

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS COVERAGE IN THE IRISH NEWS MEDIA: A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

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Industrial relations is an area that has assumed an increased importance in Irish public consciousness over the last twenty or so years. During this time, the country has started to take off industrially, moving further away from its traditional agriculture-based economy. It has been the era of social and economic change so well described by McCarthy [1973], the era of the multinationals, the era when the OPEC inflation-recession-unemployment cycle has come round twice in fairly rapid succession. Membership of the EEC has generated its own industrial relations "news" — new social and workplace legislation, increased concern with industrial democracy, etc. All in all, the man in the street today seems likely to hear more references to industrial relations matters in any given period than he would have over the same period, say, twenty years ago, and one feels intuitively that these matters form a greater portion of the news and comment beamed at him that heretofore.

This article examines some exploratory research into the coverage of industrial relations matters in the Irish news media. The project was undertaken because no similar research had previously been carried out in Ireland, and since a similar study had been conducted in the United Kingdom some years ago the opportunity existed for a comparison of results. The United Kingdom study was conducted by Paul Hartmann of the Centre for Mass Communication Research, University of Leicester [Hartmann, 1976]. Taking the view that, of necessity, the majority of people are heavily dependent on the mass media for most of their information in this area, and that it therefore becomes important to know what kind of industrial relations information is made available by the mass media, Hartmann's team set out to analyse the industrial relations news content of a selected number of newspapers and broadcast news bulletins, with the object of achieving "a broadly representative selection of daily news output in terms of readership

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Source: Joint National Media Research Report 1980/1.

For a four week period (24 days) from February 9 to March 7, 1981, (Sundays excluded), every item dealing with industrial relations in the chosen papers and programmes was examined. Two departures from Hartmann's approach may be noted here — short items of less than two column inches, omitted in the British study, were included, and all newspaper pages were scanned, pilot work having revealed that, for example, the financial pages frequently contained items relating to closures, redundancies, etc. In the British study, only the main news pages

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Objectives and Scope of Study

The project had three objectives:

- (1) to provide empirical data on the industrial relations news content of the Dublin daily and evening newspapers, and of selected radio and television newscasts.
- (2) to establish, where this was possible, whether this content was a reasonable reflection of actual events.
- (3) to establish whether criticisms levelled at the media in the literature on this topic — and which are susceptible to checking from the type of data generated in this research — can be justified in the Irish context.

A pilot study was carried out to explore some methodological and conceptual problems and proved particularly useful in establishing that a ten-category classification of data developed in connection with the British study would be appropriate in the Irish context.

The following printed news sources, with circulation figures in parenthesis — average net sales per publishing day, January/June 1980 — were examined:

The Irish Times	(80,254)	
The Irish Independent	(190,329)	
The Irish Press	(98,568)	
The Evening Press	(172,780)	
The Evening Herald	(125,526)	(ABC, 1980)

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The items encountered were further broken down into type of item, as shown in Table 3. With the exception of *Newsnight*, the format of which consists of a brief news bulletin, followed by a number of featured news stories, invariably of foreign interest, the broadcasts devoted a much higher proportion of their time to industrial relations than did the printed media. Note however, that the printed media figures include advertising, whereas the broadcast material does not. If one accepts that the advertising content of the printed media examined amounts to about 25% of total space, then the percentage of industrial relations coverage in the total news space would be slightly higher — at 3–4%; Time limitations on broadcast news editions lead to more stringent selection, and thus the suggestion is that industrial relations news was considered important and newsworthy by the broadcast media. Whilst the main concern of the survey was with aggregate figures, some individual differences may be noted. The “*Independent*” and *Press*”, “*Irish Press*” and “*Evening Herald*” were found to devote the most industrial relations, and the highest percentage of space, amongst the newspapers surveyed. If the material is adjusted to take account of the average percentage of the item given over to headlines, then the “*Irish Press*”, “*Irish Times*” and “*Evening Herald*” were found to devote more space to the main body of the report. Indeed, headline size as a percentage of the total news items yielded some interesting figures — while the average headline (for all the newspapers taken together) took up about 28% of the item space, there were 37 items in which the headline formed in excess of 50% of the item, 25 of over 55%, 16 of over 60%, 9 of over 65%, 4 of over 70%, and even 1 of over 75%. Positioning of news items is also obviously important in relation to their impact on public consciousness. 206 (30.7%) of the printed survey items appeared on the front page, and 237 (35.3%) on an outside page. With the broadcast material, an item of industrial relations news occupied first place in the main body of the bulletin on 43% of occasions.

Table 3: *IR News Items Classified by Type*

	News	News with picture	Editorial	Letter	Feature	Total
Irish Press	116	14	9	4	1	144
Irish Independent	136	13	9	4	3	165
Irish Times	133	10	6	0	3	152
Evening Press	98	1	0	3	5	107
Evening Herald	97	4	0	0	3	104
RTE Radio 1 (1.30)	56	—	—	—	—	56
RTE 1 TV (9.00)	63	—	—	—	—	63
RTE 2 TV (<i>Newsnight</i>)	26	—	—	—	—	26
<i>Total</i>	725	42	24	11	15	817

were dealt with. The 24 days studied produced a total of 817 items of industrial relations news. The criterion for inclusion of an item was the same as that used by Hartmann, "that the activities of trade unions or employers associations, or employer-employee relations needed to form an explicit and substantive part of its subject matter". This criterion was interpreted liberally, in the sense that some items were included which, while dealing with the activities of trade unions or employers' associations, were not centrally about industrial relations matters. Nevertheless, they were included inasmuch as they formed part of the total picture of trade unions and employers' associations as presented in the media.

The research period was dominated by a national strike of oil and petrol tanker drivers. Talks on this strike were on-going at the start of the research period, and a resumption of work was just about to occur as the period ended. However, the period did include official and unofficial strikes, redundancies, closures and lay-offs, the publication of unemployment statistics, a number of unfair dismissal cases, and some discussion of trade union law reform, and therefore reflected a broad range of industrial relations activity.

Results

The first question to be looked at was the extent of coverage, as measured in terms of column inches for printed material, and of seconds for Radio/TV broadcasts. Results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: *Space given to Industrial Relations News in Selected Media*

	No. of Items	Ind. Relations col. inches/secs.	Total col. inches/secs.	%
Irish Press	144	2,246	71,318	3.2
Irish Independent	165	2,249	83,841	2.7
Irish Times	152	1,970	101,747	1.9
Evening Press	107	1,514	78,095	1.9
Evening Herald	104	1,705	71,249	2.4
RTE Radio 1 (1.30)	56	6,278	34,865	18.0
RTE 1 TV (9.00)	63	5,401	32,012	16.9
RTE 2 TV (Newsnight)	26	437	21,197	2.1
<i>All Papers</i>	672	9,684 c.i.	406,250 c.i.*	2.4
<i>All Broadcasts</i>	145	12,116 sec.	88,074 sec.**	13.8

* Includes advertising

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The subject matter of the items was next examined, and the material was categorised according to the 10 category classification developed by Hartmann (op. cit., p. 6). The classification is set out in Table 4.

Table 4: *Classification of IR News Items*

1. <i>Industrial Action</i> pertaining to strikes etc.	2. <i>Negotiations</i> situations where industrial action was neither occurring nor threatened
3. <i>The Economic Context</i> cost of living, trade figures, employment figures etc. in which industrial relations featured as a substantial part.	4. <i>Political Action/Statement</i> on industrial relations matters, excluding those on on-going or threatened industrial action.
5. <i>State Agency Action/Statement</i> on industrial relations matters, excluding those on on-going or threatened industrial action.	6. <i>Trade Union Action/Statement</i> on industrial relations matters, excluding those on on-going or threatened industrial action.
7. <i>Employers, Employers' Bodies</i> <i>Action/Statement</i> on industrial relations matters, excluding those on on-going or threatened industrial action.	8. <i>Work and Conditions</i> matters relating to health, safety, etc.
9. <i>Industrial Developments</i> closures, redundancies, etc. but excluding industrial action related to these.	10. <i>Other</i> unfair dismissal cases, discrimination cases, etc.

It must be pointed out that the categorisation chosen depends on the purpose of the analysis. Categories should be mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive, but in practice these requirements are difficult to meet. Frequently, there may be nothing intrinsic in the content itself which can objectively determine the appropriate classification and thus a degree of judgement is inevitable. These points are made not in order to reduce confidence in the results, but to explain why some procedures were adopted, and to establish realistic expectations of what can and cannot be achieved by research of this kind.

Table 5 shows the distribution of items over categories for the various media. The reliability of the coding into categories was checked independently. Using Scott's formula (Scott, 1955), a coefficient of .81 was obtained, indicating a high level of agreement between the author's coding, and that of the independent coders.

Table 5: *Industrial Relations News Topics by Papers and Programmes*

Category No.	Irish Press	Irish Independent	Irish Times	Evening Press	Evening Herald	RTE Radio 1 1.30 News	RTE 1 TV 9.00 News	RTE 2 Newsnight	Total
1	77	86	87	67	57	42	42	19	477
2	8	7	4	10	7	1	1	1	39
3	5	5	2	3	2	1	2	2	22
4	15	9	13	1	4	3	7	2	54
5	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
6	11	15	15	5	13	4	1	—	64
7	2	3	3	1	—	—	—	—	9
8	1	3	2	—	2	—	—	—	8
9	15	18	18	14	9	5	7	2	88
10	10	19	8	6	10	—	3	—	56
	144	165	152	107	104	56	63	26	817

The most obvious result is the high concentration of items in the Industrial Action Category (58.4% of all items, and more than 50% for each paper and programme). Note also that the actions and statements of trade unions were reported seven times more frequently than were those of employers/employers' bodies.

The overall pattern for each of the 8 sources looks intuitively similar, and indeed Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance, which expresses the degree of similarity among a number of distributions of cases over a set of categories, yields a high value of .79 for this data, on a scale where 1.00 represents perfect agreement and 0.00 only random agreement [Siegel, 1956]. The implication here is, of course, that from the information available to them, the different papers and programmes made very similar judgements about the degree of newsworthiness of different kinds of items.

In the British study, the percentage totals for each category were as follows (totals for the present survey are also shown for comparison) (Hartmann, *op. cit.* p. 8-9).

Category	Hartmann United Kingdom	Clohessey Ireland
1. Industrial Action	43.0%	58.5%
2. Negotiations	10.0%	4.8%
3. Economic Context	2.4%	2.7%
4. Political Action/Statement	6.9%	6.6%
5. State Agency Action/Statement	7.2%	0.0%
6. T.U. Action/Statement	20.1%	7.8%
7. Employer Action/Statement	2.4%	1.1%
8. Work and Conditions	4.0%	1.0%
9. Industrial Developments	0.8%	10.7%
10. Other	3.2%	6.8%
	<u>100.0%</u>	<u>100.0%</u>

There is a broad similarity here, the increased emphasis on industrial action in the Irish context being perhaps attributable to the heavy coverage of the oil and petrol tanker drivers dispute during the survey period — if this dispute is excluded, industrial action accounts for 43.6% of all items.

Causes and effects were abstracted for the 477 reports of industrial action. 279 causes and 295 effects were noted. 128 items (26.8%) listed both cause and effect, 97 items (20.3%) cause only, 93 items (19.5%) effect only, and 159 items (33.3%) neither cause nor effect. Thus, 225 items (47.2%) mentioned causes, and 221 items (46.3%) effects, or, on average, just under .5 of one cause and one effect per item.

The most frequently quoted causes were pay (33.7%); agreements (breach of, terms of, refusal to honour) (14.3%); discipline; and conditions of employment (each 6.5%). The effects most frequently quoted were actual delay, disruption, stoppage of service (23.4%) and threatened delay, disruption, stoppage (21.3%).

The participants mentioned were also identified, and Table 6 sets out the main ones. Noteworthy here is that workers, trade unions, and union leaders, together with particular firms are the most common type of participant, and the inference here must be the same as that drawn by Hartmann in the British study — i.e., that industrial relations situations are presented in the news as being largely concerned with the actions of workers and their representatives. The importance of the State is also noteworthy, with the Government (28.8%), the Minister for Labour (12.7%), and other Ministers/Departments (25.7%) all figuring prominently. This is of course due to the Government's role as the State's largest employer, as well as to its executive and legislative roles: during the survey period for instance, there were disputes in the

Table 6: *Principal Participants Appearing*

Participant	% items in which appearing
Workers	71%
Specific firms	58%
Specific union	58%
Union leaders, officials	36%
Government	29%
Government Ministers (other than Labour)	26%
Employers Bodies	23%
Labour Court	22%
ICTU	16%

Prison Service and the Central Sorting Office as well as considerable ministerial involvement in the petrol tanker drivers' dispute.

A record of participants being quoted was also kept, and Table 7 shows the main results.

Table 7: *Participant quoted*

Participant quoted	% of Items in which quoted
Trade Union official	22%
Management Spokesman	8%
Politician	7%
Industry Association Rep.	4%

Again, the preponderance of union spokesmen in relation to other spokesmen is noteworthy, and is consistent with the evidence found in Britain. Characterisation, or the affixing of descriptive adjectives to participants, was also examined. It was found that the overall level of such characterisation was considerably less in Ireland than was the case in Britain. This is probably connected with the existence in Britain of a more distinctively "popular" press, where, it is intuitively felt, the level of characterisation would be higher than in the "quality" press. Workers were characterised on 18% of the occasions on which they appeared, and the next category, employers, owners etc. on only 3.6% of occasions. The low level of characterisation makes it difficult to indicate meaningfully what the most popular adjectives were, except perhaps with regard to workers. Of the 104 occasions on which members of this group were described by an adjective, "striking" appeared 23 times, "angry" 7 times, and "militant" and "patient" 6 times each.

Finally the main themes and concepts relevant to industrial relations which occurred during the survey were noted. The themes most frequently occurring during the period were:

	% of Items
Productivity	19%
Pickets/Picketing	16%
Redundancies, closures etc.	15%
National Wage Agreements/Understandings	15%
Voting, Balloting	14%
Previous dispute	10%
Unemployment	9%
Arbitration, Mediation, Conciliation	7%
Industrial Relations	6%
The Economy	5%
The Recession	5%
Pay Parity, Relativity, Comparability	5%
Unfair Dismissal	4%
Public inconvenience, hardship	4%

Productivity as the leading theme is perhaps surprising, but this arose largely in connection with the tanker drivers dispute, which centred on this issue. National wage agreements/understandings arose frequently, usually in connection with disputes over their terms, or over the application of, or failure to apply these terms in particular situations. Unemployment figured prominently due to its prevalence, the publication of monthly figures, and also of comparative EEC statistics during the survey period, and in general the prominence of themes such as recession, redundancies, unemployment etc. mirrored the country's present economic position.

Conclusions

The main points to emerge in respect of the first objective of the research, i.e., the establishment of empirical data, were that, broadly speaking, the greater the available space, the greater the amount of industrial relations news which was carried, in absolute terms; that the "Irish Independent" carried both the greatest number of items, and marginally the greatest total of column inches (the "Evening Herald" had the largest area per item, but when an adjustment is made for headline size the largest area per item belonged to the "Irish Press"); that industrial action accounted for 58% of all industrial relations news items; that the most common participants in industrial relations news stories were workers, unions, union leaders and specific firms (with union leaders or officials being the participants most frequently quoted), but that the absolute levels were considerably lower than in Britain; and that characterisation of participants was at a low level.

As regards the second objective of how the media reports relate to reality, one can straight away highlight the media's preoccupation with conflict, in contrast with, for example, the number of people involved in all disputes during the year, expressed as a percentage of the total numbers at work, which over the period 1971-1977 has varied between 2% and 4% (ITGWU, 1979), or with, for example, the total annual number of industrial disputes compared to the vast number of trade union/management meetings and Labour Court proceedings which are held annually.² Whatever the "actual" level of strike activity relative to total industrial relations activity, it is obviously much less than the media emphasis might suggest, and the difference can only be explained in terms of the media's judgement on the newsworthiness of events. On the question of balance, the survey produced results very similar to those in Britain. If anything, firms and managements were mentioned more frequently than in Britain (58% of items as against 47%), suggesting perhaps that a slightly more balanced approach is adopted by the Irish media. The material on causes and effects is problematic with

regard to its interpretation. The data reveal, as we have seen, an equal concentration on causes and effects, but at a level only half that obtained in the United Kingdom. It was not possible in this study to specify whether or not this was indicative of a lesser concern with causes and effects here than is the case in Britain.

With regard to the final objective, six particular criticisms of the media in relation to the reporting of industrial relations events were examined. These are, that the media:

- (i) concentrate on conflict
- (ii) over-sensationalise and dramatise events
- (iii) personalise events and only rarely deal with the underlying causes of complex problems
- (iv) can exacerbate situations by their coverage
- (v) are more concerned with effects than causes
- (vi) are biased against trade unions.

It seems from the survey data that the media *are* inclined to concentrate on conflict and deviation from the norm, which they see as newsworthy. Sensationalisation and dramatisation would be difficult to establish, but the findings on headline size might point to a greater tendency on the part of the "Irish Independent" and the two Evening papers to do this: that is, of course, if one accepts that larger headlines constitute sensationalisation and dramatisation. Neither personalisation, nor the charge that coverage could exacerbate disputes could be checked from the present data, but the data would seem to refute the allegation that the media are more concerned with effects than with causes. Finally, there is the perennial and thorny allegation that the media are biased against trade unions. Bias is difficult to define: as one union has suggested "examples of erratic and superficial coverage may be highly unsatisfactory, but this does not establish bias: however much one may feel that omission or neglect of issues constitutes the most effective tool of prejudiced reporting, it would be possible to find explanations for the oddities that have been picked out . . ." (ACTT). Hartmann in Britain approached the question from the standpoint of "differential legitimacy" rather than bias (Hartmann, *op. cit.*, p. 14 *et. seq.*), and sought to discover from the data what kinds of actions — and whose — are typically presented as being legitimate, and which illegitimate, and what kinds of consequences are characteristically associated with the actions of different parties. This approach involves asking not only what kind of events, actors, issues and arguments are brought to the attention of readers or viewers, but also what significance the producers of the material wish the recipient to attach to them. If one adopts this ap-

proach, one can argue that the media in Ireland, as in Britain, tend to portray the actions of workers and trade unions as having less legitimacy than those of employers and Government. This is supported in several ways. The actions and statements of unions are reported seven times more frequently than those of employers; and workers, trade unions and their leaders together considerably outnumber any other participants in industrial relations stories. This all helps to suggest that industrial relations, usually bad ones, are primarily the work of workers and unions. Unions, less sure of themselves in the public view, feel obliged to state their case that much more frequently, or feel a need to be seen to be "doing something" more frequently than do employers, to whom inactivity may frequently be the most appealing course of action.

Similarly, union leaders are more frequently quoted than any other category of spokesman, unions being more frequently called upon by the media to justify their actions, or feeling obliged more often than management to account for their behaviour, because the legitimacy of their activities is suspect. As regards characterisation, the findings again show that while the overall level was low, workers were characterised much more than other groups, the point being that employer or government action is, by comparison, regarded as legitimate and so qualifying adjectives are rarely needed. Who, to paraphrase Hartmann, has heard of "militant" employers, or of a "divided" FUE, or an "unreasonable" Labour Court?

On all of these counts then, workers and unions can be seen as being portrayed as somehow less legitimate entities than management, firms, or Government. But in almost every instance, the distinction is not as sharp, nor the imbalance as pronounced as it is in Britain. Thus the author's overall conclusion is that the Irish news media do not differ in many essential respects from their British counterparts, with the exception that such trends as are evident are, in every case, less marked than in Britain.

A final cautionary word is in order. Content analysis is essentially a descriptive research method, and cannot, on its own, answer questions about the effects of news coverage, nor about factors underlying news production, or the intentions of journalists. It may provide inferences about these things, but as Hartmann has pointed out (Hartmann, *op. cit.*, p. 4), such inferences need in the end to be checked by other means, by studying effects or production directly.

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NOTES

1. The technique used in both the British and Irish studies and the law was that of content analysis. Content analysis is a research method used primarily in the social sciences. It has been defined [Berelson, 1952] as a research technique for "the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication." Using this procedure, a sample of the population is examined, and a unit of analysis (words, themes, etc.) is chosen. Categories to direct the coding of the material are constructed, and results are provided most frequently in quantitative form — e.g., frequency of occurrence of a particular word, phrase, etc. or, alternatively, the research might be concerned with, for example, determining the degree of intensity of a theme or variable in the material being studied.
2. See for example, Annual Reports of the Federated Union of Employers, or of the Labour Court.

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