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Explaining election frames: A content analysis of twelve newspapers in the 2011 Irish general election

*Iain McMenamin, Roderick Flynn, Eoin O'Malley &
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The framing of elections represents the most overt instance of the media's power to influence politics. We content analysed twelve newspapers' coverage of the 2011 general election in Ireland. Ireland's newspaper market has some special advantages for social scientists, as it allows us to separate the newspaper types/formats (tabloid versus broadsheet) from their commercial basis (vulnerability or otherwise to short-term sales and profits). Therefore, we are able to make a particular contribution to the long-standing debate about the interaction of free market capitalism and the media. Our results do not find a homogeneous general election frame in Ireland. The variation in framing across Irish newspapers was much greater than that between the five countries for which we can find strictly comparable results. The different commercial statuses of the newspapers do seem to be related to different dominant frames of election coverage, but only after we develop a new measure which takes account of the relative overall prominence of election coverage in the newspapers examined.

Keywords: elections, framing, Ireland, media systems

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Introduction

Media scholars often bemoan the lack of standardised cross-national comparisons (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Norris 2009; Esser et al. 2012). The literature on election coverage is, however, rapidly becoming an exception to this rule notwithstanding the challenges of improving conceptual clarity (Aalberg et al. 2012). There is now a significant body of scientific research from several countries which considers whether media coverage of national elections primarily frames politics as a strategic game or as an arena for public debates on policy issues. . Most of these studies have concluded that the media tend towards the game frame in election news coverage. Nonetheless, the question remains as to why some media outlets, or some countries, are more inclined to frame elections in terms of issues while others are dominated by the game frame. Prominent explanations in the literature include the commercial position of the media outlet and the country's media system.

The growth in research on this question provides an opportunity for single case-studies to be rigorously comparative, as they can be building blocks in a wider research effort (George and Bennett 2005: 76). This study involved content analysis of the coverage of twelve national newspapers during the 2011 Irish general election. Ireland's newspaper market has some advantages for social scientists, as it allows researchers to separate newspaper types/formats (tabloid versus broadsheet) from their commercial basis (i.e. the extent of their vulnerability to short-term sales and profits). In this regard this study makes a particular contribution to the long-standing debate about the interaction of capitalism and the media. Calcutt and Hammond (2011: 18) argue that journalism and commercialism have "flowed through history as complementary but non-identical streams". Through an examination of news media

coverage of the 2011 electoral contest in Ireland it is possible to test the extent to which differing ownership models – and approaches to commercialism – may have an impact on that same coverage.

The research findings did not identify a homogeneous general election frame in Ireland. The range in framing across Irish newspapers was much greater than that between the five countries for which there are strictly comparable results, namely Sweden, Spain, Belgium and the United States. The different commercial positions of individual newspaper titles appear to be related to different dominant frames in election coverage, but only after the empirical approach goes beyond the methodologies informing the existing literature to include a measure of the overall prominence of the election in newspaper coverage.

The paper begins with a consideration of framing theory and how different business models may or may not influence newspapers' choice of election frames. The following section introduces the Irish case, showing how several special characteristics make it possible to dismiss some potential explanations and leverage unusual variation in order to test explanations based on commercial pressure and newspaper type. The paper then provides a detailed account of the content analysis research and shows that this work compares closely with a series of two-country studies undertaken by Strömbäck and colleagues (Strömbäck and Luengo 2008; Strömbäck and van Aelst; Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2011). The subsequent sections offer two contributions to scholarship in this area: first through a replication of Strömbäck's work that allows comparison with five other countries and second in the form of a revised measure of election coverage framing that provides a more rigorous

test of hypotheses about commercial position and newspaper type. The conclusion highlights how this research can assist the development of theory and measurement in cross-national media studies.

Theory

Framing is now considered central to understanding public opinion on political as well as many other issues (see Chong and Druckman 2007). The groundbreaking work of Kahneman and Tversky (1984) showed that people's responses to a question could be radically but predictably altered by changing the way the question is framed. In media research frames are thought to "select, organize, and emphasise certain aspects of reality, to the exclusion of others" (de Vreese, Peter and Semetko 2001: 108). There is an infinite variety of ways in which experience can be interpreted. The specific way in which we do so depends on our framing of reality (Goffman 1974). Journalists, like all of us, must operate within particular frames (Tuchman 1978) which structures the way they approach an issue or evaluate an object. This article deals with generic framing or metaframing, not with issue-specific frames. Generic frames "allow comparisons between frames, topics, and, potentially, framing practices in different countries" (de Vreese, Peter and Semetko 2001: 109). This study tests whether, and why, politics is framed as a game between competing teams or as a debate of issues and policies and a choice between political parties/ideologies. These alternative generic frames were first investigated in the United States (Patterson 1993; Cappella and Jamieson 1996) but their applicability to cross-national research has since been demonstrated (Strömbäck and Kaid 2008). There is evidence, including experimental research, that these different frames can have substantial effects on citizens' attitude to politics (Cappella and Jamieson 1996: 79).

The explanations for the choice of frames relate to the long-term development of public opinion, politics and the economy, perhaps most famously seen in the work of Habermas (Habermas 1989). Hallin and Mancini (2004) categorised media systems as being one of polarised pluralist, democratic corporatist or liberal models. If they are useful these discreet models should help explain why the media behave the way they do. For instance, the countries in the liberal or free-market model should frame elections differently to those in the other two models. From this we can argue, as Strömbäck and others have, that a completely profit-driven media results in a shared frame of ‘politics as a game’.

Hypothesis 1. If the capitalist system determines metaframing, newspapers in free-market systems should converge on a metaframe of politics as a game.

But within a given country different papers may face different commercial pressures. We can test whether the different commercial bases of profit-driven newspapers can influence their choice of metaframe. In a series of co-authored articles, Strömbäck and colleagues (Strömbäck and Luengo 2008; Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2009; Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2011) explore whether “commercialism is the driving force” behind the metaframing of politics as a game (Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2009, 55). Strömbäck links different commercial bases to different types of newspapers. In particular, he argues that quality newspapers have a large and loyal subscription readership and substantial advertising revenue, while the popular press is very dependent on presumably more fickle newsstand sales. Of course, newspapers that depend on advertising are also commercial. Indeed, many media scholars have focussed on advertising as an indicator of the commercialism that served to

depoliticise and homogenize newspapers (Curran, 2011: 88; Patterson, 2000: 253; Williams, 1965: 226). Strömbäck's hypothesis is, however, more subtle. He suggests that newspapers which rely on newsstand sales require bold headlines that will attract attention and encourage the potential reader to choose one paper over another. Thus Strömbäck argues that newsstand newspapers are driven to cover politics as a game, using headlines stressing who is going to win, rather than dry reports about complex policy positions (Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2009, 46).

Hypothesis 2. Newspapers that are more dependent on newsstand sales are more likely to frame elections as a game.

A problem with some cases studied in the extant research is that it is difficult to distinguish the newspapers' commercial basis from their format. We might see that broadsheets tend to have a strong subscriber base or different ownership structure compared to tabloids. As a consequence it is impossible to identify whether distinctions in the nature of their coverage are due to the different commercial bases or differing formats. In any case, we consider the expectation that tabloids will be more game-oriented to be mistaken. Consider how a tabloid can sensationalise a policy issue such as social welfare provision or immigration. Furthermore horse-race coverage is important even to policy-oriented readers because it indicates what policies are likely to be implemented. The format will have a primary impact on tone, but beyond tone the format should also determine the degree to which politics is covered at all, not merely the nature of political coverage. If tabloids are bought primarily to entertain rather than inform, election coverage must compete with sport, entertainment and human interest stories.

Hypothesis 3: Tabloid newspapers use the issue frame less than broadsheets as a proportion of the paper's total space.

The Irish Case

Ireland provides a useful case study for the question of game versus issue frames and variation in election coverage because it allows us to hold distinguish between the paper's commercial basis and the format. There are a number of companies in the Irish market which own both tabloid and broadsheet newspapers. But Ireland is also different in that no papers have a bedrock of subscribers, so all depend on newsstand sales to maintain their position in the market. There are however important differences in their dependence on advertising revenue. We begin with a consideration of the commercial situation of Irish newspapers and then move on to more political variables.

The revenue base for all newspapers in the Irish market is driven by direct newsstand sales and advertising revenues. The subscription model has never managed to develop a substantial income. Like their counterparts in other European countries and in the United States, newspapers in Ireland have had to cope with rapid change with loss of readers, advertising and business value. Circulation and advertising have been undermined by the industry-wide impact of the internet. The collapse in the Irish economy from 2008 onwards, and the wider international financial crisis, has compounded a difficult situation. Nevertheless, through programmes of aggressive cost cutting, some publishers have succeeded maintaining profitability, albeit at lower levels than previously (Raleigh, 2011). This approach has necessitated some difficult decisions - notwithstanding its overall profitability, Independent News and Media

(INM) shut down two loss-making titles – the Sunday Tribune and Star Sunday – in 2011.

Irish newspaper circulation has fallen for several successive years. Sales of the seven leading national daily newspapers declined by 19 per cent between 2007 and 2011.¹ Advertising revenue has also been under pressure. Newspaper advertising accounts for approximately one-third of overall advertising spend in Ireland (PWC, 2011). Newspaper advertising revenues declined by seven per cent in 2010. Continued decline was predicted for traditional newspaper advertising as online advertising continues to grow as a share of overall advertising. All the national newspapers publishers included in this study have struggled with these declines in circulation rates and advertising revenues – and the transformative impact of the internet. Nevertheless, an examination of the basic types of ownership in the Irish newspaper market reveals some useful variation.

Table 1: Newspapers included in content analysis study

Newspaper	Ownership	Ownership Type	Circulation	Circulation as % of all twelve newspapers
Irish Examiner	Thomas Crosbie Holdings	Irish - private	43,390	3.1%
Irish Independent	Independent News and Media	Irish - Publicly quoted	134,228	9.7%
Irish Times	Irish Times Trust	Irish - trust	100,951	7.3%
Irish Daily Mail	Associated Newspapers	UK - Publicly quoted	51,072	3.7%
Irish Sun	News International	UK - Publicly quoted	79,893	5.8%
Irish Daily Star	Independent News and Media & Express Newspapers	Irish - Publicly quoted & UK private	80,349	5.8%
Irish Mail on Sunday	Associated Newspapers	UK - Publicly quoted	113,160	8.2%
Sunday Business Post	Thomas Crosbie Holdings	Irish - Private	47,849	3.5%

¹ Calculation based on circulation figures in January-June 2007 compared with January-June 2011 for Irish Times, Irish Independent, Irish Examiner, Daily Star, Irish Mirror, Irish Sun and Irish Daily Mail.

Sunday Independent	Independent News and Media	Irish - Publicly quoted	255,806	18.5%
Sunday Times	News International	UK - Publicly quoted	110,692	8.0%
News of the World	News International	UK - Publicly quoted	115,577	8.4%
Sunday World	Independent News and Media	Irish - Publicly quoted	246,875	17.9%

All newspapers in the Irish market are privately-owned, either as publicly quoted companies or as private entities (see Table 1). Because of historical ties and close geographical proximity the leading British newspaper groups have a significant presence in the Irish market. Yet, regardless of whether they are classified as either ‘Irish-owned’ or ‘Irish editions of British newspapers’ all the leading national daily and Sunday titles included in this study share one common characteristic - all are dependent on commercial revenues. Unlike in the broadcast media none is in receipt of state or any other non-commercially-based funding. Where there is a difference between these businesses it is best described as a difference in their ‘degree of commercialization’.

This can best be seen in the case of The Irish Times which is owned by a complex charitable trust - somewhat akin to the Guardian in the United Kingdom – yet even this ownership structure is dependent upon profit to ensure business viability. Moreover, during the post-1997 economic boom period, The Irish Times invested in several businesses outside its core newspaper operation in a manner similar to the modus operandi of its competitors. Nevertheless, given its trust structure the Irish Times is not answerable to shareholders – as in a publicly quoted company – or to personal owners – as in a privately owned entity. This trust arrangement ensures the newspaper is not exclusively focused on profit maximisation. As its readership is

predominantly middle class and well-educated The Irish Times has been better able to rely on advertising revenue and less on circulation than its competitors (Competition Authority 1993). As such, it would be expected that the Irish Times would not be under such pressure to report the ‘game’ in order to sell newspapers like all the other national newspapers in Ireland whose ownership can be classified as either publicly-quoted or privately-owned.

The largest newspaper group in Ireland - Independent News and Media (INM) – is a publicly quoted company which publishes the Irish Independent, the Sunday Independent and the Sunday World (It also jointly owns the Irish Daily Star with the UK-based Express Newspapers). INM has a range of international media interests. Its long-time dominant shareholder Sir Anthony O’Reilly is the nearest example in Ireland to a media baron in the newspaper industry. While O’Reilly has been the dominant force in the business for almost forty years, the fact that INM is a stock market quoted operation means it is profit-driven. His control of the company has been challenged by another investor in INM, Denis O’Brien, who has sought a much more profit-driven approach. If the first hypothesis is correct, this approach to profit should mean the INM newspapers in this study are under some pressure to promote the ‘game’ in order to win readers and advertisers. In comparison with the Irish Times, the INM newspapers have been much more dependent on sales, rather than advertising.

The other significant ‘local’ newspaper publisher in the Irish market is Thomas Crosbie Holdings (TCH), a privately owned business which publishes the daily Irish Examiner and the weekly Sunday Business Post. Like the Irish Times, the Sunday

Business Post derives a relatively large proportion of its income from advertising. The Irish Examiner, also owned by Crosbie, is more dependent on sales. As TCH is a private company, it does not face shareholder pressure to maximise profits to maintain dividends and share price.

The other main national newspapers with significant circulation rates are all UK-owned and produce specific editions of their British newspapers for their Irish market. This category includes the Associated Press titles, the Irish Daily Mail and Irish Mail on Sunday, as well as the Irish Sun, the Sunday Times and the now defunct News of the World – the latter three titles published by News International. While both Associated Press and News International have made sizable investments in their Irish operations, they could conceivably withdraw from the Irish market were losses to mount. In this regard, these two British publishers should be under greater pressure than their Irish-owned competitors to maintain sales and portray politics as a “game”.

Ireland is a famous exception to the clear left-right structuring of most Western party systems (Carty, 1981: 110; Mair and Weeks 2005: 136). There is no major difference on the socio-economic questions that dominate politics and the news, and, particularly dominated the Irish general election of 2011. All papers take a broadly right-of-centre line, although some have the reputation of being more centrist than others. There is more variation in terms of issues of personal morality, with the Irish Times proudly taking a liberal line and the two Mails representing a less strident version of their UK parents’ emphasis on traditional values. It appears that this ideological consensus emanates from an editorial stance, rather than the views of the journalists themselves. Corcoran’s survey of Irish journalists revealed a profession markedly more liberal and

left-wing than their readers (Corcoran 2004). The source of this editorial stance is harder to know, but it is presumably related to a commercial judgement to reflect the views of a society in which the left has always been marginalized. There is insufficient variation for ideological commitment to explain different framing of elections.

The seismic Irish election of 2011 massively increased the proportion of coverage given to issues compared to 2002 and 2007 (own data compared to Brandenburg and Zalinski 2008). While the 2002 and 2007 elections took place in the context of buoyant economic growth, the 2011 election occurred against a backdrop of a local recession and the global financial crisis. The collapse in economic growth hit Ireland particularly hard as, in an attempt to prevent a banking crisis in 2008, the country assumed the large loan-books of several financial institutions, the majority of which were ultimately shown to be worth much less than had been thought. Economic contraction meant that tax revenues fell dramatically, while pressure for increased government spending remained, causing a fiscal crisis. In reaction to this the incumbent Fianna Fáil-led coalition government introduced a number of budgets to reduce public spending. The challenges of curtailing public deficits and dealing with the banking crisis proved too great and in November 2010 Ireland sought external assistance from the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission and the European Central Bank. The incumbent coalition government eventually fell, but not before a further so-called ‘austerity’ budget was passed in December 2010. Unsurprisingly, the economy featured prominently in the February 2011 election campaign, and many opposition parties argued that the banks debts should be

decoupled from the national debt and that some form of default of the bank debt could be achieved.

Brandenburg and Zalinski (2008: 172-3) show that between 2002 and 2007 election coverage in tabloids decreased vis-à-vis broadsheets. However, the increase in 2011 occurred more or less equally across newspapers types when comparing data from this study with that for 2007 (data provided by Brandenburg). Therefore, the particular characteristics of the election did not change the ranking of the newspapers. For this reason and lack of ideological variation, it is possible to concentrate on newspaper type and ownership in attempting to explain differences in framing across 2011 election coverage. Therefore, our case selection has a clear rationale in relation to the general literature on political communications (Norris 2009, 337). Moreover, as the next section shows, its measures are comparable to those used in studies of other countries (Norris 2009, 340).

Benchmarking cross-national comparison of election coverage

In their study of Sweden and Belgium Strömbäck and van Aelst identify all articles that “explicitly referred to domestic political actors or institutions or the elections” in the three weeks before the 2006 general election in Sweden and the 2007 general election in Belgium. They study three Belgian and four Swedish newspapers but only included news stories of more than ten sentences in the main section. They code all articles as game or issue on a ‘dominant frame basis’ (Strömbäck and van Aelst 2009, 48). By contrast the Irish study codes newspaper articles from each of the twenty-four days of the official 2011 election campaign. The analysis includes twelve national newspapers – the biggest selling daily and Sunday national newspapers – as

shown in Table 1. This excluded some large circulation newspapers whose reach did not extend far beyond Dublin.

Since digital versions of many of the newspapers in our sample were not available – and as this study is part of a larger project involving the broadcast media – manual coding of the twelve newspapers was undertaken. Articles were selected from every issue in each newspaper in the study published during the ‘short’ campaign, that is from 2 February to 25 February (inclusive). The coders went through the news, and news review sections of each newspaper, numbering all articles which covered the election. These articles fell into three categories – hard news, comment and analysis and editorials. Letters to the editor, e-mails or extracts from web coverage, such as ‘tweetwatch’ were excluded. The coding did include reviews of TV programmes on the election, including leader debates. A random number generator was used to select 40 per cent of the articles. This ensured an even coverage of front-page and inside page articles was included in the sample.² This procedure was followed for each issue in each newspaper.

The content analysis focused on twelve national newspapers, including Sunday broadsheets and Sunday tabloids, types not represented in Strömbäck and van Aelst’s research. While this Irish election research project is wider, this study is restricted to all articles of over two hundred words in the main section of the newspapers, of which there are 843.³ Instead of coding a whole article, we coded by ‘quasi-sentence’.

² For the Irish Independent, the proportion of articles sampled and coded was 30 per cent and these were then weighted up. As this is among the largest papers in terms of length, this sample was sufficient to make reasonable comparisons with the other papers.

³ This excluded eighty-four articles and made little difference to the scores for eleven of our twelve newspapers. However, it makes a big difference for the Sunday Independent, which goes from seventy

Quasi-sentences are used as the coding unit in the Comparative Manifestos Project (Budge et al., 2001) one of the largest coding projects in political science. The quasi-sentence is defined as an argument. The argument is the verbal expression of one idea or issue. So for instance, the following sentences each contain a single argument:

‘The party called for greater accountability of government’
‘The party wants ministers to be legally responsible for answers to parliamentary questions’

These however could be combined into a single sentence:

‘The party in calling for greater accountability of government, wants ministers to be legally responsible for answers to parliamentary questions’

This single sentence can be broken down to the two arguments, each coded as a single unit. Because coders will not necessarily agree on the number of units in an article we might be worried that this would affect our results. We tested to see if the two coders differed in the number of codes used, but there was no significant difference. In any case, as we analyse the proportion of coverage, not the raw number of units, we do not consider that this will bias our results.

Like Strömbäck and van Aelst we understand “the game” to refer to the “strategy of political campaigning,...the horserace and battle for voters,...the images of politicians...political power as a goal in and of itself, or...politicians and persons rather than as spokespersons for certain policies” (Capella and Jamieson 1996: 74; Strömbäck and van Aelst 2010: 48) [codes 130, 140 and 150 in Appendix One]. Framing politics as a game tends to give opinion polls great prominence in both reporting and commentary. Also like Strömbäck and van Aelst, we coded coverage of issues and issue positions, and the consequences of these issue positions [codes 10-

seven to forty one articles reverses from a roughly sixty-forty split in favour of the game to a roughly sixty-forty split in favour of issues.

120]. We closely approximate Strömbäck and van Aelst's methodology by counting an article as game- or issue-oriented if a majority of its quasi-sentences fit into the category in question. Strömbäck and van Aelst use the game and issues as exhaustive categories of election coverage, but a small proportion of our articles have been coded as neither (see Appendix One for our codes). The distinction between issue- and game-oriented election coverage is theoretically and substantively appealing. We investigated its empirical power using a principal components analysis. Using nineteen codes on 1,440 articles, of all lengths in all sections and including commentary and editorials, our analysis shows that components loading positively on game codes and negatively on coverage of the economy are the most powerful in summarising the variety of content in our articles (see Appendix Two for details). Thus, these two generic frames also have an empirical basis in our data.

We measured inter-coder reliability in a number of ways. Because the unit of analysis for our two coders was the quasi-sentence rather than the whole article, we sampled six articles to give us up to 244 units. Lombard et al. (2002: 601) argue that for the ICR test to be valid one should not use fewer than fifty units, but that one would rarely need to sample more than 300 units. If we just code each article as whether they are predominantly game or policy using the aggregates scores of each quasi-sentence, we find 100 per cent agreement, but as the number of articles is too low, we prefer to use Krippendorff's Alpha treating the codes as the unit. Krippendorff's Alpha is regarded as a conservative measure for inter-coder reliability (Lombard et al. 2002: 600). We treated each potential code (see Appendix One) as the unit of analysis, and for each article we assigned each quasi-sentence to a code. For the sample the Krippendorff's alpha was .828 if we treat the data as ratio (this rises to .972 if we

assume the data are interval). Inter-coder reliability scores then compare well to Strömbäck and van Aelst’s work as well as similar studies.

Empirical analysis

Irish comparisons

First, we examine differences between Irish newspapers and then compare Ireland with Belgium, Sweden, Spain and the USA. Table 2 shows the proportion of articles focussing on issues and the proportion focussing on the game for each newspaper. The figures demonstrate significant differences between newspapers in their framing of the 2011 general election. This serves as a rejection of the idea that a common capitalist basis serves to establish a homogeneous framing of elections. The newspapers at the top of the table dedicated over twice as much coverage to issues as they did to the game. For those at the bottom, issues were marginal, accounting for only a little over one tenth of their election coverage. The six most issue-oriented newspapers occupy a relatively narrow range of eighteen per cent. By contrast, there is a very long tail. The six most game-oriented newspapers represent a range of eighty-nine per cent. This is remarkable given the maximum is two hundred.

Table 2: Irish Newspapers’ framing of the 2011 general election

Newspaper	Issue articles minus game articles (per cent)	Articles coded as either issue or game (per cent)	Issue articles minus game (per cent of all articles coded policy and game)
The Sun	30	91	33
Sunday Independent	30	98	31
The Irish Times	26	92	28
Daily Mail	20	94	21
Sunday Times	18	90	20

Irish Examiner	13	86	15
Mail on Sunday	5	69	7
Daily Star	3	93	3
Sunday Business Post	-6	97	-6
Irish Independent	-22	92	-24
News of the World	-40	67	-60
Sunday World	-82	100	-82

Note: Circulation figures from January to June 2011 from National Newspapers of Ireland.

The placing of individual newspapers is even more remarkable than the overall picture. Readers of the quality press in Britain and Ireland will be surprised to find the tabloid Sun has the highest proportion of issue-oriented articles. The Sunday Independent – which is defined by an opinion-orientated editorial approach – is placed second followed by the self-styled ‘newspaper of record’, the Irish Times. The two most game-oriented newspapers – the News of the World and the Sunday World – conform to stereotypes; two Sunday tabloids which concentrate heavily on crime, sport and entertainment news. Interestingly, however, the findings show the third most game-oriented newspaper to be high circulation broadsheet, the Irish Independent.

Table 3: Newspaper type, commercial position and the Irish general election of 2011

Newspaper type	Issue articles minus game articles (per cent)	Newspapers	Articles
Broadsheet	5	3	479
Sunday	14	3	57
Sunday Tabloid	-39	3	47

Tabloid	17	3	260
Trust	28	1	155
Private	11	2	169
Public (Ireland)	-27	3	217
Public (UK-Ireland)	3	1	112
Public (UK)	21	5	190

Table 3 tests whether newspaper type or commercial position can explain the framing of election news. The findings show that tabloid newspapers are not more game-oriented than quality titles. The category that stands out is the Sunday tabloids, which have a much more game-oriented focus than the other types of paper. However, Table 3 does give some moderate support to the hypothesis that different commercial situations can explain variations in election coverage framing. The rank-order of ownership types fits the predictions of the theory, with the exception of the category of Irish-owned publicly quoted newspapers, in other words, Independent News and Media. If we ignore the distinction between Irish and UK-owned titles and concentrate only on legal form, the trust (Irish Times) emerges as the most issue-oriented publication, followed by the privately owned Crosbie newspapers while the nine titles owned by publicly-quoted companies display greater game orientation. While this last category includes all the tabloids, we have already shown that tabloids are not necessarily game-oriented.

International comparisons

Table 4 adopts an international perspective and benchmarks Ireland against research on Belgium, Spain, Sweden and the United States. The findings tend to undermine the

hypothesis of a common capitalist pressure to focus on elections as a contest for power. The differences between the countries are large, but, interestingly, not as wide as the variation between Irish newspapers. The cross-national range is 41 versus 115 within Ireland. However, Ireland is the only country in which the issue frame predominates over the game frame, so in a very general sense Strömbäck and Kaid's (2008) conclusion that contemporary media systems tend to frame politics as a game still holds. This data also suggests that media and political systems do not matter.

Table 4: Comparing the content of Irish, Belgian and Swedish newspapers

Newspaper	Issue articles minus game articles (per cent)	Articles coded as either issue or game (per cent)	Issue articles minus game (per cent of all articles coded policy and game)
Ireland	7	90	8
Sweden	-1	100	-1
Spain	-6	100	-6
Belgium (Flanders)	-34	100	-34
USA	-34	100	-34

All scores are article, not newspaper, average. The US figure is for coverage of the 2004 presidential election in USA Today, New York Times and Washington Post (Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2006, 140); The Spanish figure is for coverage of the 2004 national election in El País, El Mundo and ABC (Strömbäck and Luengo 2008, 557). The Swedish figure is for coverage of the 2006 Swedish election by Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet, Aftonbladet and Expressen. The Belgian Figure for coverage of the 2007 Belgian election in De Standaard, De Morgen and Het Laaste Nieuws. Both are derived from Strömbäck and van Aelst 2010, 49.

Hallin and Mancini located Ireland in a group of 'liberal model' countries including the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom (Hallin and Mancini 2004). These countries were judged to share common characteristics such as limited government, strong market orientation and party systems defined by catch-all parties and media-centred consensual politics. They conclude that there is a systematic relationship between political system and media - and that in the 'liberal model' a commercial media would be dominant. Curran (2011) has identified flaws in the Hallin and

Mancini media system approach – specifically in relation to the classification of media and politics in the United States. The Irish findings do not concur with what might be their empirical expectations.

Indeed, neither Hallin and Mancini’s classification of media systems, nor any classification of political systems fits the order of countries. Belgium and Ireland are clearly out of place. The elite nature of newspapers in polarized Spain, and the legacy of parallelism in corporatist Belgium and Spain, should be associated with more issue-oriented coverage than in liberal, non-partisan Ireland and the USA. Of course, the balance of issue- and game-oriented coverage should vary somewhat from election to election within countries. The closer the election the more game-oriented coverage should be. The greater the policy differences between competitors and the greater the policy challenges facing the country the more issue-oriented coverage is likely to be. This is likely to make a bigger difference in relatively majoritarian US and Spain, as opposed to relatively consensual Belgium and Sweden, Ireland being somewhere in the middle (Lijphart 1999, 248).

A new approach to framing analysis

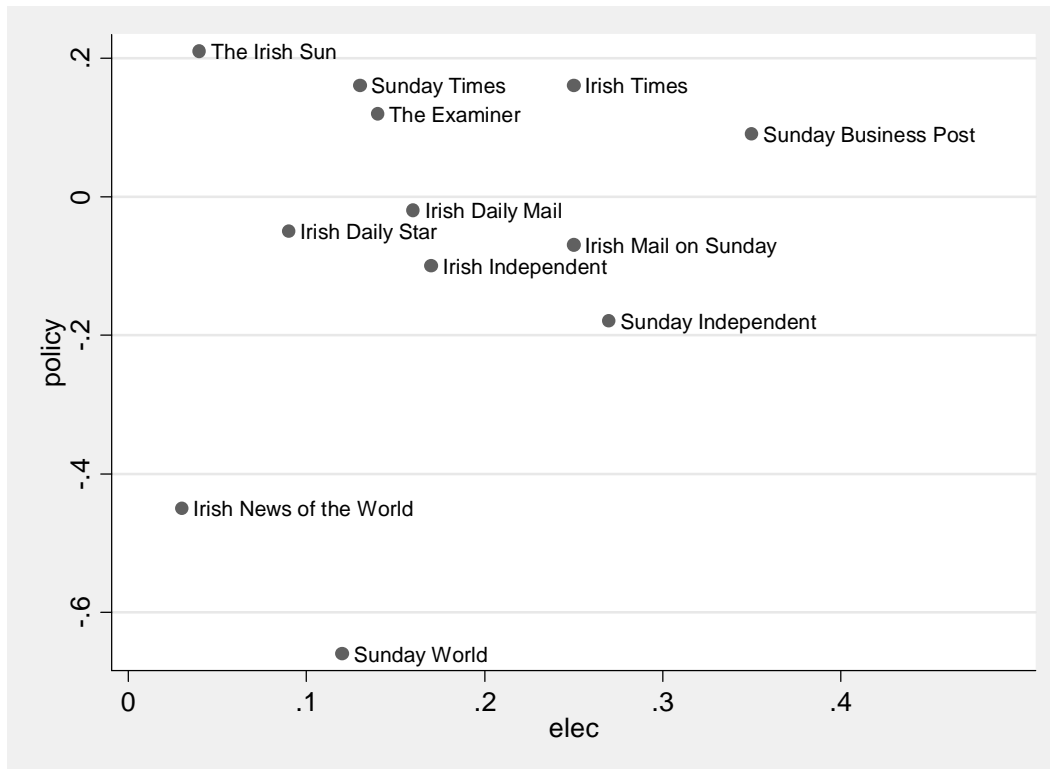
The Strömbäck method identifies the framing of election coverage, while ignoring the extent of election coverage. In the following section, we include the amount of election coverage in each newspaper, and present a method of analysis which produces significantly different results.⁴ In the Irish case in 2011 there were huge differences in the proportion of articles covering the election campaign ranging from as little as three per cent in the News of the World to some 35 per cent in the Sunday Business Post. The Y axis of Figure 1 displays the same figure as earlier tables – the

⁴ For dailies, we used the mean number of articles per day for the week beginning 31st January 2011. For Sundays, we used the number of articles on 6th February 2011.

proportion of policy-oriented election articles minus the proportion of game-oriented articles.⁵ The X axis shows the proportion of election articles in each newspaper. By adopting this approach we find that the Irish News of the World and Sunday World stand out with a game orientation and a low proportion of election articles. The other ten newspapers occupy the top half of the range of the policy variable, but represent virtually the whole range of proportion of election coverage. Thinking of this heterogeneous group as a quadrilateral, one corner would be occupied by the Sun, which has the highest proportion of policy-oriented articles but the second lowest proportion of election coverage. The Daily Star also has a low proportion of election coverage, but is relatively game-oriented. The Sunday Independent is the most game-oriented of the large group, but has the second highest proportion of election coverage. Finally, the Sunday Business Post dedicated more of its newspaper to the election than any other title and has a relatively issue-oriented profile. Obviously, there is little correlation between the proportion of election coverage and the frame dominating that coverage. These figures reinforce the impression of great variety in the newspaper coverage of the 2011 general election in Ireland and challenge the findings of the Hallin-Mancini media system comparison study.

Figure 1: The relationship between election coverage and policy focus

⁵ However, instead of benchmarking our numbers to Strömbäck, we now use our full database of 1440 articles, including shorter articles and articles outside the main section of the newspapers. Uniquely among our newspapers, the Sunday Independent's score reverses when using the narrower Strömbäck and van Aelst sample to compare to previous studies.



Note: Policy is the proportion of articles in the issue frame less the proportion of articles in the game frame. Elec is the proportion of election articles in each newspaper.

Multiplying the two dimensions produces a theoretically appealing measure of election coverage that takes into account the prominence of generic frames in the newspaper as a whole. This calculation is reported in Table 5. The two dimensions have been rescaled between 0 and 1. Therefore, the last column can be interpreted easily. The maximum score of 1 represents a newspaper in which all articles consisted of issue-oriented election coverage. A score of zero would mean the newspaper had no issue-oriented election articles.

These results more closely approximate the “common-sense” hypotheses suggested by our intuitions about Irish newspapers. The broadsheets now appear to be more clearly policy oriented. The Sun is now one of the three least policy-oriented papers. There is a statistically significant difference between broadsheets and tabloids on this measure (.115 versus .048, $p=.013$) if we group each paper by its physical format.

However, neither do the results merely reproduce stereotypes. The Irish Mail on Sunday may mostly concentrate on the game, but overall it is one of the papers most concerned with the election. A quarter of its articles were election-oriented – the same fraction as the Irish Times. In terms of the overall newspaper content, it is the third most issue-oriented.

Table 5: Irish Newspapers' framing of the 2011 general election weighted by election coverage as proportion of articles in the newspaper

Newspaper	Issue (per cent)	Game (per cent)	Election articles as proportion of all articles	Framing weighted by election coverage
Sunday Business Post	0.53	0.44	0.35	0.19
Irish Times	0.54	0.38	0.25	0.15
Irish Mail on Sunday	0.31	0.38	0.25	0.12
Sunday Independent	0.4	0.58	0.27	0.11
Sunday Times	0.53	0.37	0.13	0.08
The Examiner	0.49	0.37	0.14	0.08
Irish Daily Mail	0.46	0.48	0.16	0.08
Irish Independent	0.41	0.51	0.17	0.08
Irish Daily Star	0.44	0.49	0.09	0.04
The Irish Sun	0.56	0.35	0.04	0.02
Sunday World	0.17	0.83	0.12	0.02
Irish News of the World	0.11	0.56	0.03	0.01

This table is not benchmarked to from Strömbäck and van Aelst calculations and draws on the full sample of election articles. In other words, it includes short pieces, editorials and opinion pieces, as well as articles outside the main newspaper. The last column is the product of rescaled versions of the issue minus game and election articles. Both were scaled to a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 1.

Table 6 presents these figures by newspaper type and commercial situation. The daily tabloids now come well behind the daily broadsheets, just ahead of the Sunday

broadsheets. The Sunday tabloids continue to occupy a distinctive position. The rank-order of the different ownership models now fits the framing of the election. The more commercially sensitive are the newspapers owners', the lower is the proportion of issue-oriented election coverage. Thus, the association between commercial differences and framing cannot be reduced to differences in the format of the papers.

Table 6: Commercial position of Irish newspapers and the 2011 general election.

	Framing weighted by election coverage	Newspapers	Articles
Broadsheet	0.1	3	747
Sunday	0.13	3	176
Sunday Tabloid	0.05	3	77
Tabloid	0.06	3	440
Trust	0.15	1	280
Private	0.14	2	265
Public (Ireland)	0.1	3	374
Public (UK-Ireland)	0.04	1	161
Public (UK)	0.05	5	360

Averages are by newspaper, not by article. The second column is produced by multiplying the proportion of election coverage by the issue minus game statistic used in earlier tables. The figures are derived from the full sample of 1440 articles, not the smaller sample benchmarked to Strömbäck's figures. The last column is the product of rescaled versions of the issue minus game and election articles. Both were scaled to a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 1.

All the papers in the trust, private and public (Ireland) categories are broadsheets, but there are important differences between them. The only paper in the public (Ireland-UK) category is a tabloid. It has a higher proportion of issue-oriented election coverage than the six UK-owned newspapers, which include the broadsheet Sunday Times. However, the overall low score of the public-UK category may well reflect the five tabloids in that category. The results are consistent with different interpretations

of the relationship between commercial position, newspaper format, and the framing of general elections.

Figure 2. Business, Format, and Framing: Alternative Causal Models

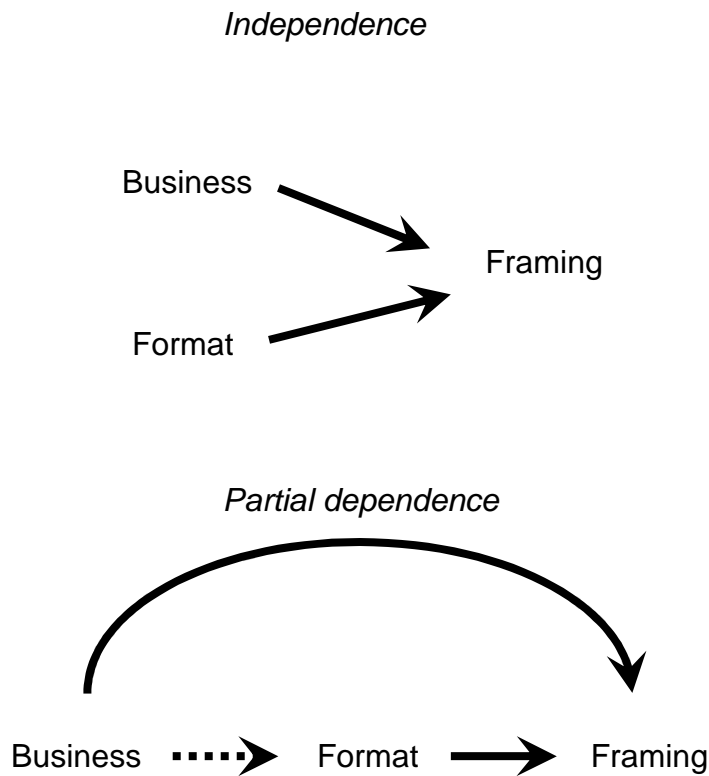


Figure 2 presents two alternative causal models. Firstly, it is possible that format and business model independently affect the framing of elections. Broadsheet newspapers emphasise politics at the expense of entertainment news or sport and frame elections in terms of issues rather than a political game. Commercially sensitive newspapers concentrate on entertainment news and sport instead of politics and their election coverage is dominated by the game frame. Secondly, perhaps there is a partial dependence between business model and format. Short-term, profit-maximising owners may prefer tabloids to broadsheets, both in terms of purchasing and founding

titles. Nonetheless, the format of a newspaper and its framing of elections can only be influenced, not controlled, by owners. Existing newspapers will have a reputation and a market segment that it would be foolhardy to ignore. Moreover, the professional ethos of journalists will often defend editorial autonomy and issue-oriented framing.

Conclusions

Many scholars conclude that capitalism results in a depoliticisation of newspapers. Instead of protagonists in political struggle they become instruments of social control. Irish newspapers are hardly radical and reflect the unusually narrow centre-right consensus of Irish politics and society. Nonetheless, our research uncovers great diversity in the extent to which the election is covered and the way in which the election is framed. The numbers are not sufficient for strong inferences, but they are consistent with the idea that different commercial situations lead to different framing of politics. A useful characteristic of the Irish case is that commercial situation and newspaper type can be separated. Broadsheets on average have a relatively strong representation of the issue frame. Nevertheless, the rank order of newspapers casts doubt on simple stereotypes of game-oriented tabloids and issue-oriented broadsheets.

The results of this Irish election-study can be compared to research on the media and elections in other countries. These challenge the idea that Liberal media systems are more likely to produce game-oriented coverage. Following the standard of the literature produces an ordering of countries that does not seem to correlate with media systems or any other variable. There are several possibilities for the absence of a pattern, such as the weakness of cross-national theory and differences between the salience of elections. This article proposes a new and relatively straightforward

explanation for this puzzle. It seems very likely that newspapers vary, not just in how they frame elections, but in the amount of coverage they devote to elections. If this is true, a recalculation of the figures on the framing of elections might well produce results that confirm, rather than confound, media systems theory. The newspaper retains an important role in politics in contemporary democracies, but it is clear that its heyday has passed. The alternative frames of the game and issues can also be applied to broadcast and on-line media, as can our measures. In principle, hypotheses about business models and framing should be relevant to other media too. It would be very interesting to see whether ownership variations drive choice of frame in other media in a similar way to that suggested by our research.

Appendix one: codes

- 10 – Political System
- 20 – Justice
- 30 – Defence
- 40 – Economy
- 50 – Agriculture
- 60 – Social Welfare
- 70 – Education
- 80 – Arts/Culture
- 90 – Infrastructure/Technology
- 100 – Environment
- 110 – Foreign Affairs
- 120 – Country specific: Ireland
- 130 – Campaigning
- 140 – Polls/Horserace
- 150 – Leadership
- 160 – Political Ethics
- 170 – Non-political
- 180 – Election
- 190 – Locality-specific issue

Appendix two: factor analysis

A principal components analysis is a description “of the variation of a set of multivariate data in terms of a set of uncorrelated variables each of which is a linear combination of the original variables” (Everitt and Dunn 1991, 45). We performed a principal components analysis using variables that recorded proportion of units (quasi-sentences) in each of the 1440 newspaper articles falling into the nineteen codes. The first two components explained over fifty per cent of the variation in the election articles. Table A1 shows how the components relate to the collapsed codes.

Table A1: Principal components (eigenvectors)

Variable	Comp1	Comp2	Comp3	Comp4	Unexplained
p10	-0.0918	0.0104	0.7586	-0.5261	.001245
p20	-0.0058	-0.0001	0.0269	0.0587	.006339
p30	-0.0041	0.0021	0.0087	0.0165	.002416
p40	-0.5622	-0.5145	-0.4475	-0.3223	.0007393
p50	-0.0058	0.0002	0.0017	0.0218	.003427
p60	-0.0545	-0.0126	0.0920	0.6175	.01042
p70	-0.0210	-0.0056	0.0356	0.1476	.01094
p80	-0.0036	0.0059	0.0064	0.0329	.003653
p90	-0.0105	0.0074	0.0048	0.0351	.003912
p100	-0.0084	0.0002	-0.0003	0.0152	.002829
p110	-0.0206	-0.0100	-0.0040	0.0140	.003363
p120	-0.0039	0.0100	0.0233	0.0459	.004638
p130	-0.0391	0.7968	-0.3914	-0.2932	.0009366
p140	0.8176	-0.3154	-0.2351	-0.2548	.0008617
p150	0.0076	0.0151	0.0480	0.1144	.01343
p160	-0.0207	0.0025	0.0255	0.0560	.007827
p170	-0.0040	0.0112	0.0063	0.0210	.003593
p180	0.0307	-0.0070	0.0401	0.1993	.01532
p190	0.0001	0.0032	0.0002	0.0006	.0002411

To interpret the components, we have highlighted loadings on variables of over 0.25. Thus, the first component primarily identifies articles that concentrate on polls and the horserace and secondarily identifies articles that tend to have little coverage of the economy. The second component primarily identifies articles on campaigning, again eliding economic issues. The second component also de-emphasises polls and the horserace. In other words, the two dominant metaframes are the game and issues.

Moreover, these two metaframes are alternatives to each other. Given that we had a coding scheme, this process is, of course, not entirely inductive. However, given that there were nineteen, not just two, codes, this exercise suggests that the generic frames fit the structure of Irish newspaper coverage of elections and are not misleading, externally-imposed artefacts.

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