Information, Communication & Society

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rics20

Random access memories or clichéd representations? Exploring historical photographs of the troubles on Instagram

Paul Reilly

To cite this article: Paul Reilly (25 Mar 2024): Random access memories or clichéd representations? Exploring historical photographs of the troubles on Instagram, Information, Communication & Society, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2024.2332605

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2024.2332605

Published online: 25 Mar 2024.

INFORMATION, COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY
https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2024.2332605

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Random access memories or clichéd representations? Exploring historical photographs of the troubles on Instagram

Paul Reilly

School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

ABSTRACT

Social media provide unprecedented opportunities for the distribution of photographs capturing experiences of conflict. Instagram in particular renders conflict photography searchable, whilst also aggregating the memories of traumatised communities. This paper adds to the nascent literature in this area by exploring how the photosharing app is used to share photographs of the Northern Irish 'Troubles', a low-intensity conflict that resulted in 3,600 fatalities and left many more bereaved, injured and traumatised. Two decades on from the Belfast Agreement, Northern Ireland remains a deeply divided society in which competing narratives over the conflict remain deeply entrenched. This study explored photographic representation of the Troubles, with a specific focus on who was represented in these images and whether they were evoke personal memories of the conflict. A content and narrative analysis of 100 historical images tagged #thetroubles was conducted in order to explore these issues. Results indicate that images showing the 'peculiarity' of everyday life during the conflict, such as armed British soldiers standing in close quarters to children playing in the street, were the most prominent visual representations under this hashtag. The memories evoked by such historical photographs reinforce zero-sum narratives on conflict, rather than promote new interpretations that build support for peace in 'post-conflict' societies.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 1 August 2023
Accepted 20 February 2024

KEYWORDS
Instagram; conflict memory; social media; Northern Ireland

Introduction

Recent scholarship suggests that partisan memories remain salient in 'post-conflict' settings as former combatants seek to convince their constituencies that their values have not changed due to their support for peace (Brown & Grant, 2016). Notably, there has been little research conducted into how photographs shared on social media (re)produce antagonistic forms of public memory in societies transitioning out of violent conflict. In

CONTACT Paul Reilly paul.reilly@glasgow.ac.uk School of Social and Political Science, 42 Bute Gardens, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom, G12 8RT

contrast to its analogue antecedents, digital memory is neither restricted by geographical borders, nor privileged to particular communities (Hoskins, 2018); those uploading, viewing and commenting on conflict imagery participate in memorialising conflict. While it is conceivable that new interpretations of these events might emerge, the commemorative processes sustaining collective memory often degenerate into 'war by another means' whereby former combatants justify past actions whilst delegitimising their opponents (Brown & Grant, 2016).

This paper empirically investigates how social media facilitates memorialisation by exploring how Instagram is used to share memories of the Northern Irish conflict (known colloquially as 'The Troubles'), a low-intensity conflict between 1969 and 1998 that resulted in 3,600 fatalities and left many more bereaved, injured and traumatised. Twenty-five years on from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, there remain deeply entrenched narratives on the conflict among those identifying as British and Irish, not to mention British Army veterans whose deployment to maintain law and order turned into a de facto thirty-year war of attrition with republican terrorist organisations like the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA). These divisions have been somewhat exacerbated by the UK's departure from the European Union in January 2020, which removed the constructive ambiguity that 'allowed both unionists and nationalists to believe different things about Northern Ireland's ultimate constitutional destiny' (Cochrane, 2020, p. 51).

This paper explores the visual representation of the conflict on Instagram, focussing on which actors were represented in historical photographs of the conflict. In doing so, it explores whether they have the potential to enable new forms of remembering that challenged deeply entrenched narratives on their origins. A visual analysis of 100 historical images tagged #thetroubles was conducted between September and December 2019 in order to investigate these issues.

Photographs and collective memory

In order to analyse photographic representations of the Troubles on Instagram, one must first understand the role of photojournalism in memory work. The photographer was not an unbiased observer, regulating who was 'seen' by deciding what to document (Azoulay, 2015). Classic models of photojournalism characterised it as a discursive practice that makes 'affective appeals to human action based on displays of human suffering', raising questions about its objectivity as a mode of knowledge production (Kennedy & Patrick, 2014, p. 2). This was a violence 'inflected from the image' rather than necessarily being inherent in the photograph itself (Carville, 2014, p. 60). Sontag (1977) was among those to argue that the familiarity of such photographs meant that they lost their emotional charge over time, with the exception of images of the Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War (Sontag, 1977). Yet there remains little evidence that viewers become less compassionate in response to photographic displays of suffering (Campbell, 2014). This did not necessarily mean that audiences shared the interpretations of those behind the camera. Hall (2006) characterised photographs as representational systems whose meaning could not be fixed; dominant interpretations reflected the 'definition of situations and events which are in dominance' (p.172). Subsequent scholarship proposed that audience members can deviate

from these dominant interpretations through a mixture of preferred and resistant readings (Shaw, 2017).

Photographs often have mnemonic characteristics that help viewers engage in memory work, the 'active practice of remembering which takes an inquiring attitude towards the past and the activity of its (re)construction through memory' (Kuhn, 2000, p. 186). While for individuals it usually revolves around the family album, photographs can extend the capacity of communities to remember culturally and politically significant events (Kuhn, 2007, p. 285). This is especially true of iconic photographs, those widely recognised images that have significant emotional significance for people and their national community' (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 472). Most notably, the image of Phan Thi Kim Phuc running down a road naked after a napalm attack symbolised the 'moral error' of US participation in the Vietnam War (Lucaites & Hariman, 2007, p. 62). Those that achieve this status, although few in number, tend to evoke strong emotional responses among audiences (Cohen et al., 2018).

'Collective memory' has often been used as a generic descriptor for this phenomenon, despite there being very little consensus on its definition (Segesten & Wüstenberg, 2017). Drawing on the work of Durkheim and Halbwachs, it can broadly be understood as the process whereby 'groups produce memories in individuals of events they never experienced' (Olick, 1999, p. 335). Yet, this term has been contested due to its 'sprawling application to describe and position an array of alleged group rememberings and circumstances' (Hoskins, 2016, p.350). Olick (1999) introduced the concept of 'collected memories' to capture how social frameworks shape what individuals remember; however he argued in favour of a social memory studies that brought together collective and individual memory and acknowledged the 'wide variety of mnemonic processes, practices and outcomes' (p.346). Irrespective of these semantics, photographs clearly have a political agency that can be leveraged to mobilise both consensus and dissenting memories of traumatic events (Conway, 2003).

Online platforms such as photosharing app Instagram provide new possibilities for photojournalism to be both distributed and spoken for by audiences. Instagrammers frequently engage in memory work using remediated photojournalistic images created during global grieving events, such as the November 2015 Paris terror attacks (Leaver et al., 2020). Historical images shared on the site can facilitate informal learning about traumatic events such as the Holocaust, which feature prominently in the memories of individuals and communities (Commane & Potton, 2019). Moreover, the sharing of historical images on social media has implications for memory work itself. The 'connective turn' has 'unmoored' memory from traditional repositories such as family albums, archives and institutions, replacing traditional notions of collective memory with the searchable 'memory of the multitude' (Hoskins, 2017). Social media users have seemingly unfettered access to photographs and other materials online which facilitate new forms of 'human remembering and forgetting' (Hoskins, 2018, p. 1). However, this hyperconnectivity renders the memory of the multitude increasingly reliant on the algorithms of platforms like Instagram (Lambert et al., 2018), raising questions about the role of big tech companies in providing memory objects for social media users. There is a lacuna of research exploring how online platforms might influence memory work through the content they make visible to users. This article will add to this emergent literature by examining the most visible photographic representations of the Northern Irish Troubles on Instagram.

Partisan memory in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland

Partisan and antagonistic forms of public memory are perhaps inevitable in a society divided along sectarian lines, with no middle ground between the two main narratives on its constitutional status. During the thirty-year conflict in Northern Ireland, the minority Catholic community, who predominantly identified as Irish and supported reunification with the rest of Ireland, perceived that they were poorly treated by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), a police force which was almost exclusively Protestant and viewed as an arm of the unionist-controlled Stormont government (Hearty, 2018). Republican paramilitaries such as PIRA engaged in an 'armed struggle' against the RUC and the British security forces in order to force a British withdrawal from Ireland (Edwards & McGrattan, 2010). Meanwhile, unionists and loyalists, who self-identified as British and supported the existing union with Great Britain, viewed the security forces as a bulwark against this republican terrorism (Smithey, 2013). Loyalist paramilitaries such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) claimed their campaigns of violence was in response to the PIRA, despite often targeting Catholic civilians who had no links to the republican movement.

After thirty years of violence, the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement created a de facto 'negative' peace, defined as the 'absence of organised collective violence' (Galtung, 1967, p. 17). Societal cleavages and differences were institutionalised in a consociationalist framework of governance based on mandatory powersharing between political elites drawn from the two main ethnic blocs (Reilly, 2011). Partisan political symbols and commemorations were salient due to the ethnonationalist basis of the conflict remaining intact. Loyalist and republican commemorative narratives remained 'thick' with references to their respective stances on who was responsible for the 'Troubles', legitimising their own past actions and demonstrating how their values remain unchanged in the 'post-conflict' era (Brown & Grant, 2016). They often revolve around highlighting attacks on their respective communities, which form part of the discourses of hurt used by political parties to mobilise their respective constituents (Murtagh et al., 2008). Crucially, these commemorative narratives rarely gain traction with members of the 'other' community, with the exception of atrocities such as the 1998 Omagh bombing which bridged such divides. They are often articulated in the form of wall murals, which convey the aspirations and fears of these communities whilst narrating the changing political landscape in the 'post-conflict' society (Rolston, 2003).

Sharing memories is often therapeutic for individuals dealing with the legacy of traumatic events, whilst also helping others understand their experiences (Hamber & Kelly, 2016). A 2009 report from the Consultative Group on the Past (CGOP) stated that storytelling 'should be seen as a process designed to facilitate individual and societal healing and to break the cycle of conflict'.[1] While there was some support for a permanent archive to be created for people to 'narrate their own pain', there was no consensus on where it should be established (Hamber & Kelly, 2016). The failure of these official, top-down initiatives reflects the lack of a shared understanding of the origins of the conflict (McQuaid, 2016). The term 'post-conflict' itself has been problematised due to its use by political elites to cast the conflict as being 'in the past' while the historic injustices experienced by traumatised communities remain unaddressed (Dawson, 2016).

Nonetheless, the malleability of memory may provide opportunities for the remembering and forgetting required to support the peace process (Brewer, 2010). While loyalist and republican valorisation of their 'fallen comrades' is often characterised as 'conflict by another means', these forms of commemoration can be adapted in order to 'attune key constituencies to necessary shifts in political dispensations', such as Irish republican party Sinn Féin's decision to participate in powersharing institutions in Northern Ireland (Brown, 2019, p. 51). This is particularly important when official accounts of the conflict are distrusted by communities who perceive their narratives have been ignored by media and political institutions.

Photographs and memories of the troubles

Photojournalistic images have often been mobilised to contest the official memory of traumatic events, such as the 'Battle of the Bogside' in Derry in August 1969. International media outlets purchased pictures taken by international photojournalists like Gilles Peress, which focussed on the 'peculiarity' of the violence rather than the politics underpinning it (Graham, 2013, p. 22). Catholics were often a 'faceless crowd' throwing stones at police and army personnel, with Protestants conspicuously absent from these photographic representations (Hanna, 2015). While for the purposes of brevity it is not possible to fully explore these representations, there were some concerns expressed about how international photojournalists like Don McCullin represented Northern Ireland in news images. Critics argued that the search for 'aesthetically satisfying photographs' resulted in a 'clichéd representation of the conflict' that did not reflect the experiences of those living in Northern Ireland (Graham, 2013, p. 25).

Photographs are frequently implicated in the struggle between official accounts of the Troubles and folk memories, those recollections passed down from generation to generation in the form of oral histories. The agency of these images, and the way they were spoken for, can be illustrated by Bloody Sunday, the name given for the murder of 13 unarmed civilians in Derry by the Parachute Regiment in January 1972. Uniform grids showing portraits of the dead, often taken from family albums rather than official forms of identification, were used by British newspapers to imply they had been somehow complicit in their own deaths; meanwhile, the same photographs became a powerful symbol of the victims' families' campaign to force the British government to recognise their innocence (Herron & Lynch, 2007). Despite the evidence provided by photographers like Fulvio Grimaldi (who produced a short booklet as a counterpoint to the official version of events), the Widgery Inquiry exonerated the soldiers.[2] Photographs of teenagers throwing stones at soldiers were used to show the 'culpability of those who had died', as part of a broader narrative justifying the actions of the soldiers as a form of 'self-defence' against those shooting at them (Hanna, 2015, p. 462). Images, such as one showing a badly injured Jackie Duddy being carried by four people behind Father Edward Daly,[3] became important components of the folk memories surrounding Bloody Sunday. These contested the Widgery 'whitewash' and drew comparisons between Catholics in the north of Ireland and victims of state oppression elsewhere in the world (Conway, 2003). The Saville Report, published in June 2010 after a 12-year Inquiry, confirmed that the 'unjustifiable firing' of British soldiers was the 'cause of those deaths and injuries'.[4] Unlike Widgery, Saville treated 'combat' photographs as

'half-truths' and considered their meaning in light of eyewitness testimonies and other evidence that had not been visually rendered by the photojournalists (Graham, 2013, p. 24).

Bloody Sunday demonstrated how photographs can be remediated and embedded into collective memories of traumatic events decades later. Twenty years after the atrocity a series of wall murals (labelled the People's Gallery) were created, featuring images such as 'Petrol Bomber' by photojournalist Clive Limpkin. This exhibition provided these photojournalistic images with a 'sphere of agency' beyond the control of institutions like the British state who wished to limit their use for dissent, in effect facilitating a cross-generational counter-memory of the atrocity (Carville, 2014, p. 72). This paper will explore the most visible photojournalistic representations of the Troubles on Instagram and their implications for those using the site for memory work.

Research questions

Specifically, there were two research questions that emerged from the preceding literature review:

> RQ1: What were the most prominent visual representations of the Troubles in historical photographs shared on Instagram?
>
> RQ2: How prominent was the iconic photojournalism of the conflict on the photosharing site?

A key aim was to explore how the photosharing site was used as a repository for the visual history of the conflict. A purposive sampling strategy was therefore applied to identify 100 photographs hashtagged #thetroubles (the colloquial name for the conflict). They were selected on the basis that they documented key actors and events between the beginning of the Troubles in 1968 and the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Contemporary images of key landmarks, such as 'peace walls' dividing Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods, were excluded as they were not considered a visual history of the conflict. By focussing on the 100 most visible historical photographs, it was possible to determine the type of images excavated by Instagram on behalf of those using #thetroubles to access objects of memory.

A content analysis (CA) was conducted in order to identify the most frequent representations of the conflict in the sample. This is a method that is frequently used to 'tell us what is there in a large corpus of media content' (Aiello & Parry, 2020, p. 23). Drawing on a methodology used in a previous study of historical images (Zhukova, 2022), this CA qualitatively identified the key theme in each photograph, and quantified how often each appeared in the dataset. Six categories were identified: bomb-related; British soldiers; civil unrest and riots; everyday life; and public figures. Open coding was then used to analyse each images and accompanying caption This enabled the two coders to examine the compositional interpretation of each photograph, such as which actors were captured in close-up or long shots (Rose, 2016). A narrative analysis of captions identified who was responsible for the image (e.g., photojournalists), its description, and whether it referred to the Troubles in general terms. It should be noted that the use of CA did not mean that a positivist approach was used to analyse the photographs. Rather,

a qualitative analysis of these images was also undertaken in order to explore how these Instagrammers used photographs to construct their memories of the conflict.

Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the host institution prior to data collection beginning in September 2019. Congruent with the most recent iteration of the ethical guidelines provided by the Association of Internet Researchers (franzke et al., 2020), a deliberative approach was undertaken to resolve any ethical dilemmas that arose. It was considered neither appropriate nor feasible to gain informed consent from these Instagrammers, especially given that their accounts were fully accessible and their images contained public hashtags such as #thetroubles. It was also not possible to anonymise the iconic war photography of McCullin and others which had become synonymous with the conflict. As per previous research exploring how marginalised groups in Northern Ireland used social media (Reilly, 2021), it was imperative that the perspectives of loyalist and republican communities, so often marginalised in the 'official' memory of the Troubles, were represented authentically here.

Findings

Photographs focus on the 'peculiarity' of life during the Troubles

Images of 'everyday life' were the most prominent visual representations of the Troubles in the corpus (see Figure 1). The 'peculiarity' of the conflict was illustrated by images showing children playing in the street in close proximity to armed British soldiers. These were typically republican areas in Belfast and Derry, as demonstrated by the PIRA murals in the background. Young people were active participants rather than bystanders in these photographs, as demonstrated by images of children holding aloft black flags to mourn the Maze Prison hunger strikers in 1981.[5] Photographs of adolescents participating in the annual Twelfth of July demonstrations were among the few

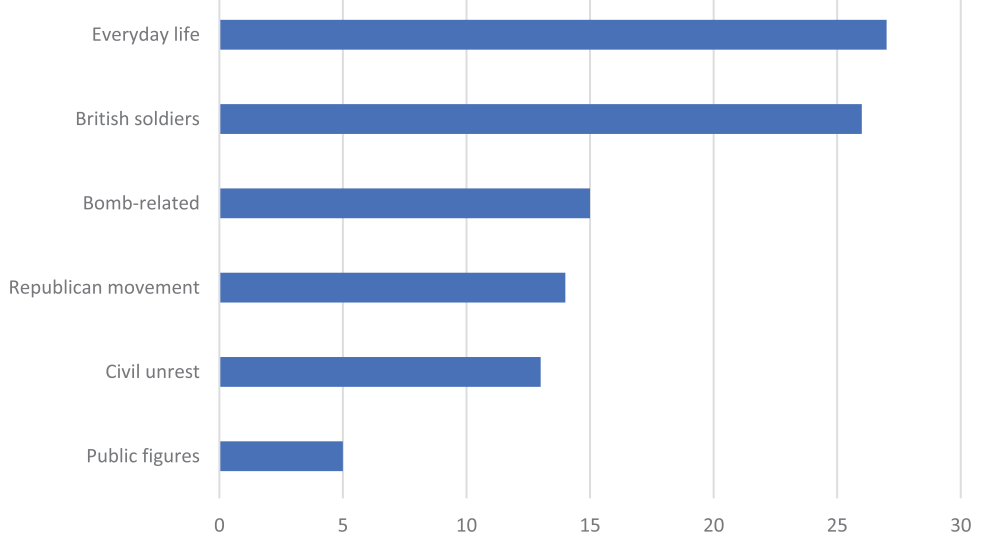

Figure 1. Content analysis of #thetroubles photographs on Instagram.

representations of unionists and loyalists in the sample. For instance, Ed Kashi's 'The Protestants in Northern Ireland' showed a (presumably) Protestant teenager jumping over the burning embers of a fire, close to a wall festooned with a union flag.[6] While most of these images focused on children and young people, older demographics were not completely absent. Most notably, there was one image of an elderly female pensioner scurrying past an armed British soldier with smoke rising from a building on the other side of the street. The implication being that people were going about their everyday business despite the violence in the streets.

There were more images in the corpus showing Protestant neighbourhoods than of the residents themselves. For example, one photograph depicted loyalist graffiti on the side of a building in the predominantly Protestant working-class Shankill Road in 1970.[7] Another, taken by photographer Willy Doherty, had the text 'God has not failed us' superimposed onto a picture of derelict houses in the Fountain Estate in Derry.[8]

Other photographs illustrated defensive architectures constructed during the Troubles, such as security gates in Belfast city centre, 'peace walls' in West Belfast separating majority Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods, and heavily fortified police stations in areas such as the Short Strand in East Belfast. A recurring theme in these photographs was that citizens were constantly reminded that they were living in a conflict zone. However, this may have been due to the fact that Instagrammers were sharing 'aesthetically pleasing' images of the Troubles rather than representing the plurality of citizens' experiences. Indeed, publisher Café Royal Books shared two of the aforementioned images of children in order to promote a forthcoming book by US photojournalist John Benton-Harris on the Troubles. In a similar vein, photographer Marc Brigden shared one of his own favourite images taken during the conflict. This showed a father and son sitting on wooden pallets intended to be used for an Eleventh night bonfire, with graffiti sprayed on a wall behind them stating 'culture before cash'.[9]

Most of the 'everyday life' images were used by Instagrammers to explore personal memories of the conflict. For example, the Decadent Theatre Company shared an image of a 'Sniper at Work' sign road sign near Dundalk in 1982, noting that such signs were 'once all too familiar'.[10] Memories were often evoked in captions expressing support for nationalist or republican narratives on the conflict. HipHop artist DJ Snuff shared a series of black and white photographs of peace walls in West Belfast, noting that spending time in Palestine reminded him of the 'occupation in my home town #Belfast during #thetroubles'.[11] In contrast, there were no captions expressing support for the union with Great Britain, or justifying the actions of the security forces during the conflict. Other Instagrammers provided few clues about their perspectives on the British presence in Ireland. Many captions carried brief descriptions of the events depicted in these photographs, with some consisting only of #thetroubles hashtag. This was perhaps to be anticipated given that publishers like Café Royal Books were promoting books on photojournalism rather than personal narratives on the conflict.

British military presence demonstrated by images of armed soldiers

Photographs of British soldiers were the next most prominent visual representation of the conflict in the corpus. The influx of British troops in August 1969 was illustrated by images showing military personnel setting up barbed wire barricades in Belfast streets.

Each soldier was dressed in full combat gear, providing further evidence of how this was a counterinsurgency operation not a peacekeeping mission. As per the 'everyday life' images, armed British soldiers were seen standing in close proximity to children playing in the street. Rather than being peripheral figures, photographers captured the faces of the military personnel on the streets of Belfast and Derry. Closed shot photographs of military personnel accounted for the most prominent representations of the British presence in Northern Ireland in the corpus. Most notably, an iconic image of 2nd Lieutenant Robin Martin and Rifleman O'Reilly of the 1st Royal Green Jackets standing next to a street barricade in Belfast was shared by one Instagrammer. This portrait photograph showed the two soldiers posing in front of a 'peace wall' consisting of barbed wire and corrugated iron fencing, situated next to a house from which a union flag was flown.[12] Such images mainly focused on the first troops to be deployed in Northern Ireland, perhaps due to data being collected during the fiftieth anniversary of Operation Banner (the name given to their deployment in Northern Ireland). There were a few pictures showing British Army personnel at later stages of the conflict. For instance, a photograph of an armed member of the RAF Regiment, standing behind a Landrover in the late 1980s, appeared twice in the corpus. It was not clear why two military enthusiasts had shared the same image, nor indeed whether they had done so to commemorate a particular incident. Captions for both confirmed that the Regiment had been on patrol in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, with no other detail provided.

Military enthusiasts and veterans accounted for all of the images of British soldiers on patrol in Northern Ireland during the conflict. Blogger and military veteran Trevor Moore shared six colour photographs, including images of soldiers from the Royal Anglian Regiment during rioting in the Bogside in September 1971, and a picture of an unidentified British soldier holding a weapon from the late 1980s. Captions focussed on what soldiers wore and carried, rather than exploring why Operation Banner had been launched in the first place. For example, Moore shared three images showing how the public order kit worn by soldiers had evolved from the early days of Operation Banner to the present day.[13] This finding demonstrated the polysemic nature of #thetroubles; while publishers and writers promoted iconic photojournalistic accounts of the conflict, military enthusiasts and veterans shared photographs of the hardware and kit they had worn during their deployment. These were the collected memories of veterans rather than the clichéd representations of the conflict captured by photojournalists such as Don McCullin.

Haunting images of violence shared to commemorate 50th anniversary of conflict

The conflict imagery heavily criticised by local photojournalists was among the most visible representations of the Troubles on Instagram. The Battle of the Bogside featured prominently in the corpus, due in no small part to the data being collected during the fiftieth anniversary of this event. Instagram accounts such as History Uncovered, whose bio claimed they existed to 'tell the most powerful stories from human history', shared familiar black and white photographs of teenagers throwing stones at lines of riot police, alongside colour images showing women making petrol bombs in the street.[14] Captions tended to be descriptive of what was seen in the photograph, rather than supporting

specific narratives on the conflict. The iconic photojournalism of the era was frequently reproduced here. For example, publisher Merrion Press shared an image taken by French photographer Gilles Caron showing a crowd gathered in the Bogside in front of a burnt out vehicle and a building that was in flames.[15]

While many of these focussed on the 1969 Bogside unrest, there were also photographs depicting violence in the district in the early 1970s and 1980s. This included an iconic Don McCullin image of a group of teenage boys jumping over a wall during a riot in 1971, with the CS gas used by British troops to disperse them visible in the background.[16] Another history account (History On This Day), showed police officers firing baton rounds at civil rights protesters in October 1968; the black and white image showed the 'faceless crowd' advancing towards police lines.[17] All but two of the photographs depicting civil unrest were taken in Derry. The outliers included an image of football-related violence shared by photographer Connor Monaghan; this showed RUC riot officers clashing with football supporters (including his two uncles, as noted in the caption) during a friendly match between Cliftonville and Glasgow Celtic in 1984 at the North Belfast club's Solitude stadium. [18] This was one of only two photographs in this category illustrating personal memories of the Troubles. As per the images of British soldiers, a clear majority of those showing civil unrest were accompanied by text describing the incidents captured on camera rather than expressing support for one of the competing narratives on the conflict.

Other photographs focused on the aftermath of Provisional IRA bombings throughout the conflict, with the actions of loyalist paramilitaries noticeably absent. Captions tended to describe what happened during these atrocities, with only a couple describing the personal experiences of those sharing the photographs. For example, one focused on the attack on the Conservative Party conference in October 1984; the text, superimposed over the image of the crumbling exterior of the Grand Brighton Hotel, confirmed that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had narrowly escaped the blast which had killed five people.[19] London Historian, an account documenting the history of the largest UK city, shared a collage of images showing the aftermath of a bomb attack on the Tower of London in 1974; this included a newspaper headline stating that local schoolchildren had been caught up in the blast.[20] However, the majority of these photographs focused on atrocities perpetrated on the island of Ireland, such as the assassination of Lord Louis Mountbatten in Mullaghmore, County Sligo in August 1979. The black and white image, shared on the fortieth anniversary of the attack, showed a group of men moving a body (presumably Mountbatten's) from a small boat on to a hospital gurney.[21] Two of these photographs showed the aftermath of PIRA bomb attacks in Belfast in July 1972 (Bloody Friday), with another showing the destruction caused by a car bomb in the city in 1991. Journalists and RUC officers were often visible in the background of these images, illustrating how they were often first on the scene of these atrocities. Once more, the focus was on the violent destruction of the conflict rather than the personal memories of victims.

Iconic black and white images remember past sacrifices of republican movement

Black and white photographs tended to be used to represent the republican movement in the corpus. These were predominantly taken during the early seventies with the

exception of an image of an unidentified hooded gunman in 1987, and another of Alex Murphy being led away from Belfast Magistrates Court in 1988. The latter was shared by photographer Keith Parnell alongside a caption confirming that the PIRA volunteer, charged with the murders of two British army corporals during an IRA funeral in March 1988, had died a month earlier.[22] Many of these photographs focussed on the 'fallen comrades' of the first few years of the Troubles. For example, an iconic image of 'Big' Joe McCann holding a weapon and crouching below a Starry Plough flag in the Markets area of Belfast in August 1971, featured prominently. The 'Che Guevara of the Official IRA' was eulogised in captions confirming he was killed by members of the Parachute Regiment in April 1972 [23], whilst others openly expressed support for the republican armed struggle in posts which included hashtags like #freedom and #uptherebels. McCann's police mug shot was also shared along with a description of the circumstances in which he was killed and a message of solidarity for the IRA. Additionally, less well-known images of masked PIRA gunmen were used in conjunction with pro-republican narratives. The standpoint of these Instagrammers, a few of whom provided no information in their bios, was further illustrated by the use of the Irish tricolour emoji and relevant hashtags such as #ourdaywillcome.

While it might have been due to the sampling strategy, there was equal representation of men and women in these images. Unlike McCann and Murphy, none of the female volunteers in these black and white photographs were identified in the captions. Most notably, an iconic image of a young female PIRA member from the early 1970s was shared by six different accounts. The young woman, dressed in a black leather jacket and patterned skirt, was seen standing on a street corner pointing an AR18 assault rifle at a target, which was off-camera. Although the captions provided no information about her identity, a history account confirmed the type of weapon she was holding and that it had been taken in the early 1970s.[24] Other Instagrammers celebrated it as an example of female empowerment, using feminist hashtags such as #iwd (International Women's Day) alongside #thetroubles. The other photograph showing female members of the republican movement focused on a Cumann na mBan Easter Sunday march in Downpatrick in 1974. It depicted a group of women all dressed in black, wearing sunglasses and black berets, standing in the middle of the street next to what was presumably a parade marshal (based on the armband he wore). It was shared by Flashback, an online retailer selling prints of historic events, along with a caption confirming that the republican women's organisation had been formed in 1914.[25] This perhaps illustrated the importance of commemorating the sacrifices of previous generations for Instagrammers who self-identified as Irish republican. An alternative but not mutually exclusive interpretation was that the iconic nature of these photographs appealed to Instagrammers. In other words, these photographs were not shared to evoke either personal or collective memories of conflict.

The Troubles form backdrop for photographs of public figures

A small but disparate group of public figures were represented in the other five photographs. An account dedicated to 'Women in Socialism' shared a black and white image of Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, the founder of civil rights movement People's Democracy and the youngest ever MP to be elected to the Westminster Parliament in

1969. The caption paid a glowing tribute to the 'Irish freedom fighter, socialist politician and feminist', providing a brief description of her career in politics including an attack by the Ulster Defence Association in January 1981 which left her severely wounded. This veneration of McAliskey was in sharp contrast to the humorous depiction of republican leader Gerry Adams in the corpus. A tongue-in-cheek 'fan page' shared a colour image of the Sinn Fein President from the mid-nineties, with a caption that read 'Gerry recently released a cookbook'.[26] Hashtags such as #funny were used to illustrate its humorous tone.

There were also several images of public figures in which the Troubles were (sometimes literally) in the background. An iconic image of singer-songwriter John Lennon, pictured with his partner Yoko Ono during a protest march in London in 1971, was shared to celebrate what would have been his 75th birthday on 9 October 2015. The placard held by the ex-Beatle read 'Red Mole for the IRA against British Imperialism', with the caption featuring relevant hashtags including #againstbritishimperialism.[27] There was a much more visceral representation of the divided society in an iconic picture taken by photographer Adrian Boot, which showed The Clash outside a Belfast police station in 1977. The post-punk band were pictured standing next to a sign which said 'danger: chain here', near the entrance to the security base behind them. The caption featured a quote from journalist John Robb discussing the rioting following the cancellation of their gig in the city.[28] While the image was tagged with #thetroubles, other hashtags in the caption referred to the punk music movement, such as #punkrock1977. The same photograph was reproduced in colour on another Instagram account run by this user, which celebrated the mods and rockers subcultures in the UK during the 1960s and 1970s. In this way, historical photographs taken in Northern Ireland during the Troubles were being shared to generate collective memories of pop culture rather than the conflict itself.

Discussion

Those using Instagram as a memory machine were likely to encounter photographs capturing the peculiarity of the Troubles, such as armed British soldiers standing next to children playing on street corners. Key events such as the Battle of the Bogside were frozen in time through the iconic 'combat photography' of Don McCullin and colleagues; in effect, this reproduced the visual economy of the conflict which had been so heavily criticised by local photojournalists during the late 1960s and early 1970s. British Army personnel were the next most prominent actors in photographs tagged #thetroubles, although the focus was more on their kit rather than the reasons why they had been deployed to Northern Ireland in 1969. The past sacrifices of the republican movement were visually commemorated in iconic images of Official IRA Volunteer 'Big' Joe McCann and a Cumann na mBan march from the 1970s. These were accompanied by captions expressing support for the republican collective memory of the conflict. In contrast, there were few representations of unionists or loyalists in these images, or captions attempting to justify the British presence in Ireland. Iconic photographs were instead used to illustrate the aftermath of atrocities such as the assassination of Lord Louis Mountbatten in posts marking their respective anniversaries. Finally, there were photographs of artists such as John Lennon which focused more on their respective stories than the conflict itself.

The multitude in this study did not appear to have been personally traumatised by the 30-year low-intensity conflict. While these were potential objects of memory for others, captions rarely disclosed personal memories of the events being depicted. Rather, 'On this Day' history accounts and British military enthusiasts shared photographs described what was 'being seen' by the photographer. This was perhaps to be expected given that many of the photographs commemorated events from the first few years of the Troubles, such as the Battle of the Bogside. Research indicates that as much as 90 percent of Instagram users are under 35 years old, thus making it highly unlikely they would have memories of these events.[29] Future research should explore whether those posting Irish Tricolour emojis alongside these images were doing so as part of a process of creating a national imaginary, rather than engaging in memory work about the conflict.

In effect, #thetroubles had a polysemic nature; while publishers and writers promoted iconic photojournalistic accounts of the conflict, military enthusiasts and veterans shared photographs of the hardware and kit they had worn during their deployment. Iconic black and white photographs of female PIRA volunteers were celebrated as exemplars of female empowerment rather than providing commentary on the republican armed struggle. #Thetroubles was one of many disparate hashtags used to categorise images shared to mark International Women's Day in 2019.

The paper contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it suggests that the prominent photographic representations of conflict on Instagram reproduce a visual economy that predates the connective turn. The photosharing app extended the mnemonic properties of iconic photographs rather than exposing social media users to objects of memory created by communities marginalised in official narratives of the conflict. Like the photomural exhibitions in Derry a few decades earlier, the photosharing app theoretically extended the capacity of these photographs to mobilise dissent against state narratives on atrocities such as Bloody Sunday. Unanchored from physical spaces, there were new opportunities for these images to be spoken for as a new form of counter memory. Second, the most visible historical photographs of conflict on sites like Instagram appear to be shared for purposes other than memory work. Most notably, iconic photojournalistic images were used to promote books on conflict imagery. Future work should examine whether the comments posted in response to such images recall individual or collective memories of the events caught on camera. This should include more recent conflicts, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, where online platforms have been used extensively to document human rights violations (Hoskins & Shchelin, 2023).

Finally, the study illustrates how platform architectures determine not only which photographic objects of memory are searchable, but also how visible they are to others. Instagram acknowledges that factors such as the likely interest in a topic and timeliness determine the visibility of posts, including those containing hashtags.[30]The purposive nature of the sampling strategy employed in this study arguably mitigated these factors when searching for the most visible photographic representations of the Troubles. Yet, there has been evidence that platforms like Instagram limit the possibility of certain forms of memorialization. The iconic image of Phan Thi Kim Phuc was removed by Facebook on the grounds of violating its rules on nudity in 2016, before being reinstated after complaints it was censoring history.[31] Pertinent to this study, historical PIRA-related content was removed from Facebook in 2017 on the grounds it violated its policy on Dangerous Individuals and Organisations by praising the republican movement. It is

therefore feasible that historical photographs of the PIRA tagged #thetroubles are not available to Instagrammers using the site for memory work.[32] Furthermore, the presence of both private and public accounts on Instagram means that the photosharing app is not a fully accessible repository of memories. Users who restrict access to their profiles (along with those who don't tag their posts with #thetroubles) might be sharing personal conflict memory materials such as photographs and videos. In this way, the searchable memory of the multitude on social media may not be fully representative of how these platforms are used for memory work.

Notes

1. The report can be read here: https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/victims/docs/consultative_group/cgp_230109_report.pdf (accessed 4 February 2022).
2. The claim that the soldiers were fired upon first was refuted by the Saville Inquiry. A comparison of the Widgery and Saville reports into Bloody Sunday can be found here: https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/jun/15/bloody-sunday-saville-report-widgery (accessed 10 February 2022).
3. Widgery's report stated he was hit by a bullet meant for someone else, but eyewitnesses confirmed he was deliberately targeted by a soldier. Background on Bloody Sunday can be found here: https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/bsunday/circum.htm (accessed 10 February 2022).
4. This quote featured in Volume 1 of the report and can be read here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/279133/0029_i.pdf (accessed 10 February 2022).
5. The 1981 Hunger strike resulted in the deaths of ten republican prisoners after their protests against the ending of special category status for paramilitaries. For more on this, see here: https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/hstrike/chronology.htm (accessed 10 February 2022).
6. https://www.instagram.com/p/qkKj2eSe-I/ (accessed 10 February 2022)
7. https://www.instagram.com/p/1iMKw0Mi8m/ (accessed 10 February 2022).
8. This image was taken in 1990 and is archived in the Ulster Museum. It can be viewed here: https://www.instagram.com/p/orgqfDQqbD/ (accessed 10 February 2022).
9. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2j8Iq-BN4T/ (accessed 10 February 2022).
10. https://www.instagram.com/p/sxB6YaEW6F/ (accessed 10 February 2022)
11. https://www.instagram.com/p/6yKXqyqaoM/ (accessed 10 February 2022)
12. The image can be viewed on the Imperial War Museum website here: https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205189948 (accessed 10 February 2022).
13. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2RdWWBBKOL/ (accessed 10 February 2022).
14. https://www.instagram.com/p/B1EQW5sgoEh/ (accessed 10 February 2022).
15. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2mDtw7nqKi/ (accessed 10 February 2022).
16. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2JdxHOjR94/ (accessed 10 February 2022).
17. https://www.instagram.com/p/B3PPJe9Cb5g/ (accessed 10 February 2022).
18. https://www.instagram.com/p/B3KxMdNg067/ (accessed 10 February 2022).
19. https://www.instagram.com/p/B3C0iMYBwzy/ (accessed 10 February 2022).
20. https://www.instagram.com/p/5OjpVyih5Q/ (accessed 10 February 2022).
21. https://www.instagram.com/p/B1q9xGbnHh5/ (accessed 10 February 2022)
22. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2ykh1hAF0z/ (accessed 10 February 2022)
23. https://www.instagram.com/p/B3VrNPShznj/ (accessed 10 February 2022).
24. https://www.instagram.com/p/xtlNC5mpEA/ (accessed 10 February 2022)
25. https://www.instagram.com/p/B19eXG_gKyw/ (accessed 10 February 2022).
26. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2aJnsmCbOp/ (accessed 10 February 2022).
27. https://www.instagram.com/p/4yy1o3nRJ-/ (accessed 10 February 2022).
28. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2hlbOgBcst/ (accessed 10 February 2022).

29. This figure is from 2017, see here: https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/communications-division/digital-communications-team/assets/documents/guides/A-Guide-To-Social-Media-Platforms-and-Demographics.pdf (accessed 10 February 2022).
30. The frequency with which users open the app also influences the posts they encouter on Instagram. For more, see here: https://buffer.com/library/instagram-feed-algorithm/ (accessed 10 May 2023).
31. Facebook were forced to apologise for the incident. For more, see here: https://www.reuters.com/article/ctech-us-norway-facebook-idCAKCN11I1VU (accessed 10 July 2023).
32. For more on this, see here: https://www.theguardian.com/news/gallery/2017/may/24/how-facebook-guides-moderators-on-terrorist-content (accessed 10 July 2023).

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Ekatherina Zhukova and Marguerite Borelli for their comments and input on earlier versions of this paper. Thanks also to the reviewers for their constructive feedback.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Paul Reilly is Senior Lecturer in Communications, Media and Democracy at the University of Glasgow. His research focuses on digital activism, social media sousveillance, and crisis communication. His work has been published in a number of journals, including First Monday, Information, Communication & Society, Journalism, and New Media & Society.

References

Aiello, G., & Parry, K. (2020). *Visual communication: Understanding images in media culture*. Sage.
Azoulay, A. (2015). *Civil imagination: A political ontology of photography*. Verso Books.
Brewer, J. (2010). *Peace processes: A sociological approach*. Polity.
Brown, K. (2019). Political commemoration and peacebuilding in ethno-national settings: The risk and utility of partisan memory. *Peacebuilding*, *7*(1), 51–70. https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2018.1491275
Brown, K., & Grant, A. (2016). A lens over conflicted memory: Surveying 'troubles' commemoration in northern Ireland. *Irish Political Studies*, *31*(1), 139–162. https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2015.1126925
Campbell, D. (2014). The myth of compassoin fatigue. In L. Kennedy & C. Patrick (Eds.), *The violence of the image: Photography and international conflict* (pp. 97–124). IB Taurus & Co.
Carville, J. (2014). The violence of the image: Conflict and post-conflict photography. In L. Kennedy & C. Patrick (Eds.), *The violence of the image: Photography and international conflict* (pp. 60–77). IB Taurus & Co.
Cochrane, F. (2020). *Breaking peace: Brexit and Northern Ireland*. Manchester University Press.
Cohen, A. A., Boudana, S., & Frosh, P. (2018). You must remember this: Iconic news photographs and collective memory. *Journal of Communication*, *68*(3), 453–479.
Commane, G., & Potton, R. (2019). Instagram and Auschwitz: A critical assessment of the impact social media has on Holocaust representation. *Holocaust Studies*, *25*(1-2), 158–181. https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2018.1472879
Conway, B. (2003). Active remembering, selective forgetting, and collective identity: The case of bloody Sunday. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, *3*(4), 305–323.

Dawson, G. (2016). Memory, 'post-conflict' temporalities and the afterlife of emotion in conflict transformation after the Irish troubles. In M. Corporaal, C. Cusack, & R. Van den Beuken (Eds.), *Irish studies and the dynamics of memory: Transitions and transformations* (pp. 257–296). Peter Lang.

Edwards, A., & McGrattan, C. (2010). *The Northern Ireland conflict*. (Beginners Guide). OneWorld.

franzke, A. S., Bechmann, A., Zimmer, M., Ess, C., & the Association of Internet Researchers. (2020). *Internet research: Ethical guidelines 3.0*. https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf

Galtung, J. (1967). *Theories of peace: A synthetic approach to Peacebuilding*. International Peace Research Institute.

Graham, C. (2013). *Northern Ireland: 30 years of photography*. Belfast Exposed Photography.

Hall, S. (2006). Encoding/Decoding. In M. G. Durham & D. N. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and cultural studies keyworks* (pp. 163–174). Blackwell.

Hamber, B., & Kelly, G. (2016). Practice, power and inertia: Personal narrative, archives and dealing with the past in Northern Ireland. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, *8*(1), 25–44. https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huw001

Hanna, E. (2015). Photographs and "Truth" during the Northern Ireland Troubles, 1969–72. *Journal of British Studies*, *54*(2), 457–480. https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2015.6

Hearty, K. (2018). Discourses of political policing in post-Patten Northern Ireland. *Critical Criminology*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-017-9376-5

Herron, T., & Lynch, J. (2007). *After Bloody Sunday: Representation, ethics, justice*. Cork University Press.

Hoskins, A. (2017). Memory of the multitude: The end of collective memory. In A. Hoskins (Ed.), *Digital memory studies: Media pasts in transition* (pp. 85–109). Routledge.

Hoskins, A. (2018). The restless past: An introduction to digital memory and media. In A. Hoskins (Ed.), *Digital memory studies: Media pasts in transition* (pp. 1–24). Routledge.

Hoskins, A., & Shchelin, P. (2023). The War feed: Digital War in plain sight. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *67*(3), 449–463. https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642221144848

Kennedy, L., & Patrick, C. (2014). Introduction: The violence of the image. In L. Kennedy & C. Patrick (Eds.), *The violence of the image: Photography and international conflict* (pp. 1–8). IB Taurus & Co.

Kuhn, A. (2000). A journey through memory. In S. Radstone (Ed), *Memory and methodology* (pp. 179–196). Berg.

Kuhn, A. (2007). Photography and cultural memory: A methodological exploration. *Visual Studies*, *22*(3), 283–292. https://doi.org/10.1080/14725860701657175

Lambert, A., Nansen, B., and Arnold, M. (2018). Algorithmic memorial videos: Contextualising automated curation. *Memory Studies*, *11*(2), 156–171. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698016679221

Leaver, T., Highfield, T., & Abidin, C. (2020). *Instagram: Visual social media cultures*. Polity.

Lucaites, J. L., & Hariman, R. (2007). *No caption needed: Iconic photographs, public culture, and liberal democracy*. University of Chicago Press.

McQuaid, S. D. (2016). Notes on studying public policies of memory: The parades commission in northern Ireland and the institutionalization of memory practices. In M. Corporaal, C. Cusack, & R. Van den Beuken (Eds.), *Irish studies and the dynamics of memory: Transitions and transformations* (pp. 129–147). Peter Lang.

Murtagh, B., Graham, B., & Shirlow, P. (2008). Authenticity and stakeholder planning in the segregated city. *Progress in Planning*, *69*, 41–49. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.progress.2007.11.001

Olick, J. K. (1999). Collective memory: The two cultures. *Sociological Theory*, *17*(3), 333–348. https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00083

Reilly, P. (2011). *The Troubles Online: Northern Irish political groups and website strategy*. Manchester University Press.

Reilly, P. (2021). *Digital contention in a divided society: Social media, parades and protests in Northern Ireland*. Manchester University Press.

Rolston, B. (2003). Changing the political landscape: Murals and transition in Northern Ireland. *Irish Studies Review*, *11*(1), 3–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/0967088032000057861

Rose, G. (2016). *Visual Methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials*, 4th ed. Sage.
Segesten, A. D., & Wüstenberg, J. (2017). Memory studies: The state of an emergent field. *Memory Studies*, *10*(4), 474–489. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698016655394
Shaw, A. (2017). Encoding and decoding affordances: Stuart Hall and interactive media technologies. *Media Culture & Society*, *39*(4), 592–602.
Smithey, L. (2013). *Unionists, loyalists, and conflict transformation in Northern Ireland.* Oxford University Press.
Sontag, S. (1977). *On photography*. Penguin.
Zhukova E. (2022). Image substitutes and visual fake history: Historical images of atrocity of the Ukrainian famine 1932–1933 on social media. *Visual Communication*, *21*(1), 3–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357219888673