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CASE STUDY

This is Ireland: commemoration as a catalyst for a new nation brand

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Abstract
This article argues that, while state-enacted commemoration can give rise to a pre-determined narrative which aligns with political expediency, the active participation and ownership by citizens in the ritual act of commemoration facilitates an 'experiential' process of national identity formation, and a new model of nation branding. It takes inspiration from Kaufmann's conceptualisation of complexity theory and the importance of 'tipping points' and thresholds, which events such as national commemorations represent, as key to our understanding of nations. Ireland's unique method of citizen-led commemoration provided a channel through which 'outsiders', beyond the prominent elite and traditional gatekeepers, are empowered to influence, critique and embody a nation brand that is of their making. Based on interviews with key informants, from historians and brand strategists to community leaders and government officials, and a sample review of news reports, this cross-sectoral study examines the critical role of state-led, citizen-focused commemoration, as a catalyst for a new nation brand.

Keywords Nation branding · National identity · National commemoration · Collective memory-making · Intermestic · Public diplomacy · Cultural diplomacy

Introduction

Easter Week 1916 remains a pivotal moment in Ireland's modern history, when a small group of insurrectionists rebelled against British rule and declared an Irish Republic. Although the short-lived uprising was quickly crushed by the ruling forces, the Easter Rising and the execution of its sixteen leaders had a transformational effect on Irish nationalism. It was the spark that lit the flame of a decade of unrest, a War of Independence and Civil War which followed the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921, and ultimately the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922.

The legacies of 1916 and the Irish Civil War were many, including over 2000 causalities, and a bitter rift between the remaining members of the anti-Treaty Irish Republican Army and the newly established Irish government and its British counterparts. Six counties within Northern Ireland remained under British rule which [more recently] caused the eruption of a violent sectarian conflict, 'the Troubles', until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. This brought a tentative peace to a partitioned Ireland but it also created the challenge of 'celebrating Ireland's hard-won freedom with the need to not re-ignite the conflicts of the past' (White and Marnane 2016, p. 30).

Although the Irish Republic was not officially ratified until 1949, the significance of the events of Easter 1916 have been marked annually in a state-led national commemorative event, a cornerstone of Ireland's nation building project. Prior to 2016, the commemoration consisted of a military parade on Dublin's O'Connell Street and official wreath-laying ceremonies, with a series of 'unofficial' events taking place around the country, organised by political or social activists.

This study examines how *Ireland 2016*, a coordinated and unprecedented national and local commemoration programme, empowered citizens to create and embrace a new national narrative of Ireland, one hundred years on from the Easter Rising and the declaration of Ireland as a Republic. By adopting a case study approach, the author examines *why* Ireland's commemoration of the 1916 Rising, a traumatic and divisive moment in its recent history, proposes a new paradigm of nation branding and *how* it might inform and contribute to future practice. Through an in-depth reflection on the state's approach to citizen-led commemoration, and its exploration of national identity and nationhood, the

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author examines the role of commemoration as a catalyst for the development of an authentic nation brand.

Unlike previous commemorations, *Ireland 2016* was the first ever year-long all-of-government citizen engagement programme, with seven distinct strands, each with an extensive programme of events (Ireland.ie). A budget of €48 million was allocated to *Ireland 2016*, which included €31 million towards seven cultural capital projects. The commemoration provided a unique opportunity for collective and individual acts of reflection and remembrance. It engaged citizens in a national conversation which examined issues around national identity, societal values and what it means to be a Republic in the twenty-first century, creating a new model and mechanism of nation brand construction.

This is the first cross-sectoral study which responds to Devereux's (2022) call for future research to examine nation branding through the lens of complexity theory. In recognising the unique role of commemoration and collective memory-making in the construction of national identity (Saito 2010), the findings resonate strongly with Kaufmann's (2017) concept of nations as 'complex organisms' and reinforce the value of complicating the (nation brand) narrative, to borrow from Shakespeare's Hamlet, to hold, as 'twere, a mirror up to (the) nation.

A nation (brand) once again

While globalisation has led to increased collaboration and co-operation within and across nation states, it has also created a climate of intense competition, where countries compete with each other to distinguish themselves from the pack. The challenge of demonstrating influence, attracting foreign direct investment, tourists, international students and an increasingly mobile educated workforce, has contributed to the emergence of nation branding as a 'key strategy for a growing number of governments' (Papadopoulos and Heslop 2002, p. 302).

Very often, a shared understanding of what constitutes a nation is implicit, if not assumed, within the practice of nation branding. However, it remains a deeply complex and contested concept, and one which many leading scholars, most notably Hobsbawm (2012), Anderson (2006) and Smith (2010) have written extensively. For the most part, nation brand practitioners have completely bypassed any meaningful interrogation of the concept of the nation, or the constructed identities which form the basis of our modern nation states, preferring instead to assume that the essence and spirit of a nation can be distilled, packaged and sold to an international audience (Kaneva 2022a, b).

An even more neo-liberal interpretation of the nation state is proposed by Van Ham (2001) who argues that countries have often adopted the tactics of corporate marketing and brand awareness as part of their public diplomacy and export strategies. Halsall (2008, p. 22) goes a step further to suggest that the realpolitick of neo-liberalism, combined with the intense competition of the global marketplace, has positioned the nation state as 'a location manager', whose role is to ensure 'the most favourable operating conditions for business 'without political interference' (ibid). This rather reductive interpretation of nation branding aligns the practice very strongly with more instrumentalist corporate brand tactics, which advocate that even a complex organism such as a nation 'should be run like a company' (Beck 2000 cited in Halsall 2008, p. 27).

A leading scholar in the field of nation branding, Dinnie (2022, p. 5) defines the phenomenon of nation branding as 'the unique, multidimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all its target audiences'. Furthermore, Larsen et al. (2022) emphasise the potential for an effective nation brand strategy to reinforce existing perceptions of a nation, but also to create new ones. In an attempt to move away from the beauty pageant corporate marketing practice of nation brand-*ing*, Anholt (2007, p. 3) devised the concept of 'competitive identity', a blend of public diplomacy and brand management, as 'a new model for enhanced national competitiveness in a global world'. Implementing an effective competitive identity strategy requires a combination of inspiring leadership, coordinated multi-stakeholder buy-in and ownership, and a long-term commitment to improving the quality of life of citizens, through words *and* actions.

From this growing literature, one can conclude that a core component of nation branding is, arguably, building and exploiting the distinct features, values and strengths of a country and its people. Van Ham (2001, p. 3) most pointedly suggests that the optimising of history, culture and geography in the service of a nation brand, is a 'benign campaign that lacks the deep-rooted and often antagonistic sense of national identity that can accompany nationalism'. Nonetheless, it would be naïve to underplay a geo-political agenda, not to mention accusations of the commodification of national identity (Kaneva 2011), and the 'visceral antagonism' (Olins 2002) which critics and sceptics feel towards the very concept of nation branding.

Nation branding is now a widespread practice with countries allocating significant resources to attract investment, charm tourists and build influence and impact on the world stage. One of the most potent reasons for implementing a nation brand strategy, particularly for countries that have come through a period of turbulent social and civic upheaval, is as a recuperative mechanism for collective identity construction and building social cohesion (Skinner and Kubacki 2007). When faced with the challenge of inheriting a strong ethnocentric nationalist narrative, juxtaposed with the need to convey a modern pluralist future-facing state, both Estonia and Kosovo for example, employed nation branding consultants to reposition and reframe their national narrative for an international market. Each of these examples demonstrate a pattern in nation branding practice of eschewing traditional representations of national identity in favour of a modern, inclusive, future-focused nation image (Bengtsson 2011). Is there a risk, therefore, of contemporary nation branding being merely 'a more palatable version of nationalism'? (Jordan 2014, p. 283).

Nationalism, not unlike the concept of nations, is also a complex and divisive topic, which often manifests as a form of racism 'dressed up as civic nationalism' (Wanga 2021). Billig (1995) emphasises the importance of what he describes as 'banal nationalism', where citizens routinely express their sense of national identity in small acts of everyday ritual and symbolism. Every nation brand leans in to symbols of soft nationalism, such as a national flag or popular anthem, which arouses a sense of solidarity and national pride for citizens, and acts as a distinguishing visual competitive identity for nations aimed at an international audience. Anholt (2007, p. 16) also reiterates the significance of 'a benign nationalism amongst the populace' as the most important component of a competitive identity strategy.

Meanwhile, Kaneva (2011, p. 125) recognises such branding as an opportunity to connect 'the discourse of nation branding to constructivist ideas of nationhood'. Contrary to Bolin and Stahlberg's belief that nation branding 'does not engage with community building' (2010, p. 96), this article contends that, if done correctly, it has the enormous potential of empowering citizens to take ownership of a nation brand, thereby 'turning the strategy into an agent of change within the country' (Anholt 2010, p. 33).

It is in the remembrance and re-enactment of the mythology of a shared past, formalised through civic commemoration, that citizens are stimulated and motivated to interrogate ideas of nationhood and national identity (Cronin 1999; Clancy 2011). Holt (2004, p. 219) perceives the opportunity presented by a 'cultural disruption' or seismic ideological shift as a key moment to 'reinvent the myth'. Kaufmann (2017, p. 10) also notes the significance of 'threshold effects' or 'tipping points' as features of the 'complex adaptive systems' (ibid) that is the nation. It is reasonable to propose, therefore, that a national state-led citizen-focused commemorative programme of reflection, remembrance and re-imagining of what it means to be a citizen of a nation, in the twenty-first century, represents just such a moment.

Many nation brands are built on the most 'economically efficient stereotypes' (Halsall 2008, p. 24), which panders to the notion that external publics do not want to spend time understanding the complexity of a nation's identity—'when you haven't got time to read a book, you judge it by its cover' (Anholt 2007, p. 1). The assimilation of corporate brand tactics by governments in the creation and implementation of nation branding has resulted in much of the criticism of campaigns such as *Cool Britannia* and Kosovo's *Young Europeans* as inauthentic spin, based on stereotypes and simplified narratives, which are inauthentic, outdated and inaccurate (Skinner and Kubacki 2007). It is therefore not surprising to learn that citizens are excluded as equal co-creators of a nation brand, which is compiled from 'an ensemble of non-threatening fragments of culture, history and geography determined by committee' (Aronczyk 2009, p. 294).

In contrast, Kaufmann (2017) recognises and values the contribution of the grassroots and local communities in national identity construction and makes the case for nations to be viewed as 'complex systems', rather than simply elite constructs. This is particularly relevant for nation branding practitioners, where the value and reward in complicating the narrative is to unlock a much more authentic and nuanced nation brand, even if it is to be refined further in its communication. As Anholt (2010, p. 40) observes: 'the true art of branding is distillation: the art of extracting the concentrated essence of something complex, so that its complexity can always be extracted back out of the distillate'. Ireland's campaign to win the 2021/2022 UN Security Council seat centred on the communication of three nation brand values—*Partnership, Independence and Empathy*—to distinguish it from Norway and Canada. Although very simple and generic, they were grounded in the complex narrative of Ireland's recent history of conflict resolution and a recognition of the power of the 'multiplicity of narratives' approach, which enabled a broad church of stakeholders and agencies to connect with them as authentic nation brand values.

Commemoration as a catalyst for a new national narrative

Durkheim (1995) coined the term 'collective effervescence' to describe the process whereby, through participating in an act of ritual, the power of the collective transcends that of the individual. Halbwachs (1952) develops this notion further with the concept of 'collective memory', which recognises the value and significance of those who have not had direct first-hand experience of an event, participating in ritual acts of remembrance. The polysemic nature of ritual facilitates large-scale national acts of remembrance, reflection and celebration, while also embracing the small, personal and local moments of shared history. The performative and shared acts of public and private commemoration generate a sense of solidarity, both nationally and at local community level, and are instrumental in collective identity formation (Saito 2010). For the hundreds of thousands of citizens who participate in commemorative events, such as *Ireland 2016*, it offers a unique opportunity to be part of a process which, if carefully managed, empowers communities and individuals to construct 'a new vision for a shared future' (Anholt 2010, p. 36).

Undoubtedly, the state is the most prominent 'elite node' (Kaufmann 2017, p. 7) in the activation and implementation of national commemorations. Stakeholders including the media, academics and historians are considered 'central nodes' (ibid.), in that they are a channel of communication for ideas and issues, which flow vertically in only one direction to the masses. Bryan et al. (2013) argue that the very act of commemoration is a political act, a construct which is played out by political actors, entrepreneurs and 'nation builders'. Such one-directional mode of dissemination is aggregated by perceptions of commemoration as being politicised (Fitzpatrick 2001; Jordan 2014), where political parties, activists, journalists and historians jockey for advantage in framing the narrative to suit their own agendas.

While state-enacted commemoration can give rise to a pre-determined narrative arising out of political expediency, the active participation and ownership by communities in acts of commemoration enables an experiential process of authentic and meaningful identity construction. It provides a mechanism through which 'outsiders' beyond historians, academics, politicians, nationalists and civil servants, the traditional gatekeepers of commemoration, are empowered to influence, create, and promote a more complex and meaningful narrative that is of their making. This is where commemoration can move beyond the level of re-enactments and memorials, to actively speak to the contemporary (Daly 2004) and to the future, through the lens of the past. It has the power to radically reclaim a narrative that is not simply claiming 'political legitimacy for a political identity, based upon a particular narrative of the past' (Bryan et al. 2013, p. 74).

However, there is a risk that an open source approach to commemoration, without some form of coordinating mechanism and shared guiding principles, could descend into incoherence and division. Providing opportunities for citizens, the 'common man and woman' (Larsen et al. 2022, p. 8), to engage in national commemorations was a key focus of the Norwegian Suffrage Jubilee in 2013. In recognition of women who are either written out or perceived as 'outsiders' in historical narratives, a programme of activities, research and special initiatives was developed to redress these omissions. Similarly, as part of *Ireland 2016*, a strand of the programme—*Women of 1916*—was developed specifically to address the underrepresentation of women who were involved in the Easter Rising (Casserly and O'Neil 2017). The Swedish Jubilee, under the brand '*Progressive Sweden: celebrating 100 years of Swedish democracy'* prioritised citizen engagement with a focus on future values (Larsen et al. 2022) but unlike its Nordic counterparts, gender equality was peripheral rather than central to the commemoration programme.

Similar to Sweden, citizen engagement was prioritised as a guiding principle of *Ireland 2016*. For O'Toole (cited in Bryan et al. 2013), it presented a unique opportunity for citizens to reflect and interrogate what it means to be a Republic, one hundred years on from the foundation of the state. It also facilitated conversations and dialogue within and across communities on the nature of national sovereignty, post Brexit, and the implications for a partitioned island, within the European Union. Leaning in to Anderson's seminal concept of 'imagined communities' (2006), national commemorative events can elicit 'feelings of group membership and solidarity among individuals' (Saito 2010, p. 631), providing both the impetus and the invitation to create a new shared vision of Ireland into the future.

Melissen (2005) notes the increasing importance placed by diplomats and those engaged in public diplomacy in connecting with 'ordinary people', as well as activists and loosely organised groups, who represent and reinforce nation 'brand values', and who can also mobilise previously elusive and often powerful networks. More recently, the concept of the 'intermestic' (Huijgh 2019, p. 1), which advocates a blend of both the domestic and international in public diplomacy and nation brand practice, is gaining some momentum. This approach recognises the importance of consulting, communicating and empowering citizens as a priority public, without whom, a competitive identity strategy is destined to remain a public relations exercise. This is particularly interesting, when considered in the context of commemoration as a model of authentic nation brand construction, as, in the case of *Ireland 2016*, Irish citizens and the diaspora[1] were the primary stakeholders, upon whom the success or failure of the centenary depended.

In his mediation on commemoration as part of Ireland's Decade of Centenaries, President Michael D. Higgins describes the need for 'a hospitality of narratives' (*Machnamh*, Aras an Uachtarain, 2020). He discusses the unique opportunity posed through the ritual and practice of commemoration for nations and communities to 'reflect, to look deeply at change over time' and for these moments to act as a 'bonding tool for enhanced social capital' (ibid).

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[1] 'Ireland takes a broad and inclusive definition of the Irish diaspora. It includes Irish citizens living overseas, both those born in Ireland and those born abroad to Irish families, as well as the heritage diaspora, those many millions of people of Irish descent around the world. It also embraces the reverse diaspora of people who have lived, studied or worked in Ireland before returning to their home countries as well as the affinity diaspora who hold a deep appreciation for our people, places and culture. Together, these groups form the Global Irish'. https://www.dfa.ie/media/globalirish/Diaspora-Strategy-2020-English.pdf.

Table 1 Interview participants

	Interviewee	Role	Date	Duration	Location
1	Catriona Crowe	Former Head of Special Projects at the National Archives of Ireland	14.09.2021	01:04:39 min	Online—Zoom
2	John Concannon	Director, *Ireland 2016*	22.01.2021	01:03:19 min	Online—Zoom
3	Diarmaid Ferriter	Academic and historian, member of the Decade of Centenaries Expert Advisory Group	17.02.2022	50:31 min	Online—Zoom
4	Maurice Manning	Chair, Decade of Centenaries Expert Advisory Group	26.07.2021	47:46 min	Online—Zoom
5	Ronan McGreevy	Journalist and author	05.08.2021	30:36 min	Online—Zoom
6	Deirdriu McQuaid,	Monaghan County Council, Decade of Centenaries Programme coordinator	29.07.2022	53:51	Online—Zoom
7	Ciarán O'Gaora	Brand strategy and design, *Ireland 2016*	11.12.2020	01:25:34	In person—Zero G offices, Capel St, D1
8	Michael O'Reilly	Policy adviser, *Ireland 2016*	11.12.2020	53:04 min	Online—Zoom
9	Participant A	Local Authority Decade of Centenaries Programme coordinator	04.08.2022	35:09 min	Online—Zoom
10	Participant B	Senior Official, *Ireland 2016*	30.06.2021	50:02 min	Online—Zoom
11	Participant C	Senior Official, Decade of Centenaries Programme	30.06.2021	50:02 min	Online—Zoom

Building on Kaufman's complexity theory, this approach supports and embraces the multiplicity of narratives in the construction of an evolving and authentic nation brand, rather than see this as a challenge or a messy confused narrative in search of an orthodoxy.

Method

The methodology chosen for this research is a case study of *Ireland 2016*, the state programme to mark the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising. According to Yin (2014, p. 16), case study research is a form of 'empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context'. The primary dataset for the research is derived from a series of semi-structured interviews, supported by a purposive review of a selection of media coverage on two key dates—the initial launch of *Ireland 2016* in November 2014 and the end of the programme year in December 2016. While a comprehensive analysis of media coverage of *Ireland 2016* is recommended in the Conclusion as a possible avenue of further research, the purposive sample in this study reveals valuable insights and strengthens the research findings.

A series of 11 one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted, including 6 male and 5 female participants, who were selected based on purposeful sampling. This method is specifically useful where the individuals or groups 'are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest' (Palinkas et al. 2015, p. 534). Interviewees were identified based on their direct role and/or expertise relating to this study. As a member of the core *Ireland 2016* project team, the author had established a relationship of trust with key informants and was in a position to contact them directly, by phone and email, to solicit their participation in the research. Participants included senior government officials, civil servants, policymakers and local *Ireland 2016* programme coordinators. Confidentiality of the data was guaranteed, where requested, with eight of the interviewees agreeing to be named in the research and three participants availing of the option to be pseudonymised (Table 1).

Interview data was coded and analysed, drawing on Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory approach, where the author has foregrounded the contributions of the interview participants to inform the discussion and analysis. A series of themes were identified for the semi-structured interviews which informed the design of the interview guide, while also allowing the interviewer the option to explore topics of relevance which might surface during the interview. A thematic analysis was used to review the news reports, which were chosen based on purposive random sampling for a specific timeframe directly relevant to the study. Subsequent data analysis consisted of reading, sorting, searching through key articles, comparing within categories, and noting thematic links and patterns (Altheide and Schneider 2017).

The revisiting of the successes and failures of the *Ireland 2016* centenary programme, through the lens of those who were closely involved in its construction and implementation, while immensely valuable, necessitates treating all informants as unreliable interlocutors. While the author's close involvement with the *Ireland 2016* initiative was a crucial factor in procuring the permission and participation of the key informants, the possibility of any potential bias was mitigated though reflexivity (Ibrahim and Edgley 2015). This involved the author critically reflecting on her influence, either intentionally or unintentionally, over the research process and applying analytical rigour in her examination of all the information and knowledge received. As noted by Corlett and Mavin (2019, p. 30) 'through positional reflexivity, qualitative researchers can consider the impact of positionality, identity and power in producing knowledge'. As a result, the research material provides an exceptionally rich dataset from which to examine *Ireland 2016* as a nation brand strategy, and for exploring the influence and contribution of authentic citizen engagement on future nation brand theory and practice.

'This time will never come again'—*Ireland 2016*

The Decade of Centenaries is the Irish government's official commemoration programme to mark key events in recent history which led to the formation of the Irish Republic. It commences with the enactment of the Home Rule Bill in 1912 and concludes with the founding of the Free State in 1922 (Whelan 2017). The commemoration of the 1916 Easter Rising, described by Kiberd (1991, p. 191) as 'a brave clean fight against an empire', where a group of men and women staged a bloody uprising against the British and called for the formation of an Irish Republic, was undoubtedly one of the most challenging and potentially divisive events in the Decade.

In anticipation of the potential for the commemoration to become a contentious and divisive spectacle, an Expert Advisory Group (EAG) comprising respected academics and historians, from across the island of Ireland, was appointed by the Irish government to oversee the Decade of Centenaries. An all-party committee of politicians was also put in place to avoid accusations of a partisan political agenda. The first task of the EAG was to agree a set of guiding principles which would ensure that the commemoration 'will be measured and reflective, and will be informed by a full acknowledgement of the complexity of historical events and their legacy, of the multiple readings of history, and of the multiple identities and traditions which are part of the Irish historical experience' (Decade of Centenaries.com).

For the organisers, managing a complex and demanding stakeholder group, which included relatives of those who died in 1916, academics, political parties and local community groups, all of whom laid claim to marking this 'pivotal event in the creation of the modern Irish state' (White and Marnane 2016, p. 30) was a considerable undertaking. There was little public or political appetite to repeat the militaristic bombastic event that marked the 50th anniversary in 1966, or the more subdued and low-key 75th anniversary in 1991.

> 'In 1966, the events had been totally politicised and effectively became part of De Valera's re-election campaign.' Maurice Manning, Chair, Decade of Centenaries Expert Advisory Group
> 'We didn't use the past as propaganda during this. We really didn't. It was used that way in 1966. Not this time. That sort of signals we are growing up.' Catriona Crowe, former Head of Special Projects at the National Archives of Ireland

However, a disastrous initial launch, featuring an ill-advised promotional video described by a leading academic as 'unhistorical bullshit' (Ferriter, cited in Brophy 2014), was heavily criticised by the media and alienated the public and the relatives of the 1916 rebels, who immediately distanced themselves from the event. The state had made the fatal mistake of using the centenary as an opportunity to promote Ireland as a modern brash tech capital of the world, brushing over any reference to the hundreds who were killed in the uprising, and completely underestimating the sensitivities of those who saw it as the significant event in modern Irish history. It was a deep embarrassment to the government, who immediately lost the trust of key audiences and publics, and the whole event quickly escalated into crisis mode.

> 'It wasn't the Provos [Provisional Irish Republican Army] that people were concerned about. It was the fact that the original video was almost like an advertisement for Ireland Inc. It had no link to the Easter Rising, you had companies like Google and LinkedIn in it.' Ronan McGreevy, Journalist and author

> 'The public at that point I think was still very uneasy about the whole thing … by and large they felt really uncomfortable that this thing was going to happen because there was a feeling that nothing good would come of it … they were worried about what it would make Ireland look like and so many people at the time were talking about just getting the hell out of the country for Easter 1916.' Michael O'Reilly, Policy adviser, *Ireland 2016*

> 'There was a fear that it would become another very jolly happy, you know, aren't we all great, isn't Ireland great, moment … the response to that and the reaction to that initial too quick off the mark, not thought through [launch] … really put a stop to the gallop.' Catriona Crowe, former Head of Special Projects, National Archives

Despite this inauspicious beginning, the organisers regrouped and immediately undertook an extensive citizen consultation process, involving hundreds of 'town hall' meetings across the length and breadth of the country. This was followed by an in-depth process of building networks of collaboration with government departments, state agencies, relatives groups and NGOs, amongst others, and with the support and leadership of the local government network, a re-imagined, inclusive citizen-focused *Ireland 2016*[2] programme was launched on the 31st March, 2015. In recognising the appetite for social change articulated in the groundswell success of the same-sex marriage referendum which was to take place on 22nd May 2015, *Ireland 2016* was perfectly poised to articulate a new narrative for Ireland as a proud, inclusive and modern nation state.

> 'I think the public wanted to look at things in a different way so that when the 2016 commemoration came, people were ready.' Maurice Manning, Chair, Decade of Centenaries Expert Advisory Group

> 'I think there's something as well about the open source idea. So we had the 44 state ceremonial events … and then we enabled the communities round the country to get on board with this and encouraged them to [get involved] …we had over 5,000 events around the country. Something that started as a complete and utter car crash became this sense of absolute optimism and confidence around the country of who we are …' John Concannon, Director, *Ireland 2016*

A project team of senior civil servants, communications and brand specialists, policy advisers and members of the Defence Forces were recruited to design and deliver the *Ireland 2016* programme. It resembled what Anholt (2010 p. 162) describes in the context of nation brand initiatives, as a 'skunkworks'—a group of people who, in order to achieve unusual results, work on a project in a way that is outside the usual rules, often a small team that assumes or is given responsibility for developing something in a short time with minimal management constraints.

A cross-sectoral programme was devised, coordinated and implemented by the project team, supported by two policy and communications specialists, working alongside over 150 partners from local and national government departments, semi-state agencies, education institutions, arts and civil society organisations, as well as a range of companies and organisations from across the private and voluntary sector. A two-year strategic communications and marketing campaign began in 2015 which included media partnerships, specially commissioned documentaries and sponsored content across tv, print and radio, as well as the development of an extensive suite of creative content for the new Ireland.ie website and social media (Facebook and Twitter).

Ireland's centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising resonated strongly with the extensive 70 million[3] Irish diaspora, with events taking place in cities and towns across the globe, creating a sense of solidarity with 'other members of the nation in other places' (Saito 2010, p. 631). This supports Halbwachs (1952) proposition around the inclusivity of commemoration and its role in building a sense of connection amongst those who have not had direct experience of the event.

What *Ireland 2016* managed to achieve was to create the context for the first of Anholt's (2010) nation branding imperatives which is to identify a common purpose which is both 'inspiring' and 'feasible' and to which a range of disparate actors with differing agendas, including government departments, state agencies, business leaders, civic society groups, could align and get behind. In addition to participating in live events, from readings to re-enactments, exhibitions, lectures and seminars, millions of people, in Ireland and worldwide, engaged with the ideas and propositions contained within the programme, through extensive access to digital and online resources.

The unique power of the arts to enable and encourage communities and individuals to reflect upon and create points of connection and understanding when confronted with difficult and disturbing issues is a recurring theme, both in the context of commemoration, but also in the construction and re-imagining of a new national narrative. The fact that four of the seven leaders of the Easter Rising in Ireland in 1916 were artists is an indication of the enduring power of culture and the key role of the arts as both a signifier and source of inspiration in the formation and construction of national identity.

Access to resources such as the Military Pensions Archive, along with major exhibitions by the National Cultural Institutions and network of local county libraries and museums, enabled a new generation of citizen researchers who, for the first time, could explore and interrogate their family histories. What began to emerge as a result of the *Ireland 2016* invitation to 'reflect, remember and re-imagine' was a form of what Kaufmann (2017, p. 17) observes in his study of Irish nationalism post-Easter Rising as 'popular political nationalism'. For the first time in the history of the state, the act of remembrance and commemoration moved from being a militaristic politicised event to being an inclusive citizen-led interrogation of Irish identity, past and present. 'Last year we found ways to talk about our identity, the meaning of citizenship, the importance of community. It was a year of debate without division and argument without rancour. We all walked a little taller as a consequence. We belonged and we were proud to belong' (Kenny 2017).

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[2] *Ireland 2016* was the state programme to mark the centenary of the Easter Rising. The ten member project team, under the directorship of John Concannon, was based in the National Museum and worked under the auspices of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. The programme was overseen by the Decade of Centenaries Expert Advisory Group, which comprised academics and historians from across the island of Ireland, who were appointed by Taoiseach Enda Kenny. It was coordinated by a Senior Officials Group with representatives from a wide range of government departments. Alongside 44 official state ceremonial events, the programme included over 5,000 events which were coordinated in partnership with the local authorities, state agencies, academic institutions as well as organisations across the private sector and civil society.

[3] The vast majority of this 70 million figure are descendants of Irish emigrants, often through several generations starting with those who left Ireland around the time of the Famine. The largest group in this figure is the 36 million people in America who in the last census self-identified as "Irish-American" or "Scots-Irish". The balance of the 70 million figure would be made up of large Irish ancestry populations in Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand and smaller Irish ancestry populations in Continental Europe and Latin America.

Complicating the narrative

A guiding principle of *Ireland 2016* was the concept of inclusion and respect for the multiplicity of narratives in undertaking what President Michael D. Higgins (2020) described as an 'ethical remembrance' of the shared history of the island of Ireland. White and Marnane (2016, p. 39) concur with the aspiration that the 1916 centenary commemoration 'should identify with an Irishness that is inclusive and not exclusive'.

The reality of embedding this principle across all aspects of the programme created layers of complexity and necessitated not just time, but sensitivity and care, in how this was managed with key stakeholders and partners. However, it was one aspect of the initiative which confounded Anholt's belief that 'the essence of social justice is diversity, but the essence of good marketing is simplicity, and this tension is seldom fully resolved' (Anholt 2010, p. 90).

> 'We didn't want this to be a replication of old fashioned heroics. Or any triumphalism of any sort. It's about deepening and complicating the narrative to include more than simply the big heroic actions that went on.' Catriona Crowe, former Head of Special Projects, National Archives

In fostering and actively facilitating discussion, debate and respect for the multiplicity of narratives and perspectives, across all aspects of the commemoration programme, it enabled a more nuanced and, arguably, richer interrogation of difficult issues and events to surface. A complex part of Irish history has always been the fact that many more Irish men died serving with the British Army at the Battle of the Somme in 1916 then took part in the Rising, something which up until the centenary, was never properly commemorated by the Irish state.

> 'There wasn't any triumphalism or excluding other people, and suddenly I realised that the people were really ahead of the politicians in all of this.' Maurice Manning, Chair, Decade of Centenaries Expert Advisory Group

The default position for nation brand initiatives is to present a positive, optimistic, modern nation, full of potential, set against a backdrop of its most recognisable geographical and cultural assets. It is often why so many campaigns end up looking so similar, even using the same 'live, study, work, invest' strapline. Understandably, no country wants to wash its dirty economic, social or environmental linen in public but if a nation brand is to truly deliver on authenticity as a core competency, it must be courageous in recognising and communicating the need for change. #*Waking the Feminists*, a grassroots campaign which highlighted gender inequality in the cultural sector, was one such moment for Ireland.

Sparked by the Abbey Theatre's lack of inclusion of women artists in its *Waking the Nation* centenary programme, and its determined refusal to revisit the omission, a national and international activist movement quickly gathered momentum and international media attention soon followed. The movement resulted in a commitment by the Irish government and key arts and culture institutions, with many international organisations following suit, to implement gender equality policies and practice across the creative industries. What began as a disturbing reminder of a deep-rooted misogyny and sexism within the Irish cultural sector, became a catalyst for change in Ireland, and beyond.

> 'A state is the sum of its failures as much as it is the sum of its successes, there is always nuances … I definitely think that the 1916 Rising commemorations in Ireland were an object lesson in how to do it, they weren't bombastic, they didn't push a simplistic narrative and I think a lot of other countries could learn from that. The important thing is to be inclusive and to move beyond the stereotypes of every nation, to move beyond the great man theory of history, to mark the good points and the bad points' Ronan McGreevy, Journalist and author

Despite the perception of *Ireland 2016* as an inclusive state-led initiative, there is evidence of acts of rejection, resentment and resistance surrounding the commemoration. A necrology 'Remembrance Wall' in Glasnevin Cemetery, one of the most historical burial sites in Ireland and the location of the graves of many of the leaders of the Rising, listing the names of all those who died in the Rising, including British soldiers, caused upset for Irish relatives and incited angry protests and arrests at the state ceremonial event to launch the wall in April 2016. James Connolly Heron, whose grandfather was one of the leaders of the Rising, maintained that the wall is part of a 'sanitisation of the Rising … it's an aberration' (Heron cited in Russell 2016). In February 2022, Glasnevin Trust confirmed that, as a result of repeated acts of vandalism and protest, the Wall would be discontinued and dismantled.

Organised by Reclaim the Vision of 1916, 'an independent, non-party political citizens' initiative' (facebook.com/reclaim1916), thousands of people took to the streets of Dublin on the afternoon of Sunday 24th April 2016, immediately following the official state commemoration. Parade participants included representatives of Ireland's new communities, travellers, residents of Direct Provision, disability and women's groups, those who felt 'forgotten, ignored, marginalised and discriminated against' (facebook.com/reclaim1916). The event was the last of a series of initiatives organised by the ad hoc group to counteract the state-led programme. Both of these initiatives are indicative of a disconnect between the ambition and rhetoric of an inclusive state-led commemoration programme and the actuality for those who felt excluded and marginalised by a state that had not lived up to the vision of the new Republic, one hundred years after the Easter Rising.

Authenticity and the nation brand

A national commemoration on the scale of *Ireland 2016* presented an invitation to Irish citizens, at home and abroad, to be part of a collective exploration of what it means to be Irish now, through the lens of the past, and to re-imagine the Ireland of the future. Every five years, a census captures primarily quantitative, but more recently some qualitative, data on the Irish population (census.ie). In 2016, a Citizens' Assembly of 100 people, deliberately chosen to be representative of Irish society, was established to discuss and consider important legal and policy issues and make recommendations to government (citizensassembly.ie). While both are useful and important research exercises, they do not offer the opportunity for an extensive, cross-generational and cross-sectoral reflection and interrogation of Irish values and identity which was provided by a year-long commemorative programme.

> 'I think countries need to pause, and reflect and take stock from time to time, that's why centenaries are around, that's why big anniversaries are around. In the best way, they are a chance to say where have we been and where are we going.' Ronan McGreevy, Journalist and author

> 'I think it's one of the achievements … that strong sense of claiming ownership, we're going to do this in our own way. It can be intergenerational, and can incorporate the schools and that strong local element.. Diarmaid Ferriter, Academic and historian, member of the Decade of Centenaries Expert Advisory Group

According to brand strategist and the creator of the *Ireland 2016* brand identity, O'Gaora (2020) makes the point that, while the state may manage the nation brand, its reputation and ownership of the brand lies with the people who engage with it. But what of the views of the citizens whom the nation brand purports to reflect—do they identify with it? Does it reflect what they believe to be a true reflection of their national identity and what role do they play as 'brand ambassadors'?

> 'So the brand of Ireland is what people say about Ireland and in my view, the first and most important audience, is the citizens. It has to be authentic and authenticity is the number one thing in nation branding.' John Concannon, Director *Ireland* 2016

> The whole narrative [of Ireland 2016] became pluralistic, non-binary, inter-textual. This is where you get in to pattern recognition rather than dragging dead white men out and saying This is Ireland. I think what we did with the second calibration of [Ireland] 2016 was to give permission to know what it was, which is a moment in time, and leave that vessel open enough that people were asked to fill that with the general plurality of history. It wasn't about the heroic other.' Ciarán O'Gaora, Brand strategy and design, *Ireland 2016*

Jordan's (2014, p. 298) study of the public perception of Brand Estonia revealed that, unlike the political elite who initiated and were very positive about the campaign, 'the majority of the public-level respondents were overwhelmingly negative in their responses' and didn't feel it was an authentic representation of the nation's values or national identity. A clear tension exists in nation branding between accentuating the positive and avoiding a descent into propaganda, where political social or economic challenges are airbrushed out of the narrative.

For a nation brand to be truly effective, it must resonate with its citizens as both authentic and meaningful. As the initial launch of *Ireland 2016* demonstrated, taking a slick marketing approach to something as serious as national identity, which is at the heart of nation branding, would not be tolerated. A nation brand initiative, built on the shared principles of authenticity and inclusivity, engenders credibility and trust, both of which were critical factors in Ireland's state-led 1916 commemoration programme.

> 'Especially for a nation … because nobody cares if the washing powder that is advertised doesn't get those stains, it won't affect a nation, but that's [the nation] who you are. And that's at the core of your being. And as a citizen, if there's a national brand that actually is underneath it, and it's all smoke screens, it's an embarrassment. It goes against eve-

> rything as a citizen that you want it to be. And if that means it's less showy, then so be it, it has to be real.' Senior Official, Decade of Centenaries Programme

Ireland, like many other countries, from Sweden to the Philippines to Tasmania, has adopted the strapline of 'live, work, study, invest' as its call to action. Nation brand authenticity requires a trust in the fulfilment of the promised social, economic and cultural benefits which have been presented to the public (Handayani and Korstanje 2017). In Ireland, it is the network of 31 local government authorities who are responsible for delivering the day to day needs of citizens, from parks and libraries, to planning, water and housing. They played a critical role in motivating and engaging local communities, schools, businesses and organisations to, not just get involved with the commemoration programme, but to own it and make it their own.

> 'I think it has to be [grassroots]. I don't think it's like a 'nice to have'. I think you just have to [involve local communities] particularly if you're pitching abroad, and you want people to move here. They have to live somewhere in a community. They don't live in a strategy. It's our local communities and our local authorities who bring those bigger national policies to real-life on the ground.' Senior Official, Decade of Centenaries Programme

Ultimately, it is local communities, people living in cities, towns and villages, who are the embodiment of a lived everyday national identity. They are effectively nation brand ambassadors and the foundation upon which an authentic nation brand has the potential to thrive and evolve.

Citizen nation brand

The decline in the role and power of the church in Ireland, combined with increased globalisation and inward international investment, growing secularisation and membership of the European Union, transformed Ireland from a rural backwater in the 1960s to the Celtic Tiger of the 1990s (Anholt 2007, p. 47). The bruising and international humiliation of the banking crisis and economic crash in 2008, resulting in a €67.5 billion bailout, sparked serious social unease and economic uncertainty. In the wake of the crash, the subsequent same-sex marriage and the abortion referenda, in 2015 and 2018, respectively, sparked a national conversation about human rights, values and Irish identity.

It was against this backdrop that the *Ireland 2016* centenary programme provided an enhanced opportunity to build on this moment of collective reflection. It sparked a visceral and deeply held connection to the personal stories and family histories of the people's uprising against a colonial oppressor in 1916 and re-ignited the sense of pride in what had been achieved for Ireland in the last hundred years and, more recently, with the passing of the same-sex marriage referendum. It demonstrated Ireland's ability to be able to reflect and shed some of the negativity and mythology of its past and visualise a new future. Critically, the mechanism of a citizen-led co-creation of a positive narrative around Irish nationalism, over the duration of *Ireland 2016*, epitomised what Kaufmann (2017, p. 21) describes as 'crowdsourced nationalism', where civil society rather than 'state elites' become the embodiment of national identity.

> 'I think it was really important in that I think it gave us a confidence as a nation, the way we faced up to old narratives and challenged them in some way' Senior Official, Decade of Centenaries Programme

> 'I think the process was the really important thing, people were hungry without even realising it … hungry for conversations about who we are, and what is the meaning of our history, where have we come from.' Michael O'Reilly, Policy advisor, *Ireland 2016*

> 'What good branding does at a national level, at a complex multi-stakeholder level, is it's less concerned about defining what we're not and more about creating a narrative of inclusion and relevance and value. It is not about making the state the hero and its dead pre-anointed heroes the hero. It is about recognising the heroic act of what it is for four and a half million people to identify with each other in all that difference and in all that challenge … the sense of shared endeavour within that of both joy and sadness. How do you create something that has a narrative that asks people to join in but is still coherent rather than all things to all people. I think that that is where you start to ground it around the idea of a collection of values that, on their own, are not differentiating but as they conspire to come together, speak to what is the kind of lived reality, and the lived ambition of a collection of people' Ciarán O'Gaora, Brand strategy and design, *Ireland 2016*

One of the challenges around collective memory-making in the context of commemoration is the conflation of memory and history in what Nora (1989) describes as historiography. The reliance on individual memorabilia and personal stories handed down from generation to generation creates a form of mythology around events which can often create tensions within communities around what is truth and what has been fictionalised to make for more palatable consumption. For the historians and academics who were closely involved with *Ireland 2016*, as well as the local authority *Ireland 2016* programme coordinators, the importance of preserving and providing access to national archives and local ephemera was vital and acted as a catalyst for debate and discussion around difficult and contentious events and issues.

> I think it's interesting looking at how memory can work as well. There are a lot of stories that are passed down through generations. Sometimes people, when they begin to research or do more in-depth research can discover that the stories that have survived or been passed down, or the memories that have been communicated are not necessarily reflective of the reality.' Diarmaid Ferriter, Academic and historian, member of the Decade of Centenaries Expert Advisory Group

> 'It has allowed us to build on that and to reach out to harder reach communities, it has given us that platform to reach out to them. And it's definitely created a really good opportunity to build on that and to discuss and debate the different areas of our recent history.' Deirdriu McQuaid, Monaghan County Council Decade of Centenaries Programme

While this article argues for the inclusion of citizens as co-authors and co-creators, one of the primary functions of a nation brand initiative is to optimise domestic assets and deploy them in competing for resources and influence on the world stage (Mordhorst 2018). Several of the sources interviewed for this article were in agreement that Ireland's approach to commemorating 1916 had a positive impact on the perception of Ireland abroad.

> 'I think a lot of diplomats were interested in how a small country with a recently very troubled past, bedevilled by violence, was able to do this in a nuanced and sensitive and empathetic way.' Catriona Crowe, former Head of Special Projects, National Archives

> 'I do think that the [commemoration] programme fed into that confidence, not being afraid to develop a strong brand. It kind of allowed us to do that. That was maybe one of the first times we've seen something that was truly kind of cross-government and cross-department that involved the citizens, that involved local authorities, it really was a national movement almost. It was like the state in partnership with the citizens'. Senior Official, Decade of Centenaries Programme

However, Ferriter (2022) disagrees:

> "I don't think it registers much. I think we can delude ourselves into believing that we are a role model in some ways for how to do certain things. I'm not dismissing our achievements. We have to be conscious that we are very unusual in having had a century of unbroken democracy. That's no mean achievement and it's something to herald and it's something to highlight. Whether or not the rest of the world is interested in that however is another matter altogether'.

A special programme strand devised to engage and empower children and young people to explore and interrogate issues around identity and shared values, inspired them to consider what it means to be Irish and to articulate their ambitions and vision for Ireland's future.

> 'Identity is the most motivating thing for all people. We gave people a platform to explore their identity … who are we, what does it mean to be Irish right now? The second thing was the sense of community. Community is so important in a democracy… people being involved, being a part of things. And then the third piece was culture, our culture, the rich culture which enabled this vast tapestry of stories to be told'. John Concannon, Director *Ireland 2016*

> 'It became a huge big conversation about identity and we just caught the moment when people were ready to react and to embrace a more generous open narrative of who we are.' Michael O'Reilly, Policy adviser, *Ireland 2016*

However, in the same way that the handling of Ireland's commemoration required sensitivity and a nuanced understanding and acceptance of the complexity of nations, questions and suspicions remain about the appropriation of a national act of remembrance and reflection in the service of a new national narrative.

> 'I'm very sceptical of branding ... and of nation branding, because I think it simplifies and distorts and that's a terribly sweeping generalization to make … there's great gulfs between the rhetoric of revolution and the reality, there are ugly realities that have to be confronted, desperate things that are done and it's shot through with contradictions. I think it's very difficult to encapsulate all of that in a branding exercise. I would see nostalgia and romanticism triumphing over that complexity.' Diarmaid Ferriter, Academic, historian and member of the Decade of Centenaries Expert Advisory Group

Even in the wake of what was agreed to have been a very successful commemoration of a difficult moment in Ireland's history, *Ireland 2016* was one element of a ten-year initiative, with the highly contentious commemorations of the

Civil War and partition of Northern Ireland, which were to follow in the period 2018 to 2022.

> 'One of the legacies of this decade is a divided Ireland. That's not something to be celebrated and I'm not making that point in an overtly political way. You know, the reality of the legacy of the revolutionary decade is the border and the division of a small island, because those issues could not be resolved within a unified Ireland. That's a great tragedy. So you have to be conscious of that, you can talk about the achievements and brand things in a particular way, we're still talking today and dealing with the fallout, in often a very toxic way, of the division.' Diarmaid Ferriter, Academic, historian and member of the Decade of Centenaries Expert Advisory Group

Media coverage of *Ireland 2016*

While the primary dataset for this study was semi-structured interviews with key informants, the author undertook a review of a purposive sample of Irish media coverage, over two key dates, as a source of secondary data. Two keyword searches were conducted on LexisNexis, using the terms *Ireland 2016* and/or *Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme*, between 12th November 2014 and 30th December 2014 (the programme launch) and between 1st December 2016 and 9th January 2017 (the final month of the programme).

The first search on the date of the inaugural programme launch generated 24 individual news pieces. Initial news reports referred to the ambition of the commemoration to be '*inclusive, in their spirit and in their activity*' (Humphreys 2014). It emphasised the importance of '*actively engaging*' with citizens (Collins 2014) and the need for '*consultation and participation*' (MacNulty 2014). Furthermore, '*extensive planning and widespread consultation*' (Humphreys 2014) were required to '*get the entire nation involved*' (Murphy 2014) through '*meetings with local communities and organisations*' (Collins 2014), especially in a commemoration that '*belongs to the people of Ireland*' (Anderson 2014).

However, some media criticised the lack of consultation with relatives and key stakeholders, including the Expert Advisory Group who were set up to oversee the commemoration, as '*the empty rhetoric of consultation and inclusion*' (MacNulty 2014). Particular prominence was given to the '*thunderous protests*' (Anderson 2014) and the '*thunderous onslaught of screaming and window banging which plagued the launch*' (Byrne 2014). Accusations that '*the Government had got the tone wrong*' (McGreevy 2014) began to emerge, with the Programme launch described as '*a shambles*' (Murphy 2014), a '*shambolic launch*' (Anderson 2014), or even '*disrespectful*' and '*a joke*' (Flanagan 2014). '*Confusion and controversy*' ("1916 Rising centenary plans set out", *Belfast Telegraph Online*, 2014) was compounded by the '*historically illiterate and vacuous video*' (Ferriter 2014), *which sparked calls for a 'citizen-led and coherent demand for a new and better way of doing things'* (Meade 2014).

A second search using the same keywords of *Ireland 2016* and/or *Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme*, but for the period covering the end of the programme, between 1st December 2016 and 9th January 2017, produced 36 news reports. In stark contrast to the initial news reports, *Ireland 2016* was described as '*a momentous occasion for the country both nationally and locally*' (O'Sullivan 2016), '*an outstanding year … the public really took ownership of the commemoration*' (Ó Gairbhí 2016). Media coverage described the citizen's response to the centenary as '*not simply a sense* of *public participation but rather a sense of real public empowerment*' ("Kent is honoured as county stages more than 500 commemorations", *Irish Independent* 2016), being both '*well planned, dignified*' (Macken 2016) or '*dignified, moving and family friendly*' (Wallace 2016), and '*strong, surprising and mainly brilliant*' (Tipton 2014).

Particular attention was drawn to the high levels of attendance and participation through an '*extraordinary public response*' (Linehan 2016), recalling events where '*the 3000 strong crowd surged to their feet … a spectacular event that attracted thousands of people*' (Brouder 2016). Engagement and interest in the centenary surpassed expectations as one reporter noted that '*the level of interest at home and abroad has been truly staggering*' (Sheahan 2016), with '*more than one million people on to the streets of Dublin for the Easter Rising commemorations*' (Downing 2016).

Summary news reports described the centenary as '*a tremendous success*', or '*an outstanding success thanks to the community groups who played their part*' ("Cork's monumental role in shaping modern Ireland, *Corkman*, 2016). While others talked of how '*the response was extraordinary*' ("Bringing 1916 to life in our classrooms", *Irish Independent* 2016) and how '*every school took part in some capacity over the year … the numbers attending exceeded what we expected*' ("Bringing 1916 to life in our classrooms", *Irish Independent* 2016). The high level of interest and participation outside of Ireland was covered in a special feature in the Irish Independent where Irish ambassadors to Britain, Germany, Canada and the United States observed '*the reaction was positive from start to finish*' and '*the commemorations were for everyone, be they Irish* or *not*' (Clifford 2016).

There was a recognition of the distinctiveness of the Irish approach to commemoration where '*2016 provided a template for how multiple, often conflicting narratives and interpretations can be embraced in a spirit of learning rather than the affirmation of previously held beliefs … 2016 was about inclusion, respect, and historical complexity*' (Mulvagh 2016). While the inclusivity of the commemoration was also reflected in a letter to the Drogheda Independent where the writer observed '*the fact that the commemorations were inclusive and respectful clearly suggests* that *the best is yet to come'* ("A lasting memorial to Lady Kate", *Drogheda Independent* 2016).

Evidence of the prevailing concerns of citizens during 2016 is clear in the top three Twitter trends noted by the Irish Examiner (*"Rio, Rising, and Robbie's goal top Twitter trends*". 2016) which included #ireland2016 alongside #GE16 and #repealthe8th (the campaign to repeal the 8th amendment to the constitution allowing for legislation on abortion). However, not all media coverage was positive. The 1916 centenary featured along with '*Brexit, Trump in the USA, a wet Summer and a change* of *Government*' in The Kerryman's list of '*a year probably best forgotten'* ("Finuge: Countrywide" *Kerryman* 2016).

Nevertheless, there appeared to be a consensus in the media coverage of the overwhelming success of the centenary and, in particular, the ownership and engagement of citizens in its ideation and implementation: '*I liked the fact that Irish people nowadays largely see history as an ideological melting pot and detective story, not a tribal religion. And I loved the collaborative aspects of the celebration—the opportunities for people all over the country to have their say'* (Freyne 2016).

Conclusion

This research explores the potential of a new contribution to existing nation brand theory and practice, building on the concepts of competitive identity (Anholt 2010) and complexity theory (Kaufmann 2017). The research draws on Ireland's approach to the Decade of Centenaries and, specifically, the citizen-led activation and engagement in 'remembering and re-imagining Ireland' (*Ireland* 2016) as a mechanism of co-authoring and co-creating an authentic nation brand. In taking a case study approach, the research findings indicate that Ireland's unique approach to commemoration as a form of 'ethical remembrance' (Higgins 2016), facilitated and enabled citizens to be co-authors of a more nuanced and authentic national narrative. It also supports Saito (2010) in recognising the unique role of commemoration as a lens to examine the construction of national identity and its relationship to nation branding in a globalised world.

Most importantly, in examining Ireland's unique approach to commemoration as an act of participative democracy and citizen engagement, a new framework of nation branding is proposed which not only acknowledges the complexity of the nation, as proposed by Devereux (2022), but embraces it. Complexity theory upholds the importance of diversity and variation in both 'the content and interpretation' of national identity (Kaufmann 2017, p. 7), a concept which was central to the principle of inclusivity and the 'multiplicity of narratives' approach of *Ireland 2016*. The power of a national collective recollection of a shared history over a hundred years is a unique opportunity 'to set the received narrative of the events for another' (Bryan et al. 2013 p. 63). There was an unspoken but understood sense of permission-giving or legitimacy to 'remember, reflect and re-imagine' (*Ireland* 2016) and in this remembrance, to forge a new vision of Ireland and its place in the world for the future.

While Anholt's original concept of nation branding may have been co-opted as a tool of government corporate communications, there is something more substantial at stake, for citizens and nations, if the principles of co-creation and authenticity are front and centre in its ideation and efficacy. If, as Anholt (2007, p. 127) believes, 'competitive identity is about making people want to pay attention to a nation's achievements and believe in its qualities', then it is critical for any strategy to be successful that its key stakeholders, which in this case are the citizens, are invested in it.

The impetus to reframe a nation brand is particularly important for countries emerging from a violent conflict or civil war, where 'reality has dramatically changed' (Olins 2002, p. 246). The empowerment of citizens in nation branding is reinforced by Kaneva (2022a, b) in her study of '*Be Brave like Ukraine'* (banda.agency), which optimises the compelling narrative for an international audience of the bravery of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine is the latest in a growing number of conflict zones, which has resulted in mass migrations across continents and the consequent rise in anti-immigration and proto-fascist groups.

Although Aronczyk (2018) questions the role of nation branding in an increasingly hostile global context, she also contends that it is our historians who can help us to understand why the uglier side of nationalism has come to matter again and what its significance might be for a shared future. The latter is particularly relevant in the context of this article and in supporting the hypothesis that commemoration can act as a catalyst for a new nation brand.

Undoubtedly, increased access to new technologies and the rise of the blogosphere and social media have transformed the landscape of media and communications, with peer-to-peer networks creating new spheres of influence, persuasion and power. This represents a new challenge for nation brand practitioners, where the shift away from top-down 'official' campaigns in favour of grassroots channels of influence, means they are no longer in complete control of how the 'brand' is being represented or promoted to a growing networked audience. There are examples where countries have tinkered at the edges of citizen-generated media in the co-authoring of nation brand campaigns such as the @Sweden and @Ireland twitter accounts. While the former is managed by the Sweden.se team 'and a moose

@SweInstitute', a different individual is invited to curate the @Ireland feed each week, working to a set of broad guidelines. However, there can be an element of risk to this approach and it requires careful handling as, has happened on occasion, it can cause unforeseen consequences and 'brand issues' when guest curators post opinions which are perceived to be controversial.[4]

While this research has focused purely on qualitative research drawing on perceptions of key informants, combined with a sample overview of news reports, there is potential for future studies to examine the effect of Ireland's state commemoration, on citizen and media audiences, using other primary datasets. These might include, for example, a comprehensive study of news reportage which documents resistances against state-led actions and the exclusions inherent within these commemorative acts, analysis of the @Ireland twitter account during key commemorative events, or a content analysis of the Proclamations for a New Generation crafted by children and young people, which have been digitised by the National Library.

The challenges for governments and countries engaged in nation branding are considerable but to not engage in some form of reputation management and control carries a risk of losing out on significant economic and social benefits for citizens, and it allows a nation's brand to be determined without influence, ambition or guidance. The practice and study of nation branding is still a relatively recent phenomenon but it has grown exponentially in recent years, as evidenced by the volume and range of countries tracked in nation brand rankings, such as the Anholt-Ipsos and Brand Finance indices.

There is much to be learned yet about why and how different countries devise, implement and evaluate their nation brand strategies. Ireland, a small nation which is consistently ranked in the top twenty successful nation brands (brandfinance.com), has much to contribute to the practice and discourse. The *Ireland 2016* centenary programme revealed that, by empowering citizens to reflect and debate issues of national identity and what it means to be Irish in the twenty-first century, it positioned them as co-creators of their own nation brand. More importantly, it provided a framework for a courageous and collaborative approach to nation branding, one which not only champions achievements and shared values, but is bravely articulating the challenges it faces, in being a nation once again.

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[4] For example, when it was discovered that one of the guest curators of @Ireland, a young American graphic designer, who was visiting Ireland in the Summer of 2012 as the abortion referendum debate was in full flow, had strong pro-life beliefs, it generated 'an inferno-like debate' (White 2018) across both traditional and social media.

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