

The Guardian

'Academic vandalism' – unique archive of the Troubles under threat

Scholars voice outrage at Ulster University's plans to confine 'impartial' records of conflict to history



Milltown cemetery in west Belfast, scene of an attack at an IRA funeral in March 1988. Photograph: Paul McErlane/The Guardian

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It is one of the most important sources of information about the Troubles in Northern Ireland, a historical memory bank of data, stories and images used by scholars around the world.

The Conflict Archive on the Internet (Cain) website, based in Derry, has taken two decades to build up an unrivalled encyclopaedic digital record of the conflict. It includes oral histories, election results, political memorabilia, public records, bibliographies and the names and details of more than 3,600 Troubles-related killings in Northern Ireland, Ireland, the UK and continental Europe. The information is free to access and responsive to requests and queries ranging from school students, professors and former paramilitaries.

But perhaps not for much longer. Ulster University, which hosts the archive's three-strong team at its Magee campus, is threatening to pull the plug. The university says the cost, estimated at £170,000 a year, is unsustainable.

Academics are appalled. Some say that to cripple the archive would be an act of intellectual vandalism when there is urgent need to understand Northern Ireland's conflicts, past and present.

“It’s a global resource,” said Goretta Horgan, a lecturer in social policy at Ulster University and policy director of Access Research Knowledge, a social policy information hub shared by Ulster University and Queen’s University Belfast, which is affiliated with the archive. “The contribution it makes to civil society in Northern Ireland cannot be underestimated. It’s neutral – a big word to use here. Every aspect of the Troubles is contested. Cain provides reliable information. Anybody, Catholic or Protestant, can access it and know they’re not getting a one-sided view.”



Katharine Clarke, the Northern Ireland representative of the University and College Union. Photograph: Paul McLane/The Guardian

The Troubles began in 1969 and largely ended in 1998 with the Good Friday agreement. But continuing violence, sectarian sentiment, political tensions and new inquiries into old atrocities make for a fraught, complex and unfinished legacy. On 19 April the New IRA, a dissident republican splinter group, shot dead Lyra McKee, 29, a journalist, during rioting in Derry, just half a mile from the Magee campus.

In the absence of white knight donors riding to the rescue, or the university having a change of heart, supporters fear the archive in its current form will itself become history. Academics and journalists have mounted a campaign to save it as a live research project. They say that to destroy it would be academic vandalism that would zombify a living, breathing resource, which fields queries and corrects, revises and updates information. The consultation period on the archive’s future is due to end on 2 May, with a decision expected soon after.

Katharine Clarke, the Northern Ireland representative of the University and College Union, which represents the archivists, accused the university of dissembling in response to the international furore over the archive’s fate. A university spokesman said it had “invested significantly in covering the costs of Cain”. He added: “But, against the backdrop of the current funding challenges for higher education in Northern Ireland and with grants insufficient to secure viability, the archive remains unsustainable in its current form. One potential outcome is that Cain will remain as a static digital archive, fully accessible through the university’s library.”

That would preserve the material online but not as an impartial, living, maintained database. Martin Melaugh, the director of Cain, and his colleagues Brendan Lynn and Mike McCool could face redundancy. “There’s no shortage

of work to do,” said Melaugh. “Political progress has stalled and Brexit has increased the debate around the unification of Ireland and a potential border poll.”

Forgetfulness about an earlier cycle of violence between 1920 and 1922, when 501 people died in Belfast, paved Northern Ireland’s tragic slide into renewed conflict in 1969, he said, and greater knowledge of the Troubles – and the border – could help avert a third cycle.

External funding largely dried up in 2016, leaving Ulster University to pick up most of the tab while the archive sought new backers. They didn’t materialise, so the university is now proposing to fold the service into its library. “Our issue is that we’re trying to manage the website and assist people, so we don’t fit exactly into the models of academic funding. That’s the dilemma,” Melaugh said.

Meanwhile, Clarke points out that Ulster University will host a conference titled *Beyond Sectarianism* on 14 May, drawing a spotlight at an awkward time, said Clarke. “If I were being cynical I’d say they’re giving conflicting messages to avoid embarrassment.” She said the university has every reason to be embarrassed. “This is an example of knowing the cost of something but not the value.”

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