

New Media Studies



Faculty of Enterprise & Humanities | Department of Humanities & Arts Management

**Final Year Project submitted in part fulfillment of
Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in New Media Studies**

Student Name: Holly O’Sullivan

Student Number: N00193099

Project Title: “Ireland’s Vanishing Triangle a Media Phenomenon that Transcended Three Decades of Irish Media”

Project Type: Video Essay

Declaration of Ownership: I declare that the attached work is entirely my own and that all sources have been acknowledged: x

Date: 27/03/2021

Ireland's Vanishing Triangle a Media Phenomenon that Transcended Three Decades of Irish Media

Introduction

Ireland's Vanishing Triangle has been a topic circulating in Irish Media for decades and the emergence of a renewed interest in the cases of the six missing women from across the east coast of Ireland has occurred despite the disappearances taking place in the early to late 1990s. When looking at the cases today as of 2023 there has been a growing trend of independent researchers on social media platforms such as TikTok and YouTube conducting their own research and analysis of the cases. The ethics surrounding this will be explored. Media scholar George S. Larke-Walsh cites this trend in her book "True Crime in American Media" "When self-proclaimed amateur sleuths use social media platforms to investigate, or comment upon ongoing criminal investigations, it adds a whole new dimension to debates about the social value or ethics of genre form"(Larke-Walsh, 2023)¹ while focusing on an American context it can be applied to ethics surrounding social media worldwide. The primary focus texts of my critical essay will focus on the works of Alan Bailey and Claire McGowan as well as other scholars to contextualise the events of The Vanishing Triangle as a media phenomenon.

The research conducted for this essay displays a media analysis of Ireland's Vanishing Triangle and the impact it has had on Irish Media over the course of three decades. The approach taken in this essay will be academic, with a focus on the six missing women and their portrayal as a collective phenomenon in the Irish Media, without delving into the realm of conspiracy theories

¹ Larke-Walsh, G.S. (2023) "True Crime, Documentary and Ethics," in *True Crime in American Media*. Routledge, p. 3.

due to no convictions being made about the cases. This essay will be accompanied by a video essay in which archival footage and newspaper archives will be analysed along with voice-over audio and other relevant clips to showcase an academic display of the socio-historical context of Ireland's Vanishing Triangle as a media phenomenon. This mode of academia is best suited to this topic as it combines the factual with the visual to display the real-life timeline of the Irish Media and its treatment of the missing women over the course of three decades.

Irish Media in the 1990s

When looking at Irish Media during the 90s the main focus of the news was The Troubles it was at the forefront of Irish Journalism. Reports of bombings and deaths were commonplace in Irish Media at the time. A short while after the first two women of The Vanishing Triangle Annie McCarrick and Eva Brennan went missing the Shankill Road Bombings occurred the Irish Times reported on the victims of the Shankill Road Bombings titled "As the dust settles, an eerie silence envelopes north and west Belfast" (Irish Times, 1993)². Above the article contains pictures of the victims of the Shankill Road Bombings. This was soon after the incident occurred in Belfast and a sense of urgency emerges when analysing articles from the 1990s that depict the troubles. However, when contrasting this with the disappearance of Annie McCarrick there is a distinct difference in the level of urgency present when journalists report on her disappearance. Annie McCarrick went missing on the 26th of March 1993. The Irish Times did not report on her disappearance until the 7th of April 1993 in an article titled "Search for woman continues" (The

² *The Irish Times* (1993) "IRA claims target was UFF Meeting," 25 October. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/archive/1993/1025/Pg006.html#Ar00604:1FBA2F22FA44>

Irish Times,1993)³. The article gives a brief description of her last known whereabouts and the timeframe in which she was last seen. The article does not contain a photo of Annie, nor does it contain a description of her appearance and it is beneath an article containing a picture of the Bishop and the Minister for Education at the time. Journalistic approaches to missing women during the early 90s weren't as urgent to report upon as opposed to political and religious matters when looking at newspaper archives from that era.

English scholar Claire McGowan discussed the cultural context of Ireland prior to the disappearances in her book “The Vanishing Triangle” she was quoted as saying "We weren't worried about being abducted by strangers in cars what we were worried about was being accidentally shot by the soldiers who were crouched in the hedgerows"(McGowan, 2022)⁴. It is evident Ireland experienced severe change and turmoil in the 90s due to the ever-growing conflict between Catholics and Protestants. Ireland was a conservative nation during the 90s and concern for the safety of women was not at the forefront of public discussion.

The safety of women was not held in high regard in society during the 90s The Troubles were a mixture of political and religious violence that dominated Northern Ireland and broadcast news channels such as RTÉ as well print newspapers such as The Irish Times. When searching in The Irish Times Archive articles pertaining to the disappearance of Eva Brennan cannot be found this is significant as among headlines about deaths in Northern Ireland and religious matters a

³ *The Irish Times* (1993) “Search for woman continues,” 7 April. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/archive/1993/0407/Pg007.html#Ar00709:8B95FC8E46146FF60C750623>

⁴ McGowan, C. (2022) “Chapter One: Then- Five Murders,” in *The Vanishing Triangle The Murdered Women Ireland Forgot*. Amazon Publishing.

significant event such as a disappearance goes unnoticed. This would change when the missing women began to be seen as a collective phenomenon and the media began coining the term “Ireland’s Vanishing Triangle”.

How “Ireland’s Vanishing Triangle” became a term used by Journalists and the Irish Media.

The media's focus shifted in the mid to late 1990s in Ireland, and there was a growing pattern of women disappearing in various counties across Leinster. The disappearances were high profile and heavily reported upon in the Irish Media. The 8 missing women as a collective were dubbed as part of “Ireland’s Vanishing Triangle”. Prior to the disappearances of Annie McCarrick and Eva Brennan, this use of terminology to describe the women missing did not exist. The term “Ireland’s Vanishing Triangle” used to describe the women as a collective created a phenomenon in Irish Media and it began sensationalisation of how missing women are portrayed in the media in Ireland. Even today, scholars and journalists continue to use this terminology when discussing cases involving the six missing women who are the formal members of The Vanishing Triangle.

The women who went missing were Deirdre Jacob, Jo Jo Dullard, Fiona Sinnott, Ciara Breen, Fiona Pender, Eva Brennan, Imelda Keenan and Annie McCarrick. Although only six of the women are considered formal members of “Ireland’s Vanishing Triangle”. During the 90s and up until today, the media held control over the narrative of these women's stories, ultimately influencing the way media operates and shaping the discourse around missing women in Irish society. Barry Cummins has covered the Vanishing Triangle cases extensively, both as a reporter and in his role as a producer and presenter for the RTE program "Crimecall." He has interviewed family members of the victims and investigated various leads in an effort to shed light on the cases.

In his book "Missing Ireland's Disappeared" Cummins provides insight into the investigative aspects of the Vanishing Triangle cases while also highlighting the impact the case had not only on a national level but also on the families of the victims. "The trauma of the families of the six women has been laid bare in the glare of the media" (Cummin,2010)⁵

In an article published by The Irish Times in 1998 titled "RTE to transmit series in enquires on Garda" (The Irish Time,1998)⁶ it discusses a documentary produced by RTÉ called *Solved and Unsolved* that discusses the Disappearances of Annie McCarrick and Jo Jo Dullard and a Garda appeal for more information on the two missing women. Another article released the same year discussed another documentary titled "Missing" which would focus on the disappearances of Eva Brennan and Jo Jo Dullard from the family's perspective. (The Irish Time,1998)⁷ It is evident from the two articles listed that there was a renewed interest in the cases of the two women in 1998 with two separate documentaries being released about their disappearances. This renewed interest would extend from the early 2000s up to the present.

The significance of The Vanishing Triangle's Timeline and Operation Trace

Operation Trace was set up in 1998 by the Irish Police Commissioner Pat Byrne. It was set up in the hope of determining if six specific cases involving missing women were linked and if a serial

⁵ Cummins, B. (2010) "Introduction," in *Missing and Unsolved: Ireland's Disappeared*. Gill Books, p. 2.

⁶ Balls, R. (1998) "RTE to transmit series in enquires on Garda," *The Irish Times*, 12 December. Available at:
<https://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/archive/1998/1212/Pg006.html#Ar00603:65371B65F72E65F71B66472E66471B67072E67B71B6A372E>

⁷ *The Irish Times* (1993) "Search for woman continues," 7 April. Available at:
<https://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/archive/1993/0407/Pg007.html#Ar00709:8B95FC8E46146FF60C750623>

killer or killers were operating throughout the eastern region of Ireland. The number of cases in this series has long been disputed as there are possible links to cases going as far back as the 1980s. Although the formal members in order are Annie McCarrick who was considered the first member of The Vanishing Triangle. At age 26 she went missing on March 3rd, 1993, and was last spotted at Johnnie Foxes Pub near the Wicklow Mountains this would become significant as her photograph was published in the media, with information being sought in relation to her whereabouts and well-being. The photograph published elicited a response from a most unlikely source. Sam Doran got in touch with Detectives Tom Rock and Val Smith at Irishtown Garda Station to inform them that he was employed as a doorman at Johnny Foxes, a renowned pub for traditional Irish music located on Ballybrack Road in the small village of Glencullen, which is nestled in the Dublin Mountains.⁸

Jo Jo Dullard aged 21 from Kilkenny Ireland went missing after spending the day in Dublin and failing to make her 6 o'clock bus to Callan she opted to get the bus to Naas and hitched from there she ended up in Moone County Kildare. This was the last known sighting of Dullard. She disappeared on November 9th, 1995.

Fiona Pender aged 25 was last seen leaving her apartment by her boyfriend, John Thompson. Pender was seven months pregnant at the time of her disappearance. The official date of her disappearance was the 23rd of August 1995.

Ciara Breen was the youngest to disappear at only 17 years old she disappeared from Dundalk, Co. Louth on the 13th of February 1997.

⁸ Bailey, A. (2014) "Annie McCarrick," in *Missing, Presumed*. Liberties Press.

Fiona Sinnott, 19, a mother of one from Rosslare, Co. Wexford, went missing on the 8th of February 1998 went missing after drinking with friends in the local pub Butler's of Broadway.

Deirdre Jacob was 18 from Newbridge, Co. Kildare. She went missing on the 28th of July 1998. She was living in Twickenham, London and studying at St Mary's University but was home for the summer. She disappeared just yards from her parent's home. Passing motorists witnessed Jacob approaching within yards of her parent's driveway as well as numerous other sightings, but she never made it to her house. No trace has ever been found and she was never seen again.

Alan Bailey is a retired member of the Garda and former head of the Cold Case Unit and columnist on the Sunday World. He released a book in 2014 titled "Missing, Presumed" in which he discusses the disappearances of the six women and Operation Trace at length. It is evident when looking at the women as individuals and as a collective, all being young and similar in appearance and disappearing under similar circumstances it can be understood why the media began to link the disappearances. After Deirdre Jacobs's disappearance this brought Operation Trace into action. "Although there had, over the years, been a number of other high-profile disappearances, very little consideration had ever been given by investigating Gardai to the possibility of a connection or pattern linking one or more of them. This attitude in media reports and in the minds of the public changed dramatically with the disappearance of Deirdre Jacob" (Bailey, 2014)⁹

Operation Trace has garnered the attention of several scholars, including Barry Cummins, Sarah McInerney, and Alan Bailey. Despite being established in the late 1990s, this investigation has persisted throughout the early 2000s and into contemporary times. Although Bailey was directly involved with Operation Trace it can be said that he is speaking from a subjective standpoint as

⁹ Bailey, A. (2014) "The Establishment of Operation TRACE," in *Missing, Presumed*. Liberties Press.

opposed to an objective standpoint like that of McInerney and Cummins. Cummins provided an objective discussion of Operation Trace, highlighting both positive and negative aspects of the investigation. While acknowledging the investigation's strengths, Cummins also offered critiques certain investigative actions in a fair and impartial manner. Cummins was quoted as saying "When I initially asked a senior officer why Eva's case wasn't part of Operation Trace, he said something like It's not my jurisdiction." (Cummins,2010)¹⁰. Cummins is putting forth a valid question but received a rather dismissive answer when contrasting how McInerney speaks of Operation Trace there is a more hopeful tone in McInerney's interpretation of Operation Trace "Both Operation Trace and the Cold Case Unit will continue their investigations. If they get that vital break, maybe one or more of the murders will be caught" (McInerney's,2010)¹¹. Both scholars address the impact of the case on the affected families. As previously mentioned, Cummins highlights the distress caused by having the cases publicly discussed in the media¹², while McInerney notes that the shared trauma among the families is a tragic theme that they all have in common. McInerney describes the impact of the cases as "damage that cannot be repaired" (McInerney,2008)¹³. Before social media became a mainstream source of information and news, in the 2000s, it became apparent that many scholars started writing about the impact of "Ireland's Vanishing Triangle." These texts focused on how the cases were portrayed and investigated, highlighting their impact on the media, the victims and the investigation process.

¹⁰ Cummins, B. (2010) "Operation Trace," in *Missing and Unsolved: Ireland's Disappeared*. Gill Books.

¹¹ McInerney, S. (2008) "Unsolved Cases, Operation Trace and the Cold Case Unit," in *Where No One Can Hear You Scream*. Gill & Macmillan, p. 246.

¹² Cummins, B. (2010) "Introduction," in *Missing and Unsolved: Ireland's Disappeared*. Gill Books, p. 2.

¹³ McInerney, S. (2008) "Unsolved Cases, Operation Trace and the Cold Case Unit," in *Where No One Can Hear You Scream*. Gill & Macmillan, p. 246.

A Renewed Interest in the Vanishing Triangle through TikTok and YouTube

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in unsolved criminal cases being discussed on video-sharing platforms, including but not limited to, YouTube and TikTok. Content creators often select news reports and stories of missing persons and subsequently analyse the intricacies of these unsolved mysteries, including posting various theories surrounding the cases. While accurately researched and carefully constructed videos can serve as valuable resources in understanding these cases, ethical considerations must be carefully navigated, particularly regarding safeguarding the victim's families' privacy and dignity and ensuring the accuracy of the information presented. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that disseminating such cases on these platforms can lead to renewed interest and potentially beneficial leads. However, it is vital that content creators take great care to avoid any inaccuracies or distortions of facts, especially when these cases remain ongoing.

As introduced in this essay, scholar George Larke-Walsh examines the ethical implications and investigative techniques employed by self-proclaimed social media sleuths¹⁴ with the emergence of the True Crime community on YouTube, numerous individuals began discussing the cases associated with Ireland's Vanishing Triangle on this platform. The first YouTuber to cover the case was the channel "Merc Docs," which released a video entitled "10 Unsolved Mysteries of Ireland"(Merc Docs,2017)¹⁵ on July 24, 2017. This video presented a well-informed analysis of the cases, yet the comments section revealed a pattern of many individuals speculating about

¹⁴ Larke-Walsh, G.S. (2023) "True Crime, Documentary and Ethics," in *True Crime in American Media*. Routledge, p. 3.

¹⁵ *10 Unsolved Mysteries of Ireland* (2017). Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ObxbeM2eAjU&t=1435s>

possible theories regarding the women's disappearance, rather than engaging with the factual details of the cases. For instance, one comment stated, "I live less than 5 minutes from Deirdre's house, and when she went missing, Larry Murphy was doing the carpentry work at the exact same time." Comments of this nature are speculative, and it is difficult to decipher whether it is factual.

When true crime videos are published on public platforms, even those that are well-researched, can give rise to inaccurate discussions in the comment sections. TikTok follows a similar trope popular Irish TikTok "Skininfluencebysk"¹⁶ discussed the case and garnered over thirty thousand likes and the comment section was similar to Merc Doc's comment section with a lot of speculation surrounding Larry Murphy. The ethics of reporting True Crime on social media are being debated due to the involvement of independent creators who conduct their own research to present the cases accurately. However, the comment sections of these creators often include unproven conspiracy theories that promote speculation and misinformation. "The ethics and civic purpose of audience participation is an important area of debate in any aspect of mass media, but now that social media has joined the true crime sphere and opened-up spaces for instant, "real-time" discussions on events as they unfold, the ethics of such practices have changed shape yet again" (Larke-Walsh, 2023)¹⁷. When contrasted with texts published in the 2000s that do not give way to public comment on social media it can be said that these comments must be moderated in order to prevent the circulation of inaccuracies, especially in media phenomenon's such as "Ireland's Vanishing Triangles".

¹⁶ *Ireland's vanishing triangle* (2021). Available at: <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMYXrdTxa/>

¹⁷ Larke-Walsh, G.S. (2023) "True Crime, Documentary and Ethics," in *True Crime in American Media*. Routledge, p. 3.

Conclusion

After conducting initial research, the chosen academic topic for this project was "Deceptions of the Working Class in Irish Media," which was originally intended to be presented as a podcast. However, due to a lack of relevant academic texts and insufficient material to cover in four 10-minute podcast episodes, the idea was eventually abandoned. Instead, after examining a variety of sources in the Irish Times archives, news reports on the "Vanishing Triangle" emerged as an interesting media phenomenon to explore. The research for this essay and video essay shifted its focus to this topic, with a greater emphasis on academic analysis through a video essay rather than the original podcast concept.

Despite the intense media coverage, the cases remain largely unsolved, and the families of the missing women continue to search for answers. While there has been less media attention on the Vanishing Triangle in recent years, up until the emergence of TikTok and YouTube as a platform to showcase information about Ireland's Vanishing Triangle and despite the renewed interest the cases remain a significant part of Ireland's cultural memory and continues to be the subject of ongoing interest and speculation and will go down in history as one of Ireland's biggest media phenomena.

Bibliography

Bailey, A. (2014) "The Establishment of Operation TRACE," in *Missing, Presumed*. Liberties Press

Balls, R. (1998) "RTE to transmit series in enquires on Garda," *The Irish Times*,

Cummins, B. (2010) "Introduction," in *Missing and Unsolved: Ireland's Disappeared*. Gill Books, p. 2.

McInerney, S. (2008) "Unsolved Cases, Operation Trace and the Cold Case Unit," in *Where No One Can Hear You Scream*. Gill & Macmillan p. 246.

Larke-Walsh, G.S. (2023) "True Crime, Documentary and Ethics," in *True Crime in American Media*. Routledge, p. 3.

McGowan, C. (2022) "Chapter One: Then- Five Murders," in *The Vanishing Triangle The Murdered Women Ireland Forgot*. Amazon Publishing.

The Irish Times (1993) "IRA claims target was UFF Meeting," 25 October

The Irish Times (1993) “Search for woman continues,” 7 April.

YouTube *10 Unsolved Mysteries of Ireland* (2017)

TikTok *Ireland's vanishing triangle* (2021)