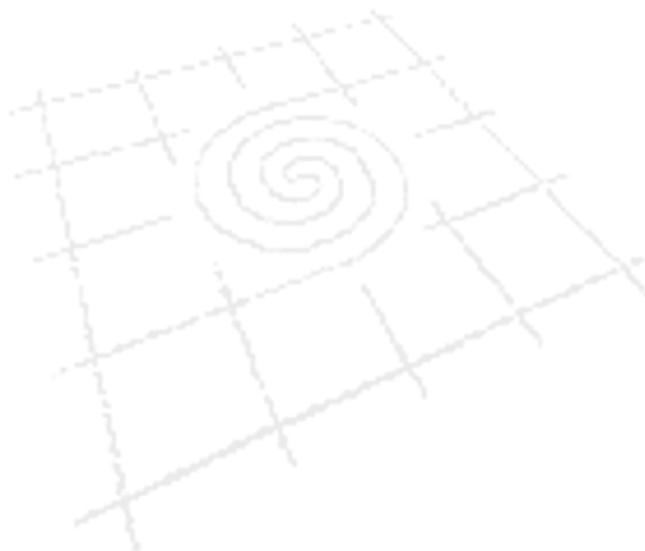


The “miracle” of Fatima : Media Framing and the Regeneration of a Dublin Housing Estate

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Fatima mural on the Luas line, 2008

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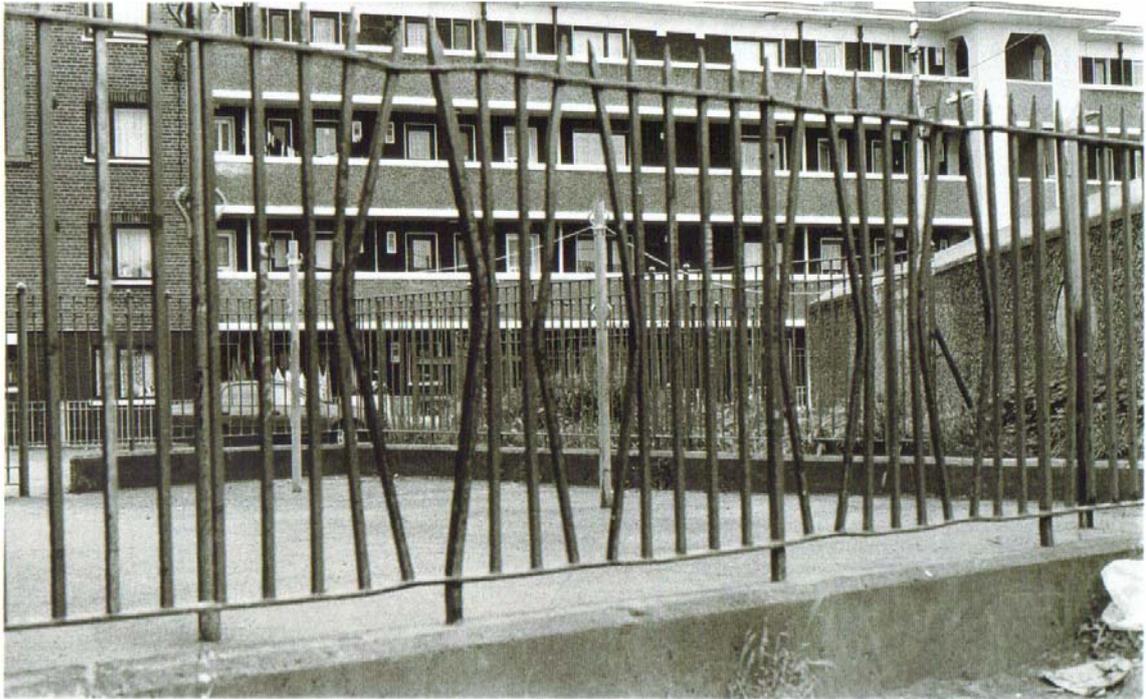
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Abstract

This paper examines media coverage of one local authority housing estate in Dublin city with a difficult past. Fatima Mansions was built in the late 1940s and enjoyed an unremarkable history up until the 1970s. A heroin problem developed in the estate in the 1980s and contributed to its negative media construction. Beginning at the end of the 1990s and continuing to the present, a regeneration project worked hard to dislodge earlier interpretations of the estate. A qualitative analysis of different media spaces that represented this change process shows how the media tuned into it and that earlier negative meaning-making in the late 1990s was later displaced by visual imagery, audio recordings and textual accounts with a more positive valence. The paper argues that media representations of social problems may not be authoritative and media agenda-setting is more provisional and open-ended than is commonly assumed.



Fatima Mansions complex, 1998

Introduction

The present study is concerned with how one social housing estate in Dublin city with a long and difficult past successfully mobilised itself and different media spaces as part of a wider redevelopment project to debunk earlier meaning-making in relation to the estate. Like other housing estates with a difficult past, factors such as high levels of crime and drug activity blighted the estate for a long time. In spite of these difficulties, Fatima had certain assets – a critical mass of residents and workers willing to challenge how the estate was perceived within and well beyond its boundaries and to bring others on board in realising this – that set it apart from other troubled estates. Fatima Mansions, then, represents a particularly interesting case study of media representations of local authority housing because of the important role its own constituents played in seeking to manage its image and reputation in concert with the media and disrupt its earlier “spoiled identity” (Goffman, 1990) as a housing estate replete with anti-social behaviour problems.

Our longitudinal analysis shows how this followed a pattern consisting of negative media claims about the estate, the estate’s reaction, and a reassessment in the media of the estate as a place to live. As well as illuminating how the media represents public housing in the specifically Irish context, this paper – by examining the variable media agenda-setting capacities of Fatima constituents – also contributes to broader debates about “institutional manoeuvring” (Ball and Lilly 1982) and claims-making in terms of media coverage of social problems. It also casts light on the relationship between institutional centres (Gamson 2001) – media professionals and state officials – and institutional peripheries – people who live in local authority

housing estates – in constituting and making sense of social realities. This case study challenges the assumption that media organisations are necessarily aligned with powerful groups in society and suggests – against the media “selection bias” and agenda-setting literature – that less powerful but resourced social groups can turn media messages on their head and find a receptive audience in media spaces. At the same time, there are good reasons for expecting that the Fatima Mansions story would have attracted media attention – the novelty of the transformation from a sink estate to a sustainable community, the difficult history and notoriety of the estate, physical proximity to some media outlets, and the emerging formal organisational and public relations ability and resources of its residents and local community development workers.

This paper takes the following structure. We begin by providing some historical context to the study first by focusing on the evolution of Fatima Mansions as a problem estate and the disparate organisations and strategies that emerged in response to this and, second, by looking at how Fatima’s relationship to media and the media’s relationship to Fatima has changed over time. Following this we present the theoretical scheme guiding the analysis focusing on media construction and framing of social problems. We then present the data, methods and hypotheses. This is followed by a presentation of the major findings. Finally, we discuss the results of the study and assess its implications for media standing and institutional manoeuvring particularly on the part of local constituents. We demonstrate the lessons community organisations can take away from this study in terms of strategies for exerting influence over media coverage and the take-home message for media organisations seeking to re-frame dominant representations of social issues and work against well-documented selection biases in media coverage.

Historical Profile of Fatima Mansions

Of the range of local authority housing estates in Ireland, Fatima Mansions is one of the oldest (Fahey, 1999). Built in 1949-51, it enjoyed a relatively settled period in the 1960-1970s and then in the 1980s, fell victim to a heroin problem that contributed significantly to the creation of its spoiled identity. Physically, it differed from other housing estates in occupying a comparatively small geographical area and consisting of a relatively small number of housing units – 320 distributed across 14 blocks each with four levels, and arranged in an introverted layout with limited connections to the surrounding community.

In the 1950s and 1960s Fatima Mansions housed a stable and sustainable community. Moving to the estate was seen as a way of bettering one’s life from the earlier deteriorating tenement dwellings of the inner-city urban poor. Dublin Corporation worked hard to maintain the physical environment of the estate, carrying out repairs of its dwellings, and develop working relations with its tenants. The 1970s were different. Deindustrialisation of that part of the inner-city had resulted in many stable families losing employment. The social fabric of Fatima Mansions began to wear thin. During this time the estate began to experience signs of community decline signalled by the onset of anti-social behaviour problems and the disengagement of the corporation. These problems intensified in the 1980s particularly in relation to drugs and provided the impetus for an organised campaign to purge the estate of its drug-related activities. A Dublin Corporation-led regeneration programme in the 1980s ran aground because of its perceived lack of connection to and engagement with local

residents' needs and interests (Corcoran 1998; Treadwell Shine and Norris 2006). Because of this long history of drug activity and anti-social behaviour Fatima Mansions was marked as “other” and frequently contrasted with the ‘nice’, ‘respectable’ civility of suburban middle-class living. Its physical location close to the inner city and clearly defined external boundaries reinforced its social distance from other living places.



Public space in Fatima Mansions, 1998

The social profile of residents in the estate showed a concentration of long-term unemployment and educational disadvantage indexed by low rates of progression to higher education and early school leaving. Of those who were in work, the majority were confined to low-paid, unskilled, service-sector employment. The negatively charged meaning of the words “Fatima Mansions” resulted in difficulties for residents in finding gainful labour market employment.

By this time, then, Fatima’s troubled reputation was well-established, making it difficult to challenge or dislodge from the public consciousness. Several decades of government neglect and indifference taught residents that the estate revitalisation did not rank high on the political agenda and that they would have to exert their own

power in concert with other agenda-setting allies to bring more public attention and government action to bear on the estates' long-standing problems. Following on from a sustained campaign, a major regeneration project was initiated in the early 2000s. This paper concerns how the regeneration process was tuned into and mediated by different media spaces.

The Fatima Mansions-Media Spaces Interface

A preliminary analysis of media spaces over the ten-year 1998-2008 time period suggests three important phases in the history or "career" of the estate in terms of how it was represented in different media spaces. This periodisation is set forth and elaborated upon below.

(1) 1998: Negative Media Representation

This stage was characterised by a heavy emphasis on 'negative' valence stories in relation to local authority housing highlighting them as sources of drug use and drug dealing, drug-related deaths, burglaries, murders, vigilantism and educational disadvantage. This pattern is consistent with previous research which leads us to expect that media coverage is tilted towards negative rather than positive stories (Ortiz, Myers, Walls, Diaz, 2005). In this period Fatima residents exerted little or no influence over how their estate was covered in the media chiefly because, by its own account, the community had done little media capacity building. This is made clear in an article in the *Irish Times* in which a representative of Rialto Network – of which FGU¹ is a part – claimed that 'the media issue has been on the agenda for a long time because people feel it is hard to get a fair crack of the whip here. The only stories covered are about drugs, crime and tragedy. The area has been sensationalised, but there is more complex story here, and a very normal story too'. This informant went on to draw attention to the community's lack of resources in challenging hegemonic representations of the estate even when asked by media professionals for the Fatima angle: 'but we would always be a bit hesitant about having anything to do with them. Now we want to turn that around, to feel confident and to use the opportunity to give a positive response'.² This default media position of representing a social problem in negative terms extends to other issues as well such as domestic violence in other national contexts (Ryan, Anastario and Jeffreys, 2005).

Empirical research – as well as forging relations with media spaces – was crucial to redefining interpretations of the estate. 1998 marked the publication of *Making Fatima A Better Place to Live* (Corcoran 1998). This report provided the discursive scaffolding for subsequent resident efforts to revitalise the estate and build relationships with others to achieve that end. The report, and in particular the manner in which it came to form the basis of community mobilisation, marked a change in how residents presented themselves and were seen by others – a shift from viewing residents as victims to seeing residents as potential allies of other interests and co-producers of the meaning the estate. This re-definition took place in the next phase.

¹For more detail on Fatima Groups United see <http://www.fatimagroupsunited.com/index.html> (accessed 26 March 2009).

²'Communities plan a media fightback', *Irish Times*, 19 January 2000.

(2) 1999-2000: Community-led Media Representation

During this phase a shift from media-led to community-led representations took place involving a clear attempt by residents of local authority estates to claim “ownership” of how they were represented through the media and to challenge dominant storylines taking hold about the alleged pathology of their living places. This was done by drawing attention to positive stories emphasising the strong social fabric and civic activism among local authority housing residents manifest in community-wide efforts to deal with educational disadvantage and child care needs and resident involvement in arts and cultural projects. There was a concerted effort to develop an indigenous media grounded in local communities, while at the same time not sanitising the problems and challenges facing the estate.

This impression management did not happen by accident though. Beginning in the late 1990s residents of Fatima became more organised and politicised via the establishment of FGU. This organisation became the conduit for forging alliances and relationships with media professionals (Ryan, Anastario and Jeffreys, 2005) that allowed it to amplify its voice in terms of how the media represented the estate to the wider world. Specifically, it sought to displace the earlier negative representation focusing on the “private troubles” of individuals from the estate with a positive feel-good emphasis on regeneration and the efforts to build a long-term sustainable community in the area. Forging links with Public Communications Centre and receiving media capacity building training via Carr Communications helped residents in the estate to secure resources to overturn their neighbourhood’s “spoiled identity”. The live broadcasting of a national radio programme *Today with Pat Kenny* from the estate in December 1999 was a turning point in the estate’s media capacity building. This radio programme was co-produced by FGU and through it residents were given an opportunity to claim ownership of how their living place was represented to themselves and to others (Dorman 2006, p. 58). The fact that the programme’s presenter, Pat Kenny, is a celebrity helped to make it more newsworthy in other media outlets. *The Irish Times* also picked up on the story and its commentary on the programme tended to emphasise how the national broadcaster – RTÉ – and residents worked together to co-produce “the story” of the estate with a mutual respect for the constraints impinging upon them.

On the media side, the constraint was to put across a story in a short period of time and in a way that upheld the personality-driven rather than issue-driven nature of the radio programme and, on the resident side, there was an explicit desire to de-sensationalise media coverage of the estate without sanitising the problems experienced by it. In this way, residents carried the favour of journalists and journalists sought out residents as reliable sources of information about the estate. That both actors were able to pull this off is noteworthy given that previous research suggests that it is difficult for feel-good stories like this to attract media attention as compared to events or incidents involving some kind of public contestation (Oliver and Myers, 1999) and given poetic expression in the ‘if it bleeds, it leads’ formulation. By most accounts, residents were satisfied that the story they sought to put across was taken up by the media and that they were successful in their framing strategies. *The Irish Times* reported in January 2000 that while the radio programme did not idealise the estate it convincingly conveyed the changes being brought about in the estate in recent times³.

³*Irish Times*, ‘The secrets of Fatima’, 19 January 2000.

FGU's establishment also provided the impetus for the carrying out of research about the estate in the late 1990s and early 2000s period. This helped to give its interpretative strategies an empirical grounding and convince sceptical external publics (including Dublin city corporation) of the challenges facing the estate as well as its capacities to overcome them. FGU became the main driver in devising a strategy for the regeneration process which importantly would include a re-fashioning of the image of Fatima. Taken together, these changes resulted in a significant change in Fatima's "media standing" (Ryan, Anastario and Jeffreys, 2005).

(3) 2001-2008: Positive Media Representation

This phase was also marked by efforts to bring about the revitalisation of disadvantaged local authority estates through innovative forms of urban design and development involving collaboration between the public and private sectors and combining both 'bricks and mortar' development alongside rebuilding social fabric. This policy background emphasising the social side of social housing provided the larger context within which Fatima residents developed their external communication⁴. This media strategy was not limited to seeking to exercise influence over how media outlets represented it but also extended to how it presented itself to external publics. One way of communicating this was via the internet and in 2007 FGU launched its own website in which it sets out its history and engagement with regeneration over the last fifteen years.

Table 1: Chronology of FGU's Internal Organisational and External Communication Trajectory, 1998-2008

Research

1998 *Making Fatima a Better Place to Live* launched

1999 *Social Housing in Ireland* published

2000 Regenerating People, Place and Partnership

Media Training

1999 Residents participate in media capacity building training via Carr

Communications

1999 FGU forges link with Public Communications Centre

Media Attention

1999 *Today with Pat Kenny* live broadcast co-produced by FGU

Media Strategy Development

2000 Residents begin development of media strategy

Research

2000 *Eleven Acres, Ten Steps* published

2005 *8 Great Expectations* published

2006 *Dream/Dare/Do* published

2006 *Things Can Be Different! The Transformation of Fatima Mansions* published

⁴ For more on contextual influences on claims-making see Best (1987).

Regeneration Implementation
2004 Fatima Regeneration Agreement signed
2005 Construction of new housing

Media Infrastructure
2007 FGU launches new website



Detail from model of the new Fatima, 2001

The Construction and Framing of Social Problems

This section of the paper outlines the theoretical scheme guiding the research. We draw here on the literature on the media construction and framing of social problems such as crime, poverty and racism to identify the key forces involved in shaping whether an issue gets defined as a social problem in the first place, how it gets defined or framed, and the factors influencing this process. Media spaces – including television, cinema, and print media – provide important discursive and visual interpretative grids, lenses and prompts through which people make sense of their everyday experiences but these resources are rarely put forward in a neutral or innocent way (Clark 2007; Best 1987).

Far more happenings occur than become news (Oliver and Myers 1999). Whether an issue makes it into ‘the news’ in the first instance is not straightforward and depends on such things as how many people are affected by it (Ortiz, Myers, Walls and Diaz, 2005), whether it involves a number of significant people, physical closeness to news organisations (Oliver and Myers 1999), whether it articulates with the interests of elites (McCombs and Shaw 1972), whether the issue jives with the routines of media organisations and the daily “beat” of journalists (Alimi 2007; Oliver and Myers, 1999; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes and Sasson 1992; McCarthy, McPhail

and Smith 1996), and whether a group of people is willing or not to sponsor the issue in the public square (Hilgartner & Bosk 1988).

Once a problem gets defined as a social problem it then enters the process of framing (Hilgartner & Bosk 1988). This has to do – following the work of symbolic interactionist Erving Goffman – with the way social reality is discursively constructed in a selective way, foregrounding certain aspects of it while backgrounding others (Binder 1993; Ghaziani and Ventresca 2005). Inevitably, some amount of simplification takes place. This discursive construction of reality takes place in a number of public spaces including universities, media outlets, national parliaments, civil society organisations, and in people’s everyday life situations, resulting in the circulation of different kinds of discourses with complex interrelationships. Sometimes these spaces propagate competing definitions of reality and at other times distribute shared understandings. All play an important role in shaping how ordinary people process and understand public issues (Gamson & Modigliani 1989). At the same time, there is no simple or straightforward relationship between the opinions ordinary people form about the world around them and how this is framed and talked about in these various discursive spaces (Gamson & Modigliani 1989). People’s opinions are mediated by their own personal experiences, social contacts, and processing of media coverage (Sacco 1995; Alimi 2007; Gans 2004).

And discourse is not simply about talk – it also involves visual representations and both work together to produce an ‘interpretative package’ (Gamson & Modigliani 1989). Photographic images condense meanings in relation to some issue or subject matter sometimes consistent with textual accounts and sometimes out of step with them. They serve the dual purpose of capturing reality as well as interpreting it (Zelizer, 2006).

These interpretative packages can be “successful” or not depending on such things as their resonance with already established cultural themes, the presence or absence of sponsors willing and able to disseminate them (Gamson & Modigliani 1989; Alimi 2007), the nature of the sponsoring organisation such as whether it is a voluntary non-profit organisation or not (Oliver and Myers, 1999), and whether frame sponsors develop allies with media journalists (Ryan & Gamson 2006; Alimi 2007). Crucially, moral messages inhere in framing (Ryan & Gamson, 2006). The way social housing is framed in discourse, for example, carries important messages about the origins and causes of problems associated with them and consequently the range of potential solutions to address them. As important creators and filters of frames, journalists play a critical role in shaping public debate and in deciding what counts as news and what does not. Journalists though do not write from “nowhere” and their work is subject to established media practices such as a frequent concentration on the local police station, court, or town hall as sources of news (Dreier, 2005; Alimi 2007; Oliver and Myers, 1999), organisational features such as proximity to political elites (Gamson 2001), spatial considerations such as physical closeness to media outlets (Ortiz, Myers, Walls and Diaz, 2005), and the presence or absence of reporters with a brief in particular subject matters such as social affairs (Hilgartner & Bosk 1988; Oliver and Myers, 1999). Against this background and expectation of a far from open contest in the competition for space in media outlets, the ability of Fatima residents to put forward their preferred interpretation of the estate challenging earlier media accounts – as we shall see – is noteworthy. In doing this they overcame their non-elite status, their physical distance from media professionals, and the fact that the problems associated with the estate affected a relatively small number of people.

In this paper we focus specifically on the framing of this public issue within a diverse range of media spaces including the newspaper print media and radio and television. Given the infinite diversity and complexity of the social world and their susceptibility to various selection biases in reporting on it (Ortiz, Myers, Walls and Diaz, 2005), journalists are necessarily selective in what they write about and how they write about it. Typically, they draw on a wide range of devices to communicate to their audience and articulate with their “framing” of an issue. Frequently journalists resort, for example, to the use of metaphors that resonate with ordinary people. In the case of reportage of Fatima Mansions, media reports sometimes invoked the religiously significant metaphor of ‘miracle’ to characterise the changes undergone in this housing estate in recent years, serving to highlight the discontinuity between ‘before’ and ‘after’ the regeneration programme. Other metaphors referring to the estate as a ‘heroin supermarket’ worked to construct Fatima as an estate suffering from a large heroin problem.

Data, Methods and Hypotheses

In this paper we employ four kinds of empirical evidence – newspaper data, radio data, television data, research published by the residents of Fatima and their communications infrastructure, and one of the author’s extended engagement with the study community. Below we discuss each data source in turn and how we analysed each⁵. Table 2 summarises the media data sources used in the study and the variable residents’ agenda-setting of the different media genre. Agenda-setting can be ranked as either high or low depending on the ability of actors to exercise power over what issues gain media attention and how those issues get talked about or represented.

Table 2: Media Data Sources

Media Space	Year/Period	Source	Residents’ agenda-setting	N
Radio	1999	RTÉ	High	1
Television	2006	RTÉ/ Macalla Teoranta	High	1
Print	1998-08	<i>Irish Times</i>	Low	144

⁵For more detail on content analysis of various media see Deacon, Pickering, Golding and Murdock (2007).

Newspaper Data

For this study we collected data on media representations of local authority housing from a single newspaper – *The Irish Times* – over a time-span of ten years (January 1998-December 2008). Founded in 1859, *The Irish Times* sees itself as representing a left-of-centre political ideology and historically has strong links with the Protestant community (Brady 2005). It prints a morning paper, has no evening edition, and publishes six days a week excluding Sunday. The bulk of each daily edition is taken up by domestic news and opinion or analysis on events of the day although a significant section is also devoted to international news, from the desks of foreign editors in places as diverse as Beijing, Washington and Brussels and often with an Irish angle, and business-related news. The back page contains death notices and this is often said to be the most read section of the paper. Compared to thirty years ago, the newspaper operates in an increasingly crowded media market and to keep up has recently begun to publish innovative dedicated sections catering to special interests such as travel, fashion, health, property, and sports as well as offering a free web-based version. It is widely viewed as a “serious” newspaper, or a newspaper of “repute”.

Our decision to analyse *The Irish Times* was deliberate – it is a national quality broadsheet newspaper with a daily circulation of about 116,102 (*Administration Yearbook and Diary 2008, 2007*, p. 312) and has all-island distribution. As such it represents an important repository of national opinion and outlet for reaching beyond a local-level audience with which Fatima residents sought to connect with. The fact that the newspaper also publishes an online version means that its audience is transnational as well as national and that one can view articles in the paper across the world. The fact that previous research on Irish media discourses in relation to such themes as divorce (Dillon 1993), political conflict (Mulcahy 1995), and asylum seekers (Haynes, Breen and Devereux 2005) also resorted to this newspaper increased our confidence in the value of this media source for getting at national perspectives on public issues and our belief that it represents an authoritative newspaper of record. The inclusion of local media sources – which admittedly tend to receive less attention in studies of print media discourses (Oliver and Myers 1999) – in this study would also be interesting but we feel that it would be less likely to exert an influence in shaping publics beyond the immediate locale of Fatima Mansions. To be sure, the print media was not the only available outlet open to and availed of by Fatima residents for media impression management and important media relations – as we shall see – also took place via radio and television coverage.

We used the search term ‘Fatima Mansions’ to identify articles pertinent to the research in the Lexis-Nexis database and the *Irish Times* online archive. Access to both of these archives allowed us to cross-check one data source with the other. We are reasonably confident that we identified all articles related to Fatima Mansions in the time-period under study. The *Irish Times* archive was particularly useful because of the digital availability – via online subscription – of full-text articles in the newspaper going back to 1859. This initial search yielded 188 articles including opinion articles, letters to the editor, and basic news items. We printed hard copies of each article and organised them by year so we could easily refer to them for more detailed information. From a basic preliminary analysis it was clear that “hard” news

reports – consisting, for example, of reportage of court cases involving the “private troubles” (Mills 1959) of residents of the estate – and with a more restricted discourse constituted the bulk of our data. In the opinion and editorial pieces we found a more explicit elaboration of views and perspectives with respect to local authority estates and the people who live in them. Because of the concentration of local authority estates in major urban centres, most of the articles initially identified by these search terms related to either Dublin or Limerick and to the local authority estates of Fatima Mansions (Dublin) and Moyross (Limerick), both of which have a ‘difficult reputation’ (Fine 2001). Because some of the articles identified related to housing estates other than Fatima Mansions or mentioned Fatima Mansions only in passing, we decided to drop these “false positives” (Ortiz, Myers, Walls and Diaz, 2005) from our dataset⁶. As a result our final dataset consisted of 144 articles. We chose January 1998-December 2008 as the time period for the study because this allowed us to examine media coverage over a relatively long timeframe and represented an important period of change in Fatima Mansions specifically and Irish society generally.

We also paid attention to whether articles were accompanied by visual imagery or not and viewed these as texts in their own right and constituting a crucial part of the media’s interpretative package and meaning-making. Only ten articles in our dataset included a photograph with a caption. We coded each of these photographs as images with a negative valence or images with a positive valence. Negatively valenced images would depict such things as graffiti, deteriorated housing, or poorly maintained public spaces. Positively valenced images, on the otherhand, would depict such things as celebratory residents, community services or programmes, or newly constructed housing units. With respect to photographs depicting people, we also paid attention to the distribution of the people represented in terms of age, gender, and race.

The distribution of coverage over this ten-year period was uneven – coverage peaked in 1999-2000 period and dropped off after this. We found little variation in terms of the number of articles relating to the estate from 2000. This temporal pattern was not surprising – from previous research we know that issues tend to have an “attention cycle”, that is, that they achieve attention for a limited time period and after this begin to lose significance (McCarthy, McPhail and Smith 1996; Baylor 1996). The 1998-2008 period was characterised by important social and economic changes. Commonly described as spanning the “Celtic Tiger” era, Irish society underwent changes in this timeframe that other societies experienced over much longer periods. Chief among these were demographic changes associated with immigration and economic changes linked to rapid and sudden economic development generating high employment on the onehand and social inequalities on the other. This provided the context for government investment in social housing regeneration which in turn had an important impact on the daily lives of the residents of Fatima Mansions in terms of how they saw themselves and how they were seen by external agents.

During this time period, then, the Irish state’s relationship to social housing changed and resulted in a more favourable political environment for resident agenda-setting – and may well have legitimised media attention of local authority housing revitalisation efforts – even if some of these changes were more symbolic than real. An older policy of treating local authority housing mainly in terms of ‘bricks and

⁴By doing this we are confident we have not left out articles that should have been included or included articles that should have been left out.

mortar' gave way to a greater stress on the social side of housing via attention to supporting and developing social services and facilities in needy neighbourhoods and providing funding for housing management initiatives to help deal with the anti-social behaviour problems commonly associated with them. These policies tended to encourage greater involvement of residents in shaping the social and physical environment of their locales against earlier arms-length approaches to tenant involvement in estate-wide planning and management (Treadwell Shine and Norris 2006; Conway 2001; Fahey 1999).

After reading the articles in our dataset we constructed a coding scheme (Franzosi 1987) with the following two broad categories: (1) issues and (2) frames of reference. Within the first issue category we identified the following subcategories: (a) private troubles (b) anti-social behaviour (c) public policy efforts (d) neighbourhood assets and institutional environment. Within the frames of reference category we distinguish between residents and officials. The private troubles and anti-social behaviour categories both have a negative valence. Across each year we simply counted the number of articles that had to do with of the private troubles of individuals living in Fatima as well as articles having to do with anti-social behaviour problems such as drug dealing that did not single out specific individuals. The public policy efforts and neighbourhood assets and institutional environment categories have a positive valence. Again, across each year we counted the number of articles that included any mention of public policy efforts to regenerate the estate and the number of articles that made reference to informal community organisations in Fatima, social services being provided in the estate, or other positive attributes of the estate such as its community spirit and residents' empowerment. Some articles contained references to more than one frame – for example, some articles on the estate's regeneration invoked its prior history as a focal point of anti-social behaviour – and for articles like this we delineated the dominant or master framing put forward.

As well as being interested in what kinds of issues the print media wrote about in relation to the estate we were also interested in the vantage point from which they wrote them and whether they called upon street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980) such as city council staff, elected politicians such as councillors, TDs, Taoiseach, and President, business elites such as property developers, or Fatima residents. Again, we simply counted the mentions of official perspectives in reportage of the estate across the ten-year period and the references to resident perspectives on the estate. Table 3 sets out the distribution of mentions of each issue and frame of reference during the study timeframe.

In order to assess change in terms of media reportage one needs to establish some baseline against which variation can be gauged. We chose 1998 as baseline year for the analysis because most of the efforts to change the way Fatima Mansions saw itself and was seen by others concentrated around the 1999-2000 time period and thus one would expect that this would be registered in changes in media coverage around this time or – owing to an expected lag between the occurrence of the changes and their reportage in the media – soon after it. Prior to this, then, mostly represented “empty” time (Zerubavel 2003) in terms of efforts to revitalise and “better” the estate though admittedly an organisational infrastructure to realise this began to develop in the mid-1980s.

A word of caution is in order about our use of newspapers as a source of data despite its popularity in the analysis of a wide range of public activities. Prior research leads us to think that its use for sociological analysis is not unproblematic and suffers from under acknowledged and under analysed “selection bias” (Ortiz, Myers, Walls

and Diaz, 2005 Franzosi 1987) that is, bias in terms of what events from the vast universe of human activity get covered in the first instance. We are cognisant of these limitations which have been drawn attention to by other scholars but we feel that they may well be more acute in relation to heavily politicized human actions such as public strikes, protests and elections that have been the focus of selection bias considerations (Ortiz, Myers, Walls and Diaz, 2005) than with reference to arguably less contested actions such as social housing redevelopment – though they are not entirely absent here either. Additionally, we rely on the print media as a source of data about the way a social issue has been represented or not rather than as an information source about the micro-detail of how often, where, or with what effects some happening occurred. To help address likely bias in our newspaper data we do not confine our research to it and also draw on secondary sources, one of the author's long-term engagement and on-site interaction with Fatima Mansions residents through ongoing research on its housing conditions and community life, as well as media coverage in outlets other than newspapers – namely on radio and television. Beyond selection bias, one must also contend with description bias or the bias involved in reporting about the social world (Koopmans and Statham 1999). Because most of our dataset consists of “hard” news rather than opinion and editorial pieces we feel that this bias is minimised in our study.

Radio Data

In addition to collecting data from *The Irish Times* we also listened to RTE's programme on Fatima Mansions broadcast on 13 December 1999. We obtained a copy of this radio programme from RTE's archive and library services. The programme consisted of an 80 minute long special feature on the estate at the end of 1999 marking the fiftieth year of the estate. It involved commentary by Pat Kenny, interviews with current and former residents about their personal life histories, a doctor treating heroin addicts via a methadone programme and a community activist involved in combating drugs, and music and singing by residents. Most of the interviewees were women who had been long-term residents of the estate and who remembered a time when the estate was more stable. Resident informants also included young people who belonged to the local youth club and the chair of FGU.

Today with Pat Kenny was analysed in way broadly similar to our analysis of *Irish Times* coverage. After listening and re-listening to the programme, we constructed a coding scheme identifying private troubles (references to drug-user life histories or experiences of homelessness), neighbourhood deficits (mentions of graffiti, physical design of the estate, housing conditions, educational disadvantage such as early school leaving and low rates of higher education entry, and political apathy), anti-social behaviour (mentions of drug activity and joyriding), public policy efforts (mentions of estate regeneration or refurbishment programmes, housing allocation policies, estate management policies and practices, community policing, state agencies-resident relationships), and neighbourhood assets (mentions of community centre, women's centre, youth club, community employment scheme, homework club, crèche, community arts, Fatima Groups United, local employment opportunities, sociability and communal bonds among residents, and resident mobilisation and organisation) as the major frames in the radio programme's account of the estate. In addition, we identified two salient vantage points from which the estate was represented – resident perspective and official elite perspective.

Television Data

Apart from examining this radio programme we also carried out a content analysis of *On the Block*, a short (26 minutes) documentary produced and narrated by children living in Fatima Mansions as their estate underwent demolition and regeneration. We obtained a copy of it via the RTÉ website⁷. Broadcast on national television, it was put together by an independent film company working in conjunction with residents from the estate and with the assistance of philanthropic funding. It was made around the time of the demolition of the flat complex in 2006. It consists of a series of impromptu and on-site interviews with children from the estate and three interviews with political elite – the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Taoiseach, and President. Crucially, the estate is represented from the vantage point of the children living in it. That it was also filmed by children from the estate – who were trained in the use of media technologies through the Fatima Film Club and independent film company Macalla Teoranta – using hand-held cameras and audio equipment adds to its realism and authenticity as a media production. Children were asked about the remembered pasts, their lived present, and their imagined futures for the estate. By contrast, political elites were questioned by the children about their work and the estate regeneration. Children remembered such things as the wallpaper on their old houses, the lived experiences of observing drug activity and drinking alongside positive experiences associated with playing and being children, and their imagined future of living in houses instead of flats and leading less rule-governed lives. Children exhibit a strong sense of attachment to place which mirrors that of their parents and grandparents. Visually, *On the Block* depicted children in quotidian contexts playing, singing, dancing, skipping, talking, and climbing. Instead of complying with other people’s representations of the estate they invested their own meaning in them by overlaying graffitied walls with children’s art. Taken together, *On the Block* emphasised the normalcy of everyday living in the estate from the standpoint of its young resourceful residents and their ability to invest meaning in urban space. It worked strongly against media coverage of local authority estates marking them as different and “Other”. To argue though that this prompted or reflects a wider public attitudinal shift about these estates involves making an empirical leap that is difficult to sustain.

We carried out a content analysis of the programme distinguishing between oral accounts and visual images. This involved watching and re-watching the programme a number of times in order to develop a coding scheme to analyse it. Under oral accounts we identified the sub-categories of anti-social behaviour (mentions of drug activity and drinking), neighbourhood assets (references to family/friends, physical facilities in the estate such as playgrounds, and community resources such as arts projects), remembered pasts (references to memories), lived present (references to present conditions), imagined future (references to moving from flats to future living in a house), and public policy efforts (mentions of the estate’s regeneration). Under visual images we identified children’s lives (images of children dancing, singing, talking, consuming, playing, cycling, climbing and skipping) neighbourhood physical design (images of boarded-up houses, flat demolition), anti-social behaviour (images of graffiti) and public policy (images of new housing construction) as sub-categories. Tables 4 and 5 sets forth the basic patterns – using raw counts – found in this analysis.

⁷For more detail see <http://www.rte.ie/tv/theden/ontheblock/index.html> (retrieved 8 April 2009).

Residents' Research and Mass Media

Apart from newspaper and radio data we also drew upon research reports published by Fatima residents over the last ten years. This published literature played an important role in the estate's identity production. The online availability of much of this material via FGU's excellent website made gaining access to it relatively easy. In reading this literature we paid special attention to whether they made mention of media representations of the estate and how residents sought to appropriate them or not over time. FGU's website also constituted an important site for our investigation and we examined the various textual materials on it.

Estate Engagement and On-Site Interaction

One of the authors of this paper – see Corcoran (1998, 1999) – has a long term engagement with the community under study spanning a ten year period. This involvement and close acquaintance with the Fatima Mansions estate took the form of conducting original empirical research in the late 1990s – via frequent site visits, attendance at estate meetings, interviews and focus groups with residents – assessing residents' lived experiences of their living places and particularly in terms of familial and community ties. This earlier research found strong internal differentiation in Fatima partly arising from the configuration of the blocks and the location of some “under the arch” and others at some remove from the estate centre point. There was also powerful symbolic boundary-drawing between Fatima and the wider neighbourhood of Rialto. Additionally, it identified a number of strategies of action for estate improvement focusing on solidifying the estate's social fabric via recreational and social facilities and programmes to promote residents' labour market integration, and dealing with long-standing anti-social behaviour problems (Corcoran 1998).



New Fatima under construction, 2008

Hypotheses

Our reading of the literatures on the social construction of social problems, housing and estate regeneration, and on media coverage of various social issues motivates a number of hypotheses which we put to the test in this study. Each hypothesis is discussed in turn below.

Hypothesis 1 (Content of Coverage): Media coverage Fatima will be more likely to put forward negative representations of living in the estate in the 1998-2000 period highlighting their “spoiled” status via attention to the private troubles of individuals living in them. By contrast, media reportage from the early 2000s onwards should carry more positive stories about the estate and will be more likely to include mentions of community regeneration, positive collective memory, and media impression management.

Hypothesis 2 (Perspectivity/Agenda Setting): Media coverage of Fatima will be more likely to rely more on the views and opinions of state actors such as government officials and politicians and professionals such as higher education lecturers in the 1998-2000 period. By contrast, media reportage from the early 2000s onwards will include more frequent mentions of resident perspectives on their living place.

Hypothesis 3 (Visual Imagery): Media coverage of Fatima will be more likely to carry more negative visual imagery of the estate in the 1998-2000 period. By contrast, media reportage from the early 2000s onwards should carry more positive imagery about the estate.

Hypothesis 4: (Institutional Environment and Neighbourhood Assets): Media coverage of Fatima will be more likely to include frequent mentions of troubled individuals living the estate in the 1998-2000 period. By contrast, media reportage from the early 2000s onwards will make mention of the institutional environment and assets of the estate including such things as its schools, youth programmes, tenant associations, and community development organisations.

Hypothesis 5: (Public Policy Efforts): Media coverage of Fatima will be more likely to include few mentions of public policy efforts to deal with estate problems in the 1998-2000 period. By contrast, media reportage from the early 2000s onwards will make mention of public policy interventions to address estate problems.

In the following section of the paper we discuss the pattern we observed in our dataset of articles and analysis of the radio and television programmes in relation to the hypotheses set forth here. Taken together, we found modest to strong support for our four hypotheses and based on this we argue that an important change in media reportage took place over the time-period of our analysis. In the discussion section we attempt to account for this with reference to the organisational abilities of Fatima residents in securing material and symbolic support within and outside of the locale for their change efforts.

Findings

Table 3 displays the frequency of mentions of the four issues and two frames of reference over the ten-year period. As is clear from this table, not every year contained articles making reference to all of them. Tables 4, 5 and 6 reports the same for our content analysis of the *Today with Pat Kenny* radio programme and the *On the Block* television programme. Based on the trends and patterns observed in these two tables we assess the level of support for each of our hypotheses. We discuss the print, radio and television texts together under each hypothesis.

Table 3: ABOUT HERE

Table 4: Distribution of Frames and Vantage Points in *Today with Pat Kenny* (1999)

Frames

Private Troubles	1
Neighbourhood Deficits	25
Anti-Social Behaviour	50

Public Policy	22
Neighbourhood Assets	21
<i>Vantage Point</i> Residents	22
Official Elites	2

Table 5: Distribution of Oral Accounts in *On the Block* (2006)

Anti-Social Behaviour	1
Neighbourhood Assets	2
Public Policy	1
Remembered Past	2
Lived Present	2
Imagined Future	1

Table 6: Distribution of Visual Images in *On the Block* (2006)

Neighbourhood Physical Design	7
Anti-Social Behaviour	2
Public Policy	4
Children's Lives	16

Content of Coverage

Our first hypothesis leads us to expect that over time there should be a change in reportage of the estate from a focus on issues and topics with a negative valence to issues with a positive valence. We find modest support for this hypothesis. In 1998-2000 period we found a concentration of articles pertaining to the “private troubles” of residents from the estate. The following example is representative of this reportage:

A Dublin Corporation official has been ordered to explain why accommodation was denied to a heroin addict who had just been released from prison. Michael Carolon (23) was refused permission by the corporation to live in his family home in Fatima Mansions. He was told he could face a fine of £1,500 if he stayed there (*Irish Times*, 13 February 1999).

Although such reportage did not disappear in subsequent years it tended to decline. Consider, for example, that 62% of articles mentioned individuals’ private troubles in 2002 compared to 86% in 1999. When we take a long-range perspective, then, it is clear that there was less coverage of stories with a negative valence in the late 1990s than in the late 2000s. In some years in our dataset we found no articles relating to individuals’ private troubles.

Pat Kenny’s special feature on the estate highlighted the tension facing media spaces in promoting a positive representation of local authority estates without dwelling on their negative histories. The programme opened with a reminder of the difficult everyday realities confronting residents of the estate by telling listeners of syringes on the ground, iron-railings and stone boulders erected to prevent joyriding, graffitied walls, boarded-up flats, spiked railings enclosing the flat complex, and blood-stained stairwells. At the same time, it sought to contextualise these problems by making reference to early school leaving and unemployment among residents of the estate, and point to their resolution via neighbourhood assets such as a community centre, women’s centre, local shops, homework clubs, and an institutional environment involving closer co-operation with state agencies including Dublin Corporation and gardai.

By contrast with *Today with Pat Kenny*, *On the Block* largely eschewed talk about Fatima Mansion’s difficult past with only one mention of its history of drug activity and drinking. Much more attention was given to the mundane and everyday lives of the children who live in it. They were depicted in a broad range of play activities from talking to one another to cycling. The visual imagery solidified the oral accounts – most of the documentary was devoted to images of the children, what they did in their everyday lives and how they felt about this rather than with the estate and how it had come to be associated with a set of unsavoury meanings over the preceding decades.

Perspectivity

In line with well-established news collection procedures (McCarthy, McPhail and Smith 1996; Baylor 1996), our second hypothesis leads one to expect that media coverage of Fatima would be more likely to rely heavily on the views and opinions of official elites such as government bureaucrats as primary sources of news in 1998 than after. In line with our expectations, early coverage frequently made mention of what government officials felt about the estate but, against expectations, about an equal amount of attention was given to views of the estate from the vantage point of residents, and those who worked there. Writing in 1998 about the drug problem in the estate, the *Irish Times* first reported the views of a Labour Party politician:

The Labour Party spokesperson, Pat Upton, issued a statement condemning the shootings and asking why most of the media had ignored it. Had it happened in a middle-class housing estate there would have been blanket coverage (*Irish Times*, 20 June 1998).

The article continued by telling readers of how one community worker felt about the estate:

People working in the complex admire the community. “They are resilient like you can’t imagine,” Mr Whyte said (*Irish Times*, 20 June 1998).

Significantly, the article does not solely rely on street-level bureaucrats to interpret the estate and goes on to tell the story from different vantage points by mentioning how local residents work together to make the estate a better place to live prompted by their own positive early memories:

The young members who grew up in the flats remember their own childhoods when they played handball in the pram sheds...at the same time they are not blind to realities. “You’ve seen that Real TV programme. Well, this is Real Fatima”, one woman said. At a meeting of the women’s education project they talked about the day a school group came across three addicts injecting outside a window (*Irish Times*, 20 June 1998)

After 2000 most frequent mentions were made of how residents understood the changes occurring in the estate. This article from 2005 typifies this framing:

More than 350 residents of the condemned 1950s flat complex Fatima Mansions will begin moving into new homes from tomorrow, following a regeneration programme started more than four years ago. Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and Lord Mayor of Dublin Catherine Byrne yesterday presented keys to Margaret Brophy (61), who will be the first tenant of the new development, along with her husband John and three sons. “I moved to Fatima 34 years ago, with my husband who had been born and reared here. I reared all my children here and my grandchildren were reared here. I’ve never had a house or a garden before in my life” (*Irish Times*, 4 October 2004).

Two patterns in Table 4 are noteworthy. First, it is clear that the radio programme did not displace talk about anti-social behaviour problems or neighbourhood deficits associated with Fatima Mansions with a more benign discourse. Frequent references

were made throughout the programme to the estate's difficult history involving, in particular, drug use and to the deterioration of its physical condition. At the same time, it is also clear from this table that the voice of residents was elevated about official elites and street-level bureaucrats in representing the estate to wider publics. Far more resident perspectives were sought and given a hearing than the perspectives of official elites such as doctors treating drug users, voluntary sector representatives, or local politicians. In their stories and life-histories, residents regularly mentioned the assets of the estate – citing the example of the community centre, women's club, youth club and so forth – and related about the strong communal bonds among residents over a long period of time. These life-histories personalized the experience of living in the estate and made its difficult conditions less abstract to grasp. In their personal biographies, long-term residents tended to draw a contrast between Fatima Mansions in the 1960s and present day conditions of the estate while at the same time pointing to the strong social ties among residents that set it apart as a place to live from other estates. The affirmation of Fatima's strengths was also a key aspect of the report published in 1998, *Making Fatima a Better Place to Live*, which had nonetheless concluded that the majority of residents favoured the demolition of the estate. Some contextualised the history of the estate in a wider political and economic background – a history of arms-length relationships with Dublin Corporation and high levels of educational disadvantage and long-term unemployment. As a referent for talking about positive social change in local authority housing, its difficult history was invoked rather than displaced.

Visual Imagery

Most of the articles examined in this study consisted of text without an accompanying photograph. Ten articles in our dataset included visual imagery alongside textual accounts. Our expectations lead us to think that visual imagery in 1998 will reinforce the estate's spoiled identity linking it to crime and drug dealing and that imagery after it will put forward a positive depiction of it such as images of newly created community institutions.

In line with our expectations, imagery in 1998 tended to reinforce the negative valency of the estate. Consider, for example, an article under the title 'Fatima Mansions, a place known to residents as the heroin supermarket' included a photograph of one resident looking at the open court-yard space of the flats complex that provided a ready physical environment for drug use and abuse. The caption 'Fatima Mansions: the planners could not have designed a better layout for drug dealing, with at least eight exits from every open area between blocks and hundreds of stairwells and balconies. Heroin has turned parts of the complex into a junkie paradise and a nightmare for the residents' (*Irish Times*, 20 June 1998, p. 10). Echoing this, an article about the launch of *Making Fatima a Better Place to Live* (Corcoran 1998) included a photograph of a teenage boy swinging a hurley with the flat complex in the background. The caption 'a young resident takes aim before belting a sliotair at Fatima Mansions yesterday, but if many residents had their way a wrecking ball would be aimed at the walls of the Dublin estate' (*Irish Times*, 24 September 1998, p. 3) registered residents' long-standing grievances about their living place.

Photographic images after 1998 were different. An article under the title 'Secrets of Fatima' about estate regeneration carried in the newspaper's Media Scope section in 2000 juxtaposed two photographic images of the estate – one of a three-member music band – with the caption 'In Your Face (two out of view – Andrew

Cahill, Sean Finley, John O'Brien, Keith O'Brien, and Eoin O'Connor – perform 'The Drugs Don't Work for the radio show' – another of the physical design of the flats complex depicting a large open court-yard space dividing each block of flats from one another captioned by 'a view of the blocks'. Another article in the same section depicted one of the residents speaking on the *Today with Pat Kenny* radio show with the caption 'Issy O'Rourke, a resident of Fatima Mansions tells Pat Kenny about 'H Block'' (*Irish Times*, 19 January 2000, p. 8).

In 2003 the Planning and Development section of the newspaper carried an article under the title 'Fatima Mansions to be demolished' and the accompanying photograph of a view of the large-open court-yard space of the flat complex was captioned by 'The Fatima Mansions Complex: to be demolished and redeveloped'. A few months later a photograph of this demolition process was carried and titled by 'Fall of Fatima: demolition of 1950s social housing complex begins in Rialto' and captioned by 'Gareth Brophy (9), from Fatima Mansions, watches as the demolition of Block P started yesterday. The 1950s-built social housing complex in Rialto, Dublin, is to undergo a phase demolition and redevelopment. Complete redevelopment is now considered the most practical solution due to the mass concrete nature of the 14 blocks in the scheme and the public perception of the area as a walled-in ghetto' (*Irish Times*, 20 August 2003, p. 7). The photograph showed a bulldozer razing the blocks to the ground.

When the estate regeneration plan was launched in 2000 the estate received more media attention and photographic imagery around this time tended to portray people living in the estate rather than its deteriorating physical environment. One article, for example, under the title 'Tenants plan regeneration of Fatima Mansions' (*Irish Times*, 24 November 2000, p. 4) included a photograph of young children from the estate backgrounded by one of the blocks in the flat complex.

Coverage around the time of the end of the regeneration was in concert with this. In 2003 reports about the Fatima Mansions regeneration festival included photographs of joyous children (*Irish Times*, 11 August 2003, p. 11) and a colour photograph of new residents receiving the keys to their homes with the caption "Miracle of Fatima: first tenant of rebuilt 1950s flat complex receives keys" depicted celebratory residents congratulating one another on their new housing environment and used the religious idiom of "miracle" to characterise the event (*Irish Times*, 4 October 2005, p. 6). Another article in the newspaper's weekend section around the time of the rehousing of tenants in the newly developed estate, consisted of a montage of photographs including tenants sitting in the sitting room of their new living place and young children from the estate with new housing units in the background (*Irish Times*, 8 October 2005, p. 108).



New housing Fatima, 2008

Institutional Environment and Neighbourhood Assets

Compared to 1998 one would expect that there would be more mentions in media coverage of neighbourhood assets such as community spirit and resident resourcefulness and of its civic organisational life. Consistent with our predictions we found that after 1998 references to these were more common. For example, in 1999 5% of articles contained references to neighbourhood assets and institutional environment compared to 57% of articles in 2004. These comments of an estate resident in a 2004 article about the estate's regeneration represent this framing:

“I hope the community spirit stays. You can't get spirit like it anywhere else. It has been a long battle to get here but we are here now, and there are opportunities for the young people. What more could you want?” (*Irish Times*, 9 August 2004).

Although *Today with Pat Kenny* tended to remind listeners of the estate's “spoiled identity” via mentions of drug activity, joy-riding, and so forth, it also made reference to neighbourhood assets such as strong social ties among residents and resident resourcefulness in dealing with overcrowded housing conditions, and the institutional environment impinging upon the estate such as changing relations between the estate and state services such as Dublin Corporation that helped create a new political context for revitalising the estate in the 1990s.

Public Policy Efforts

In 1998 we expected to see fewer mentions of public policy efforts to revitalise Fatima Mansions as a place to live compared to later years. Modest support for this hypothesis was found in our data. 40% of articles in 1999 contained references to public policy efforts such as estate regeneration plans compared to 27% in 2003. From this year on there was a continuous increase in mentions of this with a peak in 2006 in which 56% of articles mentioned this issue.

This excerpt from a 1999 article on estate child-care service provision well illustrates this framing:

As the childcare nightmare continues to torment parents, communities across the country are looking at ways of addressing the need for affordable, quality provision for themselves. Last Friday, The Little People's Palace was officially opened at Fatima Mansions in Dublin. One of 25 pilot day-care projects funded through the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform's equal opportunities childcare programme, the day-care centre evolved out of a crèche set up three years ago by five women living in Fatima Mansions (*Irish Times*, 11 May 1999).

Today with Pat Kenny made mention of public policy efforts to revitalise the estate via references to planned “regeneration” and “change”. Earlier public policy efforts to revitalise the estate were also mentioned and residents pointed to their lack of success – citing their lack of meaningful engagement with the community – in bringing about needed change. Special attention was given to how under the planned regeneration a new era of relations with three key state institutions – Dublin City Council, gardaí, and the Department of Education – was been realised. One informant contrasted earlier failed “refurbishment” efforts with planned “regeneration” plans.

Discussion

This paper has examined the media trajectory of one Dublin social housing estate with a spoiled identity against the backdrop of the regeneration of the estate, first mooted in the late 1990s and that came to fruition in the current decade. So “successful” has this regeneration become that the estate is now routinely held up as an exemplar of the possibilities of estate regeneration plans and as a referent for talking about recent social policy changes in local authority housing⁸. Whereas before Fatima Mansions was a synonym for heroin use, it is now a poster-child for what have come to be known in planning and urban development discourse as “sustainable communities”. We have been specifically concerned with identifying and explaining the shifting agenda-setting patterns with reference to Fatima Mansions. Our empirical evidence came from a number of sources including an analysis of print media coverage over a ten-year period, a content examination of radio and television programmes about the estate’s regeneration, and the published material of the resident organisation behind the regeneration – Fatima Groups United.

From the start the presence of a cadre of residents and local community workers willing and committed to the project of regenerating the estate was crucial to the changes it experienced. With this cadre in place it worked hard to develop its own leadership, build allies with and links to community power nodes, leverage resources from other community groups, and communicate its efforts to wider publics. In short, residents became more professional and sophisticated in their claims-making. All of this is made clear in Fatima United Groups’ canonical document *Dream Dare Do* in which the estate sets out the lessons it learned via its attempts to bring about positive social and economic change from the early 1990s onwards. Early on in this document, FGU makes clear the importance of evidence-based research in underwriting its change efforts and in garnering media attention for it: ‘11 Acres, 10 Steps would have remained only a dust-collecting curiosity if we hadn’t done two key things: firstly we designed and produced it to the highest of standards so that it would have to be taken seriously and secondly, we launched it to huge national and local media fanfare so that it became the central reference for all the partners’ (Donohue and Dorman, 2006, p. 16). The report goes on to argue that successful regeneration turns on a community’s ability to relate in an effective way to internal and external audiences and to exercise strategic control over how it is represented in media spaces: ‘When we embarked on this regeneration journey, Fatima was in the news for all the wrong reasons – drugs, crime, joy riding. And despite the fact that many quality services and initiatives were happening, we couldn’t get a positive story on Fatima. We knew we needed allies...we set out deliberately to portray a very different, more accurate image of Fatima and its residents...we made sure that the regeneration work was ‘sold’ to the media at key moments and for key reasons’ (Donohue and Dorman, 2006, p. 21).

The findings of this research indicating the important role of media spaces in challenging the difficult reputation of local authority estates are both in line with and contrary to some previous research. As part of their study of housing revitalisation in Bell Farm in York, England, Cole and Smith carried out an analysis of local print media reportage over a twenty-year period and – consistent with reportage about

⁸See, for example, Brendan Kenny’s article in the *Irish Times* under the title ‘Making golden age of regeneration a reality’ (*Irish Times*, 28 November 2007, p. 18). See also case study of Fatima Mansions in Treadwell Shine and Norris 2006.

Fatima Mansions prior to 1999 – found a strong focus on anti-social behaviour and the private troubles of individual residents. Journalists tended to follow the ‘if it bleeds it leads’ formulation with respect to what they wrote about and consequently paid little attention to news with a positive valence. The word ‘notorious’ was the most widely used journalistic idiom in relation to Bell Farm, contrasting with the focus on more technical issues such as planning in coverage of other less problematic estates. Not surprisingly, most Bell Farm residents felt that media coverage was less than accurate in its portrayal of the estate. Newly arrived residents who took up residence around the time of the estate’s revitalisation, by contrast with long-term settled residents, were less likely to feel that media representations were inaccurate, pointing to the possibilities of revitalisation efforts in overturning long-standing difficult reputations especially when this also involves building relations with media journalists (Cole and Smith 1996).

Hastings and Dean found that dislodging the difficult reputation of local authority estates involves more than bricks and mortar strategies and even when it does include efforts to disrupt spoiled identities via media impression management this does not necessarily bring about changes in public opinion vis-à-vis estates with problematic pasts. Put another way, the media’s ability to fix the meaning and social construction of local authority estates is not as authoritative as is often assumed. Their study lends support to the point that estate revitalisation should not be understood as a “single thing” and should involve what they call a “holistic approach” encompassing physical, economic and social elements. Compared to the Fatima Mansions case, their research leads one to think that the media may well be less influential in shaping public opinion about local authority estates than one might expect and that difficult reputations are more resilient than is commonly assumed. In one of their case studies, estate revitalisation involved the adoption of an explicit communications strategy, media training, and the appointment of a media relations officer but negative media reportage continued. Even positive reports can turn out to be false positives – to the extent that they involve further highlighting of the problematic prior histories of estates.

In this study we have argued that media spaces can play an important role in shaping meaning-making around local authority housing estates. Admittedly, the extent to which changes in media framing influence public opinion is difficult to gauge and clearly there is a danger in assuming that one is in concert with the other. Previous research (Hastings and Dean 2003) urges us to be cautious about treating changes in media reportage as a register of wider public attitudinal shifts and overstating the media’s capacity to displace earlier difficult reputations. At the same time, it appears that overcoming the social distance between cultural elites such as journalists via on-site physical interaction with residents and estate revitalisation efforts goes a long way in terms of challenging problematic pasts. Clearly, the residents of Fatima Mansions succeeded in this by inviting RTÉ to actually come to the estate and to broadcast its programme from it with an angle sympathetic to residents’ needs and interests.



Halloween night, Rialto, 2008

Conclusion

Different media spaces offer variable possibilities for residents' agenda-setting. Of the media spaces examined in this paper, radio and television gave a stronger hearing to the residents of Fatima Mansions and partnered with them in producing their coverage of the estate's evolution from a sink estate to a sustainable community. Newspapers, by contrast, appear more constrained in providing a space for resident voices to be amplified. We found strong similarity in trends in relation to coverage of Fatima Mansions across three media despite differences between them in terms of time constraints – radio and television programmes are more subject to time limitations than newspapers – and temporal organisation – newspapers are published on a daily basis – television and radio documentaries are not produced on a daily cycle – and tend to be more receptive to tuning into newly emerging issues and topics (McCombs and Shaw 1972).

Because we looked at national radio and television coverage only at one particular point in time, we are not well placed to draw conclusions about changes with respect to radio and television coverage. At the same time, both were in step with the long-term shift towards the more positive reportage that we found in *Irish Times* coverage. With respect to none of the media spaces, however, can we make claims about an effect exerted upon public opinion. Clearly, there is no simple or straightforward relationship between coverage in media spaces of this or that issue and views of the wider population and we are wary of attributing changes in media representations as the “cause” of public opinion shifts – it may well be that changed representations are a consequence of public opinion changes or, more likely, that there are reciprocal influences between the two. At any rate it is difficult to see the relationship as spurious – given that most people do not have first-hand experience of

living in local authority estates like Fatima Mansions and, consequently, tend to rely on media outlets as their key – or maybe only – source of information about them.

One important lesson we take away from this study, though, is that media coverage of local authority estates does not always follow the pattern that our earlier examination of media agenda-setting research leads one to expect. Prior research would lead us to think that media spaces would be much less subject to influence from non-elites, that there would be a strong value incongruence between audiences and media outlets, that they would be unlikely to report positive news stories about disadvantaged social groups, and that they would be more likely to rely upon established news sources even if they did. Against this pattern we found that media spaces were surprisingly receptive to non-elite views and opinions and saw them as co-producers of their relatively benign coverage. We conclude that media coverage of social problems such as those associated with local authority housing estates may well be less authoritative than previously understood.

As well as showing some evidence of resident agenda-setting in a specific Dublin housing estate we also specify the conditions under which it is possible. Underwriting estate revitalisation through empirical research, building a strong resident organisation, developing residents' communicative competencies, forging alliances with important community power nodes and the presence of a favourable political opportunity structure, are all important conditions under which rarely heard and sometimes disengaged social groups like local authority residents can mobilise and exert power and strength in agenda-setting processes and institutional politics – our put more simply, engage with the outside world – that shape what issues people deem salient and how they think about them.

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