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Gang Violence and Social Media

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GANG VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

Whilst gang-related violence has a long history that predates the advent of social media, recent research suggests that a growing proportion of this violence is closely linked to gang members' online activities. This chapter explores these links by providing a comprehensive review of literature on this issue to-date. Although research in this area is still in its infancy, we argue that there are clear indications that social media is acting as both a catalyst and trigger for gang-related violence in real life.

Introduction

The increasing permeation of social media into people's daily lives is playing an important role in (re)shaping attitudes and behaviours (Annisette and Lafreniere, 2016; Greenfield, 2014). Whilst online activity has huge potential to enhance the quantity and quality of communication between people across the world, it is also raising some serious challenges. This chapter focuses on one of these challenges in particular, namely, the links between gang-related activity in the virtual world and gang-related violence in the real world.

Of course, gang-related violence long predated the advent of social media platforms, as is well-documented by an established body of research on gangs (Decker, 1996; Hagedorn, 1998; Horowitz and Schwartz, 1974; Ralph and Marquart, 1991). However, recent research conducted in a number of countries has found that offline gang-related violence is

increasingly linked to online activity on social media platforms (Johnson and Schell-Busey, 2016). Indeed, the Internet appears both to be generating new conflicts and intensifying old ones (Moule, Decker and Pyrooz, 2016). Compared with other subjects of gang research, there are relatively few studies that have explored this issue – indicative of the subject's recent emergence, not its significance.

This chapter takes a thematic approach to reviewing the extant literature in this area, highlighting various forms of social media content that have been linked to gang-related violence in real life. It then pulls together these various forms of online content to consider some of the overarching factors that go some way toward explaining why social media activity seems to be acting as a catalyst and trigger for serious incidents of offline gang-related violence. It will begin, however, with a brief overview of the main social media platforms at the time of writing, as well as some recent statistics that serve to provide a backdrop to what follows.

Social media: the main platforms and some recent statistics

Although online social media platforms emerged in the 1990s, it was not until the early years of the twenty-first century that user numbers began to expand rapidly. Social media networks such as MySpace (created in 2003), Facebook (2004) and Twitter (2006) have played key roles in creating a world in which unprecedented numbers of people communicate instantaneously and without any direct sensory experience of one another. In 2010, the number of social media users worldwide was estimated at just under one billion; by 2016, this has grown to almost two and a half billion – a figure that is projected to reach three billion by 2020 (Statista, 2016d).

Not only has the number of people using social media platforms dramatically increased over the last decade, but the duration and frequency of people's online platform use has also been

increasing, with one in four teenagers admitting in a US-based survey that they are checking the internet 'almost constantly' during their waking hours (Statista, 2016b). Indeed, the number of photographs uploaded to selected major social media platforms has risen by over 1,500% over the last five years (Meeker, 2016).

The advent of smart phone technology lies at the heart of this trend, with smart phones accounting for over two thirds of time spent on social media (comScore, 2016). Snapchat, an application developed specifically for smart phone use, for example, generates an average of 10 billion daily videos from 150 million daily active users worldwide (Statista, 2016c). The emerging generational divide in relation to the popularity of the most recent social media platforms is also worth noting. Whilst younger generations seem to be embracing platforms developed specifically for smart phones, older generations are not: in April 2016, almost 70 percent of US smart phone owners aged between 18-24 reported using Snapchat, compared to only 14 percent of adults aged 35 and over (Statista, 2016a).

The main social media platforms used in 2016, as well as their primary functions, are: YouTube, a video sharing network; Twitter, a text-based platform; Instagram, an image sharing platform; Facebook, a text, video and image sharing network; Snapchat, a video sharing platform; and Periscope, a live video streaming platform.

Gang activity on social media platforms

Data from surveys, interviews and internet content analyses confirm that gangs are online and using social media (King, Walpole, and Lamon, 2007; Decker and Pyrooz, 2011, 2012; Van Hellemont, 2012; Knox, 2011; Decary-Hetu & Morselli, 2011; Morselli & Decary-Hetu, 2013; Shela-Shayovitz, 2012; Pyrooz et al., 2015). Gang members use the internet for a variety of reasons, which include making incendiary remarks about rival gang members, inciting challenges and dares, recruitment, flaunting illegal substances or weapons, uploading

videos of fights, watching gang-related music videos, and generally promoting gang culture (Decary-Heru and Morselli, 2011; Decker and Pyrooz, 2011; Hanser, 2011; O'Deane, 2011; Patton et al., 2013; Patton et al., 2016a, 2016b; Sela-Shayovitz, 2012; Womer and Bunker 2010). Research suggests more organised gangs are more likely to use the internet (Moule, Pyrooz and Decker, 2014) and, to some extent, social media is reconstituting gang members' criminal and routine activities (Pyrooz, Decker and Moule, 2015; Sela-Shayovitz, Pyrooz and Decker, 2016). To provide a comprehensive review of the literature to date, however, the scope of this chapter is restricted to 'cyberviolence' (Holt and Bossler, 2014), and, more specifically, the links between gang members' online activities and offline violence. The following sections therefore highlight various forms of gang-related social media activity that research has found to be acting as a catalyst and trigger for serious incidents of violence in real life.

Internet banging

In the real world of gangs, collective identification of threats, both real or perceived, lead to 'mobilizing events' for violence, such as gang-related graffiti, 'trash talk', or incursion on rival territory (Decker, 1996: 262). In the virtual word, graffiti, slander, and the protection of territory take new forms, but the fundamental elements and aims remain broadly analogous (Haut, 2014: 24). Gang members can post the equivalent of graffiti on rivals' Facebook walls or Twitter feeds, for instance, send messages and emails that denigrate other gangs, or infiltrate rival webpages and disrupt their chat forums (Moule et al., 2016). Such actions are examples of 'internet banging' that can potentially escalate gang hostilities and stimulate violent retaliation in the real world (Patton, Eschmann, and Butler, 2013; Patton et al., 2014).

Music videos

For over a decade, gangs have been using social media platforms, such as YouTube, to promote gang music videos (Haut, 2014; Johnson and Schell-Busey, 2016). Currently, in the UK and the US, these videos typically sit within the music genres of 'drill' or 'trap-rap' (Densley, 2012a; Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2016; Storrod and Densley, 2016). Many are filmed at night, either in an area associated with the gang or in a rival's territory, both of which are typically identifiable through the inclusion of street signs or local landmarks in the video shots. Although the content of some of these videos is confined only to a raw reflection of the violence that is characteristic of gang life (Patton et al., 2013), many go beyond this by including specific threats to stab or shoot members of rival gangs, as well as incendiary remarks about recent incidents in which members of a rival gang have been seriously injured or killed (Johnson and Schell-Busey, 2016). Whilst some researchers have argued that the content of gang music videos, at least in the UK, had shifted away from violence and towards boasts about the amount of money gangs were making through drug distribution (Storrod and Densley, 2016), others suggest that the glorification of violence remains a central component of the content of these videos (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2016).

Consistent with the well-established 'cycle of gang violence' (Decker, Melde and Pyrooz, 2013: 385), recent research has found that this type of online content serves as a catalyst for violence in the offline world (Moule et al., 2016). Intentionally or not, such videos 'flame wars' (Johnson and Schell-Busey, 2016: 42) by challenging the status and reputation of particular gang members, and, consistent with the 'code of the street' (Anderson, 1999), subsequently provoking some form of retaliation. In some cases, retaliation may take the form of a response music video that includes similar threats of violence or provocative remarks about recent incidents in which opposing gang members have been injured or killed. In others, revenge comes in the form of real-world violence that often proves to be an

effective tactic for gang members to protect or enhance their status and reputation (Densley, 2012b; Harding, 2014).

The perspective commonly provided by gang members and many of those who enjoy watching these music videos is that they play no role in influencing real-world attitudes and behaviours. Instead, they simply constitute a creative lens that provides an insight into the violent realities of gang rivalries. Gang members have argued that making music videos is a fun, artistic endeavour that usually constitutes an attempt to launch professional music careers as a means of ultimately escaping the violence of gang life (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2016). Increasingly, however, the courts have not accepted this view. In May 2016, for example, whilst imposing life sentences on four men for the murder of a rival gang member in the UK, Judge Rebecca Poulet QC described gang music videos on social media as being 'at the heart of [the fatal] attack' (Kirk, 2016a). Moreover, some gang members themselves have admitted that the provocative content of these music videos does fuel violence and that they are aware that the police and the courts are using social media content as evidence to charge and convict, but that the benefits from featuring in these videos – the potential for status, fame and money – outweigh the risks (Decary-Hetu and Morselli, 2011; Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2016; Lim et al., 2013).

Theft and trespassing

Whilst instances of rival gang members attacking one another and stealing one another's property have long been documented (Thrasher, 1927), because of the recent advent of smart phone technology, evidence of these activities can now be generated through photographs or videos that can then be uploaded onto social media platforms to further the humiliation of rival gang members. A recent UK study, for example, found one instance in which a gang of young people attacked a young man associated with a rival gang, stole his motorcycle, and

subsequently live-streamed themselves driving the stolen vehicle around their own estate on the social media application, Periscope (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2016). During the live video, they mocked the victim and challenged him and his gang to cross territorial boundaries to reclaim the property they had stolen. The same study found that both young people and professionals reported that this type of online content often triggered violent reprisals in real life, because gang members could not risk the damage that could be done to their reputations by ignoring these challenges.

Gang-involved young people are also bolstering their status and reputation by engaging in activity that supposedly constitutes trespassing into areas associated with rival gangs (Densley, 2012a; Van Hellemont, 2012). While research suggests that the primary intent of young people going into perceived hostile areas is to attack members of rival gangs, if potential victims cannot be found then smart phones are being used to take videos and photographs that involve displays of disrespect, such as making gang hand gestures or urinating on prominent street signs (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2016). Young people upload this content onto social media platforms to boost their status and reputation – or to use a term used by Sandberg (2008), Sandberg and Peterson (2011) and Harding (2014), their 'street capital' – as evidence of the fact that they are not afraid to enter areas which supposedly belong to rival gangs. In addition, this type of content is designed to diminish the 'street capital' of the young people affiliated with the area in question – to denigrate, taunt, and provoke retaliatory violence (Harding, 2014). As with music videos uploaded to social media platforms, digital evidence of supposed 'trespass' has also been used in recent court cases in the UK. In October 2016, for example, during an ongoing trial for a gang-related murder, the prosecution cited content uploaded to Snapchat, which displayed a supposed act of trespass into rival gang territory, as being one of the key triggers for the fatal stabbing for a rival gang member (Kirk, 2016b).

Idealised identities and violence

A notable amount of 'impression management', per Goffman (1959), occurs among gang members online (Van Hellemont, 2012). Social media platforms enable people to construct 'web enhanced' identities that often deviate from their offline personas (Pyrooz, Decker and Moule, 2015). People may chop away and hide parts of their lives they do not wish to share with others, for example, and select and highlight other parts which they do. Unsurprisingly, people's choices about what to share on social media are not random; people do not typically provide representative portraits of the lives they live offline (Greenfield, 2014). Gang members tend to mask their insecurities or lack of self-confidence by uploading images to social media that convey power and status (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2016). This may involve sharing photos and videos that portray a moneyed lifestyle, characterised by designer clothes, expensive jewellery and luxury cars. In addition, gang members may try to bolster their status and reputation as readily violent and aggressive individuals by uploading photos and videos that display knives or guns as overt displays of power (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2016; Oliver, 2006; Womer and Bunker, 2010). Idealised identities can be used by gang members as a cover for high levels of anxiety and insecurity, which may stem in large part from growing up in areas of socioeconomic deprivation as well as experiences of childhood trauma that affect a disproportionate number of young people who later become involved in gangs (Dmitrieva et al., 2014; Petering, 2016; Toy, 2016).

The epitome of the aggressive masculinity characteristic of gang members' online identities (Womer and Bunker, 2010) can be seen in the form of real life incidents of serious violence being recorded and broadcast over social media platforms. Seemingly irrational self-incrimination may instead be perfectly rational when considered in the gang context, because photographs and videos present some of the most effective evidence to authenticate one's 'criminal credentials' and solidify one's reputation for violence (Densley, 2015). Many

incidents of gang-related violence that are recorded and broadcast online take place in the community, often involving additional acts of humiliation, for example, stripping the victim of their clothes or coercing them into denouncing their own gang (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney 2016). Serious incidents of violence have also been broadcast live from within prisons by those who have obtained access to smart phones (Storrod and Densley, 2016). These prison broadcasts can be particularly effective in boosting gang members' status and reputation because they not only provide evidence of dominance over rivals, but also the ability of gang-involved prisoners to flaunt prison rules such as the prohibition of mobile phones. Social media, therefore, makes public what was once private and contributes to the gang's mythic system of violence, which, in turn, can serve to trigger further violence in real life (Moule et al., 2016).

Online activity as a catalyst and trigger for offline violence

In a recent study, Moule et al. (2016) found that individuals who reported ever being a member of a gang were more likely to have engaged in online-offline violence than their non-gang counterparts. The question is, why? What makes the various forms of online gang-related activity on social media platforms described above effective in catalysing and triggering serious incidents of offline violence? Whilst the answer to this question is not straightforward, there appear to be at least three important factors: a pervasive need for external validation prompted by increased time spent on social media and subsequent investment in online identities, the enhanced audience sizes that are facilitated by social media, and the 'reach' of online content moving beyond a single point in time and space.

Identity and external validation

Time spent on social media is diluting many people's focus on the here and now, in favour of a future-oriented focus that involves capturing photographic and video evidence of particular

experiences to share with others (Fishwick, 2016; Greenfield, 2014). Gang members are no exception, with self-esteem largely being based not on what people think about themselves, but on what others think about them (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2016). Whilst external validation (approval by others) may have mattered to people long before social media platforms emerged, this process is becoming continuous and unrelenting in an age of online technology (Bergman et al., 2011). Moreover, it is the gap between gang members' idealised online identities and the realities of their offline lives that enhances the perceived need for external validation.

On an hour-by-hour or even minute-by-minute basis, the posts of gang members (as with people not involved in gangs) are uploaded to social media and their popularity simplistically and objectively quantified through the number of views, 'likes' and positive or negatives comments they receive. On social media platforms such as Periscope, for example, users frequently employ the following phrases: 'light it up', a request that viewers repeatedly tap a heart icon that represents approval for the video content; 'swipe and invite', a request that existing viewers invite additional people to watch the current stream; and 'follow me up', a request designed to hook viewers into future posts. Essentially, social media incentivises users to upload whatever content proves to be most popular in the virtual sphere of interconnected social media platforms. In relation to gang members, this involves content that often displays or provokes serious incidents of violence in real life (Storrod and Densley, 2016).

Enhanced audiences

Although online incidents of taunting and disrespect confined to small audiences may trigger face-to-face violence, large audiences seem to make real-life retaliation more likely. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this in the literature to-date is the significant concern shown by

young people and professionals around drill music videos, which in the US and UK can be produced and promoted by professional online music channels and receive in excess of one million views (DGaines1234, 2012; Link Up TV, 2016; Storrod and Densley, 2016; Tempaboi06, 2014). With only relatively small numbers of gang members in the UK – the number of London gang members was recently estimated at around 3,600 (Home Office, 2016) – this prompts the question of who makes up these large audience counts. One prominent UK gang (as defined by the Metropolitan Police 'Trident (gangs) Matrix' (Home Office, 2015)) has received a number of prestigious music awards and nominations for their videos (Ike, 2016), suggesting there is a market for gang-related content. The use of the internet as a record label is therefore a potentially lucrative business prospect for gang members (Patterson, 2014; Storrod and Densley, 2016). On some social media platforms, such as Periscope and Instagram, the accounts of people who have viewed a particular photo or video are openly displayed. Research suggests that viewers of these videos and other gang-related content are predominantly teenage boys and girls (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2016).

Consistent with 'big gang theory' (Felson, 2006), even passive observers give material strength to gangs by demonstrating strength in numbers (Densley, 2012b: 309). As these music videos that taunt and provoke rival gangs members are seen by large numbers of people, moreover, the perceived reputational stakes are particularly high. Videos showing young people trespassing into areas associated with rival gangs, stealing the property of rival gang members, or engaging in violence, can also receive sizable audiences. Often this is the result of the fluidity with which online content can be transferred and disseminated over multiple social media platforms. What is initially uploaded onto one platform, can be

screenshotted[1], recorded and later disseminated over others, reaching new and enhanced audiences.

Beyond single points of time and space

Gang members' use of social media has resulted in a convergence of physical and digital space. As Lane (2016) observes, relations on the street now unfold through media as well as through people. Media about people and events on the street reconfigure face-to-face interactions, and vice versa, creating a digital overlay, or 'digital street', that is as meaningful and consequential as the concrete street (Lane, 2016). In addition to this enhanced audience factor, therefore, social media facilitates the transformation of events which would otherwise be confined to a single point in space and time into those that can be replayed endlessly by anyone, anywhere, provided they have the requisite technology. This makes it much more difficult for gang members to ignore or overlook instances of disrespect that are shared over social media platforms. Whereas the memory of particular events could fade with the passage of time prior to the advent of online platforms, content on social media now has a lingering nature because of its potential to continually resurface in the future. The 'end of forgetting' (Rosen, 2010) creates new opportunities for informal social control within the gang, with social media facilitating the monitoring and enforcement of social norms and behaviours (see Moule et al., 2014). Embarrassing or incriminating content can thus become 'online collateral' for 'hostage taking' that can be used to bind people to the gang, or sanction, coerce, and control them (Storrod and Densley, 2016: 13).

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[1] Screenshotting (or screen capturing) refers to the process of copying an image that is displayed on a computer or smart phone at any one time.

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter has examined recent research that evidences the links between online gang activity and offline violence. The result of all three factors discussed above – the increased importance of external validation, enhanced audiences, and incidents now being stretched beyond a single point in time and space – is that gang members have more to gain from uploading content to these platforms that displays or provokes gang-related violence. Prior to online social media, news about these incidents could spread by word of mouth to people who were not immediately present. There is a significant difference between this, however, and the current situation in which visceral displays of violence and provocation are captured by photographic and video evidence and shared online, to be seen not only by other gang members, but also many other non-gang affiliated people who deliberately or inadvertently access this content. Therefore, whilst committing violence or theft on a rival gang member, or trespassing into rival gang territory, may have earned gang members a certain degree of status and respect before the advent of social media, the perceived reputational rewards are now much greater. While social media incentivises gang members to upload content that displays or provokes violence, this online content can impose further social pressure on the gang member(s) being victimised or targeted to retaliate, so as to protect or bolster their own reputation that has been challenged. The initial uploaders therefore become prone to reactive acts of violence and provocation, which in turn are often recorded and broadcast over social media, creating vicious cycles of retaliation (Moule et al., 2016).

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider appropriate policy and practice responses in-depth, it is worth noting that intervention programs such as Cure Violence (Ransford et al., 2012), which work to predict and prevent violence 'contagion' (e.g., Loftin, 1984; Zeoli et al., 2014), may benefit from an online component: digital violence interrupters,

for example, who can mediate conflict online, but also traditional violence interrupters, for example, youth outreach workers, who can mediate conflict in person in the places depicted online (Patton et al., 2016). There are important data protection and privacy issues to consider here, not to mention the potential for disproportionate contact with black and minority ethnic communities (Behrman, 2015). It is worth noting, however, that law enforcement has already used photos and videos posted on social media sites to investigate and gather evidence of gang violence, as well as to successfully prosecute individuals of gang-related crimes (Marisco, 2009). The social media provider, YouTube, has worked with police in the past to identify gang members and their illegal activities (Hanser, 2011). We can harness the power of 'big data' to not only highlight the digital footprint of the gang, but to support those ensnared in its web (Wijeratne et al., 2015).

Looking ahead, there are numerous issues in this area that warrant further attention. Social media not only allows old questions to be addressed using new methods, but also prompts new questions. The extent to which social media is a causal or contingent factor in offline violence, for example, is an open and empirical question that merits further research. We are only just beginning to appreciate and theoretically account for the impact of social media on group processes that are central to understanding collective violence (Moule et al., 2016). Likewise, how much the victim-offender overlap that exists in conventional gang life (see Pyrooz et al., 2014) translates to gang life online will require careful unpacking. Whilst gang research that utilises data from social media is still in its infancy, there can be little doubt about the direction of travel. Social media is playing an increasingly influential role in the lives of many people around the world, including those involved in gangs; it will therefore continue to constitute an important tool for gang scholars moving forward (Pyrooz et al., 2016).

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