The Media in Ireland: Concentration, Exclusion and Datafication

Aphra Kerr, Maynooth University

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Introduction

Contemporary Irish media are increasingly ubiquitous, mostly commercial, often internationally owned in part or whole, and largely 'taken for granted' (Share et al.:353). Locally produced media form only a small part of a much larger transnational information and entertainment market. This larger field includes computer companies offering new media forms such as social media and videogames. Today almost 90% of Irish households have access to the internet which would suggest that we are increasingly a networked society (CSO). Children are going online at a young age (O'Neill and Dinh). The expectation is that we can be connected to the internet everywhere and all the time. More and more everyday activities, from education to dating, and from banking to politics, are mediated to some degree. Online media are used to govern and police our behaviour in surprising new ways, but also deployed to organise politically and socially. While there may be more networked access to knowledge and information, its quality, use and impact varies. Studies show that digital skills vary considerably in Ireland and on some measures we are below the European average (Commission). In this chapter we will examine who owns the media, what representations we have access to, and how participation operates in our networked society. We will also reflect on how we can theorise and research the role of the media in contemporary social life.

In the last edition of this book the media chapter adopted a political economy approach and applied Herman and Chomsky's 'Manufacturing Consent' (McCullagh). This chapter draws upon Des Freedman's work on media power which identifies four dominant paradigms in studies of media power, and positions manufacturing consent within the control paradigm. While control and consensus paradigms have traditionally dominated (i.e. political economy and functionalist paradigms respectively) he argues that we now need to look to expand our

theories to include relational conceptualisations of power, and capture the variety of ways that people use contemporary media. He convincingly argues that focussing just on ownership and funding is not sufficient to understand contemporary media power. Control theories can help us to understand how relationships between media, politicians and businesses can influence media content and lead to the stigmatisation of groups in society. However, it is also important to look at how people use the media. If one examines emerging forms of networked media, then he proposes we need theories that can account for chaos and contradictions.

The economic collapse in 2008 led to significant changes in media ownership in Ireland as national and local mass media succumbed to consolidation, buyouts, layoffs and competition from a few global online platforms (especially Google, Facebook, Apple and Amazon). Mass media have developed their own 'new media' services while the 'new media' have become dominant forms of information and entertainment. Horgan and Flynn argue that this is a period of 'hybrid' media and certainly the terms 'mass' and 'new' media are disappearing from use. North American social media companies like Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram, and internet based video channels like YouTube and Netflix, now attract more time, and more advertising revenue, in the Irish market than traditional Irish media companies. Many of these companies were founded in the late 2000s – so they are relatively new in a historical sense.

Conducing a media diary exercise with students reveals that many aged under 30 years spend their entire day on the media, but that few engage with national and local media. Indeed, country of origin distinctions make no sense to them as platforms categorise content by genre and popularity. They choose their media according to a mix of niche interests, peer pressure and aggressive target marketing. They multitask to such a degree that their offline time is equivalent to their time asleep. Even then devices monitor sleep and are programmed to wake one up. What does being 'off' line mean when our mobile devices, library cards and bus tickets track us? At the same time their media use reveals extensive user generated content on social media channels. Online celebrities attract millions of followers to their makeup tutorials, gameplay walkthroughs or political discussions. Media use changes for older, more rural and new arrivals to Ireland, with increasing use of radio, or more transnational media to maintain ethnic, linguistic and cultural ties. A small minority become involved in creating minority or community media. Finally, the increasing ubiquity of cookie banners signals both datafication of our media use and greater policy oversight.

Analysing the mediatisation of Irish society, requires using social theory to make the 'taken for granted' strange. In this chapter we will focus on changes in the mass and hybrid media sectors following the financial crisis of 2008 in Ireland. It is common for textbooks to divide their analysis into three sections focussing on media production, content and audiences. In this chapter we take a broader approach and include examples of recent research on media production, representation, participation and policy. What is clear is that the economic crisis in 2008 precipitated significant changes in the media in Ireland and understanding these changes will enable us to better understand wider societal trends in politics, housing, social cohesion and identity construction.

Media ownership and concentration

The economic crisis of 2008 coincided with significant technological disruption and the international expansion of North American digital media companies. These three factors lead to a swift decline in the financial strength of mass media in Ireland, and significant investment by international companies in Irish print, television, telecommunications and digital media. Between 2002 and 2008 a total of 89 media mergers took place in the Irish market across all media systems. Most were evaluated by the competition authority purely on economic terms. There was no evaluation of the political or cultural implications of such mergers. In addition, Google has 94% of the search engine market in Europe. Over the last decade there has been a significant growth in concentration in both the mass and digital media content landscape in Ireland. All of these media mergers and acquisitions have further integrated Ireland into the Anglophone media and communication markets. In a comparison with 30 other countries the International Media Concentration Collaboration found that the newspaper, radio, and television (broadcast and multichannel) market in Ireland was highly concentrated and amongst the most concentrated in Europe (Flynn and Preston).

Television provides a useful barometer of these trends. Commercial terrestrial (over the air) television stations were made legal from 1988 and the first service was launched ten years later in 1989 as TV3. Ownership of TV3 has changed hands a number of times and recently the company became Virgin Media. Protracted but unsuccessful state attempts to license a commercial digital terrestrial television took place during the 2000s. Ultimately the digital television market has become dominated by two international companies: Virgin in cable and Sky in satellite. When a national digital terrestrial service (Saorview) was finally launched in 2012 it had to compete with these two international incumbents who already had significant

market share. Television services offered over the internet (e.g. Netflix) have also entered the Irish television market recently and begun to offer limited original programming. In this highly commercialised television market there is considerable pressure on RTE as the public service broadcaster to justify their license fee. Public sector broadcasting has had to endure reduced state financial support, a static license fee and falling commercial revenues. RTE has reported significant financial deficits over the past decade and has gone through a number of rounds of redundancies. Declining revenues have been most obvious in the reduction in current affairs, documentaries and the decision to outsource children's media content production. RTE has also lost the rights to screen certain rugby, soccer and some GAA programming to commercial competitors. More cultural and sporting events would no doubt move to pay television services were it not for European legislation guaranteeing that certain national sporting and cultural events must be available free to air in the public interest.

Until the end of the last century most local Irish newspaper and radio companies were owned by family businesses or Irish based companies. While the newspaper industry has long been subject to competition from British newspapers, in the last decade this broadened to include competition from international print and digital media services. Before the economic crash national media companies were heavily indebted due to earlier investments in local newspapers, local radio, and property and recruitment websites. Consolidation meant a polarisation of ownership into the Irish Times Trust and the Independent News and Media Group (INM), with the rest of the market dominated by imports from the UK, particularly papers from the Murdoch group (News International UK). INM has significant media and non-media interests in overseas markets including South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. They are involved in outdoor advertising, and for a time were involved in cable television. If we do not include British owned newspapers sold in Ireland INM has 85% of the Sunday newspaper market and 50% of the daily market, by circulation. When we include British owned newspapers INM's share falls to 50% with Independent News (UK) having a 20% share and Trinity Mirror (20%). In 2019 INM was bought by Mediahuis, a Belgium media company.

Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* model is a key theory in the control paradigm (McCullagh). This model argues that media ownership, sources, finance, flak and the creation of a common enemy are key filters which create pressures on content production in a profit driven media system. They argue that this has serious implications for diversity of opinion and democracy. Ownership of the newsprint media in Ireland is concentrated, dependant on sales and advertising for finance and heavily reliant on official sources for

content. But the manufacturing consent model does not completely explain the Irish context. It is as Freedman would argue, more contradictory. Irish print companies now have new competitors for advertising and content – especially Google and Facebook. During the last decade INM saw declining hard copy sales. Following the crash advertising revenues collapsed. By 2018 print circulation at the Irish Times and INM newspapers were half what they were a decade previously, and have been declining by over 5% per annum since the crash. To put this in context – newspaper circulations are below 80,000, while a show like *Dancing with the Stars* on RTE One attracted an average audience of 576,000 for the final in 2018. Meanwhile The *Late Late Toy Show* attracted over a million viewers across 103 countries live in 2018 with almost 74% of the Irish television audience watching at the time and almost 90% of children. While print newspapers may still retain influence among certain elite groups, their influence on the general population has been declining. This has both methodological and theoretical implications for researchers. We have to ask are newspapers still an important source of content for the general Irish public?

While owning significant media interests does not necessarily mean the owner influences the content of that media, there is a significant trend for high profile business people to buy media outlets and some evidence in the Irish context of media owners trying to assert influence on news content. For example, businessman Denis O'Brien became a personal shareholder in INN in the early 2000s, buying into what many might saw as a declining business. By 2008 his stake had grown sufficiently to enable him to nominate a person to the board. Subsequent academic and journalist work has highlighted serious issues in the governance and journalistic integrity of INM, particularly in relation to coverage of tribunals and news relating to Denis O'Brien. Denis O'Brien is also the owner of Communicorp which owns most of the commercial radio sector in Ireland, including Newstalk and Today FM. A number of academics, consultancy reports and media commentators in the UK have all noted that the levels of concentration in Ireland ownership and our strict defamation laws together pose serious threats to diversity, pluralism and diversity of opinion in media content (Leahy).

Technological change and media concentration have also had a significant impact on levels of employment and on working conditions in the last decade. A recent consultancy report on the screen media in Ireland (film, TV, radio, animation, digital games and advertising) estimates that the sector employs approximately 17,000 full time equivalent workers of which 10,000 are directly employed. The sector is estimated to be worth approximately €1 billion (SPI and Nordicity). This is almost double the numbers employed a decade earlier but such

headline figures bely the underlying shifts. These reports do not provide us with demographic or income information. They tell us little about the quality of these jobs. A small number are able to command hugely inflated salaries, but there is little recent sociological work interrogating the social composition of the workforce. What exists points to a screen media workforce marked by persistent gender, ethnic and age distinctions – with digital games often having the lowest percentage of female and ethnic workers. Detailed qualitative research has found that those with caring or other responsibilities increasingly find it hard to both enter and remain in the Irish media industry (O'Brien). Analysis of recruitment in the digital media industries points to the importance of informal recruitment and 'passion', rather than educational qualifications (Kerr and Kelleher). This is exacerbated by the trend towards unpaid internships. Becoming a full time media worker is increasingly only accessible to those who can afford to take unpaid internships, or have access to high speed broadband and affordable housing. The National Union of Journalists in Ireland newsletters highlight the negative impact of a decade of media mergers and redundancies on the ability of journalists to do their work independently. They also point to the tendency of some foreign owned companies not to recognise collective bargaining for journalists. Other research has found that both commercial and public service broadcasters in Ireland have failed to broaden recruitment and training in line with the increased diversity of the Irish population (Rogers et al.; Titley et al.).

By 2012 the value of online advertising had overtaken both print and television advertising in Ireland – and most of this revenue was going to international digital media companies and platforms. Smartphones and computers were becoming the dominant mode for users to access content and advertising was following users. The dominant business model on the internet is no longer upfront payment, or subscription, but rather what is known as 'freemium'. Freemium services offer free content in return for users setting up accounts and their user and behavioural data being shared by the intermediary platforms with advertisers. Few under a certain age will remember a time when Google (founded 1998) was not synonymous with search, or Facebook (founded 2004) with social networking. Google and Facebook are also the dominant intermediaries in the advertising ecosystem in Europe and Ireland. Indeed, Ireland has become home for the European headquarters of these companies. Some critical scholars have argued that users of digital media services are providing 'free labour' for digital service providers (Terranova). Certainly one could argue that many social media services are 'engineering sociality' to drive their business model (Van Dijck). The freemium business model is at the heart of a broader production logic. This logic means that

technology, data and a small number of platform intermediaries combine to curate and control what information you are shown and which advertising is promoted to you (Kerr). Content production is often outsourced to freelancers or users. The number of full time salaried media workers in television and print is declining and companies who charge consumers directly for professional content are seeing declining consumers and advertising. This changed industrial and production context impacts upon both what content is produced, and who gets to see it.

Media Representation and Social Exclusion

The changing production logics, concentration of media ownership and competition from digital platforms for advertising has had an impact on media content. We have witnessed the rise of reality television, talent competitions, pseudo-investigative documentaries, and make-over television shows involving grand designs. As sociologists we know that the media re-present the world, and increasingly allow clients to personalise information and advertising to our 'interests'. We know that news sources may only reflect the official, or narrow interests. We know that the professional codes of television and the affordances of internet platforms make shorter visual 'soundbites' and controversial messages circulate faster and wider. Thus even as we have access to a greater amount of information and entertainment, we may in fact be less informed, or misinformed, on crucial issues in society. An increasing number of media channels now have the potential to 'set the agenda' but they are increasingly dominated by a small number of commercial companies. Both commercial and public service media in Ireland are reliant on advertising. Across many platforms advertising has become less the 'interstitial' time when one makes a cup of tea and more an intrinsic part of the content itself – emerging within, during and around the content. The move to advertorials and online influencers means that television and online content are increasingly dominated by infotainment.

By far the majority of professional content consumed in Ireland is generated by companies and individuals outside of Ireland, predominantly in the UK and the US. According to the European Audiovisual Observatory only 2.5 % of films screened in Irish cinemas are created in Ireland. That is amongst the lowest in the EU 28 (Observatory). While EU films and television programmes circulate relatively well in Western Europe, the Irish market is dominated by content in English, produced in the UK and US. Linguistic and cultural proximity is magnified by the fact that the UK and the US are amongst the largest global audio-visual producers. Further, across Europe private television broadcasters and internet on demand services screen less European content than public service broadcasters. Television and film on

demand services were found to have less than 30% European created content and in the case of Netflix less than 20% European film content on their European services. On the whole Irish media audiences must actively seek out culturally and linguistically diverse content.

A decline in diversity of media ownership and content may well impact citizen knowledge and behaviour. The most recent studies that exist of media representation in Ireland focus on the coverage, framing, discourse and sources of newspaper articles, television programmes and online content. Most studies approach representation in the knowledge that users and audiences may not interpret them in the ways intended. This reflects a shift away from older control theories. Media have relative power, in that they may encode certain messages but there is no guarantee that they will be decoded or received in the manner intended. In what follows we will present research which examines representations of the property market in the run up to the economic crisis in 2008 and of refugees and migrants. Both are important in relation to understanding the economic crisis and the impact of austerity measures on Irish society afterwards.

For many scholars the 'watchdog' role of the print and broadcast media has been undermined by the changing ownership structure, the close links between the boards of the media and other companies, and the investments by newspaper companies in property and recruitment websites in the run up to the economic crisis (INM bought propertynews.com and the Irish Times bought MYhome.ie in 2006). Two different studies have argued that news stories on the property and housing market in Ireland in the run up to 2008 were driven by the interest of 'elites' and a tendency for the media to rely on 'experts' (Mercille; Preston and Silke). Detailed content analysis of print media stories in the national newspapers and current affairs programmes on RTE reveal a lack of criticality, a lack of diversity of sources, and discourses dominated by a focus on property as commodity. Researchers argue that both private and state/public owned media failed to interrogate politicians and estate agents, or to predict the crisis. Indeed, some journalists acted as 'cheerleaders' and discussions in the run up to the crash focussed on a 'soft landing'. Interestingly, the total number of newspaper articles on the property market were relatively low in the run up to the crash. In retrospect some financial journalists have admitted that they were too reliant on elite sources, but they also point out that their work is subject to strong defamation laws and pressure from public relations professionals (Fahy et al.). Few journalists had formal training in finance and those that did were the most critical. Following the crash, the number of critical stories almost doubled in the main broadsheet newspapers and journalists themselves were more critical of financial data.

Subsequent research found that the media, regardless of ownership, almost unanimously presented the state's austerity policies as good and 'common sense' (Mercille). The dominant media discourse in the Irish newspaper and broadcast media after the crash again closely aligned with the views of the main political parties.

One of the most significant changes in Irish society from the late 1990s has been the rise of inward migration. During this period there was also a significant growth (and then decline) in the numbers applying for refugee and asylum status. However, refugees and asylum seekers are rarely celebrated as part of multicultural Ireland. A number of papers emerging from the University of Limerick argue that the general public is reliant on the mainstream media for their knowledge of minority groups in society, and they argue that the print media in Ireland have failed in their duty to adequately inform the public on refugees and asylum seekers (Breen et al.). Detailed analysis of mainstream newspapers identified a range of negative language in the reporting of refugees and asylum seekers. This was particularly evident prior to the citizenship referendum in 2004 when terms like 'citizenship tourists' and 'loopholes' in Irish legislation abounded in the media. Articles on asylum seekers and refugees positioned them as economic and national threats, involved in criminality, social deviants and illegal aliens. While the influence of the media is mediated by many factors, the authors argue that inaccurate and negative media framing contributed to the levels of public ignorance of the numbers, origins and supports available to refugees and asylum seekers. Some media content suggested that Ireland was being 'swamped', 'invaded' and 'mislead' by refugees and asylum seekers – emotive language also found in representations of these groups in UK produced newspapers. Academic, third sector and European monitoring reports on racism in the media have suggested that this type of reporting was typical of certain newspapers and media groups, which would support those theories that argue that media content is shaped by ownership and market positioning (Titley et al. 31-32). More recent research would suggest that this type of sensational and negative content is also found in online media (Carr et al.). The fact that most online media platforms have few processes to detect and remove racism contributes to a cycle of misinformation and 'othering' (Siapera et al.).

Broadcasting has traditionally been more closely regulated than other sectors of the media, and public service media have an obligation to serve the Irish public broadly defined. However, a study of broadcasting and cultural diversity in Ireland by Maynooth University found that for many years public service and commercial broadcast media largely ignored the arrival of migrant groups, and migration trends had little impact on media employment or on

the content they produced (Titley and Kerr; Titley et al.). Migrant communities lacked visibility in Irish media and when they were represented it was largely in terms of crime, traffic accidents or to celebrate their national holidays. By the mid to late 2000s no commercial, community or local broadcasters had policies on diversifying their workforce or output. Later studies identified a shift from multiculturalism to diversity policies in RTE over this decade but found that the delivery of diversity across programming, recruitment and the organisation was severely impacted by the economic crash in 2008 (Rogers et al.). This lack of diverse representations across Irish media is important in relation to broader patterns of social inclusion and democracy.

The vacuum in professional media representations of migrant groups was filled to some degree by a burgeoning independent migrant sector in the 2000s. Some entrepreneurial migrants living in Ireland produced newspapers and online content in their own languages and aimed at their own communities. They provided practical information in a range of languages for people on the process of moving to Ireland, on work, accommodation, religious services and local culture. Some were local versions of international diasporic media productions, but Polish language media in particular were often developed locally in Ireland. Metro Éireann was established as a print newspaper in 2000 by two Nigerian journalists and continues today as an online intercultural service. In 2007 Skein Press was founded to publish work by Black and ethnic minority writers. Its first series of books provided an outlet to residents of direct provision to write about their experiences. Also in 2007 local independent producers produced a documentary film called 'Seaview' about the Mosney direct provision centre and a series entitled 'Living in Direct Provision: 9 stories' (2009). These productions sought to diversify public discourse in Ireland but were often given limited exposure. Having a voice, and being heard, are rather different things.

Representation is an important part of how meaning is created and exchanged in a society. It is not just refugees, migrants and travellers who have been underrepresented and misrepresented in Irish media. Studies have found that women are poorly represented in current affairs programming in the mainstream Irish media, especially in terms of speaking as an expert. Female voices are often absent or trivialised in professional current affairs. The emergence of #blacklivesmatter, #meto and #wakingthefeminists on social media platforms signals that positive representations can emerge from users online. The emergence of #gamergate and the impact of new forms of cyberbullying signals that negative representations are also to be found online. Researching representations provides important insights into the

differences between commercial, public service and minority media, but also into the important and complex role played by user generated content.

Media Participation, Datafication and Policy

Understanding how people participate in, and use the media, is vital to understanding the power of the media in the networked age. This approach shifts our focus from 'Irish' media to the media that people use and highlights some important contradictions. We find, for example, that European migrants in Ireland are often able to access their home country, diasporic and transnational media from Ireland and are constantly engaged in 'relational' media consumption – comparing and contrasting different news programmes. Indeed, in our research many interviewees could not distinguish 'Irish' media from British or American media, and certainly were not familiar with the nuances of 'local' media. Yet English language broadcast media were an important means of learning English and adapting to different accents. This research points to the complex nature of contemporary transnational media flows and media use.

A focus on media participation moves us away from the binary assumptions that audience are either passive or active. Many of us are participants in the networked society and this operates on two levels – on one level we explicitly post, share and buy, and on another level we are implicitly tracked and datafied. Every time you accept an online cookie your participation is being tracked. This online activity becomes part of your 'database self' and your activity is turned into data for commodification (Simon). It is becoming impossible to avoid the circuits of data capture which seep from online social media and our smartphones. The infrastructure of the platform and app economy is built to encourage content sharing and thus generate data for advertising brokers (Turow). Some of us will be desirable targets for advertisers, others will be discarded. The datafication of economic and social processes is viewed as an important source of new jobs and wealth creation by many governments but for critical theorists datafication raises important issues of media power and its influence on democratic processes. The most popular platforms in Ireland are Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Google. Facebook owns Instagram and What's App. Alphabet owns Google and YouTube in addition to emerging smart home (Nest), smart city (Sidewalk) and Android phone technologies. The key data flows from online social and smart home media are thus intermediated by a small number of mostly North American platform companies who share

this data with a wide range of third parties. A number of whistle-blowers have revealed that surveillance and user tracking is widespread in networked societies.

At the same time there are fissures through which forms of counter power are possible (Castells). Some individuals and groups use the media to construct alternative political, cultural and social publics, and to negotiate media and data infrastructures. Studies have identified how people can collaborate to create tools that increase transparency while protecting the privacy, security and dignity of the user. The Transparent Referendum Initiative in Ireland is an example of a civic initiative where 500 volunteers applied a browser plugin to capture and reveal the extent of political advertising on Facebook immediately before the 8th amendment referendum in Ireland. The enactment of the European General Data Protection Framework in 2018 and the previous EU/US Privacy Shield indicates that European legislators are working to protect user data privacy (O'Rourke and Kerr). Belatedly there is a debate over the mass gathering and sharing of data by governments, public administrations and corporations. Ireland is staring to develop media literacy programmes and awareness raising about the dangers of cyberbullying, sexting and online gambling. In much of this the onus for action is still placed on the user with varying degrees of access to redress. In 2019 the Irish government announced the establishment of a national digital safety commissioner and after much debate set the digital age of consent (for advertisers to target young people) was set at 16.

Sociology has an important contribution to make in understanding the contradictory impacts of datafication processes and their impact on the agency and rights of citizens and consumers. Sociologists can study how these new technologies are designed to discriminate by class, gender, racial and ethnic backgrounds. We can contribute to understanding how data is politically and socially constructed and is being used to redesign our cities, homes and schools. We can also contribute to understanding how people actually use online technologies like smartphones and the internet. Two studies of young people's use of media exist as benchmarks here. The European funded project EU Kids go Online (from 2007) included a large representative study of Irish youths (O'Neill; O'Neill and Dinh). It found that young people were going online from 9 years of age and 72% were using the internet every day, primarily via mobile phones. While many have positive experiences, a quarter of 13-14 year olds, and 37% of 15-16 year olds, had negative online experiences, and 22% had experienced bullying online or offline. Girls were more likely to say they had been bullied and been upset by it. The cause was often content generated by other users including hate messages, images of anorexia, or self-harm or of suicide. Overall levels of internet use are lower in young people in Ireland

than in other European countries and more parental mediation is reported. Meanwhile the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study provides a large longitudinal evidence base to explore the everyday experiences of 9-17 year olds. Analysis of this data found lower levels of cyberbullying than the former survey, with differences in user experiences by sex and age (Savage et al.).

Detailed qualitative studies of smartphone use also point to variations in user experiences. Linda O'Keeffe explored mobile technology use by teenagers in Dublin using sound and image walks, focus groups and workshops. She identified important class differences in teenage mobile phone acquisition and use, and documented how teenagers used mobile media to regain control over public and domestic spaces which were often designed to exclude them (O'Keeffe and Kerr). These studies enable us to better evaluate the positives, as well as the risks, that young people experience when using networked media. While individual cases of harm can be heart breaking, these large representative studies would suggest that such experiences are relatively rare (but increase with age and use) and that there are important gender and sex based differences. It also gives us an insight into the varying levels of skill and awareness that children and their parents have about how to protect themselves online. Finally, they can also provide insights into the positive impact of online media on social relationships, access to information and new forms of social and political activism.

Conclusion

Today's media forms are hybrid and many companies seamlessly provide both traditional mass media (TV, radio, film, newspapers) and newer forms (internet TV, podcasts, social media, digital games). Most public service broadcasters provide live and deferred programming online, most newspapers have extensive online services, and they have been joined by digital only entertainment and information services. Further, an extensive range of social activities from politics to public administration are becoming mediatised. These developments challenge us, as sociologists, to move beyond our established methods and theories in order to understand the role of the media in everyday life.

The mainstream media in Ireland is highly concentrated in terms of ownership, predominantly commercial and increasingly focussed on entertainment. The failure of our established commercial and public service media to provide a watchdog function on political and economic interests prior to the crash is clear in research. Despite their bumper revenues they failed to invest in quality investigative journalism, preferring to invest in property websites

and indeed property itself. As our media invested in non-media ventures, and non-media businesses invested in our media, the relationships between our media businesses and businesses more generally deepened. The mainstream media failed to interrogate and critique data, trends and spokespersons both prior to and after the economic crash, and some of them have provided inadequate and inaccurate coverage of minority groups. In the decade following the crash international media businesses have invested in the Irish media but this has not lead to a qualitative change in the form and content of our media. Some journalists have belatedly become more critical of financial data and business interests, but their work is hampered they argue by the strong defamation and libel laws in the country. Clearly the watchdog role of the media needs both watching and supplementing by critical academic work.

Over the past decade a small number of North American companies have taken control of the relationship between users and advertisers in networked online spaces. In the last five years the business models of these companies have evolved to combine surveillance and data capture without regard to public and social values. These infrastructures have been shown to impede, impinge and challenge democratic and totalitarian forms of power. Networked publics have mobilised around social and cultural issues - most obviously with the mobilisation of voters around referendums in Ireland – but users and activists may also become a target for surveillance, cyberbullying, online misogyny and racism. The research on what people do online, has provided both examples of counter power and of exploitation. The algorithms can be manipulated and robots can spread misinformation transnationally and covertly. Thus while it would be true to say that the media have played a role in our increasingly liberal society and culture, it is also the case that the media have also provided a platform for illiberal and conservative aspects of society. National and European policy makers have had to rethink information and communication rights in this new context (Kerr, et al., 2019). Increased emphasis is being put on data privacy, transparency and digital literacy.

The media in Ireland in the contemporary context is not fully explained by control and consensus theories, it is indeed more contradictory. To understand the role of the media we need to look beyond ownership, finance and representations, to examine patterns of media use, the activities of amateur producers, changing media and communication policies. There is clearly a lack of enthusiasm in Ireland to fund public service media adequately, and to ensure diversity of ownership of mainstream media. On the other hand, subscriptions to some newspapers in Ireland and internationally have started to stabilise and in some cases rise again. New professional digital news services are emerging and whistle-blowers are raising awareness

about problematic state, corporate and third party online practices. In many European countries there is still a strong commitment to funding media content in the public interest and new laws are emerging to protect data privacy. There is also a strong push emerging to enshrine communication and human rights in the design of media systems and media policies. Belatedly we see consideration for responsibility, transparency and privacy in the design of digital content technologies. Ireland is a key location for North American digital content companies and we could play an important role in shaping future digital content technologies, including artificial intelligence technologies. It will be important for public and social values to be part of these innovations and for sociologists to be involved, as these technologies may decide who counts and who does not count in our future networked societies.

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