

"The Marys"

By

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A dissertation by practice submitted in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for MA in Journalism & Media
Communications (QQI)

Faculty of Journalism & Media Communications
Griffith College Dublin

July 2020

Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of the MA in [insert your programme name here, e.g.: Journalism & Media Communications], is my own; based on my personal study and/or research, and that I have acknowledged all material and sources used in its preparation. I also certify that I have not copied in part or whole or otherwise plagiarised the work of anyone else, including other students.

Signed: Sarah Jane Rooney

Dated: 30 July 2020

Abstract

This written report acts as a supporting document to the technical work produced for the dissertation by practice by radio.

This radio documentary tells the story of my deceased parents' life. The purpose of the product is to capture that story so that it can be preserved. It documents their early life, their meeting, their family life, and then their deaths. The story is narrated by me but primarily told by my two aunts, one my Dad's sister and one my Mam's, both called Mary ("The Marys").

Through telling a deeply personal story, the product aims to relate to the audience by focusing on the universal themes of loss, grief, and bereavement. It's about how we cope in the aftermath of death, and the power of storytelling.

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Acknowledgements

It is with great pleasure I acknowledge all those who helped me throughout this thesis. I thank my supervisors Francesca Lalor and Rachel Andrews, for their consistent guidance and valued opinion throughout this study. I also thank the participants in the study, my two aunts, Mary Cunningham and Mary Kavanagh, for their recollections and memories shared. Thank you to my siblings Deirdre, Shaun and Eimear, and my boyfriend Richie, who let me bounce both ideas and stress off them over the last few months. And thank you to my Mam and Dad, for their story.

Chapter One: Introduction

Background

Tony Rooney was from Bettystown in County Meath. His mam and dad owned a B&B and what were the only pub and shop in the village at that time. His family left Bettystown when he was in his early teens. His mam and dad bought a small farm a few miles over the road in a place called Cooperhill and the family lay new roots there. Tony's mam died a couple of years later of bowel cancer when Tony was 16. Tony finished school, studied mechanical engineering in Carlow IT, opened up a motorbike shop on the main street in Drogheda town, and met Una Cunningham in his early twenties.

Una Cunningham was brought up in Calry, County Sligo. Her mother stopped recognising her when she was 12 because she had brain cancer, and then she passed away a year later. The loss meant that Una and her 4 siblings spent their youths maintaining a household and small farm while her dad was out at work. Una wasn't unusually smart but she got good enough grades to go to NUIG where she was a student in Michael D Higgins' lecture theatre. She was the first person from Calry to go to university. When she finished she saw an advertisement in a national paper for a job in a school in Drogheda and got the train to Drogheda town the next day. She lived in Drogheda and taught in that school for the rest of her life.

Una and Tony were introduced to each other at the house party of a mutual friend. A courtship followed, then a marriage, a house on Tony's dad's land in Cooperhill, and a family. Una and Tony were family people and dedicated their lives to their children. They were a happy family. But tragedy struck twice in the Rooney household. Tony was out hillwalking one Sunday when he had a heart attack and dropped dead. Five years later when the family had somewhat rebuilt their lives, Una got a terminal cancer diagnosis and passed away within three months.

Tony is my dad and Una is my mam. I am Sarah and am the second eldest of their four children. I was twenty when Dad died and twenty-five when Mam passed away. This year

marks the ten year anniversary of Dad's death, and five years since Mam's. Big anniversaries can be a good time for exercises in cathartic reflection. In light of this, the product I have made for this dissertation by practice falls into the personal story genre and it is about my parents' life.

The product features two interviewees, my Dad's sister Mary and my Mam's sister Mary. They explain the details of my parents' life from childhood through to illness and death. The story is narrated by me and charts my personal grief journey.

Format

I chose to do a dissertation by practice as I was interested in utilising the practical skills I learned in my journalism studies. I studied Business with Languages in University and afterward obtained a professional accounting qualification, ACCA. I welcomed the practical format as a change from the purely academic work I had done for previous qualifications.

I chose to do my dissertation by practice by radio rather than by film as this was my area of interest throughout my MA studies. I produced a radio documentary for a module in first year and enjoyed the process and was satisfied with the final product. I felt I had both the interest and competency to make another one. A radio documentary is a spoken word radio format devoted to non-fiction. A regeneration of such audio storytelling has taken place over the past decade with the emergence of podcasting. I chose this format due to its current popularity and because it lends itself well to the personal story genre.

Purpose

One of the purposes of this product is to capture the story of my parents' life so that it can be preserved. From a personal perspective, I wanted to preserve their story before it was too late and it was lost. This purpose is justified only for a very small audience of people who would be personally interested and invested in their own ancestors' lives.

The product has a broader purpose also. Sometimes the stories that are most dear and personal to one individual are the ones that resonate most universally. The purpose of this product is to create a personal story to deal with the universal themes of loss, grief, and bereavement, which can be consumed by a broader audience.

The importance of this product lies in the exploration of the human experience. It aims to deliver two key messages. The first message is around story preservation. This product shows that the story of a person's life can be preserved after they have passed away by sharing memories and recollections of that person. The second message is around gratitude. The narrative of the product states that when grief is shared rather than burdened alone, it is easier to be grateful for what one has rather than to wallow in what one has lost. The delivery of these key messages make this work important. The universal nature of the themes captured in the product justify its importance as they make it relatable and interesting to a broader audience.

Justification of the product

The justification for this product lies mainly in its entertainment value as a story. Like most stories, it is designed to be consumed and enjoyed by an audience. It is a snapshot of a time and place, an insight into someone else's world, a description of how things were, a sharing of how things felt. The purpose is to engage the audience in the story being told so that they may feel emotions as they listen, that they may become invested in the characters, affected by the music, and form an opinion on the conclusion. The aim is that they may come away from the documentary having experienced a perspective, and having been impacted by that perspective in one way or another.

As this is a story of the broad human experience, the target audience would be broad. However, this product is specifically aimed at the Irish market as this audience shares similar backgrounds to those of the protagonists in the story. It is targeted most specifically at those who grew up in 1950s and 1960s as the experiences portrayed are likely to be familiar and therefore evoke a sense of nostalgia and poignancy in this demographic. *Documentary*

on One is somewhere the documentary could be broadcast. Their archive of documentaries is rife with simple personal stories that capture day-to-day Irish life.

Written report

The written report set out below is the supporting documentation for this dissertation by practice by radio. The chapters that follow provide analysis and discussion regarding how this topic was delivered, and how the final product was executed.

Chapter two is the evidence of research section, which documents the literature reviewed for this dissertation by practice. Literature on audio storytelling and narrative nonfiction journalism is reviewed. This literature provides a backdrop for the storytelling technique adopted. Included also is an evaluation of research methods, personal narration and scene setting, and technical possibilities. This research was used to support the construction and technical design of the product. Finally, there is a review of similar works in different media that influenced this dissertation by practice.

Chapter three is focused on the construction and design of the product. This chapter is a justification and elaboration of the decisions made in creating this product from pre-production to post-production. It includes references to technical literature as well as considerations on the ethical aspects, limitations, and challenges faced in the study.

Chapter four is a discussion chapter that outlines and reflects on the concept chosen and charts the progress to production. It is a reflective section that considers the experience of creating the product. It focuses on lessons learned and things I would have done differently. It also explores considerations around personal storytelling as a journalistic endeavour.

The essay finishes with a brief conclusion. The conclusion refers back to the original research topic and reports on how it was delivered. It contains a summary of this written report and includes a brief reflection on the product and how it relates to other work. The essay closes with an outlook on how this work may be used or developed in the future.

Chapter 2: Evidence of research

Audio storytelling

“We are living in a new golden age of storytelling,” states Mead (2018, para. 3) in a *New Yorker* article that charts the rise of the podcast. Podcasts are on-demand audio that listeners can download and play at any time in any place. When podcasts first emerged about a decade ago, they were not accessible to everyone. They possessed inherent technological blockers to the mass market. They were complicated to download and not easily accessible to the masses. These barriers were knocked down over time as podcasts such as the true-crime documentary “Serial” began to achieve mass popularity. When Apple introduced the Podcast app to the iPhone in 2014, subscribing to a podcast became an effortless and free process. According to Mead (2018), a recent study conducted by Edison Research found that almost a quarter of Americans listen to podcasts at least once a month.

Mead (2018) comments on the pace and tone of the podcast medium. The podcast is slow-paced when compared to many other digital mediums. It allows time for a story to be slowly built. A podcast is generally absorbed by a solitary listener and so it is a very intimate media product. In an article for *The Atlantic* discussing the captivating features of audio stories, Wen (2015, para. 17) cites Emma Rodero, a communications professor at the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona: “Audio is one of the most intimate forms of media because you are constantly building your own images of the story in your mind and you’re creating your own production, and that of course, is something that you can never get with visual media.”

Radio is prominent in the media landscape in Ireland. According to a JNLR/Ipsos MRBI report into radio listening covering the 12-month period from October 2018 to September 2019, 81% of all Irish adults listen to the radio on an average day. According to *The Irish Times* (2020, para 4.), the popularity of Irish radio is down to how its storytelling qualities connect to the audience in a simple way. “There is a simplicity in its connection with the community – coming on air to talk about a subject, a request played for a birthday, the local community group discussing an issue of importance, or promoting local talent and local business.”

Audio storytelling through the medium of podcast is rising in prominence in Ireland also. According to Kelleher (2019), a 2019 Reuters report showed that 37% of Irish people had listened to a podcast in the last month. This reflected the third highest listenership to podcasts in the world after South Korea (53%) and Spain (39%), and ahead of the USA (35%).

Documentary on One is a radio documentary show which airs on *RTE Radio One*. The show is aired weekly and each documentary is about forty minutes in length. The production explores stories about Irish people and Irish events. The archive of over 1,700 documentaries are available as a podcast series. They date back as far as 1954.

Documentary on One has won 320 national and international awards since 2008. According to O'Connor (2019), *Documentary on One* is among the most popular podcast shows in Apple podcast's Irish top charts.

Research on audio storytelling demonstrates the large market consuming radio and podcasts which supports the justification of doing a dissertation by practice by radio.

Narrative journalism

The radio product created for this dissertation is a narrative journalism piece. Research on narrative journalism focuses on the inherent stylistic techniques of the format and the impact of this type of journalism on the audience.

Narrative journalism or literary journalism can be broadly defined as "the genre that takes the techniques of fiction and applies them to nonfiction. The narrative form requires deep and sophisticated reporting, an appreciation for storytelling, a departure from the structural conventions of daily news, and an imaginative use of language." (Vanoost, 2013 p. 77)

In modern day journalism, the label narrative journalism can apply to journalistic products across a range of different media – including podcasts or radio documentaries. Narrative journalism differs from conventional journalism through its use of storytelling techniques which endeavour to go beyond merely informing and entertaining the audience. Storytelling

techniques are used to answer the questions of *how* and *why* rather than just *what*. The newsworthiness of the event being covered is less important than the potential of this event to move the audience by revealing the essence of the human experience. The struggle of everyday people is a popular topic among narrative journalists. (Van Krakien, 2019)

There are a range of analytical studies that focus on examining the stylistic features of narrative journalism, for example, use of the first-person point of view narrative. There is also experimental research which assesses the impact of these stylistic features on the audience. Hufford (2019, para. 13) states that “most nonfiction storytelling operates under the same goal: getting the truth to resonate with the reader”. Van Krakien (2019) discusses how experimental research shows that narrative journalism results in a stronger sense of being present at the described scenes and better processing of information. Studies indicate that narrative journalism is successful in achieving goals of truth resonance by getting the audience to engage with the story on a personal level and creating an immersive listening experience for the audience. (Van Krakien, 2019)

Qualitative research approach

Interviews were required to be carried out to form the audio recordings featuring in this dissertation’s radio documentary. Interviewing is a qualitative approach to gathering information. Fontana and Frey (1994, p.366) describe how “very important unstructured interviewing is in conducting fieldwork”. They discuss the benefits of the structured interview approach when the object is “capturing precise data of a codable nature in order to explain behaviour within pre-established categories.” On the other hand, the object of the unstructured interview containing open ended questions is to “understand the complex behaviour of members of society without imposing any a prior categorization that may limit the field of inquiry”.

According to Birkdale media (2016), open-ended questions are a strong journalistic method. They are more likely to yield a longer and more personal answer, providing a human perspective to stories. Open-ended questions increase the chances of soliciting an honest

answer, obtaining an understanding of the interviewee's intent, and understanding the emotions of the interviewee.

Jooton, McGhee, and Marland (2009) discuss the fact that throughout the development of qualitative research approaches over the years there has been an emphasis on objectivity and detachment. In this light, they explain the importance of reflexivity in the research process in instances where the researcher knows the subjects of the research personally. They define reflexivity as "the continuous process of reflection of the researcher on his or her values, preconceptions, behaviour or presence and those of the participants, which can affect the interpretation of responses." (Jooton, McGhee, and Marland, 2009, p.44) The object of reflexivity in qualitative research is to encourage objectivity where the researcher cannot help but be have pre-formed subjective views on the research topic.

According to UVM (2020) however, there is a contrasting approach to reflexivity taken in literary journalism. An important aspect of narrative journalism is the stretch beyond objective facts in order to better reflect real life and real people. While conventional journalism techniques focus on being completely objective, literary journalism allows the journalist to be influenced by their own subjective views about the world. Allowing subjectivity in the research approach may enable the journalist to be more truthful.

Personal narration and scene setting

Research was done on the narration and scene setting techniques adopted in literary journalism for this radio documentary. According to Sheikh (2019), the modern tradition of using first person narration in journalism became prominent in the 1960s and 1970s when journalists such as Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, and Hunter S. Thompson, leaders of the 'New Journalism' style of reporting, began utilising more literary techniques. Studies support the idea that first-person narration can better engage readers than third person narrative. A study by Hartung et al. (2016) found readers feel more immersed in stories using first-person pronouns, compared to stories written in the third person. According to a study by Papeo, Corradi-Dell'Acquam, and Rumiati (2011) readers were more mentally stimulated when reading action verbs in the first person rather than the third person.

According to Sheikh (2019), first-person narration can serve different functions depending on context. It can be used to add emotional authenticity, to build tension, to add humour or to lend authority to an argument. Using first-person narrative at the beginning of the story helps with scene-setting and so the reader or audience can better picture where the reporter is and who the reporter is with. This helps the audience gauge what to expect. Journalists must carefully consider the use of the first-person narrative and the purpose it serves in the piece. According to Sheikh (2019) the first-person narrative should only be used when the journalist is doing, feeling or experiencing something.

Technical possibilities

For a dissertation by practice by radio, optimising audio quality of recordings is important for creating a broadcast quality product. For optimum recording quality to be achieved, ideally interviews are carried out face-to-face. But that is not always possible. Interviews conducted down the phone have always been a staple in radio. However, the technological alternatives available for interviews are increasing in fast pace with the global technology industry. Interviews are now commonly conducted remotely – particularly over the past number of months due to the coronavirus pandemic.

A full radio documentary can be made remotely with a laptop, microphone and some audio software. Apps like Skype and Zoom can facilitate the phone calls through which the interviews can be carried out. The calls can be recorded on Mac's GarageBand and Adobe Audacity. Both programmes also include editing functions. Audio quality may be somewhat compromised by using traditional Skype or Zoom mediums as the interviewer's voice is recorded locally while the interviewees' recording is a playback through the laptop speaker. However, there are alternative apps, such as Zencast or Ringr, which can offer improved audio quality. On both of these apps each person's audio is recorded locally. This results in high-quality audio files which can be edited together. Ringr recordings are done on mobile phone, while Zencast is designed for desktop computers. (Rachel Corbett, 2020)

Similar works in different media - themes

The non-fiction novel *When Breath becomes Air* is an autobiographical book written by Paul Kalanithi. It is a memoir about his life and about the terminal cancer that killed him. This book deals with the theme of death and is an example of somebody using a literary medium to preserve a personal story. In the months after he found out he was dying, he began to document the story of his life and road to death. The book is written in the first person except for the final chapter which is completed by his wife who describes that at the moment he was ready to remove the breathing support and start morphine and die, he said his goodbyes and then "he asked us to ensure that his manuscript be published in some form... This book carries the urgency of racing against time, of having important things to say." (Kalanithi, 2016, p. 211) This work was influential during the concept exploration stage of this dissertation by practice. I knew I wanted to preserve a personal story and wasn't sure exactly how. Reviewing work covering similar themes supported in stimulating my creativity and imagination.

A similar example dealing with the theme of story preservation is the non-fiction novel *Tuesdays with Morrie*, which is a memoir by American author Mitch Albom about a series of visits he made to his former sociology professor Morrie Schwartz, during the period of time in which Schwartz is dying at home. Albom records the conversations that happened between them during those visits. The novel is a preservation capsule for the lessons on living Schwartz learned throughout his life. This work is another example of a first-person narrative dealing with the themes of loss, grief, bereavement and story preservation. As above, this work was influential during the concept exploration stage of this dissertation by practice.

There is a radio documentary from the *RTE Documentary on One* archive called the *The Two Sisters*, which also focuses on story preservation as a theme. A journalist Kevin McDermott, the youngest of eight siblings, sets about interviewing his two older sisters who had both left home when he was a child to enter the Catholic Church as nuns, and who both left their religious orders later. Given their age and generational gap, McDermott never fully knew or understood his sisters' stories and documents an interview he carries out with them, which sets about discovering and preserving those stories. This product is an example of a product

telling a similar story to that of this radio dissertation, a narrative journalism piece where a personal story about one's own family is documented.

Similar works in different media - narrative structure, settings and techniques

This American Life is a weekly public radio programme and podcast. Each week it focuses on a theme and puts together different stories on that theme. It is usually one of the five top podcasts on iTunes. It is heard by 2.2 million listeners each week on over 500 public radio stations in the U.S., with another 3.1 million people downloading each episode as a podcast. It also airs on radio stations in various countries across the world, including Ireland. (This American Life, 2020)

The *This American Life* archive of radio shows covers themes ranging across all aspects of American life in an attempt to capture the American story. The producer Ira Glass narrates the show in first person. He introduces the show, then presents research, then reflects in a narrative passage, then presents research again. This structure of research followed by narrative passage continues until Glass concludes each episode with a final narrative passage. Chien (2001) quotes the Ira Glass describing the structure: "There's an anecdote, that is, sequence of actions where someone says 'this happened then this happened then this happened - and then there's a moment of reflection about what the sequences means, and then on the next set of actions." This work influenced the manner in which the interview sections and narrative passages were organised in this radio dissertation.

Desert Island Discs is a BBC radio programme which has been in production since 1942. It is focused on interviewing celebrities, public figures and noteworthy people. Each week the interviewee is asked to select the eight songs they would choose as the only the only ones they could take with them were they to be cast away on a desert island. They discuss the reasons for their choices and discuss their lives stories. The music forms the structural pillars of the conversation and frame the dialogue. The songs are played to bring to life the memories and recollections shared. This work influenced the manner in which music was used in this radio dissertation.

Carpool Karaoke is a recurring segment on *The Late Late Show with James Corden*, a weekly American television programme, in which host James Corden drives a car around LA and other locations with a famous musical guest in the passenger seat. The host sings along with his guests to their favourite songs as a bridge between conversation sections where their lives are discussed. This product is an example of using alternative locations as settings for documentary interviews which was influential to this dissertation by practice by radio.

Chapter Three: Constructing/ designing the product

Interviewee selection

Interviews were carried out with both of my parents' sisters called Mary. Initially, I had considered interviewing all their siblings and also interviewing my own siblings, which comprises 10 people. However, I had concerns as to how I would be able to create an intimate narrative in a short 20 minute documentary with so many voices. After discussions with my technical dissertation supervisor Francesca Lalor, I decided to just interview "The Marys". I chose them as they are the aunts that I am closest to and felt I would be most comfortable interviewing. Also, they were both close in age to my parents, so I felt their childhood reflections would best capture their childhoods. And finally, I chose them because they both speak well and they both like telling stories so I felt I would be able to get a lot out of them.

Background research

Before I wrote interview questions, I did some research to guide my decision-making around question selection. This research included making ad hoc inquiries to family members, reading old newspaper articles, browsing old photos and browsing through personal artefacts of Una and Tony. Though this research was not exclusively displayed in the final product, which is a radio documentary, they contributed to my understanding of the story and influenced direction of the interview questions.

Interview questions

The first thing I did was determine my interview goals. I decided I wanted to obtain specific information on my parents' lives. I wanted to capture their home life as children, their mothers passing when they were in their teens, how they met, their wedding day, their joint family life with children, dad's sudden death and mam's illness and passing. I created a list of questions based on these goals (Appendix I).

I decided to group the list of specific questions into a list of general topics to have in front of me during the interview. This journalistic method of working with topics rather than carefully worded questions aims to create a natural, thoughtful, purposeful, conversation. (Daly and Kille, 2016)

Recording device

I selected the Zoom H4N recording device to record the interviews. The Zoom H4N is a hand held recording device with built-in microphone. I chose this device for the interview as it records high-quality audio so I believed it would deliver strong outputs to be used in the radio documentary.

I own my own Zoom H4N device so choosing to use it gave me flexibility to record wherever and whenever I wanted. I have previously recorded projects using my Zoom H4N. As such, I am comfortable with device settings and controls. I felt this familiarity would make the interviewing process easier.

Interview arrangements

In February 2020, I reached out to “The Marys” by phone to arrange a suitable time to conduct the interviews. In March, when the government introduced Covid 19-related lockdown measures, which meant we were all confined to our homes other than for essential travel, I considered carrying out the interviews using remote technology.

However, as outlined in the evidence of research section of this essay, there are many remote technology recording possibilities. I did not want to run the risk of reduced audio quality of recordings so when the government roadmap to reopening the country was released, I decided to wait until certain restrictions were lifted to carry out face to face interviews in June.

Aside from sound quality, I chose the face to face approach as I hoped it would get the most out of the interviewees from a content perspective. Neither are particularly comfortable

with technology so they may not have been relaxed using a remote method. Also, many of the topics being covered in the interview were emotionally sensitive. I hoped I would better be able to gauge and manage the interviewees emotions face to face.

Pre-interview care

I carried out the same pre-interview care in respect of both interviews. I called the interviewee two days before the scheduled interview to confirm arrangements and to ease any of their uncertainty by talking them through the interview process and to give them a sense of the type of questions I would be asking and the topics that would be covered.

On the date of the interview, I arrived at the interviewee's home a few minutes earlier than scheduled. Informed consent is the main ethical issue when making a documentary using interview sources. "Because the objects of inquiry are human beings, extreme care must be taken to avoid any harm to them." (Fontana and Frey, 1994) I complied with NUJ ethical guidelines in carrying out the interviews. Both interviewees were informed of the audience with whom the documentary would be shared, and their identities disclosed and I made them aware of how their contribution would be used.

I asked to move to a quiet room in the house to carry out the interview. I was conscious that both interviews should be carried out in similar size room with similar acoustics so that when it came to editing, I could decide to move between either voice and the sound would be consistent. I set up my Zoom H4N on a low table between me and the interviewee who both sat in armchairs in their respective living rooms.

As is best practice according to Beaman (2000), I tested the audio levels sound quality as we had a chat. I let the interviewee try on my headphones so they understood what I could hear as the interview was being carried out. While wearing the headphones I asked them to pat their legs and clap their hands. I wanted them to understand how sensitive the speaker was and asked that they limit their hand gestures and movements as much as possible throughout the interview to protect the sound quality of their interview. I explained to the interviewee that while I normally joke and laugh with them as we chat, to expect me to be

much quieter than usual throughout the interview. I asked them to try not to be distracted by my silence and advised this was intentional as I did not want to interrupt the flow of the audio recording with my interventions.

Interview

I followed the same process in conducting both interviews. I began recording on my Zoom H4N. I stated that I was a journalist. I asked the interviewee who they were and I began by moving through the three topics of questions. After every few questions, I asked the interviewee if she was happy to keep going or whether she would like a break. Toward the end of both interviews, both parties got upset talking about their loved ones' passing. I asked them would they like to break again at this stage. Mary C's interview was conducted in one recording with no break. The interview was 1 hour 49 minutes in length.

Mary K, took one break when she was upset. She took a few minutes to have a glass of water and gather her emotions before asking to start recording again. The length of her recorded interview was 45 minutes.

While I limited my own dialogue throughout the interviews, I was interactive throughout. I used facial expressions to encourage the interviewees to continue sharing their experiences. Each time they finished speaking, I waited a period before the next question. I looked expectantly at them during this period to encourage a second wind of ideas before we wrapped up on any question or topic. I did laugh and verbally encourage in certain limited instances also where not doing so would have led to the interview feeling unnatural and stiff rather than it feeling like a conversation between family.

Post-interview care

I followed the same post interview process with both interviewees. I turned off the Zoom H4N and played back a part of the interview to make sure the audio was intact.

Editing suite

I chose GarageBand to edit this piece of work. I have a mac laptop and GarageBand is a free built in application on the mac. I chose it so that I had flexibility to work on edits as and when it suited at no cost. Furthermore, I had made one documentary before and used GarageBand in that instance so had some previous experience using the application. I watched a number of GarageBand tutorials on YouTube to refresh my knowledge of the application's functions and to build up proficiency this time around.

Interview edit

Mary K's interview was a lot shorter than Mary C's. I decided to edit her interview first as there was less content to choose from. Once I selected her key messages, I knew I would be able to obtain content from Mary C to build the full story up. The process of editing both interviews was the same.

I listened through the full interview once. I listened a second time and in line with the recommendations of Radcliffe (2019) to edit sparingly, deleted any completely irrelevant passages. I listened again and split the content out by topic. I created titled tracks for each key conversation point. I moved parts of dialogue around from different parts of the conversation to group them together with their most appropriate conversation point. Doing so meant that I would be able to edit each conversation point in isolation and in full.

Once I had the final list of tracks for both interviews, I brought both the titled conversation point tracks from both interviews into one file. I began matching conversation points from one interview with the corresponding conversation point in the other interview. Then I began to group the conversation points into three tracks new tracks which defined the final documentary sections: early life, romantic and joint family life, and death. I placed the titled tracks from the two women beside each other in the three new tracks. These three tracks were the final interview tracks which were used in the documentary.

Narration

Once I had the interviews edited and understood the interview content as well as the three-part documentary structure, I made decisions around telling the story. I decided to narrate the documentary myself. As the story was a personal one, I felt I was best placed to tell it. Sheikh (2019, para. 3) cites Martha Nichols, a lecturer on first-person journalism at Harvard University, commenting on first person narration: “first-person narration is much more effective storytelling than just bringing in a bunch of expert quotes and research.”

I decided on four narrative passages: an introduction before the first interview section, a linking passage between the first and second interview section, a linking passage between the second and third interview section, and a conclusion passage at the end. This structural approach was influenced by the *This American Life* podcast structure as detailed in the evidence of research section. I chose this approach as I thought it would create continuity by my voice being used regularly. I also wanted to use narration between sections in order to separately define each section and as also to aid the flow between the sections.

Narrative setting

I decided to set the documentary as though it were recorded in the car. This was influenced by the *Carpool Karaoke* segment of *The Late Late Show with James Corden* as detailed in the evidence of research section. I chose this setting to aid storytelling. I set the scene in the introductory passage by saying: “I think of my parents most often when I am alone on a long car journey.” The conversations I have with my aunts are then set as though they are also carried out in the car, as if the three of us are going on a long journey together.

I believe the image of somebody looking out a car window and reflecting deeply on things, or the picture of close people having deep conversations while in a car, are ones that universally resonate with people in a strong way. I hoped the car setting would create a universal appeal to the topic – that the listener could picture themselves in my position.

I made this decision to set the documentary in the car as I wanted to create the sound, pace and feeling of a journey down memory lane. I also wanted to create a sense of movement

for the listener so that they felt engaged. I wanted the listener to finish listening to the documentary and feel as though they had been on their own reflective journey.

While I set the documentary in the car, I did not carry out the interviews in the car. I hoped to achieve optimum audio quality for the documentary by recording the interviews inside a still room. I decided I would instead add sound effects during the edit in order to create the impression of a car journey.

Narrative script

I wrote a script with the four short passages that would be used to narrate the documentary (Appendix II). The opening passage starts by stating that my dad passed away ten years ago of a sudden heart attack and my mam died five years ago of cancer. I describe how I find myself thinking of my parents most often when I am alone on a long car journey. But on this particular journey, I took my two aunts Mary with me to think about them together.

The final passage concludes by discussing the fact that up until now, when I was thinking of my parents, it was always alone. Alone, my approach to grief had been to bury it, to try and look forward, to try not to reflect too much on the past. But sharing the journey of grief with my aunts, made me realise the power of storytelling – that by telling stories together, we keep alive the memory of those that have passed way. Together it is easier to think of all that we have rather than alone when we can dwell on all we have lost. These are the key message of the documentary.

The two passages in the middle which are used to connect the three interview sections are my own personal reflections on my parents' lives. While my aunts reflect on their lives during the interview sections, this narration adds my view on the same topics. These passages aim to reflect my contribution to the conversation we are having as well as supporting the structure of the piece.

Narrative recording

I recorded the narration on my Zoom H4N in a living room similar to the rooms I recorded "The Marys'" interviews in. I read the script for the recording and injected emotion and feeling into the narration so that it would feel like I was speaking off the cuff. I recorded the narration close to the microphone. I wanted my voice to be strong and clear.

Sound effects

I used car sound effects to create the impression that the documentary was being recorded in the car. I had a 'car taking off' effect at the outset of the documentary to give the impression of the beginning of the journey. At the end of the third interview section, I used a 'car stopping' sound effect and a 'car door open and close' effect. I chose these effects to indicate the end of the journey.

I used a variety of 'car passing by' sound effects throughout the documentary between narrative passages, interview sections and songs. The purpose of using these effects was to bridge different parts of the documentary together. I also used 'car passing by' sound effects where I had a sharp edit in the interview sections to soften the transition between sentences.

The recording of the interview with Mary K featured natural bird chirping sounds in the background. As such, I found a similar bird chirping sound which I also used to break some sharp edits. I also used silence as a sound effect in certain instances within the interview sections to allow the listener pause on a particular point of emotion or note.

There are a range of websites online which offer free-to-download sound effects. I browsed these websites to find appropriate sound effects and downloaded effects from SoundFishing and Fesliyan Studios.

Music

I chose to use music in the documentary as influenced by the format of the radio show *Desert Island Discs*, details of which are included in the evidence of research section. I

featured four songs. The documentary deals with the themes of loss, grief and bereavement, which are sad themes. But I did not want the piece to feel too heavy. I chose four upbeat songs to place at intervals throughout the documentary with the purpose of lightening the listeners mood. The songs featured were from the 50s, 60s and 70s. The object of choosing old songs was to evoke the nostalgia of the listener, and to transport the listener to the different decades in which the documentary was set.

I chose "No Particular Place To Go" by Chuck Berry as the song to open the documentary. It opens with the words: "Riding along in my automobile" which were apt in introducing the car setting. It is a fun song and a mood lifter to start the story.

I chose "Dancing in the Moonlight" by Thin Lizzy between the second narrative passage and second interview section, and "Blue Suede Shoes" by Elvis Presley between the third narrative passage and third interview section. They are upbeat and were selected to bring to life the memories reflected upon in the narrative passages they were following.

The final song featured was "Ain't Got No – I Got Life" by Nina Simone. This song comes after the fourth narrative passage which is a conclusion. As mentioned above, the conclusion focuses on the key message of the documentary; that sharing stories can keep alive the memory of those that have passed away and remind us of what we have rather than what we have lost.

This song was chosen to come in after this final narrative passage to support this message. The song features in the documentary as a mantra on how to approach life. It is a song about gratitude and focusing on the simple things. This song aims to close the documentary leaving the listener feeling grateful for all they have. Having just listened to someone else's story beginning to end, it endeavours to leave the listener savouring in the idea of a simple life well lived.

The Irish Copyright Act of 2000 makes an exception to allow students to use copyright material for the purpose of examination. As this work is for assessment only and is not for

replication and distribution, this exception applies, and there were no implications of selecting copyright music for this documentary.

Audio levels

The final edits to the documentary were applied to the audio levels across the various sections, passages, songs and sound effects used in the documentary. The goal was to ensure the levels subtly reflected the order of importance of the audios featured: my voice as the narrator was levelled to sound strongest as I am primary storyteller, the "The Marys" voices were secondary, and then the music was third. The levels applied to the sound effects aimed to add subtle background texture, not featured sound.

Length

I aimed to create a product that was a maximum of twenty-five minutes long, in line with MA dissertation guidelines and the guidance of my technical supervisor Francesca Lalor. The final product is twenty-three minutes, fifty-four seconds in length.

Ethical considerations, challenges and limitations

Informed consent is the main ethical issue when making a documentary using interview sources. I followed correct procedures around consent during pre-interview care. The content matter of this product did not lend itself to any major ethical challenges. It does not deal with any marginalised groups or subjects that are viewed as controversial. However, the themes of bereavement, grief and loss are sensitive. As such, were this documentary to be aired on radio, noting a bereavement support helpline contact at the beginning or end of the documentary for any listeners that may be effected by the content of the documentary might be considered.

Challenges faced throughout the construction and design of this product included: the delay in being able to make interview arrangements due to the coronavirus pandemic, the emotional challenge of interviewing sources on sensitive topics, alongside the technical

challenge of having limited experience working with an editing suite. Limitations included only being able to interview a small number of sources due to the documentary time constraints, as well as not being able to record in an actual car as it would have damaged audio quality. The decisions made to cope with these challenges and limitations are detailed in the paragraphs above.

Chapter Four: Discussion

Evolution of concept

The first seed of the idea for this thesis was planted when I was living in Sydney in early 2017. I moved to Australia eight months after Mam died. During my time there, I formed a close friendship with a Dublin couple, Caoimhe and Séamus. During my last week in Sydney, Caoimhe's parents came to visit. On the morning of their arrival, Caoimhe invited me around to meet them. As we were introduced, they did what most Irish parents do, they asked me questions about my background.

Caoimhe's dad asked me what my parents did for a living. I explained that neither were alive anymore. He looked at his wife and said, "This girl has lost her both her parents around the same age you had." Then he looked at me and said. "You poor thing. You are never too old to be an orphan." In that moment, I realised the universality of the grief I had experienced. All of us lose our parents, regardless of our age or stage in life.

"Never too old to be an orphan" was the working title of this research project up until three months before completion. When I completed a module on radio in my first semester of this master's degree, I decided that I would do a radio documentary for my thesis and that the topic would be based around the concept of "never too old to be an orphan", though I did not have any ideas on how I would explore the concept at that time.

Exploration of concept

When I began my Research Methods module, I brainstormed ideas for exploration. Among other things, I considered interviewing my friend's mother who had fostered over 40 children in her lifetime. I also considered discussing the topic of grief with my two friends Joe and Aoife who are the only other friends of my age who have lost a parent. The research question I wanted to explore was – "what happens to our stores when we die?" I kept coming back to my own story to answer it.

I began reviewing the literature on this topic. I listened to a wealth of podcasts, as highlighted in the literature review section of this essay, and it was then I began to think about the voices I would use tell my story in the final product.

In these earlier stages I anticipated recording conversations between a number of family members all sitting around together talking about my parents and reflecting on their shared grief. I hoped to also interview all my parents' siblings individually and my own siblings also. This is how I envisaged carrying out interviews for the documentary at the point at which I submitted my research proposal.

As I set about beginning my final semester dissertation work and met with my thesis supervisors in early March 2020, I began to have cold feet about my concept and those I would be interviewing. I felt maybe the interviews would be too emotional and I would find it too difficult to carry out the work. I feared so many voices (10 planned interviewees) would be unmanageable in terms of editing and would also make for an incoherent final product. I also feared I would not be able to convert this deeply personal story into a product fit for universal consumption.

I eliminated the first two doubts by deciding to carry out only two interviews with my two aunts called Mary. I feel so comfortable around both of them that even if carrying out the interview became an emotional experience; I would be able to handle it with them in a way I may not have been able to with others. Having only two voices in the final edit alongside my own, would support a coherent documentary product.

On my final concern around creating a universal appeal to my work, I had to take a leap of faith in myself. I hoped that I could use the skills I had learned in my studies and take on the advice of my technical supervisor to make something others would enjoy. When I told my technical supervisor, Francesca Lalor, that I was only planning to interview two sources, my two aunts called Mary, she said, "Ah lovely, the Marys". That sentence inspired the title of the final product "The Marys".

Interview process

I carried out both interviews over June. I had worried in advance of carrying out the interviews that my aunts could be uptight, nervous or emotional about answering questions. Neither Mary had ever participated in an interview similar to this before. The content being covered was sensitive in that it forced my aunts to talk about their loved ones who had passed away.

However, neither interview felt like an emotionally-charged experience. I enjoyed both conversations which had a chat-like feel. I was satisfied with the responses I had gotten and knew coming away from both interviews that I had sufficient material required to tell the story. The interview process was a really positive experience for me. I learned how open people can be to sharing deeply personal recollections and experiences. I practiced objectivity in my approach to the interviews not allowing myself to become emotional by the memories being shared. Practicing such objectivity was a challenging learning experience for me, however, I think the fact that I had my questions and themes considered in advance of the interview, helped me to maintain my professional approach throughout.

Structure and narrative process

As I set about preparing questions to interview "The Marys", I found myself organising them into three interview sections that make up mam and dad's story – their early years up until after they went to college, their twenties when they met and into their family life, and then eventually their deaths. However, at this stage, I had not pinned down what narrative technique I would use to tie the three interview sections together.

At the stage when I submitted my research proposal, I had considered using quotes from Oliver Twist to tie the story together, as I felt it tied in well with the "never too old to be an orphan" concept. Later, I had considered using famous quotes on themes of loss, grief and bereavement to tie together each phase. But I could not find suitable quotations. I began to think that maybe serious quotes were not what was needed.

I realised when working on the research section of this report that the most direct way to deliver the key messages of the documentary was to act as narrator myself. On reflection, I fought this reality for some time. My reluctance was driven by a desire to maintain some objectivity about the story as I feared my own personal intervention might damage the journalistic integrity of the product. I was also afraid of becoming too emotionally involved with the story. I am glad I overcame that fear as I feel my own narration, coupled with the use of music, brought this media product to life.

Over the period of time I edited the interviews, I was subconsciously structuring the final product in my mind. I came across both the opening and closing songs by accident while listening to music at work. When it came to writing the script of the narrative passages, I had long since decided the words I would use. I found the process of scripting and recording the narrative passages flowed easily as I was quite prepared for them having spent so much time thinking them over in the weeks previous.

Lessons learned

Initially when I considered the twenty to twenty-five-minute timeframe of this documentary, I was worried it would not be long enough. Twenty minutes seems a really short time to tell two peoples life stories especially when accompanying it with music. However, I have learned through this process that it is time enough. The shorter time frame forced me to be cut-throat in my editing technique. I learned how to identify crucial pieces of storytelling information and distinguish them from 'nice to have' information. I learned also how to retain certain elements of non-essential information which are essential in creating the right tone.

I had completed one radio documentary before this one, for a course module two years ago. This was the only time I had previously produced a product of this nature. I had to refresh my interview technique, as well as my knowledge of my recording technology (Zoom H4N) and editing suite (GarageBand) at the outset of this project. I believe I upskilled in all of these areas during this project. In my last documentary, while I feel my storytelling technique was strong, my audio levels were weak, and my edits sharp or scruffy at the

edges. During this production I learned how to create a more polished finish in line with what would be expected for a broadcast quality documentary.

Things to do differently

My approach to the editing of this documentary was to try and keep it as simple as possible. My aim was to create a simple but effective story. As a result, I did not get very creative with sound effects. Given the chance again, I might have explored more thoroughly my editing capabilities in this area. Another thing I would have done differently was the recordings of the interviews. I recorded both interviews in a house while the narrative setting of the documentary was in the car. It was important for me to get uninterrupted high audio quality interview footage, however, I should have recorded some parts of the conversations in the car to aid realistic creation of the narrative setting.

Finally, if I were doing this again, I might have been braver with my decisions around interviewees. I chose "The Marys" as interviewing them kept me as close as possible to my comfort zone. However, I probably should have explored my other interviewee options from among my family and selected the two people from my family with the best storytelling merits. This would have been the most professional approach.

I would make this documentary again as I am happy with the final product. But I am glad I do not have to go through the process of doing it again. As noted, I found the process emotionally draining at different junctures. I was nervous in the build-up to both interviews as I was afraid that they might drag up emotions on my side or on the side of the interviewees. I was reluctant to narrate the story myself as I wanted to avoid getting too emotionally involved in the story. I found that editing the third interview section where "The Marys" speak about both my parents dying and my mother's battle with cancer was a drain on my emotions.

I was quite mentally and emotionally immersed in this project for some time. As previously mentioned, ideas for it were running through my mind constantly over a period of about

two months. While it was a cathartic process, which I am glad I did, I was relieved to see it come to an end.

Personal story as journalistic product

There are some considerations to be discussed around the concept of the personal story as a journalistic pursuit. My experience has taught me that while I feel rewarded by the experience now the final product is complete; the project took an emotional toll during production. Journalists need to weigh up the costs versus the benefits of a pursuit such as this. In the world of social media and online trolling, a journalist always needs to be mentally prepared to receive negative feedback on their work. If the work is a personal story on a sensitive subject, extra mental preparation would be needed for such feedback.

The final consideration in respect of the personal story as a journalistic product is around the universality of the product. The journalist needs to consider whether the story is more interesting to them, the person to whom the story closely relates, than it is to the broader audience. This consideration was my biggest challenge throughout the project.

As previously mentioned, I have been afraid of dedicating my time and efforts to a product that only I would enjoy. While the stories that are most personal to us are often the ones that have the ability to resonate most deeply with others, the journalist must practice critical thinking in the production of a personal story. Every decision must be scrutinised closely as to whether it will open up the story to the audience or whether it will isolate listeners.

Conclusion

Research topic

The original research topic for this dissertation was story preservation. The work intended to explore the question: What happens to our stories when we die? The radio documentary produced for this dissertation by practice, called "The Marys", answers that question. The response is: We tell them.

The research topic is answered by the telling of the story of my deceased parents life through interviews, narrative passages and music. The act of physically recording their stories in audio format addresses the topic of story preservation on a fundamental level. The documentary also endeavours to add meaning to this act of preservation. As narrator I document my own grief journey and conclude by commenting that stories "keep loved ones alive, as long as we keep on telling them."

Written report

The written report set out above examines the approach taken in executing this research topic through dissertation by practice by radio. The first chapter provides a background to the story chosen to explore the topic. It explains why I chose to carry out my dissertation by practice by radio, and focuses on the appeal of the radio format. It examines the purpose of the media product being created as well as the justification for that product.

Chapter two is the evidence of research section which documents the literature reviewed for this dissertation by practice. Literature on audio storytelling and narrative nonfiction journalism is reviewed. This literature provides a backdrop for the storytelling technique adopted. Included also is an evaluation of research methods, personal narration and scene setting, and technical possibilities. This research was used to support the construction and technical design of the product. Finally, there is a review of similar works in different media that influenced this dissertation by practice.

Chapter three is focused on the construction and design of the product. This chapter is a justification and elaboration of the decisions made in creating this product from pre-production to post-production. It includes references to technical literature as well as considerations on the ethical aspects, limitations, and challenges faced in the study.

Chapter four is a discussion chapter that outlines and reflects on the concept chosen and charts the progress to production. It is a reflective section that considers the experience of the process of creating the product. It focuses on lessons learned and things I would have done differently. It also explores considerations around personal storytelling as a journalistic endeavour.

Outlook

“The Marys” documentary was constructed and designed to be enjoyed as a personal story that resonates with an audience. Were the product to be broadcast on public radio or through a podcast channel, it would have the opportunity to reach and relate to a wide audience. It is a reflective piece of work which relates to other media products that focus on telling the stories of the human experience.

In the digital era, journalistic possibilities have expanded in respect of audio storytelling. There is no longer a requirement for a studio and bulky complex technological equipment to produce an audio product. A journalist can make a finished product of a broadcast quality with just a mobile phone or laptop. First person storytelling has become more accessible as a result of these technological changes. It is easy for journalists to record and distribute their personal perspectives and stories through blogging or podcasting.

Traditional journalism is focused on recording the truth through practicing objectivity. First person storytelling is focused on recording the truth through resonating with an audience through subjective observations. While first person storytelling gives the journalist the opportunity to present a story with a unique point of view, the risk with this type of journalism is that subjectivity swallows the truth and it is lost. This could jeopardise the integrity of the journalist. It is important that in the age of self-production and self-

broadcasting, that journalists continue to self- criticize also. They should always uphold the NUJ code of conduct and challenge the motivations behind their chosen story and perspective ensuring there is a justification for their work.

I hope this written report supporting the production of this dissertation by practice will be useful for other journalists embarking upon narrative journalism projects and personal story documentaries.

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Appendices

Appendix I – Interview questions and themes

Theme 1: Early Life

- Where did you grow up?
- What were your parents like?
- What was your family structure (order of siblings, where you came, closeness of siblings, dynamic amongst siblings)?
- What was your day to day life like growing up?
- How important was religion in your house?
- Your Mam was sick and passed away when you were young. What are your memories of that time?
- What were your teenage years like? What way did you all socialise then?
- What are your memories of mam going off to college and moving to Drogheda?

Theme 2: Meeting to joint family life

- Can you remember when mam and dad first met?
- Mam said dad proposed when they were watching television – can you remember the details of the proposal at all?
- What are your memories of mam and dad's wedding day?

- Do you recall all four of us being born?
- What kind of parents would you describe mam and dad as?
- Have you any particular memories of mam and dad as parents that stand out to you that you can share?

Theme 3: Illness and Death

- Do you remember the day we found out dad passed away - can you recall your memories of that day and of his funeral?
- I remember the five years between dad and mam dying as being tough on mam. What are your memories of mam during that period?
- Do you remember finding out mam was sick? What are your recollections of that time?
- Do you think of mam and dad much? What triggers their memory for you?

Appendix II – Narrative Script

Introduction:

Ten years ago my father died of a sudden heart attack while he was out hill walking. Five years later my mother got a terminal cancer diagnosis and passed away within three months. Over the years I find I think about my parents most often when I am in the car, alone on a long journey.

Earlier this year, I decided to take some passengers with me. My dad's sister Mary and my mam's sister Mary. The Marys. My Marys.

First bridge passage:

Mam used to tell this story from her and dad's early years. It was after their second date and dad had gone to see Thin Lizzy at Slane over the weekend. The next week, Mam was in the staff room kitchen and on the table looking up at her was Dad's face blown up on the front page of the local paper – she was like to her friends – “oh my god I am dating that man!”

Sometimes when I remember my parents, I like to think of Dad as that bearded festie, and of mam as a girl, just like me, sitting laughing with her friends talking about boys!

Second bridge passage:

I have twenty years of memories with Dad and twenty-six years with Mam. A collection of shared experiences form still frames in my mind. And yet I refer most often to one snapshot that best captures the portrait of our family life. Over and back the road to Sligo, the ferry to France, six of us happily packed into a Peugeot estate. Of course, a sing song to pass the time. “Dad, Dad – do our favourite one”, the four of us cheer from the back. Mam is laughing in the passenger seat. Then Dad does this thing where he runs all his fingers over the steering wheel as if to play the drums and launches into the Tony Rooney rendition of

Elvis Presley's "Blue Suede Shoes". Only five people in the world would consider his version better than the original. But I feel mighty lucky to be one of them!

Conclusion:

Grief is a burden I have mostly found myself shouldering alone. Get up. Get on. Move forward. Try not to look back.

In the car on my own its been easy to reflect on all that has been lost. But sharing the journey with the Marys, the focus shifts to all that we have: strong roots, family near, stories to remember. Stories that keep loved ones alive. As long as we keep on telling them.