

DIGITAL WITNESSING AS MEMORY WORK: THE CASE OF THE BESSBOROUGH PLANNING HEARING

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Introduction

Between 21-23 April 2021, An Bord Pleanála (ABP), Ireland's planning authority, held an oral hearing into plans for the development of a block of apartments at the site of the former mother and baby home at Bessborough, Co. Cork. The proposed development had caused controversy because of the unknown whereabouts of the remains of around 900 infants who were born at or associated with Bessborough between 1922 and its closure in 1998 (Roche, "Bessborough Home Development"). Due to restrictions surrounding the Covid-19 virus, the oral hearing was held virtually, but media and other interested parties who wished to attend were able to do so. Over the three days of the hearing members of the Cork Survivors and Supporters Alliance (CSSA), which represents survivors of the Bessborough Mother and Baby Home, and which argued that at least part of the development should not go ahead, live-tweeted events and testimony from the hearing, providing a real-time witnessing that existed outside of the traditional media infrastructure, whereby one or more professional reporters mediate events for an audience (Ashuri and Pinchevski 139; Mortensen 1393-406; Schankweiler et al. 1-13).

As Kurasawa has written, our current era is one of "witnessing fever", whereby "public spaces have been transformed into veritable machines for the production of testimonial discourses and evidence" (93), due to the number of media forms willing and available to present testimony and evidence, and the many audience members interested in receiving them. It is an analysis that, in recent years, has also proved important for researchers concerned with the way witnessing has been employed in digital spaces, particularly on social media (Andén-Papadopoulos; Henig and Ebbrecht-Hartmann; Núñez Puente et al.; Ristovska 1034-47; Schankweiler et al. 1-13; Truelove). Indeed, as Schankweiler et al. point out, new technologies, and societal adoption of same, have allowed for an intensification of the "affective economies" (1) of testimonies that are circulated in real time on social media platforms. Schankweiler et al. focus their exploration on the role of image testimonies on social media, as does Andén-Papadopoulos, while Henig and Ebbrecht-Hartmann consider the interplay between the visual, sonic, and textual components of posts to the Instagram platform. This essay draws upon this research by undertaking a concentration on the written witness testimonies of the CSSA activist group on Twitter over a period of three days in April 2021. As Núñez Puente et al. note in their examination of digital activism on Twitter, the platform can offer those wishing to speak about uncomfortable topics, such as gender-based violence, a way of "circumventing invisibility" as well as an opportunity for "diffusing messages at a mass scale" (295). This is due in part to

the platform's capacity for the creation of "conversational communities" (295-96) and also because of how hashtags can be used to organize and mobilize actions across physical borders. While this study relates primarily to digital witnessing, rather than digital activism, it is also concerned with the idea of circumventing invisibility, arguing that the digital witnessing work carried out by the CSSA in April 2021 operated as a way of claiming and reclaiming the narrative on behalf of those who have frequently been "condemned to silence" (Ashuri and Pinchevski 144) due to their dependence on mediators to be able to deliver public testimony (Ashuri and Pinchevski 127-51). Given that mother and baby homes can be suggested to operate as sites of trauma in the Irish collective memory and culture (Andrews; Enright; Wills) and given that the Bessborough site in Cork has its own very particular history of hurt and sadness (Andrews; Wills), it can also be argued that the digital witnessing by the activist group represents an act of memory work necessary for social justice, particularly if such an act can be defined as one of "naming, as listing, as re-calling, as re-storying, as accounting, as deferring, as listening, as speaking, and as claiming" (Grunebaum 214).

Making use of Ashuri and Pinchevski's framework for the act of witnessing, this essay also considers how Twitter allows for the blurring of the traditional roles of eyewitness and mediator (127-51), with the narratives delivered by the CSSA on the digital platform not constructed as "witnessable" (140), in the manner they would have been had they been presented by the professional media. Instead, because the testimonies being considered here were delivered virtually in real time, in fragmentary fashion, because they were often disembodied and outside of context, they enabled a form of witnessing neither shaped, nor framed, by an outside, mediating, agent (Ashuri and Pinchevski 140). While Pine (1-4) has considered the ways in which such outside media agents have offered victim witnesses the possibility of accruing social and mnemonic power, she has also written of the risk of such power being temporary and fleeting, with witnesses becoming trapped in the space of abuse tourism as they look to trade their memories for the value of being heard. This essay builds upon such work to examine the reconfiguration of the relationship between the individual and collective on digital platforms (see Mortensen 1393-406).

In doing so, the essay also interrogates how audience members on Twitter have the opportunity to step outside their traditional position as "remote spectators" (Ashuri and Pinchevski 140) through the public performance of audience-witness on the platform. That this relationship, between witness and spectator, is subject to far fewer checks and balances than would traditionally have been the case for media testimonies (Simons 17-29), meaning witness credibility on Twitter cannot be guaranteed, also needs to be borne in mind when considering both the diffusion and reception of information on the platform. Nonetheless, it is this essay's argument that the digital narratives examined here make up a crucial component of the witnessing field (Ashuri and Pinchevski 130-35) of survivor testimonies from carceral institutions such as mother and baby homes, and thus merit close consideration as the search continues for social justice among those communities.

Following a brief discussion of the Bessborough Mother and Baby Home and the contentions that there is a children's burial ground at the site, this essay then offers an overview of the ABP Oral Hearing in April 2021 along with a consideration of the CSSA's presence on the Twitter platform. The analysis is then developed through the case study of the digital testimonies published to Twitter by the CSSA group over the course of the planning hearing, as well as some of the audience responses to those testimonies. The essay concludes by reiterating that digital spaces must now be considered among those that provide the conditions for survivors of the Irish carceral state to voice their responses to past injustices.

The Children's Burial Ground at Bessborough Former Mother and Baby Home, Cork, Ireland

The Bessborough Mother and Baby Home was owned and run by the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary from 1922 until 1998, during which time 9 768 mothers entered the home and 8 938 children were born or reared there (Commission of Investigation, "Chapter 18" 1). Most women who gave birth in Bessborough remained in the home for at least a year, although many stayed much longer, and they were all expected to work as unpaid domestic servants until they were in a position to arrange for the future care of their children (15, 98-128). Some women left with their children, but in most cases the children were either adopted, placed in foster homes – where often their birth mothers paid for their upkeep – transferred to other institutions such as orphanages or industrial schools, or they died (98-128).

As with other mother and baby homes in Ireland, the Bessborough home had a high rate of infant mortality, and during the 1930s it had the highest rate of infant deaths of all four mother and baby homes then in existence (Commission of Investigation, "Chapter 18" 16). By the early 1940s, the infant death rate in the home was almost 70% and later that decade the state chief medical officer temporarily closed the institution due to concerns about the level of child deaths there (Ó Fátharta, "68% of babies in Bessborough home died"). Of the nearly 9 000 children born or reared at Bessborough between 1922 and its closure in 1998, 923 died in the home or in hospital after being transferred there from Bessborough (Commission of Investigation, "Chapter 18" 1; English, "Bessborough").

The information regarding the deaths at Bessborough was made public in 2019 following an interim report of the Commission of Investigation to inquire into Mother and Baby Homes in Ireland. The Commission had been established by the Irish government in 2015 after allegations that around 800 babies and young children had been buried in a disused sewage tank at the former Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, Co. Galway, between 1925 and 1961 (Commission of Investigation, "Introduction" 1-2; O'Reilly). The Commission's Fifth Interim Report, published in March 2019, dealt with burial practices at the mother and baby homes, and found it could not establish where the vast majority of children who died in the Bessborough Home are buried (Commission of Investigation, *Fifth Interim Report* 26-40).

Following the Commission's interim report, the CSSA, which represents family members of children who died while resident at Bessborough, and whose burial location is not recorded, called for a thorough examination of the Bessborough grounds to see if it contains the remains of the infants whose burial places remain unknown (Roche, "Bessborough Home Development"). In a submission to Cork City Council in August 2020, the CSSA stated it had discovered compelling evidence from two eyewitnesses and a 1950 Ordnance Survey of Ireland (OSI) trace map to suggest there is an unmarked children's burial ground at Bessborough and requested the local authority take possession of that section of the grounds to allow public access to the burial space (CSSA, Submission 3-4). As of today, that section remains in private ownership, but in March 2022, Cork City Councillors voted to afford a level of protection to the area, rezoning it as a landscape preservation zone, which makes it unlikely it will be built on without taking into account the sensitivities of the landscape (English, "Cork City Council").

The Oral Planning Hearing and the CSSA's Twitter Feed

In November 2021, property developer MWB Two Limited lodged a planning application with ABP for permission to construct 179 apartments in three blocks on the section of the Bessborough estate in the developer's ownership. In a written submission opposing the development, the CSSA said that part of the planned construction would take place on an area of the site marked as a children's burial ground on a 1950 OSI trace map (CSSA, Opening Statement 5-6; English, "Bessborough"), prompting the planning authority to take the rare decision to opt for an oral hearing on the case (English, "Oral Hearing"). An ABP Oral Hearing is a public meeting anyone can attend but due to public health restrictions arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, in this instance the hearing was held virtually on the Microsoft Teams platform (An Bord Pleanála, Agenda and Order of Proceedings 4) with attendees joining once they had registered their details with ABP. The hearing was originally scheduled to take place on Wednesday 21 April and Thursday 22 April, 2021, but it was extended to a third day, and concluded on Friday 23 April, 2021, with a decision on the planning application to be reached by 25 May 2021 (English, "Oral Hearing").

Over the three days, a range of oral submissions was heard, including from Roderic O'Gorman, the Irish Minister for Children; from local politicians; and from observers associated with Bessborough, some of whom were survivors of the institution. Submissions were heard by counsel for the developer; counsel for Cork City Council; and counsel for the CSSA, along with evidence from a range of expert witnesses including surveyors, cartographers, archaeologists, and a mapping expert from the OSI. Professional journalists from an array of print and online national and local media outlets were also in attendance and filed reports on the hearing.

Members of the CSSA attended the hearing as observers of the proceedings. The organization is represented publicly either by its main researcher, Maureen Considine,

a PhD candidate in the History of Art Department at University College Cork (UCC), or by the organization's survivor liaison officer, Catherine Coffey O'Brien, who is a Bessborough survivor and a graduate of UCC School of Social Science. The CSSA, which joined Twitter in June 2020, tweets under the Twitter handle @Lost900 Bessboro, a reference to the 900 children from Bessborough whose burial place has not been established. As of March 2022, the organization follows 1 573 accounts on Twitter and is followed by 1 442 accounts. Its followers include local and national politicians, members of the Irish media, Irish historians and other academics; members of charities and social activists, artists and writers; survivors of Ireland's institutional system; Traveller rights advocates, human rights lawyers, adoption rights organizations, and miscellaneous individual followers. These followers see in their timeline any tweets, retweets or likes by the CSSA whenever they log into Twitter. Meantime, the CSSA follows back many of these same people and organizations, as well as some international victim rights advocates, some national and international media organizations and journalists, and a range of national and international art, history, environmental, and advocate organizations.

The ABP hearing began at 10 a.m. each morning, and from that time on each of the three days, the CSSA live-tweeted events of the hearing. It did this by creating a Twitter thread, a series of connected tweets that can be used to provide context, an update, or an extended point. The thread was updated by CSSA members on an almost minute-by-minute basis throughout the three days of the hearing, beginning each day with a new thread. Although ABP does not allow recording, streaming, or use of mobile phones during an oral hearing, the virtual nature of the event meant it was not possible to enforce these rules in this case.

The CSSA averaged around eighty tweets a day over the three days of the hearing, with most of these tweets forming part of the main Twitter thread, although the organization occasionally responded to comments or replies to its timeline. From time to time over the three days, the group also tagged some of the observers to the hearing who have profiles on Twitter. This included the Minister for Children, Roderic O'Gorman; local Green Party Councillor Lorna Bogue; local Sinn Féin TD Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire; as well as Bessborough survivor Terri Harrison. On the final day of the hearing, after the proceedings had concluded, the organization posted a series of emotional tweets tagging and thanking its legal counsel, as well as the advocates, witnesses, and local and national politicians who had spoken in support of the group's position.

For each day of the hearing the group received the most likes for its first tweet of the day, which announced the start of the day's events, with each subsequent tweet in the thread generally receiving a handful of likes. For its first tweet of the day, the CSSA received 32 likes and 20 retweets on 21 April, 22 likes and 10 retweets on 22 April, and 85 likes and 15 retweets on 23 April. These likes and retweets were carried out by users who described themselves in their Twitter profiles as survivors,

politicians, journalists, media producers, writers, activists, academics, artists, mothers, feminists, and psychologists, with some of the likes and retweets being made by the same users across the three days, although this was not exclusively the case. The CSSA received two quote tweets – retweets with an added comment from the re-tweeter – on day one of the hearing, for its first tweet of the day. The first of these came from user @maryeaslattery, whose profile calls for adoption societies to be investigated. The quote tweet tagged 11 profiles, including survivors, adopted people, and local politicians, and it stated:

@maryeaslattery (Mary Slattery)

“Great thread, thank you.”

@Lost900Bessboro @LouiseGall24 @KayCuritin1 @cllrkmac @Terri_KHarrison
@akaalison1 @_KieranSheahan @deirdreforde @CllrDesCahill @johnbuttimer
@jerrybuttimer

Twitter, 21 Apr. 2021,
<<https://twitter.com/maryeaslattery/status/1384916858973917184>>

The second quote tweet came from @KathyDArcyCork, whose profile describes her as a poet performer, as Irish in Finland, as a doctor, as an advocate for Trans Rights, as a member of the Cork Together for Yes campaign, which sought to repeal abortion laws in Ireland, and as NeuroDiverse. The tweet, which didn't tag any other users, stated:

@KathyDArcyCork (Kathy D'Arcy)

“We should all be following this hearing: survivors [sic] of incarceration and torture at the hands of the Irish church and state beg the agents of that state not to allow property developers to disinter their lost babies. WE'RE WATCHING.”

Twitter, 21 Apr. 2021,
<<https://twitter.com/KathyDArcyCork/status/1384898424558993408>>

Finally, there were occasional conversations and responses between the CSSA and other Twitter users during the hearing. For example, towards the close of day one of the hearing, the organization shared a joke with user @IveaghGael (Finn), whom it follows, stating:

@Lost900Bessboro (Cork Survivors and Supporters Alliance)

“thanks for the light relief OFinlome its badly needed.”

Twitter, 21 Apr. 2021,
<<https://twitter.com/Lost900Bessboro/status/1384894472241270789>>

On the same day, while the hearing was on recess for lunch, the organization responded to user @DjJonhussey (Jon Hussey), who had asked about the connections between the Bessborough property developer and the National Asset Management Company, which was established by the Irish government in 2009 to take over property loans from the Republic's banks. On Twitter the CSSA clarified to the user that there was such a connection, tagging in its reply local television reporter Paul Byrne, television station Virgin Media, the Taoiseach Micheál Martin, and the Minister for Children, Roderic O'Gorman, as well as the affiliate campaign group Survivors

Unite at Last. On day two of the hearing, during the afternoon session, the CSSA replied to user @jimfitzpatrick, who is followed by the organization on Twitter and whose profile describes him as the Irish artist best-known for his iconic two-tone portrait of Che Guevara created in 1968. In his tweet @jimfitzpatrick asked:

@jimfitzpatrick (Jim Fitzpatrick)

"Who are these 'developers representatives' who want to build their apartment blocks on a sacred children's burial ground? Disgusting. Sacrilegious. Name and shame them."

Twitter, 22 Apr. 2021, <<https://twitter.com/jimfitzpatrick/status/1385176196208529408>>

The CSSA replied on Twitter by giving the name of the barrister and the solicitor representing the Bessborough developer at the hearing. The group's tweet was then replied to by user @HuggyBlair (Eric Arthur Blair), who is not followed by the organisation, and who stated:

@HuggyBlair (Eric Arthur Blair)

"You want to shame lawyers for representing people you don't agree with? What kind of society would we have if lawyers only acted for 'good' clients? Cop on."

Twitter, 22 Apr. 2021, <<https://twitter.com/HuggyBlair/status/1385183625306648576>>

However, @KathyDArcyCork (Kathy D'Arcy) also replied to the CSSA's tweet and stated:

@KathyDArcyCork (Kathy D'Arcy)

"I hope everyone shares and takes note of these names. I am."

Twitter, 22 Apr. 2021,
<<https://twitter.com/KathyDArcyCork/status/1385178738938220546>>

On the final day of the hearing, the CSSA responded to other users only after the hearing had ended. At 6:05 p.m. that day, it sent a reply to Gary Gannon TD, a member of the Social Democrat party. Earlier that week, Gannon had expressed solidarity with the group on Twitter, but the CSSA used the platform to publicly disavow any support from Gannon and his party, suggesting his encouragement was inauthentic:

@Lost900Bessboro (Cork Survivors and Supporters Alliance)

"we could have done with your solidarity months ago keep it"

Twitter, 23 Apr. 2021,
<<https://twitter.com/Lost900Bessboro/status/1385640937792098305>>

In contrast, the organization publicly expressed its thanks on the Twitter platform to a number of other elected representatives once the hearing had finished proceedings, tagging in a series of emotional tweets by the Minister for Children, local Green party Councillors Lorna Bogue and Dan Boyle, local Fine Gael Councillor Joe Kavanagh, local Labour party representative Peter Horgan, local Sinn Féin TD Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire, as well as survivors and advocates Terri Harrison, Mary Slattery, and the organization's legal team.

Having set the CSSA's Twitter feed in context, this essay will continue with a closer reading of the Twitter thread created by the CSSA over the three days of the ABP hearing, with the aim of considering how this digital document presents a divergence from traditional witness testimonies outside of the virtual sphere.

Digital Witnessing and Social Justice

Since the late 1990s survivors of Irish carceral institutions have been regularly afforded the chance to publicly bear witness to their trauma. They have been interviewed by Irish and international professional media. They have participated in many state-funded inquiries, and in a series of oral history projects by academic institutions. Meantime, contemporary Irish theatre productions have made use of verbatim survivor testimony to highlight Ireland's church and state abuses. While these forms of witnessing have certainly given survivors opportunities to be heard, victims of Ireland's carceral institutions have also expressed their disquiet at the ways their testimonies have been employed by mediating agents. Pembroke has noted the negative impact on survivors of the redress scheme procedure established by the Irish state in 1999, which required victims to write a detailed statement, and undergo an assessment by a psychologist to verify their trauma (1-17). More recently, survivors of Irish mother and baby homes said their words had been paraphrased and summarized rather than accurately transcribed by the Commission of Investigation to inquire into Mother and Baby Homes, and the revelation that this Commission had destroyed original recordings of survivors' testimony also caused enormous anger and distress (Crowe). While the Irish media has been rightly praised for its role in exposing historical child abuse, it has also been noted that journalistic accounts of trauma can be sensational and transient (Powell and Scanlon), often lacking capacity to confront systemic or underlying societal issues. Ashuri and Pinchevski (140), meantime, emphasize that mediators, in their role as gatekeepers, always hold significant power regarding how a witness is perceived by an audience, while Pine (1-22) has reminded us of the transactional nature of this kind of witnessing, whereby witnesses rely on mediators shaping and presenting their painful story in such a way as to secure an audience's interest and validation, as well as, hopefully, some form of social justice.

Does the digital documenting by the CSSA of the ABP Oral Hearing differ from these other modes of witnessing, most particularly by offering survivor witnesses the opportunity to claim and reclaim their narratives outside of the dominant codes of any mediators (Ashuri and Pinchevski 139)? If we consider the CSSA's live Twitter thread over the course of the hearing, we can see it both documented and commented on the events taking place.

For example, its second tweet of day one stated:

@Lost900Bessboro (Cork Survivors and Supporters Alliance)

"Each person or group are now briefly introducing themselves. The applicants [*sic*] barrister first, then the CSSA's barrister, now a number of individuals connected with Bessborough and local elected politicians."

Twitter, 21 Apr. 2021,
<<https://twitter.com/Lost900Bessboro/status/1384800725872648192>>

In its third tweet, the CSSA explained:

@Lost900Bessboro (Cork Survivors and Supporters Alliance)

"Statement from the National Monuments Service is now being read out by the ABP inspector. NMS says 20th century burials are outside of its remit. The letter speaks of a licence that they issued to he [*sic*] applicant they say 'it was in fact issued in error.'"

Twitter, 21 Apr. 2021,
<<https://twitter.com/Lost900Bessboro/status/1384805869716656130>>

On day one of the hearing, the CSSA's final few tweets reported verbatim the testimony of Mary Slattery, who lost her first child to a secret adoption in 1979 and who spoke as an observer at the hearing. The Twitter thread stated:

@Lost900Bessboro (Cork Survivors and Supporters Alliance)

"Mary Slattery 'a mother who lost my first born to adoption' is up now. She says 'I feel I am carrying the emotion' for all of the mothers. She speaks of the trauma and pain of the mothers. 'We deserve to be treated with respect...in life and in death'"

"My heart is breaking for the mothers and babies who are unaccounted for. We deserve dignity.... I see this development as continuing to demonise us... To silence us... to deny us"

"I am one of the mothers who do not want the resting places to be disturbed"

"It has to be preserved, it has to be preserved"... "to bring peace to everyones [*sic*] heart"

Twitter, 21 Apr. 2021,
<<https://twitter.com/Lost900Bessboro/status/1384903322004557826>>

In these examples, it can be suggested the CSSA is taking on the role of reporter as eyewitness, a position Ashuri and Pinchevski describe as that of the professional eyewitness, whereby reporters are "actors in an institutionalized practice of witnessing with its specific combination of competence and circumstance" (133). By the same token, however, the CSSA also operated frequently as a form of lay witness (see Ashuri and Pinchevski 133) during the hearing, in that it enunciated not only its knowledge of the event, but also its emotional response to it. For example, on day one, it followed its tweet reporting on the evidence of the National Monuments Service with this tweet:

@Lost900Bessboro (Cork Survivors and Supporters Alliance)

"bit of a kick in the stomach from the NMS saying that Bessborough burials are not within its remit – if not the NMS responsibility then what body is responsible for the preservation and protection of burial ground"

Twitter, 21 Apr. 2021,
<<https://twitter.com/Lost900Bessboro/status/1384806612599296000>>

On day three, Maureen Considine of the CSSA tweeted (as part of the CSSA Twitter thread):

@Lost900Bessboro (Cork Survivors and Supporters Alliance)

"Maureen here – just want to say I'm disgusted by the arrogance of the developers that they would set themselves up as an investigative agency. There is a massive conflict of interest here."

Twitter, 23 Apr. 2021,

<<https://twitter.com/Lost900Bessboro/status/1385547839414099970>>

In other words, what the CSSA is providing here is a sense of emotional authenticity no reporter can match (Ashuri and Pinchevski 134). It is, at the same time, showing a capacity for rhetoric, while it is also technologically astute, resources that make it an extremely valuable eyewitness to the events of the hearing (Ashuri and Pinchevski 134), and we can imagine that mediators, such as professional journalists or theatre producers, might also have wished to make use of the organization as eyewitness. Conversely, however, the CSSA did not need these kinds of gatekeepers to deliver its testimony. While it certainly needed to draw on what Ashuri and Pinchevski describe as "habitus and capital" (132) – the technology and permission to join the event on MS Teams, confidence with the Twitter platform, ability to communicate to an audience – it did not rely on an outside mediating agent to determine these things. This allowed it to produce testimony outside of any external ideological framework, thus potentially reclaiming the narrative on behalf of those who might have previously been deemed unqualified by such a framework, and thus "condemned to silence" (Ashuri and Pinchevski 144). Mortensen (1393-406) has described this as a fundamental shift in the practice of witnessing, with witnesses on digital media platforms now enabled to both produce and distribute their testimony, making the act of witnessing a "participatory and reflective act" (1394), and one which Mortensen has termed "connective witnessing" (1396).

It is a description that holds despite the fact that Twitter narratives, by their nature, refuse easy construction as "witnessable" (Ashuri and Pinchevski 140). That is: they arrive in fragmentary fashion, without "a timeline, context, circumstance, and causality", and with no shaped narrative constructed from a previously chaotic event (Ashuri and Pinchevski 145), as is the case in more traditional formats. What we find instead is Mortensen's connective mode of witnessing, where non-professional information is shared in a manner inviting "personalization, appropriation and collaboration" (Bennett and Segerberg, qtd. in Mortensen 1403), all of which moves towards enabling or accentuating the increasing overlap between acts of witnessing and political participation (Mortensen 1400-402) and offers the witness a role as agent rather than victim (Núñez Puente et al. 306-07).

This is not to suggest this mode of witnessing is immune to influence from external factors. As noted above, the CSSA's testimony on Twitter is contingent on the group's confidence and capacity with the platform. It is also contingent on the architecture and affordances of the platform, and on the audience users' navigation of and

presence on the Twitter site (Mortensen 1404). As has been detailed, the CSSA does not have a large number of followers on Twitter, meaning it lacks the audience reach of a national media organization, while when one considers the type of followers that like, retweet, and quote tweet its statements on Twitter, it is not obvious that it is reaching people outside of its own ideological position. At the same time, however, many of those who follow and who are followed on Twitter by the CSSA have profiles of national and even international prominence, meaning there is the potential for the CSSA's Twitter feed to become amplified and read by a larger audience.

Separately, and even if the CSSA Twitter feed is not subject to any external ideological framework, whereby a gatekeeper grants it the status of testimony (Ashuri and Pinchevski 138), its testimony is, as already noted, driven by emotional subjectivities, as well as by political inclinations, and also by space-time parameters – the 'real-time' nature of social media posts – all of which transforms the way witnessing is being presented and received (Frosh and Pinchevski 1-23; Schankweiler et al. 1-13). As Faulkner (89-104) notes in his discussion of the way Palestinian photojournalists have used digital media to challenge a stereotypical viewpoint of Palestinian victimhood, social media have often been employed to enact witnessing as a form of resistance, neither objective nor neutral, but subjective and personalized.

Thus, if we turn again to the example from the CSSA Twitter feed, we can see that by making use of such phrases as

@Lost900Bessboro (Cork Survivors and Supporters Alliance)

"Mr Cronin for the developer has interrupted – he says the method statement for the archeological [*sic*] dig was prepared by Colm Chambers. Seems a random unnecessary interruption."

Twitter, 22 Apr. 2021,

<<https://twitter.com/Lost900Bessboro/status/1385177124340916227>>

and

@Lost900Bessboro (Cork Survivors and Supporters Alliance)

"Now David Holland (for the developer) interrupts and tries to bring our attention to the nuns [*sic*] 'angels plot' where the nuns said the children were buried. We all know the children are not buried there."

Twitter, 22 Apr. 2021,

<<https://twitter.com/Lost900Bessboro/status/1385177124340916227>>

the CSSA is staking a clear narrative position, which is that the developers of the proposed apartment block are fully aware that if the development goes ahead, it will likely do so on the unmarked graves of Bessborough children. It is plausible to suggest, as per Ashuri and Pinchevski, that the proximity of first-hand witness in this instance causes "an annihilation of perspective" by simply reproducing the immediate and subjective experience of being there (140) and nothing more. However, it can also be argued that the subjectivity inherent in the tweets is a crucial factor by means of which survivors of trauma may in fact claim agency, eschewing any pretence of

objectivity or neutrality. Separately, as the tweets not only provide an eyewitness account of the events, but also seek to parse and analyze (albeit subjectively) the action as it takes place, one can suggest the witnessing carried out here becomes both participatory (as the CSSA is documenting the hearing in real time) and reflective at once. Indeed, it is the presentation of a “synthesized and informational narrative” (Mortensen 1401) alongside the immediate and subjective experience, which offers survivors yet another opportunity to claim ownership of a narrative and to define it according to their perspective of the experience.

There is, however, a difference between having a voice, and that voice being heard, and this case study will conclude considering the place of the audience/users on Twitter, and their role in listening to and engaging with the testimony of the CSSA on the platform. As Ricoeur has noted, the greatest failure of witnessing occurs because “witnesses [...] never encounter an audience capable of listening to them or hearing what they have to say” (166), and, as noted above, survivors of Ireland’s carceral institutions, despite their frequent public testimonials, have long had difficulty with the ways their narratives have been shaped and moulded (Crowe; Ó Fátharta, “Ryan Report”). While mediating agents hold significant power in relation to this, the remote position of the spectator (Ashuri and Pinchevski 134), whereby spectators share a common moral universe with eyewitnesses and mediators, but inhabit a separate sphere within which they engage with images of suffering beyond their immediate context, can also be suggested to have a bearing on the way victim narratives are received in society (140). However, as Henig and Ebbrecht-Hartmann (5) note, because the social media witnessing mode is one that focuses on sharing experiences, participatory culture and joint work from both producers and users, it offers audiences the opportunity to ask and reply to questions and comments, and, most notably in this instance, to express their emotions in relation to the Bessborough story.

Thus, although the CSSA tweets received small numbers of likes in general, and even smaller numbers of retweets and quote tweets, their feed was responded to, in the moment, and mostly in a positive manner, placing emphasis on what Henig and Ebbrecht-Hartmann term the “responsive space” (1) of the platform, one that enables ideas of “interaction rather than narration” and “testimony that is more focused on connection and dialogue than on documentation and preservation” (5). It is a space that affects both witness and user alike, with the witness feeling that they have the power to voice and communicate their experiences to others (7) and the user now a part of a process of digitally bearing witness, rather than the detached spectator of old. Even when the conversation became temporarily antagonistic, as shown earlier, that interaction was not enough to outweigh the CSSA’s sense of narrative ownership and the confidence of its voice.

Any study regarding the enabling of witness-producers, however, needs to be accompanied by an acknowledgment of the plurality of witnessing practices (Schankweiler et al. 6). As Simons has written in relation to the proliferation of audio-visual

testimonies and sources on social media platforms, we now face a situation where neutrality and objectivity give way to “subjective involvement and affective contagion”, leading to the intensification of a “general unreliability of witnessing that arises from the notorious difficulty of translating lived experience into discursive form” (18). Truelove et al. have considered the various ways academics have attempted to confront this crisis, and identify credible information on Twitter. They found that this can be achieved by means of securing location information generated from metadata and content (3), but also explored ways of defining who can be called a witness on Twitter, suggesting that to be a witness, a micro-blogger on Twitter must be understood as a “person who has directly observed the event and posted a micro-blog about their observation” (2), while also employing a range of characteristics including descriptions of sensing, linked content such as photos, and explicit acknowledgment of being impacted by the event (2). Although a deep incursion into the area of social media witness credibility is outside the scope of this essay, the above conceptual model has proved useful when assessing the digital testimonies of the CSSA activist group on the micro-blogging platform.

Conclusion

The aim of this essay has been to suggest that digital narratives now form a crucial component of the witnessing field (Ashuri and Pinchevski 130-35) and thus must be paid close attention as forming part of the memory work necessary for social justice (Grunebaum 210-19). The essay has dealt with this topic in terms of examples of the way social media witnessing alters the relationships among eyewitnesses, mediators, and audience, suggesting that it narrows and flattens the divide between the witness and the receiver of testimony (Henig and Ebbrecht-Hartmann 21-22), which can lead to witnessing becoming a shared, collective event that allows voices long condemned to silence (Ashuri and Pinchevski 138) to feel heard, and new truths to emerge.

The essay also considers the impact of the changing nature of the relation between witness and mediator, with witnesses on social media no longer beholden to a traditional media infrastructure to circulate their testimony, and instead enabled to independently produce and diffuse their perspectives. While this has, on the one hand, brought about a destabilization of the conventional checks and balances used by journalists and other mediators to verify the credibility of a witness, it has also radically impacted on the kind of stories being told, by whom, and why, with substantive implications for collective memory-making in the digital age. While there is little doubt we are in an era of a crisis of credibility (Simons 17-18, 22, 25), important research has also been done to identify ways of finding credible information on Twitter (Truelove et al. 339-59), and this research will likely only gain in significance as use of the micro-blogging site among witness-producers continues. In relation to the specific situation of survivors of the Irish carceral state, social media appears to have offered them virtual contexts in which to claim and reclaim their narratives, to

generate collective counter-memory (Demos), to enact witnessing as a form of resistance (Faulkner 95-100), and to define events from the perspective of their experience, all of which is part of the work of making trauma visible and justice possible.

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