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Chapter 8

Modern Ireland, modern media, same old story?

Ciarán McCullagh

Introduction

The last ten years have seen the Irish media develop many of the characteristics that have been noted of the media in other modern societies. These include the increasing concentration of media ownership, the rise of a tabloid press, the relentless promotion of a celebrity culture, an increasingly competitive media environment, and a fragmentation of the media audience. These changes in media organisation at a global level have been reflected in the theoretical and empirical concerns of the sociology of the mass media. They have led to the unfreezing of the old binary that had come to mark media sociology. This could be characterised, and to some degree caricatured, as the distinction between the view that the media are all powerful and the view that the audience has considerable capacity to resist their influence.

This binary has been transformed in a number of ways, though the main focus of this chapter will be on how it has altered our understanding of the issues of ownership and control. There is increasing concern in media sociology with combating the idea that the media are servants of the powerful and there is a growing interest in suggesting that the relationship between the media and social power is considerably more intricate than this. It is no longer appropriate, if it ever was, to see media content as reflecting the interests of the powerful. It is now more fruitful to see it as having a complex relationship with the economy, the surrounding culture, the power structure and the experiences of its users.

These changes in how we understand issues of ownership and control will be outlined and then some of the tools of analysis developed below will be applied to the media coverage of immigration in Ireland and the extent to which the media create, reflect or challenge a growing culture of racism.

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Media as propaganda for the powerful

One of the central working assumptions of media sociology is that, as John Corner (2003: 370) puts it, the media are 'economically and socially constrained agencies'. But this is, as Corner goes on to argue, not necessarily a 'challenging new insight'. The key issue is whose interests these constraints reflect and what their impact is on media content and media influence.

One particularly important view of the nature of the constraints on the media comes from Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (2002). They identify five filters through which information must go before it is refined and deemed suitable for entry into the public domain. The first is ownership. The media are basically profit-seeking entities owned by a relatively small number of wealthy people, generally men. Though they compete aggressively for market share they have a certain level of solidarity with each other and with government elites and this generally produces a common view of the world. Thus the material that gets into the media is that which is compatible with this worldview.

The issue of limited ownership is an increasing pertinent one in Ireland. National readership surveys, for example, suggest that over 90 per cent of the adult population reads a newspaper and this level of readership appears to be spread across the population. This looks at first sight like an encouraging figure. But the problem, as the Democracy Commission (Harris 2005) points out, is that almost 80 per cent of newspapers sold in Ireland are published by companies fully or partially owned by Independent Newspapers PLC. This makes it the dominant force in the Irish newspaper industry and one that is increasingly becoming a player on the world media market with significant media interests in Britain, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Portugal and Mexico. It also owns the two largest cable television operations in the Republic and has an increasing presence on the internet (Shaw 2005: 61). This has led a number of commentators, including John Horgan (2001: 171), to wonder whether this could be a constraining factor in the diversity of views available in the media. It has also been argued that this kind of concentration of ownership has given management at Independent Newspapers and particularly its owner, Tony O'Reilly, a level of access to and influence over politicians that is not available to the ordinary citizen.

Groups like Indymedia (see www.indymedia.ie) argue that this kind of media concentration allows Independent Newspapers to use its newspapers to attack its commercial and ideological competitors. Two incidents can be used to illustrate these concerns. One is the general election in 1997. In a departure from established practice the *Irish Independent* published its editorial on the front page of the newspaper. It was headed 'Payback Time' and encouraged a vote against the then coalition government. Some critics say that this occurred

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at a time when the owner of the newspaper group was in conflict with the government over their unwillingness to act against illegal television deflectors, a factor of considerable concern to cable television owners (see Horgan 2001: 170). The other is the dropping of a column in 2005 by a senior *Independent* journalist, Justine McCarthy, on corporate greed. This was written against the background of a dispute in Irish Ferries over the replacement of Irish workers by cheaper foreign labour (Murphy 2005), a move that some saw as a concrete expression of such greed in action. It also coincided with the replacement of their industrial relations correspondent allegedly because of complaints from Irish Ferries over a story he had written – and wished to stand by – about the willingness of the company to use tear gas against its employees. This version of events is, not surprisingly, contested both by Irish Ferries and by Independent Newspapers.

Concern over the effects of the concentration of ownership has been compounded by the current situation of the national broadcaster, RTÉ. It has lost its monopoly position as the only national broadcaster and it now operates in a highly competitive environment. Apart from the competition that it has faced from the ready availability of stations from Britain, it now has to deal with competition from two new national television stations. TV3 is currently owned mainly by international conglomerates – CanWest Global and Granada Television. It has a limited level of news and current affairs and its main menu is the simultaneous broadcast of soap opera and reality television programmes from ITV (Horgan 2001: 183). It has since been joined by Channel 6 owned by Irish business people and with no obligation to broadcast either news or sports. It is aimed at the 15–35 age group and largely shows films and imported drama and comedy from the United States.

The combined effect of the ready availability of competing national and UK commercial stations has placed pressures on RTÉ to 'dumb down' the schedule in an effort to maintain its share of the audience. According to Kinsella (quoted in Harris 2005: 14), 'private interests are re-defining its [RTÉ's] role towards a certain type of programming at the expense of its public service rol..' This can be seen in the pressure to 'lighten' the amount of investigative newsgathering and to broaden and dilute what passes as factual programming. Some critics have suggested that reality television and format shows, already a central part of the global media menu, are now 'the name of the game' (Shaw 2005: 63) in Irish television.

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The combination of the high level of concentration of ownership in newspapers and the growing power of private corporations to set the environment in which the national broadcaster is forced to operate – and to which it is forced to respond – raises the question of power. Do these changed patterns of ownership give to powerful interests a control over the media agenda and through that a capacity to shape the content of public consciousness? In the

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view of writers like Herman and Chomsky (2002), the answer is quite clearly in the affirmative.

The second filter is advertising. This makes a major contribution to the profits of the media and it is essential to commercial success that audiences are attracted by the media so that they can in turn be sold to advertisers. But in return for this revenue, advertisers want their products displayed in what Herman (1998: 192) calls a 'supportive selling environment'. This means that the media must walk a careful tightrope between attracting an audience but not entertaining or distracting them to such a degree that they do not pay attention to the advertising breaks that dictate the tempo of the television schedules. In effect, according to this model advertising agencies have effective if not direct control over what gets into the media.

Herman and Chomsky's third filter is the role of sourcing. Journalists and media personnel do not generally witness the events they report on but they depend on 'reliable sources' to provide them with accounts and interpretations of what is going on in the world. This means that the sources that can provide the media with reliable copy will get more prominent coverage. This suits dominant elites. Government spokespeople, for example, are presumed to be credible and when that is tied in with their capacity to provide timely press releases, advance copies of speeches, appropriately staged photo opportunities and controlled access to the powerful, it means they obtain favoured treatment by the media. This allows them to influence which events are seen as important and allows them to dictate how these events will be presented in the media.

One of the areas where the power of sources is evident in Ireland is in the media coverage of crime, much of which is influenced and shaped by the use of unnamed gardaí as sources. They have been able to shape our understanding of many incidents by their capacity to provide the media with information without being identified and without there necessarily being any means available to those named or to their relatives to challenge this. A representative case in point is that of two young Dublin people found dead in a hotel in late August 2006. On 1 September the *Irish Times* reported that the priest at the funeral said '[W]e can't and don't understand what has happened.' But the report went on to say that while the gardaí were not releasing information 'a source said that cocaine was found at the scene', a release of information that implicitly offers an explanation for their deaths. Similarly the way in which unnamed gardaí can, in the wake of murder, tell the media that the victim was 'known to the gardaí' somehow neutralises the impact of the killing. Whether intended to or not the phrase carries with it the notion that when people who are 'known to the gardaí' are killed then they are the kind of people who have a certain familiarity with violence and so are in some way partly responsible for their own deaths and consequently less deserving of our sympathy (see McCullagh 2003).

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Finally, for information and interpretation to get into the media it must also be consistent with the fifth and final filter, that of the dominant ideology. In the 1980s this, according to Herman and Chomsky, was anti-communism. It has since been replaced by the frame of the 'inevitability' and 'progressiveness' of globalisation. This has forced non-market or state-directed economic options off the media agenda. Market ideology has now been joined, post 9/11, by the ideology of the war on terror. This has, in its turn, squeezed any informed discussion of radical oppositional politics out of the mainstream media.

These filters have clear similarities to the term doxa, used by Pierre Bourdieu (1998b). This refers to the presuppositions that are regarded as self-evident and so outside the field of discussion. They could be regarded as setting clear limits to the terms within which arguments can be conducted and between which the media feel the obligation to be objective and balanced. In the Irish context one of the most prominent of such filters is the 'peace process'. The Minister for Justice proposed in 2004 that it be made an offence for journalists to publish stories that would 'undermine the peace process' (Williams 2004: xvi). The degree to which the creation of such an offence might be necessary is hard to evaluate but even without this legislation it often seems that the media in the Republic are more prominent in protecting the peace process than in commenting objectively on it (see Spencer 2004 for a discussion of the pressures from the media for politicians to conclude the Good Friday Agreement in 1998).

The argument of Herman and Chomsky is that these filters interact with and reinforce each other and this interaction sets limits to the media agenda. They are the means through which the powerful frame news and limit the terms of public debate and discussion. As Klaehn (2002: 152) puts it 'news content is framed so as to (re)produce "privileged" interpretations of the news which are ideologically serviceable to corporate and monied interests'. In effect, according to this model, the media are a propaganda system, with the ability to 'to mobilise an elite consensus, to give the appearance of democratic consent, and to create enough confusion, misunderstanding and apathy in the general population to allow elite programs to go forward' (Herman 1998: 194).

Responding to the propaganda model: manufacturing dissent

While the propaganda model synthesises much of the thinking on the media by critical thinkers in the United States over the last 25 years, it has, according to John Corner (2003: 367) 'very little by way of new theoretical insight . . . to bring to European media research'. He criticises the model on two main grounds. One is the way in which it presents media professionals. They are seen as 'comfortably if numbly functional' (2003: 372), tricked by the

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socialisation and reward systems in media organisations into being servants of power. Yet this is a view of their role and function with which many journalists have little patience.

They argue that if they are the servants of power then their masters do not particularly appreciate them. Most politicians see journalists if not as the enemy then most appropriately supped with in the much the same way as the devil, with a very long spoon. The relationship between the powerful and the media is not experienced by either group as cosy and mutually supportive but as suspicious and conflictual. In addition it is hard to square the model's view of the relationship with the amounts of money that politicians and powerful groups feel they have to expend on media relations or spin doctoring to control and manage the kind of press coverage that they get.

Arguments like Herman and Chomsky's fail to take into account what Hallin (1987) has called 'the maturing of journalist professionalism'. This is where the commitment to professional values gives journalists autonomy from powerful interests and provides an ideology through which their demands can be resisted. It may be a limited form of resistance but the journalistic imperative to get the other side of the story, even if interpreted in a narrow sense of the term by confining the other side to other powerful interests, still ensures some space for alternative views.

The only empirical study of journalists in the major newspapers and television stations in Ireland would tend to support the notion that their main value commitment is to the profession. Mary Corcoran (2004) found that in general journalists are somewhat more liberal in political terms than the organisations for which they work and the audiences for whom they write. But this does not encourage or permit them to use their professional work as a channel for the expression of their personal values. 'Once they enter the profession', she argues, 'their partisan beliefs become secondary to their professional orientation' (Corcoran 2004: 40).

The propaganda model is also weak on the role of the audience. Herman and Chomsky are more concerned with the controlled nature of media output than with its effects on audiences. Audiences are simply assumed to be 'brainwashed' by the media (Corner 2003: 373). The problem here is that it is now routinely accepted in media sociology that audiences are not cultural dopes but have complex and nuanced reactions to the media. Sometimes they believe what the media say, sometimes they do not, but the balance between these two responses must be considered against the background of a declining appetite of political news and an increasing loss of confidence and trust in the media (Davis 2003). A lot of the time audiences simply do not care.

While there is in effect a considerable area of agreement in media sociology – most scholars agree that factors like ownership, sourcing, advertising and journalistic professionalism are important factors shaping media

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output – there is also significant disagreement over the degree to which these control media output and over the degree to which the media are open and accessible to those outside the dominant consensus.

The problem for media sociology may be that its almost obsessive interest in the issue of control has led to a comparative neglect of other features of the news media. Three of these are worthy of mention here. These are the role of tabloids in setting the media agenda, the decline of journalistic deference to the powerful, and the rise of celebrity journalism.

The role of the tabloids

The tabloids are the most neglected area in media sociology. The empirical focus in studies of newspaper coverage tends to be on what used to be termed the broadsheets or the quality press. This is partly because of a mistaken and class-based view that, because of their content and their audience, the tabloids are of limited social and political importance. This assumption is hard to square with the evidence that they may be significant in setting the public agenda on issues like crime and public disorder (see O'Connell 2002). It is hardly consistent with their clear lead in sales figures over the more 'serious' papers. It is also difficult to reconcile with the influence that their style of reporting has had on news broadcasting with the rise of what has been termed 'tabloid TV' – short, snappy and highly visual presentations of news items.

Herman and Chomsky's work epitomises this underestimation of the power of tabloids. They argue for a trickle down version of media power. They see the elite media – in the case of the United States, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* – as determining 'what topics, issues and events are to be considered "newsworthy" by the lower-tier media' (Klaehn 2002: 157). But this is questionable as arguably the influence equally goes the other way. Thus the quality press may in many cases follow the agenda of the tabloids in terms of the increasing attention given to celebrities and the amount of space that is absorbed by the their follow-ups to tabloid led concerns such as that on paedophilia and violent crime. Also the tabloids have set a particular premium on the 'exclusive'. What they would regard as an exclusive might not be immediately obvious from or reconcilable with the ostensible politics of their owners. Indeed the tabloids are arguably in the vanguard of what some would see as the key change in media coverage and media orientation, that is, the constant search for the populist angle to issues and controversies, a process that makes them unreliable allies for political elites.

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The decline of deference

The decline of deference in the relationship between the media and politicians and power holders has been considered by Clayman (2002). This is most evident in what he terms the rise of 'aggressive journalism'. In a research project with John Heritage (Clayman and Heritage 2002) he shows how there has been an increase in the level of antagonistic questioning of American Presidents from Eisenhower in the 1950s through to Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. The underlying theme of the accountability has become more marked. Increasingly politicians are being asked to explain particular policies and actions, but the assumption behind the questions and behind the way they are asked is that politicians are either trying to hide something or that they have done something wrong.

Journalists now use a number of strategies to get around the norm of interactional politeness and deference to powerful people and to get around the risk of being accused of being biased by asking adversarial questions. The main one they use 'to neutralise and legitimate their aggressive conduct' is 'to align themselves with the public' (Clayman 2002: 216). In asking aggressive questions or questions that might in other circumstances be interpreted as rude they claim to be acting on behalf of the people. They use what is in effect the 'Tribune of the People' stance, presenting themselves as 'relaying the concerns of the populace rather than pursuing a personal agenda' (2002: 210). When questions are posed and justified in these terms it is difficult for interviewees to ignore them. The risk for them is that evading the question can in itself become a news item. This means that political interviews are now 'a formidable instrument of political accountability' (Clayman and Heritage 2002). It has also created the situation in which journalists are effectively 'uncontrollable' (Palmer 2002: 349) and where, from the point of view of journalists, nothing is unsayable.

Some journalists may be uncontrollable but Bourdieu (1998b: 6) says that these are probably limited in number. He argues that the current structure of the journalistic field is one in which there is a small core group of star reporters and columnists – the so-called opinion makers – and 'a vast journalistic sub-proletariat'. These are in the majority. They work in short-term contract positions and are never in sufficiently secure employment to be able to exercise their right to either watchdog or attack journalism. The reality of their economic position means they do not have a basis from which they can adopt an adversarial stance against the powerful.

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The rise of celebrity journalism

There has also been another significant development in journalism and that is the rise of celebrity journalism. This is a situation in which a small group of journalists or correspondents becomes better known than the people about whom they are reporting. News analysts have noted the way in which over the passage of time there has been a decline in the amount of time and space given in the media to the ideas, policies and speeches of politicians. They have been replaced by a focus on opinion polls and what has been called 'horse-race journalism', a concern with the impact that policies and behaviour of politicians have on their standing in the polls. This has resulted in a change in the frame through which stories are told and in terms of which candidates' behaviour is interpreted. Increasingly political behaviour is presented through a games schema in which their activities are seen as calculated, manipulative and strategic. Political positions are interpreted as being adopted out of a desire to impress public opinion and increase standing in the polls rather than from intrinsic or ideological conviction.

There was some evidence of this in Clancy and Brannick's analysis of the Irish media coverage of the elections to the European parliament in 2004 (Clancy and Brannick 2004). They found that little coverage was given to policy issues. The main focus of the coverage was on the political strategies of the parties and this was part of a growing trend in the media of an increase in coverage of the 'games' aspect (they suggest 'battle' might be a more appropriate term) of the election to the detriment of policy issues. Only eleven per cent of newspaper articles dealt with a policy issue, most of the remainder focused on conflicts between candidates and these conflicts were framed in terms of personal or strategic differences and never in political or policy terms.

This change has been accompanied by a decline in the presence of politicians in the news. Thomas Patterson (1994) writing about the United States has noted how in 1968 the average soundbite from a politician was 42 seconds. By 1988 it had fallen to ten seconds. So if politicians are going out of the news, by whom are they being replaced? Patterson argues that '[T]he voiceless candidate had become the norm: for every minute that the candidate spoke on the evening news in 1988 and 1992, the journalists who were covering them talked for 6 minutes' (Patterson 1994: 75). In this mode of presentation journalists become more important and are more highlighted in the media than the people on whom they are reporting. They end up being better known than politicians and become celebrities in their own right.

The most obvious Irish example is Charlie Bird, the senior correspondent on RTÉ. Because of his status he has the journalistic authority to investigate aggressively difficult areas like the defrauding of customers by major banks in Ireland (see Lee and Bird 1998). But he has also appeared on the Ryan Tubridy

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Show on RTÉ television to discuss his personal life and has had his picture used on the front of the *RTÉ Guide*. This almost inevitably attracted the attention of the tabloid press. He claimed that he was followed around Dublin by photographers hoping to obtain pictures of him luring women into what the *Evening Herald* called 'his love-nest'. In the process he has become more famous and more recognisable than the issues and the people on whom he reports (see McCullagh 2005).

Killing kings?

All of these are factors that need to be considered in any model of media power. The problem here is that their interrelationship is in some flux and this makes it difficult to make definitive statements about the relationship between media and political and social power. There are tendencies and pressures in the media such as concentration of ownership and the growing importance of advertising that would lead to a conservative and controlled media agenda. But equally there are tendencies that would lead in the opposite direction. These include the rise of aggressive journalism, the replacement of deference by suspicion in the relationship to politicians and public figures, and the rising influence of the tabloid press. For some, such as Sabato (1991: 3), this has produced a media that is 'more bent on killing kings rather than on making them'. The important question for future work in media sociology is to investigate the circumstances in which the media manufacture consent and those under which they manufacture dissent.

Two factors will be important in this. One is the role of sources. Herman and Chomsky have argued that the way in which media source stories gives an advantage to those in powerful positions. Journalists working in the political world are considered, in Davis's phrase, as having been 'captured by those they report on' (Davis 2003: 683). But this does not automatically mean the suppression of dissent. It has been argued that dissent does get into the media even if it is only in specific circumstances. These are when the powerful do not speak with a single voice. Hence journalists receive conflicting information from their sources and this results in more open and critical accounts being present in the media. Daniel Hallin (1987) had made this clear in relation to the war in Vietnam and it is a point that could be extended to current wars such as that in Iraq. The media acted as cheerleaders in the early part of the war in Vietnam when there was elite unity over its purpose and its chances of success. But when dissent emerged among the elite over the possibility of victory and over the legitimacy of the justifications for the war then that dissent was reflected in the press. It became possible for the media to legitimate this dissent and to avoid the criticism of being unpatriotic by referring to the status of the dissenting voices.

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So it is possible to see the use of sources in a more radical fashion than Herman and Chomsky. Paul Williams (2004), for example, has argued that the use of unnamed garda sources has been essential to the revelations about the extent and depth of organised crime in Ireland. It is an area that the government would prefer to see kept under wraps but the willingness of gardaí to act as anonymous sources for journalist like Williams has made this difficult to achieve. The government's response has been to propose legislation that would make it illegal for gardaí to reveal certain kinds of information and for journalists to accept it (see Williams 2004: xvi–xvii).

The second issue is more complex. We are used to speaking of the media as a mass phenomenon but it may now be more appropriate to differentiate between large circulation media and more niche-oriented ones. Arguably a different dynamic applies to the way in which they both work. Large-scale media like large circulation newspapers are in constant search of the space on which they can connect with the concerns of their audiences and become the means through which the emotions of their audiences can be engaged and expressed. This makes them alert to other media, such as radio talk shows, and to the concerns expressed there, which often provide the major stories for such papers. They are trying to identify and reproduce the concerns of their audience rather than those of powerful elites, and that makes them unreliable defenders of the status quo.

In an age when there has been a decline in support for mainstream parties it no longer makes economic sense for the media to be overly concerned with the sensibilities of political parties. Thus the concern about paedophilia has been carried largely by the popular press in Ireland, it has been framed in a particular way through what might be considered a melodramatic and simplified morality of good and evil, and it has become a force in shaping political responses to the issue. It is a force that politicians may be unhappy with but one that they feel they need to acknowledge.

On the other hand there are niche media such as the so-called quality press and high profile television news programmes. Their function has been characterised by Davis (2003: 673), as 'a communications channel for the regular negotiations and decision-making that take place between different elite groups to the exclusion of the mass of citizens'. It is his argument that a significant amount of media discussion is produced by and aimed as what he terms 'decision-making and power-broking elites'. This niche press is the arena within which they promote their political and economic agendas and, effectively speaking, negotiate with each other. It is this function that explains the continued importance of a newspaper like the *Irish Times* whose numerical circulation is not sufficient to justify its sense of self-importance. It is a question of the limited but affluent social groups among whom it circulates. Purchasing and carrying a copy of the *Irish Times* is as much a statement of social capital as a matter of personal or intellectual taste.

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If the media have become fragmented in this way then arguably their audience has too. This makes it difficult to study the impact of the media on them. It is generally accepted that we cannot predict media responses from media content and it is now accepted that the impact of media material is filtered through a range of social factors not least the amount of personal experience individuals have of the issue under media attention (see McCullagh 2002). There are also growing indications of significant differentiation in the media audiences in terms of the level of social literacy encouraged by and acquired from television in particular. There are clear gaps in the degree to which factual information promoted and highlighted in the media – such as the names and function of politicians and the geographical location of conflict zones – is actually 'learned' by audiences. Moreover these gaps tend to follow class, age, gender and educational lines. Those who engage with niche media tend to have the most detailed factual knowledge of political and economic issues; those who engage with mainstream media tend to have least (see McCullagh 2002: 174–5).

Manufacturing racism

The issue of immigration is a useful one through which we can explore some of the issues raised here. Ireland only became a country of net immigration in 1996 (see chapter 2 for further discussion). As Boucher (2004) points out, this is much later than for most other European countries. Yet while we are moving, whether willingly or not, towards a multi-racial and multicultural society concern has grown that this has been accompanied by a rise on racist attitudes and increasing levels of violence against people perceived as migrants. As a number of surveys show, social contact between migrants and 'natives' tends to be limited, with many Irish people saying they do not know any migrants personally (see, for example, Millward Brown 2004), so the issue of the source of racist attitudes immediately raises suspicion about the role of the media in the creation of these attitudes.

Guerin (2002: 92) for example argues that 'the media in Ireland has been complicit . . . in creating a context within which racism can flourish and where an anti-immigrant agenda is enabled'. He supports this by reference to a number of studies of Irish newspapers and to the ways in which the papers draw on the 'flood' metaphor to describe the arrival of immigrants in Ireland, the way they focus on the criminal behaviour of some of these immigrants, the emphasis they place on the claim that most asylum seekers are 'bogus' and the creation of a perception that such people are 'spongers' and 'scroungers'. These frames, Guerin argues, set the context within which issues of migration policy are presented and discussed. They set what he calls the 'legitimate parameters of debate on racism'.

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This is an analysis which fits very much within the perspective outlined by Herman and Chomsky. The media set the limits for debate in society and these limits are in turn set by the discourse of political parties and other official agencies. Thus media reporting on immigration reproduced in a largely unquestioning manner the pronouncements of politicians and the 'uncorroborated statements by Gardaí and Department of Justice spokespeople' (Guerin 2002: 91). Michael Breen and his colleagues (Breen et al. 2006) make much the same point in their analysis of the media coverage of the constitutional referendum on citizenship held in 2004. They point to the prevalence in media coverage of terms such as 'loophole', 'abuse', 'exploitation' and 'asylum'. These were the predominant frames within which media coverage was organised. This framing was supported by the direct and unexamined use of quotations from statements of politicians in the Dáil. The media seldom pointed out that the information and the assumptions in many of these statements were wrong. The issue of so-called 'maternity tourism' is a case in point. The notion that Irish maternity hospitals were being 'overrun' by pregnant immigrant women was promoted by the Minister for Justice as a reason for the referendum but the claim itself was, according to some, exaggerated and to others it was simply wrong. Yet newspaper reports which recorded the Minister's statements seldom indicated that these had been challenged. 'Politicians', Breen and his colleagues tell us (2006: 67), 'are privileged sources with direct access to the mass media by the simple mechanism of speaking in the Dáil'. This gives them a central role in setting media interpretations and through that in shaping public perceptions of and attitudes to immigrants.

All black and white?

This is not to suggest that the media are overwhelmingly negative in their coverage. There are many examples of articles in the media questioning government policy and criticising the spread of racist attitudes and ideologies. Even newspapers in the Independent Group, often accused of stirring up racial discontent, have carried articles that were more measured and impartial in their consideration of these issues. Similarly Breen et al. (2006) found that both the *Irish Times* and the *Sunday Tribune* were fair and balanced in their editorials on the citizenship referendum. But this is not seen as sufficient to outweigh the negative frames within which the issue was reported. As Watt (quoted in Guerin 2002: 95) put it, 'the cumulative effect of many headlines can serve to neutralise the balanced and objective reporting that can sometimes appear in the same articles elsewhere in the same newspaper'.

This work thus makes an important argument for the role of the media in shaping public perceptions about race and migration. But there are a number

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of important limitations in this analysis, similar to those that critics claim to find in the work of Herman and Chomsky (2002). These include the assumptions that are made about audiences, the neglect of television representations particularly those in television drama, and the extent of the space that there is in the media to challenge racist framings. No research work is currently available in Ireland which examines the impact of this kind of coverage on audiences and on their attitudes. It is simply assumed that media coverage must be a powerful force in shaping these. Yet while this kind of analysis may be useful in explaining the attitudes that are uncovered in large-scale surveys, it does not seem adequate to explain situations where communities have organised to prevent particular deportations of migrants. And while we do not know the impact of the predominant framings on audiences we similarly do not know the impact of the terms within which the opposition to racism is couched. The major motif here has been the demand that we consider our own experiences of emigration and discrimination and apply some of the lessons to our current situation. This is a way of framing the opposition to racism that may have considerable cultural resonance in a society in which many families have first-hand knowledge of the realities of forced emigration.

Another factor with significant cultural resonance and one that can produce somewhat contradictory media coverage is our concept of the ideal victim or of the victim that we see as deserving compassion. In theory in a world that is increasingly without borders there should be no limits, either social or geographic, on who qualifies as a victim worthy of our sympathy and help. In practice there is. Some victims, as Hoijer (2004: 517) puts it, 'are perceived to deserve our empathy better than others'. These are generally children, women and elderly people. They are 'seen as helpless in a violent situation and therefore they are more suitable than males in their prime' (Hoijer 2004: 517). Men by contrast are neither innocent nor helpless enough to be deserving of our sympathy.

This notion has been applied to media coverage of natural disasters such as famine, flooding and earthquakes but never to the migrants to developed countries. Yet these may well be the kind of immigrants who end up with more positive coverage from the media. So while women were caricatured by the media 'maternity tourists' it is also significant that a number of the campaigns that have been organised in local communities and aided by local and national media with positive coverage have all involved women or children threatened with deportation. There have been no comparable successful campaigns on behalf of men.

The final shortcoming in this work is the emphasis on the print media and the comparative neglect of television and its coverage of the issue. This is partly explained by the lack of ready access to television archives compared to newspaper ones but the cost is a series of studies that use a limited medium –

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newspapers – as the major source for large-scale statements about racism. There is a further issue here and that is the neglect of the impact of the representations of race and racism in popular television dramas and most notably in soap operas such as *Fair City*. This has introduced a more diverse range of characters to reflect the growing diversity of the society that its viewers live in and it has used story lines about racism, racial attacks and inter-racial relationships that could be considered to be broadly liberal in orientation. While we cannot be sure about their influence on audiences they must be taken into account in any comprehensive study of the media impact on racism, if only because such programmes reach an audience that is a lot more representative of the wider society than that reached by the print media and especially by the self-styled quality broadsheets.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined a number of questions of contemporary concern in the sociology of the mass media and it has looked at how these issues are pertinent to the media coverage of immigration in Ireland. The underlying assumption in this work, and indeed the reason why the media is of interest to sociologists, is the belief that it is the most important social institution for the creation and circulation of reliable and accurate social and political knowledge in society. Yet, ironically of all the statements in this chapter, it is possible to argue that this is the least securely based. As the media diversify in content but become more restricted in ownership, as their relationship to power becomes more contested and as celebrity journalism continues its apparently inexorable rise, there has also been a slow, steady but significant decline in the level of public trust in media output.

The effects of changes in the social and political landscape appear to be a decline in belief in governments and in politicians but also and significantly a decline in trust in the media that report on them. This is an issue that is not being sufficiently addressed in discussions of the media. Increasingly the focus is on technological developments that will, or so the industry claims, fundamentally alter our experiences of the mass media and in particular of television. These developments come in many shapes and sizes but can refer, for example, to whether we will be assessing television through satellite, computer or mobile phones or whether we are receiving a digital picture on a plasma screen or not.

Quite what effects these changes will have remain unclear. It could be argued that many of these developments are technologies of individualism and so will encourage and facilitate social isolation by the nature of the media reception that they encourage. Watching television on a mobile phone does

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not, despite advertising to the contrary, necessarily open opportunities for collective social interaction. Moreover this perspective tends to emphasise the nature of the technology at the expense of a consideration of the content that the technology will be carrying. You may now be watching the news on your mobile phone, but the material has been generated through the same processes as the version that you can see on a conventional television screen.

Thus what is perhaps the most pressing question about the media is being ignored in many contemporary debates. The concern is overwhelmingly with the mode through which we receive information and less with what the media tell us and with whether we believe it or not. In the era of declining trust in public institutions the media have become one of its most significant victims. The reason the powerful may no longer have to worry about the media is the strain of cynicism and indifference that has become the defining characteristic of the modern media audience.