

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> Ulster University		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management (34)		
<b>Title of case study:</b> 1. Empowering Marginalized Communities in Contemporary Northern Ireland		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2014 - 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Dr Jolene Mairs Dyer	Lecturer in Media Production	2013 - present
Dr Steve Baker	Lecturer in Film & Television Studies	2008 - present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014 - 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b>  This case study details impacts arising from the work of <b>Mairs Dyer and Baker</b>. In research-led civic projects such as <i>Women's Vision from Across the Barricades (WVAB)</i> and <i>Traditions in Transition (TiT)</i>, <b>Mairs Dyer</b> and <b>Baker</b> worked collaboratively with marginalized social groups, leading to impacts in:</p> <p><b>(I1)</b> enabling cultural understanding amongst marginalized groups in Northern Ireland, encouraging them to think critically and reflexively about how they are perceived in the media.  <b>(I2)</b> informing debate between and across marginalized republican and loyalist communities in Northern Ireland about the role of the media and how they might find their own voice and engage in their own media activism.  <b>(I3)</b> cultivating the autonomous self-expression of working-class women and men in loyalist and republican North Belfast by providing them with key media literacy skills and technical production skills.  <b>(I4)</b> engendering the political empowerment of hitherto marginalized groups by convincing them that they have a right to occupy the public realm and engage in a public discourse aimed at addressing matters of social and political importance in their locale, as well as in the broader political public sphere.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b>  <b>Mairs Dyer</b> and <b>Baker's</b> work is defined by a commitment to socially purposive research and civic engagement. <i>Women's Vision from Across the Barricades</i> emerged out of a dialogue between <b>Mairs Dyer</b> and various North Belfast women's groups, resulting in the publication of a volume of photographs or photobook. <i>Traditions in Transition</i> began as a project looking at the media representation of Ulster Loyalism. It resulted in a report authored by <b>Baker</b>, which was submitted to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland (OFMDFM). Subsequently Baker collaborated on a documentary film, released as a DVD with an accompanying essay, an abbreviated version of his OFMDFM report.</p> <p><b>Mairs Dyer's</b> and <b>Baker's</b> underpinning research combines traditional academic scholarship (i.e., monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles) with related impactful civic activity and media outputs (i.e., film, photobook). It is important to understand that these two things – the academic scholarship and the impactful civic activity – <i>happen in tandem, forming a virtuous circle or feedback loop of mutual imbrication and influence</i>. In other words, it would be too simplistic to say that <b>Baker</b> and <b>Mairs Dyer</b> conduct their underpinning research and use their findings to then drive or initiate impact. Rather, <i>it would be more precise to say that the impactful civic activity shapes their research scholarship and findings as much the research and findings drive the impact</i>.</p>		

For many years now, **Baker** has been interested in how dominant media and other elite narratives tend to marginalize specific groups in Northern Ireland. Through researching and writing his monograph *The British Media and Bloody Sunday*, 2016 (**R1**), **Baker** became increasingly aware of the political urgency of finding out why it is so difficult for certain marginalized groups in contemporary Northern Irish society to think critically about how they are perceived in the media, and how problematic it is for such groups to better understand the political influence of the media, find their own voice, and engage in their own media activism. These key insights or findings relate to impacts (**I1**), (**I2**). It is no accident that the writing of the *Bloody Sunday* book happened at the same time **Baker** was deepening his engagement with marginalized groups outside the academy. On the one hand, **Baker's** involvement in civic projects like the *Traditions in Transition* project represented a concrete translation of his insights into a real-world and phenomenologically rich setting. On the other hand, his findings and insights were also critically reflected back to him through his experiences of working with others on the project. These experiences then informed not just the emerging intellectual trajectory and writing of his monograph, but his subsequent research work. For example, in his article, 'Tribeca Belfast and the On-Screen Regeneration of Northern Ireland', 2020, (**R2**) **Baker**, drawing directly on his civic engagement with marginalized groups, began to think more purposefully about how screen culture need not simply be a vehicle for reproducing dominant and exclusionary narratives, but one that it could also challenge such narratives by providing the means for those hitherto excluded to better represent themselves in the broader political public sphere. This key insight relates to (**I4**).

Similarly, **Mairs Dyer** has, for many years, been interested in how we can encourage marginalized groups to think about how they may find their own voice and engage in their own media activism. This was a core insight and problem she wanted to explicitly address in her photobook project, *Women's Vision from Across the Barricades*, 2015. (**R3**) During this project, **Mairs Dyer** became acutely aware of the political urgency of finding ways to explore how co-creative and collaborative forms of media activism with marginalized groups could lead to their political empowerment through autonomous self-expression, better informing discussion across and between disenfranchised communities, as well as in the broader public sphere. These key insights relate to impacts (**I2**), (**I3**), (**I4**). The experiences, insights and findings garnered by **Mairs Dyer** through her civic engagement informed subsequent research. That is to say, the photobook project didn't simply work by downloading a pre-determined understanding or methodology of collaborative media practice, but, rather, brought such a media practice and methodology to life in a real-world and phenomenologically rich setting. The insights and findings gained in her collaborative exchanges in *WVAB* informed **Mairs Dyer's** more recent article: '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', 2019. (**R4**)

**3. References to the research** Outputs can be provided by Ulster University on request.

(**R1**) Baker, S. (2016) *The British Media and Bloody Sunday*, Bristol: Intellect Books. Co-authored with Greg McLaughlin.

(**R2**) Baker, S. (2020) Tribeca Belfast and the On-Screen Regeneration of Northern Ireland, *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, 16, 1, 11-26.

(**R3**) Mairs Dyer, J. et al (2015) *Women's Vision from Across the Barricades: A Visual Representation of the Tigers Bay and New Lodge Areas of North Belfast by Women Who Live There*, Photobook (Tate Modern Collection, curated by Martin Parr).

(**R4**) Mairs Dyer J. (2019) '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', *Journal of Media Practice and Education*, 21, 2, 133-147.

The above books and journal articles have been subject to blind peer review practice by internationally-based editorial boards.

#### 4. Details of the impact

**(I1) enabling cultural understanding amongst marginalized groups in Northern Ireland, encouraging them to think critically and reflexively about how they are perceived in the media.**

**Baker's** *Traditions in Transition* project and documentary film grew out of a cross-community initiative that brought together residents, young people and ethnic minorities in flashpoint areas of Belfast. Funded by the OFMDFM, 'The Belfast Interface Project' commissioned a report from **Baker** looking at the media image and public reputation of Ulster loyalism. **Baker** submitted the report in 2015 and it laid the foundations for the *Traditions in Transition* documentary film. The director of the *Traditions in Transition* documentary (**C1**) emphasised how **Baker's** research was crucial to the project: "*Throughout the Traditions in Transition project Baker was able to translate many of the profound insights from a book like his The British Media and Bloody Sunday in ways that made sense to those involved in the project, thereby immediately encouraging them to think in profound ways about how they are perceived in the media*".

The *Traditions in Transition* project operated within a broader set of cross-community initiatives that **Baker** is involved in through the auspices of organizations like *Expac* and *Trademark*. *Trademark*, the anti-sectarian unit of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, works in the field of cross-community relations and political education. The Co-Director of *Trademark* (**C2**) remarked on **Baker's** "*significant and measurable contribution to both Trademark's anti-sectarian work and political education programmes... Through sharing his research work, in particular insights from his brilliant book The British Media and Bloody Sunday, he has become a central figure in shaping the critical thinking of participants regarding how they are perceived in the media..., inspiring and enfranchising hitherto voiceless and marginalized citizens to make themselves better heard in broader cultural and political life*". **Also (I4)**

**(I2) informing debate between and across marginalized republican and loyalist communities in Northern Ireland about the role of the media and how they might find their own voice and engage in their own media activism.**

**Baker's** *Traditions in Transition* project operates within a broader ecology of community initiatives and he has strong and ongoing links to community organizations such as *Expac*. *Expac* is an ex-prisoner's organization that engages with marginalized republican and loyalist community groups seeking to afford each an insight into the thinking and outlook of the other. As the *Expac* Project Manager (**C3**) points out: "*The impact of Dr Baker has been to facilitate a more informed debate within and across marginalized republican and loyalist communities about the role of the media in society and how it touches their lives in particular. Most of these groups feel ignored, misunderstood or misrepresented by press and broadcasters, but Dr Baker's research work has encouraged them to think about how they might find their own voice and engage in their own media activism.*" **Also (I1)**

**Mairs Dyer's** *Women's Vision from Across the Barricades (WVAB)* project and photobook involved an engagement with marginalized constituents (bringing together, for the first time, a group of women from Protestant-Unionist-Loyalist and Catholic-Nationalist-Republican working-class interface areas of North Belfast). Beyond the specific impacts on the participants involved in the project - detailed below in **(I3)** and **(I4)** - the photobook has found a place in the broader public sphere as part of The Linen Hall Library Collection in Belfast, NI. More significantly, it has also been acquired by a well-known British photographer as part of a photobook collection curated for, and held at, the Tate, London. The Director of Learning and Research at Tate (**C7**) expressed "*delight at its presence in Tate's collection*", referring to the photobook as a "*significant and impactful piece of community art and media activism that importantly, and very publicly, foregrounds the voices of women too often drowned out in contemporary Northern Irish society*". **Also (I4)**

**(I3) cultivating the autonomous self-expression of working-class women and men in loyalist and Republican North Belfast by providing them with key media literacy skills and technical production skills.**

The co-creative or co-productive nature of **Mairs Dyer's** photobook was central to the project, allowing for autonomous self-expression in a group whose voices are rarely heard in public space. One participant (**C4**) stated, *"I think the fact (we) were taught how to take photographs was something that was new...(We) actually went out and took photographs of what it was that (we) were unhappy about...It was about (...) our social expression through photographs because (we) were unable (...) to get around the table to voice these and that's why the book really came about".* Also (**I2**), (**I4**) Another participant in **Mairs Dyer's** photobook project (**C5**) confirmed that this type of autonomous and creative expression challenges the silencing of *"ordinary women who are trying to improve their community and who don't have their voices heard. I believe that we achieved that as a collective by doing that book because they can't silence that book."* Also (**I2**), (**I4**).

In a similar vein, the director of the *Traditions in Transition* film (**C1**) emphasised how **Baker's** research and contribution became part of an ongoing co-creative exchange with the filming team. As he says: *"Dr Baker didn't just provide broad ideas for the filming team, he worked very closely with us on how we framed the work visually. He was instrumental in influencing various aesthetic and technical choices made during the making of the film, advice that was significant for the team as they set about expressing themselves through the film"*.

**(I4) engendering the political empowerment of hitherto marginalized groups by convincing them that they have a right to occupy the public realm and engage in a public discourse aimed at addressing matters of social and political importance in their locale, as well as in the broader political public sphere.**

*Traditions in Transition* was screened to a variety of community groups and it was shown at Irish Joint Secretary of the British Irish Secretariat's residence in Belfast on Thursday 26th May 2016. Following that event, 1,000 copies of *Traditions in Transition* were produced and distributed, accompanied by an essay based on the original report written for OFMDFM. As the director of the *Traditions in Transition* (**C1**) pointed out: *"Traditions in Transition enabled participants to begin a more positive and confident public engagement with others, evident in the encounter with the Irish Joint Secretary."*

Just as the *Traditions in Transition* film facilitated a direct exchange with key political actors, so too did the *WVAB* photobook, distributed, as it was, to prominent local politicians. Indeed, the political significance and impact of this project is immediately evidenced in the appearance of the photobook itself, launched in October 2015 by a former MLA and the then leader of the *Progressive Unionist Party* in Northern Ireland. A participant (**C4**) confirmed that *"every politician in North Belfast got that book".* *The group even managed to present a copy to Northern Ireland's First Minister.* The participant (**C4**) stated, *"I gave it to her; and I put 'trust women' on the front of it."*

It is important to again underline how the co-productive nature of **Mairs Dyer's** photobook project engendered the political empowerment of these hitherto marginalized groups of women. For not only did the photobook highlight current challenges faced by the women, it also emboldened and convinced them that they had a right to engage in a public discourse that aimed to address the immediate, real-world, issues on their doorstep. For example, the women used images from the photobook to kick-start public conversations around issues of social housing and, specifically, allowed them to call for the removal of paramilitary flags from a nearby children's playground. In relation to the latter, one participant (**C6**) reflected on how, *"we (had) paramilitary flags at either end...now there's no UDA flags."* Another stated, *"when the community takes a hold of something like that (...) they re-claim (it)."* What these testimonies show is the photobook's clear impact in building the confidence of the women involved, in giving them the freedom and courage to address matters of local political importance. Also (**I3**)

**Baker's** and **Mairs Dyer's** projects are experiments in dialogically meaningful and impactful co-creation, of reciprocal learning that aims at a genuinely democratic exchange between the academy and the civic culture(s) within which it is situated. As Co-director of the *Left Bloc Irish Media Collective* **(C8)** says: *"To be sure, there is often a degree of cynicism concerning the way academics engage with groups that are determined 'marginalized', a worry that the former (whether consciously or not) will exploit the latter for their own ends, rather than seeing their working together as a transformative end in itself. The Traditions in Transition and Women's Vision from Across the Barricades projects are distinctive, original and significant examples of transformative media activism in that they make no claims to speak for marginalized communities from a predetermined position of power or authority, but instead are about attuning the ear to the low murmur of exclusion experienced by such groups and then empowering them with a freedom to amplify their own voices within their own communities and beyond"*.

As the testimonies above make clear, those involved in *WVAB* and *Traditions in Transition* were never simply representationally shackled to some abstract expert academic discourse or somehow haughtily ventriloquized by their supposed intellectual superiors. Rather, they benefited purely and simply by way of their own media activism; that is, by collaboratively developing the communicative means to represent themselves in the most novel, immediate, meaningful, unmediated and authentic way possible.

#### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

*Testimonials from:*

**(C1)** Head of *Directory*, an inter-community arts-based social enterprise, which promotes access to the arts in disadvantaged communities.

**(C2)** Co-Director, *Trademark*, Belfast.

**(C3)** *Expac Project Manager, Ex-Prisoner's Group*.

**(C4)** Coordinator and Project Manager, *Shankill Women's Centre*, Belfast and Greater North Belfast Women's Network.

**(C5)** Coordinator and Project Manager, *Lower North Belfast Women's Group, Tigers Bay*, Belfast and Greater North Belfast Women's Network.

**(C6)** Coordinator and Project Manager, *Star Neighbourhood Centre, New Lodge*, Belfast and Greater North Belfast Women's Network.

**(C7)** The Director of Learning and Research at *Tate, London*.

**(C8)** Co-Director at *Left Bloc Media, Belfast*.