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The unique influences that have shaped the production of print and broadcast media in modern Ireland are a mixture of geographical, political, and cultural. In more recent times, there have been other influences, shared with media in the developed world generally: technological change, commercialism, and the enhanced competition, especially from niche media, in the digital age. Modern Irish media – in the sense of media aimed at a mass market rather than at a political constituency – date essentially from the establishment of the Irish Independent in 1905. Although the first radio station was established in 1926 by the new government of the Irish Free State, broadcasting was not effectively freed from the shackles of direct state control for another half a century (Horgan, 2001).

Penetration of the Irish market by British media, print and broadcast, has been one of the unique features of the Irish media system. In the early years of the State various governments attempted, Canute-like, to turn back this tide with various forms of censorship. The digital revolution, and the internet in particular, has been the death-knell for this attempt to maintain cultural purity and commercial exclusivity, but a pattern had already been well established. The rising prosperity of the 1990s saw a series of fresh and aggressive assaults on the Irish market by UK titles, which now account for roughly one in four of every daily morning newspaper sold, and one in three of Sunday titles, where

the market is especially competitive (Truetzschler 2002: 1). Research carried out for the Commission on the Newspaper Industry (1996) suggested that Irish newspapers suffered from a number of competitive disadvantages, including a very high cost base. It also suggested that there was a substantial group of Irish media consumers – largely young, male, working class and in their twenties - who consumed little or no Irish media, preferring a diet of UK tabloids and, in broadcast media, the British ITV channel.

Nor has this competition been confined to popular or populist media. Its effects elsewhere can be gauged from the fact that approximately 10 per cent of the total circulation of the Sunday Times was, by the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, accounted for by copies sold on the island of Ireland, North and South.

Throughout this period of increasing internationalisation and competition in the Irish media market, indigenous media have themselves been undergoing a number of sea changes. In Northern Ireland, the confessional character of much of the print media, reflecting the deep religious and political divisions in that society, was unaffected either by the advent of commercial television in 1959 or by the change in ownership of the highly successful Belfast Telegraph in the 1960s, when it was purchased from its Irish family owners by the multi-national Thomson organisation (it was later to go through a number of other hands). In the Republic, however, the purchase of a controlling interest in the Independent group by the young Irish entrepreneur A.J.F. O'Reilly in 1973, and the transfer of ownership of the Irish Times to a trust in the following year, set the scene for a new fluidity in the media. Some newspapers died; new titles appeared, most notably in the Sunday market-place, and competition became ever more intense, leading eventually

to the extinction of the entire Irish Press group – then comprising three newspapers – in 1995.

This period of flux was accompanied by a reinvigoration of journalism, prompted in part by the high drama and politics of the Northern Ireland conflict which, in its most intense phase between 1969 and 1998, absorbed huge quantities of media resources and public attention. By the mid-1980s, in the view of one commentator, the quality of Irish political journalism had risen considerably. ‘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’ (Chubb 1984: 80). The same period, however, also spawned decisions by both Irish (1971 and 1972) and UK (1988) governments to restrict the freedom of broadcast journalists to report certain aspects of the Northern Ireland conflict. These restrictions remained in force in one form or another until 1994 and the legal framework under which they were implemented in the Republic was not finally removed until the passage of the 2002 Broadcasting Act (Horgan 2004).

Another important influence on the production of print and broadcast media culture in Ireland has occurred 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.

The last quarter of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first have seen the emergence of three distinct trends affecting both the production and content of Irish media. The first has been one of internal consolidation, the second has been one of increasing foreign ownership. The third – dealt with later in this chapter – has been technological and web-related. The first has been characterised by consolidation that has taken place particularly in the field of regional media, where an established proprietor like the Examiner group in Cork has moved to acquire media properties both in its own hinterland and elsewhere, and where existing regional media have consolidated their spheres of interest by launching different types of publication – often free-sheets – to offset perceived competitive threats from other titles.

The more dramatic trend, however, has been in the frequent acquisitions of Irish media, particularly but not exclusively, regional print and broadcast media, by non-Irish interests. The national and regional broadcast media, after a shaky start following liberalisation in 1988, have become increasingly attractive to predators, and Today FM, the sole national commercial radio station until the expansion of Newstalk 106 in November 2006, has, together with a number of other regional print and broadcast media, been in the ownership of the Scottish Media Group for a number of years. This trend was discussed with some concern by the Forum on Broadcasting (2003), but, under EU law, which places few obstacles - apart from anti-monopoly legislation - in the way of the

purchase of media entities within any CEU state, is likely to continue. There are, it should be noted, some cross-media ownership restrictions, which prohibit media operators (defined as publishers, production companies, cable operators, etc., but excluding internet providers) from having more than a 27 per cent share in any broadcasting company. In these circumstances, the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland (BCI) has adopted a dual strategy. It takes into account the structure of the market when making licensing decisions and when ratifying (or declining to ratify) any major change in the shareholdings in independent broadcast companies. It has also created a significant regulatory framework in relation to content – notably in regard to the required proportion of news and current affairs – which is enforced on all broadcasting entities. In addition, the national Competition Authority ‘when examining media mergers (in cooperation with the BCI regarding broadcasting, and with the [Department of Communications]), also takes into account any potential impact on the competitiveness of the market’ (Kevin et al, 2004: 106).

The purchase of the important Leinster Leader group of regional newspapers by the UK-based Johnston group in 2006 was another indication of growing foreign interest in Irish media, and in the profitability in particular of regional media at a time when national media are facing increasing competition from digital rivals and from a fragmentation of the advertising marketplace. A similar trend has become evident in the print media in Northern Ireland, with the UK Mirror Group involved in purchasing one important title, and with consolidation of a growing number of regional titles under the ownership of the Alpha Group, controlled by the former Unionist MP, John Taylor, which has also acquired five regional titles in the Republic since 2003. Effectively, five

companies now account for a substantial proportion of the regional press in the island, marking a dramatic change from the situation some decades ago in which most were controlled by small family-owned business, often allied with jobbing printers.

In the technological area, the past decade has seen an accelerated rationalisation of plant and capacity in the print media, with both the Irish Independent and the Irish Times moving out of the centre of Dublin to printing plants on the outskirts of the city, where high-speed presses now produce not only their own titles but do contract printing for magazines and a number of regional titles. Similarly, UK-based titles have increasingly transferred and centralised the printing operations for the Irish titles onto greenfield sites in the Republic. The unit cost issue highlighted by the Commission on the Newspaper Industry in 1996 has generated one cost-cutting measure which would, at that time, have been greeted with incredulity: the Sunday World and the Kerryman – one a national Sunday tabloid headquartered in Dublin, the other a profitable regional published in the south west of the country, and both owned by Independent News and Media – are now printed at the presses in Belfast which are home to the same organisation's Belfast Telegraph and Sunday Life.

The role in all of this of the Independent group has frequently given rise to comment. Its expansion into the regional newspaper market in Ireland – which is substantial – was effectively organized before the O'Reilly acquisition in 1973 and before the development of strong competition legislation. It has been effectively precluded by competition law from increasing its share of the regional market, and it was prevented – also by competition law – from increasing a minority stake which it purchased in the Sunday Tribune as a way of defending its market share against the UK Sunday titles. It

was briefly involved in the Irish Press group before the collapse of that enterprise (although this venture might have been adjudged anti-competitive by the Competition Authority), but has maintained a substantial share in the Sunday marketplace and – since the demise of the Evening Press – has an effective evening paper monopoly over much of the country with the Evening Herald. Its board has, however, capitalised on its substantial and reliable cash-flow to build up an extensive portfolio of overseas media properties, which makes it one of the most successful Irish companies in its field and which, on occasion, gives rise to fears about the implications, for media diversity generally, of its strength in the Irish marketplace (O’Toole, XXX). Its most audacious – and one of its most expensive – acquisitions, mentioned earlier, was that of the Belfast Telegraph in 2004, a purchase which might not have been permitted had that newspaper been operating in the same political, legal and fiscal structure as the titles controlled by the group in the Republic of Ireland. The group owns four of the 11 Irish national newspaper titles and has stakes in three others. More recently (2006), it has launched a free morning newspaper – Herald AM – to counter the threat posed by Metro, another free morning newspaper promoted by the UK Daily Mail group and in which the Irish Times also has a minority stake.

It is estimated that the Independent group publishes about 80 per cent of all indigenous national newspapers in the Republic (Truetzschler 2004: 124). However, this should be qualified by the important consideration that its position in the total marketplace falls short of dominance because of the large proportion of the Irish market accounted for by UK-edited titles. Its board has grown the business substantially since 1973 and it now operates on four continents in countries other than Ireland, such as

Britain, South Africa, IndiaAustralia and New Zealand. In 2004 it published over 165 newspaper and magazine titles which, taken together, had a weekly circulation in excess of 13.5 million copies. It also operated 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.(XXXX update by ref to INM)

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 convenient paradox is that the persistent – although reducing – losses at the London Independent can now be offset, for tax purposes, against the substantial profits earned by the Belfast Telegraph acquisition. The trust structure of the Irish Times, and the family trust ownership of a key 29.9 per cent share-holding in the Independent group, would appear to insulate both these enterprises against any possibility of foreign ownership, but no such guarantees exist in the case of other media entities.

The liberalisation of the market for broadcast media since 1988 has been slower in the national arena than in the regional or local. The first national radio competitor for Radio Telefis Eirean, Radio Ireland, suffered a number of vicissitudes and did not achieve profitability for more than a decade, after several changes of ownership and re-branding (it is now Today FM). Plagued by financial difficulties, the national competitor for the State's public service television network, TV3, did not go on-air until 1998, and

did not achieve profitability until 2005. The majority shareholdings in two of the national competitors to RTE are held by non-Irish companies (The third, Newstalk 106, is controlled by Irish interests but achieved national coverage only at the end of 2006.)

The slowness with which national commercial broadcasting took root may partly explain the fact that – in sharp contrast to the situation in many other countries where market liberalisation has taken place - the channels operated by the national public service broadcaster, Radio Telefis Eireann, have maintained an exceptionally high market share – 40 per cent for the three national radio channels, and 43.2 per cent for the three national TV channels (including TG4, the Irish-language station) (2006 Medialive.ie). Other factors have been a successful and pro-active strategy adopted by RTE, enhanced by the rapid increase in population and household formation (and the associated increase in license fee income) and a government decision to link the license fee to inflation, subject to the achievement of certain performance targets, in line with the recommendations of the Forum on Broadcasting (2003).

The next phase of broadcasting development is the initiating of digital terrestrial television, piloted in 2007 and to spread throughout the country thereafter. The implications of this for broadcasting production are, as yet, unclear. The proliferation of channels in a content-intensive medium may result in the importation of more programming content and in the frequent re-broadcasting of material.

Irish journalism and journalistic culture have yet fully to embrace the concept of online journalism, but, thus far, this has not been an unreasonable position to take. Criticism of classic media for failing to implement the latest interactive features or ‘webby’ content

makes good copy for some ‘with-it’ media commentators and academics. Mark Deuze’s classification of interactivity in journalism serves as a useful framework for conceptualising how journalism has responded to new possibilities in online journalism, and it is tempting to take this a stage further with an approach that condemns new media laggards (Deuze 2003). But (and journalism students are sometimes quicker to grasp this) interactive technologies may not be the whole story, and many in the audience may not seek to contribute actively. As it is, print edition readerships have grown or held up well in recent years, and publishers and journalists have not yet suffered the same shrinking of audience and defections to other media as seen in the US. It is this position of relative comfort that may have contributed to the opening of a gap between national news websites in Britain, home of some of the pioneering developers of online news, and America.

Irish journalists were among the pioneers among news outlets taking to the web, when *The Irish Times* first went online in 1994, with an ambitious vision to extend the nature and reach of its journalism. However, in the intervening period, the online arm of the organization, re-branded as ireland.com, suffered cutbacks and lay-offs as part of a retrenchment that typified the global dot.bust reassessment of digital media. Now, in common with other national title and many regional titles, its main activity is the repurposing of existing content for consumption on PCs and other digital devices, with the principal added offerings of an invaluable archive, as part of its subscription service, and breaking news. Similarly, RTE’s news offerings online, while providing a vast resource of partially archived sound, vision and text, provide little more than heretofore generated by news producers. While Irish media clearly were aware of the strategic issues

and the potential to move beyond the concept of an ‘online newspaper’, experience has demonstrated the durability of established modes. This was not the vision of Peter Winter, quoted by The Irish Times in 1996, who commented:

The first thing I did when I became interim CEO of New Century Network (an online development consortium of leading US newspaper groups) was to forever ban the phrase online newspaper. It is a bankrupt concept. It is highly fallacious and it is very dangerous to think in those terms. Replicating electronically what you do in print is a bit like taking a video camera to a Broadway play and imagining you are in the business of television production. This is a new medium. (Breen 1996).

News outlets figure prominently among website rankings in Ireland, but it is clear that the market remains immature, with inconsistent and sporadic audience metrics and little progress towards the web’s integration into media planning for advertisers, with patch adherence to auditing.). At the same time, advertising globally has adopted net characteristics, and is no longer the preserve of the big media entity. Just as Google and Yahoo! have become important aggregators of news, so systems such as Google’s AdSense provide small publishers and bloggers with the ability to raise revenue based on audience numbers and characteristics.

Irish media are not uniquely netphobic, and relative inertia in the face of high-blown rhetoric of radical media reform is characteristic of many news organizations internationally. But leading players in so-called old media in Britain, whence much Irish news culture and practice and thus far has been derived, are busy experimenting. BBC

News, The Guardian, The Times and The Daily Telegraph are all well advanced with significant offerings of content rich in hyperlinks, with blogs by editors and journalists, with citizen media, with opportunities for readers to comment and engage in meaningful debate, with multimedia, including podcasting by print organizations, and with ways of connecting with new audiences through the provision of links into social media. A simple single expression of how far things have come is the invitation to readers of the Daily Telegraph, heretofore perhaps perceived as the embodiment of waning values, to post its stories to such novel media exotics as del.icio.us, Digg, NewsVine, NowPublic and Reddit, or the Daily Mail offering readers a text form with selected stories in which they can post their comments.

Thus far, British-based publications that have launched Irish print operations or editions have not similarly extended their coverage on the web. The Sunday Times, the Irish Daily Star, the Irish Daily Mirror, the Irish Sun, and the Irish Daily Mail, have chosen so far to maintain the online focus on their principal titles or digital spin-offs.

Nor do Irish news consumers, becoming more at home in a media landscape where interactivity, and intertextuality are the norm, have to look abroad to find such media features. If national media have been slow to adapt, the signs are that other sections of the new media ecology may move more quickly (and it may be remembered that national media were the last, by some distance, to make the investment and adopt changed work practices necessary to implement digital print technologies).

This overview does not afford space for a detailed taxonomy, but new developments can be observed at several levels. Within professional journalism, the specialist irishhealth.com has demonstrated its ability to augment conventional news and features

with individual customisation, multimedia, and an array of interactive features, from personalised health calculators to active discussions to 'Rate My Hospital'. Niche publications with well-focussed target audiences have long been a feature of online news, with entities such as The Irish Emigrant and the technophile electric news.net early leaders. As blogging, message boards, and government and corporate online publishing take root and grow, and as internet adoption accelerates with the switch to broadband, it is becoming clear that the colonies that Irish print and broadcast organizations have established online are becoming islands of static content, where reader or viewer comment is at best tolerated and at worst suppressed. The latter conclusion is supported by a comparison of broadcast media's vehicles of controlled interactivity, such as RTÉ's Questions and Answers, on television, or Liveline on radio, with their websites, which do not actively seek audience input, even though the medium could so easily facilitate it.

Such a position may be anathema to online editors and other champions of new media, but the contrast certainly raises fundamental questions concerning core journalistic ethics and values. It is tempting to conclude here that most practitioners are sceptical of any mission aimed at breaking the divide between audience and news producer, and integrating close scrutiny and dialogue, or of admitting bloggers to the fold, other than as curiosities worth covering as a news story. One of the most succinctly expressed responses to such a notion has been 'you don't hand the mic to the rabble'. On a more prosaic level, journalists are also entitled to ask how they are to make the time for such activities. Such responses are not unique to Ireland, and are the subject of ongoing research that may formulate them more coherently, and there is an increasing body of

literature that seeks to delineate the arguments in and around online journalism (Allen 2005, Driscoll et al. 2005).

Ultimately, however, as with any other media, the discussion is touched in no small way, by the peculiarities of Irish defamation law, which has seen the removal of message board facilities from the Irish Examiner's website and the posting of strict notices to users of online fora such as boards.ie.

In an analysis of the implications of online journalism for traditional practice, Trench (2007) 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.

As the commercial and competitive aspects of Irish media assume greater importance in an increasingly globalised economy, more attention is being paid to the nature of Irish journalism, its special characteristics, its strengths and its weaknesses. These commercial pressures have had their own impact on journalism. 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. One issue of The Irish Times in September 2006 contained 74 broadsheet pages of property editorial and advertising, a record for that newspaper.

The consumerist orientation of Irish society has resulted in noticeable increases in pagination in Irish newspapers. A snapshot survey by one of the authors 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 at reduced cost to entice potential purchasers, increase circulation figures and consequently attract more advertising.

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.' (Brady 2004) 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.

Changes in media production, according to Tovey & Share are ‘...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).

This increasing commercialism does not, however, appear to have had a substantial impact on the ideological profile of Irish journalists themselves. According to Truetzschler: ‘Most Irish newspapers are politically conservative and have a middle class orientation’ (2004: 116). However, it is important to distinguish the political positions of journalists from those of the organisations that employ them. Corcoran (2004) 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 Paterson and Donsbach. Their survey had been carried out earlier by teams of researchers in the USA, Britain, Germany, Sweden and Italy, and identified a number of trends.

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 per cent of Italian journalists placed themselves on the extreme left, only 3.6 per cent of Irish journalists did so. While 68 per cent 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 (Corcoran 2004: 30).

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. Some 43 per cent of Irish journalists perceive a distance between themselves and their audiences and 44 per cent 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: 35).

A comparison of which political parties were supported 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 - 44per cent v 5.6per cent

Fine Gael - 27per cent v 10.3per cent

Labour Party - 11per cent v 34.6per cent

Progressive Democrats - 4per cent v 2.8per cent

Green Party - 4per cent v 6.5per cent

Other parties - 11per cent v 2.8per cent

No party preference - N/A v 37.4per cent

(Corcoran, 2004: 36)

Thus the largest party in the state, Fianna Fail, was significantly under represented among journalists and the second largest party, Fine Gael, was also under represented. 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). The degree to which this supposed neutrality can overlap with scepticism or even a predominantly negative attitude among print media journalists towards all political actors is explored in a earlier but no less relevant study which suggests that negativity could be interpreted ‘as an indicator of increasing media malaise, in Ireland as elsewhere.’ (Brandenburg, 2005: 319).

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 ... 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’(Fogarty/ Ryan & Lee, 1984: 179 & 243). Eurobarometer figures indicated that, respectively, percentage levels of trust versus mistrust were: 78/18 for television; 77/19 for radio; and 53/40 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.

The traditional mutual wariness between media and other elites has been accentuated in recent years by the increasing propensity of the media to demand greater accountability from public figures, as well as by the trend – already mentioned – for the more populist media to explore the private lives of public figures (and occasionally their families) with less reserve than had traditionally been the case. At the same time, media generally have become increasingly irked by what they see as the restrictive nature of the laws on libel, arguing that these act as a curb on investigative reporting, and in this way affect the ability of the media to demand accountability from those in public life (Bourke, 2004).

Conversely, those outside the media have begun to draw attention to the fact that, almost uniquely in Western Europe at any rate, Irish media have few systems of accountability built into their own structures. Initially, this critique tended to be made by the trade union movement, particularly during a period of industrial unrest in the 1970s, when trade union leaders felt that the media were biased against them. More recently, the

same sentiment has become more widespread among business and political elites, but it is expressed less frequently and with less force because politicians, in particular, do not want to acquire a reputation for media-bashing, given that the media are one of their key channels of communication with public opinion. Some of the harshest criticism, however, has come from within the media and, in one case, from a recently retired editor of The Irish Times.

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).

Media accountability in Ireland has a varied history, and is different for the print and for the broadcast media. In the broadcast media, a Broadcasting Complaints Commission was set up by legislation in 1976, charged with examining complaints that broadcasters had breached any of the obligations laid on them under the broadcasting acts, particularly the obligations relating to impartiality. Despite its cumbersome procedures and the great length of time it took to arrive at decisions, this body achieved a certain measure of public credibility: it is required by law to publish its decisions in full in the RTE Guide, which is owned by RTE and which is one of Ireland's largest circulation journals. Originally based entirely in, and staffed by, RTE itself, its administration and functions have now been transferred to the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, successor to the Independent Radio and Television Commission which was set up to oversee the liberalisation of the broadcast media marketplace that was initiated in 1988.

In print media, although there is a substantial corpus of legislation governing its activities directly or indirectly, no corrective mechanisms of any significance exist. There is, within the National Union of Journalists, a procedure which hears complaints against members of the union for any alleged breach of professional ethics, but, in order to be processed, any complaint from a member of the public had to be sponsored by a union member. Not surprisingly, this mechanism has fallen into disuse. A number of newspapers, following US practice, appointed 'Readers Representatives' in the early 1980s in an attempt to give speedy access by media consumers to an informal means of redress for innocent mistakes or editorial misjudgements. This initiative, however, did not

really take root, and had been abandoned in all but a superficial sense within a few years. The debate has been a more live one at least since 1996, when the Commission on the Newspaper Industry (1996) suggested the appointment of a Press Ombudsman, who would have the dual function of (a) protecting media from expensive libel actions by affording complainants a low-cost method of securing correction, and (b) enhancing media credibility by importing a level of accountability into a profession that appeared increasingly to be guided by commercial instincts rather than by professional ethics.

While a number of public and private voices were raised in support of this concept, it evoked considerable hostility from the print media, where both proprietors and journalists felt that any statutory press council or press ombudsman would amount to an unwelcome curtailment by the state of the freedom of the press. The main pressure group for the print media in this instance, national newspapers of Ireland, which had been campaigning for a number of years for reform of the libel laws, made it clear that even a hoped-for reform of libel would be too high a price to pay for the restrictions envisaged in any proposed press council. The existence of the voluntary Press Complaints Commission in the UK was held up as an example to be followed, rather than a council which would – both proprietors and journalists feared – be dominated by government. After some controversy, including the appointment of an Expert Group to examine the issues involved, government and industry agreed on an outline structure for a Press Council which would have independently nominated members but which would be recognised by statute – not least to protect it from actions for defamation which might be filed by journalists and others who might be the object of complaints from members of the public. Simultaneously, proposals to reform the law on libel were announced.

Cabinet, however, felt that too much had been surrendered to the media, and instructed the Minister for Justice to prepare, in addition, a Privacy Bill, which was done: the original two-part understanding between government and media became a three-element equation, one element of which is seen by the media generally as seriously problematic. The texts of both a Defamation Bill and a Privacy Bill, introduced in the Dail on 4 July 2006, are both complex: lawyers described the Privacy Bill, in particular, as less a protection of individual rights than protecting ‘the exercise, by a few, from a position of power and strength, of rights not realistically open to other citizens.’ (O’Rourke, 2006).

CONCLUSION

The pace of change in Irish media has accelerated out of all recognition in the last quarter of a century. The dominant mode of media landscape and its production and content has changed from static to dynamic. Issues which had not been raised before, or had been raised only fitfully, have surged to the forefront of public debate – issues of media diversity, media ownership, and media ethics among them. At national level, all media are facing new challenges, not least from non-indigenous and digital media, but also from an apparently inexorable trend of weakening circulation among national print media, despite increased investment and pagination. Further research is needed to ascertain the reasons for this vulnerability, or to evaluate, even approximately, some of the more obvious factors: the fragmentation of media audiences generally; a mis-match between media and public agendas; multiple and cross-ownership; de-regulation in the field of broadcast media; the migration of advertising to non-traditional media; and cost-cutting as a factor impinging on journalistic quality. Paradoxically, the regional media,

both print and broadcast, show few signs of having been affected by these trends, and in many cases provide evidence of a vitality and profitability that does not seem to be guaranteed indefinitely to their national contemporaries. In all of this, the importance of economic factors is being recognised to a greater degree than ever before, and it may well be that media generally are disproportionately affected by any weakening of the strong economic cycle which has been apparent in Ireland – with a brief interlude in 2000-2001 – since about 1995. Finally, current discussions about media accountability, which may in due course have substantial implications for both media production and content, indicate that a re-evaluation of the largely unexamined role of media in modern Irish society may be under way.

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