**The risks and benefits of collaborative documentary filmmaking in post-conflict Northern Ireland. An analysis of participant and audience responses to telling and hearing stories from the Troubles.**

**Abstract**

This paper examines the risks and benefits of collaborative documentary filmmaking (the protocols of which were developed during production of the Prisons Memory Archive) in post-conflict Northern Ireland by analysing the production of, and audience and participant responses to, *Unheard Voices* (2009) a 30min documentary that tells the stories of six people who lost a loved one or were injured during the Troubles. Benefits include humanising the conflict by providing public access to first-person accounts. It allows participants to present contrasting narratives that challenge dominant representations. It provides validation and public acknowledgement. It is cathartic, allowing participants to externalise an internal trauma narrative by producing a tangible outcome. It is a private and public commemoration of a loved one or personal experience and provides a sense of achievement. Whilst promising, these benefits are not guaranteed. This research identifies specific risks: re-traumatisation, inadequate representation and public invalidation of the trauma narrative. Audiences highlighted the need for both reparative remembering, but equally reparative forgetting. Although collaboration aims to reduce the imbalance of power between storyteller and producer, it does not guarantee equality. This limits the potential for such projects to provide ‘healing’ and any such claims should be used with caution.

**Keywords:** collaborative; documentary; storytelling; post-conflict; Northern Ireland; responses;

 **Word count:** 6570

**Introduction**

This paper examines the benefits and risks of collaborative documentary filmmaking in post-conflict Northern Ireland by analysing participant and audience responses to *Unheard Voices* (2009) (UV), a 30min documentary that tells the stories of six people who lost a loved one or were themselves injured as a result of the conflict. UV adopted ethical filmmaking production protocols developed during the production of Cahal McLaughlin’s Prisons Memory Archive[[1]](#endnote-1) (PMA), namely: shared ownership, shared editorial control, the right to veto and transparency of approach. Shared ownership means that participants co-own their final recording, which contrasts with traditional models of documentary filmmaking where the subjects relinquish ownership of recorded material to the production company. In this collaborative model, participants retain the right to remove any section of their recording and have the right to veto their entire contribution.

In the absence of any agreed structural modes or methods of reparation, storytelling has emerged as one of the primary, if unofficial, methods of ‘dealing’ with the past in post-conflict Northern Ireland (Hackett and Rolston 2009; HTR 2005a). The term ‘storytelling’ is the presently accepted term adopted by statutory and voluntary organisations within the Northern Ireland context to describe the process of recounting memories of the conflict:

(Storytelling is) a project or process, which allows reflection, expression, listening, and possible collection of personal, communal and institutional stories related to the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. (Healing Through Remembering 2005b, 10)

The widespread use of storytelling as a tool that is deemed to offer beneficial outcomes such as healing and acknowledgement, is reliant on public consultation as its primary rationale (House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee 2009, 6; NIO 2009, 22). Storytelling has been recommended as a means of dealing with conflict by trauma theorists such as Papadopoulos (1998, 471), Laub (1992a, 78, 85) and Van der Kolk and Van der Hart (1995, 176) who suggest that in order for traumatic memories to be psychologically processed, they must be ‘re-narrativised’ in a form that reduces their intrusion into conscious thought. Storytelling is therefore seen as a tool that has the potential to offer a degree of ‘healing’ to those who tell their stories (HTR 2005, 4).

Similarly, Dawson (2007, 351-316) recommends the process of ‘reparative remembering’ on both individual psychological and public societal levels. In this process, ‘psychic openness’ to the past, which allows for ‘the integration of the event within the self’ by a ‘continuing engagement with the emotions and meanings associated with it’, will undo the Kleinian psychic defence of ‘splitting’ whereby the past is submerged within individual and public memory. In addition, conflict transformation theorists such as Hamber (2009, 159) and Sooka (2006, 320) assert that public acknowledgement of those affected by conflict is essential for any society’s transition from conflict. Storytelling therefore offers a potential means of providing a form of personal, if not official, public acknowledgement.

The general increase in a variety of storytelling projects in Northern Ireland since the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994 has caused concern amongst practitioners and researchers such as Hackett and Rolston (2009) who question the assumption that storytelling is beneficial to those who tell their stories (Laub 1992a, 78; Papadopoulos 1998, 471-2; HTR 2005, 4). This increase is not unique to Northern Ireland. Bishop (2012,1) notes a ‘surge of artistic interest in participation and collaboration that has taken place since the early 1990s in a multitude of global locations.’ Given this growing use of such projects in the Northern Irish context, Bush, Logue, and Burns (2011) argue the need for a framework to evaluate storytelling as a peace-building tool. Where organisations such as HTR (2005b) have audited the number and nature of storytelling projects and practices in Northern Ireland, and have attempted to identify common protocols, no study has yet evaluated the effects of storytelling on both participants and audiences within this context or carried out a critical examination of how, and if, these methodologies are effective. This research redresses this deficit by evaluating one form of storytelling, collaborative documentary filmmaking, in post-conflict Northern Ireland. It highlights the limitations of the collaborative model adopted here and identifies the benefits and risks to participants and audiences.

***Unheard Voices*: a production framework**

The collaborative practice methodology developed during the recording of the PMA, was brought to a production partner, which in this instance was WAVE Trauma Centre, a charity that provide counselling and support services to people who have been bereaved or injured as a result of the Troubles[[2]](#endnote-2). WAVE provided access to a group of six participants who were approached by the manager of the organisation. They sought to represent the diverse range of individuals to whom they offer support and so choose participants of both genders, of varying ages, each with a unique story of loss. They chose equal numbers from both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds. We preferred that WAVE select the participants as it had personal knowledge of each individual who attended its centres and would be best-placed to identify those whom they thought would be open to making a documentary film. They identified the following six individuals.

Figure 1. Lorna McGarry

Lorna McGarry lost her husband, Spence (46), who was a serving Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) detective, when he was killed by an Irish Republican Army (IRA) bomb, planted under his car on April 6th 1991. He had been visiting his mother who lived in Ballycastle, county Antrim.

Figure 2. Paul McKenna

Paul McKenna’s sister, Sharon (27), was shot by the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) while she was visiting an elderly neighbour in the Skegoniel area of north Belfast on January 17th 1993. Sharon’s murder had been investigated by the Historical Enquiries Team for collusion between the RUC Special Branch and the UVF.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Figure 3. Jimmy Irons

Jimmy Iron’s brother, Bobby (63), was killed by an IRA roadside bomb that was detonated when his work van was driving past Teebane crossroads in county Tyrone on January 17th 1992. Seven other men were also killed and others injured.

Figure 4. Marie Moore

Marie Moore’s son, Gary (30), who was from Dungiven, County Derry/Londonderry, was shot whilst working on a housing site in north Belfast on December 6th 2000. No organisation claimed responsibility, although it is assumed that he was shot by the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) (McKittrick et al. 2004, 1488).

Sandra Riddell’s brother, Johnny Proctor (25), a serving RUC officer, was shot by the IRA whilst getting into his car at Magherafelt hospital. Johnny had been visiting his wife who had given birth five days earlier to their son.

Figure 5. Mark Kelly

Mark Kelly was injured in a no-warning UVF bomb at the Glen Inn, Glengormley, on August 28th 1976. Mark lost both his legs in the explosion. He was 18 years old at the time.

The full film is available here:

<http://www.wavetraumacentre.org.uk/about-us/wave-projects/unheard-voices>

UV created a filmic structure that offers inclusive representations of contrasting experiences of loss during the Troubles. We recorded interviews with each participant that were edited into 5min narratives. Interviews were layered with a complementary visual narrative of a place or journey of personal significance to each participant, thereby creating a 30min linear documentary. Each story maintains its own integrity and is not intercut with the others.

Alongside meetings between individual participants and production crew, residential events in a neutral location established trusting relationships between participants and crew, and between participants themselves. Group exercises led by an experienced facilitator built trust and a sense of group cohesion. They also deepened the protocol of informed consent as each participant had the opportunity to hear each other’s story before filming began. Each 5min edit was shown to individual participants for their approval. The 30min linear film was shown at a closed screening for participants and their relatives only. WAVE organised six further public screenings, which took place in each participant’s locality in conjunction with the respective town or city councils. Participants and members of the production team were invited to participate in panel discussions with the audience after each screening. A final post-production residential provided an opportunity for participants and crew to reflect on the overall process.

This model of production could be viewed as what is termed in broader arts practice, ‘relational aesthetics,’ which, ‘takes as (its) theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space’ (Bourriaud 2002, 113). In this model, it is not the final object, or product, that takes precedence, but the processes and social context in which it was created. The on-going consultation that occurred between producers and participants ensured that the process was as important, if not more important, than the final film. As visual ethnographer Sarah Pink (2007, 112) states, ‘it is not simply the final document that is important, but rather the collaborative processes by which it is produced.’

Bishop (2012, 2), however, in discussing participatory or collaborative practice distances such projects from relational aesthetics ‘even though the rhetoric around this work appears, on a theoretical level at least, to be somewhat similar.’ Collaborative practice she contends, is ‘less interested in a relational *aesthetic* than in in the creative rewards of participation as a politicised working process.’ This form of collaborative documentary filmmaking sits within this form of participatory practice as it attempts to re-balance power relations between producers and subjects, where participants become active agents in the construction of their own narrative. In addition, in collaborative practice, audiences, and their responses to the work, are integral to the participatory process, whereby ‘the audience, once figured as ‘viewer’ or ‘beholder’ is now repositioned as a co-producer or participant’ (Bishop 2012, 2). Bush et al (2011), identify audience responses to storytelling practice in the Northern Irish context as a major gap in current research. They state that, ‘in terms of the mechanics of storytelling impact, much more attention must be paid to the audience - and the impact of hearing that story on the sense of self, and other’ (Bush, Logue, and Burns 2011, 66). Given the nature of the interconnectedness of producers, participants and audience, the benefits and risks of this form of participatory practice were explored through interviews with participants and by gathering audience responses to the film.

**Methodology**

Since the subject matter of the research centred on each participant’s personal experience of the production process, and, given the personal and politically sensitive nature of the subject, semi-structured individual interviews with each participant, as opposed to conducting a focus group, were the most appropriate methodology for gathering participant responses. The interviews reflected the chronological process of the production process: pre-production, filming, editing and exhibition (see Appendix 1). The same questions were asked to each participant, but the order in which they were asked varied according to each interview. For some, the exhibition process required further exploration; for others, it was the editing process.

For the purposes of this research, the term ‘audience’ means the individuals and/or groups who were invited by public advertisement (via newspaper and social media) or by direct invitation (by email, letter or social media), either by the production team, or our collaborators, WAVE, due to their perceived interest in the subject matter of the film, and who subsequently attended screenings of UV. Seven public screenings took place throughout 2009 and 2010 in Portstewart, Lisburn, Ballycastle, Newtownabbey, Derry/Londonderry, Ballymena and Belfast. At the end of each screening, participants and members of the production team formed a panel to which the audience was invited to ask questions. All events were chaired by a skilled, independent mediator, which included a Victims Commissioner[[4]](#endnote-4) and academics with expertise in post-conflict studies.

Audience responses were gauged by circulating questionnaires at the end of screenings, which all audience members were invited to complete. The questionnaire was devised in relation to the purported benefits of storytelling (see Appendix 2). 64 questionnaires were returned in total from an overall audience of 192 across all screenings, giving a return rate of 33.33%. Therefore, one third of the total audience completed questionnaires. The following section offers a summation of the thematic commonalities that emerged from both participant and audience responses in relation to the benefits and risks of this form of collaborative documentary filmmaking.

**Participant and audience responses**

*Benefits*

In terms of the benefits of the collaborative protocols, participants highlighted that a trusting relationship with the production team was key, which was built from the beginning via transparency of approach. Active listening, i.e. summarising and reflecting back, had a significant influence on their performance. The perceived approachability and warmth of the crew affected how comfortable participants felt on camera. The nature of the trusting relationship formed with participants, and their relationships with each other, which was founded on the principle of transparency, was fundamental to the overall success of the project.

Shared editorial control was essential to participants. They highlighted the importance of having the right to edit out, or add, material. Incidences of this were minimal, but having it in place again gave participants a sense of safety and control and had the effect of maintaining involvement throughout the project. One participant asked for a specific piece of dialogue about his/her location that was important to him/her to be added to his/her 5min edit. Another asked that a photograph of his/her loved one be added. This process of ‘viewing the video produced with (participants) can help (both) work out what are and are not appropriate representations of (...) their experiences’ (Pink 2007, 113).

In terms of expressing a rationale for taking part, participants confirmed that a key motivation was the opportunity to record their story permanently, which in this case was the creation of a DVD and website. There was a sense that the recording was for posterity, leaving a trace of their lives and experience behind for their children and for the public. The recording itself therefore became both a public and personal artefact. For participants, recording their story was also an act of commemoration for their loved one. A further motivation to record their story was the opportunity to present personal accounts of their loved ones as a challenge to dominant representations of, for example, members of the security forces.As Pink (2007, 111) observes, audiovisual storytelling can become ‘an empowering visual medium that offers (participants) an opportunity to reproduce and understand their world as opposed to the dominant representation depicted in the mass media.’ This motivation maintained participants’ engagement with the process a whole.

In addition to producing a tangible outcome, five out of the six participants confirmed that they also found the act of telling and recording their story cathartic. One participant stated, ‘I found it like releasing a valve (…) when I did speak about it.’ Another reflected that ‘in sharing it with others, you’re getting rid of some of the frustration that builds up inside you.’ Recording one’s story for the public sphere means that it becomes a functional tool of action, as opposed to an immobile, static trauma narrative that repeats endlessly:

Storytelling (...) provid(es) and generat(es) experiences that help people redress imbalances and correct perceived injustices in the distribution of Being, so that in telling a story with others one reclaims some sense of agency, recovers some sense of purpose, and comes to feel that the events that overwhelmed one from without may be brought within one’s grasp. (Jackson 2002, 36)

This act of recording, or expressing one’s story, means that a previously internalised trauma narrative is now external to the self. The production of a DVD provided a material, tangible outcome that physically represented participant’s trauma. Creating a linear story that had a beginning, middle and end transformed a trauma narrative that was previously disjointed thereby ‘enabl(ing) the person to reconstruct the meaning of traumatic experiences to him/herself’ (BenEzer 2004, 30). In addition, participants expressed the sense that the trauma experience is transformed from a senseless act of violence into an agent for positive change, where the loss of their loved one could play a role in preventing the recurrence of future conflict. One stated, ‘by making the film, some good has come out of it. Good will come out of something horrendous.’

A significant element of the recording process included the opportunity to return to the trauma site itself, for example, the place where a loved one was killed. For one participant in particular, returning to the site of the loved one’s death allowed her/him to move forward in the grieving process. This experience upholds Dawson’s (2007, 315-316) and Van der Kolk’s (1995, 176) view that re-engagement with traumatic memories, and in this case, re-visiting the trauma site, can re-configure its place in the psyche. This re-configuration of traumatic memories leads to a sense of achievement, in that participants have re-engaged with painful experiences. In addition, participants had a tangible outcome at the end of the process that embodied their achievement.

In terms of the purported outcome of storytelling as a tool that has the potential to offer healing to those affected by the conflict (HTR 2005, 4; Papadopoulos 1998, 472; Laub 1992a, 78; Hamber 2009 123, 159) participants revealed common positive outcomes that they perceived as helpful, if not healing. Being invited to record their story was validating as it meant that their story had value. This act of permanently recording one’s narrative gives a sense that the story has been publicly recognised and therefore acknowledged. Directly witnessing the effect of their narrative at public screenings augmented this. They received additional validation and acknowledgement of their loss from audiences who directly praised participants for telling and sharing their loss publicly. For one participant in particular, it offered an opportunity to elucidate on his/her narrative, which was insufficiently represented in the 5min edit (this will be explored further in the limitations section below). Similarly, eight audience members perceived the experience of publicly sharing trauma narratives as ‘healing’ for participants because it provides an opportunity to visibly share, express and therefore acknowledge the painful past. Additionally, four audience members suggested that the experience of storylistening was also ‘healing’ for themselves in that it offered the opportunity to see and hear trauma narratives similar to their own experiences of losing a loved one during the conflict.

The fact that the film was produced to be shown publicly and shown at screenings was also important to the participants. All six welcomed the opportunity to bring humanised accounts of their loved ones into the public sphere. This was borne out by audience members, six of whom directly stated that the process of seeing the effects of conflict is more powerful that written words. They valued the opportunity to hear direct, first-person storytelling from people with first-hand experiences of the Troubles. This, they stated, humanises the conflict, allowing the audience to emotionally connect with trauma narratives:

Hearing and seeing people’s stories humanises them and creates a point of contact, which hopefully leads toward a transformation of thought. We learn their names, hear about their struggles and suddenly they and others like them become more than just the people you pass on the street. (Neuschafer 2008, 203)

In terms of the purpose of hearing stories from the conflict, 20 audience members emphasised the need to remember the past in order to maintain motivation for preventing future conflict by showing the impact of the conflict on people’s lives through the irreplaceable loss of a loved one or the long-term effects of personal injury. They recognised that this could play a role in creating public ‘memory (that) forges a new powerful link between past atrocities and a peaceful future’ (Assmann and Shortt 2011, 1). Although documentary filmmaking may play a role in this process, it is primarily structural and political inequalities that create the circumstances of conflict, and it is the redressing of these that is most likely to prevent the recurrence of violence in Northern Ireland. This includes:

Substantial social, economic and political change (equity and equality). This entails identifying, reconstructing or addressing, and ultimately transforming the social, economic and political structures that caused or contributed to conflict and estrangement. (Hamber 2009, 160)

In addition, five audience members stated that they valued hearing narratives from both Protestants and Catholics as it generated a sense of shared pain or collectivity. This novel form of inclusive, reparative remembering in the Northern Irish context has the potential to ensure that:

Memory becomes a central issue in (...) transition (from conflict) (...). It is the medium of a new shared narrative of that past that integrates formerly divided perspectives. (Assmann and Shortt 2011, 1)

These positive outcomes suggest that, ‘in spite of its limitations, the wide applicability of the storytelling method is promising because it can be used to address current conflicts that have a long history.’ (Bar-On 2004, 304)

*Limitations and risks*

Limitations of this model of collaborative documentary filmmaking were also made apparent in both participant and audience responses to the overall framework. Co-ownership with a number of organisations and individuals creates a number of agendas, which, at times, may be competing. This was exemplified when WAVE requested that additional dialogue be added to participants’ narratives where they had not overtly stated the paramilitary organisation responsible for their loved one’s death. This strove to meet WAVE’s need to offer equal representation of both Catholics and Protestants. Short sections of additional dialogue were therefore subsequently added to the narrative with the participants’ participation and consent. This highlights that whilst collaborative practice seeks to redress the power imbalance between interested parties, it does not guarantee that all parties will have equal power or authorial control. In so-called ‘polyvocal’ authorship (Barbash and Taylor 1997, 89) where agendas may compete, it is not clear that the voice of the participant will be strongest. The balance is, perhaps, always inevitably tipped towards the producers who own and control the means of recording and exhibition, i.e. camera, editing equipment and the financial resources necessary for public exhibition. It is for this reason that transparency is essential.

Alongside the risks posed by polyvocal authorship, participant and audience responses revealed the limitations of the right to veto, which poses risks to both participants and producers. McLaughlin (2010, 146) identifies the risks to producers whereby:

It forces the filmmaker to accept responsibility because if negotiations are not transparent, and do not recognise participant’s sensitivities, the use of the veto has the potential to render the research, filming and editing efforts redundant.

For participants, it may serve to reinforce the power imbalance it attempts to redress. This was exemplified by one participant who stated that one contrasting narrative was ‘hard for (him/her) to take,’ but elected to remain involved, because invoking the veto would mean losing the opportunity to present a contrasting narrative. Whilst the inclusion of contrasting narratives may be beneficial to audiences, it may seem like a false choice for participants. The participant faces the choice of exclusion from the production or having one’s story placed alongside a contrasting narrative. A risk to audiences is that the editor may opt for non-contentious representations in order to reduce the risk of participant withdrawal. Such risks could be viewed as a necessary form of negotiation and compromise where perceptions of the past are contested and where the need to bring those contested views to the audience takes precedence.

Audience responses also highlighted the limitations of storytelling in post-conflict contexts. During the post-screening discussion in Belfast, representatives from Ballymurphy Massacre Families[[5]](#endnote-5) group highlighted the fact that storytelling, in any form, should not act as a replacement for judicial process, or accountability. Although it could also be argued that storytelling events in themselves generate public recognition of past injustices and act as a tool that aids in the eventual achievement of legal outcomes, acknowledgment, in the legal sense, is one of the most important aspects of any society’s transition from conflict. Equally, judicial process in itself is not enough. It is a combination of judicial, structural and storytelling processes that is most effective:

Justice works best when it is a companion of other processes such as social reconstructions, social repair, truth-telling and recovery and reparations. Traditional mechanisms can also be useful as long as they are not an excuse for ongoing impunity. (Hamber 2009, 138)

In addition, one participant also highlighted the limitations of the overall editing strategy. The participant felt that her/his complex narrative was unrepresented by the 5min edit. In this case, it was not amended or extended because the pre-existing 6x5min framework had been determined prior to all participants’ involvement in the project. The inclusivity principle, equality of representation and the pre-determined editorial structure outweighed this participant’s desire for a more complex representation. Similarly, one audience member described the film as ‘superficial,’ further questioning the effectiveness of the 6x5 editing framework as a mode of adequately representing the experiences of those affected by conflict. Where an in-depth portrayal of one narrative is preferred, the intercut linear documentary format such as that adopted by Anne Crilly’s (2004) *Lifting a Dark Cloud: The Kathleen Thompson Case*, may have offered a more adequate representation.

Whilst it can be claimed that collaborative protocols ‘lessen opportunities for exploitation and re-stimulation of trauma’ (McLaughlin 2010, 146), this risk is never eliminated. Engaging in the process of telling means opening oneself up to potential re-traumatisation. This was exemplified by one participant who found re-telling, or continuously re-visiting, his/her trauma narrative unhelpful in that it intensified, as opposed to reduced, trauma symptoms such as hyperarousal and intrusive thoughts. The same participant found the process of engaging in panel discussions after screenings equally difficult and subsequently withdrew from this aspect of the public exhibition. This risk is heightened further by the fact that there is no guarantee that the stories of people affected by the Troubles will receive a welcome reception. This was confirmed when an audience member responded negatively to a participant in a private conversation following a screening. They asked, ‘Do you not think it’s time you just walked away and forgot about it?’ Reactions of this kind carry with them the risk that participants’ narratives are publicly invalidated and dismissed, which is likely to add to their existing traumatisation.

In addition, audience members raised concerns about the potential role of this form of storytelling in the remembering/forgetting dialectic. Two respondents raised concerns about remembering painful events from the past as it ‘keeps the conflict up in people’s eyes.’ They suggested that overtly negative storytelling that recounts painful events may keep us rooted in the past and may re-ignite and maintain feelings of anger and resentment. Whilst difficult stories should be told, it should be with the overall purpose of ‘moving forward.’ This view is echoed by Shaun Henry, Director of the Special EU Programmes Body from 2001-2017, an organisation which has funded a variety of storytelling projects, who states that, ‘we need to ensure that somehow our storytelling, and our remembrance of the past, are firmly embedded in the a notion of moving forward’ (Bush, Logue, and Burns 2011, 9). The tension between the compulsion to tell (Laub 1992a, 78) and the potential for re-traumatisation, coupled with the risk that public exhibition may be met with the preference to forget, highlights one of the central contradictions of the ‘dialectic of memory and forgetting’ (Bell 2010, 5). Just as we need to tell in order to survive, we also need to forget.

The reluctance to tell or hear trauma narratives could be viewed as Dawson’s psychic defensiveness or ‘splitting off’ where the painful past is repressed only to return either psychically in the symptoms of trauma, or sociologically in the re-surfacing of past divisions through sporadic violence or maintained by divisive cultural memory practices (Dawson 2007, 14; Leydesdorff et al. 2004, 22). The experience of the participant who found repeatedly re-visiting her/his trauma narrative unhelpful, and the audience members who questioned the process of remembering, highlight the need to maintain a balance between disregarding the process of ‘splitting off’ as universally unhelpful and re-engagement with past trauma helpful. The act of telling or expressing one’s trauma narrative either to an individual or in the public sphere, despite its compulsion, can carry the risk of re-traumatisation and intensification of PTSD symptomatology. The notion of limiting what and how we remember in order to create a peaceful future by forgetting elements of the painful past and the potential for re-traumatisation either through the act of telling and re-engagement with traumatic memories or negative public reception, highlight the fact that remembering, even when it is conducted with the intention of being ‘reparative’ may not be helpful to all.

A delicate balance needs to be achieved, both psychically and at a public societal level, between on the one hand, the need to re-engage with the past in order to learn from it, and the need to function in the present. The need to remember and the need to forget are central to these processes. In terms of storytelling within the Northern Ireland context, this raises the complex question if and, therefore, who, or what body, should determine what is remembered and how public memory should be (re)presented:

The idea that the mediated production of common memory narratives can and should be ‘engineered’ (orchestrated, managed) in order to become productive of a peaceful and just co-existence, rather than the source of division, remains one of the underlying assumptions of (post-)conflict governance. At stake, then, (...) is the thorny question (...) whether the instrumentalisation of memory (for better or worse) is not an inherent feature of its public production. (Rigney 2012, 252)

The challenge of collaborative and inclusive storytelling of this kind therefore requires achieving a delicate balance between the right of those affected by conflict to be represented and their right to represent their story in a manner of their choosing, versus the need for audiences to have access to contradictory, adequately contextualised, challenging representations of the past that are not compromised by safe representations that seek to appease all parties.

**Conclusion**

This research transforms assumptions, based primarily on public consultation as its main rationale, about the efficacy of a particular form of participatory storytelling practice in the Northern Irish context, collaborative documentary filmmaking, by providing qualitative data that outlines specific benefits and risks for participants and audiences. The benefits include humanising the conflict by providing public access to first-person accounts of those affected by Troubles. It allows participants to present a contrasting narrative of a loved one or personal experience as a challenge to dominant media representations. It provides participants with validation and public acknowledgement of the trauma narrative. It is cathartic, allowing participants to externalise a previously internalised trauma narrative by producing a tangible outcome. It is a private and public commemoration or memorialisation of a loved one or personal experience and it provides an overall sense of achievement. Although promising, these benefits are not guaranteed. This research augments concerns raised by Hackett and Rolston (2009) and Bush, Logue, and Burns (2011) about the widespread use of storytelling by identifying specific risks, i.e. re-traumatisation, inadequate representation and public invalidation of the trauma narrative. This, combined with the irretrievability of loss, limits the potential for project such as this to provide ‘healing’ and any such claims should be used with caution.

Whilst collaborative protocols used by the projects identified by HTR (2005b) and also by McLaughlin in post-conflict documentary filmmaking are progressive in that they attempt to redress the imbalance of power used in traditional models of broadcast filmmaking and in storytelling practice, they do not guarantee adequate representation. As Pink (2007, 112) states, ‘collaborative work both opens up possibilities and is constrained in what it can achieve.’ Collaboration with multiple partners can create competing agendas. It is not guaranteed that the agenda of the participants will be paramount. The right to veto, particularly where contrasting narratives are included in the same filmic space, may serve to reinforce, rather than redress the imbalance of power between producers and participants. Audience responses also highlighted the complexities of the remembering/forgetting dialectic and its role in maintaining current and future peace. This highlights the need for greater criticality around the increased use of storytelling in the Northern Irish context in terms of its protocols, implementation and purported beneficial effects, particularly in the absence of any official modes of post-conflict reparations.

Despite their limitations, the methodologies devised here offer a model of reparative remembering that is inclusive. In the Northern Irish context where cultural memorial practices can reinforce division (Leydesdorff et al. 2004, 22) this framework opens up the possibility of acknowledging the similarities and separateness of contrasting experiences of the Troubles by allowing them to co-exist in the same public space. As Hamber (2009, 139) states, ‘any society grappling with mass injustice should seek to open as much social and psychological space as possible.’ The collective viewing experience offered by the screening of inclusive audiovisual material creates a shared mode of remembrance that seeks to reduce, as opposed to reinforce, the sense of the other. Transforming the individual experience to collective, cultural memory is central to documentary filmmaking:

Since its invention, the camera has figured centrally in the desire to remember, to recall the past, to make the absent present. Photographic, cinematic, and video images are the raw materials used to construct personal histories. (...) The memories constructed from camera images are not only personal, but collective. (Sturken 1996, 1)

The role of collaborative documentary filmmaking of this kind in the Northern Ireland context has the potential to contribute to the process of what Rigney (2012, 253) terms ‘slow’ memory, whereby ‘new narratives (...) develop in the public sphere and then, through various media and agencies, become integrated into subjectivities.’ As one audience member reflected, ‘Storytelling in a contested environment is a challenge - but achievable.’

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1. The PMA is a collection of 175 filmed recordings of people who experienced Armagh Gaol and the Maze and Long Kesh Prisons during the Troubles. Recorded in 2006 and 2007, participants walked and talked their way around the derelict prison sites without the use of a formal interview, using the site itself as a stimulus for their memories. See: <http://prisonsmemoryarchive.com/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For more about the work of WAVE see: <http://www.wavetraumacentre.org.uk/home> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Collusion between the RUC and loyalist paramilitaries was confirmed in a report by Police Ombudsman, Nuala O’Loan, released on 22nd January 2007. See: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/police/ombudsman/poni220107.htm> See also: Bowcott, O. 2007. ‘15 murders linked to police collusion with loyalists’ The Guardian, January 23: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2007/jan/23/northernireland.topstories3> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The role of Victims Commissioner is a statutory position, first established in 2006. The main aim of the Commissioner is to promote the interests of victims and survivors of the Troubles. See: <https://www.cvsni.org/about-us/the-commissioner/> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The Ballymurphy Massacre occurred in Ballymurphy, Belfast, between 9th and 11th August 1971 when 11 civilians were killed by the 1st Battalion Parachute Regiment of the British Army as part of ‘Operation Demetrius’, which saw the introduction of mass arrest and internment (imprisonment without trial). The incidents are referred to as Belfast’s Bloody Sunday, as the same battalion killed 13 civilians five months later on 30th January 1972 in Derry/Londonderry during a civil rights march. The first official inquest into the Ballymurphy killings began at Belfast High Court in November 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)