

## ‘Sources say . . .’: Political journalism since 1921

Mark O’Brien

### Introduction

While political journalism plays a central role in the political process it remains a hugely under-researched area of enquiry in Ireland. This is regrettable as political journalism holds those whom we elect to public account, it offers insights into the workings of political parties and governments, it is often the first draft of political history, and, occasionally it makes or breaks political careers. Taking the long view, this chapter presents a snapshot of how political journalism evolved over the course of the last ninety years or so. Using digital newspaper archives it sheds some light on political journalism and political journalists in the early years of the state. Through interviews it examines the role that television played in transforming political journalism from passive reporting to critical analysis and commentary. Finally, amid a rapidly changing media environment, it examines the factors that impact on political journalism today.

### A new state, a new parliament, 1919–61

When Dáil Éireann was established in 1919 it fell to a journalist, Piaras Béaslaí, to propose the adoption of the proclamation of independence. Béaslaí, who had worked on the *Freeman’s Journal* and been imprisoned for his part in the 1916 Rising, was one of a number of journalists who combined newspaper work with republican activities. At the *Irish Independent*, reporters Michael Knightly and Hugh Smith had been active during the Rising and, along with Ned Lawlor and Paddy Quinn, reported the bitter and divisive Treaty Debates in December 1920 and January 1921 (Smyllie, 1948). Hugh Curran reported on these debates for the *Irish Times* and some months later, that paper’s future editor, Robert Smyllie, first encountered Michael Collins. While Smyllie had expected ‘a sinister, beetle-browed, scowling kind of anarchist, who would cut your throat as soon as he would look at you’ he found Collins to be ‘a big, jovial, open-faced young man with a great shock of black hair and a wide grin that explained to me, at any rate, the astonishing hold that he had on his followers’ (Smyllie, 1948). The establishment of a new parliament and its move to Leinster House in 1922 entailed a process of negotiation regarding the facilities afforded to journalists. In June 1923 the political correspondents walked out of the Dáil halfway through a debate in protest at the lack of facilities provided for them. This had an instantaneous effect: the ceann comhairle wrote to them and the journalists agreed ‘that the offered accommodation for tea-room etc. be accepted’ (*Irish Times*, 1923a).

The following October the journalists established the press gallery committee to liaise with the clerk of the Dáil on matters affecting the work of political journalists. Its first chairman was William Clarke of the *Belfast Telegraph*, and amongst its members was Frank Geary, later editor of the *Irish Independent* (*Irish Times*, 1923b). However, the return of the political correspondents was not universally welcomed. In 1924 the leader of the Labour Party, Thomas Johnson, suggested that the Dáil had not earned the electorate’s respect and asserted that the political correspondents were to blame. The parliament had not, he declared, ‘impressed the newspapers with the necessity of appointing people who will give an intelligent criticism or an intelligent summary of [its] work’ (Dáil Debates, 1924). Unsurprisingly, the political correspondents

expressed surprise that a TD 'be permitted to abuse the privileges of the House by making such sweeping and unfounded charges' (*Irish Times*, 1924).

As had happened prior to independence politicians thought nothing of saying one thing in public and then criticising journalists for supposedly misquoting them in their reports. In 1926 the governor general, Tim Healy, accused two journalists, William Buttimer of the *Irish Times* and Ned Lawler of the *Irish Independent*, of misreporting a speech he had delivered to Dublin's chamber of commerce. In his speech, Healy had made some choice remarks about Fianna Fáil's decision to remain outside parliament. Noting that the public never heard of certain politicians 'except in connection with explosions and assassinations' Healy concluded that they were 'quite welcome to stay out, and the further out they stayed the more welcome it will be, and the better some of us will be pleased.' When Thomas Johnson raised the matter in the Dáil, W.T. Cosgrave told the house that Healy had informed him that the reports of his speech were inaccurate. However, both journalists wrote to their respective newspapers and refuted Healy's assertion by releasing their full notes of his speech (*Irish Times*, 1926). Commenting on the affair, the *Irish Statesman* noted that Healy's reaction was 'a common form with politicians of all schools, who find themselves in an awkward corner.' If, it concluded, newspapers reported all that a politician said 'as he said it, with "hems" and "haws", un-concluded sentences, futile repetition and doubtful grammar' then allegations such as Healy's would cease to be made (*Irish Times*, 1964).

Relations between Cosgrave's government and political journalists seemed patchy at best: in October 1929 they walked out of a function that he was hosting in Dublin's Shelbourne Hotel for 23 overseas journalists who had travelled to Ireland to visit the Shannon Power Works in Co. Clare. The walkout occurred when the overseas journalists were seated in the main dining hall and the Irish journalists were instructed to take seats in an adjoining room. While some newspapers, such as the *Irish Times* depended on Cosgrave's circulated speech as the basis for its report of the event, other newspapers, such as the *Evening Herald*, made no bones about telling its readers that the event was not being reported because of how its political journalists had been treated. This *contretemps* prompted Cosgrave's secretary to write to the department of external affairs, which had organised the function, to record that Cosgrave was 'much perturbed at the comments [and was] very anxious that nothing should occur in regard to any future function with which he or any other Minister is concerned which might be made the subject of complaint or adverse comment in the Press.' The secretary also wrote a letter of apology to the editors of the national newspapers recording Cosgrave's 'sincere regret' that journalists 'should find cause for complaint in anything arising out of functions' with which he was connected (National Archives, 1929).

Cosgrave was, perhaps, sensitive to the move that Fianna Fáil was making in establishing its own national newspaper to counter the negative publicity of the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Times*. First published in September 1931, five months shy of the 1932 general election, the *Irish Press* was a powerful addition to the political and media landscapes. It played a central role in bringing the party to power in 1932 and keeping it there; so much so that de Valera noted that 'if the paper were to disappear, the government would disappear with it' (de Valera, 1932). The arrival of the *Press* brought with it several new political correspondents, with Brendan Malin and Joe Dennigan joining the parliamentary lobby. Ironically, some months after

Fianna Fáil had taken power Dennigan was imprisoned for refusing to reveal the source of a story he had written. As political correspondent of the *Irish Press*, Dennigan was summoned to appear before a military tribunal where one E.J. Cronin was charged with membership of an illegal organisation, the Young Ireland Association or ‘Blue Shirts’. Sometime before this, Dennigan had written a story in relation to the Fianna Fáil government’s plans to declare the organisation illegal and had reported that the government ‘proposed to allow a short period to members of the organisation so as to provide them with an opportunity of ceasing their membership’ (*Irish Press*, 1933). This information had only appeared in the *Irish Press* and it was part of Cronin’s defence that, as a non-reader of that paper, he had been unaware of any such amnesty. When asked to identify the source of his story Dennigan claimed privilege and was gaoled for one month for contempt of court (National Archives, 1933). Whoever Dennigan’s source was, the political correspondents of this time did most of their dealing with ministers Seán Lemass, Jim Ryan and Gerry Boland. As remembered by long time *Irish Times* political correspondent Michael McInerney (1975), it was in the late 1930s that Lemass came under huge pressure from the political correspondents to hold a weekly press conference – pressure intensified no doubt by the rigorous state censorship adopted during the Second World War. As minister for supplies, Lemass briefed the journalists on a weekly basis between 1939 and 1948 and ‘was also readily available on the phone.’

The first inter-party government of 1948–51 was, as remembered by McInerney (1975), easy to deal with on the basis that ‘new governments always are easier to deal with.’ While there was ‘little official information about the famous Baltinglass Post Office case or the Noel Browne crisis’, not only did the political correspondents ‘know of Cabinet meetings, but they also knew the decisions made.’ It was this government that began the process of holding press conferences, prompted in part by Taoiseach John A. Costello’s announcement that the Free State was to leave the Commonwealth, which prompted a flurry of international press activity in Dublin (*Irish Times*, 1948). Perhaps the most startling act of political journalism in pre-1960s Ireland was the decision in 1951 by Robert Smyllie of the *Irish Times* to publish the correspondence between the inter-party government and the Catholic hierarchy in relation to Noel Browne’s ill-fated Mother and Child healthcare scheme. When the hierarchy objected to what it viewed as state intervention in an area it controlled, the government backed off and Browne resigned as minister for health. Just before he did, he delivered the correspondence to Smyllie who had promised to publish them. On 12 April 1951 the *Irish Times* reproduced the full text of the letters, forcing the other national titles to do likewise. For his trouble, Smyllie was condemned in the Dáil: the minister for defence, T.F. O’Higgins, described him ‘as the “nigger in the wood-pile” who is causing irreparable damage to . . . this nation’ (Dáil Debates, 1951).

Fianna Fáil’s return to power in 1957 resulted in a shakeup of how governments handled political communication. Tánaiste Seán Lemass held weekly press conferences: as remembered by Michael McInerney, ‘in one case a talk extended for nearly three hours: and the field was wide open . . . though much was non-attributable.’ The government information bureau, long derided by political journalists as ‘the bureau of no information’, got a new director, Pádraig Ó hAnnracháin, who McInerney recalled, ‘urged Ministers to talk to the correspondents, and they did.’ Remarkably, according to McInerney, de Valera ‘even began to hold his own press conferences.’ The most open minister in this administration, McInerney

recalled, was finance minister Jim Ryan: he ‘broke the news about the Dev. retirement [in 1959] in the most casual way, so casual that one might almost miss it’ (McInerney, 1975). But overall, political journalism in the first few decades of the state was, as described by journalist Michael O’Toole (1988, 11–12), characterised by ‘an unhealthy willingness to accept the prepared statement, the prepared speech, and the handout without demanding the opportunity of asking any searching questions by way of follow-up.’ There was he concluded, a ‘failure to apply critical analysis to practically any aspect of Irish life.’

### **Television and openness, 1961–79**

Seán Lemass’ election as Taoiseach was mirrored by the appointment of a new generation of political correspondents and the inauguration of a national television service in 1961 – a service bound in law to be objective and impartial in its coverage of news and current affairs. This stipulation was to have a profound impact on political journalism. Whereas previously the main media organisations represented or supported various interest groups, the new television service, through the requirement to be impartial, was bound to ensure more than one viewpoint on any matter was represented. While this was to eventually force the print media, to varying degrees, to move in the same direction, in the early days it gave a new generation of political correspondents a powerful platform, independent of their newspapers, to air their views and opinions. Amongst the new generation of political correspondents were Michael Mills of the *Irish Press* and Arthur Noonan of the *Irish Independent*, while John Healy joined the *Irish Times* as a political columnist.

When offered the post of political correspondent of the *Irish Press* in 1963 Mills accepted it on the basis that he ‘would try it for six months but would not write propaganda.’ This condition was accepted by the Press Group’s chairman Vivion de Valera who, influenced by the arrival of television, was trying to transform the paper’s editorial ethos from its reverential coverage of the party to a ‘fair to all, friendly to Fianna Fáil’ approach (Mills, 1997). Arthur Noonan, who succeeded Paddy Quinn as the *Irish Independent’s* political correspondent, was a regular television commentator on political events; in the 1970s he served as RTÉ’s political correspondent, and later still, its political editor. But it was John Healy’s ‘Inside Politics’ column, written under the penname ‘Backbencher’, that was to many people the most influential political column of the 1960s. It first appeared in the *Sunday Review* (Ireland’s first tabloid newspaper) and from 1963 onwards in the *Irish Times*. The column was distinctive in that it often contained information, sometimes on government policy, sometimes political gossip, derived from Healy’s large circle of sources and it was written in an irreverent style. As one commentator noted, ‘until the arrival of the “Backbencher” column in the *Sunday Review* and later the *Irish Times*, which has in turn led to a similar licence in other newspapers, regular and provocative political journalism was almost unknown in Ireland’ (Thornley, 1967, 223). Healy’s column has inspired a long line of successors in the form of informed and sometimes irreverent parliamentary diarists.

The changing media scene was also helped by the appointment of a younger generation of ministers determined to use the media to help shape their public profile – a process dismissively described by Máirtín Ó Cadhain as ‘pressomatosis’ (Ó hEithir, 1983). Along with Charles Haughey and Brian Lenihan, Donogh O’Malley courted the political correspondents: as Michael McInerney remembered it, ‘in the

days of the “Golden Boys” Donogh O’Malley perhaps was the first “open Minister” (McInerney, 1975). A gregarious individual, O’Malley would often sit with the political correspondents in the Dáil restaurant and revelled in his friendship with John Healy (Mills, 2005, 41). Besides O’Malley, Healy was enamoured with Charles Haughey and often referred to him in his ‘Backbencher’ column as ‘The Golden Boy’. But Healy also had sources within Fine Gael and at least one commentator has hinted that his insider within that party was Patrick Lindsay, the long time Co. Mayo TD (O’Dea, 1984, 29). Whoever his source was, in May 1964 Healy noted cryptically at end of his column, ‘I share with Mr Declan Costello a passion for discretion just now, but I can be depended upon to speak at the appropriate time.’ The following week Healy was the first journalist to reveal the new ‘Just Society’ policy programme that Costello had confidentially circulated within Fine Gael (Healy, 1964).

Healy also chaired the current affairs programme ‘The Hurler on the Ditch’ on Telefís Éireann. The programme consisted of a weekly overview of events by the political correspondents of the national dailies. The programme gave Michael Mills, Michael McInerney, and Arthur Noonan a platform from which to analyse and discuss the issues of the day, sometimes in ways that were not possible in their respective newspapers, a point recounted in detail by Mills:

I had an advantage over previous political correspondents in that television had arrived and I appeared on several programmes and would often say on television what I might have difficulty saying in the *Irish Press*. There was opposition from sections of Fianna Fáil with many meetings passing resolutions trying to get the management to sack me. When the attacks came, Vivion [de Valera] resisted them and said he would stand by me. I used to get flak from TDs but I had regular access to television and radio which was a great help as I could reach a far greater audience there than by the *Irish Press* (Mills, 1997).

Mills did, however, come under intense pressure to retract a story published in the *Irish Press* in October 1966. He had been ‘given a tip off by one of his political friends’ that Lemass was about to retire and the editor, Joe Walsh, accepted ‘the veracity of the story and ran it as a lead in the following day’s papers’ (Mills, 1997). The article informed a stunned party faithful that ‘sources close to the government were predicting that the Taoiseach would announce his retirement within the coming fortnight’ (*Irish Press*, 1966). The scoop was news to most senior party figures and was vigorously denied. Pressure mounted on Mills and Walsh to retract it and by that evening Walsh ‘began to have doubts as other political correspondents attempted to knock the story on the basis of contacts with reliable government sources.’ After two days of denial and pressure from Fianna Fáil and the rebuttal of the story by the other newspapers, Walsh decided that the *Irish Press* would retract the story. However, Mills asked Walsh to ‘hold off until the last minute in the belief that the story would be confirmed. Just before the deadline, a message arrived stating that a special meeting of the Fianna Fáil Parliamentary Party had been called for the following week’ – a sure sign that something dramatic was about to happen. Lemass then announced his intention to retire (Mills, 1997).

The analysis and commentary by Mills, Healy, Noonan and McInerney in their respective newspapers and on television did not sit well with many politicians. During

a 1966 Seanad debate on broadcasting Senator Patrick Quinlan criticised the prominent coverage given to the views of political correspondents. He noted that ‘the political commentators who have appeared in GAA clothes, “The Hurler on the Ditch”, have been given a place of importance in this country altogether out of keeping with a democratic country.’ No other democracy would, he declared, allow ‘a small group to get into their hands the power to make and break politicians and to make and break Governments that Telefís Éireann have given to the political commentators here’ (Seanad Debates, 1966). The arrival of television also created some competition between broadcasters and the political correspondents. While one commentator noted that ‘Irish print journalists suddenly found themselves in competition with a new breed of interviewer, people like Brian Farrell and John O’Donoghue [who] were often better educated, more confident and more professional than their colleagues in the newspapers’ (O’Toole, 1988, 11), simply by their longevity in reporting politics, the newspapers’ political correspondents tended to have better sources which occasionally produced tensions when they were interviewed by the newer broadcasters. Reviewing one current affairs programme in 1970, one television critic noted that ‘Brian Farrell had got a bit testy with John Healy and Arthur Noonan because they seemed to him to be coy about their interpretation of Mr Ó Móráin’s resignation as Minister for Justice and John Healy had, in turn ticked Farrell off for expecting them to provide sensational tit-bits specially for television’ (*Irish Times*, 1970).

While the sudden resignation of Ó Móráin, a sociable minister with a history of health problems, raised a few eyebrows, a telephone call from the government information bureau asking the national newspapers to hold off printing the next day’s edition until an important government statement could be released increased the suspense. The statement – that ministers Neil Blaney and Charles Haughey had been sacked by Taoiseach Jack Lynch because they did not fully subscribe to government policy on Northern Ireland and that another minister, Kevin Boland, had resigned in protest – finally reached the newspapers at 2.50 a.m. As remembered by Chris Glennon, who shortly afterwards replaced Arthur Noonan as the *Irish Independent’s* political correspondent, ‘in keeping with the style of the time, there was no explanation of why Mr Lynch had taken such a drastic step. It was well into the day before newspapers were able to link the upheaval to an alleged attempt to import arms into the state for possible transfer to Northern Ireland’ (Glennon, 2011).

The formation of the Fine Gael – Labour Party coalition in 1973 seemed to herald a new beginning in many ways and a new generation of political correspondents that included Dick Walsh of the *Irish Times*, Chris Glennon of the *Irish Independent*, and Seán Duignan and Donal Kelly of RTÉ entered the fold. Despite his dour public persona, as remembered by Dick Walsh, Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave showed ‘more willingness than any of his predecessors to explain to commentators and the public at large what he and his colleagues are about.’ Cosgrave was, Walsh remarked, ‘positively garrulous and some of his colleagues embarrassingly loquacious . . . on all subjects other than security there is a frankness which, ten years ago, would have seemed startling.’ As Walsh recalled, some ministers agreed to attribution of their remarks though ‘in a minority of instances’ they preferred the political correspondents to use phrases such as ‘Ministers believe’ or ‘A senior member of the Cabinet considers.’

The appointment of Muiris Mac Conghail as government spokesman was a key factor in the coalition's good media relations in its early days (Walsh, 1975). Mac Conghail met with the political correspondents daily and briefed them on developments and, as remembered by Michael Mills, 'this was a completely new development which removed much of the secrecy surrounding cabinet sessions and made the public more aware of the nature of government operations' (Mills, 2005, 112). Despite such progressive moves the coalition endured a sometimes fraught relationship with the media. Conor Cruise O'Brien's proposal to extend a Section 31 type ban to the print media and Paddy Donegan's description of President Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh as 'a thundering disgrace' soured media coverage of the coalition (O'Brien, 2001, 147–55). At the 1977 general election Fianna Fáil romped home with a 20 seat majority, helped in no small part by Jack Lynch's popularity. Having hired Frank Dunlop as press officer in 1973 in an attempt to play the coalition at the briefing game, Lynch appointed Dunlop as the country's first government press secretary. But it was the *Irish Press* not the opposition parties that helped bring Lynch's term as Taoiseach to an end. Despite the friendship that existed between Lynch and Michael Mills, the latter never let it interfere with his job. In 1979, following a harrowing day of violence north and south of the border and under intense pressure from the British government, Lynch conceded a ten-kilometre over-flight zone along the border; a concession shrouded in secrecy but which Mills revealed in a front page story (*Irish Press*, 1979). As Mills remembered it:

We had a very good relationship until the story about the cross-border flyovers. Of course it upset the relationship, but I was a journalist with a good story and I could not sit on it. I knew new security arrangements had been made and there was only one place that it could be – the air. When I put my idea to certain people they were visibly upset by my knowledge. I ran the story but it was denied by the government (Mills, 1997).

At a stormy parliamentary party meeting, one TD asked whether Mills' report was true, to which Lynch replied 'as of now, the British have not permission to over-fly the border.' As Mills reported, much anger was directed at him and the *Irish Press* for running the story (*Irish Press*, 1979). By this stage a number of pressure points had built up: there were two by-elections in Lynch's native Cork but towards the end of these campaigns Lynch was on a tour of the US. Briefing the political correspondents on the flight over to Washington, Lynch told them, off the record, that 'if he lost one it would be manageable, but if he lost two he would be "goosed"' (private source). The following day, in the wake of those two by-election defeats, Lynch let a fatal truth slip from his lips when answering questions about border security at a news conference in Washington (*Irish Press*, 1979). As remembered by Mills:

It was at the Washington news conference that Jack slipped up. In reply to a question from Seán Cronin of the *Irish Times*, he replied that there was no change. He should have stopped there but then he said "except in one slight respect". This confirmed my story. The story appeared in the *Irish Press* and Bill Loughnane [TD] made an attack on Lynch. Lynch tried to have him expelled but failed. Of course our relationship suffered. He blamed me, but my duty was to the paper not to Jack (Mills, 1997).

Lynch's resignation followed shortly afterwards. It was around this time too (1977) that Vincent Browne launched *Magill*, a magazine that, following in the footsteps of *Hibernia*, unmercifully dissected Irish politics. Its speciality was in-depth investigative pieces: its series on the arms crisis (1980), the relationship between the Workers' Party and the Official IRA (1982) and the Kerry Babies case (1985) came to define political journalism during the early 1980s.

### **The Haughey years**

The politics and the reporting of politics in the 1980s were coloured by the events of the arms crisis a decade earlier. Having been sacked from cabinet in 1970 and having worked his way back to be elected Taoiseach in 1979 Charles Haughey was viewed with wariness by most, if not all, the political correspondents. He, in turn, viewed the group with undisguised suspicion. The appointment of the first female political correspondent, Geraldine Kennedy of the *Sunday Tribune*, in 1980 introduced a new dimension to political journalism. Kennedy made a name for herself by scooping the existing political correspondents: so much so that a tap was placed on her telephone by Haughey's minister for justice, Seán Doherty. In January 1983 the Fine Gael – Labour Party coalition revealed that the previous Haughey-led government had authorised the Garda Síochána to bug Kennedy's telephone and that of *Irish Independent* political columnist Bruce Arnold for most of 1982, presumably in an attempt to discover the sources of their stories on the heaves against Haughey then ongoing within Fianna Fáil. The coalition neglected to mention that the previous Fine Gael – Labour Party government had authorised a tap on the telephone of journalist Vincent Browne – a tap that lasted eight years. While Haughey denied any knowledge of the affair the revelations were followed by rumours that he was about to resign as party leader. On the day of a much anticipated parliamentary party meeting, the *Irish Press* printed its infamous two-page political obituary of Haughey (*Irish Press*, 1983). The obituary, which carried a detailed account of Haughey's political career, had been prepared in line with the standard media practice of compiling biographies of national figures ready for immediate use should the need arise. By its context and content it was assumed by both Haughey supporters and critics alike as evidence that the paper believed he should resign. Haughey's survival badly wrong-footed the newspaper: as remembered by former minister, David Andrews (1997) 'it caused some ill-feeling within the party and the party took a very poor view of it. Of course Haughey was upset – who wouldn't be?'

While the coalition's press secretary, Peter Prendergast, who as general secretary of Fine Gael, played a role in the government revealing the phone tapping scandal, had a good relationship with the political correspondents – one of them remembered him for his 'candidness' – he had a torturous relationship with the opposition. In 1984 he accused Haughey of 'gate-crashing' the departure ceremony for US President Ronald Reagan at Dublin airport (*Irish Independent*, 1984). Fianna Fáil responded by pointing out the impropriety of the leader of the opposition being criticised by a public servant and the coalition ultimately made the post of government press secretary a temporary one tied to the government of the day. While in opposition, Haughey appointed P.J. Mara as Prendergast's counterpoint: every day after Prendergast had briefed the political correspondents, Mara would brief them on the Fianna Fáil viewpoint. Despite Mara's best efforts, the political correspondents remained suspicious of Haughey, and he of them. As remembered by Dick Walsh, this situation was exacerbated by Haughey's aloofness: 'he would carry on a very stilted



conversation instead of having a relationship with people and talking normally. He was always conscious of who he was, and who you were' (Ryan, 1992, 60). Haughey's wariness of reporters was only reinforced by an indiscreet interview given to journalist John Waters that was subsequently published in *Hot Press*. Speaking freely, Haughey's frank assessment of political commentators left nothing to the imagination. When asked by Water (1984) 'what aspect of Ireland or Irish society angers you most?' Haughey had responded:

I *could* instance a load of fuckers who whose throats I'd cut and push over the nearest cliff, but there's no percentage in that! (laughs). Smug people. I hate smug people. People who think they know it all. I know from my own experiences that *nobody* knows it all. Some of these commentators who purport to a smug knowallness, who pontificate . . . They'll say something today and they're *totally* wrong about it – *completely* wrong – and they're *shown* to be wrong about it. Then the next day they're back, pontificating the same as ever. That sort of smug, knowall commentator – I suppose if anything annoys me, that annoys me. But I don't have sleepless nights about it!

Similarly, Mara's attempts to disarm the political correspondents with humour often backfired, as occurred in 1984 when he concluded a briefing with the words 'Uno duce, una voce' [one leader, one voice] and the quip was reported by Geraldine Kennedy in the *Sunday Press*. While Kennedy believed the quip was 'on the record', Mara disputed this by pointing out that she alone among the journalists present used the phrase in her report (Ryan, 1992, 63–4).

By this stage, the line-up of political correspondents had changed again: Seán O'Rourke replaced Michael Mills as political correspondent of the *Irish Press* in 1984 while Dick Walsh of the *Irish Times* was succeeded by John Cooney and later again by Denis Coughlan. In 1986 Mara adopted a new policy of inviting the political correspondents to travel with himself and Haughey to constituencies in advance of the upcoming election; a strategy that guaranteed media coverage while the Dáil was in recess. Activities such as these were viewed with suspicion by the coalition. As remembered by John Cooney, 'there was a far more independent line coming from a section of the political correspondents which was being interpreted in Fine Gael as pro-Haughey. By the end of my term I found the relationship with FitzGerald quite strained' (Ryan, 1992, 88).

Haughey's return to power in the 1987 election (in which Geraldine Kennedy was elected as a Progressive Democrats TD) coincided with the arrival of several female political correspondents. Emily O'Reilly was appointed political correspondent of the *Irish Press* in 1989 and Una Claffey became RTÉ's political correspondent in 1991. The daily briefings by Mara continued though the political correspondents knew he was only imparting what Haughey wanted them to know, and that other than some off-the-record context, little else would be forthcoming. As remembered by Emily O'Reilly, the briefings consisted of 'a litany of atrocious gossip . . . You were left with a benign impression of Mara, which to a degree translated into a benign impression of Haughey' (Ryan, 1992, 101). One person who ceased to have a benign view of Haughey was his former minister for justice, Seán Doherty. In January 1992 Doherty announced on RTÉ's 'Nighthawks' programme that Haughey had known about the telephone taps in 1982, prompting Haughey's resignation and the election of

Albert Reynolds as Taoiseach. Reynolds' decision to host a weekly, on the record, briefing with political correspondents backfired when the 'X-case' controversy erupted. As remembered by one political correspondent, Reynolds found himself 'being pressed again and again, particularly by the women political correspondents on the issue about which he felt uncomfortable . . . It became a weekly briefing by the Taoiseach on the "X-case" and the abortion issue rather than a comprehensive run through of the broad range of issues facing the government' (Collins, 2004, 206). The weekly briefing was abruptly dropped when Fianna Fáil and the Labour Party formed a coalition in 1993 and, as Collins put it 'the lobby system gradually became a less valuable vehicle for the transmission of information' (207).

### **Shifting priorities**

By the 1990s quite a number of factors had changed the nature of political journalism. The establishment of a vibrant independent media sector from the late 1980s onwards and a more aggressive strategy on the part of British newspapers to more firmly establish their place in the Irish market in the early 1990s resulted in a large increase in the number of reporters being accredited as political journalists. As recalled by long-time political correspondent, Steven Collins (2004, 217) this increase in numbers had a dramatic effect: 'with so many journalists in competition with each other for stories, the old off-the-record rule withered away and successive press secretaries became less and less willing to risk frank exchanges with the lobby.' In addition, the custom of having one press secretary per coalition party has led to different parties cultivating relationships with particular journalists. As Rafter (2009, 98) put it: 'The truth is that journalists do their business in private with their own sources. Politicians and their advisors also naturally brief journalists individually – and that is where the real business is done.'

Both Collins (2004) and Rafter (2009) have described in detail the changes they witnessed in the operation of political journalism. These include the hiring of private media consultants to work with journalists located outside parliament; the preference within some parties for local radio and tabloid newspapers, particularly at election time; the decline in time / space devoted to parliamentary reporting; the preference of political parties to make major announcements outside parliament; and an increase in the space / time given to commentary, opinion and punditry. How much of this is media rather than politically driven remains unclear: the proliferation of media outlets with more time and space to fill combined with digital technology has effectively created an instantaneous news cycle that cannot wait for parliament to convene and debate whatever issue is dominating the political and media agenda. As Collins (2008) recalled, in his 11 years as Taoiseach Bertie Ahern never met with the political correspondents in the Dáil to brief them: instead he communicated with the public through the 'doorstep interview' in which he answered questions as he moved from one function to another. While this created a public profile of a smiling Taoiseach willing to interrupt his busy schedule to answer questions, the technique prevented any serious questions being asked and facilitated short answers and sound-bites that suited Ahern's communication style.

What is certain is that the proliferation of media outlets has created more competition between journalists for a political scoop. For many years the media had turned a blind eye to Charles Haughey's extra-marital affair and a clear line divided what happened in the public and private lives of politicians, even if they did not practice what they

preached. However, in March 1994 this long standing tradition ended when the *Sunday Press* revealed that gardaí had instructed a prominent (Labour Party) politician to leave a ‘cruising’ area of the Phoenix Park in Dublin. Some months later, at a press conference, journalists from *The Sun* questioned Fianna Fáil leader Bertie Ahern on the breakdown of his marriage. The *Sunday Independent*’s reportage on the death of former Fianna Fáil TD Liam Lawlor in a car crash in Moscow in 2005 caused controversy by inaccurately reporting that the crash had occurred in a ‘red light district’. It was clear that a new era had arrived in which the private lives of politicians were now worthy of scrutiny.

It was also clear that the media would no longer shy away from revealing wrongdoing on the part of politicians. The tribunals of inquiry that began in the early 1990s revealed a litany of payments to politicians with the media often adding to the investigations. In 1996 the *Irish Independent* revealed the payments made by Ben Dunne to then Fine Gael minister Michael Lowry, prompting his resignation. The following year the media turned its attention to minister Ray Burke who, after confirming he had received a donation of £30,000 in 1989, resigned. Even Taoisigh were not immune: in September 2006 the *Irish Times* revealed that certain payments to then Taoiseach Bertie Ahern were being investigated by the Mahon Tribunal. While Ahern’s initial explanation, that friends had given him loans following his legal separation from his wife, won him sympathy, his later explanation that he won some of the money on horse bets earned him ridicule. In 2009 the *Sunday Tribune* published the lavish expenses that had been enjoyed by ceann comhairle, John O’Donoghue while a government minister. Despite an attempt to weather the storm, O’Donoghue resigned as ceann comhairle and later lost his seat in the 2011 general election. It is noteworthy that these stories were broken not by political correspondents but public affairs correspondents.

However, should this offer any validity to John Waters’ (1992) assertion that ‘political journalism in this country is both excessively conservative and far too close to politicians’ it is equally clear that, in the battle for readers and viewers, some of the newer media outlets are more than willing to push the boundaries in terms of political coverage. In December 2009, TV3 revealed that then minister for finance, Brian Lenihan, had been diagnosed with a terminal illness. Despite repeated requests from Lenihan’s staff not to run the story over the Christmas period, the station broadcast the story on St Stephen’s Day. While the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland ruled that the story was in the public interest (see Rafter and Knowlton, 2013), it is difficult to imagine RTÉ having run that story, or at least having emulated TV3’s sense of timing. It was also TV3’s political editor, Ursula Halligan, who challenged then Taoiseach Brian Cowen on the cyber-based discussions about his sobriety that followed his less than impressive performance on ‘Morning Ireland’ in September 2010. It was this action – asking Cowen to comment on the online debate – that fuelled much of the subsequent coverage. The ensuing, and heated, debate about the rights and wrongs of using online content to instantly challenge current or aspiring officeholders was a mere harbinger of controversies to come in a transformed media landscape.

## **Conclusion**

In many ways, the development of political journalism in Ireland has mirrored the development of the state itself. The isolation engendered by economic protectionism, neutrality and state censorship certainly did not lend itself to vibrant political

journalism. The adoption of free trade and the advent of a national television service that was bound in statute to be fair and impartial in news and current affairs changed the political and media landscapes dramatically. National newspapers could no longer be seen to be handmaidens of political parties and television provided political correspondents an independent platform from which to analyse and comment on the issues of the day. The appointment from the 1970s onwards of government press secretaries to act as intermediaries brought mixed results but has not engendered a return to passive reporting. If anything, the greater proliferation of media outlets has changed the nature of political journalism. In the digital age politicians can be questioned on just-breaking news-stories and are somehow expected to articulate an instant and coherent answer to every political problem or controversy. Digital media also allow citizens to respond instantly to any politician's utterances. As the speed of technology increases so too does the speed of the news cycle and arguably the political process itself. What all this means for political journalism and attempts by politicians, journalists and the public alike to maintain a genuinely deliberative democracy remains to be seen.

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