Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Prisons Memory Archive: The Role of Oral History in Societies emerging from Political Conflict: a case study.

Cahal McLaughlin, Chair of Film Studies, Queens University Belfast.

c.mclaughlin@qub.ac.uk

Introduction

I will begin with a quote from Elizabeth Jelin, an Argentinian writer who commented, 'We live in a time when traditions are subject to multiple forms of critical scrutiny, when hierarchical paradigms based on canonical knowledge are undergoing profound transformations, and in which a plurality of new subjects are demanding their place within the public sphere. In this context, the transmission of the knowledge and meanings of the past becomes an open and public issue, subject to strategic struggles and controversies about the "politics of memory".' (Jelin, 2003, p95)[i]

With the North of Ireland emerging out of violence, there is a general, but not yet officially recognized, consensus that storytelling can be one of the ways of addressing the legacy of the conflict in the present. The Northern Ireland Victims Commissioner's *We Will Remember Them* (1998), The *Report of the Consultative Group on the Past (2009),* and *the Hass O'Sullivan Report* (2014), all established by the government, call for storytelling as part of a range of recommendations requiring government support, yet none have been implemented to date. As you probably know from the Stormont House Agreement's failure to address the legacy of the past, none of these recommendations have been impolemented. Filling this gap, the Prisons Memory Archive[ii] is just one of up to 50 initiatives that have been produced by civil and academic communities as part of the attempt to find ways to come to terms with our violent past – another worth checking out is the Accounts of the Conflict at UU[iii].

During the Troubles, the prisons were seen as iconic – as touchstone and tinderbox – influencing outside politics and outside politics influencing what happened inside the prison walls. We considered that if we could tell the story of the prisons through documentary film, we could tell one of the most important stories from what become known as the Troubles.

As a result of the two ceasefires of 1994 and 1998 and the Belfast Agreement between the London and Dublin governments in 1998, prisoners were released by 2000 and some of the prisons closed. These prisoners were a crucial constituency in the decisions to agree the ceasefires and accept the 1998 Agreement.

The PMA is a collection of filmed recordings of the memories of 175 people who worked in, were imprisoned in, or visited the prisons, which were used to hold political prisoners. There are 300 hours of audiovisual material. After several years of negotiations with the Northern Ireland Office and, later, the Office of First and Deputy First Minister of the Stormont Assembly, followed by negotiations with ex-prison staff and ex-prisoner groups, the Prisons Memory Archive filmed inside the empty prisons during the summers of 2006 (Armagh) and 2007 (Maze and Long Kesh').

Protocols

There are three main protocols that we use in the PMA – collaboration, inclusivity and life-story telling.

The first, and from which the others evolved, is a collaborative approach where we work closely with the participants and underpin our commitment by agreeing co-ownership of the material with them. Since they have a veto over their own material, this entails an enormous risk that they might pull out towards the end of the process, but the reward is that participants gain trust in the production process.

This ethical approach has two purposes:

1. It allows participants to be co-authors of their own stories, an important aspect of the healing process for anyone who has undergone a traumatic experience;
2. It eases accessibility. Given the ongoing sensitivities around our political conflict –including contestation over whose stories are privileged – we were informed by several participants that they cooperated only on the basis that it was not intended for television and that they would have control over its use.

A second protocol is inclusivity with as full a range as possible of participants, many of whose stories conflict in terms of experience and interpretation. One way of gauging a society's ability to mature is to measure how it is able to listen to the stories of the 'other', the stories of those whom you had been in conflict with. So we are asking audiences to experience stories that maybe challenge their own perceptions.

The third protocol is the use of the life-story approach to oral history and to rely on the materiality of the sites to stimulate memory recollection. While we engaged in conversations with the participants, this was to clarify and tease out what they had expressed in a briefing session the areas that they wished to cover. There was no list of set questions, but an encouragement for participants to set the agenda. Selma Leydesdorff et al. explain, life-story telling 'allows room for contradiction, a holistic richness and complexity. It gives the opportunity to explore the relations between personal and collective experience, by focusing on remembering and forgetting as cultural processes'. (Leydesdorf et. al., 2004, p12)[iv].

Methodology

We established a consistent methodology to our work, so that all participants were treated equally. We aimed for the highest affordable production standards, using HD cameras and professional camera operators. We also aimed for the highest standard of sensitivity in dealing with traumatic experiences. One precaution that we took was to offer trauma

counselling for each participant and also provided a half-day counseling session for all crew before filming in order to address the transference of trauma. We provided a 15 minute briefing before and after each recording session for the participant to understand what the purposes were and to offer opportunities to reflect on the recording act. All recordings have been sent to the participants to agree to. Some have asked for deletions, mostly where others' names are mentioned. A few have asked for a moratorium, so that their material will not be released for some years, due to the ongoing political tensions. However, most have agreed to allow their material to be released for public screening, although under various circumstances, e.g. some online, some in museums, etc., depending on how they feel comfortable with the exhibition context.

Iterations and Reception:

The material was not recorded to be edited in linear intercut films, but difficulty in getting funding lead to considering this format for outputs. PhD scholarships lead to two outputs and a small CRC grant lead to another – the website www.prisonsmemoryarchive.com, which has up to 20 participants stories in full or in part. I want to show you an example of one recording – 3 minutes from John Hetherington, a Prison Officer, who remembers the hunger strike period and his difficulty in physically and psychically returning to that period.

The significance of the work is the most difficult to measure. The work is personal, sensitive, political and contested. The films have been screened internationally at conferences and most significantly with local community groups, which range from women's groups to single identity, cross community and ex-services groups. I will use reception to one film to illustrate the rewards and risks of engaging with stories from the past.

Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol is a 59 minute film from the PMA that contains the stories of prisoners (loyalist and republican), prison officers, a lawyer, doctor and chaplain. It is not, inevitably, an easy film to watch - the tensions and violence that were often intimate and sustained are addressed. Reception to the film has been varied and worth considering here, because how an archive is used is worth considering as much as how it is collected in the planning stages.

A cross community women's group in west Belfast used a screening to take the opportunity to begin talking about the experiences of the past across the 'peace line' – communicating their own personal stories of their friends and families. Although not addressing the issues directly in the film, the film created a safe space for the sharing of experiences from the past in a divided society.

By contrast, the film was shown to a group of ex-service personnel (UDR, RUC and POs) and resulted in a difficult – at times pained and at times angry – discussion. The experience of the present, where many feel 'left behind', is as important in discussing the past as the past experience itself. One useful outcome was a discussion on possibilities for addressing the past in ways that guarantee anonymity, an important criteria for some, e.g. through verbatim theatre, art and writing.

Conclusion

In a society that has yet to agree on a process for addressing the legacy of a past conflict, storytelling offers one way of addressing a conflicted past in a contested present. The Prisons Memory Archive is one of many such initiatives that are taking place. By offering our society the opportunity to hear and see stories of all its members, including those with whom we do not agree, we hope that the archive will make transparent and manageable the struggles over what Jelin calls the 'politics of memory'.

Recommendations

There are a number of briefing papers[v] in the public that make recommendations for the proposed Oral History Archive as envisioned by the Stormont House Agreement, so I will not add to those, but will suggest the following as lessons learned from the Prisons Memory Archive.

1. Co-ownership – by offering co-authorship to participants, two achievements may be obtained. Firstly, harm is minimised by returning agency to the storyteller. Secondly, one is more likely to include hard-to-reach constituencies, by building a foundation of with the storyteller. The nature of such co-ownership requires further consideration that time allows here.
2. Inclusivity – the range of stories from the Troubles is varied, contradictory, and contested. One of the best ways of building a society that tolerates the presence of all its members is a preparedness to hear the story of the 'other'.
3. Life-storytelling – by returning agency to the storyteller, we provide a safe space for them to tell their story, free of intrusiveness and interrogation. Again, this helps build trust.
4. Preservation – there needs to be guarantees that the host repository(s) has a record in digital preservation to ensure the material is preserved in perpetuity.
5. Accessibility – the point of storytelling is to be heard, to have public acknowledgement of one's experience, as a way of coming to terms with a traumatic past. A range of accessibility should be considered and offered. One size does not necessarily fit all.
6. Engagement – a programme of use of the archive, e.g. in schools, communities, media, etc. should be planned in advance to anticipate future use for consideration by storytellers.
7. Governance – independence is crucial to establishing trust for inclusion and use of the archive.

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i Jelin, E. (2003) *State Repression and the Struggles for Memory*. London: Latin American Bureau.

ii See www.prisonsmemoryarchive.com and McLaughlin, C. (2014) 'Who Tells What to Whom and How: the Prisons Memory Archive'. Paris: http://www.p-e-r-f-o-r-m-a-n-c-e.org/?p=139.

iii The following are examples of community or academic based projects: http://accounts.ulster.ac.uk/repo24/index.php and http://web-previews.com/healingthroughremembering/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Storytelling-Audit_2005.pdf.

iv Leydesdorff, S. et al (2004) 'Introduction' in Lacey Rogers, K. L. Leydesdorff, S. Dawson, G. *Trauma: life stories of survivors.* New Brunswick: Transaction.

v Briefing papers include http://rightsni.org/2015/10/the-stormont-house-oral-history-archive-proni-and-the-meaning-of-independence-guest-post-by-dr-anna-bryson/ and http://web-previews.com/healingthroughremembering/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/TSN_Briefing_Paper_on_SHA_FINAL_Oct_2015.pdf.