Impact template (REF3a)

Institution: University of Ulster
Unit of Assessment: 36 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management

a. Context

Media Studies at the University of Ulster is deeply embedded in the social, cultural and political life of Northern Ireland while, at the same time, engaging with the wider national and international environment. This is the result of a strategy, in place over a twenty-five year period, which seeks to bridge the gap between the academy and the main media and cultural industries (and the bodies established to support and regulate those industries) at local, regional and national level.

As a result, the training bodies that service these industries – **Skillset**, the **National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ)** at a national level and **Northern Ireland Screen** in the region – validate the teaching degrees offered by Media Studies. Since the Unit's research strategy has always been built on the inextricable link between teaching and research, research has also always involved partnerships with the media industries, including the **BBC, UTV, Channel Four, RTÉ** and with the national press as well as the very diverse local and regional press. Research has also forged links with a range of statutory and support agencies like the **Community Relations Council (CRC)**, **Ofcom**, **Northern Ireland Screen, Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI)** and the statutory agency for economic development, **Invest Northern Ireland (InvestNI)**. These partnerships and collaborations have directed the nature of the research undertaken and have provided the mechanism for ensuring that the research has had impact beyond the academy. These research and impact collaborations emerged from the research strands established in the unit back in 2004 (described in REF 5 below) but have predominantly emanated from the **Irish Media**, **Media Policy** and **Digital Arts and Creative Industries** strands.

Over this long period, the unit's research has fed back into the media industries generally while key researchers have been involved in building up and strengthening the local media infrastructure. **Martin McLoone**, for example, was a founding member and long-term board member of what is now **NI Screen** (the main funding and support body for the local film and television industry) and in the 1990s, he chaired the Community Relations Council's Cultural Traditions Group media committee, which disbursed funds to the nascent independent film and video sector.

During this period as well, Northern Ireland endured three decades of violence and inter-communal conflict (the 'Troubles') and research in Media Studies was centrally concerned with media representations of that violence and the conflict over identity that has underpinned it. This research also considered the particular pressures that both local and national media faced in responding to the violence and with the ways in which this has impacted on notions of cultural or national identity. The Unit hosted a range of symposia and round-table discussions with the broadcasting and press industries to address these issues and the results were disseminated through a number of publications during the 1990s and 2000s (all of which were submitted for peer review in previous RAEs).

This experience at the cutting edge of debate about the social, cultural and political role of the media has laid the groundwork and context for the unit's approach to impact during the last five years. In the period under review, the big change has been that we have now been in a 'post-conflict' environment and the research focus has shifted to the role of the media in such a post-conflict culture.

b. Approach to impact

A key aim of research in Media Studies for many years has been to support the kind of diverse media environment that is necessary for good citizenship and this continues to underpin our overall strategy. In the last five years, however, we have tried to set up more clearly defined pathways to achieve such impact, delineating more clearly the stages of development from **research**, through **dissemination** and onto **verifiable impact**.

A fundamental aim of our impact strategy was to establish relationships with end users of the research. Thus, **Messenger-Davies** has worked with the **BBC**, **Ofcom** and the **Voice of the Listener and Viewer (VLV)**, **Jackson** with **Invest Northern Ireland** and the **Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB), Hook** with the national **Museums Computer Group (MCG)** as well as the

NITB and other cultural end-users like the **Verbal Arts Centre** in Derry and **Queen's Film Theatre (QFT)** in Belfast. **Jewesbury** has worked with the Arts Council Northern Ireland and wrote a strategically important report for the Arts Council in Dublin in 2009.The key users of research, in other words, have been involved with the unit's researchers in establishing the research agenda and in this way, impact has been built into the research from the beginning

These key personnel have organised a range of symposia, seminars and discussions that have served to disseminate research as well as help identify further research needs. For each publication, exhibition or interactive media output that has emerged from the Unit's research, we have endeavoured to mount a 'launch event' using our community and media contacts to reach beyond the academy. We have funded staff to travel to non-academic end-users (ex-prisoners groups, victims groups, local community groups, political parties, museums and galleries, tourist agencies) to disseminate our research and explore its implications for the wider community.

Early on in this reporting period, we identified three areas that build on the strengths of previous years but which have also respond to the contemporary media and cultural environment:

- Influencing the Media and Youth Policy Agenda;
- Supporting Digital Media and the Creative Industries;
- Supporting Post-conflict Reconciliation and Social Inclusion.

Influencing the Media and Youth Policy Agenda
In the Unit's Policy Research, **Messenger-Davies** has developed a particular interest in supporting and promoting children's and young people's programming, especially in terms of the aims and objectives of public service broadcasting. She has worked with both the BBC and Ofcom to research aspects of this programming and to research audience responses, the better to develop and influence future policy.

Supporting Digital Media and the Creative Industries
In the last five years, research has responded to the developing concerns of Digital Humanities and has increasingly focused on the impact that digital media have had, and can have, on the creative industries. This has resulted in policy initiatives to support the new industries and research initiatives with the public sector that explore how digital technologies can impact on the wider cultural environment. While the long-established cultural focus remains central, there has also been a newer emphasis on the role that the creative industries can play and are playing in job creation and economic regeneration and the Unit's researchers (especially **Colm Murphy**, **Sarah Edge**, **Helen Jackson** and **Alan Hook**) have established research projects that feed directly into the developing digital sector and have established research relationships with those sectors that have both significant economic and cultural impact.

We have developed particularly strong links with the tourism industry to explore the potential of mobile phone apps and on-line gaming to promote tourism generally and to increase visitor numbers in museums, galleries and heritage sites (**Jackson** and **Hook**). Finally we have developed our relationship with the devolved government, the NI Executive, with local government and InvestNI to disseminate our policy research on the creative industries. We have contributed to regional and local government policy debates about job creation in the new digital economy and have helped Government to identify the skills needed to sustain growth in the digital media sector (**C. Murphy**, **S. Edge**).

Supporting Post-conflict Reconciliation and Social Inclusion
In the post-conflict environment of recent years the Unit has identified communities of interest that, for a variety of reasons, had been left largely unrepresented in the media during the years of conflict. In other words, the peace process was itself explored. From early on in this research round, researchers cooperated and collaborated with these communities, including groups as diverse as victims of violence and the relatives of victims; ex-prisoners and prison governors; prison teachers, clergy, caterers and others whose daily life and work interacted with the prison service; community relations groups and local community groups of various kinds.

During the last five years, the **Prisons Memory Archive (PMA),** an important and internationally admired initiative, was developed by former colleague Cahal McLaughlin assisted by ECR researcher **Jolene Mairs** (when she was a postgraduate researcher). The PMA and some of the films that were spun out of it (especially Mairs' *Unseen Women* and *Unheard Voices*,) have had considerable impact in the process of remembering and reconciliation central to a post conflict culture.

Researchers in the Unit have been particularly concerned with the coverage of the peace process – the 'propaganda' of peace (**G. McLaughlin**, **Baker**) – and particular emphasis has been on the documentary form and the range of voices and experience that this accesses. **Jewesbury** and **Porter** have promoted and contributed to public debate about space and development in post-conflict Belfast.

c. Strategy and plans

The Centre for Media Research strategy for supporting impact over for many years was, quite simply, to bridge the gap between the university and the cultural industries that we studied, researched and taught about. We have been very successful in this and we intend to consolidate and build on the strategy, maintaining our close relationship with the media industries and cultural agencies nationally that have been key to our success in the past. Our research so far has played a significant role in the wider **cultural and political** life and we plan to continue to do so through our strategies of dissemination beyond traditional academia. However, in recent years, our impact strategy has included an **economic objective** and in collaboration with agencies such as InvestNI, we will continue to develop our research in digital and interactive media to create products that will encourage the growth of small business, both spin-in and spin-out. We intend to continue to provide regional and local government with analyses of the developing digital economy, drawing from international experience, and to contribute to economic policy in the creative media sectors. In particular we will continue to develop interactive mobile apps that will be of use to the tourist industry by recirculating archive images of the past for the purposes of contemporary interactive use. To do so we will continue to work with local museums, galleries, heritage sites as well as local, regional and national tourist agencies. In particular we have developed European links through the Interreg programme and set up international collaborations across a range of northern periphery states, especially Finland.

d. Relationship to case studies

There is a strong causal relationship between our approach to impact and the case studies we include here.

1. **Influencing the Media and Youth Policy Agenda.**
Our policy research, to begin with, focused on the need for a local (Northern Ireland) film industry, policies for supporting filmmaking and with the function and future of public service broadcasting (PSB). Latterly, the research in Policy has concentrated on children's television and the need to interrogate and support programming made for children as a central aspect of PSB.

2. **Supporting Digital Media and the Creative Industries.**
As this reporting period has progressed our research in new media technologies and interactive media arts has developed an economic as well as a cultural dimension and the case study here demonstrates the impact that this research has had in the related areas of tourism, arts administration and job creation in the creative industries.

3. **Supporting Post-conflict Reconciliation and Social Inclusion.**
The research here is concerned with those 'unseen voices' and 'unheard stories' from communities that were less represented by mainstream media. The research is about those communities and has been disseminated within those communities and has given voice to groups and individuals most affected by the violence and trauma of the recent past. The research has reached out to formerly excluded groups and has devised ways of bringing them into the peace process and democratic institutions.