



Adequate Information Management in Europe

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The Case of Ireland

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1: THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL APPROACHES TO INFORMATION/NEWS MANAGEMENT

In Irish media, definitions of the terms 'information management' and 'news management' are generally sourced in the English-language literatures relating to journalism practice, public relations practice, political communication, media theory and political science which, in the case of the first four, largely originate in Britain and the USA. Although widely understood by journalists, theorists and the general public, the terms are not used extensively and their precise meanings are contentious. The essence of these concepts has been discussed over several decades. They have been associated with a variety of terms, including, among others: spinning, image consultancy, perception management, image management, media management, news manipulation, damage limitation, strategic communication, public relations, propaganda and information warfare. Public relations practitioners employ a variety of devices to achieve their news management goals including, among others: selective release of information, information concealment, information overload, release of false information, advance leaks of information, photo opportunities, event promotion, pseudo-events, embargoes, news blackouts and censorship.

The term 'news management' may also be used in a business context and the term 'information management' in a business and/or ICT context. Their meanings in these contexts are not the ones we are using here. Our focus is on their use in news media, public relations and political communication.

Irish literature on the general area of media management is limited. Indeed, the first Irish university degrees in political communication came on stream in the late 1990s. 'Despite the varied and vociferous prognostications on the Irish media, remarkably little data on Irish journalists has been systematically gathered by social scientists' (Corcoran: 2004). The same could be said about their sources. While journalists' reactions to news manipulation vary widely, production and deadline pressures may result in managed news messages being taken at face value and forwarded to the public without adequate examination.

In constructing a theoretical framework to map activity in this area, it is necessary to include news management in the matrix. However, it is just one

element in a complex process involving numerous actors and information trajectories. As a concept, news management is perhaps neither wide enough nor deep enough to occupy a more significant position. It would be wrong to exaggerate its importance. That the senders of information, the shapers and shunters of news, want to manage it in some way is hardly surprising, given their investment in generating and distributing it. Any notion that journalists are, in general, gullible receivers of managed information is problematic. Their ability to assess incoming material is limited by the space and time boundaries of their medium and the pressures arising from a commercial media market in which some news organisations may value cost-saving over quality.

Although the definitions which follow focus largely on Britain, they are broadly applicable to the Irish context. As this research project develops, closer examination of the political communication processes in Britain and Ireland may uncover differences between the two countries as to how media management is effected. Manning (2001) offers a particularly useful insight into the complexities of the relationship between the journalist, her sources and its impact on democracy in Britain.

News management:

Political parties, government agencies and all major institutions employ news managers and 'spin doctors' whose task is to maximise the favourable presentation of policy and action and minimize any negative aspect. The overriding goal is to have either a positive or an unconcerned public opinion, while truth and even 'reality' take second place. It is hard to say if the media are actually more influenced than in the past, but it has probably become harder for the media to make any independent assessment of their own of the value of information provided to them in such volume. As a result, the responsibility for truth is left to the source, more often than not (McQuail 2000: 290-291).

The crucial art of a spin doctor is to understand how to bargain with information: how much to release; when it should be released to optimise its value and what can be secured in return for the release of information...spin doctors may anticipate, for example, that while not serving simply as uncritical mouthpieces for spin doctors, corre-

spondents enjoying the benefits of insider briefings should include in their selection of the most salient themes those identified by the spin doctor... the capacity of press officers working within government to control the channels through which information flows from the inside to the outside world will depend upon specific political and historical circumstances. Press officers spin most effectively in circumstances where journalists are most dependent on them. In circumstances where journalists can obtain alternative versions and interpretations, or more comprehensive background 'contextual information' from other sources, the authority of the spin doctor is diminished in proportion (Manning 2001: 114-116).

The activities or tactics associated with individuals or groups, including government officials, public relations officials and activist or lobby organisations, attempting to secure what they consider to be positive or favourable news coverage (Allan 2004: 222).

Information management (by government):

By this is meant activities designed to control or manipulate the flow of information from institutions of government to the public sphere beyond... The dissemination of information is not, however, the only purpose of governmental communication. Information is a power resource, the astute deployment of which can play a major role in the management of public opinion... Information can be freely given out in the pursuit of democratic government, but it can also be suppressed, censored, leaked, and manufactured in accordance with the more particular interests of a government and the organs of state power (McNair 2003: 157).

Media management (in politics)

...the wide variety of practices whereby political actors may seek to control, manipulate or influence media organisations in ways which correspond to their political objectives... media management comprises activities designed to maintain a positive politician-media relationship, acknowledging the needs which each has of the other... the first newspaper interview with a public figure was conducted in the US in 1859 (Boorstin 1962), and...the first American news release was issued in 1907. The interview form was imported

to Britain in the 1880s, as subsequently were all the techniques of influencing media coverage pioneered in America (Silvester 1993) (McNair 2003: 135-136)

Image management (in politics)

The supply by politicians of structured news events for the purposes of maximising favourable media coverage is accompanied by a heightened concern with image: the personal image of political actors on the one hand and the corporate image of the party on the other. In the area of personal image, modern politicians are judged not only by what they say and do, but how they say and do it (McNair 2003: 147)

News manipulation (in politics)

The astute politician will know...that in a situation where media organisations have finite resources of time and money, where deadlines are tight and exclusives increasingly important, there is much to be gained by ensuring the journalists' ease of supply, providing...an "information subsidy" (Schlesinger & Tumber 1994) (McNair 2003: 71).

Information management has existed in Ireland for several hundred years. As Nowlan notes:

...the most effective means available to government to influence the press was direct or indirect patronage and bribery. These practices were all familiar in Britain and much criticised by reformers, but, in Ireland, they were employed (by the British Government) with even greater intensity and resolution during the turbulent years, in political and social terms, from the seventeenth-eighties onwards into the early nineteenth century (1984:11).

Information management activities continued after the foundation of the state in 1922. 'Government and republicans realised early on that the newspapers were as important as any territory being fought over (in the civil war), and both sides evolved media management techniques that varied from the persuasive to the intimidatory' (Horgan 2001: 8). Two notable later examples were the establishment of the Irish Press newspaper by the leader of the Fianna Fail party in 1931 and the launch of the Irish News Agency by the Irish Government in 1950.

In more recent times, British Government expenditure on media activities on the island of Ireland continued. According to Feeney:

In the fiscal year 1989-1990, the NIO (Northern Ireland Office) spent £20 million on PR work and information. The Northern Ireland Information Service, the press division of the NIO, delivers three packets of press releases every day: that could amount to a dozen separate items. In 1992 it had a staff of 58 in Belfast and London. In 1990 it spent £7.2 million in (Northern Ireland) alone for a population of 1.5 million...The police and (before 1994) the British Army also deploy vast PR resources which amount to a total of about £20 million (per annum) (1997: 44).

Corporate public relations became widespread in Ireland in the 1970s, often in relation to publicly quoted companies and business people of high net wealth who had a public profile. Since then, the number of PR consultancies has grown, as has the range of specialist services they provide. Political parties embraced the image and policy consultancy services of such companies to maintain or build popularity with the electorate. The power of television was particularly significant in this image game. The physical appearance and dress of politicians became more important, as did their ability to perform satisfactorily in public interviews on TV and radio. According to Chubb:

During the seventies, the major market survey organisations refined their techniques for measuring political opinions and became increasingly expert at drawing inferences from the data. By the late seventies their published findings were an important part not only of election coverage but of inter-election political reporting as well (1984: 80).

Political parties hired image consultants to groom their front-line representatives in media techniques. Such activity would typically involve advice on dress, enunciation, interview skills, strategies to anticipate media questions and advice on how best to prepare answers in advance. Business people likely to find themselves being interviewed in the media, also availed of such 'training'. It was common for former and practising journalists to deliver these grooming sessions. In addition, political parties directly employed an increasing number of consultants or mind-

ers to implement their public relations strategies and communications programmes, to manage party image and to improve election performance. A head count conducted in 2002 by British government officials found that the Irish government, serving less than four million citizens at the time, employed more spin doctors than its British counterpart, which was serving a population approaching 60 million and which had become notorious for the aggressive practices of its chief spinners. According to McCarthy:

One of the first measures introduced by Bertie Ahern (Irish prime minister) after the 1997 general election was to establish a Media Monitoring Unit in Government Buildings. When Tony Blair... was tackled in the House of Commons about the bills his government was running up on advisers, he replied that 'the Irish Taoiseach' (prime minister) had more people at his beck and call. In the 12 months before the last general election (2002), the total spent by (Irish) government departments on PR firms and their own press officers came to Euro 11 million (2004).

According to Leahy: 'The internationalisation of political consulting has been a phenomenon of the last decade' (2004). The two largest Irish political parties have hired election-winning expertise from the USA. Fianna Fail engaged the services of Bob Shrum in their successful 1997 and 2002 election campaigns. Shrum directed John Kerry's bid for the US presidency in 2004. Fine Gael was advised by Stanley Greenberg in 2004. Greenberg has worked as a political adviser in over 40 countries and has served Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Gerhard Schroeder and Nelson Mandela among others. Such election expertise is hired from abroad because it is left to be absent in Ireland (Leahy, 2004).

New aggressive public relations tactics have also produced dividends for certain companies. The Irish low fares airline, Ryanair, is an example. Its chief executive is happy to organise media stunts or buy extensive newspaper advertising to ridicule politicians and organisations that Ryanair regards as having hindered its business activity in some way. Irish media tend to focus on the interpersonal confrontations in such situations and ignore more significant issues such as the sustainability of cheap air travel or the additional pollution caused by growth in this sector. Media consultancy and grooming services extended beyond the political and financial elites. It became common

for the spokespersons of lobby and voluntary activist groups to take courses in 'handling the media'. In turn, some of those responsible for educating news reporters examined the advice that the groomers gave their clients in order to develop interview technique counter strategies. This became necessary because some sources appeared to have more control over interviews and their outcomes than the interviewers. Organisations that invested sufficient time in media training reaped rewards. For instance, Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Provisional IRA, has steadily increased its support base in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland on the back of, among other things, slick media performances by some of its senior spokespersons.

2: NATIONAL JOURNALISM CULTURE

Irish journalism culture draws on its own traditions, those of the English-speaking world, particularly British and North American, and to a lesser extent from those of other European countries. This is hardly surprising given Ireland's close connections with Britain and the USA over the centuries. The Irish diaspora is in excess of 70 million people worldwide, which is a large figure given that the population of the Republic of Ireland breached four million in 2004, the highest it had been for over 130 years. Some 45 million people claim Irish ancestry in the USA.

British and North American influences enter Irish journalism at various levels and in different ways. The most significant factor is the penetration of the Irish market by British television and newspapers. Competition in Irish national media is intense. British media compete directly with Irish media. For instance, British television channels captured some 48% of the Irish audience in 2001 (Loughrey, cited in Truetzschler 2004: 123). All British national newspapers circulate in Ireland. As a result, over 30 Irish and British national newspapers sell on the Irish market. Irish national newspapers are more expensive than their British counterparts and value added tax is imposed on them, which is not the case in Britain. In 2001 about one-in-four daily and one-in-three Sunday national newspapers sold in Ireland were British (Truetzschler 2002: 1) The circulation of British national Sunday newspapers in Ireland increased by 35% between 1989 and 2003, according to Curran. By late 2003, total national Sunday newspaper circulation in Ireland

was 1.28 million, of which 44% were British-owned titles (2004: 4).

Some British newspapers have a strong anti-EU stance and use their pages to attack the European project. Although many of these stories circulate in Ireland, they don't appear to have had significant influence on Irish public opinion in relation to EU issues. A number of British national newspapers have opened Irish offices in a bid to increase the attractiveness of their products on the Irish market. These offices produce pages specifically for their Irish editions. In such cases, as far as possible, British copy is 'rinsed' for the Irish edition to ensure it is acceptable to Irish readers or is replaced entirely by Irish copy. On the popular tabloids the policy, predictably, is to give the readers what they want. This can result in diametrically opposed versions of a story appearing in the Irish and British editions of the same newspaper. An example appeared on the front page of *The Sun* on the day the Euro was launched in January 2002. The Irish edition headlined a positive piece 'Dawn of a new era' while the British edition headlined a negative story 'Dawn of a new error'.

There are also close professional connections between Irish and British journalism. The vast majority of Irish journalists belong to the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), which is also the major union for journalists in Britain. However, the level of journalist migration between the two countries is not as high as it might be. In addition, the organisational and editorial structures of media companies in Ireland and Britain are broadly similar.

An increasingly important influence on journalism culture in Ireland occurs via the media education system where journalism textbooks from Britain and the USA are widely used because of the dearth of Irish titles. This situation partly arises for reasons of scale. The total number of journalism students in Ireland at any given time does not justify, on financial grounds, the publication of an extensive range of Irish journalism textbooks. As a result, the influence of British and North American texts is significant. Journalism education at university degree level only came on stream in Ireland in the early 1990s, whereas journalism has been offered at third level in the USA for over 100 years, giving rise to an extensive back-catalogue of journalism textbooks and academic media analysis. Ireland is in the early stages of making good this intellectual lacuna.

2.1: Historical

Since the foundation of the state in 1922, history and politics shaped Irish media and, in turn, were shaped by them (Horgan 2001). In the decade prior to independence, the major newspapers were the Irish Independent and the Irish Times. The former served the Catholic middle class, which was only moderately republican in outlook. The latter served the wealthier Protestant community, which was broadly in favour of the Union with Britain but also had a strong liberal undercurrent. The 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty allowed 26 of the 32 counties of Ireland to separate from Britain. Six of the nine counties of the northern province of Ulster remained under British control. This aspect of the Treaty gave rise to intense political conflict in the new state, shaped its political future for decades to come and resulted in a short but bitter civil war between the pro-Treaty and anti-Treaty sides in 1922-23. These factions in turn eventually gave rise to the two major political parties in the state, both conservative, both republican. Each, the more republican Fianna Fail (soldiers of Ireland) and the more conservative Fine Gael (Irish race), became associated with competing national newspaper groups. In the case of Fine Gael, it was the existing Evening Herald, Irish Independent and Sunday Independent titles. To counter this influence, the leader of Fianna Fail, Eamon de Valera, launched his own newspapers. These were the Irish Press in 1931, the Sunday Press in 1949 and the Evening Press in 1954. Fianna Fail has been in government for 54 of the 82 years of the state's existence.

The first national radio service was launched in 1926 under tight Government control. During the Second World War censorship of both mainstream and other media was widespread. The 1950s saw one manifestation of a media management policy when the Government established the short-lived (1950-1957) Irish News Agency. British television became available in Ireland in this decade also. The first Irish national television service appeared in 1961. The new medium played a major role in the development of Irish society over the following decades and ushered in a process of secularisation. Privately owned commercial radio came on stream in the late 1980s and was followed by privately owned television in 1998. British newspapers, especially the popular tabloids, have taken a particular interest in the Irish market over the last two decades and have grown their cir-

ulation figures. The three Press titles, published by the most overtly political media organisation in the history of the state, ceased publication in 1995. Foreign, especially British, companies have shown an increased interest in purchasing Irish media in recent years in a pluriform market which is characterised by agglomeration and rationalisation (Horgan 2001: 1-4).

The largest media entity is Independent News & Media, which owns four of the 11 Irish national newspaper titles and has stakes in three others. It is estimated that the group publishes about 80% of all newspapers in Ireland (Truetzschler 2004: 124). Its chief executive officer, A.J.F. O'Reilly, took control of the group in 1973 and has grown it substantially in the intervening period. It operates on four continents in eight countries including Ireland, Britain, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. It publishes over 165 newspaper and magazine titles which, taken together, have a weekly circulation of 13.5 million copies. It operates 53 online sites, which have 95 million page impressions per month in aggregate. The group's assets were valued at US\$4.2 billion in 2004 when it had over 11,000 employees world-wide. In 2003 it generated revenues of US\$1,573 million and posted an operating profit of US\$270 million. It is credited with launching the so-called compact or dual edition of broadsheet newspapers. This innovation has increased circulation figures for The Independent in Britain, which is owned by the group, and the Irish Independent in Ireland.

A perceived gradual improvement in the quality of Irish journalism over the last 50 years is of note. In 1954 the German Ambassador to Ireland said: 'Irish journalists... are intellectually incapable of comprehending world events... If Ireland is a small country on the sidelines of world political events, that is no excuse for the relatively poor quality of its press...The Irish press in general only reaches the level of a provincial press...The papers have no foreign correspondents... The journalists are badly paid, so that they lack the incentive to improve their knowledge, and they have no resources to undertake foreign travel' (Lee 1989: 607). Ten years after the German Ambassador's comments and following Ireland's first unsuccessful application to join the Common Market in 1963, the Irish Independent introduced a weekly survey of the Continental European press. This was regarded as an innovation at the time (Horgan 2001: 95).

In a still difficult, but improved, economic environment 20 years later, Chubb wrote:

...the quality of (Irish) political journalism, both newspaper and broadcasting, has risen considerably in recent years. Investigative journalism began to develop from the late sixties, as it did also on television. A race of specialists appeared and multiplied - political correspondents, economic correspondents, experts on local affairs, health, education and so on. Their knowledge of their own subjects is impressive. Staffed with resourceful experts of this kind, the press - indeed the media as a whole - carry out one of the major functions of the Oireachtas (parliament), that of scrutinising the conduct of governments and the administration, far better than do the deputies (members of the lower house of parliament) and senators (members of the upper house of parliament) themselves (1984: 80).

In recent decades Irish media have experienced the effects of globalization and a much greater degree of internationalisation than formerly.

In a sense the mediascape is a developing 'shared culture'. We can ask what kind of culture is it? Is it a homogeneous Anglo-American imperial culture that Irish people will eventually be submerged in, or does it provide the opportunity for Irish people to insert their particular cultural nuances into a developing global sensitivity? Given the dual processes of globalisation and specialisation/fragmentation that have taken place in the media and allied industries, this is a very difficult question to answer (Tovey & Share 2000: 396).

2.2: Political

The support which Independent group newspapers gave to Fine Gael, the second largest political party in the state, was not of the consistency or scale which Press group newspapers gave to Fianna Fail, the largest political party. In fact, Horgan warns: 'To suggest...that the Independent group papers were closely linked to one political party would be an overstatement...To the extent that (they) supported Fine Gael, it was primarily because (they) supported the Catholic middle-class and commercial groupings, of which Fine Gael happened to be the most coherent

and conservative political expression' (2001: 64-65). In the first 50 years of the state's existence, Independent newspapers were critical of Fine Gael policies when the need arose. In the O'Reilly era, the group was perceived to take a more neutral stance from the late 1970s onwards. It tended to be critical of any political party that failed to run the economy to its liking or in a way that threatened its steadily expanding commercial interests. Indeed, the 1997 election saw the Irish Independent urging readers to support a Fianna Fail coalition and not the incumbent Fine Gael coalition. The Irish Press 'attempted to appeal to the same coalition of interests as did the party (Fianna Fail): a sometimes uneasy mix of small farmers, the urban working class, indigenous industrialists and the nationalist political position... Its eventual decline (in 1995)...has been broadly interpreted as symptomatic of the break-up of the discourse of "official Ireland"' (Tovey & Share 2000: 375).

Thus, some 75 years after the foundation of the state, it could be argued that whatever historical support mechanisms had existed in the past between the state's largest political parties and its major national newspapers had now dissipated.

The coverage of politics in Irish media is extensive. Reporting is usually issue-specific with an emphasis on interpersonal and inter-party confrontation. Between elections, the media likes to stage verbal confrontations between politicians of different parties on particular issues. In election periods, the media tends to portray the campaign as if it were a horserace. Indeed, the outcomes of elections are betted on in the same way as horse races. The media examines the past form of the candidates and issues predictions about likely winners and losers, while feeding the latest public opinion poll results into the mix. Like horseraces, some elections are regarded as more important than others. Journalists regard those to national parliament as highly significant whereas those to the European Parliament are, at best, a minor spectacle. The precise nature of the relationship between politicians and the media is difficult to gauge. Following revelations about allegedly corrupt politicians arising from a number of public tribunals of inquiry, some feel the relationship has never been more adversarial. Others, however, perceive it to be rather cosy. According to Truetzschler: 'Most Irish newspapers are politically conservative and have a middle class orientation' (2004: 116).

It is important to distinguish the political positions of journalists from those of the organisations that employ them. Corcoran conducted a survey of the political preferences of Irish journalists in 1997, based on a questionnaire developed by a team of international scholars led by Patterson and Donsbach. Their survey had been carried out earlier by teams of researchers in the USA, Britain, Germany, Sweden and Italy. The Irish survey produced the following results:

- On the political spectrum, Irish journalists identified more with the left than the right. On a scale where right was seven, left was one and four was centre, the mean score for Irish journalists was 3.15. Only the Italian journalists considered themselves more liberal. The mean scores for the other countries were: Italy (3.01); USA (3.32); Germany (3.39); Sweden (3.45); and Britain (3.46). Whereas 11% of Italian journalists placed themselves on the extreme left, only 3.6% of Irish journalists did so. While 68% of Irish journalists placed themselves left of centre, no journalist placed herself on the extreme right.
- Irish journalists perceived the news organisations they worked for to be more conservative than themselves. Only the Italian journalists saw their news organisations as being clearly left of centre at 3.76. The other countries scored as follows: USA (3.98); Ireland (4.22); Sweden (4.22); Germany (4.27); and Britain (4.36).
- Irish journalists saw themselves as substantially more liberal than their audiences. The difference between Irish journalists' mean position and that of their audiences was more than a full point (3.15 v 4.48). This was the largest perceived difference of the six countries surveyed. The only other country to record a gap of more than a full point was the USA (3.32 v 4.47). The gap between journalists and audiences was smallest in Sweden (3.45 v 4.11) with Italy and Britain showing slightly larger gaps.
- The ownership of Irish media is in few hands and the editorial position of much of the industry is generally held to be centre-right. There is no correlation between Irish journalists' political beliefs and those of the news organisations for which they work. A more diverse ownership pattern in the media might give rise to a wider range of political positions therein. It would appear that Irish journalists' political partisanship is not relevant in determining the jobs they hold.
- A comparison of which political parties were sup-

ported by the public and which by journalists indicated that the gap journalists perceived between themselves and their audiences was real. The support levels of the public and journalists respectively for Irish political parties in 1997 were:

- Fianna Fail - 44% v 5.6%
- Fine Gael - 27% v 10.3%
- Labour Party - 11% v 34.6%
- Progressive Democrats - 4% v 2.8%
- Green Party - 4% v 6.5%
- Other parties - 11% v 2.8%
- No party preference - N/A v 37.4%

Thus the largest party in the state, Fianna Fail, was significantly under represented among journalists and the second largest party, Fine Gael, was underrepresented. Furthermore, the largest of the small parties, the socialist Labour Party, was significantly over represented among journalists. However, Corcoran notes that: '... the largest single group of journalists claim no party preference, probably because they see neutrality as a key element of their journalistic objectivity' (2004).

2.3: Legal

Numerous pieces of Irish legislation have implications for journalists and the types of information they are free to publish or broadcast. As in many countries, for historical and other reasons, regulation of broadcasting is more extensive than that which applies to newspapers. Although freedom of expression is guaranteed in the 1937 Irish Constitution, the guarantee is restricted. Article 40(6) of the Constitution states:

The State guarantees liberty for the exercise of the following rights, subject to public order and morality: -

The right of the citizen to express freely their convictions and opinions. The education of public opinion being, however, a matter of such grave import to the common good, the State shall endeavour to ensure that organs of public opinion, such as radio, the press, the cinema, while preserving their rightful liberty of expression, including criticism of Government policy, shall not be used to undermine public order or morality or the authority of the State.

The publication or utterance of blasphemous, seditious, or indecent matter is an offence which shall be punished in accordance with law.

The Constitution is now viewed as a creature of its time and a conservative document. The following pieces of legislation, among others, have implications for journalists: Official Secrets Act, Defamation Act, Copyright and Related Rights Act, Electronic Commerce Act, Broadcasting Act, and the Freedom of Information Amendment Act; as does the common law misdemeanour of criminal contempt of court. Of these, libel and contempt are perhaps the two areas of the law of most direct interest to journalists (Murphy 2000). Newspaper publishers have been concerned about the operation of libel laws for several decades. Juries decide both liability and the size of damages in High Court defamation proceedings. The perception is that they tend generally to favour plaintiffs. Concerns focus on legal costs arising from such actions and quantum of damages. A party losing a straightforward three-day High Court libel trial can expect to incur costs in excess of Euro 325,000 with any award on top of that. One expensive libel case involving an Irish politician is estimated to have cost a newspaper publisher circa Euro 2.5million.

The representative body of Irish national newspapers, National Newspapers of Ireland, began talks with the Government as far back as 1985 seeking libel law reform. Since then a number of reports have recommended changes in the libel laws, including one on the promotion and protection of the right of freedom of opinion and expression from a UNCHR special rapporteur in 2000. It stated: '...libel actions are seriously inhibiting journalism in Ireland...Writers, editors and publishers may become increasingly reluctant to report and publish matters of public interest because of the large costs of defending such actions and the big awards granted in these cases' (Bourke 2004: 18). Following widespread debate on these issues over several years, Justice Minister, Michael McDowell, is expected to propose changes to libel law, the establishment of a press council, and new laws on privacy in 2005. It is unclear whether the press council will be statutory or voluntary. Such proposals contain a trade-off between the politicians and the publishers. In return for making libel trials less expensive, publishers will be expected to accept the establishment of a press council and, perhaps, new laws on privacy, a concept largely absent in existing Irish media law.

According to a former editor of the Irish Times, the proposals come at a time when libel is less of a problem than in the past:

The newspapers have pretty well got libel licked. After years of being ripped off, set up and treated as a sort of windfall pension-fund by opportunistic litigants - along with many genuine ones - they got their act together.

First, they started seriously, training reporters and sub-editors in how to avoid libel. Second, they started fighting back, increasingly obliging litigants to go into court, rather than paying them off for nuisance-value. Third, they actually began to win some cases...

There are now fewer confident litigants. Buccaneer lawyers are less likely to be gung-ho in their advice. In part, this is probably due to the exposure of some of yesterday's litigants as today's charlatans (Brady 2004: 33).

A 2003 survey of Irish newspaper journalists on the 'chilling' effects of libel law found that:

- A significant number of stories – between two and 10 per journalist sampled per year – were omitted by lawyers or editors and further significant numbers were withheld by the journalists themselves; or emasculated, either by lawyers or editors or by the journalists themselves.
- A significant proportion of omitted and emasculated stories possessed a genuine public-interest element and a significant proportion of such stories related to political figures (including non-elected public officials) and to the activities of business people and companies.
- Most complaints of libel were perceived to be motivated by a desire to stifle publicity and thus were in line with what Canan & Pring (1988 a & b) identified as the Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP).
- The allocation of newsroom resources in terms of the tasking and timetabling of journalists contributed to the chilling effect of libel law (Bourke 2004: 11 & 34-35).

The size of payouts in some libel cases encourages a cautious approach to routine reporting work in Irish newsrooms and serves to curtail the publication of certain stories containing negative allegations about powerful and/or wealthy individuals or organisations. As a result, debate in the public sphere is not as wide reaching, open or comprehensive as it might be. The fear of libel restricts the output of reporters.

Journalists welcomed the introduction of the Freedom of Information Act 1997, which entitled citizens to: consult official records held by government departments and other state agencies; have information on them corrected or updated; and access the reasons for decisions of public bodies which affect them. The legislation was restricted in a 2003 Amendment Act. This abolished a provision in the original legislation which allowed the release of government papers once they were five years old; placed restrictions on access to other categories of government information and introduced an expensive revised fee structure (Conolly 2005: 334-335 & 347-348).

2.4: Economic

All media in Ireland compete for a share of the advertising cake. The national public service broadcaster, RTE, which operates three TV channels and four radio stations, provides a typical range of public service outputs. Although it carries advertising, it also benefits from an annual TV licence fee. In 2004 this amounted to Euro 152 per household which generated in excess of Euro 160 million for RTE. Commercial competitors in the broadcast sector have demanded a share of this licence fund, claiming that RTE uses this money 'to bid up the price of foreign programmes and to keep down the cost of television advertising in Ireland, thus distorting the market' (Kenny 2004: 21). However, following an investigation, the Irish Competition Authority rejected a claim that the public service broadcaster engaged in predatory pricing. Competition to RTE consists of one national TV channel, TV3, one national radio station, a network of local commercial stations and a network of community and special interest stations.

According to Laffan & Tonra: '...the dramatic increase in Irish (economic) growth rates in the second half of the 1990s, the so-called "Celtic Tiger" phenomenon, caught most observers by surprise as the Irish economy outperformed all others in the European Union for more than a decade' (2005: 435). In its early years in the EC, which it joined in 1973, Ireland's economic progress was poor. Its per capita Gross Domestic Product was 66% of the EC/EU average in 1972 and 69% in 1987. However, the situation changed dramatically in the 1990s. By 2000 the figure was 115% and by 2003 it was 136%. GDP grew at an average annual rate of 6.9% throughout the 1990s. Between 1995 and

2000, the average annual growth rate was 9.5%. Ireland is one of the more productive OECD economies and is ranked sixth in the performance league table. Its economy is forecast to grow by circa 5% in 2004, 2005 and 2006. However, the wealth generated by this economic upturn has not been evenly distributed across society. A large gap has developed between the rich and the social welfare class. The factors driving past growth included:

- More people at work, especially women;
- Fiscal and monetary consolidation through cuts in spending, borrowing and taxes;
- Social partnership which included wage negotiations and dialogue at national level between unions and employers;
- A younger population than in many other European states;
- Increases in exports resulting from the single European market;
- Investment from incoming multinational companies in high tech areas such as computing and pharmaceuticals;
- Government investment in education, especially at third level;
- Low personal taxes;
- EU subsidies, which are estimated to have added 0.5% per annum to growth during the 1990s (Peet 2004: 4-6).

This buoyant commercial backdrop influenced Irish media in various ways. Over the last two decades, there has been a substantial increase in business, personal finance, consumer, property, technology and travel news in print and broadcast media. Increased allocation of space in the newshole, the total space occupied by news, to specific commercial and consumer areas is often driven by their capacity to attract advertising revenue. For instance, the property supplements of national newspapers have grown in size and expanded their focus in recent years. They now routinely offer advice on the purchase of second homes in Ireland and abroad. A survey published in October 2004 indicated that Dublin had the world's fifth most expensive shopping street based on annual rent per square metre. Only New York, Paris, Hong Kong and London were more expensive. House prices in the greater Dublin area, where about one third of the country's population resides, have risen by circa 300% in the decade since 1995. This has led to property speculation and strong growth in the construction

sector. Some 80,000 new houses are expected to be completed in Ireland in 2004. By comparison, Britain, with 15 times more people, will build approximately 160,000 in the same period. In November 2004, an International Monetary Fund report called on the Irish Government to introduce property taxes and abolish existing mortgage interest relief for home owners as ways to prick the overheated property market. Neither recommendation is likely to be implemented by the Government.

The consumerist orientation of Irish society has resulted in increases in pagination in Irish newspapers. A snapshot survey by the author of 11 national daily and Sunday newspapers published in March and April 2004 showed that, on average, each issue contained just over 100 pages, a clear reflection of a strong advertising market. Some newspapers regularly offer free music CDs or books to entice potential purchasers, increase circulation figures and attract more advertising.

The concentration of ownership in Irish media is of concern to some observers, particularly the position of Independent News & Media in the newspaper sector. They fear that it will reduce diversity, inhibit plurality, and restrict the range of employment opportunities available to individual journalists, which in turn may induce self-censorship. Nine of the 11 Irish national newspaper titles are wholly or partially owned by just two groups. One senior financial journalist said:

The media is getting less free and less diverse...All newspapers and the media in general are forced to adopt a more market-led approach to content. A wide range of news and opinion gets little coverage...for instance, one third of society – the social welfare class – has never had much access to the media. Unemployment, poverty, and the need to develop a real national consensus for tackling those problems get scant enough attention in our newspapers. Market forces are ensuring that that won't change...the media must reflect the wide diversity of opinion existing in society and, of course, it should promote and encourage the formation of opinion by providing a channel for debate, analysis, and discussion (Rapple 1997: 67-68).

In some cases, commercial pressures to boost profits and shareholders' dividends impact on journalists

when they are expected to increase output by cutting corners. This is achieved 'by employing journalists on short-term contracts, by demanding extraordinary rates of productivity - sheer volume of copy - from reporters, by reducing and, in some cases, effectively eliminating the sub-editing function - and so on. There is less on-the-ground reportage and research. There is more use of non-attributable quotes and material clogged from the internet' (Brady 2004: 33). The casualisation of news workers by refusing them security of tenure is often driven by economic factors. Tenured staff are more expensive and much more difficult to dismiss. 'Permanent' staff are perceived to be in a better position to take an editorial stance independent to that of their news organisation than are freelance news workers whose contracts may be terminated at short notice and with relative ease.

2.5: Technological

Online journalism in Ireland received a setback in the 2000-2002 period when the global digital bubble burst. Unrealistic expectations in relation to revenue generation saw some digital content providers expand too fast during the 1990s in an untested area. Media consumers were slower to embrace new digital journalism services than had been predicted, eventually resulting in some loss-making entities being scaled back or closed. Two of the major media outlets, the national broadcaster, RTE, and the national newspaper of record, Irish Times, reduced their staff numbers in an effort to cut expenditure and place themselves on a more secure financial footing. Both have portals offering an extensive range of information about Ireland. Despite these teething troubles, online journalism provides opportunities to expand and enrich debate on matters of importance in the public sphere. Those who can afford the technology will, among other things, be able to contribute to debates, participate in the making of stories and offer feedback to journalists in ways not possible in the past. Challenges remain, however, in relation to information access, management, cost and overload.

Referring to 2002, Truetzschler states that:

The active Internet universe, i.e. the number of people who have Internet access at home and who have used it during the last month, stands at 16 per cent of the population. The average home

user spent just under four hours on-line in April 2002. Internet penetration in business is substantially higher than residential Internet penetration, with 98 per cent of Irish businesses using the Internet on a regular basis (2004: 120).

The number of Irish households connected to the internet in 2003 was 36%, up from 5% in 1998 (Coakley 2005: 43).

Changes in media production are, according to Tovey & Share: '...not just a matter of technological evolution. Typically they are tied up with conflicts over power... public service broadcasters...have been forced to adopt the methods of commercial broadcasters, including new technologies and work practices.' They cite the work of Hazelkorn (1996), which examined changes in work practices at RTE. She found that:

- Demarcation between journalists, presenters and engineers had broken down, resulting in the elimination of some jobs and the creation of others, such as IT experts and 'multi-skilled' engineers;
- RTE used early retirement, redeployment, retraining and alterations to staffing structures to effect the necessary cost efficiencies demanded by competition and commercialisation;
- Casualisation and 'flexibilisation' of the workforce enabled more people to make more programmes more cheaply;
- Women benefited disproportionately as the number of 'creative' and administrative jobs increased, whereas the number of male-dominated craft jobs declined;
- The amount of 'independent' production sector programming used by public service broadcasters increased;
- Such output typically involved cheap and cheerful infotainment fare such as entertainment news, and cookery, holiday and home improvement programming (Tovey & Share 2000: 380-381).

In an analysis of the implications of online journalism for traditional practice, Trench found that the legacy of established practice and standards have little influence in the online media world. Some forms of online journalism offer models that challenge key relationships underlying journalism theory and practice. Online journalism tends: to be recycled from other sources; to allow commercial content into editorial

space; to be highly self-referential, where self-generated; to risk being inadequately checked because of rapid dissemination; to create difficulties for readers in identifying a verifiable record of events from rumour or parody. Yet, it also tends: to represent the context of news more fully; to allow for alternative and personally relevant versions of stories to be considered; to present news in a playful manner; to incorporate audience inputs seamlessly; to present news as a continuous process open to inputs from producers, consumers and sources; and to create communities or strengthen existing ones.

Although news publishing on the Web provides many new ways to cheat and misrepresent, best practice in online journalism requires a redefinition of established journalism values, according to Trench. The boundaries between the 'us' and 'them' of established practice and scholarship are redrawn in the online context. This has implications for editorial practice, publishing strategy, professional self-definition and ethical standards. Professional education in journalism must catch up if it is to remain relevant in the changing media environment. Standards-based education in online journalism needs to address professional issues for pre-entry students, editorial values for recent hires and technology awareness for established journalists (Trench 2005).

Technology has impacted Irish journalism in diverse ways. For instance, a multifaceted financial and management-union dispute at the Irish Press group, which included unresolved issues related to the use and implementation of pagination and print technology, resulted in the eventual closure of the company which published three national newspapers. Two of these titles, Evening Press and Sunday Press, provided the main opposition to the Evening Herald and Sunday Independent from the Independent News & Media stable. In this case, technology contributed, at least partially, to the narrowing of public debate and plurality. The utilisation of modern printing technology at one national newspaper appears to have resulted in a decrease in the quantity of news being distributed to the public from that source. In this case, the newspaper now has fewer daily editions using state-of-the-art presses than it did when it operated hot metal technology in the 1980s. News workers on the title produce and process fewer stories and the public receives less news. Traffic congestion in the greater Dublin area, cost considerations and the fact that the

newspaper holds a monopoly position in its segment of the market are also likely to have contributed to this situation.

2.6: Social

Irish journalists are a diverse group. Some see their role as informing and, perhaps, educating their audience. Others see it as entertaining and amusing the audience. Some view themselves as 'simple' storytellers who are happy to inform and/or entertain depending on the category of story, the type of audience and the medium.

Some 43% of Irish journalists perceive a distance between themselves and their audiences and 44% believe that journalists and the public do not share similar views.

They see no reason to tailor their journalism so that it fits with the ideas and values expressed by the audience...a significant proportion of Irish journalists see themselves as having an agenda-setting role in terms of popularising ideas and values that may be at variance with the views of their audience (Corcoran: 2004).

Senior Irish journalists are amongst those most critical of their profession. A former editor of the Irish Times states:

Journalism is one of the last functions without any system of public accountability – short of the courts – in this society. (Ireland) is the only western European state that does not have some sort of press council or ombudsman. As a result, Irish media can get away with a lot. There is little self-scrutiny. Supervision is frequently lax. Professional standards are sometimes low and are often tolerated on high. There is virtually no reference to international best practice...

Most of the newspapers have learned how to say more or less what they want about people without getting themselves into legal trouble. A rich lexicon of journalistic euphemism (and some clever design stunts) have been developed that enables a publication to blast away at any chosen target – provided that considerations of fairness, propriety and balance can be put aside... Other considerations may be given short shrift – the methods

employed by the journalist, the use of deception or illegality, the improper attribution of quotes, the eliding of the line between on-the-record and off-the-record, the invasion of privacy, hearing both sides of the story (Brady 2004: 33).

According to a former editor of the Sunday Business Post, the Irish media industry is beset by the following problems:

- The predominance of short-term thinking within media companies and the absence of long-term planning;
- The absence of top-class training for journalists and the haphazard nature of recruitment to the profession of journalism;
- The huge competitive pressures in the open Irish marketplace which can, and do, lead to the making of bad editorial judgements, or in some cases the total absence of judgement;
- The secular switch from fact gathering to commentary in large parts of the industry;
- The abuse of key media platforms for ideological and political purposes (Kiberd 1997: 34-35).

A perceived reason for a lack of diversity in Irish journalism is that:

Few journalists come from poor backgrounds. This possibly reflects the fact that very few people from poor backgrounds manage to get a third level education, and that is changing only slowly. Indeed, more people from working/social welfare class backgrounds got into journalism 30 years ago (1967) than are getting in now. It was possible then to start as a copy boy and become an editor (Rapple 1997: 76).

The views of some academics on journalists are less critical. According to Chubb:

Clearly what journalists report and their observations will not always please governments, politicians or bureaucrats and, thus, (the) view of the political role of the journalist leads to a somewhat antagonistic relationship between press and politicians. This characteristically shows itself in the politicians' propensity to chide the media for misrepresentation when what has so often occurred is an inconvenient exposure or less-than-favourable presentation (1984: 78).

In similar vein, Lee states:

... the public nowadays (1997) absorbs far more information from the media, and particularly from television, than from politicians. We have not yet adjusted our concept of education to take cognisance of the central role the media now plays in influencing our views. Indeed, many of the issues on the political agenda are set by the media. Government ministers regularly express more concern about the media response to issues than about the opposition's response in the Dail (parliament) (1997: 18).

For Laffan & O'Donnell, the media played a significant role in the modernisation of Irish society where a shift occurred from the traditional homogenous closed Catholic culture to an open pluralist one (cited in Tovey & Share 2000: 368).

Others argue that Irish journalism played an important role in exposing corruption and hypocrisy in public life, especially in the last 15 years. They credit the media with uncovering information that led to public tribunals of inquiry into such areas as illegal practices in the beef industry, illegal and other payments to politicians, illegal activities related to planning and re-zoning of land in the construction sector, in addition to revealing scandals involving the health services, the financial world and the paedophilic activities of some members of the Catholic clergy. For Corcoran: '...at the turn of the twenty-first century Irish journalists occupy a robust position, riding high on their new found reputation as whistle blowers willing to take on establishment figures and institutions' (2004).

In the early 1980s, Irish journalists were generally trusted and held in high esteem by the public. 'Compared with the British press, the Irish dailies are quite serious newspapers, nearer to the so-called quality British newspapers than to the populars' (Chubb 1984: 79). However, the situation began to change in the late 1980s when the British pop tabloids began to take a greater interest in the Irish market. They brought a different tradition, different practices and a different emphasis compared to Irish journalism. They pushed sport, sex and the cult of the celebrity and they pursued stories about the private lives of public people, something that had not been done previously in Ireland. One effect was to lower the reputation of

all newspaper journalists in the eyes of the public. Broadcast and newspaper journalists are now viewed differently by the public. According to Coakley: '... a 1981 survey showed that the Irish were more likely than the 'average' European to express confidence in the police, the civil service, parliament and the press (Fogarty/ Ryan & Lee 1984: 179 & 243)...By 2001, the position had changed...levels of trust in television and radio are high by European standards, but the print media are treated with some suspicion.' Eurobarometer (56) figures indicated that, respectively, percentage levels of trust v mistrust were: 78 v 18 for television; 77 v 19 for radio; and 53 v 40 for press. Newspapers are now treated with a significant degree of suspicion (2005: 57-58).

Irish journalists in general are a highly educated but predominantly middle-class group, according to Corcoran (2004). The fact that admission criteria to journalism and media degrees typically demand high previous academic achievement works against those from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is also resistance among some journalists to pre-entry journalism education at undergraduate or graduate level. They argue that journalism is essentially a non-academic pursuit, a trade rather than a profession. Some even suggest that the only education necessary for journalism is in skills-based areas such as shorthand and media production software. Corcoran's findings clearly indicate that the latter group is swimming against the tide. Mid-career training is not widely available to Irish journalists. The managers of news organisations are reluctant to fund such activities or grant news workers the time to participate in them. Where sanctioned, the emphasis tends to be on short how-to and technical courses rather than theoretical and reflexive ones, on developing production skills rather than reflective practitioners.

3: INFORMATION/NEWS MANAGEMENT WITH REGARD TO EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE (EPS)

Irish news organisations do not invest heavily in foreign correspondents. The latter are based in a small number of locations around the globe and are often expected to monitor vast geographic areas. The number of Brussels-based Irish journalists employed directly by Irish national media to cover EU issues on a full-time basis is remarkably small and may be as low as three. Commercial news organisations in the

business of generating profit are reluctant to spend it on expensive foreign correspondents when they can subscribe to international news agencies at a fraction of the cost. The Brussels press pack employed by the international news agencies feeds hundreds of news organisations across Europe relatively cheaply.

Many journalists based in Ireland cover EU stories related to their patch or beat. Such stories are typically used in the domestic rather than the foreign news sections of Irish national media. Stories with EU angles are common. This integration of EU information in the domestic public sphere has echoes in the Irish legal, political and public policy systems. 'Engagement with the Union creates a new type of politics that is neither international nor domestic but shares elements of both' (Laffan & Tonra 2005: 431). EU stories in the Irish media tend to concentrate on money, personalities, senior appointments, elections, referenda, treaties, interpersonal disagreements and interstate disputes. Many of the stories are structured as conflicts or competitions that ask or answer the following questions:

- Who gets the money, when and how much?
- What is in it for ,us'?
- Who pays?
- Who wins the argument?
- Who wins the election?
- Who gets the job?
- Who is the king-maker?

An example may serve to illustrate the communication challenges encountered in the EU public sphere. Ireland is sometimes characterised as a model pupil in the EU, a poor state which made good through hard work and wisely spent subventions. Yet 54% of the Irish electorate voted against the Nice Treaty in June 2001. It did this for many reasons, one of which was to send a warning to the Irish Government about its domestic policies. Other factors such as the boring, inadequate and unrealistically short campaign ahead of the referendum, and the poor turnout of voters (34%) undoubtedly contributed to the result. This situation might not have arisen had the EU been able to communicate effectively with the Irish electorate. It was incapable of doing so for various reasons. 'External' interference is often received negatively in nation states. As a result, when the electorate came to vote it was more influenced by issues in the Irish public sphere than those in the EU public sphere. However, its domestic protest was registered in the latter.

In calling a second referendum in October 2002, the Irish Government said to its people that they would have to continue to vote until they got it right. The electorate obliged when 67% voted Yes. The turnout was 49% on this occasion. If this is democracy in action, it is not adequate. New and better information systems and democratic processes, involving adequate information management, are required if the EU aspires to hold the enlarged entity together. And Ireland was one of those countries that held a referendum on the Nice Treaty. The citizens of some EU states were not given this opportunity.

4. CONCLUSION

To date, no major research has been published on Irish news flows, news management and the European public sphere. To advance this project, it will be necessary to distinguish between the European public sphere and the EU public sphere. They are not coterminous. An examination of EU information flows in the Irish news media may provide an insight into their adequacy as building blocks in the democratic process. As of now, it appears that EU information systems are inadequate and do not serve citizens as well as they might, even in countries that have benefited substantially from membership. A number of factors influence the inadequate public debate on issues related to the EU. These include an unwillingness on the part of media to invest in costly foreign correspondents; and the complexity and volume of information generated by the various institutions of the EU. One result is a lack of knowledge and interest on the part of citizens, which contributes to the democratic deficit.

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