Shock to the System?

Journalism in Irish Public Service Media after the Crash

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Abstract:

The political and economic disjunctures associated with the 2008 financial crisis and the policy responses to it have coincided with the deepening of professional journalism's 'cultural crisis' (Nadler and Vavrus, 2015: 71) of authority and legitimacy, associated with declining public confidence in the hegemonic norms underpinning journalism practice. This paper presents the findings of research undertaken in the newsroom of Ireland's main public service media organisation aimed at exploring the durability of key tenets of journalistic professionalism as its practitioners negotiated the crisis.

In demonstrating evidence from interview testimony of limited editorial responses to crisis, enduring support for dominant professional norms and prevailing practices of representation, inclusion and participation, the findings are suggestive of a broad normative resilience in the face of crisis. Such stability, it is argued, reflects the ideological enmeshment of public service

media and journalistic professionalism within the political and cultural systems of their host

states, but offers few resources for extricating public service journalism from deepening

professional and institutional cultural crises.

Keywords

Public service media, Public service broadcasting, Journalism, Public sphere, Ireland

Introduction

Scholarship on the contemporary crises of Western professional journalism have emphasised

its imperilment by intersecting threats of organisational viability and social relevance. These

arise from, respectively, the increasing fragility of the economic basis supporting institutional

journalism and growing concerns about the efficacy of its regulative role in democratic life.

The economic threat, attributed above all to the rapid evaporation in the internet age of the

advertising subsidy which traditionally sustained the commercial press, has given rise to well-

documented disruptions to the business models and economic sustainability of legacy print and

broadcast news organisations which have brought with them a range of profound consequences

for employment in the profession. Since the mid-2000s, these have included newspaper

closures, smaller newsrooms with lower editorial budgets, broad deteriorations in working

conditions or journalists, declines in investigative and local reporting, and a greater reliance on

'office-bound, derivative journalism' (Curran, 2019: 192, see also McChesney and Pickard,

2010, Preston, 2009).

The second threat- the focus of this paper- entails what Nadler and Vavrus (2015: 71) describe

as journalism's current 'cultural crisis'. This arises from an increasing questioning and

challenging of the 'authority, legitimacy, and norms' of the 'hegemonic Western model' (Nerone, 2013) professional journalism, codified by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956) as the 'social responsibility' model of the press. This 20th century normative ideal of journalism emphasised professional autonomy and committed itself to the 'chief occupational value' (Schudson, 2001) of "objectivity", the moral ideal and set of practices that elevate the possibility and desirability of separating facts from values in reportage. The advent of this normative ethic and professionalisation project also saw journalism pursue a new place in democratic life, orienting away from a prior role as explicitly partisan 'appendages' (Kaplan, 2009: 31) of institutionalised politics toward one that envisaged its core democratic function as impartially providing 'news according to what they as a professional group believe citizens should know' (Schudson, 1998: 136).

Today, professional defences of journalistic authority, autonomy and claims to legitimacy informed by key tenets of this hegemonic normative model are coming 'under siege' (Tumber and Zelizer, 2019) from various quarters, amongst them individual media consumers, political and social movements of the left and right, and illiberal political regimes. Like institutional journalism's economic travails, this new wave of cultural contestation has also been frequently blamed on the internet, particularly owing to its transformative impacts on the range of information sources available to users as well as the many-to-many communicative affordances of the web which have torn down distinctions between producers of media and their audiences.

Growing fears of the political and professional implications of a presumed diminishment of space and appetite in the networked age for journalistically-mediated 'shared public discourses' (Robinson, 2019) have been amplified by the attribution of recent political upheaval in both Western and non-Western democracies to the dynamics of online informational environments. In particular, the election of Donald Trump to the United States presidency and the referendum result in favour of the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union have both been regularly ascribed in significant part to the fragmenting and polarising impacts of online mis/dis-

information and the algorithmically-driven circulation of news and other informational content on social media platforms (Sunstein, 2018). This has prompted a flurry of institutional responses from both media and political institutions (e.g. European Commission, 2018, Dunlop, 2017) attempting to identify means of protecting journalism and political systems from these sources of destabilisation.

In this emphasis on ostensibly novel and exogenous threats, elite narratives emphasising the recent technological undermining of the institutional architecture and discursive norms of the liberal democratic public sphere since the 2010s obscure much. They elide a clear role on the part of large sections of the agenda-setting media- particularly but not exclusively driven by the conservative press in Britain and conservative broadcast media in the United States- in helping bring about those instances of political upheaval.More fundamentally, they obscure the broader aetiology of journalism's cultural crisis, which Hallin (2006) locates within a longer-run erosion of the socio-cultural and political-economic conditions which sustained its hegemonic normative model. Such changes, generalisable to varying degrees beyond the US context on which Hallin focused, included the radical restructuring of media industries, the rise of forms of various tabloid and hyper-partisan journalisms, the ideological hegemony of neoliberalism, declines in public confidence in institutions, as well as increasing challenges to the professions and the rise of social movements. Hallin argues that these pre-internet age developments undercut confidence and credibility in core tenets of 'high modernism' journalistic professionalism, particularly the conceptual tenability of the journalist standing above and dispassionately mediating between reconcilable political divisions in the service of a unitary public interest.

In this spirit, this paper takes as its subject matter the implications for professional journalism's normative model raised by a set of antecedent events to the political turmoil of the mid-2010s- what Sum and Jessop (2013) term the 'North Atlantic financial crisis' (NAFC) of 2008. It is suggested that as the crash and ensuing Great Recession represented a crisis within the post-WWII compact of 'democratic capitalism' (Streeck, 2011), it implies, too, a critical juncture in

hegemonic professional journalism's long-run cultural crisis. This is so in part because of the symmetries between the general dynamics of capitalist crisis and of contemporary trends in media industries including overproduction, monopolisation and financialisation and their many impacts on the practice of journalism (see Silke, 2015 for a discussion). It is also because of the political dynamics of crisis, specifically the democratic and social consequences of the shock to the neoliberal political-economic order in 2008 yet its subsequent survival as a 'dead but dominant' 'zombie neoliberalism' (Peck, 2010: 108) shaping disciplinary and post-democratic (Macartney, 2013) regimes of crisis management within nation states and at supranational level. Rather than precipitating a crisis *of* neoliberalism, opening up political and discursive space for alternative economic paradigms, the 'blowback neoliberalism' (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 436) that followed the NAFC has acted as a powerful accelerant of the secular trends (Mair, 2006) of deepening democratic disenchantment within European polities and implicated in processes of social fracture and polarisation. This has contributed to phenomena such as citizen withdrawal from electoral politics and the spawning of politically heterogenous populisms and oppositional movements (Streeck, 2011, Honneth, 2014), although it is the far right which has succeeded in many nations to a much greater degree in capitalising electorally on the decline of the political centre.

The threat to the authority of professional journalism represented by the NAFC, its aftershocks and political responses are manifold. In particular, the deepening of legitimacy deficits within political systems and the widening of political, economic and social cleavages may be seen as further eroding the consensual ground on which its normative model relies. Further, the democratic regressions associated with the 'coercive nationalisation of a systemic capitalist crisis' (Fenton and Titley, 2015: 560) served to cast into sharper relief the pro-hegemonic impact of news media's ideological and material imbrication in networks of economic and political power and the consequent "indexing" (Bennett, 1990) of objectivity and impartiality in practice to the parameters of elite opinion. This, alongside the crisis of political representation,

also challenges journalism's investment in the 'established political mythology' (Burns, 1999:

180) of elite liberal democracy.

Public service media and the crisis

For public service media, the institutional and empirical focus of this paper, the more

generalised challenges to the hegemonic normative model of journalistic professionalism

presented by the post-2008 political, economic and cultural order are compounded and

complicated by threats and challenges to contemporary relevance and institutional legitimacy

that are distinctive to that media-institutional form.

As exemplars *par excellence* of the social responsibility model of journalism (Christians, Glasser

and McQuail, 2009: 10), particularly in "liberal-type" media systems like that of the Republic of

Ireland (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 198)**,** national public service media organisations may be

seen as having a pronounced exposure to professional journalism's cultural crisis but

possessing limited room to respond effectively to it.

The crisis of 2008 and its aftermath , and the political, economic and socio-cultural cleavages it

has widened and helped visibilise particularly challenges the liberal normative model

underpinning the public service institutional and journalistic ethos in part as they strain its ability

to plausibly discharge its traditional role as a 'centripetal, socially integrative force' (Blumler,

1992: 11). Diminishing value consensus and deepening democratic dislocations also complicate

and challenge the plausibility of PSM's claim to be able to dispassionately moderate the

national political public sphere in the service of democracy itself. This increasingly exposes the

ideological content of its consensualist orientation to politics (Schlesinger, 1979: 164) and of

liberalism's 'illusion of pluralism without antagonism' (Panizza, 2005: 28) more generally.

Beyond the challenges posed by the political dynamics of crisis, dramatically intensified global

competition for audiences and revenue in the digital age, subjection to neoliberalising structural

reforms (Steemers, 1999: 50) and political instrumentalisation in liberal and illiberal European states (Llorens, 2019) have cast into increasingly sharp relief the survival imperative of renewed, effective strategies of institutional legitimation for PSM.

Yet, as 'creatures ultimately of the state' (Blumler, 1992: 12), the prospects of PSM organisations effecting a normative shift commensurate to its present challenges appear weak. This is in significant part due to the structural and normative tethering of PSM's democratic imaginary to what Schlesinger (1979: 167) described in the British context as nothing less than its core 'constitutional role': the valourisation, even veneration of the parliamentary state, its prevailing ideologies and its central agents, in which the 'system of formal representation through political parties' (Ferree et al., 2002: 290) is upheld through the discursive and representative practices of PSM journalism.

The state's retention of legislative and regulatory control of the parameters which govern the expression of normativity in the news and current affairs output of PSM organisations as well as its control of the funding arrangements and competitive contexts in which PSM organisations operate together grant it a range of powerful tools to incentivise institutional adherence to that constitutional role. This means that PSM organisations, despite enjoying a significant measure of formal institutional autonomy, are in no small measure 'constrained to prudence' (Blumler, 1992: 13). These are constraints that are heightened in periods of national crisis in which their discursive functions are subject to increased surveillance by the state (Scannell, 1990: 24).

Public service media in the Irish public sphere

The specificities of public service broadcasting in Ireland and the broader public sphere and socio-political contexts in which it is embedded exemplify many of these tensions and constraints. The enduring role and influence of the main English-language national public service broadcasting organisation, Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) as a key institutional former of

collective identity, mediator of political life and narrator of the Irish modernisation process (e.g. McLoone, 1991: 14, Corcoran, 2004: 1, Bowman, 2011) has been frequently noted in the Irish literature, and is indicative of the broadcaster's significant power to shape public understandings of political and economic crisis in post-2008 Ireland.

The national socio-political context in which this power is discharged, however, is characterised by an unusually consensual political culture (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 240) and a 'strictly representative, clientelistic and elitist' (O'Mahony, 2011: 93) democratic culture. Indeed, reflecting the historical dominance of centre-right political forces in Ireland and the influence of their ideological projects, the Irish public sphere has been characterised as generally in thrall to the hegemony of economic rationalism (Coakley, 2012: 161) and colonised by administrative power and economic actors (O'Mahony, 2011: 93). In the context of a local media environment characterised by a broadly politically conservative, highly professionalised, middle-class oriented press (Truetzschler, 2004: 116), Browne (2004, 2018) has emphasised the record of large sections of the Irish media in sowing consent to the hegemonic political-economic order and when necessary repressing dissent against it.

The extent to which Irish public service broadcast journalism plays an ideologically distinct role within the national media system has been a matter of some scholarly debate. Orlik (1976: 471) has pointed to the influence of the Irish press on RTÉ journalism, from which the broadcaster traditionally drew large numbers of personnel as well as daily news agendas. In his empirical study, Devereux (1998) described a pervasive middle-class institutional culture as influential in the ideological character of RTÉ journalism, arguing that its coverage of poverty and inequality has tended to uphold and obscure the power relations that sustained structural inequities in Irish life. More celebratory accounts of RTÉ journalism and its programming more generally have tended to emphasise the role of public service radio and television- particularly in its earlier decades- in significantly contributing to social liberalisation in Ireland, including but not limited to

the expansion of secularism and broadening of discourses around public and private morality (Farrell, 1984: 116, Bowman, 2011: 227-229).

Although RTÉ has been an exemplar of the 'formally autonomous' (Kelly, 1983) model of institutional public broadcasting governance since its modern establishment as a combined radio and television public service broadcasting organisation in the early 1960s, its history offers ample illustration of the formative and constraining influences of state power on formerly directly state-run media. Murphy (2008: 67-68) has described the endurance of an ideological struggle between RTÉ's 'identity and practice as a national, cultural institution reflecting the catholic (and later, consumerist) values of the state or as a public informational broadcaster reflecting the UK and continental leaning towards a liberal pluralist public sphere'. Golding and Elliot (1979: 61) described RTÉ's relationship with the state as based on the 'tacit exchange of autonomy for responsibility', with a significant body of literature providing evidence for the readiness of successive Irish governments to enforce that implicit understanding of the boundaries of the broadcaster's role (Orlik, 1976: 469). Sometimes this has been enforced by culturally and materially imprinting the broadcaster with the state's authorised developmental ideologies through measures like an enforced reliance- exceptional in European terms- on commercial revenue (PwC, 2013: 14), in addition to frequent subjection to neoliberalising structural reforms (Murray, 2011). Other forms of political influence have been aimed more directly at RTÉ's journalistic operations, with the literature replete with accounts of various forms of state steering- particularly during times of political exigency- up to and including legislative reprisals against its editorial independence (Corcoran, 2004, Horgan, 2004, Corcoran and O'Brien, 2005).

Despite the structural constraints outlined here, there is strong analytic value in probing how the crisis in neoliberalism impacted- or did not impact- the theory and practice of professional journalism in Irish public service media. This is partly because of the social significance of journalistically-legitimated constructions of crisis and the always contingent and porous nature

of cultural hegemony (Kellner, 1990: 16). Further, the journalistic occupational field remains a semi-autonomous one, which '*refracts* rather than simply reflects the play of external forces' (Benson, 2006: 196). Hallin and Mancini (2004: 236) suggest in their discussion on the extent of the relative autonomy enjoyed by the BBC that 'the most important political limits on broadcasting are to be found not in political intervention from outside, but within the community of broadcasting professionals, in their commitment [to] a centrist, consensualist view of "responsible" professional broadcasting', a view echoed in Golding and Elliott's (1979: 62) analysis of Irish public service broadcast professionals. Elsewhere, research on journalistic role performance has demonstrated and emphasised that journalistic norms and cultures are not fixed and immutable but situationally contextualised, socially constructed and renegotiated over time (Mellado et al., 2020: 4).

Lastly, better understanding the extent of durability of the norms underpinning professional practice at a time of political and economic crisis contributes to understanding 'the margins available for intervention, resistance, and the renewal of journalistic practices' (Neveu, 2005: 206) in the context of journalism's own cultural crises.

The remainder of this paper contributes an empirical exploration based on contemporaneous primary research of how journalists and editorial management at RTÉ perceived the implications of the crisis for their professional practice and the democratic functions of public service media.

Methodology and research context

The three-month period of fieldwork at RTÉ's Dublin headquarters between April and July 2012 coincided with a new phase of the long aftermath of the post-2008 economic collapse in Ireland. Though a coalition of the centre-right Fine Gael and centre-left Labour parties had been in

governmental office for a year and were beginning to tout the first signs of "green shoots" as narratives of economic recovery were beginning to pick up steam, Ireland remained mired in the fallout from the crash. Unemployment levels remained amongst the EU's highest, and the state was still more than eighteen months out from the completion of a EU, IMF and World Bank bailout programme of strict economic supervision agreed in 2010. Total fiscal retrenchment in response to the crisis would by 2015 amount to almost one fifth of Irish gross domestic product pre-2008 (Mercille and Murphy, 2015: 82).

On the continent, what became known as the Euro debt crisis, described by Picard (2015: 1) as entailing 'the most significant challenge to European integration in 60 years', was escalating in severity, with the fieldwork period also occasioned by an Irish constitutional referendum on consolidating the Eurozone's economic governance (the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union) which took place in May.

The period of fieldwork also coincided with a time when RTÉ was not simply discursively preoccupied with crisis but institutionally enveloped by it. Years of sharp deterioration in the commercial revenues on which the broadcaster depended had prompted an increasingly severe internal austerity drive, resulting in sweeping organisational restructuring and swingeing cuts to pay, resources and organisational headcount. By the end of the year, staffing would fall by a full fifth compared to 2008 levels and operating costs cut by a quarter over the same period (RTÉ, 2013: 13).

Interviews were carried out on-site in and around the RTÉ newsroom during the fieldwork period as part of the author's doctoral research project. The fieldwork additionally entailed ethnographic observations of newsroom editorial processes (see Cullinane, 2016 for an account). From a combination of convenience and purposive sampling, a total of 32 interviews were arranged and completed with journalists and programme editors working in RTÉ's News and Current Affairs division as well as personnel in senior editorial and management roles inside and outside the newsroom. Interviews were semi-structured in nature, allowing for the

deeper exploration of emergent issues and topical areas with question schedules tailored in part to the occupational specialism of the interviewee as well as responding to new areas of inquiry as the period of ethnographic observation in the newsroom progressed.

Reflecting the research aim of interrogating self-conceptions of journalistic professionalism in PSM at a time of crisis, question topics for all interviewees focused on three meta-themes: journalistic understandings of and responses to exogenous and endogenous institutional, political, economic crises; perspectives on the contemporary democratic adequacy of RTÉ's public service remit, its place in the State, and the professional norms which underpin its mediation of the national political public sphere; and views on professional accountability and public participation. In exploring professional perspectives on the journalistic voice, the power relations impacting journalism and approaches to audiences, these meta-themes overlap substantially with Mellado's (2015) three core conceptual domains of professional journalistic role performance.

Following manual transcription of recorded interviews, interview data was imported into the Nvivo qualitative data analysis software, after which two rounds of inductive coding of all transcribed data were undertaken. Seven broad topical categories were first identified through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of interview material at the level of individual question responses, comprising: RTÉ and the crisis; RTE and the public; internal and external influences on RTÉ journalism; news content; journalistic norms and practices; funding and commercial imperatives; and RTÉ and politics. A second round of inductive coding was then undertaken with individual sentences as the unit of analysis, facilitating the identification of finer thematic patterns within an expanded set of thirty-one sub-topics.

 An illustrative subset of interview data now follows, anonymised as appropriate and covering areas relevant to all three meta-themes.

Findings

Covering the crisis

RTÉ's performance in anticipating the 2008 economic crisis arose in several interviews, with failings tending to be admitted in the abstract but mixed with a certain pride that warnings were nonetheless heard on its airwaves. A senior member of station management involved in editorial policy suggested in this vein that 'RTÉ has actually had quite a good record […] in pointing out, along the way, that what was happening was dangerous', but that within the Irish media as a whole, 'there wasn't sufficient interrogation about the possibility that it was a bubble…that there was going to be a crash...'

While acknowledging that '[w]e probably missed out on' critics of the prevailing economic orthodoxy, a senior journalist suggested that dissenting voices- or at least, voices deemed sufficiently credible- simply weren't there for RTÉ to find. They questioned their 'locus standi' to secure journalistic interest and suggested that those who did speak out 'probably did it in sufficiently muted terms for them not to be heard'.

Asked about whether the crisis had engendered a change in editorial practices, the same journalist said that in general the crisis has not occasioned significant changes in programme guest selection, saying that 'in terms of having a black book of people you can't use or wouldn't use, there wouldn't be many names in it'.

A senior manager in the newsroom similarly expressed the view in relation to 'minority or dissenting voices getting heard' that 'I don't think that [the crisis] has changed it one way or the other'. Another experienced journalist suggested, however, that they have observed a greater reliance on in-house journalistic expertise on news programmes as a consequence of the decline of authority of at least some forms of external expertise, saying that 'politics and finance

has become very discredited' and that 'if you put a stockbroker on the television and interviewed them […] you'll get emails and phone calls complaining'.

For some senior figures, particularly in the newsroom, severe doubt was expressed over the idea that the crisis presented a significant challenge to journalistic practices. A senior member of newsroom management described the contexts of crisis as simply 'another element of the story', and that

> …the business of...of news is much the same, whether, you know, society is collapsing all around you, or, whether it's a time of...you know, peace and plenty and everything's fairly straightforward.

A senior news editor similarly rejected the idea that the current crises represent a particular problem for journalism beyond the quotidian challenges of news production, suggesting that questions of whether the crisis required a problematisation of dominant economic orthodoxies were concerns best left 'to the philosophers' rather than journalists and that they must dedicate their time and effort to 'dealing with the news of today'.

Others were often less certain about how well equipped they were to meet the challenges of making sense of events for their audiences. One journalist described 'struggling each day to try and stay abreast of what was going on' and another spoke about feeling 'at sea' when the banking collapse occurred, likening it to 'looking up and seeing up this landscape that you thought was fixed and permanent has just sort of melted, contorted, and completely changed'. Some interviewees identified internal and external constraints of different kinds that helped induce an enhanced journalistic caution in response to crisis. One journalist pointed to a chilling effect engendered by the political constraints within which RTÉ operated, suggesting that

> …to be blunt we're under a certain constraint, because sometimes the political system eh, doesn't like to hear...eh...the reality of what's happening, and em...and if they hear

things , they started to take it out on RTÉ because they feel we're certainly the punchbag, the ball that can be kicked around…

They further suggested that parties of government were not shy, either in the past or present, about contacting RTÉ management to express displeasure about reportage. This meant that 'we do walk sometimes on eggshells in here', and that as a consequence, journalists needed to avoid becoming 'exposed' to potential blowback. Another journalist described such external political 'pressures' as 'quite significant'.

One journalist suggested that RTÉ's capacity to apportion responsibility for aspects of the crisis was legally constrained by the fact that 'nobody has been charged or convicted of any offence in relation to the...collapse of the country'. This means that while

…everybody knows that millions have been lost through the financial collapse, but that doesn't mean that I can go up with a microphone to named individuals and say you're a crook, you know? You can't do that!

Several interviewees reported a keen sense of external pressure and surveillance of RTÉ's performance, including a journalist who reported being 'acutely conscious' of the critique that RTÉ was 'damaging the national psyche' and even 'deepening the crisis' through its reportage, and a senior member of station management who commented that the Irish business lobby were actively pressuring the broadcaster to be more positive in its editorial output, in the interests of boosting national morale.

Another journalist pointed to internal constraints in the newsroom, suggesting the existence of 'a pressure, almost invisible pressure' to go along with a 'dominant narrative' on economic recovery. This was described as 'pressure on me as a journalist to kind of go with the good news…' which they said they have personally 'resisted', adding that it is difficult to 'get other voices on' because 'people who […] don't share that narrative are seen as oddballs'.

Queried on whether they felt they had a role in contributing to post-crisis narratives of national recovery, many however responded in the vein of one journalist who said that they didn't feel 'the need to be Pollyanna' or to 'sugar coat what is…an awful situation at the moment in this country'.

Interviewees reported that what one senior manager described as 'our private economic crisis' has been consequential in terms of morale- with cuts to remuneration described by a journalist as a 'tsunami of cutting people's lives apart'- but also with impacts for RTÉ's journalism. Senior members of newsroom management noted that cuts of around 20% meant, as one put it, 'much less room for discretionary action than we would've had before'. Another journalist disclosed that with resource reductions cutting 'to the bone', the money required for 'extended research and investigation...just isn't there', making it harder for journalists to get away from the daily news cycle and pursue other kinds of stories.

Professional norms and journalism

When queried on their views on the enduring relevance of the norms of objectivity, impartiality and balance, respondents tended to express unqualified support, viewing them as timeless lodestars guiding and justifying professional practice. This was exemplified by a senior newsroom manager who described them as the 'vital' heart of PSM, the guarantor of public trust in its journalism and 'what differentiates public service broadcasting from all the other sources that are out there'. Journalists themselves spoke of the journalistic disposition towards objectivity and impartiality as, variously, 'natural', 'essential', and that journalists shouldn't see them as 'constraints', with the removal of personal agendas identified by multiple journalists as a key component of the practical expression of these professional norms.

However, many interviewees expressed a more negotiated support for these professional norms. This was articulated in a number of ways, including a recognition by a senior member of station management that objectivity and impartiality were best seen in aspirational terms, as ideals to be striven for 'even if you recognise that it is not achievable' and more commonly by other interviewees who viewed their application as reconcilable with more explicitly normative journalistic roles, particularly a "watchdog" role in which power was held to account. One journalist identified this as the 'essence' of public service broadcasting, involving 'explaining, challenging, holding to account...and taking...the story forward, into its next steps'. Another commented on how a watchdog role was compatible with these norms, as long as one remains 'fact-based' and doesn't 'editorialise or give opinion […] cos that's not my job'. This reconciliation appeared to be founded on a reluctance to view journalistic norms as straightforwardly codifiable. This was exemplified by the comment of a senior newsroom manager who suggested that the "rules" of impartiality, balance and objectivity are important but were complemented and moderated by a broader professional ethic, reliant on instinct and experience accrued over time:

> Obviously certain elements of science are applied to it, but...but most journalist calls are based on […] experience and based on a feel for what is the right thing to do at that moment in time...

This was illustrated by other journalists, one of whom spoke about how 'you kind of operate on a gut instinct', and another who suggested that good journalism is about having a 'moral compass', with both identifying 'fairness' as a quality emerging from the individual rather than the application of a rulebook.

A few, however, offered a critical account of objectivity beyond negotiated support. One journalist offered the view that impartiality and balance are desirable values, but objectivity may not be, because it would inhibit journalism as a catalyst for change- that journalism 'can break a consensus, question it […] pose problems which are implicit but can make those explicit' and that 'there is no value-free journalism'.

Another offered the view that cardinal values of professional journalism tended to be invoked as a disciplinary tool and would 'only ever be really used when they're thrown…used against you', particularly where errant journalists 'step outside of the […] dominant narrative'.

Another suggested that on occasion, the 'constraints' of fairness and objectivity inhibited truth-telling, suggesting that '[s]ometimes it's not really our position given the constraints on us about fairness and objectivity to actually say that something is a pile of shite'.

Most critically, a current affairs journalist described the word objectivity as 'a bit idiotic […] in current affairs, and maybe even more insidiously in news', because it erroneously implies that journalist approach an issue with no perspective which would go on to shape their work.

Interviewees tended to take the view that conventional news values and professional norms meant that as one journalist put it, when it came to proactively raising issues within news journalism, 'you can't go too far off the radar'. Journalists and managers alike cited the restrictions of professional ethics, legislative constraints, news genres, and audience expectations as reasons why advocacy or campaigning journalism was not usually appropriate or possible. Two editors suggested that a more campaigning approach to journalism was only possible in RTÉ on issues within the boundaries of broad political and cultural consensus, what one described as 'righting wrongs that are obviously wrong' such as child poverty.

The politics of mediated representation

With the referendum campaign for the European Fiscal Compact Treaty ongoing, interviewees were frequently scathing in their criticism of what was widely perceived as unwelcome and unhelpful external interference arising from the Irish legal context shaping the organisation and discursive mediation of competing sides in referendum campaigns. Particular ire was reserved for the implications of the Irish Supreme Court's ruling in the 1998 Coughlan v. Broadcasting Complaints Commission case which was seen as forcing RTÉ to grant equal broadcast airtime to those campaigning for and against constitutional amendments (see Barrett, 2011).

One journalist saw this as a direct affront to their professionalism, describing as 'prescriptive nonsense' the idea of giving trained staff the 'donkey task' of

> …literally having a stopwatch in either hand, one is yes and one is no, and they spend entire programmes clicking on and off in order to try and reach exact balance, when we do that over the course of the range of programmes anyway. […] We are very very good at, eh, ensuring equal access to the airwaves

More than simply a 'daft' bureaucratic burden, it was one which journalists described, variously, as resulting in 'tainted' coverage or which even 'distorts our political process'. This was explained by a journalist who felt that according equal time to both sides in a context where the political mainstream was almost unanimous in its support for the relevant treaty severed the legitimate, proportional link between the extent of parliamentary representation and coverage subsequently accorded. An editor suggested that granting airtime to those 'who have little or no...mandate' is problematic because 'in striving for balance, you're actually distorting the picture'.

Much of the frustration appeared to centre around the fact that the equal time rule was what one journalist described as a 'godsend to Sinn Féin', the chief party-political beneficiary of broadcast time allocation on the No side- even to the extent that a senior member of station management said that there was a need to find non-parliamentary voices on the No side to ensure that Sinn Féin wouldn't 'totally dominate' debate.

For some interviewees at least, this objection wasn't merely rooted in concerns about representational balance in programming but in substantive impacts on the integrity of the referendum and RTÉ's mediation of it by having to provide access to the public airwaves to an expanded range of actors opposing the ratification of the Treaty. In this vein, one journalist expressed frustration about 'handing the debate over to people who don't want to debate what should be debated', while another suggested that some of those suddenly granted airtime abuse the privilege by seeking to deceive the electorate, warning of the dangers of allowing 'extraneous issues' from people with 'very specific agendas', a lot of whom 'don't know what they're talking about'- yet, 'we have to let them say it'.

On the broader question of RTÉ's posture toward the representational legitimacy of including extra-parliamentary political voices outside election time- including those of citizens at large, interviewees tended to once again emphasise the centrality of parliament as the basis of accruing legitimacy. A senior journalist on this topic suggested that 'to be taken seriously… […] you can't beat an electoral mandate', and that the outcome of elections is the clearest guide to RTÉ in determining who should be asked on to programmes as political actors. This journalist added that in any case, they were 'not sure that there's a whole lot of new voices out there offering anything'.

One editor suggested in strong terms that it is not RTÉ's job to represent the carriers of political ideas which have not proved to be 'credible', and that RTÉ must first of all reflect the existing electorally-validated balance of perspectives, primarily as established at the ballot box:

…show me the alternative idea that has not had the airtime and show me the alternative

idea that has not had airtime but remains credible. […] do we necessarily have to

represent the communists and the neo-nazis just because...you know, for the sake of

political debate? Actually, no, we don't...nor should we. If they want to put themselves

forward for an election and get a mandate, by all means…

A senior journalist expressed the view that extra-parliamentary voices are given due coverage

when necessary, but that their lack of 'democratic legitimacy' meant that they were not afforded

the sort of status Dáil parties rightfully enjoyed. Noting that 'they're not taken particularly

seriously by RTÉ, and I wouldn't really have a problem with that', they said that ultimately, when

it comes to determining 'how seriously should we take some dude with a bull-horn outside the

gates of Leinster House' [the Irish parliament], that 'it's with the numbers', preferably in the form

of an electoral mandate.

A number of interviewees were more ambivalent or even critical of RTÉ's representational

practices. One current affairs journalist demurred from the consensus around parliamentary

numbers as the legitimate basis for determining media access, suggesting that allocating

coverage to parties based on past electoral performance was the 'most anti-change thing we

do' and an 'utterly pro-incumbent' practice, particularly in a changing political climate. One

senior journalist cited the example of a campaign group against the nationalisation of banking

debt as an example of 'a very interesting piece of local defiance' of the kind that should have a

greater place in RTÉ programming, additionally expressing a wariness of the extent of access

given to 'official Ireland' on the public airwaves. Another suggested that in light of what they saw

as a sense of disenfranchisement and collapse of trust in institutions among sections of the

population engendered by the crisis, 'we're supposed to be reflecting that society, and I don't think we're reflecting the society now'.

Two interviewees drew attention to the backgrounds of journalists in sustaining a pro-incumbent philosophy to representation. A member of senior station management suggested that 'the criteria by which people are given access' to the public airwaves was heavily influenced by the traditionalism of people who tended to become senior in the organisation and who looked to the parliamentary process as the locus of political life. A journalist suggested that weaknesses in representational diversity in media output was directly related to a diminished diversity in the journalistic cohort, noting

> …the danger is that we're all terribly middle class […] and the diversity and the texture and the difference that we had in journalism in the past is being lost. And you see that then in maybe a failure to realise there are other voices out there that should be heard...

RTÉ's long-established "access" radio phone-in programme *Liveline* was spontaneously raised by several interviewees as a programme that operated on the basis of a radically different representational mode than news and current affairs programming. Describing *Liveline* as 'really the only unmediated programme on RTÉ', a senior station manager commented that the agendas of *Liveline* contributors are '…significantly at times quite different at times from what is perceived to be the public agenda', and that it may be seen as facilitating a quasi-public discursive space, in which issues raised '…sometimes […] can move from there into the bigger wider public sphere'. Another editor identified the '*Liveline* effect' as a critical part of a chain of action which allowed the public to use RTÉ to raise issues and agitate for causes.

News programming, on the other hand, must restrict itself to what one journalist described as 'legitimate' voices. Limited representative diversity was justified on grounds of what were

perceived as settled audience expectations of who constitutes a sufficiently validated voice to appear on live news programming, as well as expediency in the context of tight timelines for programme production, militating against the use of untested contributors. As one journalist put it, '…it's all very well to talk about diverse voices and bringing in people from the margins and so on' but that '[Y]ou can't...put someone on air who is not ready...who has never done it'.

Knowing their place: the 'public' in public service media

Interviewees were asked for their views on the desirability of transparency and public participation measures including editors' online blogs, public editors, media response programmes, as well public involvement in programme commissioning.

A common theme emerging from interviews, particularly evident among senior editorial figures, was that the public should be kept at a healthy distance from any encroachment on journalistic autonomy. When asked whether journalists are sufficiently equipped to- or should be tasked with- the sole responsibility of deciding which voices and ideas are granted access to the public airwaves, a senior station manager said that 'I'd be nervous about..any..scheme.. […] which actually imposes greater...eh, restraint on broadcasters' and that calls for 'greater scrutiny of RTÉ' must be resisted because

> You have to trust your public service broadcaster to be fair in determining what sort of subject matter will be discussed on the programmes we report etc. […] I think you have to allow journalism its space, and sometimes that space may be misused, but..eh, I think generally speaking, that is a lesser...problem, than the alternative, which is

actually somebody else telling journalists what is the news and what are the stories they should be covering.

When asked about the desirability of involving the public in programming decisions, this interviewee went on to express both normative and practical doubts, suggesting that 'if you allow a degree of democracy to creep in to determining who are editors', editorial behaviour would inevitably descend into a popularity contest and 'you increase the likelihood of pandering to prejudice rather than challenging prejudice'.

For several other interviewees, including an editor and a senior correspondent, direct public involvement in influencing journalistic content is undesirable for the similar reason that it would result in dumbed down journalism- what one editor described as 'happy clappy stories about […] stuff happening in their communities'. Another editor portended the arrival of interminable 'Big Brother style television' should the public get a say in journalist output.

One editor adopted a firm line against any dilution of autonomy, arguing that just as people 'don't go into...a shop and tell the shopkeeper what to do', journalists are 'paid professionals' whose practice should not be subject to direct public oversight.

The strongest resistance of any interviewee was expressed by a senior news editor who dismissed out of hand the idea that the public should have a greater involvement in RTÉ News, going so far as to say that they 'resist' ideas that involve the solicitation of public views in determining what news should be. Focus groups, for examples, should 'buzz off', and that 'corporate RTÉ' may do as it pleases regarding audience involvement, but that is 'their business'.

Some interviewees saw pragmatic merit in stronger participative relationships between RTÉ and its publics, so long as, as one editor put it, this did not involve RTÉ being 'driven by the public'. In this vein, speaking in relation to the desirability of a broadcast media response programme,

one journalist suggested that such an initiative might 'help…dispose of and deal with things that could potentially fester into complaints', enabling the public to 'understand better' and for journalists to 'articulate and explain' their decision-making.

Interviewees espoused mixed opinions on the health and adequacy of RTÉ's broader relationships with its publics. One journalist noted that the internal practice of personally responding to all direct public contacts rendered RTÉ meaningfully responsive to the public- that contrary to what 'most people' thought, they are not an 'untouchable' caste of 'D4 broadcasters' (a reference to the upmarket South Dublin postcode where RTÉ is headquartered). The idea that RTÉ journalists are already responsive and accountable to the public in important ways was voiced by other interviewees, many of whom expressed pride in strong personal connections with the public in the form of family, friends and direct feedback received from audiences. One editor suggested that RTÉ are 'utterly accountable in terms of boards, authorities, viewers, etc.', a view echoed by a senior newsroom manager who described RTÉ as 'pretty transparent' and 'open about what we do despite...opinions to the contrary'. A senior journalist emphasised that audiences developed relationships with RTÉ mediated through individual programmes and personalities rather than via formal institutional means.

Several expressed concerns about ambivalent public attitudes to RTÉ, including a senior newsroom manager who spoke of a sense that 'people regard RTÉ as part of the establishment' and a small number who voiced anxieties about the longer-term implications of what they saw as worrying trends and disparities in RTÉ's relevance and reach along socio-economic, geographical and cultural lines.

Others alluded to problems of perception regarding the accountability and responsiveness of RTÉ to the public, including one journalist who suggested that from the public's point of view, it looks

…wholly unsatisfactory that the only real methods by which I could make RTÉ

accountable are to take a BAI [the Irish broadcasting regulator] complaint, which is a

very very flawed process, from everybody's point of view, or to go to the courts

Another senior journalist went as far as to describe journalism as 'the last sort of unchallenged

institution in the State':

…you've seen the authority of the church, the authority of the political parties, the

authority of the State, the authority of the banks, the authority of some of the

regulators...all of them challenged in really fundamental ways in the last decade,

decade and a half, and yet the media not so much

They added that 'apart from the libel laws, there's very little comeback for people' and that

'[j]ournalists really don't like getting questioned, or challenged, and maybe it's time that more of

us were. And not just in RTÉ'.

Discussion

The interview data paints a mixed picture of the impacts of political and economic crisis on

journalism in RTÉ by the time of the fieldwork in 2012. It reveals sometimes significant

measures of disruption and dissonance engendered by the crisis in terms of the exposure of

journalists' own knowledge gaps, a partial discrediting of some sources of external expertise, a

degree of ambivalence around the implications of internal and external constraints shaping their

practice and uncertainty around the adequacy of professional and institutional relationships with the broader public. On the whole, however, interview data suggested that political and economic crisis had occasioned only a generally limited disturbance to core norms and practices of professional journalism in RTÉ.

This is illustrated by the key findings of limited post-crisis editorial responses; broad if sometimes negotiated support for key prevailing professional norms and institutional ideologies; backing for a view of the political public sphere as principally a support system for institutionalised politics; and a general upholding of PSM's minimalist traditions of public participation (Lowe, 2010) in the interests of quality and maintaining professional autonomy. These findings provide evidence and rationales for the relative stability of key 'hegemonic nodal points' (Carpentier, 2005) of the journalism professional in public service media, including the objectivity norm, professional elitism and autonomy. They also help clarify the variegated and nuanced ways in which journalistic epistemologies are understood and operationalised in practice (Cottle, 2007: 11) within a public service context.

Such findings are congruent with and help illuminate some of the key findings of critical empirical international scholarship on the journalistic mediation of political and economic crisis since 2008. This literature has identified clear affinities and alignments between journalistic crisis and recovery 'imaginaries' (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 297) and those of political and economic elites (Curran, 2019).

European scholarly analyses of print and broadcast media (both commercial and of a public service orientation) have demonstrated and explored how journalistic output in the period around and since the crisis has lent ideological ballast to the re-legitimation of neoliberal governmentality via favourable sourcing, agenda-setting and framing practices as well as through the elision of the democratic implications- and human costs- of neoliberal programs of crisis remediation (e.g. Picard, 2015, Berry, 2019, Basu, Schifferes and Knowles, 2018).

Irish research has provided illustrations of these dynamics during different phases of the crisis. Rafter's (2014: 606) account of sourcing practices during the height of the banking crisis which found a dominance of elite business sources on the public and private airwaves at the height of the banking crisis pointed to their status as central definers of the unfolding events. Fahy et al.'s (2010) exploratory interviews with financial journalists indicated an acknowledgement that close source relationships within elite networks particularly during the pre-crisis "Celtic Tiger" period of Irish economic growth had contributed to limited sourcing practices and uncritical reporting on economic issues. McCullagh (2010) argues that this heightened access was effectively parlayed into a 'discursive fightback' by financial and political elites who through the print and broadcast media helped effect a reframing of the causes of crisis- and consequently the spectrum of possible solutions- in ways congruent with their material interests and ideological projects. Subsequent content, framing and discourse analyses of agenda-setting Irish media later found substantial evidence for the amplification and legitimation of neoliberal policy responses to crisis, including the socialization of private banking debts and the implementation of large fiscal consolidation programs (e.g. Cawley, 2012, Mercille, 2014, Silke, 2015). Later, Coulter, Arqueros-Fernández and Nagle (2019) emphasised the ideological work performed by major Irish and international media in advancing pro-hegemonic narratives of Ireland as a "poster child" of economic recovery in the dual contexts of domestic and regional economic shocks. This was further empirically illustrated in Cullinane's (2018) framing analysis of coverage of key phases of the Euro debt crisis which implicated Irish public service broadcast journalism in aligning itself with the Irish state's crisis management strategy by legitimising the deployment of anti-democratic disciplinary neoliberalism in Europe's periphery.

This paper has illustrated some of the means by which these ideological tendencies in media content are underpinned by the discharge and endurance of hegemonic public service journalistic norms. These include the effacement of the democratic implications of the crisis, the

upholding of pro-incumbent logics of sourcing, agenda-setting and accrual of representative legitimacy, and the valourisation of professional authority and autonomy from the public as a key guarantor of PSM values. These findings suggest the explanatory value of studies of professional normativity and role performance that explore the dynamics of change and resilience in response to specific changes in the political-economic and socio-cultural contexts in which journalistic work is undertaken (Mellado et al., 2020: 19).

The picture of relative normative stability indicated here is also congruent with the testimonies of senior editorial figures from major Irish media outlets, including RTÉ, to the Irish parliamentary inquiry into the banking collapse in Ireland in 2015, which as Rafter (2017) has argued betrayed little sense either of recognition of any specific editorial failures prior to the crash or changes instituted subsequently.

Normative resilience in context

Such normative resilience in the face of systemic economic and political crisis may be understood as emerging from factors internal and external to journalistic professionalism. Partly, it reflects the broader normative regulation of public service media by the state. In particular, it highlights the manner in which legislative provisions mandating journalistic impartiality and objectivity acquire contextual meaning, practical applicability, and ideological force from within the confines of an existing set of values (Schlesinger, 1979: 164) and are particularly informed by 'root assumptions about legitimate political contentions shared by government and broadcasters alike' (Golding and Elliot, 1979: 62).

It is worth recognising here that the founding ethos of 'public service *in the national interest',* as Scannell (1990: 23-24, italics in original) notes, reflected a journalistic rapprochement with state power and its political systems. The bourgeois character of those systems was described by

Raymond Williams (1982: 19) as entailing the 'coexistence of political representation and participation with an economic system which admits no such rights, procedures or claims'. This alone helps explain the strong incentives for public service media elide or deny the significance of the contemporary democratic disjunctures wrought by neoliberal capitalism and crystallised in the post-2008 period. This tendency was only likely to be enhanced by the influence of an Irish cultural backdrop marked by low levels of politically-institutionalised ideological pluralism beyond the centre-right (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 60), a predominantly conservative press and a virtual absence of media accountability activism of either a liberal or radical kind.

This tendency towards normative stability was further abetted by other factors that shaped the trajectory of the crisis in Ireland. These include, particularly, the high level of policy coherence in support of neoliberal and austerian responses to crisis across most of the main Irish political parties and across successive administrations, and the relatively subdued nature of most social and trade union movement mobilisations against austerity (with some significant exceptions, notably the large mass movement against the imposition of consumer water charges). These factors helped narrow the political and discursive opportunity structure for counter-hegemonic responses to crisis, aiding political governability and helping to diminish pressures on prevailing journalistic and institutional norms of mediation, representation and participation.

A muted and slack professional journalistic response to the crisis of democratic capitalism is also congruent with the logics of Irish PSM's hegemonic democratic imaginary. This was characterised by Cullinane (2016: 282) as strongly influenced by classical liberal and elitist conceptions of democracy. This may be seen in the implications of the professional adherence to a 'representative liberal' (Ferree et al., 2002: 290) model of democratic politics and publicity, whose principal orientation to institutionalised politics as the basis of the political public sphere generates and legitimises a powerful incumbency bias. This discursively favours the 'interests and most salient concerns of previously legitimized political forces' (Cobb and Elder, 1971: 902) and leaves institutional agendas poorly attuned to responding to new demands from below.

Further, the 'disillusioned realism' (O'Mahony, 2013: 113) and technocratic affinity of this democratic imaginary can be seen as likely having militated against the prospects of the crisis engendering more positive professional views on the desirability of greater public participation in media or politics. In positing a 'pessimistic understanding of the political capacities of citizens' (O'Mahony, 2013: 121), this model holds that a well-functioning democracy relies on maintaining a safe distance from the vagaries of public demands in the interests of systemic stability and political efficacy.

Conclusion

More than a decade after the crash, journalism's 'cultural crisis' (Nadler and Vavrus (2015: 71) looms ever larger in the face of ongoing disruptions to the hegemony of the political centre in many liberal democracies. Although this paper's primary research predates the contemporary heightened anxieties around the causes and trajectories of polarised polities and informational environments, its principal findings of relative professional normative stability in the years following the North Atlantic Financial Crisis lends further credence to doubts about the ability of public service media organisations to extricate themselves from deepening political, institutional and professional crises of authority, legitimacy, relevance and economic sustainability (Freedman, 2018, 2019, Mills, 2016).

The relevance and urgency of this challenge is underscored in the Irish context by the present entanglement of Irish public service media in cultural and institutional crises that may yet prove to be of existential proportions. The present period of economic adversity at RTÉ, inaugurated by the collapse of the advertising market following the financial crisis and already acute by the time of the fieldwork, has since grown increasingly grave. By 2019, the broadcaster was warning that income reductions had 'severely compromised' (RTÉ, 2019) its ability to fulfil its

existing remit and that increasingly desperate 'survival strategies' (Steemers, 1999: 50) would

be required to secure its institutional future beyond the rounds of job losses, spending cuts,

efficiency programmes and asset sales already enacted. Yet, owing in significant part to the

residual legacy of the public toxicity of austerity impositions following the crisis, RTÉ has to date

been unable to either successfully lobby successive governments or win broad public assent for

the swift implementation of long-standing proposals to modernise its traditional license fee

model (based on television ownership) that would tackle some of the highest evasion rates in

Europe and grant the broadcaster a modestly-increased security of funding. This state of affairs

indicates much about the wider implications of Irish public service broadcasting's structural

subjection to state power and market forces. It illustrates the interlinked nature of the state's

economic and normative regulation of public service broadcasting and consequent

entanglement with journalism's economic and cultural crises. It suggests, in particular, exposure

to a set of material and ideological forces in the field of political and economic power that are

less than conducive to the emergence of counter-hegemonic professional or institutional

responses to crisis (Bourdieu, 1995: 41).

The imperative for public service media organisations like RTÉ to safeguard their institutional

futures and renewing their public legitimacy by finding ways to, as Freedman (2018: 208) puts it,

'transcend the tensions and polarization that mark their wider political environment', grow

increasingly acute. This paper's findings suggest that if by 2012 this imperative was recognised

it was not seen within RTÉ as presenting a material challenge to hegemonic professional

values. Further and more extensive empirical exploration with journalism practitioners on

professional normativity would help shed light on the impacts, if any, of subsequent political and

economic developments in the intervening years since this fieldwork was undertaken.

Combined with parallel analyses of journalistic output such work could, as Mellado et al. (2020:

16) emphasise, yield important insights on the relationships between journalistic role conception

and actual role performance as well as the individual, institutional and extra-institutional factors that mediate the nature and extent of the discrepancies between the two.

There is more recent evidence, however, that far from prompting a disruption to dominant professional and institutional norms, by strongly activating public service broadcasting's tradition of antipathy to populism (Lunt, 2009: 130) the political dynamics of crisis have solidified them. This is illustrated by the emergence of renewed strategies of legitimation which implicitly or explicitly articulate a reassertion of classical hegemonic professional and institutional values as antidotes to the tumult of the contemporary political and communication orders. These emphasise the rationality, objectivity, impartiality and autonomous judgement of journalism professionals as necessary bulwarks against the threats to democracy represented by mis/dis-information, the rise of anti-democratic political extremes and the self-reinforcing group polarisation emerging from social media's echo chambers. Such sentiments are exemplified in the Irish context by senior PSM figures including the current Director-General of RTÉ who has pointed to the role of social and highly commercial media in eroding the idea of a 'trusted public space, impartial and balanced' but that PSM values offered a 'compelling response to the […] changes and challenges of fragmenting societies, and to the growing public disconnection from institutions' (Forbes, 2016, see also McGee, 2016). At European level, it can be clearly seen in then Council of Europe Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland's declaration that public service broadcasters were on the 'front line' in a 'battle against populism and the threat it poses to human rights here in Europe', which he described as giving rise directly to "fake news" and hate speech and which had to be fought with 'accurate', 'reliable' and 'impartial' information (Jagland, 2017).

A fuller discussion on the content and prospects of success for such contemporary strategies of legitimation is beyond the scope of this contribution. However, a continued 'ritual reliance' (De Maeyer, 2019: 23) on the enduring verities of the hegemonic professional canon may be read, however, as of a piece with a shared anti-populist project and rearguard action by political and

media incumbents to re-inscribe order within disordered polities and public spheres and to arrest the 'de-reification' (Nadler and Vavrus, 2015: 72) of dominant forms of professional journalistic normativity.

In presenting a post-crisis face of professional business as usual- despite increasing social challenge- such a strategy effaces critical engagement with the adequacy of the epistemologies underpinning journalism's claims to authority and the accuracy of its accounts of the world. In particular, such prescriptions fail to reckon with the extent to which journalism's democratic imaginary is, as Fenton and Titley (2015: 555) charge in relation to dominant media studies paradigms, 'saturated in assumptions' about the operation of deliberation, representation and democratic politics in an age of democratic regressions where 'representative democracy and the organization and distribution of power shift in ways not registered in these canonical ideas'. The endurance of such assumptions may well be implicated in promoting rather than curtailing the willingness of audiences to turn to alternative informational sources. Certainly, as Freedman (2018: 614) notes, the existence of strong public service media organisations in many European countries does not appear to have effectively functioned as a bulwark against the growth of right-wing extremism.

Neither the findings of this study nor public service media's institutional and professional co-ordinates in the broader field of power indicate strong prospects for a journalistic rupture with its hegemonic professional canon or a recognition of the limits and blindspots of the liberal democratic imagination. This suggests that a normative revitalisation of public service journalism that responds substantively both to the exigencies of post-democracy and what Seymour (2019: 143) describes as our 'degraded information ecologies' appears distant. The stormy waters of its cultural crisis, therefore, appears unlikely to abate- with uncertain implications for institutional futures in Ireland and elsewhere.

Acknowledgements

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