Confessional journalism, authenticity and lived experiences: a case study of news stories published during the Irish Abortion referendum

As part of a societal preoccupation with subjectivity and emotions, a discussion of authenticity has started to emerge in the professional practice of journalism. This is similar yet different to the more traditional notion of credibility: while credibility has connotations of truth-telling and unbiased reporting, authenticity points to other features, such as genuineness, intimacy, and, notoriously, trust, derived from what is regarded as an honest self. This article discusses the shift from a theoretical perspective and through an analysis of newspaper pieces written around the Irish Abortion Referendum of 2018. While some of these stories could be uncritically framed in the tradition of the so-called 'personal essay' that is associated with 'click-bait' journalism and cheap content, the article proposes that they present personal stories as a form of "witnessing" (Peters 2001) and "bearing witness" (Tait 2011), both of the journalists and writers' own experiences and the experiences of others. The reflective tone becomes a dialogical form of correspondence between the author and the reader, where authenticity is derived in the relationship between the writer, the text, and the audience.

KEYWORDS: autobiographical journalism; lived experiences; Ireland; abortion referendum; authenticity

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Introduction

As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) has argued, 'authenticity' and the 'authentic' are elusive terms yet central to how individuals live their lives. Often defined by what it is not –fake, branded, commercial and similar adjectives—, authenticity appears to be more important than ever in "a culture that is increasingly understood and experienced through the logics of commercial branding, and characterized by the postmodern style of irony, parody and the superficial" (Banet-Weiser 2012, 10).

One aspect of this debate is the centrality of 'lived' experiences in public debate and how they relate to trust, relatability, and engagement, which are all key aspects of the contemporary ecology of journalism. As a recent edition of the BBC4 radio programme *Moral Maze* described it, the currency of lived experiences in contemporary conversations, including conversations that take place in or through journalism, often suggests that someone can only truly understand an issue if she/he has been through it. Given that *Moral Maze* is a debate programme, which tends to divide positions into two distinct and opposing camps, it suggested that the arguments could be summarised as follows: one sector claims that lived experiences are essential for social justice and therefore that those who have been through something should be given higher moral weight to take policy decisions about the issue over those who have not, implying that their stories matter more than others; the other sector argues that this position privileges emotional over rational or evidence-based claims and hence that it closes discussions.

The interventions of *Moral Maze*'s various panellists suggest that this is much more multi-layered conversation than the debate format would normally allow, yet it seems clear that lived experiences have become an important part of public discourse and the political landscape. Two widely shared and praised parliamentary contributions could be cited as examples of this in the UK: in 2019 the Labour MP Rosie Duffield gave a distressing account of her personal experience of coercive control and verbal and financial abuse by her partner, as part of the debate about the new domestic abuse bill. Previously two male MPs, Liam Byrne and Jonathan Ashworth, had spoken about their experiences growing up as children of severely alcoholic fathers, to raise awareness of the extended damage that alcoholism does and the need to support

families with adequate services. All three contributions could be considered as an expansion of what James Stanyer has termed “intimate politics” (2013), the revelation and publicising of politicians’ private lives. Yet in their case, the intimate details come from the politicians themselves and not from a non-consensual or sensational exposé.

In this context, the lived experiences of journalists and how they feature in their published work have also started to be researched and discussed. For instance, Becket and Deuze (2016) address them briefly as part of their discussion of “emotional journalism”, arguing that the sharing of journalists’ personal stories could generate audience engagement. Coward (2009, 2010, 2013), whose work is discussed in detail in the literature review section of this article, uses the term “confessional” journalism to focus on this, while Lindgren (2017) has researched autobiographical accounts of journalists in podcasting, and Fowler-Watt (2020) has focused on narratives of “lived experiences” used by journalists who have transitioned from the newsroom to a career in education. More generally, Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) has recently written about this in the context of an “emotional turn in journalism studies”, and noted the connections between intimate storytelling and the authenticity of the storyteller.

My research here both draws and departs from this literature. It focuses on journalism produced during the three months before the Irish Abortion Referendum of May 25th 2018, when Ireland voted by 66.4% (Yes) to 33.6% (No) to repeal the Eighth Amendment. This Amendment, a constitutional provision inserted into the 1937 Irish constitution following a referendum in 1983, established the equal right to life of the unborn and a pregnant woman, effectively restricting abortion in almost all circumstances.

Two new amendments were introduced in 1992, also after a public consultation in the form of three referendums that run alongside a general election: one establishes the freedom to travel outside the country to access abortion services, and the other one allows the freedom to obtain and make available information about these services. The third amendment, which proposed that the possibility of suicide was not enough threat to justify an abortion, was rejected on that occasion. These referendums were held in response to the controversy, discussion, and rulings around the ‘X case’ of a 14-year

old girl who got pregnant after being raped by a family friend. A High Court ruling initially granted an injunction preventing the girl from travelling abroad, which was then overturned by the Supreme Court on the basis that X was at risk of death by suicide. According to Smyth (1998), this case represented a significant shift in public conversations and reporting about abortion, from a discussion about "rights" to one about national identity, the position of women regarding the state and the nation, and also the status of children in society. This period of transformation in Ireland coincided with changes and reformation in the media industry, that saw new journalistic titles, renewed managerial structures, and substantial debates about the increasing influence of UK Media in both ownership and content, all trends that got accelerated in the years that followed (Horgan 2001; M. O'Brien 2017).

The Irish electorate rejected a further attempt to increase abortion restrictions in 2002 when another referendum (this time a stand-alone one) was held. Later, in 2012, the public discussion of abortion came back to dominate the news with the death of Savita Halappanavar, a dentist of Indian origin who was living in Ireland at the time. When she developed sepsis after a spontaneous yet incomplete miscarriage, Halappanavar and her husband requested an abortion as the foetus was not going to survive, but staff from a Hospital in Galway denied it to her on the grounds that a foetal heartbeat was still present. As with the 'X case', this event has been highlighted as a catalyst for the conversation that led to the 2018 Abortion Referendum (Field 2018; Specia 2018). It also led to the Fine Gael-Labour coalition government to pass the 2013 Protection of Life During Pregnancy legislation. During the election campaigns of 2016, various political parties made explicit manifesto commitments to put forward a referendum to repeal the Eight Amendment or to convene a Citizens' Assembly to deliberate on the issue. In the end, a resolution of July 2016 convened the creation of a Citizens' Assembly, and, informed by its deliberative democracy work, in January 2019 Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced that his government was proposing a new referendum on the issue.

The reporting about this most recent Abortion Referendum seems an appropriate case study to address how the narration of lived experiences in contemporary journalism could speak to policy issues, as the vote was planned to have a direct and immediate effect on abortion legislation. It also appears particularly relevant now that access to

abortion services is being restricted in other countries such as Poland and the USA, changes that have also generated a significant amount of journalism that could be labelled as 'autobiographical' or 'of the self'.

Many of the stories about abortion published during the 2018 campaign were directly solicited by media organizations like *The Irish Times* through the section 'Abortion and Me: Share your Story'. The newspaper later ran a couple of editorials suggesting that those accounts greatly contributed to the 'Yes' (repeal) victory (Loscher 2018; Barr 2019). Róisín Ingle's (2015) column for this newspaper, "Why I need to tell my abortion story", is often alluded to in these claims (and the author regarded as an established voice in Irish journalism about personal experiences), yet did not form part of the analysis here as it was originally published almost three years before the referendum. Other platforms outside journalism also hosted people's abortion stories during the campaign: for instance, Tumblr, through the https://shareyourabortionstory.tumblr.com/, ran workshops for women who have had abortions in countries where it is not legal and who might want to write their autobiographical accounts either for themselves or to publish them in established media. That initiative has now been replicated in the recent https://myabortionstory.tumblr.com/, the #youknowme stories, and several others in various countries.

Literature review

Credibility v/s authenticity in journalism

Various authors have argued that we now live in a "confessional society" (Coward 2009) or an era of "digital narcissism" (Keen 2007). Coward's work (2009, 2010, 2013) describes, for instance, how this environment privileges narratives suggesting that the writer has been on a 'journey' or undergone some kind of transformation, that place great value on lived, real experiences, and that invite voyeurism from the audience. "Authenticity is therefore the holy grail of a culture needing to see how real people react to real difficulties" (Coward 2009, 241), she writes. Notably, authenticity is sometimes even demanded from contemporary works of fiction, a discussion often framed as who has the right to tell a story, real or not, in a novel, for instance. The discussion around *My Dark Vanessa*, a book by American author Kate Elisabeth

Russell about an exploited teenager's relationship with her older teacher, illustrates this: the writer has been repeatedly challenged to say if she is well placed to tell this story, as someone who has not experienced grooming and sexual abuse. "In a literary climate in which some readers explicitly value creative authenticity in a writer above creative impulse, publishers are having to carry out stringent new levels of due diligence on all submitted fiction", describes Thorpe (2020), who adds *My Dark Vanessa* to debates around other works of fiction recently published, such as *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins (2020) and *Apierogon* by Colum McCann (2020).

It could be argued that the sphere of journalism is slightly different, as it provides a space that guarantees the authenticity of that personal account, that journey lived, that transformation achieved, by providing a context of genuineness and reality derived from the role and standards of the profession (Coward 2009, 244). Indeed, unlike a series of media controversies around the bogus nature of some supposedly authentic and personal lived experiences shared online (for instance, the case of the Australian blogger who faked an illness and cure of terminal brain cancer, or that of the stage married proposal in exchange for gifts in the @fashionambitionist Instagram account), journalism still seems to provide that ambience of validity and truth. "The self of autobiographical journalism is restrained from excessive fabrication by the conventions of the profession. Yet the authenticity effect can mean that these conventions are even more difficult to detect than in less scrupulous discourses", writes Coward (2009, 244).

This discussion of the authentic is relatively new in journalism, a profession that has been defined by, and sometimes accused of a lack of, credibility, which is similar yet also significantly different to authenticity. While the former has connotations of truth-telling and unbiased reporting, the latter points to other features, such as genuineness, intimacy, and, notoriously, trust, derived from what is perceived as an honest self. Conversely, credibility could be divorced from trust, as Feighery (2011), for instance, has argued following the work of Vanacker and Belmas (2009): "An individual or a

report might be credible…."; "but trust is complex, relational, and cumulative" (Feighery 2011, 162). Trust might be based on qualities such as directness, immediacy, and intimacy, an "authentic narrative voice" that we are disposed to confide in (Tulloch 2014, 630), which is a fairly different quality to both the traditional idea of credibility in journalism and the notion of professional integrity, generally associated with someone independent, principled, and incorruptible.

Other authors such as Hayes, Singer, and Ceppos (2007) have spoken about the dynamics between authenticity and credibility in journalism using slightly different terms. They argue that the former is one of three dimensions of the latter but not the whole of it; the other two aspects of credibility are autonomy and accountability, traditionally associated with a credible journalist. Yet the authors regard both authenticity and credibility as a form of institutional reliability, the integrity emanated from a news organisation that lends its authority to the journalist as an individual: "In practice, this means that outside of their own professional community, journalists derive much of their credibility from that of their employer…" (Hayes, Singer, and Ceppos 2007, 268). "They become part of a "brand" that has, over time, succeeded in gaining public trust as a source of credible information" (Hayes, Singer, and Ceppos 2007, 269).

But this form of institutional credibility would not necessarily work for very personal, intimate accounts, where trust is derived from a form of experiential truth. Indeed, Hayes, Singer, and Ceppos (2007) acknowledge that their argument works better in yesterday's media environment than it does in today's, characterised by the "individuation" of journalists (Deuze 2008), who build personals 'brands' around themselves (Molyneux and Holton 2015, 2017; Olausson 2017; Bruns 2012; Hedman and Djerf-Pierre 2013) and therefore work outside or often alongside a credible news organisation.

Authenticity, agency, and the personal essay

Tim Markham (2012) is another author who has written about the question of authenticity in journalism, yet indirectly and from a fairly different perspective to the ones discussed in the previous section. His work explores authenticity when examining notions of creativity within the profession, which, he argues, has "moved from being a matter of guile and ingenuity to being about expressiveness" and reflects a "broader cultural shift from professional expertise to the authenticity of personal expression as dominant modes of valorization" (Markham 2012, 187). Even though Markham's main question is if contemporary journalism is more creative than it was before as a result of more personalised viewpoints, he also touches on authenticity as part of this discussion. The author argues that contemporary discourses about creativity are bound with a notion of agency that, unlike the traditional idea of journalism as a trade or tribe, is "individualistic, tied up with the authentic voices or trusted authority of particular journalists" (Markham 2012, 189). He regards this as perhaps naïve, given that journalistic production is always determined by power relations and historical contingencies, similar to the 'restrains' alluded to by Coward (2009) in the previous section. Therefore, in his argument "authenticity is not a given; it is enacted in practices that are both structured and structuring" (Markham 2012, 191). However, he acknowledges that there has been a significant shift in the profession, from the domain of the expert and the professional to the assumed (or not) authenticity of personal experience, or even to what we might call a 'perceived' or 'demonstrable' authenticity:

> There is a further normative commitment in the promotion of creativity as the expression of personal experience: democratization. The deprioritization of professional expertise is a shift from what could be regarded as exclusive and elitist to something which everyone has. Creativity thus carries with it the ethos that the fact of self-expression is more important than its content, so long as it is genuine. But what counts as genuine depends upon how authenticity is perceived: you have to learn the rules in order to appear to others as authentic, and these rules come more naturally to some than others (Markham 2012, 192).

Markham is not alone in challenging the assumed or immediate genuineness of that perceived authenticity in journalism, at a time in which its value seems to occupy a central role in cultural life. Journalists themselves, like Steve Toole (2013) or Pandora Sykes (2019) have also highlighted the naivety of this approach, albeit from a fairly different perspective: while the former has stressed that authenticity has been commoditised and become another brand value, the latter's essay 'The authentic lie' suggests that authenticity's relationship with truth-telling is far from straightforward.

Some of the personal news stories published in the context of the Irish abortion referendum have the added complexity of being intimate, first-person accounts of private events, which could perhaps be placed uncritically in the tradition of the so-called 'personal essay', a form of autobiographical writing that uses the first-person and a conversational tone to reveal intimate details. This is just one aspect in the many expressions of the currency of authenticity, yet a very recognisable one within contemporary journalism.

The personal essay has sometimes been referred to as the 'native form of the Internet' and it has been deployed in outlets such as *Jezebel* and *Slate* and specific sections within alternative or mainstream media such as *Vox*'s 'First Person', *The Guardian*'s 'Experience' or *BuzzFeed*'s 'Ideas'. Those texts could be directly written by a journalist or writer, or it could be that a member of the public narrates his/her story to a journalist, and that account is later published as a personal, first-person article that includes the phrase 'as told to X' at the end (this is the way *The Guardian*'s 'Experience' works, for instance).

The merits, limitations, and gendered aspects of this genre have been discussed openly in journalism itself, as opinion columns such as Ruth Spencer's for *The Guardian* (2015), Jia Tolentino's for *The New Yorker* (2017), Emily Gould's for *The New York Times Magazine* (2008) or Laura Bennett's for *Slate* (2015) exemplify. These opinion pieces address some of the prevalent observations about the genre –too personal, undignified, harrowing, commercial—and so constitute a rare public display of the industry's criticism and self-reflexivity. Spencer and Gould's pieces were written as a direct response to Chenier's (2015) viral article for *Jezebel* about falling in love and having sex with her biological father (whom she only came to know as a

young adult), yet also discuss the genre more broadly as an essential dimension of contemporary journalism. Even though these essays are often associated with female writing, Spencer highlights how a man publishing a memoir would also constitute a form of confessional writing even if it is not publicly discussed in that way. The fact that the personal essay can give room to stories about domestic lives and allow for minority voices are referred to as potential positives of this form of first-person writing (Spencer 2015; Gould 2015). At the most critical end, Tolentino (2017) argues that its pervasive presence a few years ago coincided with a demand for cheap content that could be delivered by less-known writers, usually young female journalists at the start of their career, implicitly questioning the freedom of those writers and the commodification of their lived experiences. She states that a particular version of the personal essay, embodied by online sites such as *Gawker*, *Salon*, and *Jezebel* (where Tolentino once worked) is now on its way out.

Coward (2013) also addresses the gendered aspects of this form of writing, reflecting on her career as a journalist before moving into academia and the recent growth of personal stories within mainstream and traditional journalism. She describes how when she started her professional life many of the so-called 'emotional issues' (abortion, depression, cancer, mental health) were considered private yet they are now openly discussed, not only in journalism but also at a policy level. She argues that journalism is not an isolated realm and therefore mirrors societal trends like the growing preoccupation with subjectivity and emotions, yet she also acknowledges that this recent emphasis relates to "the push of feminism and featurisation towards more personal and intimate subjects" (Coward 2013, 88). She states that women have brought in a more confessional voice to journalism, which could be regarded as a feminist practice, given that it implicitly or explicitly questions the patriarchal values embodied in ideas of objectivity and distance, amongst others.

This link between feminism and experiential writing discussed by Coward is explicitly articulated in Elgy Gillespie's anthology *Changing the Times: Irish Women Journalists 1969 – 1981* (2003), which brings together the work of various female journalists who have written for *The Irish Times* at different points of their careers such as Nell McCafferty, Mary Cummins, Maeve Donelan, and Caroline Walsh, among others. "The women's pages were designed by male editors with the

advertising department, for housewives whom they imagined had only one interest: to buy things to bring home", states Maher in the Introduction (2003, 16), explaining why she initially opposed the idea of a dedicated page for female voices. But she later agreed. The designated section –'Women First—went on to provide a "discerning eye on the patriarchal nature of Irish society and how this impacted on the day-to-day lives of women" (M. O'Brien 2017, 154). Early topics such as censorship, slum properties, the cost of living, and education gave way to others such as contraception, unmarried mothers, and family law, while also including travel and fashion pieces. "When the Women's Liberation Movement burst open us in 1969, Irish women's pages became a forum", Maher adds (2003, 18), referring to parallel work from other news organisations such as the *Irish Press* with 'Woman's Press' and the *Irish Independent* with 'Independent Woman'. It has been argued, though, that the latter was somehow 'tamer' than the others given that the *Irish Independent* is usually regarded as the newspaper of conservative middle Ireland (M. O'Brien 2017, 155).

One chapter of Gillespie's anthology, "Our Bodies, Ourselves" is a close precursor of some of the topics discussed in this article, because of both the focus on women being or not in control of their sexuality and the inclusion of sources such as midwives and nurses, experiential scenes from labour wards and similar settings, and voices who were neither in a position of authority nor existed in mainstream media. According to Anne O'Brien, these journalists "used their own and other's personal stories not as an end in themselves but as a mechanism to connect social problems to specific gendered social systems that needed to change" (2017, 51).

First-person accounts written by Irish journalists such as Ursula Halligan and Una Mullally were also very visible during the Same-Sex Marriage Referendum of 2015 when Ireland voted in favour of amending the Constitution to permit marriage to be contracted by two people without distinction as to their sex. In her piece for *The Irish Times*, Halligan (2015) describes the fear, shame, and repression she has experienced during her life as a lesbian who, up until then, had not been public about her sexuality. She also mentions that TV3 had to take her off the referendum coverage after her disclosure and open support for the Yes campaign, in order to follow the rules. "If my story helps even one 17-year old schoolgirl, struggling with her sexuality, it will have been worth it", Halligan (2015), then 54 years old, states. The presence of these

personal stories in the public debate has been highlighted as one of several elements of the successful Yes campaign (Mullally 2015; Healy, Sheehan and Whelan 2015; Farrell and Hardiman 2015), an argument that can also be found in the book *Ireland Says Yes: The Inside Story of How the Vote for Marriage Equality Was Won* (2015). Field (2018) has also researched how the Yes to Repeal campaign during the 2018 abortion debate learnt from the messaging of love, compassion, and support deployed during this Same-Sex Marriage Referendum.

Beyond these examples of stories shared by journalists through their work in newspapers, Nuala O'Faolain's celebrated memoir *Are you Somebody?* (originally published in 1996) could also be considered as a precursor of some of the topics explored here. The book deals with personal themes such as love, loss, alcoholism, misogyny, and female dissent, chronicling both O'Faolain's life story and decades of Irish history, exploring the wounds of a changing patriarchal society. The author, a broadcaster and journalist, writes about being transformed by the readers' response to her text, which, in turn, had transformed them: "It spoke so authentically to strangers that it had become a medium, carrying experiences between them and me. There was so much they have not been able to mourn until they saw me mourning for myself" (O'Faolain 1997, 216). The analysis section of this article will come back to these themes of intimacy and dialogue in the relationship between the journalist and the reader.

Methods

This article aims to answer how accounts of lived experiences were deployed by Irish newspapers in the three months before the 2018 Abortion Referendum and to establish the main themes present in those accounts. The newspapers researched were *The Irish Times*, *Irish Examiner*, *Irish Independent,* and *Sunday Independent.*

The Irish Times is a broadsheet newspaper, which presents itself as liberal while leaning to the centre-right on economic matters. It is published every day except on Sundays. In December 2017 it initiated the process of acquiring the *Irish Examiner* (alongside the *Evening Echo*), which was completed in July 2018. The *Irish Examiner* aligns itself to the political centre. Both the *Irish Independent* and *Sunday*

Independent are owned by Independent News & Media (the latter is the Sunday edition of the former). Their political alignment is conservative, with the *Sunday Independent* presenting elements of tabloid journalism. While none of these titles are currently audited by the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC), they all were in 2018, the year of the Abortion Referendum. The circulation figures for the first semester of 2018 are as follows: *The Irish Times* had a circulation average of 60,352 issues for print and 19,083 for digital; the *Irish Examiner* had 26,085 for print (no figures are reported for digital purchases); the *Irish Independent* had a circulation average of 87,673 for print and 3,551 for digital; the *Sunday Independent* had a circulation average of 176,580 for print and 3,601 for digital, out of just 26 issues as it is only published on Sundays (ABC no date).

ProQuest was used as the database to access the newspaper articles, ranging from February 25th 2018 to May 25th 2018, the day of the Referendum. The sample total was 765 articles, all of which contain the words 'abortion', 'Ireland', and 'Referendum'. Content analysis was carried out to establish 1) if the articles were editorial pieces, features, interviews, or opinion columns; 2) who were the main 'actors' of those pieces (who is writing, and who is featured in them); 3) if those articles deployed lived stories of abortion, either experienced by the author or by one of the sources 4) what are the main issues discussed or reported in those pieces.

As a second step, a qualitative thematic analysis was deployed for a subsection of the articles, a total of 29 articles that were written in the first person and narrated lived experiences about abortion. Because they are personal accounts that use a confessional voice, they could be regarded as having the quality of a 'personal essay' in the manner described in the literature review. Even though I am using the phrase 'abortion stories' to refer to them because they speak about abortion issues in the context of the referendum campaign, not all of them narrate literal experiences of abortion. Indeed, a number of the articles tell stories of, for instance, women deciding to carry on with an inviable pregnancy or giving birth to a stillborn child, or men, relatives, or health workers speaking about experiences they witness either in a personal or professional capacity.

After going through the texts, all data was collated into groups identified by code, which allowed me to have a condensed view of the main themes. This follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) understanding of thematic analysis as both a way of organising, identifying, and reporting themes, and a form of interpretation. The themes were identified in an inductive or 'bottom-up' way, that is, from the data itself.

Findings

The majority of articles were classified as 'news' stories, followed by 'opinion columns'. There were very few features and long-form pieces of journalism. Proportionately, the *Sunday Independent* exhibits the biggest percentage of features compared to the totality of articles about the referendum, perhaps something to be expected given that the Sunday magazine format lends itself to this journalistic genre. Various of these articles are pitched as 'on the campaign trail' forms of reportage, featuring activists and campaigners on both sides of the argument and grassroots events and gatherings. Conversely, the majority of news stories in all newspapers are driven by 'politicians' and 'professionals' (lawyers, doctors, constitutional experts), and to a lesser degree by 'campaigners' and 'church leaders'. They feature very few voices of members of the public, in contrast with what happened in TV and radio debates, which seemed to have had a bigger impact on people's voting decisions (Loscher 2018). There is very little, almost no use of 'celebrities' in any of the formats.

From the total sample of 765 articles, 75 feature personal experiences of abortion, abortion stories, or narratives of decisions about continuing with an unwanted pregnancy. There is an almost even split between personal stories used to support the Yes position, and those used to support the No cause. This positioning is always explicitly articulated when using personal stories.

While 'professionals' are most often used in a position of expertise, doctors and other members of the health profession provide some of the personal stories featured; this does not happen with politicians. An example of this is the story 'I have been a midwife for 30 years and I am voting Yes' (Brosnan 2018), where the author -who is

Director of midwifery and nursery at the National Maternity Hospital and Associate Professor at University College Dublin—shares her experiences when caring for pregnant women and when attending hospitals in England where Irish women used to travel to receive abortion services: "I have met many of these women, especially when I was working in ultrasound. From the outside, it is difficult to comprehend the challenges faced by women who made the decision to 'travel', a euphemism we all understand in maternity services as referring to going abroad for abortion", Brosnan writes (2018). In the text, she explicitly articulates her voting position in relation to the experiences of her patients. Other personal stories driven by medics include that of an oncologist, who writes about pregnant women with cancer who need to suspend treatment when they are carrying a baby and the impact of their experiences on her.

The subsection of articles that come closer to the genre of confessional journalism brings together stories of different ages and eras, as contemporary young women write about their own recent experiences of abortion at the same time that older women tell stories of events that happen 35 or even 40 years ago; the majority of personal stories are about events of the distant past. Not all the writers are professional journalists, and only a small proportion of them are young people, in contrast with my earlier discussion of the existing literature. This prevalence of old experiences provides a sense of temporal displacement when read as pieces of journalism, a profession that is determined by 'newness', organized by issues of temporality (Bødker and Sonnevend 2017) and closely aligned to social constructions of time (Carlson and Lewis 2019). The old story, very often, as expressed by writers, had not been told to anyone until the point of writing; it then becomes the 'news' now but only because it is written about, and merges almost seamlessly with the new yet parallel (and at times very similar) experiences of new abortion stories.

The collection of essays includes rural women, city women, married women who already have children, young women who have none. There are working-class women and middle-class women, rape survivors, women who got pregnant by their boyfriends or husbands. The name of Savita Halappanavar is often mentioned, but her abortion story could not have been written about directly by her or by her husband who was there when she was denied an abortion and subsequently died: he has not spoken publicly about the event since 2016 when an out-of-court settlement was

agreed shortly before a medical negligence case was due to open at Ireland's high court. Yet her parents gave an interview to *The Guardian* (Sherwood 2018) during the referendum campaign and recorded a video message for the Yes cause, which also used her image in various banners and placards.

The abortion stories feature devoted Catholic mothers writing on behalf of their daughters and their inviable pregnancies, gynaecologists on behalf of their patients, husbands on behalf of their wives. There is a young woman in a bedsitter who receives a bleeding teenager yet cannot seek medical help because the girl's recent abortion would be discovered and sanctioned. Three stories are written by men. While many stories are about personal abortion experiences, others are about the experiences of others, which have then become part of the writer's lived history. These are two examples of the latter, one written by the journalist, playwright, and campaigner Nell McCafferty (2018), whom I mentioned earlier in the text, for the *Sunday Independent*, the other by the journalist and broadcaster Sean Moncrieff (2018) for *The Irish Times*:

> When I was a 20-year old university student in Belfast in 1964, a woman came to my bedsitter, bleeding heavily from what she said was her period. I put her to bed, lying on a bath towel. By the time I came back with a cup of tea, the towel was soaked with blood. Four towels later, the mattress was soaked and leaking. I suggested we call a doctor or an ambulance. Her face contorted with fear as she begged me not to do such a thing – she had an illegal abortion, her uterus pierced with a knitting needle wielded by the medical student who had impregnated her (McCafferty 2018).

> Afterwards, she didn't say much. We passed bars we might otherwise have found inviting, but we didn't go in. We walked through a park, and I picked her a flower. She held it like it was a precious thing, and only then did tears wriggle down her face. Normally, I would have hugged her, try to make the crying stop. Fix it, as men always try to do. But somehow we both knew that this was necessary, that this was healthy; part of the process (Moncrieff 2018).

In terms of themes, the experience of travelling to receive abortion services abroad features largely, as it does the alienation and loneliness of secret pregnancies. For

instance, this is an extract of a text written by a professional journalist, Laura Bourne, for the *Irish Independent:* "One of the many gut-wrenching moments as you make your way to Liverpool and home again is travelling on a packed plane where 95pc of your fellow passengers are booze-fuelled stags and hens gearing up for a weekend on the town", Bourne, who travelled with her husband, writes (2018). In a different text, a 'reader' who does not provide her name submits her story to *The Irish Times* (2018)*:* "I'd just found out my child was dying, how was I supposed to go about booking flights, organising childcare, finding out about cremations and couriers. Not to mention the cost - where were we going to get over €2,000 to pay for it all?"

Adoption and choice are also recurrent themes in personal stories supporting both the Yes and No positions, as illustrated by this extract from a piece by *The Irish Times* that features various stories submitted my 'readers' without further identification: "Martin and I ultimately agreed we would not be the acting hand in ending our child's life. We would respect and celebrate her natural lifecycle, no matter how short it would be" (*The Irish Times* 2018). The most prevalent theme in the coding was 'intergenerational experiences', presented in two ways: several stories narrate events that happened to other members of the family (for instance, a daughter having a conversation with her mother about the secret surrounding an old abortion), others make a moral argument about taking one of the two positions to give other people (a daughter, wife, girlfriend, unborn child) a choice.

Discussion and conclusion

When personal stories were deployed, very often they were about the abortion of other people –a relative, partner, daughter, patient, lodger—, which separates this writing from the genre of the personal essay as described in the literature review. Rather than acts of sensational disclosure, these articles express the idea of "bearing witness", a practice that, as Tait (2011) has argued, is central to journalism's legitimation. "Here 'bearing witness' refers to media practices of producing testimony, however the qualifier of 'possibility' renders bearing witness provisional. This indicates that its meaning extends beyond the furnishing of reports", Tait writes (2011, 1221). This is the key aspect of the notion of "bearing witness" in journalism: whereas reporting is associated with the detached and objective approach of an

eyewitness, “bearing witness necessarily involves an attempt to change the witnessed reality by eliciting an affective experience that incites the audience’s action” (Tait 2011, 1227).

The incitement or motivation to reach an audience is also present in the personal accounts of women who had abortions themselves or who decided to continue with an unviable or unwanted pregnancy, often expressed as a moral imperative to tell a story even if they would otherwise not want to. As Pantti (2019, 3) writes, to witness “is not a choice but an imperative”, which takes the form of producing and disseminating knowledge about the events witnessed or experienced. Notable examples of this include stories of abortion from a distant past that resurfaced because of the referendum in Ireland, such as “I have kept my abortion secret for 40 years” (Sheehan 2018), the testimony of a woman who finally decides to reveal her secret abortion after visiting an exhibition about Irish women and termination that invited visitors to submit their narrated experiences through an iPad. Though the story of this woman named Siobhan is only narrated to the journalist using the ‘as told to’ format, not disclosed to her husband, children, friends, or extended family, which emphasises both this moral imperative and the position of the journalist as a witness. “It is the stigma and the fear of being judged. We are still moving slowly in accepting what women like myself had to do back in the day, generation of women, and still have to do”, she says (Sheehan 2018), making the distinction between telling her story to a stranger and telling it to people she knows.

Given that this ‘bearing witness’ is often discussed in relation to the role of journalism in the context of war, suffering, and conflict (the work of Lilie Chouliariki 2009, for instance, or Luc Boltansky 1999, are examples of this), Tait (2011) argues that there is a “managed asymmetry” between the safe and rewarded journalist and the vulnerable victim. There are indeed examples of this within Irish journalism, such as Kevin Myers’ (2006, 2020) two memoirs about his life as a reporter, first covering the Northern Ireland conflict post-1969 and later travelling to war zones such as Lebanon or Bosnia. Through memories and personal anecdotes, his writing often emphasises the ‘being there’ as an avid witness when an explosion or shooting happened and reflects on the position of the journalist as an observer. In addition to the work of Myers, Hopkins (2011, 101) has researched the memoirs of other journalists working

in Belfast in the 1970s such as John Conroy and Mark Devenport to discuss the "difficulty in balancing their human and emotional reactions to the violence they witnessed, and the sense of professional detachment that was necessary to get the job done". In the case of the written abortion experiences, it could be argued that this distance or asymmetry between a safe journalist and a vulnerable victim collapses in the telling of some stories where the journalist/writer is the same person who lived the experience of pain (directly or as a relative or acquaintance) and so is fully consenting and has agency in the way is being represented, albeit within the constraints, formats, and traditions of newspaper writing.

Pantti (2019) has also written about the relationship between this witnessing and the seal of authenticity, even arguing that the former could be theorised as a "competition" for authenticity. "The journalists' presence serves as an assurance of the authenticity and the significance of the event, she writes (Pantti 2019, 9). Peters (2001) states something similar when suggesting that the privilege of the journalist as a witness is the raw and authentic proximity to the facts, while also arguing that "witnessing' comprises the three elements of a witness, the text (sometimes also called an object 'witness'), and an audience. This relates to the idea of authenticity as a perceived quality discussed earlier (about Markham's work), which is therefore not an intrinsic quality of the text or a journalist, but the relationship between those and the audience.

None of the personal essays studied here dwell on feelings of regrets, express a visceral form of emotion or make an explicit claim to 'know better' or to convey a more truthful story because of the lived experience. The fact that a substantial number of them describe events of a distant past might contribute to this form of writing, where the intensity derives from the circumstances of the pregnancy and, in some cases, the abortion –being alone, travelling to a different country—rather than the pregnancy itself. As the writing of Pantti (2009) states after examining various aspects of the literature about witnessing in journalism, the audience might engage with this witnessing if the text is conveyed with a mixture of facts and reflexivity. The tone of examination featured in many of these articles could be characterised in this way.

The literature review of this article discussed some positive elements of the genre of confessional journalism, yet Coward acknowledges that this format is "often more about self-revelation than self-reflection" (2009, 243). However, in the texts analysed here that come closer to this journalistic genre, the bearing witness is often expressed in the writing, retelling, and sharing of stories that foster a dialogue between the lived experiences of the authors and that of the readers, and therefore is not just about individual self-expression. As Michel Foucault (2013) wrote in the late part of his oeuvre, when he focused on techniques of the self, writing can be regarded as an act of self-creation that also expresses the necessity of relationality: "The self is something to write about, a theme or object (subject) of writing activity" (Foucault 1988, 28).

Almost all of these stories, including the very personal ones, mention other women, other abortions, old friends from school, women who are very young or not born yet, those who could not travel, those who in the future would not have a choice. As in Foucault's argument, this writing is a remedy or counterpart to reclusion, a "conversing with oneself and with others" (1997, 210). This conversing is then less about navel-gazing and individual reflection, and more of an expression of the dialogue between a writer and the audience through the story. Rather than individual and exclusive, certain forms of autobiographical journalism could be considered a way of offering oneself to the reader, an invitation to converse and communicate.

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