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The Power to Censor: the Catholic Church, the Media and Child Sexual Abuse

Kevin Rafter

The media has played a significant role in the exposure of child sexual abuse and the scandals involving the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland. From the early 1990s onwards media coverage has been important in increasing public awareness and facilitating a wider discussion about the causes and consequences of clerical child sexual abuse. In addition, media attention has been critical in facilitating the debate about the handling of abuse revelations by both the Church authorities and the Irish State itself.

Widespread public awareness of child sexual abuse by Roman Catholic clergy emerged following media coverage of the Brendan Smyth case in 1994.ⁱ The following year Andrew Madden became the first person in Ireland to publicly tell his story of abuse by a priest in *The Sunday Times*. Television documentaries such as *Dear Daughter* (1996) and *States of Fear* (1999) were important in exposing the treatment of children in religious run institutions in the nineteen fifties and nineteen sixties. Two documentaries in 2002 - *Suing the Pope* on BBC and RTE's *Cardinal Secrets* contained graphic accounts of sexual abuse experienced by some children, while also highlighting the failure of Church leaders to protect children in their care.

This type of reportage undoubtedly contributed to the new climate of public acknowledgement of wrongdoing that is evident today, and also to an acceptance by the State authorities that new legislation was needed to protect vulnerable children. Moreover, calls for independent inquiries were strengthened in the aftermath of revelations given prominence by newspapers and broadcasters.

The media's recent record, as just described, has largely been positive. But this record cannot alone be used to judge the media's interaction with the story of how children in care - in State and religious run institutions - were treated. The ill-treatment of thousands of children - physical and sexual abuse - in the residential school system from the 1930s to the 1970s was chronicled in the report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (the Ryan Report). The report which was published in May 2009 showed how just like other institutions, the media's record is less impressive when a broader sweep is taken of recent Irish history. Indeed, for several decades the overwhelming majority of media editors and reporters - and the managers of these organisations - participated in what was a conspiracy of silence taking in religious orders, the political class, the Gardai, the judiciary and the wider public.

The media in Ireland over many years failed to expose serious crimes perpetrated against innocent children. Why? Some have pointed blame at "cowardly editors [who] were so in fear of the church and State [that] they were not prepared to go against these authorities."ⁱⁱ Certainly, in an era when reporting was not as robust as it is today, the Roman Catholic Church held great sway over whole areas of Irish life - and in

relation to the media that power was used to censor material which would have been damaging to the Church's reputation and authority.

The Media Environment

For almost the entire first half century following Independence the Irish media sector was small in size and homogeneous in its content. Throughout the period covered by the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Ireland was served by four main newspaper groups, and a State-owned radio broadcast service. Radio was essentially a passive medium in terms of news and current affairs output. Radio Eireann - which was firmly under governmental control as an arm of the Department of Posts and Telegraphs - studiously avoided controversy. When the radio service first went on air in 1926 J.J. Walsh, the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, advised the station director to steer clear as far as possible of political and religious programming. Nevertheless, Archbishop John Charles McQuaid maintained a close watch on the development of the new radio service. He believed that as the studios were in his dioceses the service - and its programming - came under his control.

Interventions were motivated by a desire to ensure that broadcasts reflected and promoted the Catholic faith. In reality, however, for well over thirty years little direct interference was needed as the radio service was very much in tune with the world as presented by the Catholic Church:

“The hierarchy knew it could rely on officials in Posts and Telegraphs and Radio Eireann and that nothing would be broadcast that might be inimical to its interests. In the unlikely event that problems developed, they were handled through informal channels.”ⁱⁱⁱ

All religious programming required Church approval including the introduction of Sunday morning mass in 1948 and the Angelus in 1950. Moreover, it has been argued that the ease by which the Angelus was included in the programme schedule underscored “the very comfortable relationship between Radio Eireann and the Catholic Church.”^{iv} There was no place in the schedule for programmes dealing with sensitive issues, not to mind providing resources for investigative reporting. For example, the major programme innovations in the 1950s included an expansion in the number of news bulletins and the first broadcast of an unscripted political discussion programme. Set against this timid programming background the national radio service was simply not a place for open discussion that questioned awkward subjects or offered a platform for voices to challenge authority. Programmes that facilitated a ‘national conversation’ and which challenged perceived norms only started to appear in the radio schedule in the early nineteen seventies. Indeed, *The Gay Byrne Hour* - widely seen as facilitating, and responding to, a new openness in Irish society - first broadcast in February 1973.

During the initial decades after Independence, the media sector in Ireland was essentially defined by print - this was very much a world in which newspapers dominated. The mainstream national publications had considerable reach. For example, in 1953 the *Irish Independent* had a circulation of 203,206; the *Irish Press* 198,784, *The Irish Times* 35,421 and the *Cork Examiner* 45,917. In the Sunday

market the two big sellers were the *Sunday Independent* (395,507) and the *Sunday Press* (378,454).^v

All these newspapers devoted considerable editorial space to political news, and unlike the national radio service, they were not subject to direct governmental control. They displayed considerable similarities in their selection of news stories while analysis and commentary sections did not feature as prominently as they do today. The main newspapers were by and large conservative in their outlook, in that they reflected the views of their readers, and wider Irish society. In marking its fifth anniversary the *Irish Independent* invited several senior Roman Catholic clergymen to contribute special messages. Archbishop John Charles McQuaid told the newspaper editor that his publication had been marked by, “your policy of distinctive loyalty towards the Church.”^{vi} In the latter regard, the leading national newspapers mirrored the deference shown in other areas of Irish life towards the Roman Catholic Church.

Media and the Church

The failure to report in a systematic manner from the 1930s to the 1970s on the industrial school system or to expose endemic abuse suffered by thousands of children is not easy to explain. Undoubtedly, a journalistic culture, which saw newspapers and the national radio service follow a less proactive approach to newsgathering than is the norm today, had an influence. Throughout this entire period in the middle decades of the twentieth century there was an absence of a culture of journalistic inquiry of the type, which more recently produced investigations such as *Cardinal Secrets*. Indeed, it was only in the late 1940s that investigative reporting made regular appearances in the mainstream British press - and then only in one newspaper, *The People*, and even then with a limited focus on crime stories.^{vii} Their Irish counterparts had no tradition of investigative reporting - there was no tradition of exposing wrongdoing. In this regard, it was not just wrongdoing by the Catholic Church that was ignored. In the arena of politics it has been argued that political journalism in the national newspapers until well into the 1960s operated at a “quieter pace” that would be evident in subsequent decades.^{viii}

Alongside this journalistic culture, what has been described as “the matter of ignorance” has been offered an explanation for the failure to report on the industrial schools and the treatment of thousands of children. In the words of one newspaper journalist: “That the Christian Brothers were indulging in their passion for sexual abuse on their captive boys was something that I admit would not have occurred to me.”^{ix}

It is, however, hard to explain away the absence of media attention by arguing nothing was known. The industrial school system featured periodically in newspapers articles on court proceedings, in reports of local authority meetings, and in human-interest stories.^x As early as 1938 a discussion at a local authority meeting on the merits of boarding-out children rather than committing them to industrial schools was reported in the local newspapers. In addition, extensive reporting of committal hearings in the Children’s Courts in Dublin and elsewhere featured in national and regional newspapers.

This type of coverage was, however, “varied and inconsistent” and would seem to have been dependant upon the presence of a freelance reporter to supply copy to newspapers. There is no evidence that any newspaper adopted a deliberate policy of covering court proceedings on a regular basis. The position of specialist correspondent - beyond having a reporter covering parliamentary affairs at Leinster House - only began to emerge in the 1960s. Yet, even the absence of a reporter ‘watching this beat’ is not sufficient to explain why the stories were not followed up on in greater detail, or worse, not reported at all.

As noted in the report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse: “Serious cases of sexual or physical abuse were not reported, even if they came to light by way of a court case.”^{xi} For example, when an employee at Marlborough House, a Department of Education run place of detention, was convicted in January 1951 of sexually abusing two boys at the institution there was no media reporting of the case. Thirteen years later, the *Connacht Tribune* published a story about head shaving in industrial schools, which was picked up by the British Sunday newspaper, *The People*, but failed to make the Irish national newspapers.

In these cases it is likely that a local freelance reporter - possibly the only journalist at the trial - would have filed the same copy to all national newspapers. The failure to publish such material may well be due to the power of Church authorities to control the flow of information which was damaging to its reputation and influence.

As in its relationship with Radio Eireann, sufficient evidence exists to suggest that there was an informal relationship stopped the publication of controversial articles. This influence - what can be described as the ‘power to censor’ - allowed the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church considerable influence over media output and the public’s right to know.

This ‘power to censor’ existed over many years. For example, following the death of a child in Rathdrum “owing to careless supervision” a departmental inspector visited the school in January 1948 and sought to convey the seriousness of the situation to the residence manager. The response is revealing in relation to the influence of Church figures over key newspaper staff.

“I drew her attention to the bad impression that would be likely to be created regarding the conduct of affairs in her school on anybody who would read the inquest proceedings in the newspapers. She told me that the matter had been taken care of in Carysfort and that there would be no report in the press.”^{xii}

The Church hierarchy was also able to lean on newspaper staff to censor whatever little reporting - “sparse coverage” according to the Ryan Report - there was about the industrial school system. Brian Quinn, who was editor of the *Evening Herald* from 1969 to 1976, recalled one episode when this ‘power-to-censor’ was successful:

“I witnessed one of the worst of the Christian Brothers break into the office of the manager and demand that a court case that mentioned Artane should not be used. Before the manager could lift a phone he would push open the editorial door to tell us the manager had instructed that the case be dumped.”^{xiii}

There was a second intervention by this particular member of the Christian Brothers before the manager in question indicated his unwillingness to interfere again in the editorial process to censor a story about Artane although it is not clear if other access points within the newspaper were also available to prevent publication.

These examples of direct ‘power to censor’ were matched by indirect censorship over coverage of an uncomfortable nature for the Church in newspapers ‘outside the flock, as it were, in publications such as *The Irish Times*. Throughout much of this period *The Irish Times*, which appealed to those from a different religious and political tradition than the Catholic faith, had the smallest circulation of the national morning newspapers. On the handful of occasions when the newspaper published stories to the dislike of the Catholic Church they made little wider impact. For example, a series of articles on venereal disease in July 1949 was “greeted with dismay in higher Catholic circles, and the subject was almost completely boycotted by the Catholic press.”^{xiv}

There was a similar reaction following the publication of a four-part series on industrial schools in February 1950. The articles have been described as very critical but well-informed and proposed closing the institutions. “They are the unwanted, the neglected and the outcast children of Ireland,” the opening articles asserted.^{xv} The series, however, made minimal impact: “there was little reaction to the articles, which seem to have gone largely unnoticed in official and political circles as well as among the general public.”^{xvi}

It may, however, be possible to speculate that the articles did not go unnoticed and, as in the earlier examples, editorial intervention ensured there was no ‘pick-up’ by other mainstream newspapers. It is not an outlandish conclusion given what is known about the Church’s system of informal interventions with media organisations at that time.

The ability of the Church to intervene in editorial coverage reduced from the nineteen sixties onwards. The nascent changes in Irish society also impacted on Church-media relations with increasing editorial independence and a greater willingness to challenge figures in positions of authority. The arrival of the national television service and programmes such as *The Late Late Show* were “associated with encouraging more frank and open discussion” of contentious matters.^{xvii}

The powerful relationship which McQuaid and other clergy enjoyed with the media sector was coming to an end although the development of a more robust culture of journalistic practice was not a linear process. An eight-part series in *The Irish Times* in 1966 offered revealing insight into “the social background of Ireland’s delinquency problem and the system of dealing with young offenders.”^{xviii}

The series, the work of journalist Michael Viney, was a fine example of the move away from a passive reporting style and a willingness to adopt much greater scrutiny of those in positions of authority. Yet, despite the evidence unearthed “the series was met with an eerie silence from other Irish newspapers, which declined the opportunity to mine the rich lode, which, in might seem, had been opened up by Mr Viney.”^{xix}

By way of contrast in the late nineteen nineties and initial years of the twentieth century television had become were pivotal to telling the story of child sexual abuse: “it has been the sight and sound of survivors of child abuse on television that has most obviously driven the Church and State into significant admission and major reactions.”^{xx}

Conclusion

The best works of journalism are often those that challenge the prevailing majority ethos. The mainstream media in Ireland in the period covered by the Ryan Report was, however, not in this tradition and was not defined by a culture of exposing wrongdoing. But reporting on the industrial school system and the treatment of children in residential care did not require work of an investigative nature. Whatever about exposing the physical and sexual abuse of children in care, a great deal of information about the system itself - and related questions about its appropriateness - was in the public domain from court reports and other sources. There was most certainly a public interest justification in pursuing and publishing such stories. That this did not happen diminishes Irish journalism - irrespective of the great broadcast and newspaper work of more recent times. The explanation for these failures - like those in other societal spheres - is multi-faceted. There is, however, strong evidence in the media area to conclude that there was an acceptance of Church authority to censor and, in many cases, a culture of deference was willingly supported by editors and other media managers.

ⁱ Goode, H. McGee, H. and C. O’Boyle (eds.) 2003. *Time to listen. Confronting Child Sexual Abuse by Catholic Clergy in Ireland*. Dublin: Liffey Press. pp.6-11.

ⁱⁱ Harkin, J. 2009. ‘Letter to the Editor’ - *The Irish Times*, 27 May.

ⁱⁱⁱ Savage, R. 2010. *A loss of innocence? Television and Irish Society 1960-72*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. p.169

^{iv} Savage, p.170.

^v Horgan, J. 2001. *Irish Media: A Critical History Since 1922*. London: Taylor and Francis. pp.62-63.

^{vi} Horgan, p.66.

^{vii} Greenslade, R. 2008. ‘Subterfuge, set-ups, stings and stunts: how red-tops go about their investigations,’ in De Burgh, H. *Investigative Journalism* (second edition). London: Routledge.

^{viii} Mills, Michael. 2006. ‘Presentation to the Brendan Corish Seminar’ in Halligan, B. (ed.) *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings, 11 March 2006*. Dublin: Scathan Publications. p.13.

^{ix} Quinn, B. 1999. ‘Letter to the Editor’ - *The Irish Times*, 11 May.

^x See Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, *Report* (five volumes). Dublin: Government Publications. In particular, Gwynn Morgan, D. 2009. ‘Society and the schools’ - Chapter 3 of Commission’s report available at: www.childabusecommission.com/rpt/pdfs/CICA-VOL4-09.PDF (Accessed 9 July 2011)

^{xi} See *The Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse*

^{xii} See *The Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse*

^{xiii} Quinn, B. 1999. ‘Letter to the Editor’ - *The Irish Times*, 11 May.

^{xiv} Horgan, p.62.

^{xv} *The Irish Times*, 3 February 1950.

^{xvi} See *The Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse*

^{xvii} Ferriter, D. 2009. *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*. London: Profile Books. p.374.

^{xviii} Viney, M. 1966. *The Irish Times*. 27 April to 6 May.

^{xix} See *The Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse*

^{xx} Kenny, C. 2009. 'Significant Television: Journalism, Sex Abuse and the Catholic Church,' in *Irish Communications Review*, 1, pp.63-76.