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Festivals, Social Order and Community Engagement: The Big Scream Halloween Festival, North East Inner City, Dublin

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This Blog was written by Dr. Theresa Ryan, TU Dublin, and is based on research undertaken as part of the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) funded Festspace project (<http://festspace.net/>).

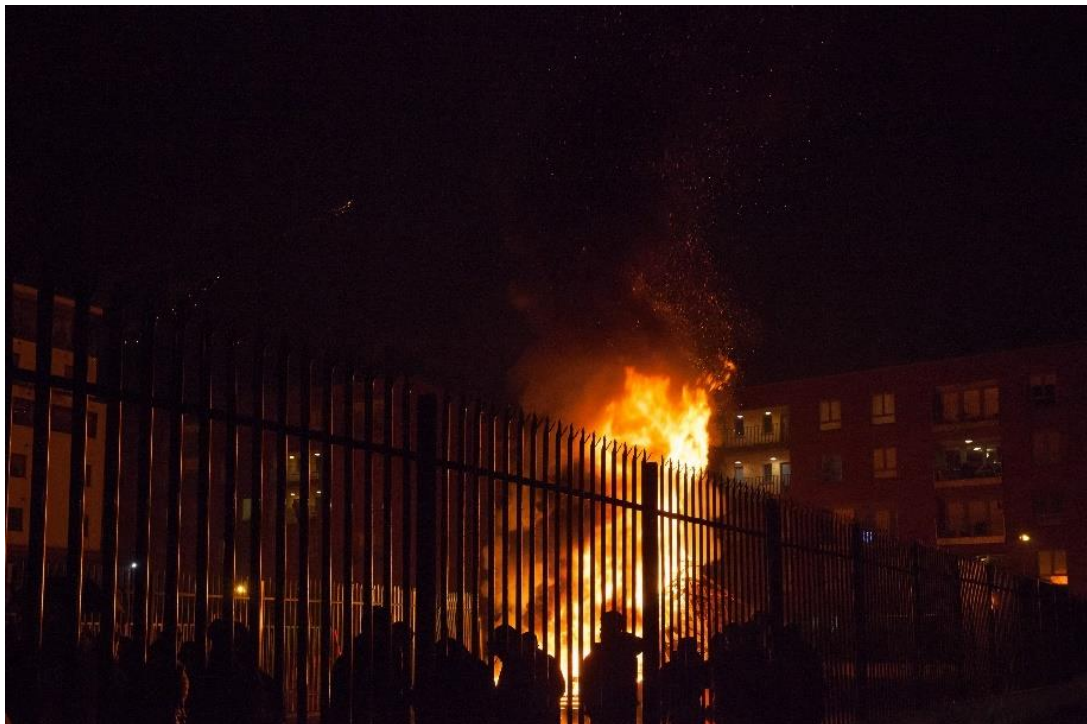


The festival of Halloween, celebrated every year on the 31st of October, has its origins in the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain. This was the most important of the four Celtic fire festivals and celebrated the beginning of the Celtic New Year (Gilroy 2000). In Celtic lore, the festival marked the boundary between summer and winter, light and darkness and was a time during which the border between the living and the dead was thought to become breachable (Rogers 2002). Samhain was a festival of transition and rituals, of supernatural energy, a time out of time where normal life was suspended, and many of the qualities of Samhain continue to resonate through the celebration of Halloween today (Rogers 2000). Traditions such as the lighting of bonfires, the wearing of costumes to ward off evil spirits, can all be linked back to these ancient times, even the practice of trick or treating can be thought of as a modern-day version of the Celtic offering of food to appease ancestral ghosts stalking the earth. Overtime, the festival has had many influences not least of which the Catholic Church's designation of the 1st of November as 'All Hallows Day' (All Saints Day), the eve of which is referred to as 'All Hallows Eve', becoming what we now know as Halloween. The festival has embraced new traditions, such as the carving of pumpkins, a practice adopted by Irish emigrants to America. Over time, the festival has become much more carnivalesque and spectacular and today, it typically involves children and adults dressing in Halloween costumes, going to parties, trick-or-treating at houses decorated with spooky decorations in neighbourhoods across many cities.



Ghostly decorations in houses and gardens across Dublin, Halloween 2020

The festival has now become a secular event, where participants make few conscious connections to its historical and religious heritage. For many it is an important social ritual, a multivocal festival that crosses cultures and boundaries, that is able to serve children, adolescents, and adults in different ways and with different meanings (Belk 1990). Participation in Halloween celebrations serves many different functions (Piatti-Farnell, 2020), including, as Belk (1990) suggests, the ability to transcend normal rules of propriety and relieve the tensions of social order. It is perhaps because of this that Halloween can sometimes be associated with anti-social behaviour. The lighting of unofficial bonfires and the illegal use of fireworks in public spaces across Dublin city, for example, has been a frequent occurrence at Halloween. Such behaviour causes not only physical and criminal damage to local parks and public spaces, but also anxiety and fear for locals.



An unofficial bonfire in Dublin City Centre on Halloween night 2019

In an effort to combat these issues, Dublin City Council has in recent years supported local communities to organise Halloween festivals in many public spaces across city neighbourhoods. One such festival, 'The Big Scream' takes place in the North East Inner City (NEIC), an area located very centrally in Dublin city and home to a number of small distinct communities. As ICON (Inner City Organisations Network 2020) explains, the community in the NEIC has become very ethnically diverse in recent years, and experiences higher rates of socio-economic disadvantage and marginalisation relative to the city and country more generally. Halloween in the NEIC has historically been characterised by anti-social behaviour, and has been commonly referred to in newspapers reports as being 'like a war zone' where unorganised and dangerous behaviour is commonplace in public spaces (Lynott, 2017). The core objectives of the 'The Big Scream' are to tackle some of these issues by bringing local communities together to 'create alternative ways of celebrating Halloween in a safe and fun environment, and to create an annual calendar event that the community would genuinely want to participate in and would look forward to in years to come' (Dublin City Community Co-operative, 2020, p. 4).

Since its first inception in 2016, the festival has grown to become an integral part of the NEIC social and community calendar, the 'festival itself is now expected, and there is a sense that it has created a change in how Halloween is perceived and celebrated' (Dublin City Community Co-operative, 2020, p. 23). In 2019, at post event de-briefings, the Gardaí (the Irish Police force) and Dublin City Council reported that there were no incidents of anti-social behaviour on Halloween night in the area, and that 'The Big Scream' festival has had a significant positive impact on anti-social behaviour on Halloween night in the community (Dublin City Community Co-operative, 2020, p. 17). The festival's success in this regard, has also been heralded on social media and across news reports. RTE news, (Ireland's national television and radio broadcaster), reported that anti-social behaviour at Halloween had reduced across the city, crediting 'The Big Scream' and other such festivals with the reduction (Kilraine, 2019). 'The Big Scream' has become an increasingly important festival in the NEIC, drawing crowds of participants from the surrounding community and beyond. It has effectively achieved its ambition of taking back Halloween, making it more open and inclusive, a celebration for all of the community to enjoy, transforming the public parks and spaces from the 'war zones' of previous years to 'fun zones' for people of all ages and backgrounds. The many events of the festival are attended by 'local people who have lived in NEIC communities for generations, by members of minority ethnic communities who are often newer to the NEIC, and also by people who are very socially excluded, such as homeless families who are living in temporary accommodation in or close to the NEIC area' (Dublin City Community Co-operative, 2020, p. 51). An evaluation of the 2019 event shows how the festival has succeeded in making the community feel safer, and comments from the local community illustrate how 'The Big Scream' turned Halloween into a night of 'atmosphere' where all the community are 'out together', but where 'there is no trouble', effectively making 'Halloween feel safe' again (2020, p.42).



'The Big Scream' Halloween Festival 2019 in Dublin's NEIC, a 'fun zone' for the community

(Source: Dublin City Community Co-operative, 2020)

The question of course arose as to how this success could continue in an era of COVID-19, where engagement with public spaces is restricted and where festivals and events have been largely cancelled, postponed or moved to an online environment. With the city experiencing the tight government imposed level 5 restrictions, families were encouraged to celebrate in the safety of their own homes rather than in the city's parks and public spaces. In some areas efforts to prevent illegal bonfires resulted in the boarding up of green spaces, making them inaccessible to all. Thus, across Dublin, Halloween festivals that had become such a part of the fabric of the city were absent, although many were reinvented in virtual form.



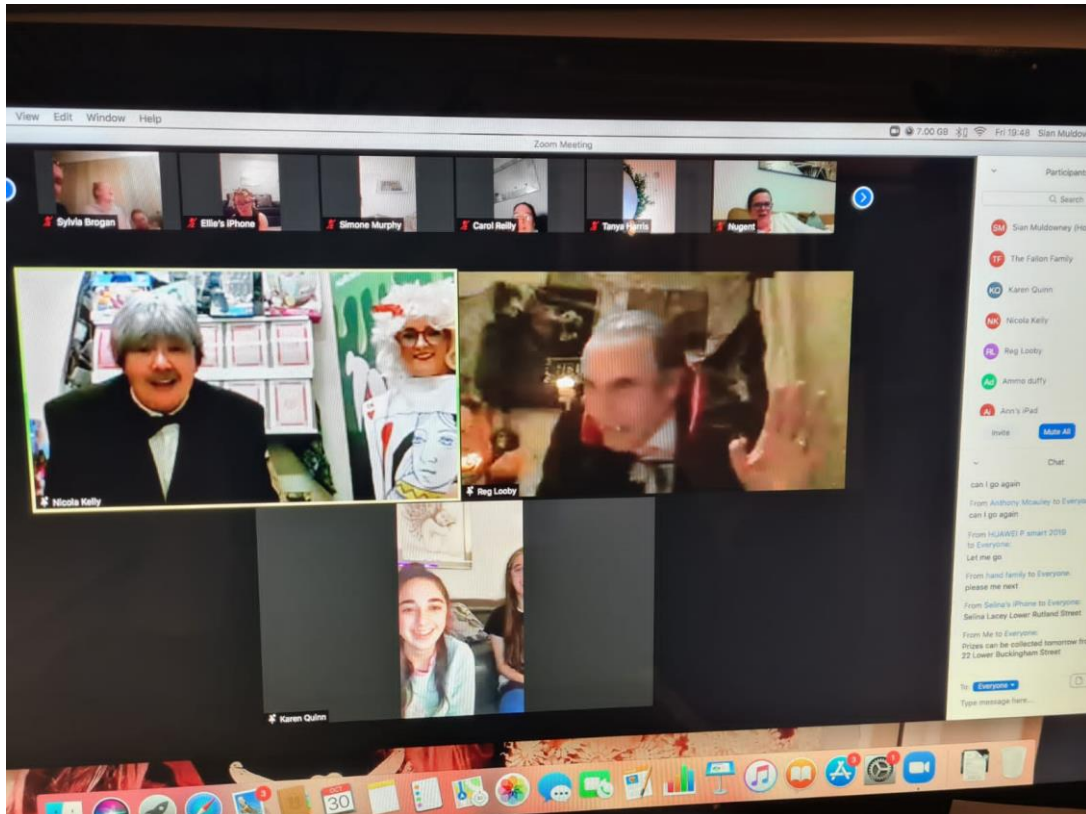
Fencing constructed around a small park in Dublin 8, in an effort to prevent illegal bonfires & fireworks

In Dublin's North East Inner City, 'The Big Scream' underwent a virtual reinvention, but its on-street carnival, such an important feature of the event, was cancelled. Nevertheless, engaging with the parks and spaces in the NEIC area remained an important feature of the festival. While physical gatherings were not possible under COVID-19 restrictions, engagement with local parks and spaces was encouraged through for example, the organisation of fairy trails, 'find the fangs' events as well as scavenger hunts. Streets and parks became a veritable gallery of portraits of children and adults from previous years' festivals. These posters graced buildings, streets and park railings throughout the area, adding colour and vibrancy and providing a sense of the carnivalesque atmosphere of previous years' festivals. Children were encouraged to take photographs standing beside their portraits and to share on social media, and competitions for counting the number of portraits decorating the various building and park railings around the NEIC took place.



Engaging with parks & public space took on an alternative form during this year's Halloween festival in the NEIC, Dublin.

Encouraging the local community to engage with public spaces and parks in a safe and socially distanced way was only one aspect of the festival. The online space enabled a level of engagement that brought together a disparate community in a way that had not previously been achieved. Online social media games and quizzes encouraged the sharing of 'best dog Halloween costumes' or the 'worst trick or treating' experiences. Bingo on zoom brought extended families together in a way that did not normally occur at Halloween, as traditionally children and younger adults and families attend the street carnival or go trick or treating, leaving older relatives at home. Communities from different areas of the NEIC, who are generally divided, came together online to play bingo or the online quiz. In this online forum there were no geographic, social or other boundaries, and the impact of these events in bringing 'divided communities together in way that had not happened before' was clear in interviews undertaken with the festival's organisers.



Online bingo helping to create a strong community connection

(Source: <http://bigscreen.ie/photos/#107>)

All of this activity suggests that DCC and the organisers of the Big Scream, in partnership with communities' actors and agencies, have managed to invent new Halloween festivities in a way that attracts support from across different community groups. This year, these community efforts managed to withstand the disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and to imaginatively devise ways that enabled people to maintain a sense of communal celebration, to use the district's public spaces in ways that marked them as safe, open and accessible spaces for family and community enjoyment. The festival engaged and united a community, crossing generational, social and geographic divides, providing a moment of exception, a collective sense of fun and celebration during a particularly difficult time. The success of the virtual events demonstrated new means of involving and connecting communities that will be built on post COVID-19 and future festivals are likely to incorporate both offline and online events.

Since its inception in 2016, the festival has supported a range of community, voluntary and statutory organisations to work together in a coherent, collegial and cooperative way to develop a large-scale community festival (Dublin City Community Co-operative, 2020). Overcoming the challenges imposed by COVID-19 restrictions has provided a new confidence and an awareness of what can be achieved going forward. The success of the festival has resulted in the creation of a new Christmas festival, 'The Big Cheer' which aims to build on the benefits generated by 'The Big Scream'. All of this clearly attests to the power of community festivals, to incite change, to unite and engage communities, and to address many of the issues that communities are faced with. The real challenge now is to continue to maintain and build on these successes in successive years.