

Visual Voices of the Prisons Memory Archive

For those of us involved in the production of the audio-visual recordings at two of Northern Ireland's infamous prisons almost a decade ago, we knew we were part of something significant. We were humbled as people arrived back at the site, the journey of how they had come to a place in their mind where they were ready to tell their story was as intriguing as the memories they were willing to offer us. What we didn't know when those recordings were made in 2006 at Armagh Gaol and Maze and Long Kesh Prison in 2007 was that many of those stories would remain largely unheard almost a decade later, an indication of how a society recovering from conflict continues to grapple with the past.

The Prisons Memory Archive (PMA), as the 170 audio-visual recordings are collectively known, was initiated by documentary film-maker Cahal McLaughlin's *Inside Stories: Memories of the Maze and Long Kesh Prison* (2002) and supported by the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund. McLaughlin, now Professor of Film at Queens University Belfast and PMA Director, describes and analyses the use of the genre, including the importance of ethics in the collaboration between the filmmaker and the participant in *Recording Memories from Political Violence: A Film-Makers Journey* (Intellect, 2010).

This collaborative relationship was developed into an ethical framework for the PMA, with three key principles: co-ownership, inclusivity and life storytelling, underpinning both the production and dissemination of the audio-visual recordings. To explain further, the centrality of co-ownership of the recordings by the PMA and the participants, means that the individuals are involved at all stages of production and exhibition; participants ultimately have the power of veto over the use of their own material. This first ethical principle is primarily intended to establish trust between participants and the PMA in a society emerging from violence where political and personal sensitivities remain tender.

Secondly, life storytelling empowers participants to tell their own story, with the space of the site acting as both a stimulus for memory and challenging the boundaries between collective and individual memories. The recordings capture how everyday life was impacted by the conflict and provide powerful, emotional reminders of humanity, relationships and turmoil. Each recording makes a contribution to individual memories that complement the more common collective histories in our society. The third ethical principle is inclusivity, with a diverse range of participants, including prison staff, prisoners, relatives, teachers, chaplains, lawyers, doctors, and probation officers. Work on governance and accountability for the PMA is also delivered within this principle, such as through the PMA Management Group comprised of representatives of the constituencies that originally contributed.

There have been a number of outputs from the PMA which give public access to the recordings through films, art installations and workshops. These have been held in various community, cinema and academic settings, throughout the island of Ireland, London and internationally in Montreal, Johannesburg,

Stockholm, Sydney and Brazil. Many of the film screenings have been followed by facilitated discussions, frequently with participants and filmmakers present. Responses have confirmed the unique value of the material, the appropriateness of the approach, and the impact of the range of stories on received views. The value of the material as a way to learn about heritage was assessed in a survey of responses to a film that emerged from the PMA, *Unseen Women*: '87% of audience responses agreed that audio-visual storytelling is an effective way of telling, or representing, the stories of people affected by the conflict, while 74% of respondents agreed that audio-visual storytelling events such as these (screenings, plus discussions) would help educate future generations.' (Jolene Mairs, 'Audiovisual Storytelling in Post-conflict Northern Ireland', *Ulster University, PhD Thesis, 2013*).

Funding was secured from the Community Relations Council in 2013 to publish 24 interviews online at www.prisonmemoryarchive.com. Totalling almost 50 hours of filmed material the content can be navigated in two ways: either via the full interviews, which range from 20 minutes to 3 hours, or through 15 conceptual categories, lasting on average five minutes each. With these signposts, we offer users the opportunity to navigate their way through different pathways. Turning this material into an interactive webpage has raised many questions, such as why use interactivity, how the subjective nature of categorising affects the outcome, how much authorship can be given to users, and how interactivity can help listen to the 'other'.

The material which is available provides audiences with an opportunity to see and listen to the 'other,' meaning that the PMA is of significant importance to local communities as a representation of our shared heritage, as well as practitioners globally for its ethical approach to intangible cultural heritage. It is one of many projects in the North of Ireland that record narratives of the conflict, but is unique in its focus on the largest male and female prisons, combined with ethical principles and audio-visual recordings. A review of one of the PMA films captured the need for access to the recordings: 'There were so many layers of history and emotion underlying the film *We Were There* that it was impossible to immediately digest – and certainly impossible to dismiss – this one hour film.....more time and skill is needed for healing and remembering' (*Irish News*, 3 April 2014).

Over the past decade it has become clear that whilst many of the stories make for uncomfortable viewing, improved access to the PMA is needed to expand on the potential of the material. Increased access, preservation of all the audio-visual recordings and paper records, as well as engaging communities with the recordings are the strategic aims for the PMA Management Group over the next five years. In a local context, this will provide increased opportunities to learn about our shared heritage. Internationally, the PMA will continue to build on its reputation as model of best practice due to its ethical approach in how to record memories from conflict in a way which can contribute to reconciliation and does not cause harm.

Securing funding for the delivery of these strategic aims requires a robust evidence base of the need for people to learn about their own and others' heritage. Recent funding from the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund has allowed us to develop these strategic aims, and explore both the opportunities and significant challenges the material offers. As support from the Heritage Lottery Fund made the initial

recordings possible, it seems appropriate that they have a development role as a key funder almost a decade later.

In conclusion, I reflect on the words of advisor to the PMA and Emeritus Professor of Social Work Faith Gibson: 'Growing is a lifetime experience....This means learning to listen to people's stories, to what is said, and also unsaid.' (*Reminiscence and Life Story Work: a Practice Guide*, 2011, London: Jessica Kingsley. p.19). The audio-visual recordings of the PMA provide an invaluable opportunity to see and hear people's stories and offer opportunities for growth and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and beyond. For those of us who were part of the original production team almost a decade ago, we look forward to the realisation of this opportunity for increased access in the next few years to share this unique project with many others.

Dr Lorraine Dennis is currently Project Manager of the *Visual Voices of the Prisons Memory Archive: preservation, access and engagement* project at Queens University Belfast. She also served as Production Manager for the original recordings in 2006 and 2007.

Article published in *Viewfinder* 101 November 2015. *Viewfinder* is the British Universities Film and Video Council <http://bufvc.ac.uk/publications/viewfinder-archive>