented toward mobilizing people out of their compliance and into action in conflictual settings” (1998: 112). Addressing a newly available audience necessarily involves a process of ‘frame alignment’ in which activists “fashion [their movements’ frames] at the intersection between a target population’s culture and their own values and goals” (Tarrow 1998: 110). In the case of Ulster loyalism this means presenting their cause in a way that will allow the intended audience in the US to understand the cause of loyalism within the frames of reference already available to that audience. Snow et al. (1986) outline four types of frame alignment process and argue that frame alignment is “a necessary condition for movement participation” (1986: 464). One of the processes they identify is frame-bridging. This involves the linkage of a social movement organisation with “unmobilized sentiment pools or public opinion preference clusters” (1986: 467). They outline the increase in opportunities for frame-bridging that was presented when computerized membership lists facilitated direct mail campaigns,

allowing movements to quickly and cheaply reach large groups of potential new supporters (1986: 467-8). This provides an earlier example of the way in which new technology led to a direct increase in mobilization potential for particular kinds of social movements across the political spectrum in the US. Frame-bridging will necessarily be central to the initial activities of any movement attempting to tap the potential support pools made newly accessible by technological change.

The frames used in these efforts reveal how movements imagine the potential new supporters they are trying to reach. In the case of Ulster loyalists, the frames used to address an imagined American audience illustrate a set of very specific ideas on the nature of the relationship between communication media and the mobilization of diaspora support for a cause in an ethnic 'homeland'. This article argues that those ideas are directly based on loyalist understandings of Irish-American support networks in the United States. It argues that the weaknesses in these understandings have directed some loyalists towards ineffective framing strategies and ineffective deployment of the new technologies. For the most part, loyalist arguments do not reach and do not resonate with their intended audience because that audience is inaccurately imagined and because loyalists place undue weight on the role of mass communication in mobilization.

### **Ulster loyalism and communication: Media hostility to the mass media**

Ulster loyalism has long been characterised by a strong and generalized hostility to the mass media. The bulk of complaints about BBC coverage in Northern Ireland, for example, and virtually all of the violence against reporters in the early years of the conflict came from the loyalist side (Cathcart 1984: 209, 221). The Reverend Ian Paisley,

who became Northern Ireland's First Minister (effectively the Prime Minister) in 2007, memorably encapsulated loyalist hostility to the media when he described journalists in the 1960s as

the whirring multitudes of pestiferous scribbling rodents... [who] usually sport thick-lensed glasses, wear six pairs of ropey sandals, are homosexuals, kiss holy medals or carry secret membership cards of the Communist party.... Spineless, brainless mongoloids. But, because of it, as maliciously perilous as vipers (Moloney and Pollak 1986: 124-5).

Loyalist hostility to the media has moderated over the years but remains strong. Some of the central themes of a well-established loyalist discourse on the media directly influence loyalist understandings of the internet. Loyalists complain of a liberal bias or even a liberal conspiracy in 'the media', by which loyalists usually mean the British media (see, for example, Probert 1984: 74; McGarry and O'Leary 1995: 102-3; Peatling 2004: 231-233). Loyalists also argue that Irish republicans have an efficient propaganda machine which influences media coverage by duping gullible journalists, an argument summed up on the *Ulster Protestant Movement for Justice* (UPMJ) website where it is argued that "Sinn Fein have for decades exploited without parallel the most powerful weaponry in any army – propaganda" (UPMJ 2001c). A sympathetic 1998 study of loyalism and the British media described loyalists as "the clear losers in Northern Ireland's propaganda war" (Parkinson 1998: 12).

A third important theme in loyalist discourse on the media is the poor media performance of unionists and loyalists. The author of a key text in defence of Ulster unionism argues that "Unionism has been characterised in the main by inarticulateness"

(Aughey 1989: **au page number? – back cover**). This partially contradicts the other central themes and suggests that unionist and loyalist defeat in the propaganda war is not solely a result of media bias and republican propaganda but is also attributable to the failings of unionist and loyalist spokespersons. As William Frazer, one of those most actively involved in presenting a unionist and loyalist perspective to an international audience online puts it, “Our story had never been told, and the reason for that was we’d never told it” (Frazer, personal interview).

It is argued that loyalists are so convinced of the obvious rightness and truthfulness of their message that they neglect to present it well (see, for example, Probert 1984: 75; Bruce 1994: 62-3). It might reasonably be argued however that Ulster loyalism’s unpopularity in the wider world is a problem not only of presentation but also of substance. High profile loyalist protests in recent years have included attempts to block the route of Catholic schoolgirls walking to a north Belfast school (Cadwallader 2004), picketing Catholic churchgoers attending mass in a Protestant area and, in one notorious case, protesting at a Catholic religious ceremony in a graveyard (*BBC News*, 3 October 2005). Protests such as these are unlikely to generate sympathetic coverage from any quarter.

The flip side of the rejection of the media is a confidence in the 'plain truth' of the loyalist message. Implicit in the loyalist argument that the mass media has turned people against their cause is the assumption that there are untapped support pools for loyalism, if only the mass media can be circumvented. The enthusiastic adoption of the internet by grassroots loyalist campaigns illustrates how neatly the utopian discourses around the

internet and unmediated access to the public have been absorbed into loyalist discourses on media bias.

### **Alternative media**

In tandem with hostility to the 'liberal bias' of the mass media there is a longstanding loyalist and unionist tradition of alternative media. The tradition of loyalist mural-painting dates back over a hundred years and wall murals are regularly used to convey attitudes to contemporary political events (Coulter 1999: 205; Jarman 1998; Rolston 1991, 1992). Loyalists recognize the web as the kind of intimate (and formerly local) space, beyond direct government control, which has allowed them to bypass the mass media and state control. The existing tradition of using marginal media forms provides a strong framework within which loyalists could understand and appropriate the new communication technologies.

However, the internet is more than just another platform for a familiar set of messages. The possibilities associated with the technology suggest new messages and new audiences. Traditional loyalist media were doggedly local, no more so than in the murals and parades, each of which in their own way was concerned with communicating messages in specific patches of territory and in the process laying claim to that territory. Although much of the loyalist presence online similarly addresses a local audience, even the most local of sites often displays an awareness of their potentially global reach, explicitly addressing a range of audiences beyond the sympathetic local audience.

## **Loyalist internet euphoria**

It is time to stand up and tell the world the truth (Ulster Protestant Movement for Justice, *UPMJ* 2001c)

We are currently working on a variety of new projects aimed at forging links World-Wide and ushering Loyalism into a new era (Ulster Loyalist Information Service, *ULISNet.com* 2002b)

After years of being demonized by Irish republican propaganda and the liberal media, the internet finally allows loyalists to spread the simple truth of their message to the world: this is the theme at the heart of loyalist internet euphoria. The strength of this enthusiasm for the net can be explained largely in terms of long-established loyalist discourses about the media and the 'republican propaganda machine'. One of the earliest loyalist websites to be established states bluntly "This site was established in November 1998 to counter republican propaganda" (Kilcluney Volunteers Flute Band, 2002) while ULIS Network, official website of the paramilitary group, the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF), declared itself "dedicated to countering the relentless onslaught of anti-Protestant, anti-British-Ulster propaganda which comes from the Pan-Nationalist front's deep pockets" (*ULISNet.com* 2002a). Loyalists also celebrate the internet as a technology that finally allows them to bypass a biased and unsympathetic media. The *UPMJ* site, for example, proclaims that they will "confront the anti-Protestant, Unionist loyalist propaganda of the press, BBC and ITV etc." (*UPMJ* 2001a). Understood within existing loyalist explanations of why they have 'lost' the propaganda war, the internet seems to provide an almost millennial opportunity to reverse that defeat.

These understandings were reinforced in the early days of internet use. Those few unionists and loyalists who were online at the time found online discussion about Northern Ireland completely dominated by American-based supporters of Irish republicanism and nationalism. This was largely because online interaction in general was dominated by American contributors in the early years of the web. The first attempt to create a significant unionist and loyalist presence online, the Ulster Cyber Community (UCC: <http://www.ulster.org.uk>)<sup>1</sup> was a conscious attempt to redress this imbalance. Established in 1996, the *UCC* drew in a wide range of loyalist and unionist opinion and provided a forum for the exchange of both political views and technical advice on using the new technologies (Christopher, personal interview). It marked the beginning of unionism and loyalism online. Online interaction with American-based supporters of Irish republicanism reinforced loyalist and unionist perceptions of a vast, extreme and passionate American support base for their opponents. And the intensive use of the internet by their opponents reinforced the perception that media and communication technologies were central to the success of republican transnational networks.

It was only whenever we started to look into what's actually out there we found that there was nothing, basically nothing, from a unionist or Protestant, whatever you want to call it, background. Republicans were away ahead. They had a world of web sites, especially between here and America...nobody was challenging it (Frazer, personal interview).

Irish republican use of the internet confirmed established loyalist explanations of republican propaganda success and provided a direct model for loyalist appropriation of the new technologies.

We knew that republicans were way ahead when it came to propaganda so we sat down and took a look at how they were achieving this and what way we could best make contact with people around the world and basically the internet is the fastest way of getting information and sending information out (Frazer, personal interview).

Loyalist use of the internet also reflects a set of ideas relating to computerization. Kling and Iacono write that “a rhetorical form, which we call technological utopianism, is a key framing device for portraying societal renewal through technology” and argue that “much of the enthusiasm to computerize is a by-product of ... visions of technological utopianism” (1996: 101). A particular historical relationship with mass media and a set of discourses around it makes loyalists particularly receptive to the utopian rhetoric surrounding the political potential of the internet.

Irish republican support networks in the United States, built on both ethnic and ideological bases, are long-established and have had significant influence on the course of events in Northern Ireland (Dumbrell 1995; Guelke 1994; Hanley 2004; Holland 1999; Kenny 2000; Ó Dochartaigh 1995; Wilson 1995). Loyalists, by contrast, have never had strong support networks in the US, despite the strong religious connections of the Reverend Ian Paisley, founder of the Democratic Unionist Party, and occasional activism by small support groups over the years (Wilson 2005).



In the absence of their own models of successful mobilization of support in the US, Irish republican networks provide loyalists with a ready-made model for understanding the role of communication media in mobilizing transnational support networks. Loyalists and unionists have always placed great emphasis on the external causes of conflict in Northern Ireland. Irish-American support for the IRA was seen as a key external (and therefore illegitimate) factor in perpetuating the conflict, and its influence was grossly exaggerated. Loyalists also draw on a powerful caricature of Irish-American support for Irish republicanism that has been widely diffused through the mass media in Ireland and Britain. According to this caricature, fourth and fifth generation Irish-Americans with no real personal connections to Ireland, ignorant of modern Irish society and of the politics of Northern Ireland, support US-based support groups such as Noraid, and by extension the IRA, as part of a sentimental expression of their ancestral background and ethnic identity. There was

a view within the unionist community that Americans had no clue about what went on here other than... their granny was Irish and they thought of themselves as Irish and there was this broad view that they all supported, you know, nationalism (McFarland, personal interview).

Although it has elements of truth, the caricature seriously misrepresents the character of US-based support (Guelke 1994; Hanley 2004; Ó Dochartaigh 1995). This caricature has powerfully influenced loyalist understandings of their potential American audience. If loyalists believe that US-based support groups are sustained by an ill-informed and

sentimental attachment to a distant ancestral connection, it immediately suggest two reasons why they might seek to address a US audience.

If support is based on ignorance then it may be possible to dissuade Americans from supporting the Irish republican cause simply by exposing them to the ‘truth’ about this cause. Thus a key target audience for loyalists is American-based supporters of Irish republican support groups such as Noraid (Irish Northern Aid). Loyalists also conceive the American public in general as unduly sympathetic to the IRA and heavily influenced by Irish republican propaganda. Arguments aimed at Noraid supporters are also directed at this more general audience. Loyalists aim to reveal what they see as the true nature of the IRA and Sinn Féin to this very broadly defined audience.

The ethnic aspect of the caricature suggests a second use of the new technologies. If Irish republicans can mobilize support on the basis of distant ethnic ties, Ulster loyalists should be able to do the same. For two decades public discourse in Ireland on Irish-Americans has been dominated by the figure of approximately 40 million Irish-Americans generated by the 1980 US census, the first to include a question on ancestry (Hout and Goldstein 1994). This figure includes everyone who mentioned Irish among their ancestries and grossly exaggerates the number of those with any active connection to, or interest in Ireland. The pool from which Irish republicans have been able to draw support is far smaller than this figure suggests. Nonetheless, the myth of the 40 million, the myth of a vast reservoir of potential support for Irish causes is extremely powerful in Ireland. In loyalist discourse this myth takes on a new twist.

A recurrent theme on loyalist websites is the fact that of the 40 million people who said they were at least partly of Irish descent in the 1980 US census a majority were

Protestant. The myth of the 20 million complements the nationalist myth of the 40 million. For loyalists this raises a question of immediate political importance. Why do Protestant Irish-Americans not support Ulster loyalism or unionism in the same way that Catholic Irish-Americans support the republican cause? Though there have been small loyalist support groups in the US in the past they have been tiny and marginal and contrast sharply with the way in which Irish republican support groups in the US were embedded in a wider ethnic community (Wilson 2005). Many loyalists, relying on a caricature of the relationship between ethnic identity and political mobilization based on their interpretation of the Irish republican support base, draw the conclusion that it has everything to do with media and communication. They attribute the imbalance to the effectiveness of republican propaganda and the failure of loyalists to combat that propaganda and to reach out to this pool of potential support. That is, the key to converting ethnic identity into political activism on behalf of the homeland is propaganda. This analysis places communication media at the heart of explaining transnational mobilization. As the *UPMJ* site puts it: “On the American side of the Atlantic Sinn fein/IRA have also used propaganda and lies against Ulster protestants to devastating effect” (*UPMJ* 2001b). This analysis suggests an obvious course of action: imitate Irish republicans in mobilizing an ethnic support base for organizations in the homeland now that new information and communication technologies make this possible.

### **Reframing loyalism: The war on terror**

In addressing an American audience, loyalist frame-bridging efforts have clustered around a small number of central themes, of which the most common is the attempt to fit

the loyalist cause into the master frame of the 'War on Terror'. The Al-Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington DC on September 11, 2001 provoked a surge of activity by loyalists online and large numbers of loyalist sites began to frame the conflict in Northern Ireland as part of the new worldwide 'war on terror'. This unfocused approach, addressing a generalised American audience, reflected the fact that loyalists saw American sympathy for Irish republicans as widespread and diffuse.

A number of loyalist sites set up September 11 tribute pages. Among those groups expressing solidarity with the US was one of the most extreme and violent loyalist groups, the Loyalist Volunteer Force. The LVF website, *ULISNet.com*, placed a box containing an American flag and the words "ulisnet.com supports America in their time of need" on its front page (*ULISNet.com*, 2002a). Other examples include *FAIR* which placed a 'Support America' graphic on its front page and *Scotchirish.net* which chose a 'Defend America' banner to head its front page (*Scotchirish.net*, 2003a). This enthusiastic display of American symbols is most striking in light of longstanding loyalist hostility to US involvement in Northern Ireland, a hostility based on resentment of US-based support for Irish republicans and a belief that the American public and US administrations were unduly sympathetic to the IRA.

Loyalists drew detailed parallels between the September 11 attacks and IRA actions, conflating the IRA with Al-Qaeda. *NoraidWatch*, for example, comparing an IRA hunger-striker with one of the September 11 attackers, argued that:

Bobby Sands and Mohamed Atta... died for different 'causes' but their act was the same. They ended their own lives, they worked to take the lives of others, because they hate freedom. The terrorist mind insists on their way and no other (*Noraid Watch* 2003b).

Another central feature of these loyalist sites was the representation of the IRA as a component part of an international terrorist network. *Friends of Ulster - USA*, for example, provided a series of articles linking Sinn Féin and the IRA to Basque Homeland and Freedom (ETA), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK), and the Libyan regime. They also linked the IRA directly to Al Qaeda, reproducing articles from other sources with titles such as "Sinn Fein/IRA Osama's Soul Brother" (*Friends of Ulster-USA*, 2003a). *FAIR* likewise provided articles on "The Terrorist Comrades of Irish Republicanism" and "The IRAs Libyan Connection" while *NoraidWatch* displayed a photograph of Gerry Adams meeting Fidel Castro alongside a text which describes Noraid in the following terms: "They are a vital cog in the international terrorist machine providing finance, propaganda and logistics for the IRA and in turn a global terrorist network that threatens the foundations of their native America and the free world" (*NoraidWatch*, 2003a). That is, to support Noraid is to support Al Qaeda.

While many US-based supporters of Irish republicanism are on the left, many others are based in strongly conservative working-class Irish-American neighbourhoods. Sinn Féin long tried to ensure that the left-wing policies of the movement in Ireland were muted in the US in order to avoid alienating conservative Irish-American supporters. Loyalist websites aimed to break down this insulation through the simplest of methods, providing hyperlinks to articles written by Irish republicans or to images of republican graffiti and murals. Thus *Friends of Ulster - USA* links to articles written by republicans or republican supporters which are unsympathetic to the US war on terror while the

UPMJ website, the FAIR website and the *Friends of Ulster - USA* site, all display the same republican mural expressing solidarity with the PLO.

Loyalists argued that Sinn Féin should be confronted and defeated in the course of the War on Terror. As the *FAIR* website puts it, “It's fine for Tony [Blair] to play the robust international statesman, in crushing the Ba'ath regime or the taliban, but what about dealing with the terrorist threat in Northern Ireland. All we have seen is weakness and appeasement” (*FAIR* 2003).

The invasion of Iraq by a coalition of American and British troops in March 2003 provided the occasion for a flurry of updating as loyalist websites busily associated the Iraq war with the cause of loyalism. If the 'War on Terror' provided the ideal master frame within which to locate loyalist opposition to the Northern Irish peace settlement to an American audience, the invasion of Iraq had added dimensions which allowed loyalist arguments to be fitted even more neatly into this frame.

Loyalists online and offline lined up to actively support the war and to celebrate the British-American alliance. Loyalists emphasized the theme that Britain, almost alone in Europe, was standing by the US in this hour of need and that 'Ulstermen' were part of this British effort. The common cause of Ulster loyalism and the United States in the War on Terror was embodied in the Ulster regiments fighting as part of the British army alongside the Americans in Iraq (*Scotchirish.net* 2003a). Loyalist websites also highlighted the opposition of Irish republicans to the war. Sinn Féin opposed the war and was prominently involved in organizing anti-war demonstrations in Ireland. Articles emphasizing this appeared on the *UPMJ* site, *Ulisnet.com*, *Friends of Ulster - USA* and the *FAIR* website.

Loyalist support for the war culminated on the streets of Belfast in a 'Support our troops' demonstration in April 2003, as Tony Blair and George Bush met near Belfast to discuss the ongoing war. Ulster loyalists played a central role in this rare public display of support for the invasion of Iraq in Europe, advertising the event online and displaying placards at the demonstration.

The war in Iraq seemed to give immediate and concrete expression to the loyalist argument that Irish republicans were enemies in the war on terror and that Northern Ireland was best conceptualized and dealt with within the framework of that war. Loyalists place great emphasis on revealing the 'true' face of Irish republicanism to the American public at large. This generalized American audience is characterized as being highly susceptible to homeland-generated propaganda, sympathetic to Irish republicans primarily because of the absence of opposing voices. The attempt to place Irish republicans in the alternative master-frame of the war on terror is an attempt to emulate what is seen as a successful Irish republican propaganda campaign to frame the conflict as a 'liberation struggle' for a mass American audience.

### **The Scotch-Irish diaspora**

The myth of the Scotch-Irish (or Scots-Irish, a more recent variation on the term), of a huge well of potential ethnic support for Ulster loyalism in the US, has diffused widely through loyalist webspace. In the course of the 17th century, large numbers of Scottish Presbyterians settled in the northern Irish province of Ulster, many of them as part of a government-sponsored plantation of this rebellious and mainly Catholic province. The following century, the descendants of many of these Scottish settlers emigrated in turn

from Ireland to America. In the 19th century the label 'Scotch-Irish' came into widespread use in the United States to distinguish this group from the Irish Catholic immigrants who were arriving in huge numbers in the eastern cities (Blethen and Wood 1997; Griffin 2001). There are huge difficulties around mobilizing people who belong to this ethnic category as part of a Northern Irish Protestant diaspora.

Scotch-Irish is not used as an ethnic category in Ireland or Britain and does not fit neatly with any of the well-established ethno-national self-identifications used in Northern Ireland. Neither the British, Irish, Northern Irish nor Ulster categories used in public surveys on ethnic identity in Northern Ireland can be plausibly presented as the contemporary Northern Irish equivalent of Scotch-Irish. Many loyalists and unionists have placed an emphasis in recent years on the Scottish heritage of much of the Protestant population and have emphasized the 'Ulster-Scots' identity. This 'Ulster-Scots' category provides a distinctive identity associated with Northern Irish Protestants that looks like a much clearer ethnic category than simply 'British' or 'Protestant' (see McCall 2002 for an analysis of the politics of Ulster-Scots identity).

The first step taken by loyalists in addressing potential ethnic support in the US is to try to align these two problematic categories, Scotch-Irish and Ulster-Scots. Tarrow writes that "...mobilization ...depends on framing identities so that they will lead to action, alliances, interaction" (1998: 119). Loyalists need to align two long-separated ethnic categories into a unified diasporic identity. They need to convince their target audience that Scotch-Irish is the American equivalent of 'Ulster-Scots' and that it is, as such, the American manifestation of a specifically *Northern* Irish (and Protestant) identity



and therefore should inspire or provoke a connection to Northern Ireland in the same way that Irish identity inspires so many Americans to make a connection with Ireland.

If the first step is to establish a shared terminology for an Ulster Protestant diaspora identity, the next step is to awaken people to the fact that they belong to this diaspora. Much loyalist material is aimed at increasing consciousness of this distinct identity, encouraging American Protestants of Irish descent who self-identify as Irish to come to realize that they are in fact Scotch-Irish. *The Ulster Scots* website, for example, declares that its core purpose is “to promote the Scots-Irish/ Ulster-Scots heritage overseas, particularly among Scotch-Irish Americans, many of whom wrongly believe themselves to be Irish American” (*The Ulster Scots* 2004).

Loyalist web-sites addressing the Scotch-Irish diaspora scarcely pause for breath before drawing a direct connection between this ethnic identity and the contemporary politics of Northern Ireland. On some nominally 'Scotch-Irish' sites the vast majority of materials relate to Sinn Féin, the IRA and opposition to the Belfast Agreement. *Ulster Loyalist: Home of the Scotch Irish (Ulster Scots)* for example, is copyrighted to the 'International Sinn Fein /IRA Watch Committee'. *Friends of Ulster - USA* juxtaposes articles on “Scotch-Irish migration to Pittsburgh” with statements like “the current Sinn Fein Lord mayor of Belfast is a convicted criminal AND terrorist” (*Friends of Ulster – USA* 2003a and 2003b).

One theme used to link Scotch-Irish ethnicity to current political struggles in Northern Ireland is the theme of conflict on the frontier. *Scotchirish.net* blends references to Scotch-Irish frontier culture with contemporary Northern Irish politics. A text placed alongside a picture of Davy Crockett reads “The Indians apparently lived in some fear of

the Scotch-Irish. It's of no great surprise that today in Ulster the Scotch Irish still stand defiant after 35 years of Irish nationalist propaganda, terrorism and murder". After a reference to the Scotch-Irish population in the US today the text argues that "One should also remember that many tens of thousands of Scotch Irish/Ulster Scots still exist in Northern Ireland, and as you know are still involved in a struggle with Irish nationalists to this day" (*Scotchirish.net* 2003b).

Another key theme is loyalty. Many Scotch-Irish were prominent in the US war of independence and this fact is celebrated on Ulster loyalist websites. But these Scotch-Irish rebelled against the British crown and fought against pro-British 'loyalists' to establish an independent united Republic. Those of Scotch-Irish ancestry in the US are being asked to affirm this ethnic history by showing solidarity with their ethnic compatriots in Northern Ireland today: pro-British loyalists who struggle to maintain the link to Britain, and whose enemies are trying to establish an Irish Republic independent of British rule. The theme of loyalty is used to awkwardly bridge this gap: loyalty to the principles of freedom which are embodied both in the United States of America itself and in loyalist resistance to aggressive Irish nationalism. In one striking sentence which links the deeply prized loyalist value of loyalty with the role of the Scotch-Irish in disloyal rebellion against the British crown *Scotchirish.net* proclaims that "...we were instrumental in bringing about the War for Independence, which we loyally supported" (*Scotchirish.net* 2003b, **emphasis in the original**).

The heavy emphasis placed on Scotch-Irish identity and the way in which loyalist websites draw immediate and direct links between 18th century Scotch-Irish history and current loyalist opposition to the peace settlement in Northern Ireland illustrate the way

in which these loyalists attempt to convert ethnic identity directly into political activism on behalf of a homeland cause. They identify distant ethnic ties as a crucial element in support for a cause in the homeland. This determines the support pools that they target and shapes the arguments that they use to address those potential supporters.

### **No answering echo: understanding a failed mobilization**

New technologies have brought vast new audiences within broadcast range of Ulster loyalism but online frame-bridging efforts aimed at realising this potential have had only limited success. *UPMJ*, *FAIR* and *ScotchIrish.net* representatives have all made trips to the United States, and begun to build face-to-face contacts, but these connections are on a very small scale. When measured against the grand scale of loyalist ambitions to re-awaken a vast pool of ethnic support in the United States, this initiative can be characterised as a failed mobilization. There is, for example, not a single web site originating in the US that could be characterised as a response to this appeal. Links to these sites from other political sites come almost exclusively from other Ulster loyalist sites.

The difficulties in brokering Scotch-Irish ancestry into support for Ulster Loyalism are bluntly illustrated by a message on the guestbook of one loyalist Ulster Scots site from 'Scotirishrob' in Oklahoma, a member of the loyalist target audience:

Well I'm glad to see Ulster Scots or Scots-Irish on the web as my Fathers Family are good old Scots Irish but I must admit I don't understand this love of the United Kingdom or of the English Crown for that matter....My Fathers family left Ulster Because the

English Crown stabbed them in the backs for being Presbyterians ...we... fought like dogs against those Tories and The English crown in the Revolutionary War. But anyway we are Proud Of our Ulster Roots and our Scottish roots and could give a fig for supporting the English Crown (*Ulster-Scots Online, Guestbook 2007*).

The loyalist initiative gives significant weight to ethnic identity and shared ancestry, however distant, as a basis for political mobilisation. While the caricature of Irish-American mobilisation emphasises the ignorance and sentimentality of third and fourth generation Irish-Americans as a factor in generating support for the IRA, research on Noraid has shown that Irish-American republican support groups were heavily dominated by, and dependent on, Irish-born immigrants (Hanley 2004; Ó Dochartaigh 1995). The crucial factors in Irish-American mobilisation were the strong pre-existing personal and political networks that linked Irish-born republicans on both sides of the Atlantic, the local networks in which American-based republicans were embedded in the US, and a small number of working-class Irish-American urban neighbourhoods. Vague and distant connections to an ancestral homeland among third and fourth generation Irish-Americans were not central to this mobilisation and the overwhelming mass of Americans of Irish descent had no involvement of any kind with Irish republican support groups. The caricature directs loyalists towards a broad appeal to a massive group defined by shared ancestry, an appeal which has met with little success because ancestry in its own right does not provide the basis for mobilisation on a homeland cause in the way that these loyalists imagine.

New Ulster Scots / Scotch Irish cultural associations such as the Ulster-Scots Society Of America ([www.ulsterscotssociety.com](http://www.ulsterscotssociety.com)) have been established in the US in

recent years. However these groups have focused primarily on genealogy, and on the US-based history of the 'Scotch-Irish'. They do not constitute a political support network for Ulster Loyalism.

At the heart of these loyalist efforts is an analysis that grossly exaggerates the significance of propaganda from the 'homeland' in mobilising transnational support, based on a caricature of the role of the Irish republican 'propaganda machine' in mobilising Irish-Americans (Coulter 1999: 201). Loyalist characterisations of the internet as a means to compete with the mass media also show the influence of the kind of technological utopian rhetoric encapsulated in the Indymedia slogan "Don't hate the media. Be the media". This misleading equation between the internet and existing mass media suggests a broadcast model for communication and a vast imagined audience. A small movement might deploy the technologies more effectively if the broadcast model was eschewed, if messages were much more targeted and the focus switched to building networks through personal contact, online and offline. Aimed as they are at a broad and hazily imagined audience, these loyalist frame-bridging strategies are unlikely to resonate with any significant proportion of their target audience.

### **Reflexivity and reframing: loyalist learning online**

The visions that some loyalists had of a significant new transnational mobilisation based primarily on ethnic solidarity have not been realised but the new technologies have permitted loyalists to build up their knowledge of distant audiences in a way that was never possible before. Direct feedback, including the feedback of eloquent silence from

the intended audience, has forced loyalists to reassess their analysis and the effectiveness of their arguments.

In their discussion of the significance of online interaction for Chinese and South Asian identity in the UK, Parker and Song (2006: 581, 583) stress the reflexive character of online interaction, arguing that “Discussions move within boundaries that are constantly challenged and redrawn...Traditions are interrogated, rather than accepted, and inherited identities continually revised”. They outline how understandings of individual and collective identities are adjusted and developed in interaction with others. The reflexive character of online interaction has important implications for political mobilisation. Movements can use online interaction to build their understanding of potential support pools, gradually learning which arguments resonate, which arguments provoke resistance, and which repel.

One of the most striking examples of this reflexivity is the way in which international connections have been developed by *FAIR*, a victims’ group with a clear loyalist stamp. William Frazer, the key figure in *FAIR*, describes the origins of these connections:

It’s only through the internet we found...that...the IRA were linked with most other terrorist organisations around the world...we would look at... what the victims is that’s being hurt by the actual violence in that area and we would then try and tie in with them (Frazer, personal interview).

Having identified potential contacts online, email contact was crucial in learning about potential allies, and discovering whether they shared a common frame for understanding violent conflict. *FAIR* went:

back and forward with emails and stuff, before we would actually go out and meet these groups. Because actually there's no point going out and meeting a group who had different views... that actually believes that terrorists were the, were victims and things like that there because as far as we were concerned terrorists are not victims (Frazer, personal interview).

As a direct result of these online explorations, *FAIR* members travelled to Colombia and Israel and also built links to victims' groups in Spain, the United States, Rwanda, and Russia, taking part in conferences of victims groups in Colombia, Spain and New York. The internet has been crucial not only in identifying such groups but in learning how to communicate with them, learning which themes will resonate and which themes should be avoided. As Frazer puts it:

there are certain things, certain approaches we've changed slightly... we always leave the politics to the side. We try to work just solely on the rights and wrongs of terrorism and the needs of victims who've been affected by terrorism (Frazer, personal interview).

We can see this, to a degree, as a process of reorientation. Tarrow identifies reorientation, "a shift in direction and activism of an actor in response to that actor's connections to another actor" as a key change resulting from the Zapatista movement's "interaction with

its external supporters” (Tarrow 2005). He argues that “the importance that its solidarity network gained helped to transform the way the EZLN [Zapatista movement] came to frame itself” (2005: **au- page number?**). Reframing to reach out to new audiences involves changes to the movements making those appeals. In entering a new arena they have to orient themselves to debates and discourses they were never called on to engage with before.

This new network is far removed from the model of ethnic solidarity that inspired initial loyalist attempts to build transnational links online. But it shows the importance of the new technologies in identifying and learning about potential support pools that had not even been imagined previously. The relative failure of the loyalist initiative to mobilize diaspora support exposes the weakness of ancestry in itself as a basis for solidarity with movements in the ‘homeland’ but the technologies allow loyalists to gradually identify much more promising support pools and to learn how to much more effectively frame their cause for such groups.

## **Conclusion**

New technologies increase the mobilization potential of political groupings by bringing vast new audiences within broadcast range of even the most marginal and peripheral groups. This is of particular significance for transnational mobilization efforts. The frame-bridging strategies deployed by Ulster loyalists illustrate how activist understandings of those potential new support pools can decisively shape the way in which the new technologies are used in attempts to mobilize them. A well-established understanding of the relationship between media and transnational mobilization, based on



deeply embedded discourses on the mass media and on Irish republican support networks shaped loyalist understandings of the possibilities opened up by the new technologies and are central to explaining the shape which recent loyalist attempts at transnational mobilization have taken.

The relative failure of this initiative demonstrates the weaknesses of an analysis that places undue emphasis on the significance of mass communication in the mobilization of transnational support networks. It also illustrates the weakness of ancestry, in itself, as a basis for mobilizing transnational support, in the absence of a politicised ethnic identity and dense and direct personal ties to the 'homeland'. In the case of Ulster loyalism the combination of new communication technologies, a large diaspora newly brought into broadcast range, and a concerted initiative to deploy propaganda from the homeland in an attempt to mobilize potential new support pools, has generated minimal mobilization.

These ineffective strategies have been based on an understanding of the relationship between homeland propaganda and diaspora mobilization that grossly exaggerates the significance of the former and that underestimates the difficulties in the latter. This analysis eclipses the importance of more fundamental factors in mobilization of diaspora support for a homeland cause, including pre-existing organisational structures, personal networks, direct links to the homeland, and dramatic events that contribute to mobilisation. New communication technologies can be used to powerful effect in mobilisation when other conditions are in place. The relative failure of this initiative demonstrates that the combination of new technology and shared ancestry can be of marginal significance for the mobilisation of transnational support networks in the

absence of those fundamentals. Shared ancestry, in its own right, does not provide a strong basis for transnational political mobilisation, and propaganda from the homeland, in its own right, is not a powerful force in mobilising distant support pools on the basis of shared ancestry. In facilitating the development of new interpersonal links and new cultural organisations catering to a scattered membership however, the new technologies may facilitate the gradual development of a stronger organisational base for mobilisation in the event of future crises.

New technologies also allow movements to learn more about distant and little-understood support pools, to identify new support pools and to learn what arguments resonate with these new audiences. The reflexive character of online interaction is illustrated by the way in which at least some loyalists have responded to the failure of this initiative by shifting their arguments, and by exploring alternative bases for transnational co-operation.

## **Notes**

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1. The UCC web site has been defunct for some time and although the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine includes the URL, the archived pages appear to be blank. As a result, there is no publicly-available archive of this key unionist/loyalist site.

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### **Appendix 1: Loyalist websites addressing a US audience**

- *Families Acting for Innocent Relatives (FAIR)* <[www.victims.org.uk](http://www.victims.org.uk)>

An organization representing victims of republican paramilitary violence based in South Armagh.

- *Friends of Ulster - USA* <[www.ulster.bravepages.com](http://www.ulster.bravepages.com)> [Now defunct]

“Home of the Ulster-Scots / Scotch-Irish in America”

- *NoraidWatch* <<http://members.lycos.co.uk/inac/main.html>>

Focused entirely on attacking Noraid, an American support group for Irish republicans. The site is not explicitly loyalist but the terminology used and the arguments deployed are consistent with a loyalist interpretation of the conflict.

- *Scotchirish.net* <[www.scotchirish.net](http://www.scotchirish.net)>

“Brewed in Scotland, Bottled in Ulster uncorked in the USA”

- *Ulster Loyalist: Home of the Scotch Irish (Ulster Scots)* <[www.ulsterloyalist.co.uk](http://www.ulsterloyalist.co.uk)> [Now defunct]

“The truth about Northern Ireland and its people”

- *Ulster Protestant Movement for Justice* <[www.upmj.co.uk](http://www.upmj.co.uk)> [Now defunct]

“An enemy of Ulster is an enemy of America”

- *Ulster-Scots Online (Previously Ulster-Scots & Irish Unionist Resource)* <[www.ulster-scots.co.uk](http://www.ulster-scots.co.uk)>

“We aim primarily to promote Ulster-Scots / Scotch-Irish culture...”

- *The Ulster Scots* <[www.theulsterscots.com](http://www.theulsterscots.com)>

“... to promote the Scots-Irish/ Ulster-Scots heritage overseas, particularly among Scotch-Irish Americans, many of whom wrongly believe themselves to be Irish American.”