

## SELLING FEAR? THE CHANGING FACE OF CRIME REPORTING IN IRELAND

MARK O'BRIEN

### *Introduction*

If newspapers are the first draft of history, then from looking at how some sections of the Irish media cover the crime issue one would be tempted to assume that the history of Ireland is characterised by a safe, non-violent, relatively crime free past and an unsafe, violent, crime ridden present. The past – when streets were safer and front doors were left open – has, almost overnight, been replaced by an unsafe present where crime is tearing society apart. In the public imagination the island of saints and scholars has been supplanted by an island of thieves, murderers and sex offenders.

This chapter contends that this assumption is inaccurate despite its prevalence in public reminiscing and media concern about society being overwhelmed by crime. The perception of society as having evolved from being safe and relatively crime free to being unsafe and crime ridden is appealing but too simplistic. Like many assumptions it suffers from the defects of any rose-tinted view of the past and any jaundiced view of the present. There never was a golden crime free era – other than in the public's collective memory and media reminisces.

Every generation fears the moral decline of the present compared to the comfortable certainties of the past. This chapter contends that the low crime figures of the past are inaccurate due to the non-reporting of crime by victims and that crime levels were kept artificially low by mass emigration. It also contends that the way in which crime was reported – or rather not reported – by the media in the past perpetuated this assumption that post-independence Ireland was a virtuous idyll. It argues that various constraints impeded explicit media reporting of crime in the past so as to create an inaccurate public image of the types of crime then being committed. It further argues that the style of crime reporting that emerged from the 1980s onwards has helped foster the perception that present day Ireland is a much more dangerous society than it was in the past. In stark contrast to the past, crime is now overly reported with every graphic detail being included in reportage. It concludes by arguing that it is the changes in the way that the media report crime, more so than any quantum increase in the crime rate, that has created this perception of a safe past and an unsafe present.

*Measuring crime – a perennial problem*

Measuring the true extent of crime in any society is, and has always been, problematic. Ireland is no different in this regard. Up to the year 2000 crime, as reported to the Garda Síochána, was divided into two distinct categories – indictable and non-indictable crime. Indictable crime was the more serious, containing within its four subsections offences such as murder, manslaughter, firearms offences, rape, sexual assault, incest and kidnap. Non-indictable crime consisted of more minor offences, such as public order offences, driving offences, minor assaults and licensing law offences.<sup>1</sup> In 2000 the two categories were replaced by headline and non-headline offences. For the most part the new headings simply replaced the old ones but one big change was the reorganisation of the subsections within each category. Headline offences now contain ten subcategories of offences, as opposed to indictable offences, which contained four. This allows for a more detailed breakdown of offences in the official statistics. In quantitative terms, non-headline offences account for approximately three quarters of all offences in any given year.<sup>2</sup> Media attention, however, is almost exclusively devoted to levels of headline offences, and although this reflects their more serious nature, at least one analyst has concluded that this focus has resulted in the public being misinformed about the true nature of crime in Irish society.<sup>3</sup>

While the reorganisation of Garda statistics allow for easier analysis of individual offences, two facts should be borne in mind when reading these statistics. Firstly, they record only crime that has been reported, and secondly, they represent a count of the offences that have been reported and do not take into account population change. There are a plethora of reasons why a crime might not be reported to the Gardai: the victim may feel that the crime is not worth reporting or that, if it is, nothing will be done; the victim may know the offender and may not want to involve the Gardai; the victim may fear reprisals from the offender; the victim may feel that he or she will not be believed; or the victim may feel implicated in or stigmatised by the offence.

As regards the statistics themselves, when read and discussed in isolation – as happens for the most part in media coverage of crime – they give only a partial understanding of the crime issue. The statistics represent a count of offences that have

---

<sup>1</sup> Indictable crime was dealt with by judge and jury, non-indictable crime was dealt with at a summary level at the District Court. The same distinction applies to headline and non-headline offences.

<sup>2</sup> See annual reports at [www.garda.ie](http://www.garda.ie)

<sup>3</sup> O'Connell, M. (1999) 'Is Irish public opinion towards crime distorted by media bias?' *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp191-212.

been reported without any reference to population growth. Given that the issue of crime is a quantitative one it follows that it can only be meaningfully measured and understood in comparative terms. Unfortunately the comparator adopted by most media is that of year to year increases in headline crime – without any reference to population increase or comparisons to other developed countries – comparators that indicate that Ireland has a lower crime rate (per head of population) than most other European countries. In one EU study Ireland had half the amount of recorded crime per head of population as the US and one quarter as much as England and Wales.<sup>4</sup> Relating crime figures to population change would give a clearer picture of the crime situation in Irish society while comparisons with other jurisdictions would also put the issue into a more realistic focus.

Much ado is made by various commentators about the low levels of crime in pre-1960s Ireland – a situation usually explained with reference to greater community solidarity, the influence of religion, the lack of luxury goods to steal and greater respect for the living person.<sup>5</sup> Little or no reference is made to the reluctance or inability of certain individuals to report crime or to population change, despite these being critical variables in any realistic analysis. Firstly, only lately have the physical and sexual abuse of children, established beyond doubt as endemic in post-independence Ireland, been acknowledged and atoned.<sup>6</sup> The victims of this abuse – children in the care of the state who were farmed off to religious orders to be cared for – were effectively voiceless. Victims of physical and sexual abuse while in institutional care were hardly in a position to report such crimes to the Garda Síochána. The reverence accorded to religious personnel by society and the fear of reprisal was more than enough to ensure the victims' silence.

It thereby follows that the crime statistics for post-independence Ireland are inaccurate about the levels of crime being committed. While some may argue that this relates solely to physical and sexual crime, one must also bear in mind the deaths (often unexplained) of children within the institutions run by the religious orders. Is it possible that these deaths might mean that the statistics relating to murder and manslaughter are also inaccurate? Much of this criminal activity has only recently become public knowledge and is only now being recorded in crime statistics simply because an offence

---

<sup>4</sup> O'Donnell, I. (2004) 'Patterns in crime' in *Irish Criminal Law Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp2-7.

<sup>5</sup> *Irish Times* 'Maintaining law and order should be seen as community responsibility' 19 September 1994, p6.

<sup>6</sup> See Raftery, M. & O'Sullivan, E. (1999) *Suffer the little children: the inside story of Ireland's industrial schools* Dublin, New Island Books.

is recorded when it is reported, which is not necessarily the same time as when it occurred. These offences are not categorised separately and so it is difficult to quantify these offences. Sexual offences reported to the Garda Síochána grew from 397 in 1990 to 968 in 1998 and the Garda Síochána annual reports from 1996 to 1999 noted that the statistics on sexual crime were inflated by cases that had been reported ‘several years after they have taken place’.<sup>7</sup> By late 2006, approximately 2,500 survivors of institutional abuse had applied to the Residential Institutions Redress Board for compensation.<sup>8</sup> It follows that the non-reporting by victims of these crimes when they occurred means that the crime figures from that period are a distorted base from which to compare past and present crime levels and that the past was not the virtuous idyll people might remember.

Secondly, post-independence Ireland was characterised by high levels of emigration. From the late 1920s to the early 1960s, economic stagnation ensured that vast swathes of the young adult population left the country in search of a better life elsewhere. Between 1951 and 1961 alone, over 400,000 people emigrated and the 1961 census recorded an all-time population low of 2.8 million people. It is impossible that that this mass exodus of young adults did not contribute in some way to the country’s low crime levels. Ryan (1990) concluded that ‘along with those who came to Britain seeking a better life, there came also the misfits, the psychologically disturbed and the criminal’. Such individuals inevitably got into trouble with the law and ended up in prison. In 1960 alone approximately 3,000 Irish born males were committed to English and Welsh prisons and between 1960 and 1969 Irish nationals made up approximately 14 per cent of prison committals.<sup>9</sup>

It follows that the high levels of emigration kept crime levels in Ireland artificially low. The economic boom that swept through Ireland from the early 1960s onwards changed this situation. As emigration declined, the population increased from 2.818 million people in 1961 to 2.978 million in 1971.<sup>10</sup> As the population increased so too did the level of crime. Between 1966 and 1971 alone the number of reported indictable crimes doubled from 19,029 to 37,781.<sup>11</sup> Therefore alongside a swell in population came an increase in crime levels – evidence perhaps that Ireland was a low crime society, not because it was an isle of saints and scholars, but because it was an isle of emigrants.

---

<sup>7</sup> Garda Síochána annual reports 1996-9.

<sup>8</sup> *Irish Times* ‘Final bill for abuse in care may be €1.2bn’ 13 October 2006, p11.

<sup>9</sup> Ryan, L. (1990) ‘Irish emigration to Britain since World War II’ in Kearney, R. (ed) *Migrations: The Irish at Home and Abroad*. Dublin, Wolfhound Press, p64.

<sup>10</sup> Figures from [www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie)

<sup>11</sup> McCullagh, C. (1996) *Crime in Ireland: A Sociological Introduction*. Cork, CUP, p3.

*'Don't read all about it'*

The non-reporting of sexual crime to the Garda Síochána and the influence of emigration on crime levels thus create an official picture of low crime levels in pre-1960s Ireland and contribute to the perception that the past was a safer place. But so too did the inability of the media to report adequately on sexual crimes that were reported to Gardai and the court cases that followed. In a study on how the print media reported on sexual offence cases between 1923 and 1974, Keating (2002) examined the Garda statistics on sexual offences to determine the level of such offences and then conducted a search of local and national newspapers to determine the type of reporting that accompanied, or, as he found, did not accompany, such offences and resultant court cases. Keating (2002) identified a belief among clergy and politicians that the public needed to be protected from discussions about crime, particularly sexual crime, for fear that such discussions would corrupt susceptible people. The publication by British newspapers of crime stories, and in particular crime stories of a sexual nature, was debated at length by the Catholic Church inspired Committee of Enquiry on Evil Literature. One member of that committee later recalled the discussion on 'harmful-newspapers which simply set themselves out to describe crime, particularly sexual crime, with every disgusting detail; newspapers which serve no useful purpose, without any literary merit for which anybody with an educated mind would care one jot'.<sup>12</sup>

The legislation that stemmed directly from the committee's report was the Censorship of Publications Act 1929, the debate on which was characterised by deputies lining up to criticise media coverage of crime. The Minister for Justice, James FitzGerald-Kenney, asserted that the bill's most useful function would be 'to prohibit the sale in this country of objectionable newspapers'. Kenny expressed concern about the cumulative effect of reading too many crime stories, noting that, 'when you find perpetually one heaped on another, when you find that the person who reads that paper has his or her mind from the beginning of the time he or she reads that paper until the end of the time steeped in the details of sexually unpleasant cases, it must have the effect of depraving that particular person's mind'.<sup>13</sup> Another deputy, Hugh Law, criticised what he saw as the ever increasing 'production of a kind of newspaper which specialises in sordid, evil, demoralising matter' and the 'glaring headlines which relate in every case to some sordid,

---

<sup>12</sup> Dáil Debates, Vol. 26, col. 625, 18/10/28.

<sup>13</sup> Dáil Debates, Vol. 26, col. 624, 18/10/28.

disgusting crime, or to some other evil aspect of life'. He regarded it as 'demoralising that we should have the attention of the people continually directed to crimes of violence, to sordid, ugly, vulgar things...'.<sup>14</sup> Deputy Michael Tierney declared that there was 'a kind of tendency among even quite respectable periodicals, even among the periodicals of this very great and sainted country, where the Press is beyond all suspicion, to specialise a little too much in the collection and publication of details of all kinds of sordid crimes apart altogether from sexual crimes'. Readers were thus 'compelled to wade through pages of headlines dealing with this horror that took place in Paris and that horror that took place in New York, or how this man has committed suicide in a slum in one city, or another man has cut his sweetheart to pieces in another city'. Tierney was in no doubt as to the effects of such coverage, asserting that newspapers that 'devote a large part of their space to the publication of details of crimes of cruelty and violence, are doing a good deal to lay the foundations for a later development in the direction of sexual crime'.<sup>15</sup>

As a result of such concerns several sections of the Censorship Act were geared towards sanitising the coverage of crime by the media. Section 7 of the act allowed the public to complain to the Minister for Justice if several issues of a periodical publication 'devoted an unduly large proportion of space to the publication of matter relating to crime'. The minister could then refer the complaint to the Censorship of Publications Board and subsequently ban the periodical if the board so recommended. This measure is still in force today. Once passed, several periodicals fell foul of this provision. In an answer to a Dáil question in November 1930, the minister indicated that he had banned six imported newspapers for devoting an unduly large proportion of space to matters related to crime.<sup>16</sup>

But the act was also intended to curb crime coverage by indigenous media. In this respect, the legislature imposed constraints on the detail that periodicals could publish vis-à-vis court cases. Referring to judicial proceedings, section fourteen of the act declared it unlawful to print or publish '(a) any indecent matter the publication of which would be calculated to injure public morals, or (b) any indecent medical, surgical or physiological details the publication of which would be calculated to injure public morals'.

---

<sup>14</sup> Dáil Debates, Vol. 26, col. 624-5, 18/10/28.

<sup>15</sup> Dáil Debates, Vol. 26, col. 643, 18/10/28.

<sup>16</sup> Dáil Debates, Vol. 36, col. 719-20, 28 November 1930. The periodicals were: *World's Pictorial News and Competitor's Guide*, *News of the World*, *Empire News*, *The People*, *Thomson's Weekly News*, *Weekly Record*.

It was not long before a newspaper fell foul of these new regulations. In 1929 charges of breaching section fourteen were preferred against the proprietor and editor of the *Waterford Standard* over its reportage of an arraignment hearing against a local theatre owner who was accused of unlawful and felonious carnal knowledge and indecent assault against a 13 year old girl in his employment. The paper had devoted its entire front page to the arraignment hearing and included some medical detail which had been presented in evidence by the prosecution.<sup>17</sup> The inclusion of this detail in the paper's reportage was, the state argued, calculated to injure public morals. On conviction, the editor, David C. Boyd, faced a fine not exceeding £500 or imprisonment with hard labour for six months or both. In his evidence Boyd stated he had published the story in full in the public interest – it had always been 'the policy of the paper to give careful, verbatim, and authentic reports'. He denied that he published the details to deliberately offend public morals asserting that 'the medical evidence was reported in clean, scientific terms in which there was nothing smutty'. He stated that such cases did not get the publicity they deserved and asserted that 'Publicity is good for morality. What evil-doers fear most in offences of this kind is publicity'. He also stated that attempts were often made to suppress reportage of such cases and that refusal to bend to such pressure resulted in commercial consequences for the newspaper concerned – most likely in terms of loss of advertising.<sup>18</sup>

In the month between Boyd's reporting on the alleged sexual assault and his prosecution, the Bishop of Waterford had condemned the paper's reportage 'as an outrage on public decency and morality, which no mere purposes of market could for a moment justify or extenuate'. While this 'outrage' remained unatoned for, he warned, 'parents cannot be expected to admit the offending newspaper to their households with the implicit confidence which they may have hitherto entertained'.<sup>19</sup> Such a denunciation could hardly have helped Boyd's paper in terms of attracting advertising from Catholic businesses – a message not lost on other newspapers. When counsel for the prosecution accused him of 'pandering to the prurient curiosity' of his readers Boyd retorted that 'if only a summary of the case were published people would be more smutty in their minds about it. There would be more speculation in their minds as to what happened'. Boyd was found guilty and fined £25, and the judge, who had also presided over the original hearing, declared

---

<sup>17</sup> *Waterford Standard*, 'Serious charge against Mr Laurence Breen', 28 September 1929, p1.

<sup>18</sup> *Waterford Standard*, 'Censorship of publications act', 26 October 1929, p8.

<sup>19</sup> *The Standard*, 'Fined under censorship', 26 October 1929, p2.

that the publication of the medical details ‘was a scandal’. He noted that he had had the right to exclude the press from the original hearing and would have done so if he had anticipated reportage along the lines of Boyd’s. After Boyd’s conviction however, he felt that such an offence would not be repeated by the press.<sup>20</sup> This double blow to free reportage – from both the church and the judicial system – sent a clear signal to all media proprietors and while the potency of this signal cannot be measured at such a remove it can hardly have inspired adequate coverage of sexual crime and resultant court cases.

Such sensitivity towards crime reporting back then, as is the case still, probably had much to do with political expediency. Given the extent of sexual crime in the Free State, it is possible that there was a political motive, as well as a moral one, in keeping crime news, particularly news of sexual crime, out of the media. The extent of sexual crime in the Free State was brought home to the government in the report of the Carrigan Committee, established by the government in 1930. Part of its remit was to investigate sexual crime and throughout its hearings it received evidence of the levels of sexual offences being committed. In his evidence to the committee, the Garda Commissioner, General Eoin O’Duffy stated that the corruption of children was an increasing problem and noted that:

an alarming aspect is the number of cases with interference with girls under 15, and even under 13 and under 11, which come before the courts. These are in most cases heard of accidentally by the Garda, and are very rarely the result of a direct complaint. It is generally accepted that reported cases do not exceed 15 per cent of those actually happening.<sup>21</sup>

Outlining the extent of the problem, and referring only to cases in Dublin between 1924-9, O’Duffy stated that for the reported defilements of girls under ten there were 13 prosecutions, for the 10-13 age bracket there were seven prosecutions, for the 13-16 age bracket there were 11 prosecutions, for the 16-18 age bracket there was one prosecution and for the offence of rape of over 18s there were seven prosecutions and 72 prosecutions for the indecent assault of females. As Keating (2002) asserts, O’Duffy’s evidence clearly indicates that the extent of sexual abuse of children was known in government circles. The public, however, were very much in the dark about the extent of the problem. The report of the Carrigan Committee was deemed too damaging for publication. As one civil

---

<sup>20</sup> *Waterford Standard*, ‘Censorship of publications act’ 26 October 1929, p9.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in O’Sullivan, E. (2001) “‘this otherwise delicate subject’: Child sexual abuse in early twentieth-century Ireland’ in O’Mahony, P. *Criminal Justice in Ireland*. Dublin, IPA, p189 of 176-201.



servant noted; ‘the obvious conclusion to be drawn is that the ordinary feeling of decency and the influence of religion have failed in this country and that the only remedy is by way of police action. It is clearly undesirable that such a view of conditions in the Saorstat should be given wider circulation’.<sup>22</sup>

The suppression of the report amounted to suppression of public knowledge of sexual crimes against children. Thus public discourse on sexual crime was curtailed by the suppression of an official report and the legal constraints imposed on the media. In his systematic search in national and local newspapers for reports of sexual offences and subsequent court cases, Keating (2002) found that while newspapers carried comprehensive and highly detailed coverage of everything from petty larceny to murder, reports of crimes of a sexual nature were ‘noticeable by their absence’.<sup>23</sup>

This scenario was bought about by the cumulative effects of taboo nature of the crime, the impact of the censorship act and the impact of *Waterford Standard* case. As Keating (2002) himself put it: ‘From the evidence to hand there would seem to have been a general reluctance by local and national papers at the time to publicise cases involving sexual crime against children’.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, as far back as 1942, one ‘Crime Reporter’ bemoaned the extent of sexual crime being perpetrated and the failure of the press to report on this issue:

Few vice cases are ever mentioned in the press. Indeed a screen of official secrecy seems to shroud the whole question. The arguments for and against the publicising of vice prosecutions are various. Some contend that to publicise them tends to deprave the young and ignorant; some argue that it lowers the standard of public taste; some argue that vice and crime always find imitators. The opposite viewpoint, which, I must say, is also mine, is that, provided press notices are judicious, publicity acts as a warning – especially when...exemplary sentences are imposed.<sup>25</sup>

In the wake of the *Waterford Standard* case newspapers were careful about how they reported on sexual crimes, if they were reported on at all. While not overstating the effects of the case, it demonstrates the mood of the time as regards media coverage of crime. As Keating (2002) asserts, when sexual crime was reported on it was generally described as ‘sexual assault’ with no detail being given about the specifics of the offence

---

<sup>22</sup> Keating, A. (2002) *Secrets and Lies*, PhD Thesis, p166. NA SR22/36. The report was released to the public in 2000.

<sup>23</sup> Keating, A. (2002) *Secrets and Lies*, PhD Thesis, p160.

<sup>24</sup> Keating, A. (2002) *Secrets and Lies*, PhD Thesis, p161.

<sup>25</sup> *The Bell* (1942) ‘Crime in Dublin’ Vol. 5, No. 3, p183 of 173-83.

itself. Such reporting was incapable of sensationalism with people either reading between the lines or not. This sober and restrictive reporting of crime was also a product of the nature of reporting at the time. Reporters were anonymous in that the practices of attributing by-lines and photographs of reporters to their stories was unknown. This prevented reporters from developing a public or crusading persona. Also absent was the system of specialist correspondent (with the exception of political correspondents), which ensured that crime reporting was not the preserve of any one reporter. All of this lay in the future.

*From under-reporting to over-reporting?*

Throughout the 1960s, as Ireland opened up economically and culturally, a new social order began to emerge. An educated and affluent post-civil war generation began to make its voice heard, a generation unwilling to accept uncritically the received wisdom of doctrines of the past, whether political or religious. Along with the questioning of political and religious certainties came changes in the structure and newsgathering tactics of the media. Telefís Éireann arrived in 1961 and, for the first time, the public could see, identify and identify with reporters. Although most people would have been familiar with newsreels in cinemas, now news was visual in a much more everyday way.

Television could also report news much more quickly than newspapers. It was a radically changed media environment to which newspapers had to respond. While this response was gradual, newspapers began to change during the 1960s. The introduction of by-lines (and much later photographs) did away with the anonymity of print journalists and gave the public an idea of whose work they were reading. The 1960s were also characterised by the appointment of specialist correspondents, whereby reporters were assigned to specific news areas and encouraged to develop an expertise and cultivate sources in these particular areas. While the position of political correspondent existed in most national papers, the mid-1960s witnessed the appointment of reporters to specific beats, for example, education, religion, business or agriculture. Crime reporting, however, remained part of the general newsroom beat. This specialised post would evolve later and would stem from the appointment of reporters to cover general law and order news. Such reporters were invariably called security correspondents, a less exciting title than that of crime correspondent that would emerge later.

State sensitivity about crime reporting was again heightened during the 1970s, when, as the northern troubles worsened, the state struggled with a spate of paramilitary

crime. Between 1971 and 1981 the level of indictable crime doubled from 37,781 to 89,400 indictable offences. Between 1971 and 1981 crimes against the person (which included murder, manslaughter, firearms offences and kidnap) jumped from 1,256 to 2,478, while offences against property (which included armed robbery) jumped from 10,654 to 28,916.<sup>26</sup> Rather than hyping this real increase in crime levels as a threat to society, many publications found themselves being hauled before the Special Criminal Court on charges of contempt of court and being accused by politicians of being ‘on the wrong side’ in the fight against paramilitary crime.

In 1975 the Special Criminal Court declared itself ‘scandalised’ after the *Irish Press* published claims that Gardai had beaten up suspects. Its editor, Tim Pat Coogan, was prosecuted, but successfully defended the paper. In 1976 the editor of the *Irish Times*, Fergus Pyle, was similarly prosecuted after the paper reproduced terminology from a press release that referred to the court as a ‘sentencing tribunal’. Pyle apologised to the court and the charges were dropped. *Hibernia* magazine was also prosecuted and forced to apologise after it published a reader’s letter that referred to a trial with the word ‘trial’ in quotation marks. In 1977 the *Irish Times* incurred the wrath of the government after it published an extensive investigation into the alleged beating of suspects by Gardai.<sup>27</sup> The ‘Heavy Gang’ exposé prompted the Minister for Justice, Paddy Cooney, to condemn the ‘gullible and uninformed media’ that had, as he saw it, been ‘taken in by people whose interests are served by breaking down public confidence in the police’.<sup>28</sup>

It was in the 1980s, though, that crime reporting came into its own. The problems of social exclusion and disadvantage caused by the clearance of inner-city Dublin tenements and the creation of inadequately serviced sprawling suburban estates was reflected in a growth in drugs crime and anti-social behaviour in the form of joy-riding. The growing problem of heroin became the focus of much media coverage, as did the emergence of criminal gangs involved in the drugs trade. In this respect the *Sunday World* led the way with its exposé on Dublin drug dealer Larry Dunne. *Magill* magazine profiled one of the city’s most reclusive criminals, Martin Cahill, prompting RTÉ’s flagship current affairs programme, *Today Tonight*, also to profile Cahill, with a harassed Brendan O’Brien pursuing Cahill around the street of Dublin.

---

<sup>26</sup> McCullagh, C. (1996) *Crime in Ireland: A Sociological Introduction*. Cork, CUP, p3.

<sup>27</sup> See *Irish Times* 14 February 1977, p1.

<sup>28</sup> Allen, G. (1999) *The Garda Síochána: Policing Independent Ireland 1922-82*. Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, p193.

This new approach in crime reporting, profiling and door-stepping dangerous criminals for comment, marked a new departure in crime reporting, a tactic that gained currency throughout the early 1990s. By this time the media landscape had again changed. Independent Newspapers had changed ownership and in the early 1980s, following extensive market research, it was decided to reinvent the company's titles. The *Evening Herald* was the first to undergo a revamp with market research suggesting a more aggressive and competitive approach to newsgathering and the addition of new features. The image of the *Herald* as an inner city working class newspaper no longer cut it with advertisers and so, in 1982, it was re-launched as a tabloid aimed at a young, urban, middle class readership.

As one study suggested, this new target readership was demographically most likely to be victims of crime, and so it was perhaps inevitable that the paper would put a special emphasis on crime coverage. A war on crime was declared and executives decided that the paper would concentrate on a select few aspects of crime, those affecting the paper's readers, on a regular and systematic basis. Independent Newspapers group news editor, Ray Doyle, stated on RTE radio that that this policy 'had been established within Independent Newspapers by representatives of editorial executives at a very high level. It has been decided that we should engage in this war'.<sup>29</sup>

But, other than crime being an issue that affected its new target readership, why did the reinvented *Herald* choose crime as its unique selling point? Why not politics or sport? The answer may be that crime continually satisfies the media's demand for news like no other phenomena. In their seminal work on news values, Galtung and Ruge (1973) identified several criteria that influence whether or not media personnel feel an event is newsworthy. Among the criteria were: frequency – the time span needed for an event to unfold; amplitude – the dramatic affect of an event; clarity – the unambiguous nature of the event; meaningfulness – the emotional impact of the event; unexpectedness – the unanticipated occurrence of the event; negativity – the harmfulness of an event; continuity – whereby the event becomes a running story; and personification – whereby an event is held up as personifying the moral state of society.<sup>30</sup> Galtung and Ruge argued that the more an event satisfies these criteria the more likely the event will become news.

---

<sup>29</sup> Kerrigan, G. & Shaw, H. (April 1985) 'Crime Hysteria' *Magill*, p19 of 10-21.

<sup>30</sup> Galtung, J. & Ruge, M. (1973) Structuring and Selecting News in Cohen, S. & Young, J. (eds) *The Manufacture of News*. London, Constable, pp62-72.

Crime satisfies all these news values. The immediate – or here and now – element of crime fits the news production cycle; crime is dramatic and can be reported in a easily understood ‘good versus evil’ narrative; it is meaningful because people sympathise with its victims; it is unexpected and it has negative consequences; a running story may emerge from coverage of the investigation and subsequent court case; and isolated events, horrific though they may be, are often held up as personifying how violent society has become. Equally important is the fact that crime is omnipresent. Unlike politics or sports, it does not have sessions or seasons. It is an all-year round phenomena and is capable of feeding the media’s insatiable appetite for dramatic and negative events to report.

While this explains why crime becomes news, it does not explain how crime might be hyped out of proportion by the media. To explain this Galtung and Ruge (1973) argued that once an event becomes news, what made it newsworthy – its unexpectedness, its negativity etc – becomes accentuated. The cumulative effect of this process of selection and emphasis was, they concluded, to produce an image of society that is at variance with social reality. In terms of crime coverage, this would mean that more serious crimes, those that most match news values, are over reported in quantitative terms, while the less serious crimes, those that are most common in society, but which do not fit news values as much, are barely mentioned thus creating a picture of a society being engulfed by serious crime.

Is there any empirical proof to show that such a process actually occurs? An analysis by O’Connell (1999) of 2,191 crime stories from four national newspaper titles concluded that rather than giving a representative picture of the offences occurring, the newspapers provided ‘an almost chemically pure, unrepresentative picture of crime in Ireland’.<sup>31</sup> O’Connell’s (1999) study identified several biases in the newspapers’ coverage of crime. He found a bias towards extreme and atypical offences in terms of frequency. In other word, the least frequent but more serious offences, such as murder and sexual assault, featured in reportage most often and the most common but less serious offences featured more rarely.

Comparing the reportage to Garda statistics, O’Connell (1999) found that while murder accounted for .004 per cent of overall crime it accounted for 12.3 per cent of crime stories in the sample; armed robbery accounted for .9 per cent of overall crime but 15.8 per cent of crime stories in the sample. O’Connell (1999) concluded that the typical

---

<sup>31</sup> The four titles were: *Irish Times*, *Irish Press*, *Evening Herald* and *Daily Star*.

offences that appear in the print media appear rarely in official crime statistics and that the typical crimes that appear in the official statistics appear rarely in the print media. Along with this over-representation of serious crime, he also found a bias towards these offences in terms of newspaper space (word count), finding that the more frequent the offence the lower the wordage and vice versa. He also identified a bias towards stories involving vulnerable victims and invulnerable offenders. Stories involving victims aged under sixteen or over fifty-five and stories involving females as victims received greater coverage in terms of word count. He similarly found that stories involving male offenders received more space than stories involving female offenders. Thus the print media had a preference for male adult offenders and female and either very young or very old victims.<sup>32</sup> In his study O'Connell (1999) found that of the four papers sampled, the *Evening Herald* contained the greatest proportion of crime stories to other stories. Indeed, a previous study of public attitudes towards crime (O'Connell & Whelan 1996) found that readers of Independent Group newspapers tended to have the greatest fear of crime, regardless of previous victimisation experiences. This result held up even when statistical techniques were used to control for educational and social class differences between newspaper readerships.<sup>33</sup>

#### *No one shouted stop*

Along with this new emphasis on crime coverage came a new style of crime reporting. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, the newspaper market became more competitive. The creation of Irish editions of British titles, whereby four to six pages of Irish news were wrapped around content already produced for the British market, resulted in the dumping of low-priced hybrid titles on the Irish market. This upped the ante in competitive terms and prompted some Irish titles to respond with aggressive marketing tactics, whereby, rather than the marketing being constructed around content, the content began to be constructed to fit the marketing. As ever, the all year round phenomena of crime was an issue that provided endless marketing opportunities.

It was an era when crime correspondents and the criminals they were writing about were elevated to celebrity status. It was also an era when crime correspondents actively and publicly used criminals as acknowledged sources of information. The two

---

<sup>32</sup> O'Connell, M. (1999) 'Is Irish public opinion towards crime distorted by media bias?' *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp191-212.

<sup>33</sup> O'Connell, M. & Whelan, A. (1996) 'The public perception of crime prevalence, newspaper readership and "mean world" attitudes' in *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, Vol. 1, pp179-95.

newspapers that led the field in this regard were the *Sunday World* and the *Sunday Independent*.<sup>34</sup> Unlike previous generations of reporters who covered the crime beat, the public profiles of the crime correspondents of these newspapers were actively promoted in their respective marketing strategies and they became household names. Stories of how crime correspondents personally challenged and door-stepped dangerous criminals made for great marketing opportunities but whether this was the function of a crime reporter was barely discussed while the stories were forthcoming.

The shape of crime reporting changed too. The new style of crime reporting was very much centred on reports of the interaction that took place between reporter and criminal. This situated the reporter as a central participant in, rather than a mere observer, of an event. Such a scenario involved the use of the first person singular, a more intimate and involved style of writing very different from the detached and impartial style of crime reporting that had dominated Irish journalism until then. While this style of writing was engaging and dramatic, what it meant for objectivity and balance was not adequately discussed while the stories were forthcoming.

A new tactic, the use of codenames, to write about criminals without naming them was also adopted. Thus the public was introduced to a cast of characters such as the General, the Viper, the Coach, the Penguin, the Warehouseman, the Gambler, the Monk and the Boxer. While this tactic may have safeguarded the newspapers from libel proceedings and from prejudicing any trial, it is at least arguable that it also tended to debase crime reporting by turning it into something akin to an oddly cast journalistic soap opera. The use of apocalyptic terminology such as ‘untouchables’ and ‘gangland’ in media discourse about crime became commonplace. The inclusion of personal and intimate details on the lives of criminals – their relationships, their sex lives, where they lived, what type of car they drove and where they went on holidays also broke new ground and it is on this issue that the lines between what is in the public interest and what the public is interested in began to blur. While such information was of huge interest to a public hungry for salacious gossip, it is debatable whether such stories were in the public interest. It is also debatable as to whether stories on violent criminals belonged in the lifestyle section of a newspaper. What is certain however is that such content was highly marketable to a scandal hungry public.

---

<sup>34</sup> The *Irish Times* had a policy of not using criminals as sources for stories.

The killing of the *Sunday Independent's* crime correspondent, Veronica Guerin, in June 1996 by the same criminals that she was writing about prompted a debate on what the function of a crime reporter should be. Was it, as it had evolved in some newspapers, to personally confront dangerous criminals on their doorsteps on the basis of information mostly received from sources with their own agendas, namely other criminals and gardaí? Was it to bring criminals to justice on the pages of their newspapers if the Garda Síochána was incapable of securing the evidence to convict them in court? Or was it, as Vincent Browne argued, to hold public institutions, the police, the court system and the prison system, to account in their handling of the crime issue?<sup>35</sup> But as a colleague of Brown's pointed out, for the most part media outlets opt for 'certain "sexy" and potentially sensational elements in order to steal an edge over the competition...Crime exposés sell newspapers; exposés of injustice, as a rule, do not'.<sup>36</sup>

There is no easy answer to this, but it is at least arguable that the new style of crime reporting had at least one blind spot. Such was the enthusiasm for dramatic stories of the criminal underworld that corruption within the Garda Síochána went unnoticed and unreported. It is instructive that no crime correspondent broke the story of the corruption within the Donegal division of the Garda Síochána. Instead it fell to two Dáil deputies, Jim Higgins and Brendan Howlin, to use Dáil privilege to bring the corruption to public attention. Likewise the findings of the Morris Tribunal that 'proper discipline has been lost from An Garda Síochána' is hardly a vote of confidence in the ability of crime correspondents to make the force accountable to the public.<sup>37</sup> Whether crime reporting, a potent mix of detective work, intelligence gathering and journalism, should be the preserve of one high profile reporter or be carried out by an investigative team to diffuse the risks involved was also discussed, although little has changed in this regard. Crime reporting, for the most part, is still centred on the 'celebrity crime correspondent' model – death threats against at least one crime correspondent notwithstanding.<sup>38</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Although the media portray the evolution of Irish society as continuously moving from a safe and crime free past to an unsafe crime ridden present, there are a number of factors which contradict this simple narrative. Firstly, in the past many victims of crime were

---

<sup>35</sup> *Irish Times*, 'Litany of repressive measures emanating from the airways is not an appropriate response' 28 June 1996, p6.

<sup>36</sup> *Irish Times*, 'Media are the greatest enemy of crusading journalists' 22 October 1996, p14.

<sup>37</sup> *Irish Times*, 'New disciplinary code for gardai after Morris reports' 20 May 2006, p1.

<sup>38</sup> *Irish Times*, 'INLA link suspected in bomb hoax' 15 November 2003, p3.



unable to report their victimisation; secondly, mass emigration kept crime levels artificially low in the past; and thirdly, the restrictions placed on media reporting of crime in the past ensured that crime, particularly sexual crime, was not adequately reported. These factors mean that the crime statistics from the past are an inaccurate base from which to compare present crime levels and that public discourse about the types of crime being committed was inhibited by lack of media coverage. In reminiscing about the past, present day crime reporting overlooks these factors, just as it overlooks the continuing rise in population in favour of concentrating on the annual rise in crime levels as indicated by the Garda statistics. In 2004 there was a three per cent increase in headline crime, but there was also a population increase of five percent, a fact missing from most coverage, but which is a crucial factor in giving context to increases in crime levels. Similarly Ireland's favourable international position in crime league tables is mostly ignored. So too is the fact that one is more likely to be a victim of a crime involving property than a crime involving physical harm. In the year 2000 crimes against the person accounted for 4.26 per cent of headline crime, while crimes against property accounted for 95.74 per cent. In 2005 the respective figures were 6.37 per cent and 93.63 per cent.<sup>39</sup>

The ignoring of such factors and the over-representation of headline crime in the media gives a distorted view of a society besieged by crime and has two direct consequences. Firstly, it produces a fear of crime among the public. A July 2006 Eurobarometer poll found that 54 per cent of the Irish public identified crime as one of the two most important issues facing the country. The European average was 24 per cent. Another Eurobarometer poll published in February 2006 found that ten per cent of the Irish public thought it 'very likely' that they would be victims of crime compared to an EU average of 6 per cent. In the same poll, 44 per cent of Irish respondents thought it 'not likely' that they would be a victim of crime, compared to an EU average of 63 per cent.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, this public fear of crime allows politicians who should know better to hop on the 'tough on crime' bandwagon. Rather than a rational debate on the causes of crime – say for example, on the merits of drug prohibition – what emerges is a concentration on the effects of crime and how more Gardaí and more prison places are needed to police us from ourselves.

From media coverage of crime one gets the sense that risk is ever present, more so now than in the past. This is a narrative that gives a sense of continuity to crime stories –

---

<sup>39</sup> See annual reports at [www.garda.ie](http://www.garda.ie)

<sup>40</sup> Corrigan, C. (September 2006) 'Crime: "out of control" once again' in *Magill*, September, p15 of 14-16.

that danger is just around the corner and nobody knows who is going to be the next victim. In stark contrast, the consensus among criminologists is that the crime rate is fairly stable, when expressed as per head of population and when allowance is made for occasional fluctuations in individual offences, such as murder, that occur in every jurisdiction. The fact that Ireland has one of the lowest crime rates in Europe is a headline that has yet to make it on to the front page.