

# When a 1981 Diary Meets Twitter: Reclaiming a teenage girl's ordinary experience of the Northern Irish Troubles

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## ABSTRACT

*The Northern Irish Troubles (1969-1998) have been the focus of many cross-disciplinary literature and official and unofficial storytelling projects. When reviewing the accounts produced by these studies and initiatives it is visible that less focus has been paid to the everyday experiences of the Troubles, particularly to a young girl's perspective of them.*

## Introduction

In this paper we take an unusual object of study: a Twitter account set up by Bronagh McAtasney who recently rediscovered her 1981 teenage diary and has been tweeting entries from it since. By carrying out a textual analysis of her tweets and complementing it with an analysis of the original diary and one structured interview with McAtasney, our aim is twofold: firstly, we seek to re-claim an often marginalised experience of the conflict, that of a teenage girl; secondly, we explore and suggest the different roles personal forms of writing can play in Northern Ireland's current transition to peace.

The findings show that the very banality of her experiences can function as a counter-narrative to the overheard (male) heroic accounts of the conflict, adding a female and young perspective. Furthermore, despite its reliance on memory, the diary/tweets offer a welcome addition to historical accounts of the conflict, which have lacked plurality. As a result, the diary plays the important role of archival material and

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contributes to past and current official and unofficial storytelling initiatives. This potential can be maximised through the use of popular digital tools, such as Twitter, which provide a new framework from which recollection and memory can be channelled.

Five years ago, my sister gave me my 1981 diary, found at the back of a drawer. We read it together and laughed at the old memories and the preciousness of 13-year-old me but I realised there was more to it than family stories. In between entries about riding my bike around Newry, or proclaiming my love for Suggs [from the band Madness] there were mentions of death, tragedy and hunger strikers. Just passing thoughts most of the time – five soldiers killed here, a Catholic shot there. In early summer, though, it became more pervading as one after another hunger strikers died.

And yet, the drama of my own life was far more important to me really. I recorded these events because they were all around me but at the time I was really far more concerned about whether or not I would get a Valentine's card, or if the boys would be hanging about outside Woolworths. No matter what was going on around us, we were teenagers first and foremost, as tormented by the nuances of teenage life as any 13-year-old in Glasgow, Manchester or indeed anywhere else in the western world.<sup>1</sup>

When Bronagh McAtasney recently rediscovered her teenage diary, written during a significant period of contemporary Irish history, she also unearthed a powerful and under told narrative – that of a 13 year-old girl, living in rural Northern Ireland, struggling to become a woman, fanatical about pop music, but also mindful of the uncertainty that existed around her.

The diary was written at the height of the conflict euphemistically called the 'Troubles' (1968-1998)<sup>2</sup>, and more precisely in 1981, the year of the famous Republican hunger strike that would not only lead to the death of 10 prisoners but also change the course

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<sup>1</sup> Oonagh Murphy, 'Hunger Strikes and Teenage Angst – the World of @NrnIrnrnGirl1981', The Irish Times, 29 February 2016, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/hunger-strikes-and-teenage-angst-the-world-of-nrnirnrngirl1981-1.2552470>. Accessed 1 Jan 2019.

<sup>2</sup> The conflict can be categorised by 'systematic and sustained abuses of human rights by the British State, and a systematic blurring, by all protagonists of violence, of the categories of armed combatants and unarmed civilians'. Graham Dawson, *Making Peace with the Past? Memory Trauma and the Irish Troubles* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). P. 9. It had a death toll of nearly 4,000 and left over 40,000 injured. David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (New Amsterdam Books, 2002).

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of the conflict.<sup>3</sup> Written as a private memoir, it reflects the internal monologue of a teenage girl becoming a woman, in parallel to the growing civil unrest and political uncertainty happening around her.

As interesting as the uncovering of the diary is in its own right, it is the corresponding series of contemporary but chronological tweets which were written in response to this discovery that this paper focuses on, revealing an important example of how digital technologies can provide a platform for marginalised voices to be heard and also become an invaluable educational tool to learn about war in post-conflict societies.

Since January 2013, McAtasney has tweeted daily snippets of her teenage diary through the account @NrnlnGirl1981. The Twitter biography describes the account as 'Teenage angst, boys and hunger strikes. The life of a 13-year-old in Northern Ireland. My 1981 diary entries tweeted daily'. She originally choose to start tweeting her diary 'as a bit of fun' unaware of the wider attention it would attract beyond her immediate group of friends and some curious onlookers'. McAtasney was not a writer nor an artist when she began tweeting her diary; she worked as an administrator, was a mum and she didn't tweet for literary acclaim, but because she thought her diary was funny, embarrassing, and nostalgic. It was a reason to reach out to old friends. Twitter was a platform that McAtasney already had a personal account on, and she knew how it worked, there was no great academic or literary analysis of appropriate platforms, instead she simply opened an account and started tweeting.<sup>4</sup> When the Arts Council of Northern Ireland contacted her in 2015 to discuss supporting the development of her work, and explained its literary significance, she began to think about it within the context of wider academic concepts such as public memory. In 2016 an article on the diary, Twitter account and experience of McAtasney was published in the *Irish Times*.<sup>5</sup> In 2017 BBC Northern Ireland commissioned a series of articles and videos based on the diary which sought to link the experience of an individual to their wider archive.<sup>6</sup> As of October 2018, her Twitter account has over 4,500 followers and over 2,560 tweets. These outcomes, and this article were not in McAtasney's initial plans of a personal project from the comfort of her own sofa.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on this area see Chris Ryder, *Inside the Maze: The Untold Story of the Northern Ireland Prison Service* (New York: Methuen, 2000); Nell McCafferty, *The Armagh Women* (Dublin: Co-Op Books, 1981); Raymond Murray, *Hard Time: Armagh Gaol, 1971-1986* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1998); Mary Corcoran, *Out of Order: The Political Imprisonment of Women in Northern Ireland, 1972-1999* (Devon: Willan Publishing, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Interview with author.

<sup>5</sup> Murphy, 'Hunger Strikes and Teenage Angst – the World of @NrnlnGirl1981'

<sup>6</sup> BBC - What Was Your Ma Doing When She Was Your Age?

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/5dw8IGXwpqB19VFd6rZqZ3m/what-was-your-ma-doing-when-she-was-your-age>. Accessed 1 January 2019.

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With followers ranging from politicians to teachers and approaches being made from TV producers and playwrights, it is visible that there is appetite for this neglected story – one that places politics, human interest and popular culture on an equal footing in the mind of a teenage girl in 1981. This appetite has been further confirmed with the success of the Channel 4 series *Derry Girls* in 2017. Written by Northern Irish author Lisa McGee, this comedy focuses on the life of four teenagers set in Derry/Londonderry at the tail end of the Troubles in the 1990s. The series drew an average audience of 2.5 million an episode and became Channel 4's highest-rated comedy launch since Ricky Gervais's *Derek*, five years ago.<sup>7</sup>

Based on a textual analysis of the tweets and complemented by an analysis her diary entries and one structured interview via email with McAtasney, this article seeks to broaden our existing understanding of the conflict through 'other stuff', i.e. personal writings during the hunger strike period by a frequently marginalised voice, that of an ordinary, teenage girl. This article also situates McAtasney's practice of diary-writing, and later tweeting entries from it, within academic debates about its role in not only uncovering hidden memories of conflicts but also in furthering peace processes. We argue that while her diary acts as a powerful historical archival document revealing a marginalised voice, her retelling through tweets provides a new framework from which recollection and memory can be channelled to a large audience. We hope to highlight the power of personal stories found in a diary in recovering the plurality of everyday experiences of conflict.

We begin by reviewing cross-disciplinary scholarly work and official and unofficial storytelling initiatives to provide an overview of how the Troubles have been studied, analysed and represented. We then move to a discussion about the role of memory in reclaiming marginalised voices in historical accounts. We finish with an analysis of her tweets to show the many roles and lessons that can be learnt from ordinary stories of conflict and from personal written sources such as diaries and Twitter. We would encourage readers to read this article whilst simultaneously engaging with the live and publicly available @NrnlnGirl1981 Twitter account. This presents the reader with the rare opportunity to engage with the academic analysis contained in this article alongside the raw data which serves as our site of research.

### **Studying and Representing the Troubles**

The Irish Troubles is a period of history that has been studied extensively. Roger MacGinty et al. state that Northern Ireland was a somewhat perfect conflict for

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<sup>7</sup> Shilpa Ganatra, 'How Derry Girls Became an Instant Sitcom Classic', *The Guardian*, 13 February 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/feb/13/derry-girls-instant-sitcom-classic-schoolgirls-northern-ireland>. Accessed 1 January 2019.

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researchers who chose Northern Ireland over other more difficult and indeed dangerous civil conflicts such as Darfur, Chechnya or Burma. They describe the Northern Ireland conflict as being comparatively safe and accessible for Western journalists to cover.<sup>8</sup>

It is not surprising then to see the many different paths taken by scholars within a wide range of academic disciplines. To cite a few examples, there is growing scholarship within Film Studies examining how different aspects of the Troubles have been represented in films.<sup>9</sup> Oral History and History scholars have shown how the conflict affected communities and individuals in different ways.<sup>10</sup> Women Studies and Feminist Studies have focused on uncovering women's marginalised experiences and have highlighted their active roles inside and outside their homes as combatants, activists and breadwinners.<sup>11</sup> Scholars within Museum Studies and Archaeology have looked at issues regarding the preservation, collection and display of contested narratives of the past and the contentious role of heritage sites.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Roger Mac Ginty, Orla T. Muldoon, and Neil Ferguson, 'No War, No Peace: Northern Ireland after the Agreement' in *Political Psychology*, Vol. 28, no. 1 (2007) pp. 1–11.

<sup>9</sup> Megan Sullivan, *Irish Women and Cinema: 1980-1990* (Florida: NOVA Southeastern University, 2001); Brian McIlroy, *Shooting to Kill: Filmmaking and the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland* (Wiltshire: Flicks Books, 1998); John Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland: Film, Culture and Politics* (London: BFI, 2006); Laura Aguiar, "'We Were There': The Women of the Maze and Long Kesh Prison: Collaborative Filmmaking in Transitional Northern Ireland.' (PhD, Queen's University Belfast, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Sharon Macdonald, Pat Holden, and Shirley Ardener, eds., *Images of Women in Peace and War: Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspectives* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Mary Corcoran, *Out of Order: The Political Imprisonment of Women in Northern Ireland, 1972-1999* (London: Routledge, 2006); Rachel Ward, *Women, Unionism and Loyalism in Northern Ireland: From 'tea-Makers' to Political Actors* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Sharon Macdonald, Pat Holden, and Shirley Ardener, eds., *Images of Women in Peace and War: Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspectives* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Mary Corcoran, *Out of Order: The Political Imprisonment of Women in Northern Ireland, 1972-1999* (London: Routledge, 2006); Rachel Ward, *Women, Unionism and Loyalism in Northern Ireland: From 'tea-Makers' to Political Actors* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Crooke, 'Museums and Community', in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon MacDonald (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 170–85; Laura McAttackney 'The Negotiation of Identity at Shared Sites: Long Kesh/Maze Prison Site, Northern Ireland' in *Cultural Landscapes in the 21st Century* (UNESCO University and Heritage 10th International Seminar, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2005); Brian Graham and Sara

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The Troubles have also been a key feature in many official and unofficial storytelling initiatives in Northern Ireland. The mid-1990s witnessed not only the peace process finally getting underway, but also a proliferation of projects dealing with the conflict.

Official initiatives include, quite early in the peace process, the report *We Will Remember Them* (1998) which looked at 'possible ways to recognise the pain and suffering felt by victims of violence arising from the troubles'<sup>13</sup>. There have also been legally based initiatives, with the most notorious, lengthy, and costly being the *Saville Inquiry*, which examined the infamous Bloody Sunday.<sup>14</sup> The inquiry established that the British army had shot and killed unarmed innocent civilians and led to an official apology by the British Prime Minister David Cameron.

When it comes to collecting and exhibiting 'The Troubles', for instance, a number of approaches have been taken not only by museums, such as The Ulster Museum, the Police Museum, and the Irish Republican History Museum, but also by grassroots, cross-community projects. These initiatives have challenged official narratives through photography, oral history, exhibition, theatre and film and have focused on personal testimonies (oral and written). To name a few to exemplify this point: *An Crann 'The Tree'* (1994-2001) used drama, textiles, creative writing and photography to engage participants to talk about the past. The Playhouse Theatre's *Theatre of Witness Programme* produced plays where people performed their own stories of trauma. These were filmed and turned into documentary films. Personal testimonies have been produced by a number of projects such as *The Ardoyne Commemoration Project* (2002), the *Duchas Oral History Archive* (2000), *Epilogues* (2005), and *The Prisons Memory Archive* (2006), and the travelling exhibition *Everyday Objects Transformed by the Conflict* (2012-2014).

Film production in Northern Ireland has also had a strong focus on depicting the Troubles to the point that John Hill notes that the conflict has been 'the distinctive feature' of fiction and non-fiction films, making it difficult to set a film 'that does not

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McDowell, 'Meaning in the Maze: The Heritage of Long Kesh', *Cultural Geographies*, Vol. 14, no. 3 (July 2007) pp. 343–68.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Bloomfield, 'We Will Remember Them' (Northern Ireland Victims Commissioner, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> This is when a peaceful civil rights march turned into bloodshed when British soldiers opened fire against unarmed protesters in the Bogside area of Derry/Londonderry. Thirteen civilians were killed on the day (one person died a month after the event, and as such the death toll commonly attributed to Bloody Sunday is fourteen civilians), fourteen more were injured and paramilitary activity escalated. Douglas Murray, *Bloody Sunday: Truth, Lies and the Saville Inquiry* (Biteback Publishing, 2011). p. 3.

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deal with the impact of the conflict in some way or other'.<sup>15</sup> From as early as *The Violent Enemy* to the more recently *Maze*, the Troubles continue to trigger interest from independent filmmakers and mainstream film production companies.<sup>16</sup>

### **Situating McAtasney's Personal Testimony**

What all of these scholarly works and grassroots storytelling initiatives have in common is that they have uncovered and given voice to plural accounts of conflict which were rarely heard during the many years of conflict. They contrast with mainstream media practices which manipulated public perceptions and marginalized the conflict in the minds of British public through vetoes, censorship of certain voices and careful choice of words.<sup>17</sup>

However, they also share another feature: the focus on gathering and disseminating stories from (and about) combatants and victims. Very little has been heard about the everyday lived experiences of those on the periphery of this conflict, particularly children and adolescents with the exception of Bill Rolston's 2011 book *Children of the Revolution*.<sup>18</sup> One reason for this absence, suggested by Ed Gains, is due to ethical concerns around the researcher finding out too much information. For example, a child could end up disclosing parents' involvement in a paramilitary group or knowledge of participation in research could lead to physical threat.<sup>19</sup> In identifying a gap in research on children and conflict in Northern Ireland, Orla Muldoon identifies researcher bias as a key concern— researchers research what is of interest to them, as such we can see how the peripheral experience of conflict is easily overlooked.<sup>20</sup>

In popular culture, there have not been many representations of the 'Children of the Troubles' or indeed the children born after the ceasefire, what McKee terms the 'Ceasefire Babies' a group of young people growing up in a complex and unique environment.<sup>21</sup> The rare exceptions to this being the contemporary (post 1998) films *After '68*, *Mickybo and Me* and *Good Vibrations* and more recently *Derry Girls*. Therefore, in the bloody and multifaceted story of Northern Ireland paramilitaries, politicians and

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<sup>15</sup> Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland*, p. 242.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Burke, *Maze* (Lionsgate Home Entertainment, 2017); Wilfred Eades and Don Sharp, *The Violent Enemy* (Group W Productions, 1969).

<sup>18</sup> Bill Rolston and David Miller, eds., *War and Words: The Northern Ireland Media Reader* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Bill Rolston, *Children of the Revolution: The Lives of Sons and Daughters of Activists in Northern Ireland*, (Derry/Londonderry: Guildhall Press, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Macdonald, Holden, and Ardener, *Images of Women in Peace and War*, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Orla T. Muldoon, 'Children of the Troubles: The Impact of Political Violence in Northern Ireland', *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 60, no. 3 (September 2004) pp. 453–68.

<sup>21</sup> Muldoon, 'Children of the Troubles'.

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political activists from Bobby Sands to Ian Paisley remain situated as the lead protagonists while those existing on the periphery of this conflict, such as Bronagh McAtasney, often do not even make the footnotes. Therefore, we hope that by uncovering and analyzing her experiences – conveyed to us through her tweets – this paper can contribute in an important way to this growing body of work and will hopefully open up to more academic and artistic interest in ordinary experiences of the conflict.

This task is even more timely given the fact that, despite (great) efforts by many researchers and grassroots storytellers and the success of Derry Girls, available material on the Troubles remains strongly focused on male paramilitarism. However, this is not Northern Ireland's fault; one does not have to dig too far into war history or war cinema to find evidence that 'personalized symbols of pain and suffering have tended to become embodied in women, while institutional repressive mechanisms have been for the most part connected to men'.<sup>22</sup> As a result, women's diverse experiences before, during and after warfare have often been relegated to absence, silence and marginality in both historical and filmic discourse.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, it is the weaving of the banal experiences of teenage and female life with the political that makes McAtasney's personal testimony unique when it comes to historical accounts of the Troubles. As a male-centred history, particularly focused on paramilitarism, activism and politics, her writings as a teenage woman broaden our existing understanding of this country which has been the object of interest by many academic and storytellers for so many years – and will probably continue to be so for more years to come.

### The Research

From January 2014 to January 2016 we analysed over 1,000 Tweets posted by McAtasney's pseudonym @NrnlnrnlGirl1981. We also analysed her original diary entries, consisting of 365 pages. As Uwe Flick notes, 'sampling decision always fluctuate between the aims of covering as wide a field as possible and of doing analyses which are deep as possible',<sup>24</sup> therefore, our sample was not defined in advance, but chosen gradually according to its relevance to the case we are making for McAtasney's diary to answer the following questions:

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<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* (U of Minnesota Press, 2003) p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> Macdonald, Holden, and Ardener, *Images of Women in Peace and War*; Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory*; Ward, *Women, Unionism and Loyalty in Northern Ireland: From 'tea-Makers' to Political Actors*; Alison, Miranda, *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-National Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (London: Sage, 2009) p. 123.

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1. Production: From Diary to Twitter:
  - Who has produced these Tweets, for which purpose and for whom?
  - How does the author choose which diary entries will be tweeted and which will be left out? Are there any reasons behind the dates on which the author tweets?
  - Why did the author choose to turn her diary into tweets and not into more traditional formats, such as books or films?
2. Content: Analysis and Impact
  - What can the tweets reveal about people's everyday experiences of war?
  - To what extent can her tweets offer a counter-narrative to official and unofficial accounts of the Troubles?
  - How can these types of ordinary narratives contribute to the transitional period from violence to peace in Northern Ireland?

To answer these questions, we first conducted a textual analysis to map and understand how certain discourses were structured and how they produce certain knowledge. Narratives can provide 'a framework in which experiences may be located, presented and evaluated.'<sup>25</sup> The type of textual analysis we employed here focused more on the content of the tweets, its subject matter (McAtasney) and its social rather than linguistic organisation. We include here quotes from her diaries, her tweets and from the interview we conducted with her.

However, Flick warns that 'as a stand-alone method, analysing documents gives you a very specific and sometimes limited approach to experiences and processes'.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, we complemented our textual analysis with one structured email interview with McAtasney to help us better interpret her tweets. We have deliberately left out an analysis of followers' responses to her tweets and opted to focus solely on the meanings and lessons that can be drawn from the content of the tweets. Hence, as this research answers questions concerning the production stage, it opens up to research on the reception stage. So, what lessons can be drawn from McAtasney's Tweets?

### **From Diary to Tweets**

Personal testimonies, gathered mostly via oral history and to a lesser extent via diary writing, have become popular as a way of trying to supplement 'gaps' in archival collections, or in knowledge of a particular area or field of study. For instance, in Clare O'Kane's research on rural women in Ireland, she notes that 'It is in local history, oral testimony, memoir and autobiography that the voices of women in rural Northern Ireland are rarely heard' (in McIntosh and Urquhart 2010, 87). Whilst official

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 81.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 261.

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documents and historical accounts can tell us what happened, personal testimonies can go further and also tell us what it felt like.

For the purpose of our analysis, it is important to distinguish between personal testimonies gathered via oral history (as the result of an interview) and the personal narrative found in a diary. Diaries are personal and private and offer the freedom to surface, express, explore and develop ideas without the restrictions, fears, and assessments of external observers. Former US president Barack Obama stated in an interview that writing while he was in the White House 'was the way I sorted through a lot of crosscurrents in my life — race, class, family. And I genuinely believe that it was part of the way in which I was able to integrate all these pieces of myself into something relatively whole'.<sup>27</sup> As Maria Luddy notes, 'It is perhaps only in the personal diaries and letters of women that we find a true immediate reflection of women about themselves, their own feelings and lives'.<sup>28</sup> These reflections are selected and censored by the writer herself who writes in a personal space with little technology (generally a pen/pencil and the diary and more recently a computer) as an everyday activity or to capture experiences of a particular moment in time, though in some cases they can be written as reflections afterwards.

Oral history testimonies, on the other hand, can be captured in many different ways and more often than not are collected with the aim to be shared publicly. In most cases they are conducted by researchers, filmmakers, etc and they can be written, audio recorded or filmed. Oral history is centred around the idea of disrupting the hegemonised power dynamics between interviewers and interviewees in more traditional scholarly practices and making the interviewing process a more shared and ethical experience for interviewees.<sup>29</sup> Oral Historians, thus, have accomplished this by adopting various approaches, including family-tree interviewing, single-issue testimony, focus groups, individual life story interview, and so forth.<sup>30</sup>

Despite its ethical efforts, the influence of the interviewer on the personal testimony must be acknowledged. Unlike diary writing which is an individual, private and reflexive practice, oral history testimony often involves at least two people and many things can come into play: the interviewees' answers can be influenced by the questions asked,

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<sup>27</sup> Gillian McIntosh and Diane Urquhart, eds., *Irish Women at War: The Twentieth Century* (Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2010) p. 87.

<sup>28</sup> Michiko Kakutani, 'Transcript: President Obama on What Books Mean to Him - The New York Times', 16 January 2017,

<sup>29</sup> Maria Luddy, *Women in Ireland, 1800-1918: A Documentary History* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> Michael H. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, SUNY Series in Oral and Public History (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

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the use of a camera or audio recorder can inhibit or distract interviewees, and interviewers must make sure to set aside preconceived structures and interpretations of their own.<sup>31</sup> Context can also influence the process as Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson rightly note: 'the methods taken for granted by oral historians in the "developed world" of the north can be wholly inappropriate for researchers in the South'.<sup>32</sup>

However, these differences do not mean that written testimony in the form of diaries inspires better reflexivity while audio or visual testimony, in the form of oral history interviews, does not. The above discussion highlights how the content of original sources such as diaries and oral testimony can be affected by the way it is collected. Indeed, one thing is capturing personal testimonies, another is making them accessible and available to the public and as in the collection process, there are also losses and gains.

Diaries and oral testimonies have been turned into exhibitions, books, films, virtual reality experiences and so forth. Turning memories of the past into tweets is a novel practice and this places McAtasney's tweets in a unique position for analysis. For instance, whilst in a filmed oral history interview we can get extra layers of meaning by looking at a person's body language, expression and tones, in an original diary we can learn a lot about a person's personality by examining the handwriting and choice of language. As McAtasney diary is available in the format of tweets, what is lost and what is gained in this transition?

One could argue that while the extra meanings particular to the physicality of the object, i.e. her handwriting, are lost, choosing a channel like Twitter has opened up not only new opportunities for self-representation, but also new collaborative prospects.

For Runa Benmayor, the digital world provides 'exciting new possibilities for representing, interpreting, archiving and teaching' and also is centred around key verbs such as 'enable, help, enhance, facilitate, promote'.<sup>33</sup> Hence, digital tools such as Twitter have potential for 'increasing understanding across generations, ethnicities and

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<sup>31</sup> There is an increasing participatory practice within Oral History and this is allowing Interviewees to act as both historians and sources, such as, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, Second edition (London; New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*. p. 116.

<sup>33</sup> Rinha Benmayor, 'Cyber-Teaching in the Oral History Classroom', in *The Oral History Reader*. p. 435.

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other divides' and 'as a tool in activist organizing, education, professional reflection and corporate communication'.<sup>34</sup>

Therefore, McAtasney has an unprecedented opportunity to build and nurture a personal audience and can have a much more direct, instant connection to her personal audience, perhaps in a much more profound way than she would have had if she her diary was subject of a film or a book.

### **The Ordinary versus the (Hypermasculine) Heroic**

Rather than being irrelevant, a narrative of the everyday provides us with a hook to support a non-partisan reading of lived experience during The Troubles. Stephen Johnstone talks about the art of the everyday sparking a 'distrust of the heroic and the spectacular' and argues that such work has dissident connotations because it provides an alternative to a constructed and bureaucratically controlled consumption of history and popular culture.<sup>35</sup>

If we look at the most internationally famous war-time diary, that of Anne Frank, we find another teenage girl recording her banal domestic experience amidst what were less than banal times. In our reading of her diary, we see her humanity rather than her religion: she is a child, a girl, and a teenager. The banality of her diary is what may make readers empathize and relate to her experience and, for much of the diary, the Holocaust is the background, not the foreground to her experience. Although referring to museums, Johnstone suggests that 'the everyday might be the common ground experience that allows' people 'to understand the effects of history on the private lives of those who were usually overlooked'<sup>36</sup>.

Everyday life is also captured in McAtasney's writing. It could be suggested that her work has 'a vaguely ethnographic aesthetic' in that it sits in parallel to, but also beyond, the constructed realms of art or history.<sup>37</sup> As a result, the focus on the everyday in her writing may help the contemporary reader to question what they know about the Troubles. It is perhaps timely to return to one of her more banal entries to consider the transformative potential of the everyday when understanding lived experience during civil conflict:

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 435.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Johnstone, *The Everyday: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London, Whitechapel, 2008) p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> Johnstone, *The Everyday*, p. 13

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

## A TEENAGE GIRL'S EXPERIENCE OF THE TROUBLES

Wednesday June 24

I got my hair cut in Phil's tonight. I think it's lovely. I can't wait to go in tomorrow. I love doing that. Most people say, "Did you get your hair cut?" I remember doing it in 2nd year. Great fun.<sup>38</sup>

And the banality of her experience of the Troubles was recognized by her when she was interviewed in 2016:

However my diary entry from June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1983 shows that at that time my biggest priority was my new haircut, something that I'm sure the international news crews failed to take an interest in. Looking at everyone else's hair, trying and failing to copy hairdos from Top of the Pops. Hair disasters like the perm that went wrong or thinking I could bleach my hair by using actual bleach. Peer pressure was nothing as bad as nowadays, but it was still there and badly-flicked hair could make or break a reputation in the classroom.<sup>39</sup>

Whilst the international headlines at the time represented a single, simplistic account of Northern Ireland of men starving themselves to death, bombs, shootings, and terrorism, this passage reminds us that life goes on as it always does in times of war, even if people took the long way round a bomb scare to get to work, families were searched by the security forces before going shopping, and children stepped around soldiers as they went to school.

Crucially McAtasney's audience was herself and she was writing about childish things to cement her thinking, understand her emotions and develop self-confidence around her daily experiences. However, her writing is reflective when it comes to lived experience, but more observational when it comes to wider political issues and events. The entry on which she seems most aware of politics perhaps is made on Tuesday the 5th of May 1981:

Tuesday May 5

Bobby Sands died at 1.17am this morning. It's very sad and the whole day has been filled with trouble and news about it. The people of Belfast were on the streets the moment they heard & there was fighting. Many girls from S. Armagh didn't come to school today because the buses were off. The police barracks or somewhere near there has just had a fire but I think its out.

I couldn't stay fallen out with Eileen so although we're not as friendly as were used to be we are friends. She doesn't know how disappointed & sad I was after Saturday. B.S. passed peacefully although I was told off once or twice my Cornish pasties turned out lovely. There may be trouble yet. I don't know.

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<sup>38</sup> Twitter post.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with author.

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Many shop windows have been broken in Dublin. I feel sorry for the Sands family.<sup>40</sup>

In this entry, we see McAtasney situate the political within her immediate surroundings of school, friends and family. While this is an entry about a significant political occurrence, the death of Bobby Sands, the weaving of the political and lived experience in single entries is characteristic of the diary. This suggests how politics was internalized and interrupted by young people on the margins of the conflict, be that *geographically marginal* (McAtasney lived in Newry) or *politically marginal* (her family did not actively participate as either state actors, or combatants). It reminds us that civil conflict does not exist within a vacuum, and instead must be viewed within a wider social ecological perspective, context is key when it comes to validly analysing lived experience of conflict within the wider population.<sup>41</sup>

McAtasney reflects on the juxtaposition of omnipresent conflict and the everyday as being a particularly powerful element of her tweets. The May 5 extract drew attention on Twitter, not only because it mentions a key political event, but also because of the other components, as highlighted by McAtasney:

This is one of the most commented on quotes. I think many people focus on the news of the day but now, it reads more like straightforward reporting to me. It is the idea of my Cornish pasties being so good and my pride in that that makes this entry important to me. I do remember all the news coverage but I was always really looking at that from a distance. In addition, friendships were a constant battle at that age and falling out and reconciling were my real obsession – at that age, you are so completely defined by your friends.<sup>42</sup>

The focus of the everyday within contemporary storytelling can represent 'the desire to bring these uneventful and overlooked aspects of lived experience into visibility'.<sup>43</sup> However, a storyteller's ability to focus on the everyday is perhaps more challenging when working within a country rife with political uncertainty and civil unrest – in short, these artists have something more pressing, exciting and compelling to focus on. As such, one could praise McAtasney for her private writing and its powerful mirroring to everyday lived experience of civil conflict.

Her narrative about ordinary life becomes even fresher and more welcoming when it is added to accounts of a specific period of the conflict, the 1981 republican hunger

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<sup>40</sup> Original diary entry.

<sup>41</sup> Bronagh McAtasney, *Contemporary Reflection*, interview by Oonagh Murphy, 20 November 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with author.

<sup>43</sup> Johnstone, 'The Everyday', p. 12.

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strikes, which have focused strongly, almost exclusively, on male paramilitarism and politics.<sup>44</sup> As Lorraine Dowler notes, the Maze and Long Kesh prison has 'figured as a 'prominent site of resistance' and has become part of the 'façade of [republican] hypermasculinity'.<sup>45</sup> This is easily noticeable in most scholarly work as well as films about the prison,<sup>46</sup> with Bobby Sands' story featuring more prominently than the others. The over-focus on paramilitarism and masculinity has led to a double marginalisation of experiences like McAtasney's as both young and as a woman. Her diary and tweets bring them all back to life.

### **Challenging Homogenized Collective Memory**

The analysis of McAtasney's personal testimony raises the well-established debate about the role of memory in the re-writing of history. As Elizabeth Crooke notes, historical and contemporary memory has been utilised to create narratives in democratic societies: 'the national memory is naturalised through a shared history represented in the grand narrative of the nation, and in turn depicted in museums, history books and by other forms of cultural symbolism, such as memorials'.<sup>47</sup> Babara Misztal furthers Crookes argument in stating that 'collective memory is the condition of justice and freedom of democratic order'.<sup>48</sup>

Storytelling has often been pointed as one of the main ways of dealing with the legacy of the past in transitional societies. While Governments may encourage collective amnesia by suppressing memorialization, other times they recycle past wars in different guises: 'victories restaged, defeats rendered palatable, historical grievances nurtured, new enemies substituted for old'<sup>49</sup>. Remembering may help communities stick together in certain ways and split in others and offer opportunities to engage with the contested past. Graham Dawson reminds us that 'war memory is first of all the possession of those individuals, military or civilian, who have experienced war and

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<sup>44</sup> Johnstone, 'The Everyday'.

<sup>45</sup> Peter Shirlow and Lorraine Dowler, "'Wee Women No More": Female Partners of Republican Political Prisoners in Belfast', *Environment and Planning* Vol. 42, No. 2 (2010), pp. 384-399 (p. 387).

<sup>46</sup> Peter Shirlow and Kieran McEvoy, *Beyond the Wire: Former Prisoners and Conflict Transformation in Northern Ireland* (London: Pluto, 2008); Ryder.

<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Crooke, 'Dealing with the Past: Museums and Heritage in Northern Ireland and Cape Town, South Africa', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* Vol. 11, no. 2 (2005) p. 174.

<sup>48</sup> Barbara Misztal, 'The Banalization and the Contestation of Memory in Post Communist Poland' in *Heritage and Identity: Engagement and Demission in the Contemporary World*, ed. Marta Anico and Elsa Peralta, Museum Meanings Series (London: Routledge, 2009) p. 118.

<sup>49</sup> Susan Carruthers, *The Media at War: Communication and Conflict in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000) p. 244.

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lived to tell their story'.<sup>50</sup> Martin Conway frames memory in two ways that of 'official state memory' and 'folk memory' Official state memory being the narrative recorded in official accounts be that through the courts, archives or museums. While folk memory is a truth held as accurate by a community, it traditionally focuses on the heroes and villains of seminal tales, and ignores the private memoirs, and life writing of those on the periphery.<sup>51</sup>

Any debate on memory, whether state or folk, and history re-writing must take into account the fact that memory is selective and narratives are built upon what is remembered and forgotten. The concept of absence is particularly relevant here: Colin Graham discusses the concept of remembering to forget the conscious or subconscious creation of an absence.<sup>52</sup> The creation of absence is not deleting a history' instead it is creating a new history: it re-defines, individual, institutional or indeed societal approaches ultimately, the goal of the storyteller is the creation of an accepted, homogenised and normalised memory, the creation of not a single grand narrative, but a multiplicity of valid narratives, narratives that reflect the varied experiences of conflict in an environment 'where stories can be told, where the layers of memory can be uncovered in an ensemble of hope'.<sup>53</sup>

Memory is not only selective but it is also subject to contemporary interpretation and reflection. For instance, within the context of the District Six Museum in South Africa Elizabeth Crooke observes that 'What caused people shame now evokes pride; closed memories have now become open and shared; and a fragile people are becoming a stronger community'.<sup>54</sup> That way, memories are plural and more than recollections of our past and can potentially be 'the history we expect for the present'.<sup>55</sup>

The debates around what is remembered and what is forgotten are key to the analysis of McAtasney's personal testimony. As she puts her diary into the public domain via Twitter, self-censorship comes into play as diary entries have the possibility of being omitted or edited. However, when we look at the original written diary entries from 1981, alongside the tweeted diary posts, what we find is that McAtasney rather than self-censoring, recognises the value of the embarrassing, banal, immature, and innocence of her diary and as such translates this to her tweets. The diary has not

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<sup>50</sup> Carruthers, *The Media at War*. p. 244.

<sup>51</sup> Dawson, *Making Peace with the Past?*, p. 89.

<sup>52</sup> Colin Graham, "Every Passer-by a Culprit?" *Third Text* vol. 19, no. 5 (September 2005): pp. 567–80.

<sup>53</sup> Crooke, 'Museums and Community' p. 121.

<sup>54</sup> Crooke, 'Dealing with the Past: Museums and Heritage in Northern Ireland and Cape Town, South Africa' p. 175.

<sup>55</sup> Sarah Maltby, ed., *Communicating War: Memory, Media and Military* (Suffolk: Arima Publ, 2007) p. 19.

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been published, however a full transcript was provided to the researchers, which served as a rich source of textual analysis, and cross tabulation against the publicly available Twitter entries. Furthermore, McAtasney did not choose what days to tweet, but instead tweeted each day, the content of the corresponding date of the original diary entry. For example, on the 12 February she tweeted an edited (for brevity) version of what was written in her diary on the 12 of February 1981.

If memory is 'a narrative rather than a replica of an experience that can be retrieved and relived' and if 'what we remember is highly selective', then how reliable can her testimony be?<sup>56</sup> To what extent can they challenge or complement history? Instead of asking if a certain memory is true, we should be asking what the story being told could reveal about how the past affects the present. Stories based on memories have a valuable place in history re-writing because 'the emotions they convey have social import, reflecting readings of the world that are embedded in collective history, and group experience'.<sup>57</sup>

Therefore, it could be argued that the potential of accounts dealing with personal memories, such as McAtasney's diary notes/tweets, in transitional societies lies in the way they challenge the public to acknowledge that memory depend on context and is continually an interpretation and affects directly the present and the future. The creation of a valid record of The Troubles requires the critical appraisal of the entire history, a history of people - and not just heroes and of individual stories and experiences. As she put it:

We aren't the people who get commemorated in murals and songs but our stories are important. When everything was falling apart around us, we needed the family politics, the teenage angst, the homework rants, to help create a semblance of normality. We needed the ordinary to ensure the extraordinary did not become our accepted norm. Of course it wasn't normal, but it was normal to us. "Ordinary" life – whatever that is – does not stop at the dawn of war and the diary of a 13-year-old girl in 1981, my diary, helps to breathe life into the people in the background, it helps give our stories the attention they deserve.<sup>58</sup>

In this passage we see McAtasney yearning for acknowledgement within the grand narrative of a nation's history. And doing so can have a twofold effect: on a personal level, this acknowledgement can publicly validate the importance of a person's ordinary

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<sup>56</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Univ of California Press, 1997), p. 7.

<sup>57</sup> Aguiar, "We Were There", p. 9.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with author.

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life in extraordinary times and reinforce the sense of having been part of a historically relevant place/time.

On a society level, the addition of personal stories to national history has the potential to create cohesive communities. This is even more crucial in places such as Northern Ireland, where dealing with the past has been considerably problematic as one person's 'victim' may be another's 'perpetrator', a hierarchy of victims remains debatable, and there remains a 'meta-conflict' - a conflict on what the conflict is about and how to address it.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, storytelling based on plural experiences have the potential to build sustainable and multi-layered relationships and produce a new narrative that 'tell a story of respect, difference, and positive relationships in the present'<sup>60</sup>. And key to this creation is reinforcing what unites people – their human experiences of conflict – and not what separates them – religion, political affiliations and geographic locations. That we are all human despite our plurality of experiences is perhaps a simple but effective narrative framework from which to build upon the layers of memory that exist within Northern Ireland - a Northern Ireland that is now working towards a shared future.<sup>61</sup>

### **Personal Diary as an Archival source**

McAtasney's diary notes and tweets also raise questions around the role of official and unofficial archival initiatives. Archives that relate to the Troubles exist all over Northern Ireland. However, most 'cultural artefacts of the conflict are squirreled away out of sight of the new Northern Ireland' as the material object has been deemed too raw and too sensitive to put on display.<sup>62</sup> While the international press viewed the conflict as a somewhat safe and accessible to cover, local museums and heritage institutions were more hesitant in their response. In 'Confessions of an Archivist' Gerry Slater, former Director of the Public Records Office Northern Ireland (PRONI), reflects upon his initial desire not to engage with the story of The Troubles:

I was comfortable in the belief that 'The Troubles' would be documented in the 'official archives' even if it might not be open for 30, 50, 75 or even 100 years. Everything else was unreliable evidence tainted by emotion and

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<sup>59</sup> Michelle Moloney, 'Reaching Out from the Archive: The Role of Community Oral History Archives in Conflict Transformation in Northern Ireland.' p. 298.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>61</sup> Graham, "Every Passer-by a Culprit?" p. 578.

<sup>62</sup> Gerry Slater, 'Confessions of an Archivist', *Journal of the Society of Archivists* vol.29, no. 2 (October 2008) p. 140.

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partisanship. I could hide behind the excuse that it was not time to be collecting memories amid the bloody reality of terrorist outrages.<sup>63</sup>

Slater is not alone in reflecting upon the role of the individual within official government funded, and or sanctioned institutions when it came to identifying, defining, collecting and constructing narrative accounts of The Troubles. Claire Hackett and Bill Rolston also provide a critical context from which to understand the politics of community and institutional engagement with the Northern Ireland Troubles; they discuss the impact of community-led storytelling and conversely its significance through 'official mechanisms', for example the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. They identify the often polar opposite approaches – Catholics vs Protestants or Republicans vs Loyalists - that are taken by community groups and institutions who engage with storytelling as a mechanism to create reconciliation.<sup>64</sup>

While their article focuses on 'official mechanisms', in terms of legal and or statutory mechanisms such as truth commissions and public inquiries as an alternative to community mechanisms, it provides valuable insights into the barriers museums as non-community organisations face when working with dissociated communities who may see them as 'official mechanisms' to record and exhibit the recent period of civil conflict.

One could argue that personal diaries, thus, can become an important tool for humanising the 'official mechanism' and perhaps help identify potential crossovers with 'unofficial mechanisms' when responding to The Troubles. As an unofficial archive, McAtasney's diary (and later tweets) is a personal account shaped by lived experience, which exists beyond the political motivations of state funded collecting institutions such as PRONI or museums. Her entries show the subtler side of lived experience during civil conflict, the shared experience of loss, inconvenience and an attempt to understand events that she lacks the emotional maturity to truly comprehend. In the below entry, there is a naivety in McAtasney's recording and interruption of the political; it is brief, and lacks emotion or empathy, which is in contrast to the emotion and empathy narrated when it comes to her appearance, music and friendships:

Thursday May 28

I went to Phils with Mummy. I may get my hair cut and permed, I don't know yet. I missed TOTP tonight. A policeman was shot dead last night @ Whitecross & two IRA men were shot by an SAS soldier in Derry. John gave

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<sup>63</sup> Claire Hackett and Bill Rolston, 'The Burden of Memory: Victims, Storytelling and Resistance in Northern Ireland', *Memory Studies* vol.2, no.3 (September 2009): pp. 355–76.

<sup>64</sup> Hackett and Rolston, 'The Burden of Memory'. pp. 355–76.

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me a “Smash H Block” badge. Another hunger-striker is supposed to be taking over Brendan McLaughlin. Maggie Thatcher was in Belfast today visiting.<sup>65</sup>

Upon reflection of this passage, McAtasney observes that

Again, the juxtaposition appears deliberate, but it is not. It reads more like a stream of consciousness. I had an urge to record everything, convinced I needed to do so out of fear of forgetting so I had to get as much detail in as possible. Missing Top of the Pops was huge – that was my show and to not see it was devastating. It's not as if we could go back and catch up on it.<sup>66</sup>

The naivety helps present a nonpartisan record of events, which differs from other state and popular culture references that focus primarily on the heroes, villains, and emotion of politics.

### **Validation and Acknowledgement**

Dissemination of personal stories, particularly of a contested past such as Northern Ireland, can have a paradoxical outcome: whilst it can offer a sense of validation and acknowledgment for people whose life experiences have been left out of official and unofficial discourses, it can also offer risks such as re-traumatisation or misrepresentation. To collect and exhibit is to remember and to remember is to validate this memory and thus validate the community, its values and truths. Hence, a carefully thought-out dissemination strategy can potentially become not only a tool ‘for expressing and shaping internalised narratives’ but also ‘instigate different dialogues, for example on dealing with the past and on other experiences’<sup>67</sup>.

Contemporarily museum, archives and governments use of Twitter further validates the importance of everyday personal experiences in the re-telling of history. Jean Burgess et. al. argue that the ‘mediatisation’ of historical institutions, presents opportunities for the introduction of new voices and the opportunity to correct historical wrongs. However, they note that such actions often exist at the periphery of an institution rather than forming part of their core collection or interpretive narrative.<sup>68</sup> As such, the voice of the individual distinct from the institution has a unique and different cultural and historical value. McAtasney’s diary does not seek to tell ‘the truth’, but instead seeks to share her truth and her experience, and in doing so adds

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<sup>65</sup> Twitter post.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with author.

<sup>67</sup> Aguiar, ‘We Were There’, p. 112.

<sup>68</sup> Aguiar, ‘We Were There’

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to public memory.<sup>69</sup>

However, one still cannot assume that speaking out will always be positive and unproblematic. This is because there is no guarantee that storytelling will work according to plan, or produce, the intended effects because of the volatility of populations strained by violence and agony.<sup>70</sup> Also, any project dealing with sensitive stories must consider the possibilities of dissemination and the implications that it may bring to producers, participants, audiences, and institutions that host the stories. Bringing people's stories to the public may put people in life-threatening danger, subject them to moral criticism, criminal proceedings, or simply damage their reputations.

A recent, controversial case showed very clearly the risks of dissemination: the Boston College's *Belfast Oral History Project*, a U.S.-based project headed by Irish journalist Ed Moloney and former IRA member Anthony McIntyre. It contains dozens of audio-recorded interviews with former republican and loyalist paramilitaries. Initially, participants were assured that their recordings would not be made public until their deaths, but this was later undermined by a U.S. court ruling, after the *Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)* sought access to some of the recordings as part of their probing the IRA 1972 killing of Jean McConville, one of the Troubles 'disappeared'.<sup>71</sup> The turning over of the interviews has not only put the researchers and participants of the project in real risk of physical harm, but it has also complicated future projects dealing with the Troubles, as people may become more reticent to share stories. This case draws attention to the need to discuss with participants potential consequences of having their stories made publicly available and how storytelling projects can have long-term effects in their lives.

As well as real life-threatening risks, there is the risk of re-traumatisation which cannot be ignored. Graham Dawson asks whether 'the attempt to represent the traumatic past help a survivor to come to terms with it' or it is 'risking too much, ploughing up thing too painful or disturbing to remember'.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, as noted by Shaun Henry '[t]here is a danger we could become involved in an intergenerational transfer of all our hang-ups about the Troubles to a younger generation, who are, in fact, much more open-minded to things' and he urges us 'to ensure that somehow our storytelling, and our remembrance of the past, are firmly embedded in the a notion of

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<sup>69</sup> Jean Burgess, Helen Klæbe, and Kelly McWilliam, 'Mediatisation and Institutions of Public Memory: Digital Storytelling and the Apology', *Australian Historical Studies* vol.41, no.2 (June 2010) pp. 149–65.

<sup>70</sup> Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker, *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering* (London: Routledge, 2009) p. 18.

<sup>71</sup> Sarkar and Walker, *Documentary Testimonies*.

<sup>72</sup> Dawson, *Making Peace with the Past?*, p. 70.

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moving forward'<sup>73</sup>.

Therefore, when telling stories of such sensitivity it is important to thoroughly consider dissemination strategies so that these can create dialogues that will potentially promote mutual understanding and not more division or re-traumatisation. McAtasney's diary/tweets carries a dual historical and contemporary significance. They stand in their own right as a historical document, full of naïve personal bias, prejudice and emphasis towards pop music and boys. The diary also holds contemporary significance in that, through its Twitter retelling, it is providing a new framework from which recollection and memory can be channelled through shared experience, rather than the divisive framework of politics. Whilst it is important to identify a representative narrative it is also important to acknowledge the extremes of Northern Ireland's recent civil conflict in order to provide a powerful example of why peace must be maintained.

### Conclusion

The ability to represent the little narratives - the individual stories and multiple perspectives has methodologically never before been so easy. Digital technology provides the opportunity to capture and distribute a vast amount of 'memory' and narratives of lived experiences. As @NornIronGirl1981 shows, the voices and experiences of those on the periphery of conflict can add depth, validity, plurality and provide a framework from which to begin to examine collective memory in a more human-centred way.

Perhaps then a compromise in response to collecting and exhibiting the Northern Ireland Troubles is seeking not to close and prevent the collection of politically sensitive subjects, but to assess and recognise the limitations and sensitivities that surround it. Perhaps then we can identify that the key curatorial or authorial dilemma 'is the dilemma of choice and selection, of learning to live with some absences while filling others'.<sup>74</sup> What we need in Northern Ireland is not to create an accepted, homogenised and normalised single grand narrative, but a multiplicity of narratives that reflect the varied experiences of conflict and that are found when we look at the 'other stuff'. In this article, we demonstrated how McAtasney's diary and tweets, and the many other personal diaries waiting to be discovered, have much to contribute to debates around teenage experiences of war as well as to Northern Ireland's ongoing peace process.

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<sup>73</sup> Jolene Mairs, 'Audiovisual Storytelling in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland - Participant and Audience Responses to Filming, Editing and Exhibiting Memories of the Troubles via Two Practice-Led Collaborative Documentary Film Productions' (PhD, University of Ulster, 2013), p. 221.

<sup>74</sup> Crooke, 'Museums and Community', p. 27.