



Plans by Ulster University to mothball the digital record of the conflict can only give succour to those who would rewrite history, says **Goretta Horgan**

A former vice chancellor of Ulster University returned a few years ago from a visit to a prestigious US university.

He told some colleagues that the American students he had met had never heard of Ulster University, but they knew about the CAIN website.

The website is recognised around the world as an important source of information about the Northern Ireland conflict. CAIN (<https://cain.ulster.ac.uk>) is an encyclopaedic digital record of the conflict in and about Ireland.

It was established by the then University of Ulster in 1996 and, over the last two decades, has built a unique digital archive that is freely available online.

It contains a large archive of materials and information related to the conflict and politics in Northern Ireland.

It includes bibliographies, biographies, chronologies, databases, election results, guides, key events and issues, oral histories, personal collections, photographic archives, political ephemera, public records and materials relating to victims, survivors and commemoration.

“If CAIN is not kept active, there is a threat that a static resource could eventually die

The resources are heavily used: there have been over 22 million visits to the site, with visitors coming from many countries — one-in-four of them from the US.

CAIN is cited in more than 2,400 books, journal articles and reports.

CAIN staff have replied to the many thousands of email queries and permission requests that were sent via the website over the lifetime of the project.

Users include academics, students, journalists, those working in peace building and conflict-transformation and the general public who are interested in the situation in Northern Ireland.

CAIN is unique in that it is in Northern Ireland and about Northern Ireland, but has global reach; it provides an independent, trustworthy and neutral source of information which is vital in peace building.

CAIN's position as an active archive is currently under threat, as Ulster University says that external funding must be found to support the resource.

The university will otherwise guarantee only that the site will remain as a static digital resource within the library and that this will happen during 2019. The university says that CAIN will remain available to the public and to scholars.

But it is important people understand that, if CAIN is not kept active, there is a threat that a static resource could eventually die.



An injured man is led away following an IRA bomb attack on the Abercorn restaurant in Belfast in March 1972. Below, from left, police at the scene of the Greysteel massacre in 1993, and the CAIN web page

The world-famous CAIN Troubles archive must not be allowed to gather dust

This may not be intentional, but a site like CAIN, which started in 1996, has grown organically. Without due management and maintenance, it is possible that web pages driven by databases will go down and not be noticed, so that valuable material is not available.

CAIN is content-rich and staff have worked hard to attract over £2m in external funding over the years. It would be a travesty if such an investment and such a quality resource was not kept active.

Ulster University aims to be a civic and a global university. For the University and Colleges Union (UCU), it is hard to understand the narrow, short-term thinking of Ulster University management in relation to CAIN. Management is making a huge investment in trying to “promote Ulster programmes across the world and to recruit high-quality students to these programmes”.

CAIN is Ulster University's most globally acknowledged resource. Yet, the university is willing to consider ending CAIN as a live archive for the sake of less than £170,000 — some of which is currently met by external funding.



While this is a disaster for the university's global reach, it is even more concerning in relation to its civic mission. The Troubles may be over, but the conflict remains, often fought out in relation to how history is interpreted. If it “mothballs” CAIN, what does it say about Ulster University's role in Northern Ireland at this point in time, when the region is without a government for over two years and without a broad consensus around legacy issues and dealing with the past?

Since its inception, CAIN has quietly and carefully recorded a wide range of material relevant to the legacy debate. Two major projects, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research

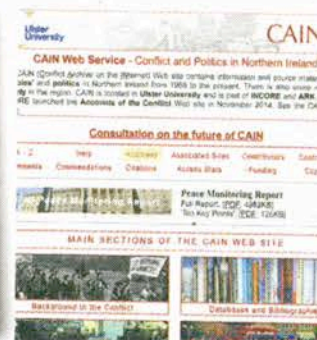
Council on victims, survivors and commemoration, built detailed databases on memorials and public debate.

The Stormont House Agreement sought to establish an oral history archive and an agreed timeline of the conflict.

Prior to the agreement, and funded by the EU's PEACE III programme, CAIN staff had produced the Accounts of the Conflict archive.

This online archive allows us to read/listen/view how the conflict affected a range of people across Northern Ireland and should form part of, or parallel, any future oral history archive.

CAIN also includes a chronology of the conflict that could



form a starting-point for the proposed timeline.

CAIN staff collaborate with the two national archives on the island of Ireland, PRONI and National Archives Ireland, to select newly declassified documents for archiving on CAIN. New information about the history of the conflict comes to light almost every day and this requires the information to be added to the site, or existing information needs to be amended.

New items are donated regularly; these must be assessed and, where suitable, digitised, catalogued and placed on the website. For example, recently CAIN was donated a collection of the speeches, statements and

articles that John Hume made during his political career.

History is constantly being rewritten in Northern Ireland. Even what has happened over the last decade is already in danger of being rewritten: for example, try to find Peter Robinson's speeches when he was First Minister. They are no longer available on the DUP website, but happily CAIN archived a selection that were most controversial at the time they were made. CAIN thus challenges the rewriting of “current” history and ensures the original sources are available to scholars and the public.

These are just some of the reasons why UCU is concerned about keeping CAIN live — of course, our first concern is for the jobs of our three members who make up the CAIN team.

But keeping CAIN live is also about ensuring that Ulster University does not destroy an important tool in its mission to be a civic and global university.

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