NEWS

SCHOLARS VOICE SUPPORT FOR ULSTER UNIVERSITY'S CONFLICT ARCHIVE

Threat to Troubles site 'shameful'

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The closure of a huge University of Ulster website which offers free public access to a wealth of Troubles facts would be "shameful" and "a massive blow" to the institution's reputation.

Those are the views of two Troubles researchers, Brian Feeney and Dr Aaron Edwards, after it emerged the university regards the Conflict Archive on the Internet (or CAIN for short) as being "unsustainable".

The university is currently trying to figure out what to do about the website, which is operated from its Magee campus.

It is unclear if the site will closed to the public altogether, be kept publicly available but never updated, or whether it will become a service which could be accessed solely on university campuses.

The university would not tell the News Letter how much CAIN costs to run, how many academics work on it, or who they are, saying: "Out of respect for the small number of staff involved it would be inappropriate to disclose this information."

Mr Feeney, Irish News columnist and co-author of the book Lost Lives, chronicling all Troubles deaths, said "it's shameful that funding can't be found for such an internationally important site as CAIN" which is "used daily by scholars across the world".

He said: "University of Ulster have got their priorities all wrong. CAIN makes a greater impact on conflict studies internationally than anything else it does. Its database, archive and hyperlinks are widely accessed by colleges and universities."

Dr Edwards, lecturer at Sandhurst military academy and author of 'UVF: Behind the Mask', said he uses it "every day I'm doing research into the Northern Ireland conflict".

"In this world of past-fact and post-truth, it has reliable statistics and facts that academics and journalists and others need in order to fully critique the past," he said.

Axing it would be "a massive blow to the university and its reputation".

The university itself said: "Ulster University has invested significantly in covering the costs of CAIN but as it stands, against the backdrop of the current funding challenges for higher education locally and with some successful grants insufficient to secure viability, the archive remains unsustainable in its current form."

It said consultation is under way with staff about its future, but one option is "a static digital archive, fully accessible to researchers through the university's library, but without future content curation".

Among the outside bodies which fund it are the Irish government and the EU but, again, the university declined to list all of them or say how much they gave.

82 million visits and counting

CAIN allows the public to access an academically compiled chronology of Troubles events, and original source material like government documents and paramilitary propaganda.
It also includes the enormous Sutton Index of Deaths – a year-by-year breakdown of all fatalities from 1969 to 2001.
The website itself says that since it was created in June 1996, its pages have been viewed roughly 82 million times; last year, there were an average of about 37,000 unique visitors per month.

A photograph of a UDA mural on the Shankill Road, Belfast, taken by CAIN director Martin Melaugh; one of many such images on the site