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Media agendas, public opinion and elections

Evidence from Ireland and the United Kingdom

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PhD Thesis

Department of Political Science

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Declaration

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Summary

This dissertation analyses the news media coverage of the 2005 general election campaign in the United Kingdom and the 2007 general election campaign in Ireland. The study also investigates the public opinion in those countries during the election campaigns and explores the possible relationship between media and public agendas. It compares the media and public agendas across countries.

The thesis addresses the lack of systematic analyses of news media election coverage in Ireland. It also offers a unique cross-country comparative study of media and public agendas during elections. It investigates the variations between news media campaign coverage in different media cultures and electoral systems.

The study explores the question of media partisanship and the resulting coverage bias. It also investigates agenda bias and statement bias. It compares the media agenda across different types of media, such as broadsheet and tabloid newspapers and television news. In the Irish case the thesis looks at the changes of the media campaign coverage over time, by comparing the 2007 election with the 2002 one. The thesis also examines the public agendas and their dynamics during election campaigns.

This dissertation uses a multi-method research design. A quantitative analysis of media agendas is based on the manual content analyses of campaign-related news content from newspapers and TV news. Various public opinion surveys are examined in order to determine the items on the public agenda during election campaigns. A number of interviews with key media insiders in Ireland add a qualitative research

element to the investigation. The study also uses the latest technological advances to explore new research possibilities of measuring public and media agendas.

The results suggest that the news media election coverage focuses on the campaign process rather than policy issues. There is also evidence of incumbency-driven partisan bias in the British and Irish media during general election campaigns. Leaders are found to be a focal point of a substantial proportion of the campaign news coverage. The study shows that the 2007 general election in Ireland was more neutral in tone in comparison to the 2002 one. The study shows that the British press follows their official party endorsements in their campaign-related coverage. The data show that the average mean score bias for commentary about parties and leaders during the 2005 British general election was negative. Journalists, media managers, PR specialists working in Ireland saw their role as primarily reporting the news. They suggest that an agenda is not a result of deliberate decision, but rather an outcome of news gathering and reporting practices.

Findings highlight the importance of further systematic studies of media and public agendas to determine the nature of their complex relationship. Future research could combine quantitative, qualitative and experimental research design in order to offer a multi-dimensional analysis of the role of mass media during election campaigns.

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This thesis is dedicated to my Mother and my Father.

Dla Mamy i Taty.

1 Introduction

The world of politics has found an (im)perfect partner in the mass media. It might not be the most harmonious relationship, but it is an undeniably a strong one with no prospect of a looming divorce. As democracies have become more complex politicians need the media to reach the people and potential voters. Citizens cannot scrutinize the governing parties by attending meetings at the agora, so they use the media to track their actions. Politicians can and do organize rallies and canvass door to door for votes, but they recognise that the easiest way to get their message across to voters is to engage with the media. That is why the world of politics is so tightly linked with the world of mass media. We could even ask whether politicians could survive without the exposure of the media. And as they recognise the importance of the mass media in reaching the voters, another question becomes immediately apparent: what is the role of media in shaping voters' political (and other) preferences? If we say that the media provide us with certain images of reality, then how does this affect our perception of it? If a traveller from a different planet came and visited us and was subjected to a seven-day media diet – what would they think of the world? Would their mental picture consist mainly of images of war, crime and violence? Would they be surprised how preoccupied we are with the state of the economy, health service and the CO₂ emissions of our cars? And would they be persuaded to think that these really are the most pressing issues? More importantly are we persuaded that this is what we should be concerned with?

This thesis analyses the news media coverage of the 2005 general election in the United Kingdom and the 2007 general election in Ireland. It also examines the public opinion in those countries during election campaigns and discusses the possible relationship between the media and public agendas. By doing so, it offers a unique,

cross-country comparative study of media and public agendas in Ireland and in the UK. The main focus of this study is a detailed examination of media content during election campaigns. The thesis addresses the lack of systematic analysis of media election coverage in Ireland. Majority of media agenda studies have been conducted in the United States and Britain and it is of scholarly importance to investigate whether “campaign coverage may work similarly in different electoral contexts and media cultures” (Balkir et al. 2008: 200). In addition, responding to a suggestion made by de Vreese (2003: 184) that “evidence from cross-national comparisons of national elections is virtually non-existent,” this study addresses the role of media during national elections in a comparative fashion. We also look at the coverage of print media and television, public and commercial broadcasters and tabloid and broadsheet newspapers. The study investigates in detail different types of bias in the campaign coverage, such as agenda bias, partisan bias or statement bias. In the Irish context, we look at the changes of the media agenda over time, by comparing our results with the campaign coverage in 2002. The thesis examines the campaign not only from the perspective of the media, but also from the point of view of the public. The relationship the public has with the media is also explored. This thesis uses both quantitative and qualitative research methods in an effort to provide a multi-dimensional analysis of news coverage during national elections. Thanks to a number of interviews with key media insiders in Ireland, it investigates the mechanisms at work within the media during election campaigns. We also explore the latest technological advances to assess whether there are new research possibilities for measuring public and media agendas and we make some recommendations for possible improvements in the agenda setting research.

The media agenda setting theory provides a theoretical backbone to this thesis. It is, however, examined critically, especially when considering the research methods used to

address the agenda setting puzzle. The thesis also looks at the origins of the agenda setting theory, by exploring the limited effects literature.

The mass media have been a constant presence in people's everyday lives for decades, but it seems that in the first decade of the twenty-first century they have become even more omnipresent and interwoven into the very fabric of our existence than ever before. The different outlets of the print and electronic media – newspapers, radio, television – have been constantly evolving and changing, reaching more and more people all the time. The advent of the Internet and its rapid expansion meant that the media market got more crowded, more competitive and the news travels even faster than ever before. We are living in the times of the always on, broadband Internet connection, the 24 hour news channels and mobile phone news updates co-existing with the traditional media like newsprint. One example of just how quickly the Internet changes is the fact, that when the idea for this thesis was conceived, the micro blogging platform Twitter and the video sharing web site YouTube did not exist and the now ubiquitous Facebook was in its infancy. This means that people have access to more information than ever before and their appetites are not getting smaller. The Internet was seen as a threat for the newspapers, but newspapers are still with us and looking for new ways of delivering content. One thing which has changed beyond recognition is the way people consume the media. The sheer number of alternatives means that people pick and choose how, where and when they get their news. A hypothetical scenario could be that one reads a newspaper during the morning commute, checks the constantly updated news on the Internet while at work, puts on a twenty four hour news channel when at home in the evening and listens to the roundup of the day's events on the radio while falling asleep. Such behaviour does not diminish the power of the media, but rather enhances it by placing them at the core of our daily activities. Alan

Rusbridger – editor of the *Guardian* newspaper in the UK – is in fact quite optimistic about the future of newspapers. He said that “the growth of newspapers' digital audience should be a beacon of hope” (Busfield 2010). It is no surprise that the Internet search company Google has been named as a top superbrand in Britain in a YouGov poll published on July 21, 2008. It highlights the thirst for information and the central role mass media play in providing it. Of course the role of the media is multi-faceted and is not limited to providing information. We turn to them for entertainment and communication too. More and more often mass media act as an interface, an intermediary between us and reality, however close or far removed it is. By reading a newspaper we are exposed to news from our immediate locality, our country and also from other parts of the world. On radio news bulletins we would get information about the latest political developments, crime, state of the economy, show business gossip and the weather (often in that order). Consuming the media helps us understand the world and connect with others. Whether it is our conscious or unconscious choice, the media have a huge part in shaping our lives and our minds. Mass media also inspired academic research. Political science and communication researchers have been trying to disentangle the complex web of connections between the public, media and political actors since the beginning of the last century. The aim of this thesis was to follow their path and to systematically study news coverage during national election campaigns. In the section below we will briefly discuss the agenda setting theory. This is followed by an outline of the thesis, presentation of the data and cases.

What is media agenda setting?

It has been 34 years since the publication of an article that introduced a concept of agenda setting to mass communication studies. The article in question, entitled simply “The Agenda Setting Function of Mass Media,” was written by two professors of journalism at University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill: Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw and published in *Public Opinion Quarterly* in 1972. The roots of the agenda setting theory, however, can be traced back to 1922 and the publication of Walter Lipmann’s *Public Opinion*. Lipmann was the first researcher to point out a link between “pictures in our heads” and the pictures we are fed by the mass media. The media - he argued - act as a crucial link between the events in the world and our own images of them. Without using the term “agenda setting”, he described it quite accurately.

Other academics also investigated the power of the mass media prior to McCombs and Shaw. The importance of the media in adding weight to the stories it reports on was also recognized by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948). Another step towards formulating a proper theory of agenda setting was taken by Cohen in 1963. He noted that the press “might not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. The world will look different to different people, depending on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the paper they read” (1963: 13). Cohen's words were echoed by the claims of Lang and Lang in 1966. They concluded that “the mass media force attention to certain issues. They build up public images of political figures. They are constantly presenting objects suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, have feelings about” (Lang & Lang 1966: 468).

But it was McCombs and Shaw who, in their 1972 article, used the term “agenda setting” for the first time. Using a simple methodology, they were able to show that,

what mass media writes about can influence what people think about. They concluded that “the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues” (McCombs & Shaw 1972: 177). This seminal article is discussed at length in the following chapter.

Simply put, the theory of the agenda setting function of the mass media explores the power of the news media to set the agenda of the public. According to the theory the news media do so, by making some issues more prominent and therefore shifting the attention of the public onto precisely the issues highlighted by the media. In the words of the father of all agenda setting research – Maxwell McCombs – “the news media can set the agenda for the public's attention to that small group of issues around which public opinion forms” (McCombs 2002: 1). The media can do this by making some issues more visible to the public. They can use the front page, eye-catching headlines or the top position on a TV news bulletin. Absorbed by the public through their daily media diet, the media agenda can become the public one too.

The media agenda is a group of issues that the mass media are repeatedly including in their news coverage. One of the concerns of this research is not only a list of such issues, but the pattern of the coverage over a period of time. The list itself is somewhat limited and quite obvious for anybody with an even passing interest in media. War, crime, natural disasters, economy, politics and entertainment form the core elements of news content. What is interesting is which issues and at what time are made more prominent by the media. We have anecdotal evidence of media agenda changing over time with the number of travel articles swelling in the summer months or school-related news being more prominent at the time of exams and at the start of a new teaching term. This is understandable and without much consequence to the reader and society. But if the size of coverage of economy or the state of health service changes significantly

at election time, then we are obliged to investigate repercussions of such an event further. Do people start thinking about these problems more, do they believe them to be more important, does the coverage influence their voting decisions? Or do people's opinions stay unchanged with top priorities firmly entrenched? All these questions make the examination of the theory of media agenda setting and its relationship, and possible influence on public opinion difficult, but most importantly they pose a challenging research puzzle. As mass media are crucial to the democratic process, a systematic study of news campaign coverage – such as the one conducted in this dissertation – helps to scrutinise and understand their role better.

Public agenda is the list of concerns shared by large sections of society. For the purposes of this thesis, public agenda is measured using the answer to the survey question asking respondents to name “the most important problem facing the country at the moment.” Admittedly, this is not a perfect question to examine what the “pictures” in people's heads really are. The respondents might be confused by the question's wording, not being able to distinguish between their personal opinion and what they think is the dominant opinion as expressed in the mass media. For some, a relatively niche or unpopular concern might be of extreme importance, but they will not list it as the most important problem facing the country, as they know (and this is where mass media come into the equation), that there are other more pressing, or perhaps just better publicized, issues. We address those methodological issues by examining the answers to the “most important issue to you personally” question included in the Irish National Election Study. We also investigate the search volume of Internet searches to determine the public agenda.

Thesis outline

The purpose of this study is to systematically analyse news media campaign coverage and public opinion during general elections in Ireland and in the United Kingdom. The research is comprised of two parts, treated as case studies, each of them providing a unique perspective on the role media play during campaigns. Such an approach also allows for a cross-national comparison across countries with different electoral and media systems.

The first part (Chapter 4) is a campaign study of British 2005 general election, focusing on the study of election-related campaign coverage in newspapers. We also look at the possibility of a relationship between the media and public agendas. Combining a daily public opinion measurement with the media content analysis, we are able to study the relationship between the media and the public.

The second part (chapters 5 to 8) focuses on the investigation of the media agenda during the general election in Ireland in 2007. The aim of this part is to provide a systematic study of the campaign news coverage which emerged from data collected and analysed for content for this dissertation. We look at the issues prominent in the media, the pattern of the news coverage during the general election campaign and its links with the real world events. We investigate the content for bias and we address the question of the possible partisanship of the Irish media. The data have been collected by the author during the general election in Ireland in 2007 and they have also been analysed by the author of the thesis. This means that an informed and multi-layered analysis was possible. In both cases manual content analysis of the media is used to examine their campaign coverage. This technique enables us to see very precisely what kind of stories, tackling which issues are prominent within the media coverage of elections. It also helps to paint a fuller picture of what the election campaign is about – as understood and

conveyed by the media. The results of our investigation of the media agenda in Ireland during the 2007 election campaign are compared with the outcomes of the investigation into the 2005 British election campaign. We also look at the changes in the Irish media agenda over time. These results are juxtaposed with the results of computer coding in Chapter 7. The computer coding was done using software developed by Factiva Insight for DowJones. Comparing and contrasting these two different ways of coding media material produced a more rounded picture of the media during the general election campaign in Ireland in May 2007. We also explored the possibilities of using new technologies in the future research.

Chapter 8 examines how the agenda is set by the media industry in Ireland. It is based on semi-structured interviews with key figures in the Irish media and public relations industries. What are the behind the scenes mechanisms which allow the media to set the agenda? And are the media aware of their power as agenda-setters? Is it a self-conscious act or is it an institutionalised process, which happens without much thought?

The issues that have been occupying the minds of the voters during the two election campaigns are also examined in correspondence with the content analysis of the mass media. We can then draw tentative conclusions about the nature and closeness of the relationship between media agenda and the agenda of the public opinion.

The thesis finishes with conclusions bringing together the results of our analyses. We also discuss the role of news media coverage during national election campaigns and point towards policy implications of this research. Possibilities for future research are also discussed.

Data

To answer the above questions this thesis uses a number of datasets. For the case examining the general election in the UK in 2005, we employ two datasets. The first one is the Rolling Campaign Survey Data collected by the British Election Study group from the University of Essex. The second one is the media content analysis dataset collected and analysed by Dr. Heinz Brandenburg from the University of Aberdeen. Combining these two datasets allows for an exploratory analysis of the relationship between the media agenda and the agenda of the public opinion.

For the study of the general election campaign in Ireland in 2007 the data were collected and analysed by the author of the thesis¹. All major Irish daily newspapers (the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Independent*, the *Irish Examiner*, the *Irish Daily Star*, the *Irish Sun* and the *Evening Herald*) were collected between April 30, 2007 and May 24, 2007. TV news bulletins were also recorded during this period. These include the 6:01 News broadcast on RTÉ One and the 5:30 News aired by commercial broadcaster TV3. This has not been done before with only the Brandenburg & Hayden study of the 2002 campaign and the Brandenburg analysis of the Irish media political bias (2005) as only examples of past research in this area. The analysis of this data follows the methodology established by Brandenburg for his media dataset for the British general election campaign in 2005. This allows for a cross-national comparison between Ireland and Britain.

In addition to the media dataset various data is used to investigate the agenda of the Irish public opinion in 2007. Irish National Election Study asked important questions

¹ The author would like to thank Dr. Heinz Brandenburg and his wife Marion for their help, guidance and support during this process.

about the issues that were important to voters at the time of the general election as well as their media consumption habits.

An innovative part of the study of the Irish general election in 2007 is the use of electronic content analysis. This is done employing software developed by Factiva Insight™ from DowJones. It enables users to track and monitor changes in the levels of media coverage of chosen variables. It has been customized for the use during the 2007 Irish general election by Dow Jones for Raidió Teilifís Éireann. It used text mining and database search technology to code thousands of stories, which appeared in a variety of different media.

A small number of semi-structured interviews was conducted as part of the research for this thesis. They included conversations with the senior managers and editors working for the public broadcaster, newspaper political editors, PR specialist and former party press officers.

Thanks to the variety of datasets used in this thesis, a truly comprehensive research into media and its relationship with the public opinion is possible.

Cases

The two cases used in this thesis offer a great opportunity to contrast and compare the nature of media agendas, their role and the interaction between media and the public, in the UK and in Ireland. Despite geographical proximity and shared language, the media markets in the UK and Ireland and the way they operate during general elections, are very much different.

The first major difference is of course the size of the market and the readership, with the mass media in the UK reaching bigger numbers of readers. The choice of mass

media available in the UK is also much greater than the one in Ireland. There are six national daily newspapers available in the UK and a number of freesheets in the bigger cities; five national terrestrial TV channels and five national radio stations. The funding model for the public service broadcaster is also somewhat different with the BBC output free of advertising. The UK mass media, and especially the BBC, is at the forefront of digital revolution, investing heavily in the new technologies (BBC's greatly admired iPlayer) and preparing for the fast-approaching digital switchover.

The situation is rather different in Ireland, where the size of the market and the accessibility of the British media output, means that the indigenous media are not as advanced as their British counterparts. Out of seven national daily newspapers three are the Irish versions of the British tabloids, such as the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror*. There are four national TV channels but often they offer imported content or Irish versions of shows known from Britain or elsewhere. Also smaller financial resources mean that the public broadcaster Raidió Teilifís Éireann is yet to match the digital output of the BBC. There are five national radio stations and a plethora of strong local stations with dedicated listenership. It could be said, though, that for a market of around 4 million people, the Irish public is rather well served media-wise.

These seemingly technical differences between Ireland and the UK are, however, quite important as they influence how people consume media. Are the traditional outlets (newspapers, radio, TV) going strong or are people switching to the more pick and choose way of consuming their media? Another technological development has to be mentioned here, which is PVR – Personal Video Recorder. These devices (available as separate machines or bundled with a digital subscription, such as SKY+) make it easy to record and store one's favourite TV programmes and to view them at one's convenience. This means that people are increasingly free of the constraints of TV

schedules. The same goes for radio listenership with radio programmes available on the web after being broadcast.

The media markets in the UK and Ireland are discussed at length and in more detail in relevant chapters.

But the most important difference between the cases examined in this thesis is the partisanship of the press. The newspapers in the UK have been endorsing political parties for decades now, openly supporting Labour or the Tories during general elections. This sends a very clear message to the reader (and the voter) and is an interesting phenomenon that is also examined in this thesis. The Irish press has had a reputation of being relatively neutral (Brandenburg and Hayden 2002; Brandenburg 2005) never explicitly endorsing any of the parties. The research into the 2007 general election in Ireland sheds an interesting light on this and suggests that things might have changed quite significantly.

Investigation and comparison of the public opinion agendas is also of great importance and interest. Are the issues that concern the public different in the UK and Ireland and if they are, why? Also the fact that the media markets are quite different in some respects in the UK and Ireland makes it important to investigate whether the way people consume media has an influence on the public agenda.

The following chapter examines the body of academic literature and research, which informed the theoretical and methodological approaches of this study.

Chapter 2
Literature review

2 Literature review

The definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power.

E.E. Schattschneider (1960: 8)

An authority that in other nations is reserved for tyrants, priests, parties and mandarins.

Theodore White describing the agenda setting power of the mass media (1973: 327)

Agenda setting theory scrutinizes the relationships between media agenda and the public. It operates on two levels and argues that the mass media not only tell people what to think (first level of agenda setting), but they also tell them how to think about it (second level agenda setting, framing). The first level agenda setting focuses on the transfer of salience of issues from the media agenda to the public one. Framing scrutinizes the transfer of salience of selected attributes. Agenda setting has been successfully replicated by hundreds of studies published since the original agenda setting study conducted in Chapel Hill by McCombs and Shaw (1972). Agenda setting scholars have been able to show that there is a link between the items prominent in the media and those which are important for the public opinion.

In this chapter we present an overview of the agenda setting literature and most important theoretical concepts used in this study. We also critically assess the theory and review the research, which has been conducted so far. The literature review section of this thesis is divided into two sections. First, we discuss the agenda setting theory. Second, we look at the media effects research and the limited effects theory, which came before the emergence of agenda setting. This enables us to put the agenda setting in a more rounded research perspective. The process of agenda setting might have been empirically tested for the first time in 1972, but in fact it has been part of media research

from as early as 1922, when Lipmann concluded that people live in a mediated environment and made a connection between “pictures in our heads” and what is written in the papers. Chapters 2 and 3 offer a comprehensive overview of academic research on the role of media and their relationship with the public, which informed the theoretical and methodological approaches adopted by this study.

2.1 Agenda setting

As the media have become a crucial link between the political parties and policymakers and the society, the scientific study of such links has proved to be of great importance. Few people get directly involved in politics and election campaigns, and some researchers claim we live in a “media democracy” (Linsky 1986). To understand the implications of the relationship between the public, the media and the policymakers, one can study the agendas of these actors. The research into agendas aims at explaining their societal influence (Rogers and Dearing 1988). There are two main research paths in the field of agenda research: agenda setting (a process in which media signal a relative importance of issues to the public) and agenda building (study of influence exerted by a variety of actors on policy agendas). However some researchers prefer to use the term agenda setting for all of the studies of agendas and to differentiate between them by highlighting the dependent variable of each study (media agenda setting, public agenda setting, policy agenda setting).

Put very simply, agenda setting can be described as a study of issue salience (Soroka 2002: 5) – how important is an issue on any actor’s (political party, mass media, public/voter) agenda. Dearing and Rogers (1996: 1) define the agenda setting process as

an ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of media professionals, the public, and policy elites. Agenda setting offers an explanation of why information about certain issues, and not other issues, is

available to the public in a democracy; how public opinion is shaped; and why certain issues are addressed through policy actions while other issues are not.

Looking at it from a broader and more ambitious perspective, research into agenda setting looks into the changes in the order of issues on actors' agendas over time; it looks at the relationship between various agendas (political parties and media, media and voters, political parties and institutions, etc.) and it examines how agendas come about.

In fact Dalton et al. (1998: 477) describe agenda setting using a transaction model:

[Agenda setting] is not a causal relationship that can be solely attributed to the media; rather, it reflects the convergence of attention by these several actors. Candidates offer a selection of issues, some of which resonate with the public and some of which are dropped for lack of response. Citizens are potentially interested in a variety of issues, and their attention focuses on the subset discussed by candidates and analysed in the media [...] the media as a whole will not continue to discuss an issue that neither the public nor the candidates consider important.

The body of agenda setting literature is extensive, as the theory encompasses and links such various academic fields as political science, media studies, policy studies and public opinion research. Subjects of agenda setting research include: the environment (Parlour and Schatzow 1978); pollution, inflation and defence (Iyengar et al. 1983); home healthcare programmes (Cook et al. 1983); energy and inflation (Behr and Iyengar 1985); civil rights (Winter and Eyal 1981); the Gulf War (Iyengar and Simon 1993). However, this versatility and popularity are also the main problems for the theory. Swanson argues that agenda setting has suffered from "inconsistency of conceptualization, method and result" (Swanson 1988: 604).

The following sections look at the empirical evidence gathered by agenda setting research so far and the most popular methodological approaches adopted by

researchers. We shall also discuss the psychological mechanisms behind the agenda setting process. Finally we discuss crucial parts of the agenda setting puzzle: agendas, issues and salience.

2.1.1 Empirical evidence so far

Since the beginning of agenda setting studies in the early 1970s there have been hundreds of studies replicating and updating the Chapel Hill study's findings (Dearing and Rogers 1996). At the beginning the theory of agenda setting was tested during elections. McCombs and Shaw focused on presidential elections in the USA with three studies in 1968, 1972 and 1976. With every study they used more advanced methodology progressing from simple rank correlation to cross-lag correlations which were more sensitive to the influence of time on media agenda setting effects. They also used panel data and in the 1976 study they interviewed voters over an entire election year. McCombs and Shaw found that the correlation between the national television agenda and the following public agenda was +0.63. In addition they tested the correlation between the public agenda and following national television agenda. The correlations score was only +0.22 (McCombs and Shaw 1977).

Local elections provided another outlet for agenda setting studies. One of the first of such studies was carried out during the 1986 mayoral election in Japan (Takeshita 1993). The study of voters in Machida City, found a significant correlation between residents' agenda and the media one. Another study using local elections as its setting was conducted during 1995 election in Pamplona, Spain (Canel, Llamas and Rey 1996). Spanish scholars found very high degrees of correspondence, even reaching +0.90 for the correlation between the agenda of the local newspaper and the concerns of the residents. There was also a study of agenda setting effects in 1997 legislative elections in Buenos Aires in Argentina (Lennon 1998; quoted in McCombs 2004). This study is

interesting as it found a negative correlation of -0.20 at its beginning, which went up to $+0.80$ just before the polling day.

Apart from the American studies, there are also examples of research of agenda setting during national elections. Sheafer and Weiman examined four Israeli elections (2005). Norris (2006) examines the agenda setting effects in the 2005 British election.

Agenda setting effects have also been found in studies focusing on the salience of foreign affairs among the British and American public. Soroka (2001) found that the salience of such issues for the British public opinion, between 1990 and 2000 was significantly correlated ($+0.54$) to the number of corresponding stories published in the *Times*. A positive correlation of $+0.38$ was also found between the number of articles related to foreign affairs published in the *New York Times* between 1981 and 2000, and the salience of such issues for the American public opinion.

2.1.2 Methodological approaches to the study of media agenda setting

Until the publication of the first McCombs and Shaw study, with its emphasis on the link between media and public's agendas, communication research had been following two separate lines of inquiry. One focused on media content research, the other examined audience effects, taking media content as a given. The arrival of agenda setting research in 1972 answered the calls to bridge the gap between these two paths of research. The methods used in the first agenda setting studies were quite simple, but over the following decades they became more and more sophisticated. More variables, such as intervening, controlling or moderating ones, were added to the original ones (media agenda and public agenda), different techniques were employed by scholars to analyse their data. Following Zhu and Blood we will discuss three distinct methodological problems encountered by the agenda setting research, namely the

question of causality, the contingent conditions and substantive context of agenda setting.

The Chapel Hill study implied that it was the news media agenda that preceded and set the public's agenda. There was a clear implication of causality on the side of the media. Quite naturally, this resulted in a centuries old chicken and egg-type question of what comes first. Other scholars interested in this phenomenon quickly suggested alternative approaches to the question of causality in agenda setting. They agreed that indeed the media can influence public's agenda, but they can also only reflect it. Another scenario argued that media agenda and public agenda reinforce each other's issue salience (Zhu and Blood 1997: 109). McQuail (1987: 275-276) argued that a simple comparison of the rank orders of issues on the media and public agenda is not enough to prove any causal relationship. He wrote:

For that we need a combination of: content analysis of party programmes, evidence of opinion changes over time in a given section of the public (preferably with panel data); a content analysis showing media attention to different issues in the relevant period; and some indication of relevant media use by the public concerned. Such data have rarely, if ever, been produced at the same time in support of the hypothesis of agenda setting and the further one moves from the general notion that media direct attention and shape cognitions and towards precise cases, the more uncertain it becomes whether such an effect actually occurs.

A wide variety of techniques has been used by social scientists ever since to solve the causality puzzle. I will briefly discuss some of the most interesting and often used ones: panel design with cross-lagged correlations, structural equation modelling and time series analysis. I will also briefly discuss the experimental approach to the study of agenda setting.

The first study which set out to explicitly determine whether it was really the news media which set the public's agenda, came from the pioneers themselves McCombs and Shaw in 1977. It is known as the Charlotte study, as it was conducted in Charlotte, North Carolina during the 1972 presidential election. It employed a panel design with cross-lagged correlations. Using this method meant that the correlation between media agenda at time one and the public agenda at time two was compared with the correlation between public agenda at time one and the media agenda at time two. This was supposed to help to establish who started the sequence of causality. McCombs and Shaw interviewed a panel of voters at different stages of the election campaign and also gathered media data. The cross-lagged correlation between media agenda at time one and public's agenda at time two was higher than for the other pairing. This, however, was not repeated for the TV data. This simple method of examining causality in agenda setting research as been used in other studies too (Tipton, Haney and Baseheart 1975; Weaver et al., 1981).

Other scholars (most notably Huegel, Degenhardt and Weiss 1989; 1992) decided to use structural equation modelling to investigate the question of causality in the agenda setting process. Using this method Huegel et al. were able to control for such intervening variables as interpersonal communication or issue obtrusiveness. Structural equation modelling allows for decomposition of direct and indirect effects and for investigating alternative causal paths. It has been praised by Kosicki (1993) especially for its ability to model intervening variables.

Another methodological tool used by scholars in their quest to establish the direction of causality in agenda setting research is time-series analysis (Behr and Iyengar 1985; Beniger 1978; Brosius and Kepplinger 1990; Funkhouser 1973; MacKuen 1981; Neuman 1990; Smith 1980; Zhu 1992; Zhu et al. 1993). Time-series analysis is a good

method to look at agenda setting more as a process than as an event. It uses many more time points than any other approach discussed above. It is also more "real" as it can use such indicators as inflation or unemployment, which help to eliminate the possibility of a spurious relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda. Brandenburg (2002: 40) argues convincingly for the use of time-series analysis while studying political campaign agendas. While discussing the research into the relationship between party and media agendas he writes:

The unit of analysis in previous studies has been "the campaign agenda," that is, the communication output of both sides aggregated over the entire course of the campaign. These studies (Semetko et al. 1991; Norris et al. 1999; Petrocik et al. 2001) did not allow agenda composition to vary during campaigns, but only between elections. Therefore, they can only correlate and compare overall levels of agenda convergence for individual elections; they cannot investigate the processes that produced convergence or lack of it. Both the direction of causality and the scale of effects are untraceable at that level of aggregation. (...) To trace causal direction and scale of effects, a time-series design is needed (...).

All the studies discussed above dealt with aggregate-level data. It is important to note that some scholars (Iyengar and Kinder 1987) examined the agenda setting effects at the individual-level. To do so, they designed laboratory experiments in which people watched several news reports on issues such as inflation, unemployment or defence. The perceived importance attached to these issues by the viewers was compared to the answers on the non-viewers. The results showed, that even after some time after watching the reports, the viewers still attached more importance to the issues presented to them, than the non-viewers. There are also examples of field studies in the history of agenda setting research (Protess et al. 1991).

Another methodological problem encountered by the research into agenda setting effects is the question whether these effects are the same for everyone involved in the process, or perhaps they are stronger for some people than others and happen only under certain conditions. The question of the contingent conditions present in the agenda setting process was addressed even in the very first study of McCombs and Shaw. They compared the effects across voter groups (Democrats, Republicans and Independents) and across media outlets (newspapers, TV) and across issues (being high or low on the media agenda). They did so, because a belief that these effects would be the same for everybody was reminiscent of pre-war claims of the powerful media effects, which had been subsequently refuted. The research into a "contingent theory" of agenda setting focused on audience characteristics, issue characteristics and media characteristics (Winter 1981).

As far as audience characteristics are concerned, research to date has shown that the most important contingent condition is audience involvement. Demographic and socio-economic variables do not play an important role in the agenda setting process. Audience involvement, on the other hand, seems to be an important controlling variable (used to eliminate a possibility of a spurious effect of the media agenda on the public agenda) or a moderator variable (to see whether the media effects are the same for different groups). Zhu and Blood note that audience involvement has been operationalized using such variables as political partisanship (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McLeod et al. 1974), campaign interest (McLeod et al. 1974; Weaver et al. 1981), and also media preference (Benton and Frazier 1976) and media dependency (Salwen 1987). These studies have shown that the more involved an audience is, the more likely it is to be influenced by agenda setting. This can be explained in many different ways. Some people for example might have a strong need

for orientation (Weaver 1977), which leads them to an active use of the media and leaves them vulnerable to the effects of agenda setting.

The research into issue characteristics and their role in the study of agenda setting effects has resulted in distinguishing between obtrusive and unobtrusive issues (Zucker 1978). Obtrusive issues are the ones people have a form of a direct relationship with (unemployment, inflation), whereas the unobtrusive ones are more remote to respondents (for example foreign affairs, the environment). Agenda setting effects have been proven to be stronger for the unobtrusive issues, as people need media to get information about them. The media agenda setting effects are substantively weaker (or even non-existent) for the obtrusive issues, as people learn about them from their personal experiences or from contacts with others (Zucker 1978; Huegel et al. 1988; Palmgreen and Clarke 1977).

Another part of the contingent theory of agenda setting hypothesis is the importance of media characteristics. Are some media better at setting the agenda than others? The answers to this question vary and remain inconclusive. Some research has shown a clear advantage of the newspapers over television in the agenda setting process (McCombs 1977; Weaver 1977). Other studies have focused primarily on the role of television (Iyengar and Kinder 1987) following claims of its super-powers. As these dealt with television only, they did not give any scope for comparison across different media outlets.

Although much time and effort has been spent in the quest to understand and systematize qualifying effects of audience, issue and media characteristics we still do not have any clear-cut answers. However, it is crucial to remember that agenda setting effects are indeed conditional.

The first studies investigating the agenda setting phenomenon were carried out in the context of local and national political elections. This, however, has changed over the years and the agenda setting effects have been studied in a variety of contexts. The hypothesis has been employed by research in fields such as advertising, peace activism, economy, study of civil rights movement or public health. The branch dealing with the study of agenda setting effects in political elections is still as important as ever, with examples of research in Spain (McCombs, Escobar and Llamas 2000), Israel (Sheafer and Weimann 2005) and the US (Kiousis 2004).

2.1.3 Psychological mechanisms of agenda setting

Most of the agenda setting research has worked with aggregate-level data, not paying much attention to the processes taking place at an individual level. One cannot forget, however, about the psychological mechanisms of agenda setting.

It is generally assumed in the study of political information processing that people organize the environment around them into cognitive knowledge structures - a sort of mental clusters of information. Assuming they do so, we can see that if a cluster is activated then it serves as a base on which people can build their understanding of the world (Fiske and Taylor 1991; Domke, Shah and Wackman 1998: 53). However, individuals do not use all the cognitive structures available to them to process information, but rely on those constructs that are easily accessible (Higgins and Bargh 1987). Iyengar and Kinder (1987: 67) argue that in a political context choices and judgements can “depend less on the entire repertoire of people’s knowledge and more on which aspects of their knowledge happen to come to mind.” The more accessible a mental consideration is, the more prominently it will feature in an individual's evaluations. Scholarly work on accessibility models (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Tourangeau and Rasinski 1988; Zaller 1992) argues that one's political beliefs and

attitudes depend, at least partly on the moment. Zaller's (1992: 58) Accessibility Axiom states that "the more recently a consideration has been called to mind or thought about, the less time it takes to retrieve that consideration or related considerations from memory and bring them to the top of the head for use." This might work better when people have to deal with information that is familiar to them. If they need to process something more complex - as often happens in the processing of political information - contextual cues might be needed to activate corresponding cognitive structures. This helps in the information processing but it also plays an important part in building and changing attitudes (Zaller 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992). The research examining the problem of accessibility and priming focuses mainly on the frequency and recency of cognitions use. The media can trigger an opinion or behaviour change by making some considerations more prominent in their reports and repeating them and therefore activating particular mental constructs taken into account by individuals while making up their opinions or evaluating ideas. Issues highlighted by the media can influence how voters regard and rate political candidates. This has been reflected in a number of empirical research studies (Iyengar and Simon 1984; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Johnston et al. 1992, Krosnick and Brannon 1993; Mendelsohn, 1996).

McCombs and Shaw study (1972) was in line with the shift from studies of persuasive media effects to cognitive ones. This change in scholarly interest is pivotal for cognitive political communication effects. Research focused on persuasion was linked with the minimal effects model (Bauer 1964), which argued that exposure to campaign only triggered already existing partisan affiliations. Following the cognitive route allowed the researchers to examine such important problems as transmission of information, agenda setting and change in the criteria used to judge political candidates (Iyengar and Simon 2000: 151)

2.1.4 Issues

The most important distinction one needs to make at this point is between issues and events. Shaw (1977: 7) suggests that an event “is defined as discrete happenings that are limited by space and time.” Thus we must not confuse single mentions of the changes in interest rates with the broader issue of economy, or articles about the nurses’ strike with the issue of health or health policy. As Dearing and Rogers (1988: 86) put it “events are specific components of issues.”

It is more difficult, as it is often the case with simple and seemingly easily understood terms, to define an issue. Without a proper definition “the concept of agenda setting becomes so all-embracing as to be rendered practically meaningless” (Lang and Lang 1981: 450). At first no clear definition of what an issue actually is, has been given by the agenda setting scholars. Studying early research in this field, we can see that the scholars focused mainly on broad topics, such as war/Vietnam war or inflation and not specific news/media events. Popular definitions (“important question that is in dispute and must be settled”; “a vital or unsettled matter” (Merriam-Webster)) underline the importance of conflict/dispute in the nature of an issue. For Shaw (1977: 7) an “issue is defined as involving cumulative news coverage of a series of related events that fit together in a broader category.” Dearing and Rogers define it as “a social problem, often conflictual, that has received mass media coverage” (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 4). Many scholars think it is necessary for an issue to incorporate some form of conflict. Cobb and Elder (1972: 82) stated that it is “a conflict between two or more identifiable groups over procedural or substantive matters relating to the distribution of positions or power.” In addition Eyestone (1974: 3) argued that “an issue arises when a public with a problem seeks or demands governmental action, and there is public disagreement over the best solution to the problem.” Soroka (2002: 6) points out that an issue does not necessarily

have to be contentious, nor does it have to be defined by presence in the mass media. Such valence issues as child abuse, domestic violence or drug abuse do not have sides, but are still issues (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Nelson 1984). The same goes for issues that might not be present in the media, but are on the policy or public agenda. Including media in the definition of an issue (as we read in Dearing and Rogers, see above) is only essential if we see media as the first step in the agenda setting process. Only adopting a very media-centric point of view, can we say that issues exist only if they are picked up on by the media. However, one has to also note that certain issues and social problems might exist and be important, but without the exposure of the media, they would find it difficult to get onto any agenda. Conflictual nature of some of the issues makes them newsworthy and therefore more interesting for the mass media (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 2).

Lang and Lang (1981: 451) offered an elegant and succinct definition of an issue, which is “whatever is in contention among a relevant public.” By including “contention” in their definition, they highlight the importance of discussion surrounding topics/issues, but it does not mean there has to be a conflict between the two (or more) sides. The “relevant public” is the public connected to the specific agenda setting process. It might be the public at large (measured by opinion polls), it might include journalists (for the measures of media agenda), policymakers (for the political agenda) or any other political actor for that matter (Dearing 1989; Soroka 2002).

So far agenda setting research lacks proper systematization of issues studied by various scholars. Among issues we can distinguish between short-lived, high-salience ones (terrorist attacks) to ones that have been going up or down on media agenda for years or decades, with low level of salience (unemployment). Issues also compete with one another for a place on the different agendas and the attention given to them. Issue

proponents (for example the news media, lobby groups, NGOs, government) want their issues to be given as much attention in the media, among the public and the policymakers, as it is possible (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). McCombs (2004) finds that this competition among issues is one of the most important aspects of the agenda setting process. The space on the public agenda and the amount of attention available among political actors is rather limited. Empirical research so far has shown that there is space for not more than about five issues on the public agenda. This goes some way to support Miller's (1956) idea of the "magic number seven, plus or minus two."

Agenda setting is an "inherently a political process" (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 3). Getting an issue high up on any agenda is only a part of the problem for issue proponents. Media audiences are known to "co-construct" meaning for an issue from what they see and their own personal experience and they might reject the way an issue is presented by the media (Neumann, Just and Crigler 1992).

2.1.5 Agenda(s)

Agenda is a term which is somewhat easier to define than an issue. "An agenda is a set of issues that are communicated in a hierarchy of importance at a point in time" write Dearing and Rogers (1996: 2). The former author argued in one of his earlier works that agendas are "a ranking of the relative importance of various public issues" (Dearing 1989: 310). Issues are important in relation to one another and their order is based on salience of individual issues. The notion that agendas can be measured "at a point in time" is misleading, as the salience of issues rises and falls constantly over time. By studying agendas we are looking at "snapshots of this fluidity" (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 2).

Agenda can also be interpreted in a political way. Cobb and Elder (1972: 14) thought about an agenda as “a general set of political controversies that will be viewed at any point in time as falling within the range of legitimate concerns meriting the attention of the polity.”

The agenda setting research recognises three different agendas and focuses on the relationships between them. These are the public agenda, the media agenda and the policy agenda. Each one is measured in a different way. The public agenda is most often evaluated by the public’s response to the “most important problem” survey question (for example Gallup’s “What is the most important problem facing this country today?,” which was first asked in 1935). Once aggregated the responses tell us what is the relative position of an issue on the public’s agenda.

The media agenda is usually gauged using various content analysis techniques. We can find several conceptualizations of content analysis in the literature. Berelson described it as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (1952: 18). Walizer and Wienir (1978) define content analysis as “any systematic procedure devised to examine the content of recorded information.” Kerlinger (1986) observed that “content analysis is a method of studying and analysing communication in a systematic, objective and quantifiable manner for the purpose of measuring variables.” The quantification process might take a form of counting column inches given to a particular issue or minutes of airtime devoted to it. What can also be taken into account is the position of the article related to issues in question on a page or in a running order of a news programme (Gormley 1975; Williams and Semlak 1978). Content analysis of the media material is focused chiefly on the number of stories relating to particular issues, without scrutinizing the meaning.

Measures employed in the studies of policy agenda vary much more than those discussed above. They can include the amount of airtime given to policy debated in parliaments; the number of bills regarding an issue or money allocated to it in a budget (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 18).

2.1.6 Saliency

Some researchers think of the agenda setting process as the transfer of saliency (McCombs and Shaw 1977) and saliency is at the very heart of agenda setting research. Whereas some studies into public opinion might look at how people view certain issues or perhaps how they are portrayed by the media, agenda setting concentrates on the importance of issues. One of the main questions employed in the agenda setting research is the “Most Important Problem” one. Straightforward agenda setting studies do not analyze issue attributes or look in detail at people’s negative or positive opinions toward it. What is of interest is the relative importance of one issue compared with another.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines saliency as “the most noticeable or important.” Dearing and Rogers (1996: 8) write that it “is the degree to which an issue on the agenda is perceived as relatively important.” This is how the first studies of agenda setting saw saliency. Such an approach to saliency stemmed from the earlier research into media effects done by the group led by Lazarsfeld. McCombs and Shaw (1977) wrote of similarities between agenda setting and Lazarsfeld’s idea of the status conferral role of the media. As discussed earlier in this chapter Lazarsfeld argued that media are able to give status to individuals simply by featuring them in their reports (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1948). The notion of “perceived importance” is what connects agenda setting studies with earlier research efforts.

The concept of salience, however, has been interpreted in many different ways by other scholars too. Young (1992: 189) wrote that salience is “the importance that a respondent attaches to some issue or problem asked about, or the extent to which an issue is ‘top of mind’ to respondents.” Takeshita (2005: 277) highlights that such a conceptualization is really comprised of two parts: the usual perceived importance part and the accessibility part (issues that are ‘top of mind’). This brings us to a discussion among scholars interested in and using the concept of salience about the possible flaws in the popular definition of the concept and measures one should employ to examine it properly. Scheufele (1999; 2000) criticized the way agenda setting research has been measuring salience (as perceived importance) and claims that one should think of it more in terms of accessibility. Roessler and Eichhorn (1999) also point out that the concept of salience is really two-fold and is made up of awareness (accessibility) and importance (based on individuals’ belief system) (Takeshita 2005: 277). We can conclude that there are two distinct schools of thought as regard to salience: this of agenda setting and the one focused on salience as accessibility within the field of cognitive psychology.

2.1.7 Measuring salience

As salience is one of the key concepts in the agenda setting research, it is useful to take a closer look at different ways of measuring it. As discussed above the first and most popular way is to use the open-ended question from the Gallup Poll: “What is the most important problem facing this country today?” However, a number of researchers developed different techniques of capturing the effect of salience. McCombs (2005: 82-85) brought some of them together.

In an experimental setting, Althaus and Tewksbury (2002) added the recognition and recall of news stories to the standard MIP question. Other researchers (Wang 2000; Iyengar and Kinder 1987) used three, five-point scales to paint a fuller picture of the

salience of issues, such as racism. These scales were the importance of the issue; extent of discussion with friends and the need for more government action. Evatt and Ghanem (2001) employed 13 bipolar semantic differential scales, which upon further investigation revealed three underlying dimensions of salience: social salience; personal salience and emotional arousal (e.g. boring vs. interesting). Another way of measuring salience was used by Einsiedel, Salomone and Schneider (1984) when they added behavioural measures into their study of public opinion on crime. Japanese scholars, in their work on media effects on vote choice, asked respondents to pick the most important issue from a list of ten (Takeshita and Mikami 1993; Mikami, Takeshita, Nakada and Kawabata 1995). Recently an innovative approach was taken by Kiouisis (2000) who used non-response as an inverse measure of salience. If only few people do not have an opinion on an issue or a political candidate, then one can assume the salience is rather high.

2.1.8 Agenda setting as a zero-sum game

When asked the Most Important Problem question, respondents on average name four to five issues (Brosius and Kepplinger 1992). Similarly media, although with a huge number of outlets, newsprint pages, minutes of airtime and seemingly infinite Internet storage at their disposal tend to focus on a limited number of issues. Often the news media seem to be following Pulitzer's words that "the news attracting people most is related to sports, scandal and crime news" (Brian 2001). This means that the space available for issues on the media agenda and the public agenda is limited. If a new issue is to join the top-ranking ones, it needs to "fight" for its place.

2.1.9 Second level agenda setting

So far we have discussed the first level of agenda setting and indeed the majority of studies focused on this aspect of research. Second level agenda setting studies the

salience of attributes of objects/issues. While first level agenda setting focuses on the influence media have on the hierarchy of issues on public agenda, second level studies uncover another layer of the agenda setting puzzle. They look at the salience of attributes and try to examine whether the media not only tell us “what to think,” but also “how to think about it.”

Such an approach marries agenda setting research with framing theory. According to Entman (1993: 52)

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. Typically frames diagnose, evaluate, and prescribe. Frames define problems – determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; diagnose causes – identify forces creating the problem, make moral judgements – evaluate causal agents and their effects; and suggest remedies – offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects.

Frames determine how people think about a problem. It focuses not only on the ranking of stories, but includes an element of evaluation.

2.1.10 Priming

Priming is considered to be an alternative type of media effect, but at the same time, some researchers (Price and Tewskbury 1997) consider it to be close – on a conceptual level – to agenda setting. Weaver (2007) argues that priming is a mechanism which is “making certain issues or attributes more salient and more likely to be accessed in forming opinions.” It happens when the media highlight a particular issue, which results in people relying on that issue when evaluating political actors (Iyengar and Kinder

1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Miller and Krosnick 2000). By doing so media give cues to the public to rate political candidates on the basis of the aforementioned highlighted themes. Similarly to agenda setting, priming is not regarded as influencing people's perceptions of how the political figures are handling a particular issue. It is thought to bring certain issues to the fore in terms of overall evaluation. The importance of priming lies in its ability to change the standards people use to make political evaluations (Iyeangar and Kinder 1987: 63).

As we mentioned above, some researchers have argued that priming is an extension of agenda setting. Price and Tewksbury (1997) opine that both are accessibility effects based on similar cognitive processes. Their claim, rooted in memory based models of information processing, says that the issues which are more salient are more accessible and in the end easier to recall (Tversky and Kahneman 1973; Hastie and Park 1986). Others (Scheufele 2000) note that priming could be a temporal extension of agenda setting. Media can make some issues more salient (agenda setting) and therefore shape what people take into consideration when evaluating political figures.

Although both agenda setting and priming use the same cognitive processes and are based on salience, agenda setting is thought to be more than just about accessibility. Weaver (2007: 146) observes that "not all persons are equally affected by the same amount and prominence of media coverage, and not all easily accessible information is considered important." Takeshita (2006: 277) points out that salience itself is "a word with two meanings." It can indicate the perceived importance, while its second meaning is closer to the "top of mind" understanding of accessibility research.

In the next part, this chapter goes back to the beginnings of communication study. We explore the theory of limited effects and the academic journey, which led to the emergence of the agenda setting theory outlined above.

2.2 Before agenda setting: limited effects theory

Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail. Without it, nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who moulds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statues and pronounces decisions

Abraham Lincoln (Rivers 1970: 53).

In the previous section of this chapter we discussed the theory of agenda setting and the research into the link between media and public agendas. The first study which empirically tested and put a label on the agenda setting theory was conducted by McCombs and Shaw and published in 1972. But scholars had been interested in studying the power of mass media and their possible effects on the public since the beginning of the twentieth century. In the following section we discuss the media effects theories, which came prior to agenda setting and, which ultimately gave rise to the paradigm shift in the field of political communication studies. We start by examining the limited effects theory; this is followed by discussion of the work of Bureau of Applied Social Research. Finally we look at the paradigm shift and the path towards the agenda setting theory.

2.2.1 Limited effects theory

To trace back the roots of this thesis' core theory, one needs to go back in time as far as to 1922 and the publication of Walter Lipmann's *Public Opinion*. It was Lipmann who was the first to make the connection between the "pictures in our heads" and what is written in the papers. He wrote that the public needs to make sense of the "swarming

confusion of problems.” He argued that the media act as a link between the real world events and the images of these events we have in our heads. Additionally the media, by adding more weight to some stories make them more important for the consumers. Although Lipmann did not use the term agenda setting, he described it rather accurately. He wrote about the changes in the society, brought by the emerging mass media, in terms of a “revolution”:

That the manufacture of consent is capable of great refinements no one, I think, denies. The process by which public opinions arise is certainly no less intricate than it has appeared in these pages, and the opportunities for manipulation open to anyone who understands the process are plain enough. (...) As a result of psychological research, coupled with the modern means of communication, the practice of democracy has turned a corner. A revolution is taking place, infinitely more significant than any shifting of economic power. (...) Under the impact of propaganda, not necessarily in the sinister meaning of the word alone, the old constants of our thinking have become variables. It is no longer possible, for example, to believe in the original dogma of democracy; that the knowledge needed for the management of human affairs comes up spontaneously from the human heart. Where we act on that theory we expose ourselves to self-deception, and to forms of persuasion that we cannot verify. It has been demonstrated that we cannot rely upon intuition, conscience, or the accidents of casual opinion if we are to deal with the world beyond our reach (Lipmann 1961: 248).

The rapid growth of the mass media in the 1930s and the rise of the Nazi propaganda, prompted social scientists to start serious investigation into media effects. In 1937 The Office of Radio Research was established with a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. Its aim was “to study what radio means in the lives of the listeners.” At that stage radio was only a little bit than a decade old. Paul Lazarsfeld was the director (Morrison 1978; Pollack 1980). He was born in Vienna at the beginning of the twentieth century. His doctoral thesis was in mathematics and in Austria he funded

an institute for market and consumer research. After co-writing a study about attitudes of the unemployed (Lazarsfeld, Jahoda, and Zeisel 1933; 1960; 1971) in Marienthal, he was offered a fellowship in America, where he decided to stay and continue his research. The Office of Radio Research was at first located in Newark, then at Princeton and finally moved to Columbia University in 1940. This is when it changed its name to Bureau of Applied Social Research. While at Columbia Lazarsfeld became research partner with Robert Merton and they continued working together for the following 35 years. From the publishing of *The People's Choice* in 1944 to *Personal Influence* in 1955 the researchers at the Bureau focused their investigations on the role of mass media in the decision-making process, which was a legacy of Lazarsfeld's work in consumer and market research in Vienna. They were interested to see whether the mass media can influence people to vote, to buy, to go to the movies, to change an opinion (Morrison 1978; Pollack 1980).

2.2.2 The People's Choice

In 1944 Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet published *The People's Choice* – the study of the 1940 presidential election in the US, conducted in Erie County (Ohio). Rather disappointingly and contrary to their expectations, the authors found that the media only strengthens the already existing predispositions. Any effects that the media might have are weakened by the process of selectivity in attention, perception and recall. People relied mainly on interpersonal communication with their peers. Friends, family and neighbours were found to be more important than the media. Another theory formulated in the book was the one of two-step flow of communication. It argued that “ideas often flow from radio and print to the opinion leaders and from them to the less active sections of the population” (Lazarsfeld et al 1944: 151). This put opinion leaders as a mediating part in the flow of information (and influence) from the media to the

public. *The People's Choice* marks the start of the academic school of the minimal effects of mass communication.

Lasswell's model of communication process

One has to recognize, however, that the model of communication process underlining research of the Bureau was a very simple five-step model developed by Harold Lasswell in 1948. This model proposes that the communication process comprises of these simple questions:

1. Who ("factors that initiate and guide the act of communication")
2. Says What ("content analysis")
3. In Which Channel ("media analysis")
4. To Whom ("audience analysis")
5. With What Effect? ("effect analysis")

(Lasswell 1948: 37)

Although, at first glance these elements might seem a bit simplistic as an approach to such a complicated matter as communication process and its effects, on further inspection it provides plenty of opportunities for thorough research. It also takes into account various (inter)relationship between different actors, such as political parties and the media; voters and the mass media; voters themselves (passive or active?); media (are they in a business of persuading or just providing information? Or are they offering a framework/agenda to which one should refer?); the nature of media language. In fact, as Schramm (1997: 112) puts it "once one fills in Lasswell's five questions catalog, one can never again think of communication as a simple five-factor process."

2.2.3 Further studies from the Bureau of Applied Social Research

Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948/1964) followed Lipmann's way of thinking and recognized the influence of media, although once again this power was more about reinforcing the already existing attitudes. In "Mass communication, popular taste and organized social action" (1948/1964) they underlined the status-conferral role of the media. They wrote that the media "confer status on public issues, persons, organizations and social movements." They also highlighted the canalization role of the media. "Once the gross pattern of behaviour or the generic attitude has been established, it can be canalized in one direction or another" (1948/1964). However they were keen to stress that the mass media "have been effectively used to canalize basic attitudes, but there is little evidence of their having served to change these attitudes" (1948/1964).

Lazarsfeld and all the researchers working at the Bureau of Applied Social Research are regarded as one of the forefathers of modern media research. They certainly seem perceptive in their understanding of the media, which at the time were nowhere near as "mass" as they are nowadays.

Bernard Berelson was another social scientist who worked closely with Lazarsfeld. They co-wrote (with Hazel Gaudet) *The People's Choice: how the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign* in 1944. Berelson in his paper "Communications and Public Opinion" concluded that "some kinds of communication on some kinds of issues, brought to the attention of some kinds of people under some kinds of conditions, have some kinds of effects." (Berelson 1948: 172). His remarks not only sound unpromising for the research into mass media effects, but are also rather vague; nevertheless scientists continued with their research in this area.

Carl Hovland is another key figure in the development of research into media effects. Just like Lazarsfeld, he too has been described as one of the “forefathers” of the study of communication in the US (Schramm 1997: 3). Unlike Lazarsfeld, however, who worked mainly in a manner of survey sociologist, Hovland excelled as an experimental psychologist (Schramm 1997: 89). During the Second World War he was the Chief Psychologist and Director of Experimental Studies for the Research Branch of the Information and Education Division of the U.S. War Department. In the 1940s together with Arthur A. Lumsdaine and Fred D. Sheffield he carried out controlled experiments on American draftees who were asked to watch army training films *Why We Fight*. One of the most important results of this study is the discovery of the “ sleeper effect.” Hovland discovered that when a message is delivered with a discounting cue or by a low credibility source, then the effect of persuasion and possible attitude change increases over time. At first people might not consider such a message persuasive, but the researchers discovered that after some time the persuasion effect kicks in. This was surprising (and counter-intuitive) as the standard pattern of behaviour was thought to be of diminishing effects. *Experiments on Mass Communication*, which contained the results of the experiments carried out during the war, was published a few years after the war, in 1949, but its success provided Hovland an opportunity to start the Program in Communication and Attitude Change at Yale.

These first academic forays into media effects were all in agreement that the media have less influence than was originally believed. The researchers were aware, however, of methodological problems of their studies, for example the focus on short-term change. Lazarsfeld (1948) wrote:

Mass media are not mainly effective in promoting a specific idea or engendering a stand on a definite issue. What they tend rather to do is to shape

for us the picture of the more distant world with which we do not have direct personal contact... Short-term investigations will never be able to trace the way in which, over a lifetime, the mass media accentuate for some people parts of the social world and conceal them from others (Lazarsfeld, 1948: 255).

The limited effects thesis was nevertheless repeated by Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee in their book *Voting* published in 1954. The book contained various analyses of the data collected during the 1948 presidential election campaign in the United States. The data were collected in a small community of Elmira, New York. The results were not that much different from the 1940 study in Erie County. The surface effects of press and radio were deemed “not impressive” (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954: ix). The role of the media was once again more about reinforcement and mobilization. Opinion leaders were found important as mediating link between the media and the voters.

The work, and the body of literature, of the Bureau of Applied Social Research are at the very foundation of modern media research. Interpersonal influence was found of particular importance by Lazarsfeld and his followers. Interestingly the mass media did not become the heroes of this phase of communication research. Elihu Katz (1987: 26) points out that “if there is a hero in these stories it is not the newspaper or the radio but the primary group, which is represented both as a network of information and a source of social pressure.” Their theory of the two-step flow of communication was also connected to the aforementioned status-conferral role of the media. These first studies assessed the possibility of media effects, but were mainly interested (and later on criticised for) in short-term changes, often in the context of election campaigns. They also highlighted the fact that, contrary to the popular belief, mass media might not be as influential as we thought. This was based on quite a simple model of media effects with the early research looking for direct effects and focused strongly on the individual. The

findings of the limited/minimal effects model were criticised by scholars from the mid-1960s onwards. With the new empirical evidence, the old model was considered outdated and insufficient. Chafee stresses that the conclusions of the media effect studies from the 1940s and 1950s could have been “peculiar to the political conditions and media systems of the 1940s” (Rogers and Chaffee 1983: 22). Another criticism of the early work, especially the research conducted by the Bureau of Applied Social Research under Lazarsfeld, was the fact that it was too dependent on the funding received from the mass media themselves (Schramm 1997: 113). Kurt and Gladys Lang went as far as to say that “the minimal effects theorem was a boon for the media industry” (Lang and Lang 1983: 135). In fact Lazarsfeld was quoted as saying that “a budding research institute (Bureau of Applied Social Research) is dependent on the media and must try to avoid losing their support” (in Noelle-Neumann 1983: 160). And indeed the reason behind Lazarsfeld’s decision to retire from communication research is believed to be his growing resentment of the “pressure that the media exerted on a communication researcher” (Schramm 1997: 109).

Klapper’s *The Effects of Mass Communication* (1960) serves as a bookend to the period when the dominant theory was the one of the limited effects of the media. He highlights a new approach in the research of mass media that he calls “phenomenistic” (Klapper 1966: 476). He argues that “the old quest of specific effects stemming from the communication has given way to the observation of existing conditions or changes, followed by an inquiry into the factors, including mass communication, which produced those conditions and changes, and the roles which these factors played relative to each other” (1966: 476). This shows that social scientists were starting to grow aware of the complicated nature of mass media effects research, which could not only seek “simple

and direct effects of which mass communication is the sole and sufficient cause” (1966: 483).

2.2.4 Paradigm shift

The limited effects paradigm had been the leading one in the field of communications research for many years. Indeed it seemed to be popular with a wide variety of research schools. Following Katz (1987) we should note that the Columbia voting studies (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944; Berelson et al. 1954) are the most referenced within political communication (Chaffee and Hochheimer 1982); they were liked both by the traditionally-minded scientists and the Marxists for their recognition of the power of resistance of the classes (Giddens quoted in Gitlin 1978); they helped with the concept of public space, providing the link between inter-personal and the media (Gouldner 1976; Newcomb and Hirsch 1983; Hallin and Mancini 1984). However in spite of such great popularity and wide-ranging influence, some social scientists felt the need to abandon the limited effects paradigm (in fact Lazarsfeld himself lost his interest around 1960 (Katz 1987)).

In the 1960s there was a clear need for a paradigm shift, for a new start, so that communication research could progress and expand. The critics pointed out that the limited effects paradigm focuses too much on short-term effects and the change in opinion of individuals. This might have been a valid criticism, although, as pointed out by Katz (1987) this might not have necessarily been the stance of “Lazarsfeldians.” Different challenges to the established (and dominant) paradigm appeared, but three of them deserve a more detailed examination.

If we say that the early communication research tried to investigate the idea that the media tell us what to think, then the alternative paradigms challenged this approach and

examined the ideas that the media tell us what to think about (the institutional/critical/political paradigm), what not to think (the critical paradigm) and how to think, where to belong (the technological paradigm) (Katz 1987). Each of these paradigms offer a critique of the limited effects paradigm from a different perspective and they all argue that media can have a strong influence on the world of politics. They all differ in their approach to the role of media and its influence. The institutional paradigm views media not as agents of persuasion, but as suppliers of information, able to give a certain shape to reality. The critical paradigm sees the power of the media in maintaining the status quo rather than triggering any type of change. The technological paradigm is not interested in content, but focuses on the type of medium itself and the consequences this has for societies. The basis for these alternative approaches are therefore information (the institutional paradigm), ideology (the critical paradigm) and organization (the technological paradigm).

This thesis builds on the rich empirical research tradition of the institutional paradigm as we felt it offers the most interesting approach to the problem of the role of the media in the world of politics. It also provided us with established methodological approaches which we could consult while carrying out this research. It is important to take a closer look at these challenges to the mighty limited effects theory and how they shaped the next decades of communication research.

2.2.5 The institutional paradigm

This is perhaps the least confrontational of the paradigms that sprang out of frustration with the restrictions of the limited effects model. If anything else, it was built on the foundation of the preceding research with a view of progressing it with a strong commitment to empirical research. Once again we shall follow the analysis of Katz

(1987) and outline the criticisms that the institutional paradigm levelled at the limited effects theory. It argued that:

1. Media should not be treated as agents of persuasion, but as agents, supplying information to the public and the “public space.”
2. Politics is not only about voting. By narrowing it only to voting, we are limiting the political role of the media.
3. Influence of the media in politics might be different than in other realms of life (Chaffee and Hochheimer 1982).
4. The image of the all-powerful media and the defenceless mass is distorted and makes it hard to find a possibility of a change (Chaffee 1977; Delia 1987).
5. Limited effects theory did not prevent from generalizing from findings from some places and times to others.

The institutional paradigm claimed that we should treat politics as an institution. It has norms, rules, practices and history. Once we look at it from this perspective we should focus on the relationship among these parts. One of the most prominent examples of the institutional approach came with the already mentioned agenda-setting study of McCombs and Shaw (1972). The media appear in it as “architects of social and political reality” (Katz 1987). We move away from the power of persuasion to the power of information and shaping the reality in which we all live. The institutional paradigm and the work of researchers that adopted it, was discussed in detail at the beginning of this chapter. It is, however, also important to briefly summarize the two other paradigms that challenged the dominance of the limited effects one: the critical paradigm and the technological one.

2.2.6 The critical paradigm

Todd Gitlin in his *Media Sociology: The Dominant Paradigm* (1978) attacked the limited effects theory from the critical perspective. He maintains that the work of Lazarsfeld and his followers ignored the real power of the media, which lies not in their ability to introduce change, but rather in maintaining the status quo. What is important – suggests Gitlin – is not to investigate the power of the media to tell us what to think (power of change) or what to think about (power of agenda setting), but what not to think. The media are powerful, because they can leave things out and exclude alternative choices. He argues that the limited effects model has “denied attention from the power of the media to define normal and abnormal social and political activity, to say what is politically real and what is not.” This introduces a false belief of the public that choices exist, when in fact the choices are purely imaginary (Coca-Cola or Pepsi? O2 or Vodafone?). This echoes the writing of both Adorno (1972) and Hall (1973). More empirical works following the critical theory were produced by Noelle-Neumann (1973) and Gerbner and Gross (1976). The authors, coming from two opposite ends of political spectrum concluded that isolated individuals in the mass society have grown more dependent on the media, which cancelled out their selectivity and inter-personal dependence, thus making way for powerful media effects. Herbert I. Schiller is another researcher working within the critical tradition. Writing about communication research (1983: 253) he outlined characteristics which are common to all critical research. He argues that it is not “focusing on individual consumption [and impact] of media products, [it] addresses the production of informational outputs.” The critical research “makes an effort to understand the sources and exercises of power, especially as they relate to communication processes and information flow.” It also “demonstrates an awareness of continuous change in social processes and institutions, or, put differently, a strong sense of history” (Schiller 1983: 253).

2.2.7 The technological paradigm

The crux of the technological paradigm is to look more closely at social organization and not to be too preoccupied with the influence of the media. McLuhan in his *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) wrote that “the medium is the message.” And indeed the technological paradigm focuses on the different types of media and the network setting power they possess. It is the form of the media that is responsible for effects and McLuhan was not interested in content. Examples are in abundance; from the revolution of the telegraph (Carey 1983), the impact of print on Renaissance scholarship and science (Eisenstein 1979) to the more recent examples of the explosion of social networking on the Internet (Facebook, MySpace, etc.). According to the technological paradigm, the agent of change is technological (Katz (1987: 33) lists portability, simultaneity, exactness, reproducibility) and the effect is on organization (market, science, church, social groups). The technological paradigm provides an interesting counterpoint to the institutional one, as the media elites are in charge of these technologies (MySpace is owned by Rupert Murdoch’s NewsCorp) and use them to spread their message. It also quizzes the preoccupation of communication research with the influence of the media on opinion and the perceived lack of interest in their influence on social organization.

2.2.8 Towards agenda setting theory

At the beginning of this chapter we discussed the agenda setting theory. Since the first empirical study of agenda setting in 1972, it has become a popular theoretical approach to the study of media effects on public opinion. In the sections above we went back to the very roots of the agenda setting and the first studies into media effects. The following section closes this historical circle by discussing the research, which led directly to the emergence of agenda setting theory.

It was 1963 when another big step toward formulating a proper theory of agenda setting was taken. Bernard Cohen published *The Press and Foreign Policy* (1963) in which he studied the influence of press on the foreign policy of the United States. The book contains one of the best-known quotes in the field of communication research. Cohen suggested that the press “might not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. The world will look different to different people, depending on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the paper they read” (Cohen 1963:13). These few lines elegantly and succinctly summarize at least part of this thesis theoretical approach. They highlight the importance of systematic studies of media agenda, which can determine precisely what the media tell us during election campaigns. Cohen’s words also signalled a new approach to communication studies and a move from the early research into the role of media in making decisions to a broader outlook. While the media might not necessarily be successful at telling us what to do or who to vote for, they might be quite effective in persuading us what we should think about. What are the topics we should find important, what we should be preoccupied with. Equipped with such a list we can then make our own choices, but the media provide us with a limited menu of issues we should concern ourselves with. It has to be stressed, however, that Cohen’s study was not focused on the general public, but on the attentive public and the policymakers.

Cohen’s thoughts were not lost on other researchers and were echoed three years later by Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang. In their article “The Mass Media and Voting” they remarked that “the mass media force attention to certain issues. They build up public images of political figures. They are constantly presenting objects suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, have feelings about” (Lang and

Lang 1966: 468).

The authors wanted to discuss the notion (prevalent at the time of writing) of how *little* (emphasis from Lang and Lang) influence the mass media have on voters and their choices. They understood the need for a better research into the mass media influence, especially the long term one. They suggested that changes (in news agenda, order of issues) may occur between the campaigns and not necessarily during the campaigns. They said: “In turning attention to the continuous, and not only the intermittent, aspects of mass media influence, we must deal, first, with the role of mass communications as such, focusing not only on the communicator’s job as a transmitting agent for party propagandists but on the direct impress the communications have on what individuals in the mass society know of the larger political world” (Lang and Lang 1966: 470).

Lang and Lang published their article in *Reader in Public Opinion and Communication* edited by the previously mentioned Bernard Berelson and Morris Janowitz (1966). The book brought together articles advancing the theoretical concepts and methodologies behind public opinion and communication research. It introduced a new way of thinking about public opinion and communication research and paved the way for the formation of the agenda setting theory.

The next section will look at the importance of comparative media research. It explores the concept of party-press parallelism as well as Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) three models of media and politics.

2.3 Comparing Media Systems

The following section looks at the importance of comparative analysis of media systems. It also examines the problems behind cross-national comparisons of media-effects. This

will inform our expectations in regards to possible similarities and differences between the role of the media agendas and public opinion during elections in the two countries studied in this thesis: Ireland and the United Kingdom.

Hallin and Mancini (2004: 2) argue that comparative analysis of media systems is important as it “sensitizes us to variation and to similarity, and this can contribute powerfully to concept formation and to the refinement of our conceptual approaches.” Graber (1993: 305) observes that political communication has to be studied from a comparative perspective “as its form varies between cultures which makes it necessary and instructive to analyze it from different cultural perspectives.” Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956) were the first ones to ask why there are differences between media systems. They enquired “Why is the press as it is? Why does it apparently serve different purposes and appear in widely different forms in different countries? Why, for example, is the press of the Soviet Union so different from our own, and the press of Argentina, so different from that of Great Britain?” According to Hallin and Mancini, there are several reasons why a comparative study of media systems is a research path worth taking. Firstly, most of the existing literature focuses on a single country, but at the same time, research seems to offer generalized conclusions. Secondly, comparative research can highlight some features of media systems that “may be taken for granted and difficult to detect when the focus is on only one national case” (Blumler and Gurevitch 1975: 76). Thirdly, when conducting comparative research, we can spot differences as well as similarities. Esser and Pfetsch (2004: 384) also argue for the importance of comparative research. Such an approach helps us to expand an existing database and therefore simplifies generalizations and refines theories. It also prevents parochialism and ethnocentrism of political communication research. Furthermore it enables to understand one’s society better by juxtaposing it with another system. Also, by looking

at one's country from a cross-national perspective, we can see "the specific identity of political communication arrangements within a given system" (Esser and Pfetsch 2004: 384). Finally a cross-national approach offers a variety of different solutions to practical research problems. Following Plasser (2002: 79) we note that some of the components which have to be taken into consideration while studying campaigns from a cross-national perspective include the electoral system, the system of party competition, legal regulations of campaigns, degree of professionalization of campaigns, the media system the national political culture and the degree of modernization in society.

Following previous attempts at setting up similar frameworks for comparisons of media systems (Blumler and Gurevitch 1975) Hallin and Mancini identify four dimensions which can be used for comparing media systems. These are:

1. the development of media markets with an emphasis on strong or weak development of mass circulation press.
2. political parallelism, by which they understand the links between the political parties and the mass media.
3. professionalization of journalism.
4. state intervention in the media system.

To better understand the relationship between the media and political systems, they also take into account the political context of media systems being compared. This can be analyzed across five different dimensions. They include the relationship between state and society (liberal and welfare state); the differences between consensus and majoritarian government, organized pluralism or corporatism and liberalism, rational-legal authority and the distinction between moderate and polarized pluralism. Hallin

and Mancini (2004: 65) argue that by looking at the political variables, we can detect “regular patterns of association with important characteristics of the media system.” The politics-media relationship can be traced back to common historical roots of the systems and “the early or late development of the bourgeois institutions of market and political democracy.” Before we take a closer look at the three models, we shall examine one of the four dimensions used by Hallin and Mancini to analyze and differentiate between media systems: press-party parallelism.

2.3.1 Press/party parallelism

From the time of the Reformation newspapers began to act as an important force in political life and political advocacy became one of the many roles of a journalist. Hallin and Mancini (2004: 26) describe a political journalist as “a publicist who saw it as his or her role to influence public opinion in the name of a political faction or cause.” But with the rise of commercial press a new type of neutral, objective and non-partisan type of journalism emerged. Nowadays, it would be difficult to argue that absolutely objective journalism exists. At the same time the differences between commercial and politicized media are not obvious either. There are examples of partisan commercial media and of balanced media which are connected or supported by political parties. Hallin and Mancini observe that one of the most prominent differences between media systems is the fact that in some of them we can see media with very clear political orientations, while in others such obvious political leanings are absent.

In the context of comparative research this can be explained by the concept of party-press parallelism. It was introduced in the studies of Seymour-Ure (1974) and Blumler and Gurevitch (1975) and originally meant “the degree to which the structure of the media system paralleled that of the party system” (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 27). Van Kempen (2007: 303) follows Seymour-Ure and argues that we can observe press-party

parallelism “if ties exist between newspapers and political parties. It exists in its strongest form when each newspaper supports a party which is highly visible in the leader columns and in the editorial parts of newspapers – but sometimes in the news items themselves.” To judge the strength of political parallelism in a media system one can examine several different components. Hallin and Mancini identify them as media content, organizational connections, tendency for media personnel to be active in political life, partisanship of media audiences and journalistic role orientations and practices.

The existence and the degree of press-party parallelism can have several consequences. According to some studies it can strengthen the existing political preferences (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1944; Rokkan and Torsvik 1970; Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell and Semetko 1999; Voltmer 2000; Newton and Brynin 2001) a high degree of press-party parallelism can impact positively on the turnout levels. There is quite a variation between countries when it comes to the strength of party-press parallelism. Researchers detected a high degree of parallelism in countries such as Greece (Dimitras 1997), but there are countries where press-party parallelism is “virtually absent” (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 209; van Kempen 2007: 304). Kempen reports that the media-party parallelism in Ireland (on the scale where 0 = no parallelism and 100 = maximum parallelism) is 1.6, whereas in the United Kingdom it is at 7.1.

2.3.2 Three models of media and politics

Hallin and Mancini group their models according to their geographical region and the most distinctive feature of their political systems. We could summarize that in the Liberal countries the media are closer to business than they are to the world of politics.

In Polarized Pluralist countries the media are more connected to politics, whereas in the Democratic Corporatist model the media are integrated with both business and politics.

Another important observation is the fact that in all of the countries studied by Hallin and Mancini, they observe a trend leading towards the Liberal Model.

THE MEDITERRANEAN / POLARIZED PLURALIST MODEL

The countries which share the features of the Polarized Pluralist model include France, Italy, Greece, Portugal and Spain. Thanks to historical similarities in the way political institutions and societies of these countries have developed over centuries, their media systems share certain characteristics. Hallin and Mancini observe that liberal institutions came late in these countries and that ancien régime institutions, such as the Catholic Church or the Orthodox Church had a stronger influence there. This resulted in a late development of commercial media and freedom of the press. The media are also closely tied to the world of politics and the press is elite-oriented with small circulation. The press has a strong focus on political life and the media are often seen as “means of ideological expression” (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 90). The degree of political parallelism is usually high and the government and political parties can view the media as a tool to extend their influence. We can also see the centrality of the electronic media. The state plays a big role in terms of funding, owning and regulating the media. This, however, can be problematic, because of limited resources and lack of political consensus. Some of the countries belonging to the Mediterranean model have experienced savage deregulation when commercial broadcasting was introduced with no control and no clear obligations to serve the public. The above characteristics are not only rooted in history but are also based on the ideological diversity and conflict which exists in countries like France, Italy or Spain. It is important to note that France could

be viewed as a borderline case because of its stronger industrialization, the strength of the rational-legal authority and the better development of the mass-market press.

THE NORTH/CENTRAL EUROPEAN. DEMOCRATIC CORPORATIST MODEL

As with the Polarized Pluralist countries, the Democratic Corporatist model comprises of countries which occupy a distinct geographical region and share many historical links. The social, political and business ties binding them together go back over hundreds of years and include times of peace and war. The countries belonging to the Democratic Corporatist model are: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. Their media systems are characterized by the early development of press freedom and the press industry. In fact Sweden was the world pioneer in terms of press freedom and publicly available official information. Both prerogatives were guaranteed in the 1766 constitution. The newspaper circulation is high and we observe high levels of political parallelism. One of the key features of the North/Central European model is the fact that it incorporates characteristics which exist side by side, though often have been regarded as incompatible. They are described by Hallin and Mancini as “three coexistences” (2004: 195). For example the strong commercial media coexists with politically-linked press. Strong press freedom goes hand in hand with a high degree of state intervention and a high degree of political parallelism is present alongside journalistic professionalization. This model can also be identified by well-organized social groups (parties, unions, interest groups, cultural and religious groups) which traditionally used media as an “instrument of identification and organization within and discussion, comparison and conflict among them” (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 153). They continue by arguing that the media “have traditionally reflected the divisions and diversity of society, yet have functioned as members of a profession with strong institutional coherence, consensus on its own rules of conduct and

substantial autonomy from other social institutions” (2004: 196). In all the countries identified above we observe moderate pluralism, consensus politics, strong rational-legal authority and the development (with variations) of the welfare state.

THE LIBERAL MODEL

Sometimes called and Anglo-American model and it is similar to the Democratic Corporatist model described in the previous section. Countries which belong to the Liberal Model are: the United Kingdom, Ireland, USA and Canada. Media research often takes this model as a normative ideal, which surprises Hallin and Mancini as they regard it as quite diverse. They also add that all systems are dynamic. There is also a degree of variation within national media systems. McQuail (1987: 133) observes that “in most countries, the media do not constitute any single ‘system’ with a single purpose or philosophy, but are composed of many separate, overlapping, often inconsistent elements, with appropriate differences of normative expectation and actual regulation.” Nevertheless there are many common characteristics between the countries of the North Atlantic model. Among them we observe the dominance of market forces and commercial media. The early development of the mass-circulation press and press freedom. The degree of political parallelism is low, with the United Kingdom being an exception. Hallin and Mancini note (2004: 210) that “despite (...) general trend toward diminishing political parallelism (...), the political orientations of British newspapers today are as distinct as anywhere in Europe (...)” They conclude that “(...) within the limits of the British political spectrum, strong, distinct political orientations are clearly manifested in news content.” The role of the state in terms of its involvement in the media is limited in the Liberal Model countries, but once again there is a considerable amount of variation between them. In the United Kingdom there is a strong regulation of the public, as well as commercial, broadcasters. In Ireland and Canada the role of the

state has been more pronounced due to the problems of forming a national identity. Commenting on Irish press Hallin and Mancini write that “(...) politicized newspapers had an extremely important role to play in the political mobilizations that formed the Irish democratic system” (2004: 209).

2.4 Conclusions

This chapter examines the agenda setting literature and also the communication research which preceded it. The first section explains what agenda setting is and discusses its key theoretical components. In the second part we examine the beginning of communication research in order to put agenda setting literature in a context of a vibrant and changing body of research. We also look at the importance of comparative media research. With the pace of technological change in the world of media increasing dramatically, we expect agenda setting research to evolve accordingly. In this thesis we explore the possibilities of using new technologies as alternative ways of measuring media and public agendas.

The following chapter presents an overview of methods, data and variable operationalization used in this thesis.

Chapter 3

Methods and data

3 Methods and data

Introduction

This thesis focuses on the role of media agendas during national election campaigns. It provides a detailed examination of media content during national election campaigns in Ireland and in the United Kingdom. It also examines the items on the public agendas during election campaigns. For our examination to be as detailed as possible, we use a multi method research design, including quantitative media and public opinion data analysis, as well as qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. To investigate whether media agendas are different depending on electoral context and if they vary between different media markets, the study uses a cross-national case study research design. We focus on two neighbouring countries with different electoral systems and distinct media markets: the United Kingdom and Ireland.

Original media data was collected and analysed for content to examine the role of news media campaign coverage in the 2007 Irish general election. In addition, we conducted a small number of semi-structured interviews with the key media figures in Ireland. The thesis was able to provide direct comparisons between media agendas in Ireland in 2007 and 2002, as well as the United Kingdom in 2005, as all three datasets were collected using the same methodology.

The public opinion data comes from a variety of sources. For the study of the 2005 British election we use the Rolling Campaign Survey collected by YouGov for the British Election Study. We also use public opinion data collected by market research companies. For the study of the 2007 election in Ireland, we use public opinion data collected by the Irish National Election Study.

This chapter starts with describing the cases chosen for this study. In the second part, it presents the data sources and collection process. In the third part we focus on data operationalization. This is followed by explanation of methods and data used to explore the alternative ways of measuring media and public agendas. The chapter finishes with a short summary.

3.1 Cases

We have previously noted that research into the role of news media coverage of election campaigns lacks a cross-national comparative element. We also observed that there is virtually no systematic research of media and public agenda in the Irish context. This study addresses those research gaps by looking at the campaign news coverage in two countries: the United Kingdom and Ireland. It also advances the study of political communication in Ireland, by building on Brandenburg's previous research (2002; 2005) and adding a comparative element, by examining media agenda in 2002 and 2007.

Examining the Irish and British media during election campaigns gives a unique chance to compare and contrast their role under different electoral context. The two countries also have distinct media cultures, therefore adding another layer to the investigation. By investigating these two cases we are seeking to establish what the differences and similarities between them are. A comparative case study is a good way to understand the role of news media during election campaigns. As King Koeohane and Verba (1994: 43) observe

social science should be both general and specific: it should tell us something about classes of events as well as about specific events at particular places We want to be timeless and timebound at the same time. (...) The best way to

understand a particular event may be by using the methods of scientific inference also to study systematic patterns in similar parallel events.

3.1.1 Political systems

Britain has a multi-party political system, but traditionally two parties dominate the parliament. Coalitions occur rarely and the first past the post electoral system has tended to ensure that either Labour or the Tories dominate in the House of Commons². The predominance of the two big parties provides a natural focus for the mass media news coverage. It also means that party leaders are of great importance during the campaign. Leaders have become even more central to the campaign process in 2010 with the introduction of televised leaders' debates. There are two differences between the Irish and British political systems, which are of particular interest of this study. First, Ireland is a multi-party democracy with two dominant parties (Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael), but coalition governments are much more common than in the UK. Second, it has been argued that Irish politics and elections are highly localized and "candidate centered but party wrapped" (Marsh 2000). He adds that "in the 1950s and 1960s manifestos were considered unnecessary, and if they were drawn up this was done at the last minute and such proposals could be ignored by local campaigns" (2000: 4).

These differences provide us with a context in which to examine the possible variations of the role of news media during elections. We look at proportional representation of political parties in the news media, the role of party leaders and the importance of the national campaign.

² Evans and Norris (1999) provide a comprehensive study of British parties and voters. See also *Political Choice in Britain* (Clarke, Sanders, Stewart and Whiteley 2004).

3.1.2 Media cultures

One of the most compelling reasons to study news campaign coverage in the UK is the belief in the strong partisanship of the British media. This is well supported in the literature with Newton and Brynin observing that “the British press is highly partisan by most western standards” (2001: 267) and Denver (2003: 138) asserting that “the national press in Britain has traditionally been overwhelmingly and clearly partisan.” British media culture is also unique, because of the existence of the BBC. Other countries have public broadcasters too, but what makes the BBC especially interesting is the fact that it does not have to rely on advertisements for its revenue. This means that it is in a different position to other broadcasters (both public and commercial) in terms of maintaining impartiality and objectivity. Also, the size of the BBC means that its role and the shadow it casts over the British media market make it a distinctive feature of the British media market. The UK elections are a popular subject of political communication research (Brandenburg 2005; Semetko 1996; 2000, Deacon, Wring and Golding 2005; Bartle 2005; Norris 2006; Norris and Wlezien 2005; Norris and Sanders 2003). Although there has been some cross-national comparative research (for example Semetko 1996), it has not been extensive to date.

Contrary to their British counterparts, the Irish press and the way it reports the election campaigns has been traditionally described as “unbiased, proportional and largely non-partisan” (Brandenburg 2005: 299). He goes on to say that Irish newspapers “are presumed to primarily fulfil a normative role as information providers.” The presumed lack of partisanship in the Irish media offers an important distinction between the two media markets which is explored in this thesis. Another important reason for studying news media agenda in the Irish context is the fact that systematic studies of media and elections in Ireland are few and far between.

Some of the general questions explored both by the quantitative and qualitative analyses employed by this study are a result of “soaking and poking” (Fenno 1978) observations about the mass media in Ireland. This required

the researcher to marinate himself in the minutiae of an institution – to experience its customs and practices, its successes and its failings, as those who live it every day do. This immersion sharpens out intuitions and provides innumerable clues about how the institution fits together and how it adapts to its environment (Putnam 1993:12)

Another important argument behind the choice of the two cases for this study was the availability of comparable datasets. We were able to use the media dataset compiled by Brandenburg after the 2005 general election in the UK, as well as his dataset for the 2002 Irish general election. Adding to these our own data gathered and analysed after the 2007 Irish election, we had three comprehensive datasets of news media content with the same unit of analysis, which were compiled using the exact same methodology. This approach follows George and McKeown (1985) who highlight the “need for a systematic collection of the same information – the same variables – across carefully selected units” (King, Keohane and Verba 1994: 45).

3.2 Data and variable operationalization

3.2.1 Britain 2005

For the study of the British media coverage and public opinion during the general election in 2005, this thesis used several datasets. For the media agenda we used the press data compiled and analysed by Dr. Heinz Brandenburg from the University of Aberdeen. For the analysis of public opinion we used the Rolling Campaign Panel Survey and the Face-to-Face Survey conducted for the British Election Study.

Data for the Rolling Campaign Survey were collected in a Britain-wide survey administered by YouGov company. This dataset allows for a detailed day-by-day study of the public opinion agenda during the election campaign. It also makes it possible to establish how many people changed their minds in regards to the MIP question pre and post election.

The public opinion datasets are complemented by Brandenburg's media content data. He content-analysed main British newspapers - the *Guardian*, the *Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Mirror* – over a period of a four-week long election campaign (5 April 2005 – 5 May 2005). The unit of analysis in this dataset is a line of text, with every line coded for its policy dimension or campaign/process dimension. The coding procedure defines 12 policy dimensions (with several issues each)³: political system; crime/justice; defence; economy (tax, unemployment, etc.); agriculture; social welfare (health, immigration); education; arts/culture; infrastructure/technology; environment; foreign affairs; Northern Ireland. There are five campaign/process dimensions identified in the Brandenburg dataset: campaign; poll/horserace; leadership; political ethics; election general. These dimensions are then broken down into individual issues. The Economy dimension and the issues associated with it might provide a useful example. It has six issues associated with it: economical development; industry and commerce; job/unemployment; tax; finances; economic (general). This dataset allows for a comprehensive study of the media content during the 2005 general election in the UK. It shows which issues were on top of the mass media agenda during that period and whether this changed between the start and the finish of

³ For a complete list of all policy dimensions and issues, please see Appendix 1.

the election campaign. This detail-rich dataset also gives an opportunity to see whether the claims about partisanship of the British press are true.

3.2.2 Ireland 2007

Original data were collected for the analysis of news campaign coverage in Ireland during the 2007 general election campaign. This section provides details on how the data were collected and the content analysis methodology. Six daily newspapers were collected during the election campaign (April 30, 2007 through May 24). In addition, TV news programmes, broadcast on RTÉ One and TV3 were recorded every day. The newspapers were selected on the basis of their circulation and readership. We also looked for differences in terms of format and collected three broadsheet newspapers and three tabloid ones. The newspaper titles collected are: the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Independent*, the *Irish Examiner*, the *Irish Sun*, the *Irish Daily Star* and the *Evening Herald*. Various Sunday newspapers were collected throughout the campaign and were used for anecdotal evidence throughout the thesis. For the TV data, the main TV news bulletins from the public broadcaster (News at 9) and its commercial rival (TV3 – News at 5:30) were recorded. The content analysis method followed the one used by Brandenburg in his analyses of campaign coverage in Ireland in 2002 and the United Kingdom in 2005. The unit of analysis is analogous to the one explained in the section above. For print media it is a standardised line of text. For TV news it is a second of broadcast.

For the analysis of the public agenda we used the Irish National Election Study data. INES is a five-wave survey encompassing the 2002 general election, local elections and the European election in 2007. The survey initially had 2,663 respondents. The principal investigators are Professor Michael Marsh (Trinity College Dublin, 2002, 2007) and Professor Richard Sinnott (University College Dublin, 2002).

The 2007 wave of the survey also included questions relating to interest in media. The respondents were asked where they get their political information from, how often and whether they trust a particular news source (questions v0049 through v0066).

This study adopted a multi-method research approach and the quantitative analysis of the news campaign coverage was cross-examined by qualitative interview data. This methodological triangulation (Denzin 1978) helps us to look at the role media play in national election campaigns from distinct research angles. The quantitative analysis allows us to examine the news coverage in detail and look for different types of bias, such as agenda bias or statement bias. Through the data collection process and subsequent content analysis we were also able to have an intimate knowledge of the campaign. Qualitative interview data enables us to verify these findings with the views of key media practitioners in Ireland. For this study we interviewed senior managers from the public broadcaster RTÉ (Head of Broadcast Compliance Peter Feeney and editor of radio news Michael Good), print journalists (political editor of the *Sunday Business Post* Pat Leahy), PR specialist and columnists (Terry Prone) and former party press officers (former secretary general of Fianna Fáil Martin Mackin). Thanks to these semi-structured interviews we are able to add another dimension to the analysis of quantitative data. It also broadened the scope of research and helped to formulate questions, which might be interesting for further research.

3.2.3 Variable operationalization: media agenda

This study follows a typical agenda setting research in the operationalization of media and public agendas. To measure media agendas we quantified the meaning of newspaper articles and TV news broadcasts over a period of general election campaigns in the UK and Ireland. Media content is operationalized as the number of standardised text lines (for clarification, please see below) or the number of story seconds of TV news

broadcast about an issue. All the daily newspaper issues published during the period of the election campaign were collected. All stories with an explicit reference to the campaign were selected, regardless of their position in the newspaper. This means that the dataset includes stories from special sections dedicated to the election as well as articles referencing the election from other sections. The codebook includes 12 policy dimensions (broken down into several smaller issues) and five campaign/process dimensions. Each line of election-related material was coded for content across a number of variables. If several lines of text (which might have encompassed more than one sentence) referred to one policy dimension and issue, they were grouped together, but the unit of analysis remained the same. We recorded the policy and campaign dimensions and issues, whether a political party or a party leader were mentioned. Print media articles were also coded in terms of ranking on the page, type of text (headline, sub-headline, photo, cartoon/graph). All photos were also coded and their size transferred into a number of standardised text lines. TV news was also coded for its placing in the bulletin. All the election-related opinion and editorial content was coded for tone of statement too. The scale ranged from -1.00 (negative statement), through 0.00 (neutral statement) to +1.00 (positive statement). In the case of newspaper content, column width was measured to allow for comparison between papers which have varying column widths. Two new variables were calculated. First, text units were multiplied by the column width measure, which gives us centimetres of text. It was then divided by the mean column width for the entire dataset. This gave us a variable, which we refer to as “standardised column line.” This is a weight variable for the entire dataset. It allows for between-paper comparisons and facilitates an easy to understand unit of analysis. Also we were able to use the same unit of analysis across three different media datasets.

3.2.4 Variable operationalization: public agenda

To measure the public agenda we used several questions from various public opinion polls. Agenda setting research usually uses the Most Important Problem question to index the public agenda (Smith 1980). We acknowledge the methodological concerns regarding the use of the MIP question to measure public agenda. Johns (2008) observes that such a question could be interpreted in a contextual or a personal way. If we look at it from a contextual perspective⁴ than we observe “what seems to matter to people at the moment” (Johns 2010, Sarlvik and Crewe 1983). Examining results of public opinion surveys in terms of a more personal agenda we are looking at “what matters to me” answers. We also note that using the MIP question to examine the public agenda has been one of the most popular ways of establishing the public agenda at national level (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 47).

We address those concerns in the part of the thesis investigating media agenda and public opinion during general election campaign in Ireland in 2007. The INES survey we used contained two questions, which were used to measure the public agenda in this thesis. The first one was the standard MIP question: “What do you think is the most important political problem facing Ireland today?” (question v0840) The second question we used was worded as follows: “What has been the issue most important to you personally in this election? (v0842). Examining the answers to both these questions allowed us to look at the differences in between the contextual interpretation of the question (which might be based on media cues) and the personal interpretation (the issue important to the respondent personally). This helped to address some methodological problems surrounding the use of the MIP measure, identified in the

⁴ We also have to consider the wording of the question and whether it uses the word problem or issue.

literature (Zaller 1992; Wlezien and Norris 2005; Wlezien 2005; Niemi and Bartels 1985; Hutchings 2001).

This problem is explored further in this thesis, also in the part looking at the public agenda in Ireland in 2007 and in the section exploring alternative measures of media and public agendas.

The public opinion polls used for this study include the Rolling Campaign Panel Survey and the Face-to-Face Survey conducted for the British Election study and the public opinion survey collected for the Irish National Election Study.

The first part of the Rolling Campaign Panel Survey was conducted in March 2005 (N=7,793), then during the campaign a random sample of ~270 of the original participants were contacted every day for the follow-up interviews. All the respondents were also contacted for the post-election interviews. The Rolling Campaign Survey questionnaire asks the question which is at the centre of the study of public opinion agenda. It is an open question and is worded as follows: “Now, I’d like to ask you a few questions about the issues and problems facing Britain today. As far as you’re concerned, what is the SINGLE MOST important issue facing the country at the present time? [Please write in. If you think there are no important issues facing the country at the present time, please write NONE; if you don’t know, please write DK]” (RCPS 2005 – questionnaire). The pre and post-election surveys which complete the BES Rolling Campaign Survey Data, also ask the MIP questions. For the Face-to-Face Survey (N=2,343) data were collected by in-person CAPI interviews and a self-completion questionnaire mailed to all respondents in the post-election wave. From the INES survey (N=2,663) we used two questions to examine the public agenda: the MIP question and the “most important issue to you personally” one.

3.3 Alternative measures of public and media agendas

We have already discussed the methodological issue surrounding the use of the MIP question to measure the public agenda. This study adopted several approaches to address this problem and explore whether alternative measurements could be developed using new technologies. First we used two different variables from the Irish National Election Study survey to analyse the differences in the proportion of respondents naming particular issues as important problems facing Ireland and important issues for them personally. Chapter 8 looked at a possibility of using new technologies to measure both media and public agenda. We provide details of the software used and data gathered below.

3.3.1 Google Insights and the behavioural aspect of public agenda

Agenda setting research has been successful in establishing a relationship between media and public agendas. It has been argued, however, that using the Most Important Problem question might not necessarily provide us with the correct measure of public opinion. Funkhouser (1973) argues that “the public agenda depends to a large extent upon the way that it is conceptualized and measured.” It may, in fact, be the case that the agenda setting relationship between media and public agendas can be an integral part of the MIP measure itself (Dearing and Rogers 1996, Funkhouser 1973a). We add to the traditional measures of public agenda an alternative one based on the volume of Google searches for a particular item over time. This allows us to explore a possibility of measuring a behavioural aspect of agenda setting.

Google Insights for Search acts like an Internet search engine, compiling data on the volume of searches for an item queried. Google examines how many searches have been done for the item entered, relative to the total number of searches on Google over time. The data are normalized and presented on a scale from 0 to 100. They are also plotted

over time. We can also look at the search volume index from a certain Google domain. This feature was used by this study as it helped us to look closely at the volume of searches in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

We argue that such an approach helps to capture the public in a more active mode. We treat the act of an Internet search as an expression of interest about a particular item. It shows that a person seeks certain services, answers or knowledge. McLeod et al. (1974) argue that agenda setting research should consider behavioural responses of the audience, resulting from an earlier level of salience (Scharkow and Vogelgesang 2009). While public opinion surveys can only measure what respondents choose to reveal, a method examining their behaviour could provide valuable insights into the nature of issue salience. The list of items we examined was based on the issues which were high on media and public agendas in the UK in 2005 and in Ireland in 2007.

We acknowledge that there are certain limitations to this approach⁵. First, the normalization of the Google Insights for Search data makes comparison between countries difficult. Second, we do not know the numbers of people who use Google to search for a particular term. We also lack the knowledge about what makes people query a particular item using an Internet search engine. Is it in addition to interpersonal communication? Is it driven by media cues and stemming from the need to clarify something people read, heard about from the traditional media? Finally, we need more knowledge on the socio-demographic profile of Google users to make any generalized observations.

⁵ These were also outlined by Scharkow and Vogelgesang (2009).

3.3.2 Factiva from Dow Jones

Content analysis is the traditional method used by media agenda studies to systematically analyse news coverage. As it is usually operationalized as a number of a countable unit (Dearing and Rogers 1996), the content analysis process might be lengthy⁶. This study looks at the possibility of using searchable Internet-based news databases, such Factiva from DowJones, to measure media agenda. It also compares the results of the manual content analysis with the computer-aided research.

We used two different versions of the Factiva news database. During the election campaign we had access to Factiva Media Intelligence tool, which was customised for the use of RTÉ. This web-based tool lets users track and monitor changes in the levels of media coverage of chosen terms over time. It used text mining technology to search for and code thousands of stories from a variety of sources. Factiva database includes newspaper titles such as the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Independent*, the *Irish Examiner*, the *Evening Herald*, the *Sunday Independent*, *The Sunday Tribune* and the *Sunday Business Post*. It also looks at the content from news web sites, blogs and the Internet discussion boards. The search terms chosen for this part of the study are: parties, parties' spokespeople and regions. Issues examined include economy, health, education, environment, crime, immigration, trustworthiness, government spending, housing, transport, childcare/carers and pensioners. As Factiva Insight allows for customized reporting, we were able to choose only these sources and issues which were of interest to our study.

The Factiva Media Intelligence tool was preconfigured by RTÉ for use during its campaign coverage. This study also conducted its own independent research using the

⁶ Krippendorff (2004) offers a comprehensive overview of content analysis methodology.

Factiva search engine. We were able to set up our own search terms and choose exactly the sources and time periods we wanted to examine.

We have already discussed the multi-method approach adopted by this thesis and exploring new technologies is part of it. Computer-aided content analysis has been used by agenda setting and political science before (Benoit, Laver and Gary 2003; Benoit, Laver and Mikhaylov 2009; Danke et al., 1997; Fan & Tims 1989; Kleinnijenhuis & Fan 1999; Conway 2003) and this study wants to explore it further with a possibility of using such technologies in future research and also to compare it with the results of the manual content analysis.

3.4 Conclusions

In this chapter we discussed the data used in this thesis and the way we operationalized the main variables. The media agenda is measured using content analysis method of quantifying the meaning of news articles and TV broadcast over the period of election campaigns. The unit of analysis is a standardised line of text or a second of TV news broadcast. We examine the public agenda by using questions from opinion polls conducted during and after election campaigns in the UK and Ireland. This study also uses qualitative data gathered in semi-structured interviews with media practitioners in Ireland. We also explore possibilities of using new technologies to measure media and public agendas. We use Google Insights for Search to investigate the dynamics of public agenda and Factiva from DowJones to measure media agenda. The way the data were collected and analysed, and the operationalization of key variables followed typical agenda setting studies (Dearing and Rogers 1996, McCombs 2004). We discuss some of the methodological problems connected to measuring the public opinion further in relevant sections of the thesis. In the next chapter we present the findings of our

investigation into the media agenda and public opinion during the 2005 general election campaign in the United Kingdom. This is then followed by the third part of the thesis, which examines the media and public agendas in Ireland in 2007.

Chapter 4
British 2005 general election
Media agenda and public opinion

4 British 2005 general election. Media agenda and public opinion

This thesis analyses the campaign news coverage and the public agenda during national election campaigns in Britain and Ireland. The following chapter examines the first case under scrutiny – the 2005 general election in the United Kingdom. This part is then followed by our investigation into the role of mass media during the 2007 election in Ireland. That chapter also compares the results, which adds to the cross-national approach of this thesis.

This part starts with a short general discussion about the role mass media play during elections in Britain. We argue that there are several reasons to examine the British case, amongst them the highly partisan press, unique role of the public broadcaster and the two-party political system⁷. This is then followed by a brief overview of the British media market with further discussion about the partisanship of the British press. We also present data on media use, such as newspaper circulation figures and radio listenership in 2005. The third part of this chapter discusses the relationship of the public with the media in Britain, which is illustrated with opinion poll data. In the main part of the chapter we present the results of our study of the news campaign coverage in May 2005. We also look at the items and dynamics of the public agenda. The chapter finishes with a short summary and conclusions.

Great Britain has some of the most venerable media institutions in the world. Such brands as the BBC, the *Times*, the *Guardian* or the *Financial Times* are recognized and

⁷ Although developments during the 2010 election campaign and the rise in popularity of the Liberal Democrats might have changed that.

respected all over the world. It is also a well established two-party democracy. The area where these two worlds collide or, perhaps, where they meet, where newspaper news reporters and TV crews confront politicians, where party officials meet with media moguls and where millions of citizens read a newspaper every morning and tune into TV news at night – this area provides a fertile ground for research. We often talk about “media power” of “the Fourth Estate,” about their ability to “change” people’s minds and such casual observations have become common wisdom and a myth-like reality accepted by many. But it is the aim of science to question, and as Popper wrote “science must begin with myths – and with the criticism of myths” (Popper 2002 :66). This chapter casts a detailed look at the campaign news coverage and examines the issues which made it onto the aforementioned agendas.

In this thesis we have already written about the fact that the media, especially in recent years, have become an integral part of life for many people in the developed world. We have also discussed the media’s perceived importance and their possible influence on the public in terms of direct media effects theories and the agenda setting theory and research. This chapter is the beginning of the empirical part of this thesis, which is comprised of two cases: the general election in the United Kingdom in 2005 and the general election in Ireland in 2007. The chapter examining the agenda setting function of the mass media in the UK in 2005 starts with an explanation of why such research should be conducted using Great Britain in 2005 as a test case. This is then followed by a brief discussion about the previous research into the topic of interest in the UK and a snapshot of what the British media market looked like at that time. We then move on to describe the data and methods used in the empirical part of the study. Finally we provide the results of our tests and observations and finish with conclusions.

4.1 British media and elections

4.1.1 It's the Sun Wot Won It⁸



Figure 4-1 The *Sun* front page, April 11, 1992.

Source:

sunheadlines.blogspot.com

In September 2009, agenda setting theory became the top story in many news bulletins across the UK and a topic of conversation for many of its citizens. While they might not have discussed the research by McCombs and Shaw or Weaver, in fact they might not have used the term agenda setting at all, mass media and many ordinary Britons had an opinion on the power of the media. This sudden interest was a result of the decision of the country's biggest selling tabloid newspaper – the *Sun* – to stop supporting Labour and pledge its support to the Tories. On Wednesday, September 30, 2009 – just a day after Gordon Brown's keynote speech at Labour's annual conference – the front page of the newspaper was headlined “Labour's lost it.”

Why did this decision become such a big news story and why is it pertinent to this research? Let us begin with answering the former part of the question.

The *Sun* – selling, on average, over three million copies every day – is considered to be a force to be reckoned with by British politicians; it sets the agenda for national debates; its front pages become part of everyday conversations among the general public and it is also owned by Rupert Murdoch's News International – one of the biggest media companies in the world. Therefore major decisions, like the one to support David Cameron's party, are discussed by other media outlets, commented on by both

⁸ This headline appeared on the front page of the *Sun* on April 11, 1992, after the polling day in the UK.

politicians and columnists. They become national events. Former editor of the *Sun*, David Yelland writes “the trick is to ally yourself with the winner and win influence or at least the ear of the prime minister” (2010). Indeed during his time editing the paper he met “Tony Blair, William Hague and Iain Duncan Smith on countless occasions.”

Another aspect of this decision is the fact that British media, and especially newspapers, are highly partisan. This in itself is not that unusual, as many newspapers all over the world present certain political leanings. We know what to expect from an editorial line when we pick up the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Times*. The former has often been called Pravda on the Potomac⁹, the latter was read daily by President Ronald Reagan during his time in the White House (Clarkson 1987). But for some of the British newspapers, their political stance is heralded on the front page and becomes an integral part of their mast head. The *Sun* has had a long history of backing one of the two main parties in the UK and since 1979 when the tabloid backed the Tories, the party they publicly supported always won. The newspaper and its editors also seem to be quite sure of their power, which is illustrated by the headline after the 1992 general election, which read “It's The Sun Wot Won It.” In fact the history of British newspapers offers plenty of examples of the press becoming actively involved in politics. As noted by media observer Roy Greenslade, the *Daily Mail* in the 1960s “acted for a time as the Labour party's official opposition” (Greenslade 2009b) and the *Daily Mail* “under both David English and Paul Dacre acted like a rightwing political party” (Greenslade 2009a).

Conversely, one can argue that such proclamations are not there to influence voters, but to get closer to their existing position. The polls had been signalling growing public

⁹ Recently by James Kirchick (2009) in the *New Republic*.

support for the Tories before the *Sun's* September announcement. Professor David Denver commented that “it is much more likely that newspapers shift to get themselves in line with their readers, rather than they influence their readers in a particular direction.”¹⁰ Denver's opinion has been echoed by the writings of many influential commentators. Peter Kellner of YouGov said that “Although the *Sun* newspaper is a great weather vane, it doesn't decide the direction of the wind.”¹¹ Academics expressed their doubts about the power of the media to influence voters even earlier. In his paper studying the 1997 general election in the UK, Curtice wrote that

There was little evidence that newspapers had much impact on the aggregate outcome of elections. Between 1987 and 1992 and 1992 and 1995 the net movement of voting preferences amongst the whole electorate was very similar to what happened amongst those who did not read a newspaper at all. (...) When it comes to the outcome of elections, the disposition of the press does not make much difference at all (1999: 6).

This might be true, but one cannot underestimate the importance and impact of the support of the biggest-selling newspaper in a country for a perceived strength of a political party and their leader. The media might be jumping on a public opinion bandwagon, but in the end they might also boost or consolidate the already existing party support. One might also look at their influence not in terms of direct influence on the voting decision, but from a more subtle agenda setting perspective.

Another reason why the *Sun's* 2009 decision became as big as it did, was the reaction of political leaders and media commentators. “It is people that decide elections” – said

¹⁰ Denver as quoted by the BBC, “Brown defiant after *Sun* rejection.” September 30, 2009 [<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8281859.stm>].

¹¹ As quoted in “*Sun's* circulation down 35% from its mid-1990s peak,” Left Foot Forward, September 30, 2009 [<http://www.leftfootforward.org/2009/09/suns-circulation-down-35-from-mid-1990s-peak/>].

Gordon Brown in his response to the *Sun's* announcement. In November 2009 he criticized the *Sun* and said that “it made a terrible mistake” by backing David Cameron's party and claimed that the paper “tried to become a political party” (Robinson 2009).

4.1.2 Importance for research

The discussions surrounding the *Sun's* choice to support the Tories highlighted the importance and interest in the power of the mass media in the United Kingdom. We have highlighted above some of the reasons why this decision became a big news story, but it also helps us to underline the reasons why this thesis looks at the role of media coverage of election campaigns in the UK and its relationship with the public agenda.

THE UK AND THE PARTISAN PRESS. We have noted earlier on in this chapter that the press in the UK is highly partisan, and visibly so (Dalton et al. 1998). This characteristic has been identified by scholars in political science and political communication as fertile ground for further research. The open and vocal endorsement of political parties by the British press enables us to attempt to measure mass media's effects on the voters. The dramatic shifts in support, as presented in the section above, help us to gauge whether the changed agenda of a newspaper results in a changed agenda of the public/of its readers. The 1997 general election proved to be an important test case, when the Labour party, led by Tony Blair, managed to win an “unprecedented, if not surprising level of support amongst the national press” (Curtice 1999: 3), which was followed by the best election results in the party's history. For those who believed in an unfair advantage of the Tories in terms of press coverage (Linton 1995), the 1997 change in press support and the subsequent election results, provided enough evidence to believe in the power of the mass media. More sceptical scholars, mindful of methodological

problems associated with media research, were more cautious (Curtice 1997; Curtice and Semetko 1994; Curtice 1999).

UNIQUE BBC. The public broadcaster in the United Kingdom – the British Broadcasting Corporation – provides another unique characteristic to the country's media market. It is the most trusted public institution in the UK (Ipsos MORI 2008), ahead of the government by 40 percentage points. Its position and services it provides are discussed later on in this chapter. What is pertinent to the question at hand is the fact that the entirely publicly funded BBC does not have to rely on advertisers and therefore it is in a better position than commercial broadcasters to maintain its editorial impartiality. This provides us with another reason why examining the role of the mass media during general elections in the UK is especially interesting. Recently there seems to be a growing rift between the commercial media sector and the BBC. In his MacTaggart Lecture, delivered at the MediaGuardian Edinburgh International Television Festival in 2009, James Murdoch¹² described the breadth of BBC activities as “chilling” and added that “we seem to have decided to let independence and plurality wither. To let the BBC throttle the news market, and get bigger to compensate” (Murdoch 2009: 16).

POLITICAL SYSTEM. Britain, with its two party political system is significantly different from the majority of democracies across the world. The fact that its political life concentrates mainly on only two parties, gives an ideal opportunity to study coverage bias of the mass media. It also makes it possible to see whether some of the aspects of campaign coverage, like the advantage of the governing party or proportion of the

¹² James Murdoch is the Chairman and the CEO of News Corporation in Europe and Asia. He is also the son of Rupert Murdoch. The lecture was delivered 20 years after his father's.

coverage devoted to particular issues, are significantly different from other countries, like Ireland.

PREVIOUS STUDIES TO COMPARE. Another compelling reason for studying mass media and elections in the UK is the fact that one can build and expand on the existing body of academic knowledge.

POSSIBILITY FOR CROSS-COUNTRY COMPARISON WITH IRELAND. Researching the mass media in the United Kingdom; their role during general elections and the nature of their relationship and possible impact on the public agenda also offers another advantage to this thesis. It enables us to make an interesting and informed cross-country comparison with Ireland. The media data collected and analysed for the general election in the UK in 2005 and for the elections in Ireland in 2007, was coded using the same content-analysis scheme. Also, the countries' media markets are, in some aspects, significantly different, although they do belong to the same liberal media model (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Media partisanship is much less visible in Ireland and the market overall is much smaller. But both countries enjoy a healthy number of newspapers, especially tabloids, with some of the journalistic culture and practices overlapping between the two neighbouring countries. The differences between the media in Ireland and in the UK give us an opportunity to see whether there is a variation in the role of newspapers and TV news during elections in those countries.

Following Hallin and Mancini (2004) and Plasser (2002) we developed questions that would highlight our expectations for the media system effects. Is the high level of press-party parallelism reflected in the tone of the campaign in the United Kingdom? Are high levels of partisanship of the British press reflected in the media agenda? Is the existence of the neutral, balanced and heavily regulated approach of the BBC to election coverage echoed by other media? Following Plasser (2002) we also ask whether

the electoral system at work in the UK has an impact on the amount of coverage devoted to political parties.

4.2 UK media market

In this section we present a brief overview of the British media market and the variety of media outlets operating. This allows us to place the quantitative analysis in context. This section is followed by a discussion on the media habits of the UK public.

4.2.1 The British press

At the beginning of this chapter we have discussed the partisanship of the British press. One could trace its roots as far back as the 19th century when all political forces wanted to “secure prominent, sympathetic, and reasonably accurate publicity for its own views (...) joined to political agencies, (...) [newspapers] augmented their own status (...) they were invested with a new validity, and an implicit authority” (Koss 1981: 9). The development of such an intimate relationship does not come as a surprise, as politicians needed the press to disseminate their message and the press wanted *and* needed to report on politics. And the links between the British press and politics used to be even closer. Lee (quoted in Negrine 1994: 37) reports that between 1892 and 1910 there were up to 30 newspaper proprietors in the House of Commons. This natural close relationship also manifests itself in the numbers of journalists standing in elections for the main parties. Negrine (1994: 44) uses several elections to illustrate this point, for example in 1987, 93 “publishers / journalists” stood for parliament; 43 were elected and 26 were members of the Conservative Party. In the 2005 general election, which is of interest to this chapter, 43 MPs listed “journalist / publisher” as their profession; 24 of them belonged to the Labour party, 14 to the Conservatives and five to Liberal Democrats (Cracknell 2005: 4). Quite astonishingly there is also an example of a former newspaper editor becoming a director of communications for a political party. Between 2003 and

2007, Andrew 'Andy' Coulson was the editor of the tabloid newspaper *News of the World*. After resigning from that post at the beginning of 2007, he became Director of Communications and Planning for the Conservative Party in July of that year. We believe this highlights the uniquely close and complicated relationship between media and politics in the UK.

This relationship has always been fraught with tension, however, and as the press became more commercialized, the ties between newspapers and political parties loosened. The "industrialization" of the press (Curran and Seaton 1981) led to changes in the actual content of the newspapers and their approach to the readers. Towards the end of the 19th century, the importance of politics in the press declined and popular titles focused on sensation and sport (Negrine 1994; Lee 1976). In fact these changes had a tremendous impact on the nature of journalism in Britain and they reverberate to this day. Koss (1981) argues that the press became more commercial, dependent on advertising, sensationalistic with concentrated ownership and reduced political coverage. These problems are evident in the newspapers in the UK to this day.

There were 11 daily national newspapers published in the UK in May 2005. They were: the *Sun*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Daily Star*, the *Daily Record*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Times*, the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian* and the *Independent*. Most of them had popular Sunday editions too. British newspapers can be divided into three distinct categories: tabloids, or red tops (for example the *Sun*); mid-market tabloids (the *Daily Mail*) and quality broadsheets (the *Times*, the *Guardian*). The term broadsheets is a bit misleading when it comes to its examples in the UK press. In the past decade, almost all traditional broadsheets (the *Times*, the *Guardian* and the *Independent*) have changed their format to a more compact, tabloid-like one. The *Guardian* opted for a Berliner format, which is between the one of a broadsheet and a tabloid. One could say

that being a broadsheet in Britain is more of a “state of mind” or rather it has to do with the quality of the content, than how big the newspapers’ pages are. The only remaining popular broadsheet is the *Daily Telegraph*.

In terms of circulation, the *Sun* was by far the most popular newspaper in the UK in May 2005 (according to the figures compiled by the Audit Bureau of Circulations, for all the circulation figures, please see Appendix 6) as it was bought by 3,230,232 people. The *Daily Mail* (over 2,250,000 copies sold) and the *Daily Mirror* (circulation of nearly 1,8 million) were in second and third place. The most popular broadsheet newspaper was the *Daily Telegraph*, which, with 865,676 copies sold on average daily in May 2005, was also in fourth place overall. Other quality newspapers sold much less: the *Times* was in second place with the circulation of around 650 thousand, the *Financial Times* in third with nearly 400 thousand, the *Guardian* had nearly 350 thousand and the *Independent* almost 230 thousand. We can see that the papers with the highest circulation figures were the red tops with popular and populist appeal in their editorial mix.

We have already discussed the importance of trust in media channels in the study of news campaign coverage. We have also shown that the question of the British public’s trust in the mass media is far from straightforward. Circulation and readership figures provide one angle from which to assess the position on a title. The amount of trust people place in a newspaper could be another. In 2008, an aforementioned Ipsos MORI survey asked: “to what extent do you trust ... (newspaper read in past week or two) ... to tell the truth?” The results are quite startling, especially when one looks at the share of papers’ own readers who trust it to tell the truth: for the *Sun* and the *News of the World* not even a third of its readers trust them. The vast majority of the *Guardian* and the *Telegraph on Sunday* readers trust the titles (94 and 93 percent respectively).

4.2.2 Electronic media: the BBC

The electronic media market in the United Kingdom is defined by the unique position and character of the public broadcaster – the British Broadcasting Corporation. The BBC is not only one of the most important mass media companies in the UK, but it is also the biggest broadcasting company in the world¹³. One could argue that in many respects the BBC is a standard-bearer in terms of broadcast journalism. The Corporation was set up under the Royal Charter in 1927, is governed by the BBC Trust, but is ultimately accountable to the Parliament. It is one of the few public broadcasters funded almost exclusively through license fees and its role and influence on the life of British citizens cannot be underestimated. According to Burns (1977: 41 in Negrine 1994: 89) BBC's first Managing Director – John Reith – developed the BBC into

A kind of domestic diplomatic service, representing the British – or what he saw as the best of the British – to the British. BBC culture, like the BBC standard English, was not peculiar in itself but an intellectual ambience composed of the values, standards and beliefs of the professional middle class, especially that part educated at Oxford and Cambridge.

The Royal Charter for the BBC and the subsequent Broadcasting Act of 1990 underline the importance of impartiality: “The BBC must ensure that (...) due impartiality is preserved in news programmes” (BBC 2009). Editorial guidelines state that the BBC is “to produce comprehensive, authoritative and impartial coverage of news and current affairs in the UK and throughout the world to support fair and informed debate.”¹⁴ The Corporation also recognises that it is under more pressure and

¹³ “What is the BBC” [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/purpose/what.shtml>].

¹⁴ BBC Editorial Guidelines [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/edguide/impartiality/>].

scrutiny during elections; in another section of the guidelines mentioned above it states that “All political parties will seek to influence editorial decisions but news judgements at election time are made within a framework of democratic debate which ensures that due weight is given to hearing the views and examining and challenging the policies of all parties.”

The BBC operates five national radio stations and two TV channels. In addition it also has a number of radio stations and TV channels available digitally¹⁵. In recent years the BBC has invested heavily in the new media/the Internet sector. The organisation also pioneered an on-demand access to its broadcast content through the BBC iPlayer. This highlights one of the main shifts in terms of people’s media habits, as listeners and viewers are freed from the constraints of TV or daily schedules and can enjoy their favourite programmes at their leisure. Listenership and viewership figures have already started to include digital access to media content and possible academic interpretations of media effects must take into account these changes.

4.2.3 Electronic media: commercial broadcasters

In 1954, after passing the Television Act, an Independent Television Authority was set up and a first independent TV channel¹⁶ – ITV – emerged. This began a period of change in the UK broadcasting sector, with the arrival of the second BBC TV channel (BBC Two in 1963) and commercial radio stations. But it was only in 1982 that another independent TV station – Channel 4 – went to air. The arrival of Channel 4 at the beginning of the 1980s heralded a marked shift in the electronic broadcasting landscape of Britain. It was supposed to be “innovative and experimental in content and form”

¹⁵ For a breakdown of the TV Licence Fee in the UK, please see Appendix 4.

¹⁶ ITV was also the first commercial broadcaster in Europe according to ITV Publications & Policies [<http://www.itv.com/aboutitv/publications-policies/default.html>].

and appeal to “tastes and interests not generally catered for by ITV” (Hobson 2008: vii). With its colourful logo and controversial programmes (screening 18-rated films, commissioning hard-hitting dramas, etc.) it was like a breath of fresh air after decades of BBC-ITV duopoly.

The list of national, terrestrial analogue TV channels was finalized in 1997 with the launch of Five¹⁷. Commercial broadcasters are regulated since 2003 by Office of Communications (Ofcom), which replaced the Independent Television Commission.

We previously wrote about the partisanship of the British press. Television is not free from political pressures either, although there has been no explicit support for any particular party by a TV channel. There is, however, the question of the ownership of commercial television stations, the role of the BBC as the public broadcaster and the uneasy relationship between the two worlds.

At the beginning of this chapter we mentioned the unprecedented attack on the BBC by James Murdoch (CEO of News International) delivered in his MacTaggart lecture (Murdoch 2009). His description of the BBC activities as “chilling” combined with the *Sun*’s (owned by News International) decision to support the Conservative Party, was not left without a response from the Labour Government. Peter Mandelson “declared a war” (Watt 2009) on Murdoch’s empire¹⁸. As was reported earlier, speaking in the House of Lords Mandelson criticized the Conservatives’ plans to dismantle Ofcom. He added that those who want to diminish Ofcom’s responsibilities want to do so, so they can “commandeer more space and income for themselves and because they want to

¹⁷ Originally called Channel 5 and rebranded Five in 2002.

¹⁸ One should note here that the Labour party enjoyed a close relationship with Rupert Murdoch from the mid 1990’s until 2009.

maintain their iron grip on pay-TV, a market in which many viewers feel they are paying more than they should for their music and sport. They also want to erode the commitment to impartiality. In other words, to fill British airwaves with more Fox-style news” (Watt 2009). Fox News is a TV station owned by News International and associated with right-wing agenda. Mandelson’s words once again prove how complicated, and how central to the workings of a democracy, is a relationship between the parties, public and the media.

To sum up, the main electronic media companies in the UK include Channel 4, Independent Television¹⁹ (ITV), Five, Sky (owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation), Virgin and many others. There is a number of competing satellite TV providers (for example Sky, Virgin) and a number of ways to access broadcast content on-line. The separate sections on radio and TV below will provide a succinct overview of the mass media offer in the United Kingdom at the time of the 2005 general election.

4.2.4 Radio

THE BBC. One of the most distinctive impressions while listening to the radio in the United Kingdom is the fact that one might not hear any adverts. This is because BBC Radio is funded by the Television Licence and does not carry them. The BBC operates a vast network of national, local and digital radio stations in the UK. There are five national radio stations broadcasting on FM: Radio 1, 2, 3 and 4 and 5Live. One can also listen to the BBC World Service (funded by the British Government) on Medium Wave. Each of these stations has a different format and is directed at a distinct age profile. For example Radio 1 is focused on music and caters for young listeners, while

¹⁹ ITV’s legal name is Channel 3 in order to distinguish it from ITV plc., which is the parent company of ITV Broadcasting Limited.

Radio 4 is a speech station with a mix of news, current affairs, features and documentary programming. Along with the national stations mentioned above, the BBC has three pan-local networks (Radio Scotland, Radio Wales and Radio Ulster) and 43 local radio stations. In recent years, the corporation has expanded its digital offering with such services as 6Music, 5Live Sport, 1Extra, BBC 7 and Asian Network. All the above radio stations broadcast news bulletins. National listenership figures are provided by Radio Joint Audience Research Limited (RAJAR) which carries out quarterly listenership research. According to the figures collated after the 2005 General Election, at the end of June 2005, radio as a medium had a reach of 90 per cent), all BBC radio services had a reach²⁰ of 67 per cent and a listening share²¹ of 54 per cent. The same survey found that local BBC radio services had a reach of 20 per cent and a listening share of almost 11 per cent. For a detailed breakdown of radio listenership figures in 2005, please see Appendix 7.

COMMERCIAL RADIO. There are three national, commercial radio services, funded by income from adverts and sponsorship. They are Classic FM, Virgin Radio and Talk Sport. In addition, there are ten independent regional networks, hundreds of commercial local radio stations and also temporary radio services (for special events, football clubs, student radio). Almost all commercial radio stations are regulated by the communications regulator – Ofcom. According to the aforementioned RAJAR figures from June 2005, all commercial radio had a reach of 63 per cent and a listening share of

²⁰ Weekly reach is the number of people aged 15+ who tune to a radio station within at least 1 quarter-hour period over the course of a week.

²¹ The percentage of total listening time accounted for by a station in its Total Survey Area in an average week. This is obtained by dividing the station's total hours by the "All Radio" total hours in the station's TSA (total survey area).

44 per cent. All national commercial radio services had a reach of 26 per cent and a listening share of ten per cent.

RAJAR figures show that BBC radio is very popular in the UK and, although listeners do have a myriad of choices, they tend to opt for the publicly funded stations. To illustrate this point, we note that BBC Radio 2 had a reach of 27 per cent and a listening share of 16 per cent, while these figures for BBC Radio 4 were 19 and 11 per cent respectively.

4.2.5 The Internet

Looking back at the 2005 general election campaign in the UK from a few years' perspective, we realize how quickly the world of new media changes. How in the span of only a few years, the Internet has grown even more ubiquitous and important in almost all areas of our lives. It was only four years ago, but it is hard to imagine that there was no Twitter and Facebook was used mainly by college students. To illustrate the speed of the Internet growth and change, we could look at the micro-blogging web site Twitter, which almost replaced the traditional media during the revolution in Iran. The social networking web site Facebook reached 350 million users and its content was incorporated into Google search results.

In 2005, the election campaign used the Internet, but it all seems rather simple, especially when we compare it to what was achieved during the 2008 Presidential campaign in the US. But we must stress that in 2005 the Internet was very much an established part of the mass media in the UK and it played an important role during the general election campaign. It was used for campaigning by political parties, to distribute the news by traditional media organizations and to some extent to learn about the campaign by the public.

Figures show that the two most popular web sites at that time were Guardian Unlimited (the Internet presence of the Guardian Media Group) and the home page of the BBC. According to Nielsen Netrankings, in May 2005 Guardian Unlimited had 10 million unique users, three million of them based in the UK. The main BBC web site had 9.8 million unique users from the UK.

The Internet presence, especially that of established media brands, such as the *Guardian* or the BBC, was fairly comprehensive, but was the Internet an integral part of voters' media diet? Although an estimated 15 per cent of the UK population went online to get information about the election, Lusoli and Ward (2005: 14) report that only 3.3 per cent of them got a lot of it from the Internet, 4.5 per cent got some of it from the web and 7.7 per cent got a little of their news and information about the election from the Internet. More than 80 per cent did not get any election news from online sources. These figures are in stark contrast with the 48 per cent of the people in the UK who got a lot of their election news from TV, for example.

4.3 Public and the campaign

SOURCES OF CAMPAIGN NEWS. The tangled relationship between political parties and the British mass media is just one part of a complicated web of interactions between parties, TV, radio or press and the public. Further on in the first part of this chapter we shall examine the media landscape at the time of the 2005 general election campaign. We will look at what could have been the ingredients of a British voters' media diet. Before we do so, however, let us see to what extent had the British voters used particular media to get the news and information about the election. Also, are more traditional and direct channels of communication still in use?

In the age of television and the 24 hour news cycle, it would be difficult to imagine British parties relying heavily on face-to-face meetings with the voters. Many studies have shown that the diminishing numbers of registered party members²² made it much more difficult to organize grassroots campaigns (Norris 2006; Mair and van Biezen 2001; Scarrow 2001; Whiteley and Seyd 2002). This might indeed be true, but other research (Whiteley and Seyd 1994; Johnston and Pattie 2003; Denver and Hands 1997) suggests that interpersonal communication still plays an important role during British general election campaigns. The significance of personal communication, such as campaign rallies or door-to-door canvassing, has also been studied in the United States (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995), where it was found to be effective, especially in galvanizing party backing amongst the core supporters. We do recognize that a more direct, personal communication channel between political parties and the voters might have its effects, but this particular area lies beyond the scope of our enquiry. This thesis focuses on the relationship between the mass media and the public and it would be difficult to argue that parties do not see the media as their primary channels of communications and that people do not get most of their election news and information from newspaper, TV, radio or the Internet. This is corroborated by the results of the Ipsos MORI survey on trust conducted on behalf of the BBC in January 2008. When asked about the most powerful influences²³ a majority of the respondents chose TV and radio broadcasters²⁴ (34 percent). Newspapers were in the third place (21 per cent of people thought they had the most influence on society), behind the sadly ubiquitous

²² For example the number of registered members of the Labour Party fell from 407,000 in 1997 to 200,000 in 2005 (Norris 2006: 6).

²³ The exact wording of the question was: "What affects and influences society and people's day to day lives in Britain today, which of the following has the most powerful influence, and which has the least?"

²⁴ Interestingly the list did not include TV or radio broadcasts/programmes, but the people working in the electronic media.

celebrities (25 per cent). What must have been a sad and sobering finding for civil servants, 36 per cent of people said they exerted the least influence on society.

Interestingly the same study revealed that 35 per cent of the people in the UK agreed with the following statement: "I believe what my friends tell me" and only slightly fewer respondents (33 per cent) agreed that they believed what they saw and heard on the TV and Radio. These results pose some pertinent questions about the role and influence of one's social circle, as it seems that almost the same number of Britons believes their friends as they believe the mass media.

The NOP survey²⁵, carried out immediately after the election, asked the respondents about their media consumption habits²⁶. The unquestionable winner was television: almost 50 per cent of the respondents got a lot of their election news from TV, 24 percent got some of it, 16 percent got a little and only 11 percent got none. The press came second according to the survey with more than 22 percent of those asked got a lot of their election news from papers, with over 25 percent getting some of it from the press and over 20 percent a little. Over 30 percent of respondents got none of their information about the election from the press. Party literature was also popular as a source of election information and more than 17 percent of respondents indicated that they got a lot of their election information from party materials. Interestingly, they were more popular than radio, as only around ten percent of those asked by NOP in 2005 said that they got lot of their election news from the radio and almost half of them getting none of it from radio broadcasts. Friends, colleagues and family, the Internet

²⁵ The survey was based on a representative sample of British adults (16+) with n = 1937. Face-to-face interviews were conducted between 12 – 17th May 2005. As reported in "Spinning the Web" (Coleman and Ward 2005).

²⁶ The wording of the question was: "how much of your news and information about the election did you get from (TV, newspaper, party literature, radio, friends, colleagues, family, Internet, or magazines)."

and magazines were the three least popular sources for news and information about the election in 2005.

Figure 2 presents the results of research conducted by ICM Research on behalf of Ofcom in April and May of 2005. When asked about the sources of information on political issues during election almost 90 percent of respondents indicated television programmes; 58 percent chose conversations; 54 percent local newspapers; 51 percent party campaign material; 50 percent radio and 43 percent broadsheet and tabloid newspapers. The Internet was the least popular source of information on political issues, chosen by 26 percent of respondents

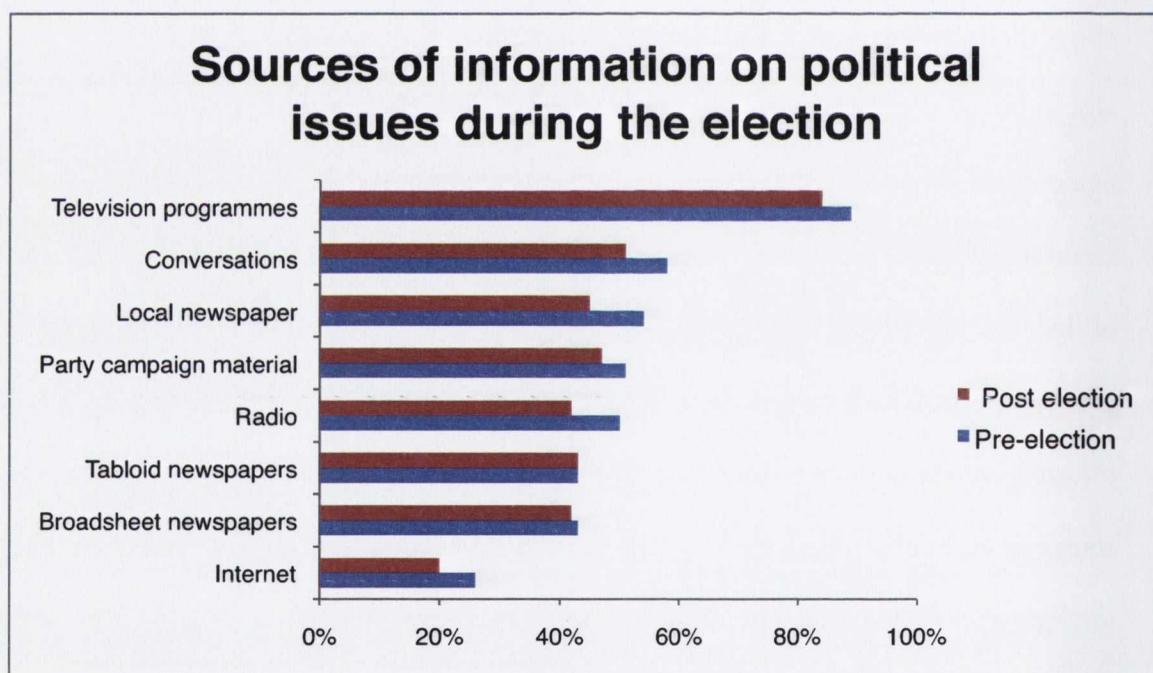


Figure 4-2 Sources of information on political issues during the election. Base: pre-election 1,438; post election 1,433. Source: Ofcom 2005.

INFLUENCE. While attempting to measure the influence of the mass media on the public, the agenda setting studies traditionally compared the public agenda with that presented by the media. But it would also be interesting to see what people themselves thought when asked which institutions they thought had the most influence on their

lives? The Ipsos MORI survey on trust conducted on behalf of the BBC in January 2008 asked respondents the following question: “thinking of what affects and influences society and people’s day to day lives in Britain today, which of the following has the most powerful influence, and which has the least?” The picture which emerged from the study showed quite clearly that citizens of the United Kingdom are quite certain about the media influence on their day to day lives: 34 percent indicated TV/radio broadcasters.

TRUST. Trust is an essential part of the agenda setting puzzle. One can pick up a copy of a newspaper or tune into TV news, but if the message is received with mistrust, it might not influence viewers’ opinions in any way. This, naturally, also means that people tend to choose and trust media that reflect their own political preferences, which in turn can diminish any possible agenda setting / media effects. It is important, however, to stress that this study does not disaggregate the audience into trusting and non-trusting individuals and therefore we are not able to see any contingent effects of audience involvement.

According to the ten-country opinion poll conducted by GlobeScan for the BBC, Reuters and the Media Centre in 2006²⁷, overall more people (61 percent) trust the media than their governments (52 percent). This trend was not evident in the UK, however, where the level of trust in the government was slightly above trust in media (51 percent and 47 percent respectively). Figure 3 presents the results. Television was one of the news sources people in the UK had the most trust in at the beginning of 2006 (86 percent had a lot or some trust in TV). Friends and family were a trustworthy news source for 78 percent of Britons, national and regional newspapers for 75 percent

²⁷ “Trust in Media” – poll by GlobeScan (2006) for the BBC, Reuters and Media Centre.

whereas public radio was a trustworthy source for 67 percent. The three sources with the least amount of trust amongst British respondents were international newspapers (55 percent), news web sites on the Internet (44 percent) and blogs (24 percent). When asked about specific media brands they trusted, 32 percent of the people asked by Globescan mentioned BBC News, eight percent ITV News, seven percent Sky News, three percent the *Daily Mail*, also three percent the BBC News web site and two percent BBC Radio. Other newspapers mentioned included the *Times* (indicated by two percent), the *Daily Telegraph* (two percent), the *Guardian* (one percent).

Another of the key findings of the study highlighted the fact that citizens of the UK were much less likely than those living in other countries included in the survey, to say that the media present all sides of the news story (64 percent) or that they do it accurately (43 percent). Quite remarkably these figures are similar to those obtained from respondents in the US where 69 percent of people disagreed with the statement that the media report all sides of the story. We might argue that these results corroborate our earlier argument about the partisanship of the mass media (and press especially) in Britain and in the United States. Citizens of those countries have been exposed to overt political campaigning in the press and their answers in the GlobeScan survey are a reflection of the politicized media.

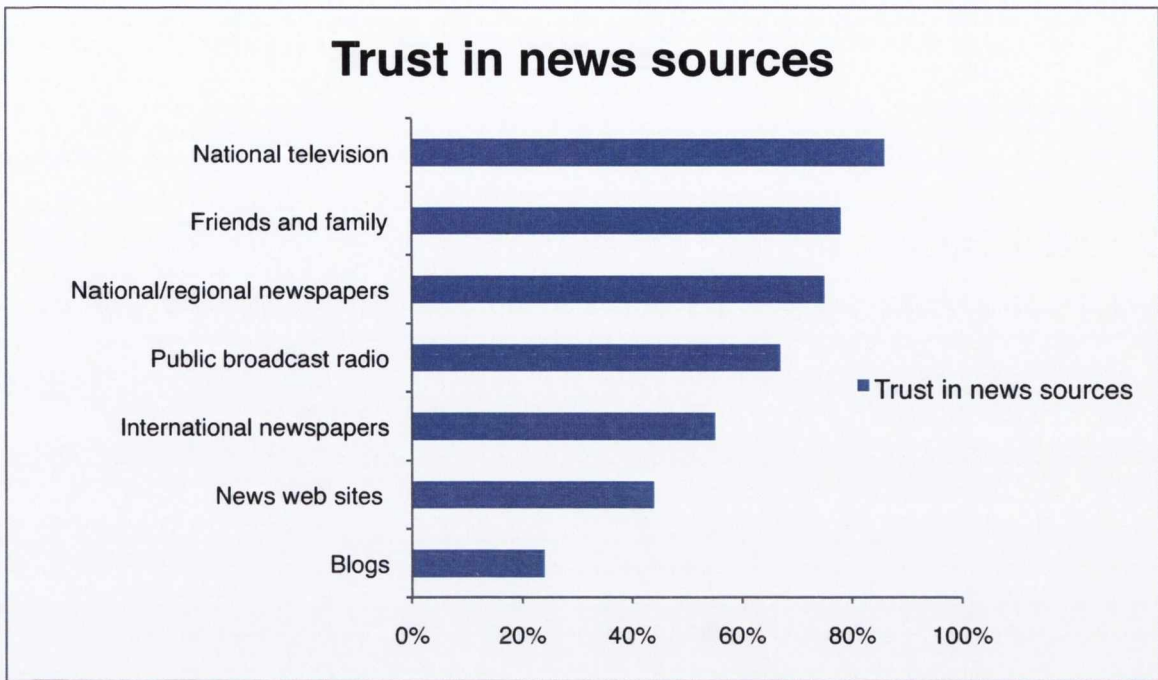


Figure 4-3 Trust in news sources. Percentages of respondents who have a lot or some trust. Sample size = 1000. Source: GlobeScan 2006.

Even with the scandals which troubled the media industry in Britain in the recent years (phone competitions inaccuracies, fake photos on the front pages of newspapers, bugging of the phones of the royal family), the public still seems to put a lot of trust in the media. But looking at the Ipsos MORI survey conducted on behalf of the BBC in January 2008 the picture is far from clear. The BBC is the most trusted institution in the UK: 50 percent of respondents indicated that they trust the public broadcaster the most, ahead of the National Health Service (47 percent), Church of England (36 percent) and the government (ten percent). When asked to choose organisations they trust the least, however, 44 percent of the survey’s participants picked “media in general.”

4.4 Media agenda in 2005: analysis

This part provides a quantitative analysis of the media agenda during the 2005 general election in the United Kingdom. It starts by briefly describing the data used, which is then followed by the analysis. After analysing the media agenda, we turn our attention to public opinion and the interaction between the media and public agenda.

4.4.1 Data

This part of the thesis uses mass media data from British newspapers collected during the period of the campaign and afterwards content analysed by Dr. Heinz Brandenburg from the University of Aberdeen (Brandenburg 2006). Seven national newspapers were collected between the start of the campaign (April 6, 2005) and the polling day of May 5, 2005. The newspapers were selected based on their circulation figures and format. They included the three most popular tabloids: the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror* and the four biggest broadsheets²⁸, the *Guardian*, the *Times*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Independent*.

Only articles containing explicit references to the campaign were coded. The unit of analysis for the study was a line of text (this was standardized, so a comparison could be made between all different titles, as they have varying column widths). Every time a party or a party leader were mentioned in an article, such a line was coded for that particular political actor. Each line was coded for a policy dimension and an issue mentioned. The codebook employed by Brandenburg and also adopted by this study contains a number of dimensions, which are divided into two groups: 12 policy dimensions, five process/campaign ones and one non-political category (see Appendix 1). These are then broken down into more detailed issues. Policy dimensions include between two to six more narrowly defined issues. All election-related, editorial or opinion articles, were coded for tone (negative, neutral or positive). This enabled us to examine the partisan bias of British press and also make comparisons with Bartle's classification (2005).

²⁸ Brandenburg (2006) rightly points out that since most British broadsheets have actually changed their format from a traditional broadsheet to the one of a tabloid or a "Berliner" (in case of the *Guardian*), we should employ the term more as an indication of their more serious content and approach to news, than to their physical size.

4.4.2 Media and the government – how close is too close?

The 2005 general election in the UK was the third time Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair took the country to the polls since his historic victory in 1997. While we have already highlighted the importance mass media play in the political life of Britain, we have written only briefly at the beginning of this chapter about the relationship of the governing party with the mass media. In 1997, before the election that swept Blair into power, the reinvigorated Labour party received endorsements from six out of eleven national daily newspapers (Bartle 2005). This signalled a good relationship between the party and the press. Indeed so close was this relationship that Blair disclosed in the parliamentary register that in 1995, when he was the leader of the opposition, he was flown by Rupert Murdoch of News International to meet him in Hyman Island, Australia (Grice 2008). It was also revealed that the Prime Minister spoke with Murdoch six times between 2002 and 2005; three times in the ten days before the outbreak of the war in Iraq. He also held meetings with Richard Desmond of Northern and Shell Media, whose business portfolio includes the *Daily Express* and *OK!* magazine. Lance Price – Press Adviser to Tony Blair and Labour Party’s Director of Communications between 2000 and 2001 – commented in the *Guardian* that he has “never met Mr. Murdoch, but at times when I worked at Downing Street, he seemed like a 24th member of the Cabinet... No big decision could ever be made inside No 10 without taking into account of the likely reaction of three men – Gordon Brown, John Prescott and Rupert Murdoch. On all the really big decisions, anybody else could safely be ignored” (Fletcher 2006). Price’s observations serve as a neat summary of the relationship between the Labour government and the media. At first this rapport seemed good-natured in spirit with the public and the media celebrating Labour’s return to power after 18 years in opposition. In 2001 Labour managed to receive even more endorsements from the press, with seven out of eleven daily newspapers officially

supporting its bid for re-election (Bartle 2005). Soon the relationship between the government and the media turned sour and Downing Street had been accused more and more often of spinning – using public relations techniques to present their version of events and paint the government in a favourable light. Behind the “culture of spin” was Alastair Campbell, Blair’s Press Secretary, who became synonymous with the bad practices. The relationship with the BBC was also difficult and reached its nadir in 2003, when stories about the government’s reasons for going to war in Iraq were linked to the death of Dr. David Kelly and later on resulted in the Hutton Inquiry. Due to, what was by many perceived as government interference, Greg Dyke – BBC’s Director General – and Gavyn Davis – the Chairman of the corporation’s Board of Governors – resigned. These events help to illustrate the almost symbiotic relationship between political parties, the government and the mass media in the UK.

The 2005 election was an important one for the Labour party which was bruised by the fall out after the decision to go to war in Iraq in 2003. For Tony Blair it was a matter of personal pride to secure a third term in office. It is, therefore, of considerable interest to see how the media reported on the election campaign.

The effects media might have on the public are still seen as rather limited in the literature (Anderson, Tilley and Heath 2005; Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell and Semetko 1999; Norris and Sanders 2001). The subject of this thesis – analysis of the news media agenda and public opinion during election campaigns – has also been recognized as a vital component of the media effects research puzzle (Denver 1994), but some studies have found that the media agenda and the public agenda are out of sync (Miller 1991; Butler and Kavanagh 2002; Deacon et al. 2001; Kavanagh and Butler 2005; Norris 2006). But even though there is a growing body of research exploring the area at the intersection of mass media, political arena and public opinion in the United

Kingdom, some comprehensive studies ignore the influence of media altogether (for example Clarke et al. 2004).

4.5 Party endorsements: “However way you vote, give Mr Blair a bloody nose.”

4.5.1 Press dealignment

Official party endorsements by the press are commonplace in Britain; Denver opines that “the national press in Britain has traditionally been overwhelmingly and clearly partisan” (2003: 138), while Newton and Brynlin argue that “the British press is highly partisan by most Western standards” (2001: 267). The 2005 general election was no exception, but the strength and enthusiasm with which such support was given by the media had weakened considerably, compared to the two previous elections. There were several reasons for this, amongst them the difficult war in Iraq, weariness with Blair’s government and his perceived reliance on spin, disillusion with New Labour after their eight years in power. Research has talked about press dealignment, as the whole nature of press partisanship has changed since the Second World War. We have seen loosening of the ties between parties and newspapers; the extreme positions of papers in the 1970s and 1980s; and then, the more ambivalent “hollow-centred partisanship” (Deacon et al. 1998: 148) of the 1990s. Seymour-Ure observes that the press has been losing its firm alliances and has become more “unhinged.” He argues that “instead of swinging from one side of the party system to the other, papers are losing their fixed attachments in politics” (1998: 43). The changing nature of party endorsements of the British press over the years reflects a more general disillusionment with politics. This has been illustrated by a declining turnout, which reached its post-war low in 2001, with only 59 percent of the public turning up to vote. That “sense of ennui” might have contributed to “a further gravitation in the national press towards more ambivalent positions” (Deacon et

al., 2001: 111). As the differences between the two major parties had become harder to distinguish, the press was wont to give them clear-cut endorsements. Discussing the press dealignment Deacon and Wring wrote:

The causes of this transformation are to be found in the party system (...) and the media (with the spread of aggressive news management and conflictive media relations, marketing considerations and eroding public-service ideals and discouraging close engagement with the formal political sphere) (2002: 207).

The often-cited case, also in this thesis, of the *Sun* backing Labour in 1997 has also been seen as problematic by research into press partisanship. Rather than a perfect example of the nature and power of press endorsement, it has been described as the first example of “competitive opportunism rather than change in political orientation” (Nessheim 2001, Brandenburg 2006: 159). We are witnessing newspapers using party endorsements for their own gain²⁹, rather than parties relying on the press to present them in a favourable way. As with other elements of the mass media/politics/the public question, its elements are inter-dependent with links going in all directions. Writing about the *Sun*'s 1997 decision Nessheim concludes that:

The emphatic denial that the “mood of the country” (i.e. the probable voting intentions of millions of readers) had anything to do with the case, was almost certainly disingenuous, but the paper which so frequently had avoided making political choices by hiding behind its readers, evidently did not wish to be seen to do so on this occasion (2001: 365).

Tables 1 and 2 present a summary of newspaper endorsements and election winners in Britain since 1945. We also present the figures for circulations of newspapers by the party endorsed and parties' vote share. We observe that in the first election of 1974,

²⁹ As illustrated by the *Daily Mirror* growing more critical of Labour under the editorship of Piers Morgan at the beginning of the 2000s, more of which later on in this section.

Labour was endorsed by newspapers with 31 percent of total circulation, compared to 70 percent behind the Conservatives, but Labour managed to win. The situation was similar in 1964 and 1966 when Labour won the election, with the smaller proportion of newspapers supporting it, as compared with the Tories. From 1979 onwards, however, the party with a bigger share of newspapers behind it, won. This is true for the four elections which went to the Conservatives between 1979 and 1992 (newspapers supporting the party accounted for around 70 percent of total circulation). The patterns stayed the same in 1997, with a swing of support behind Labour (they had 60 percent of the newspapers behind them in 1997 and more than 70 percent in 2001).

Table 4-1 Main national newspapers' support. Source: *Twentieth-Century British Political Facts 1900-2000* (Butler and Butler 2000) and *British Political Fact Since 1979* (Butler and Butler 2006), Rogers 2009.

Election + winner	Sun	Express	Mail	Mirror	Telegraph	Guardian	Independent	Times
1945 Lab	Lab	Cons	Cons	Lab	Cons	Lib		Lab
1950 Lab	Lab	Cons	Cons	Lab	Cons	Lib		Cons
1951 Cons	Lab	Cons	Cons	Lab	Cons	Lib/Cons		Cons
1955 Cons	Lab	Cons	Cons	Lab	Cons	Lib/Cons		Cons
1959 Cons	Lab	Cons	Cons	Lab	Cons	Lab/Lib		Cons
1964 Lab	Lab	Cons	Cons	Lab	Cons	Lab		Cons/Lib
1966 Lab	Lab	Cons	Cons	Lab	Cons	Lab/Lib		Cons/Lib
1970 Cons	Lab	Cons	Cons	Lab	Cons	Lab/Lib		Cons/Lib
1974 Lab	Lab	Cons	Cons	Lab	Cons			Cons/Lib
1974 Lab	Coal	Cons	Coal	Lab	Cons	Lib		Coal
1979 Cons	Cons	Cons	Cons	Lab	Cons	Lab/Lib		
1983 Cons	Cons	Cons	Cons	Lab	Cons			Cons
1987 Cons	Cons	Cons	Cons	Lab	Cons	Lab	None	Cons
1992 Cons	Cons	Cons	Cons	Lab	Cons	Lab/Lib	None	Cons
1997 Lab	Lab	Cons	Cons	Lab	Cons	Lab/Lib	Lab	Cons
2001 Lab	Lab	Lab	Cons	Lab	Cons	Lab/Lib	Lab/Lib	Lab
2005 Lab	Lab	Cons	Cons	Lab	Cons	Lab	Lib	Lab

Table 4-2 The circulations of newspapers and party support; percentage of newspapers' circulation and percentage of vote. Source: *Twentieth-Century British Political Facts 1900-2000* (Butler and Butler 2000) and *British Political Fact Since 1979* (Butler and Butler 2006) and Rogers 2009.

Election + winner	Conservative papers	Conservative vote	Labour newspapers	Labour vote	Liberal newspapers	Liberal vote
1945 Lab	0.52	0.4	0.35	0.48	0.13	0.09
1950 Lab	0.5	0.43	0.4	0.46	0.1	0.09
1951 Cons	0.52	0.48	0.39	0.49	0.1	0.02
1955 Cons	0.52	0.5	0.4	0.46	0.09	0.03
1959 Cons	0.54	0.49	0.38	0.44	0.09	0.06
1964 Lab	0.57	0.43	0.42	0.44		0.11
1966 Lab	0.55	0.42	0.43	0.48	0.04	0.08
1970 Cons	0.55	0.46	0.44	0.43	0.05	0.07
1974 Lab	0.71	0.38	0.31	0.37	0.05	0.19
1974 Lab	0.47	0.36	0.31	0.39	0.17	0.18
1979 Cons	0.71	0.44	0.29	0.37		0.14
1983 Cons	0.78	0.42	0.22	0.28	0.03	0.25
1987 Cons	0.74	0.42	0.26	0.31	0.02	0.23
1992 Cons	0.64	0.42	0.25	0.34	0.03	0.18
1997 Lab	0.34	0.31	0.6	0.44		0.17
2001 Lab	0.29	0.32	0.71	0.41	0.02	0.18
2005 Lab	0.37	0.33	0.54	0.36	0.02	0.23

Figure 4-4 illustrates the relationship between the circulations of newspapers endorsing a particular party and the share of the vote. We observe that the relationship is non-linear and that it is different at different levels of the independent variable. There is a steady increase up to 0.4 of the party's share of the papers which then flattens out.

4.5.2 Operationalizing partisanship

Apart from the changing nature of press partisanship and the theory of press dealignment, one also needs to discuss the operationalization of the partisanship variable. Brandenburg (2006: 158) argues that “the notion of press partisanship as an absolute value has long been challenged” and that we should look at degrees of partisan intensity expressed by newspaper, rather than just using a simple dichotomous variable, categorizing papers as, for example, either Conservative or Labour. As we have discussed above, with British newspapers moving away from clear political endorsements, the notion of placing partisanship on a continuum (Seymour-Ure 1974) seems logical. Indeed some researchers have examined the possibility of a more nuanced approach to measuring the partisanship variable (Deacon et al. 1998, 2001; Wring 2001; Deacon & Wring 2002). Brandenburg (2006) used a five point scale of party endorsement developed by Deacon and Wring (2002). They categorize the press support for a political party as very weak, weak, moderate, strong and very strong. Brandenburg modified it slightly and introduced a partial endorsement category. These scales have their roots in the research of Blumler and Gurevitch (1975: 175) who suggested a five-point scale to describe the partisanship of mass media. Their scale ranged from party ownership (media as tools of party propaganda), “voluntary fixed partnerships,” qualified support, ad hoc partisanship, to disinterested independence. In this chapter we will complement Brandenburg’s findings with those from research into party endorsements conducted by Bartle (2005).

Brandenburg observed that two national daily newspapers (out of the seven strong dataset he collected) expressed their endorsements of the Conservatives. The *Daily Telegraph* has been a traditionally Tory newspaper and it had provided the Conservative party with support between 2001 and 2005. Deacon and Wring considered its support

for the Tories in 1997 as very strong. The paper's stance towards the party in 2005 was conveyed in a headline printed on the polling day: "Small government + freedom + low taxes = vote Tory" (Daily Telegraph 5 May 2005). Another daily which urged voters to support William Hague's party was the *Daily Mail*. Bartle categorized it as "violently anti-Blair and anti-Labour" (2005). Perhaps the fact that it was mainly anti-Labour, but not really pro-Tory led Brandenburg (2006: 164) to describe its support for the Conservatives as very weak. There was nothing weak or unclear about the paper's distaste for Blair's government. In one of the articles, published just a day before the election, the *Daily Mail* said: "if we're being honest, our support for the Conservative victory – which we concede is unlikely – is superseded by an even greater imperative: to diminish the power of the overwhelmingly arrogant Mr Blair and restore a healthy democracy to this country. (...) However you vote, give Mr Blair a bloody nose." Brandenburg's dataset does not include the *Daily Express*, which is owned by the aforementioned Richard Desmond, but Bartle concluded that the newspaper supported the Conservative party. This was also concluded by Butler and Butler (2006). This represented a u-turn, as it endorsed Labour during the 2001 election. It started criticizing Blair around 2003 on a number of issues, such as failure of the NHS reforms, taxing the middle classes and the EU.

Press support for the Tories was less than enthusiastic, but endorsement for the governing party was not universal or warm either. Long gone were the heady days of mid 1990s when Tony Blair was treated as the country's saviour. By 2005, the approach of the press to New Labour had become more critical. We have already discussed in this chapter the case of the *Sun* and the history and implications of the famous "It's the Sun wot won it" slogan. As the biggest national daily tabloid the *Sun* is perceived to wield an enormous power over more than three million of its readers. The Rupert Murdoch

owned newspaper endorsed Labour in 2001, but had been criticizing it in the following years. Bartle (2005) argues that Murdoch realised in 2005 that the party would win the election with or without the *Sun's* endorsement, but he needed to maintain the myth of the kingmaker “and provide its proprietor with leverage in his dealings with government.” Whatever the motives behind the paper’s decision, in the end it endorsed Labour. It used a publicity stunt to inform of this pronouncement; the *Sun* used papal elections and on April 21, 2005, it released red smoke from its chimney to signal it supported Labour. The headlines were less than enthusiastic, though. “Give them one last chance” – said the most prominent one. The tabloid might have officially endorsed the governing party, but it remained critical of New Labour policies. The NHS “squandered millions,” the immigration policy was a “disgrace,” the European Constitution was “disastrous” and the government needed to “get a grip” on crime. But the newspaper and its proprietor agreed with Blair and his government about their decision to go to war in Iraq and because of “standing firm on Iraq and the lack of any real alternative” the most popular newspaper in the United Kingdom once again gave its seal of approval to Labour.

Another of the Murdoch-owned newspapers – the *Times* – also endorsed Labour, but not without reservations. One needs to note that during the 2004 European elections the paper gave its support to the Conservatives. In 2005 it opined that “it is not yet time for a change” and that “the best result would be a smaller but viable Labour majority and a larger and renewed opposition.” It was hardly a ringing endorsement and Brandenburg (2006: 164) described it as very weak.

One paper had stayed with the Labour party through thick and thin: the *Daily Mirror*. It supported Labour when the party was at its lowest point in the 1980s and it was happy to endorse it through the period of rejuvenation and re-branding of the mid-

1990s. In 2005, writes Brandenburg, it had no reservations in supporting Labour. We have to stress that this came after a turbulent period in the relationship between the party and the Mirror. When Piers Morgan became the editor of the paper, it started to be more critical of the government. The chasm grew wider as Britain decided to go to war in Iraq. When Morgan was fired from the post of the editor, after publishing fake photos of British soldiers abusing Iraqi prisoners, the relationship between the government and the paper became slightly warmer. In May 2005, the newspaper endorsed Labour, but once again this was not a clarion call to vote for Blair's party, but rather an appeal not to let the Conservatives back in. In one article, published on April 6, 2005, the paper said that the "simple truth is that in most seats a vote that is not for Labour is a vote for Michael Howard's Tories and all that would mean for Britain" (*Daily Mirror*, April 6, 2005).

What about the papers traditionally perceived as left-wing, such as the *Guardian* and the *Independent*? They too shied away from a clear endorsement of the Labour party. The *Guardian* supported the government, but some of its columnists were more favourable towards it than others. The paper's editors had a difficult choice in front of them, whether to support Labour, despite its shortcomings, or whether to split their support between Labour and the Liberal Democrats and risk losing marginal Labour seats to the Conservatives. In the end, it endorsed Labour "partially" (Brandenburg 2005: 164) and concluded that it was "an imperfect choice under an imperfect electoral system" (*The Guardian Leader*, May 3, 2005).

The *Independent* took a similar approach. It too wanted more Liberal Democrats in the House of Commons and it did not see fit to endorse a single party. The *Independent* called for a change of Labour leadership and on May 4, 2005, wrote: "we seek an outcome in which there is a significantly larger force of Liberal Democrat MPs. And we hope that

Mr Brown replaces Mr Blair sooner rather than later.”³⁰ The endorsement of the *Independent* was also considered by Brandenburg as “partial.” Having discussed the partisanship of the press based on a qualitative analysis of Brandenburg (2006), Bartle (2005) and Butler and Butler (2000; 2006), let us proceed to a quantitative look at the coverage bias in the British press during the 2005 parliamentary elections. Our analysis will use the previously described data collected and content-analysed by Brandenburg, which will be complemented by findings of Deacon et al. (2005).

4.5.3 Coverage bias: strategic or incumbency driven?

British voters are well-served in terms of the number of newspapers available and the daily titles devote a considerable amount of their news coverage to political matters during an election campaign. This is reflected by the number of lines contained in Brandenburg’s dataset. He coded 577,000 standardized text lines across 26 editions of seven newspapers. The data confirms a common perception that the broadsheets/quality newspapers carry more electoral content than the tabloids. With 121,066 standardized text lines referring to the campaign, the *Guardian*’s campaign coverage accounted for almost 21 percent of all press campaign reporting and analyses. The *Times* came second with 114,735 standardized text lines, which was nearly 20 percent of the overall coverage. The other two quality newspapers: the *Independent* and the *Daily Telegraph* carried roughly equal amounts of lines about the election at around 90,000 (15.5 percent of all campaign coverage).

Unsurprisingly, the tabloids devoted substantially less of their output to the general election campaign. The *Sun* carried nearly four times less standardized text lines about

³⁰ The *Independent*, May 4, 2005, “It is vital that the forces of liberalism prevail in this complex election.”

the election compared to the *Guardian* (37,644 to the *Guardian*'s 121,066). Researchers from Loughborough University made an interesting comparison between the amount of space dedicated to the campaign and the space devoted to the marriage troubles of celebrity footballer David Beckham and his wife. They found that the tabloid press (the *Daily Mirror*, the *Daily Star* and the *Sun*) paid much more attention to the Beckhams' marriage than to the leaking of Lord Goldsmith's legal advice on Iraq. For example on April 25, 2005, the *Sun* devoted 2146 cm² to David and Victoria Beckham, as compared to 204 cm² focused on Goldsmith's legal advice, printed in that paper on April 28, 2005 (Deacon et al. 2005: 12).

We have previously mentioned that real world events might distract newspaper editors (and the public) from the minutiae of the campaign. And such attention and headline-grabbing events occurred in April 2005. We have written above about the casus of David and Victoria Beckham and the prominence of campaign coverage in the UK tabloid newspapers. Other events which overshadowed the campaign were the funeral of Pope John Paul II (held on April 8, 2005) and the Royal Wedding between Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles (also April 8, 2005). These events coincided with the lowest amount of campaign coverage in the *Sun*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mirror* on April 9.

At the beginning of this chapter we have discussed the editorial policies of electronic broadcasters relating to fair and balanced political reporting, especially during elections. No such directives or laws exist for print media in the UK. Newspapers are free to dedicate as much or as little space to any party they wish. This creates a problem, and an opportunity for researchers, as one would like to establish whether the amount of party coverage is systematically biased and whether it reflects official endorsements. Brandenburg observes that "nobody can expect them [the press – Zalinski] to reflect, in

the amount of coverage they grant the different protagonists, their respective parliamentary strength or standings in opinion polls. The main question here is, whether print media make any discernable strategic use of their relative freedom to distribute coverage at will" (2006: 166). This is of crucial importance to any research measuring the role of media during elections as it helps to illuminate the question of press partisanship. It is also important as parties are mentioned in a majority of campaign related articles. Out of all the lines contained within Brandenburg's dataset, 70 percent of them made some reference to a political party.

Table 4-3 Party newspaper coverage; percentage of newspaper coverage devoted to party by newspaper. UK 2005 election. N = total number of standardised text lines. Pearson Chi-Square = 21842.996 (df = 102); Sig. (2-sided) = .000.

	Mail	Mirror	Telegraph	Guardian	Independent	Sun	Times	Total
Labour	70.7	57.9	53.0	52.1	50.3	67.1	46.3	54.2
Conservatives	17.3	32.3	31.4	29.2	27.2	16.1	32.8	28.0
Lib Dems	7.4	5.8	12.2	13.2	15.4	14.4	13.9	12.5
SNP	0.2	0.6	0.3	0.2	0.1	1.0	0.6	0.3
BNP	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.5	0.1	0.7	0.4
UKIP	0.0	0.1	0.4	0.6	0.1	0.1	1.0	0.4
Veritas	0.4	0.1	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.2
Sinn Féin	0.0	0.1	0.6	0.6	0.1	0.0	0.3	0.3
Green Party	0.6	0.3	0.4	0.8	2.3	0.3	0.6	0.9
Plaid Cymru	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1
DUP	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.9	0.0	0.4	0.3
UUP	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.1
SDLP	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1
Independents	1.9	0.7	0.6	1.1	1.7	0.1	1.9	1.3
Respect	1.3	2.1	0.3	0.6	0.8	0.7	1.2	0.9
N	45,073	30,352	64,771	86,510	74,908	24,207	80,435	406,256
Share	11%	7.5%	15.9%	21.3%	18.5%	5.95%	19.8	100%

Looking at Table 3 we can see that Labour was over represented in all the newspapers. This can be easily explained by the fact of its incumbency. By virtue of being in government, Blair's party managed to attract more of the press attention. That incumbency generates more media coverage had been previously shown by Brandenburg in the context of the Irish general election in 2002 (2005: 301-306). It will also be demonstrated in the third part of this thesis, which measures the role of mass media during the general election in Ireland in 2007. The power of incumbency does not mean that there were no differences between the amount of lines devoted to a particular party between papers.

The *Sun* proves yet again to be an exceptional case: 67 percent of its campaign coverage referred to the Labour party, while only 16.4 percent to the Tories. Other newspapers offered few surprises, with the exception of the *Daily Mail*. As we have stated earlier in the chapter, this was one of the two newspapers, which endorsed the Conservatives. Ironically, 71 percent of its overall campaign coverage was dedicated to the Michael Howard's opponents. This percentage was the biggest share of Labour's coverage out of all newspapers coded. Looking at the results of the chi-square test (as reported in the caption of Table 4-3) we observe that there is a difference between newspapers in their coverage of the parties. Figure 4 shows the proportionality of the newspaper party coverage as compared with the share of popular vote and the proportion of the seats in the House of Commons won by parties in the 2001 general election in the UK. We observe that Labour received more coverage than their share of the popular vote. For the two other parties the situation was different as they both had proportionally less coverage in the newspapers than their share of the 2001 popular vote.

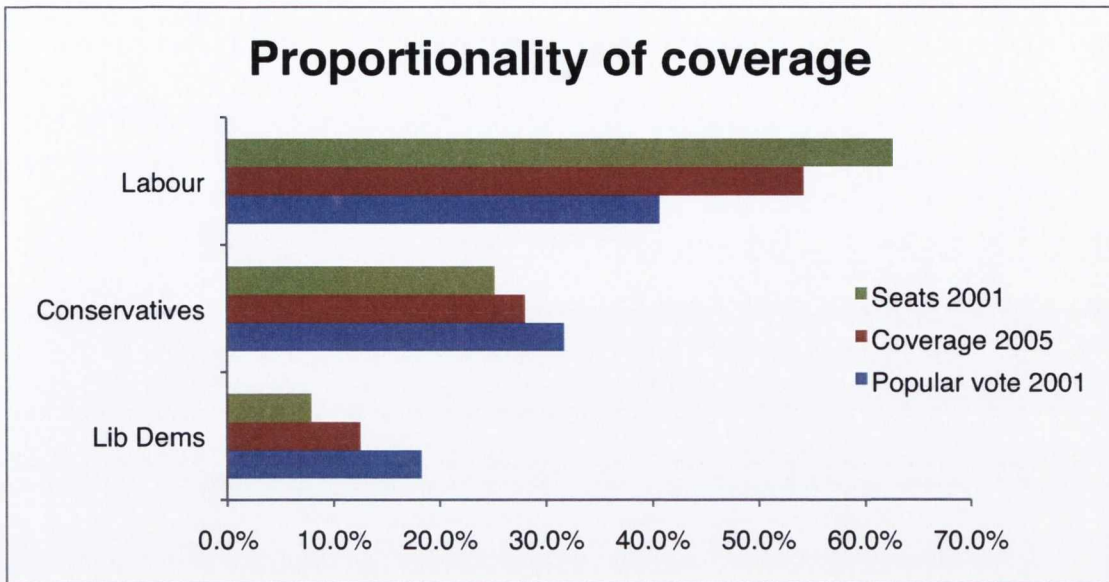


Figure 4-5 Proportionality of coverage. Newspaper party coverage in 2005, share of popular vote and parliamentary seats in the previous election. Source: Morgan (2001: 11).

All in all newspapers did follow their endorsements. The *Guardian* and the *Independent* gave more than average share of their campaign-related content to the Liberal Democrats. This reflects the papers’ partial endorsement of Labour and Liberal Democrats. The *Daily Mirror*, unexpectedly for a newspaper perceived to be a staunch supporter of Labour³¹, devoted over one-third of its party coverage to the Conservatives.

Brandenburg concludes that “papers did either deviate moderately from the overall pattern in the expected direction (the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Guardian*, the *Independent*), or else applied coverage bias in a more strategic fashion (the *Sun*, the *Times*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Daily Mail*)” (2006: 167). This ties in with our earlier discussion on the changing nature of press partisanship in the UK and the strategic approach of newspapers to party endorsements.

This thesis follows the research methodology developed by Dr. Heinz Brandenburg. It does so in order to be able to make informed comparisons between the British

³¹ But perhaps not “New Labour” as Brandenburg rightly points out (2006: 167).

elections in 2005 and the Irish campaign in 2007. But we think it would be beneficial to complement the results presented above with the findings of Deacon et al. (2005) who also conducted a quantitative study of media campaign reporting in 2005. Looking at the balance of space devoted to competing political actors, they made several discoveries. We shall briefly discuss them below.

As with Brandenburg's findings, the Loughborough University researchers concluded that the representatives of the Labour party received more coverage across all the media outlets than their opponents. They also found that the two main parties dominated the media election coverage, which was also evident in the dataset used in this study. Another interesting observation highlighted the growing importance of party leaders in British politics. This has also been noted by other researchers. Heffernan and Webb argue that "there is little doubt that the party leaders figure extremely prominently in contemporary election campaign in the UK, and that this prominence has grown with the advent of televised campaigning... Thus, the increasingly presidential style of election campaigning in Britain is likely to prove an enduring phenomenon" (2005: 55). This "presidentialisation" of the election campaign was evident in the media coverage. According to Deacon et al. (2005) in the popular/tabloid press, the three main party leaders accounted for 39 percent of all politician-related news and 60 percent of all direct quotes.

The analysis contained in "Reporting the 2005 U.K. General Election" by Deacon et al. (2005) is rich in detail and we will come back to it later on in this chapter to draw comparisons with our observations. Table 4 presents the proportion of newspaper coverage devoted to leaders of the three main parties. The share of the leaders coverage was 31.8 percent of the overall campaign related newspaper coverage during the 2005 election campaign in the UK. We can see that almost half of the coverage focused on

leaders mentioned Labour's leader Tony Blair. He had almost twice as many lines devoted to him than Michael Howard. Some newspapers (the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Sun*) dedicated more than a half of their leaders-related coverage to Blair.

Table 4-4 Leaders coverage by newspaper (percentage of campaign-related news coverage). UK election 2005. N = total number of standardised text lines coded for leaders.

	Mail	Mirror	Telegraph	Guardian	Independent	Sun	Times	Total
Tony Blair	61.5	52.2	39.2	40.8	47.7	60.5	40.5	47.2
Michael Howard	15.4	25.6	26.1	28.0	24.3	16.0	25.7	23.8
Charles Kennedy	9.8	7.8	15.2	15.5	18.1	11.5	18.1	14.5
Gordon Brown	13.3	14.4	19.5	15.7	9.9	12.0	15.7	14.6
N	24,821	17,614	29,630	34,931	31,892	15,309	29,686	183,883

4.6 Agenda bias

4.6.1 Process vs. issues

One of the most prominent features of the campaign reporting is its focus on the campaign process over writing and analysing policies. This means that newspapers tend to focus on campaign activities (canvassing, party rallies, etc.) and horserace aspects of the campaign. These features are deemed to be of more interest to the public, which might not be interested in reading dry and detailed studies of parties' policy proposals. This was also found to be a feature of the media reporting on the 2005 campaign in Britain: all the newspapers from the sample devoted more than half of their campaign coverage to process issues. Some tabloids, such as the *Sun* and the *Daily Mirror*, dedicated almost three-quarters of their campaign-related coverage to process (74 and 71.4 percent respectively). For the quality/broadsheet newspapers the share of process coverage was smaller, but not substantially so. Out of the four of them included in the sample, the *Independent's* process coverage amounted to 63.7 percent of all the text lines

coded, the *Daily Telegraph's* to 65.4 percent, the *Guardian's* to 66 percent and the *Times'* to 69.2 percent. The *Daily Mail* proved to be an exception, as it was the only paper analysed by Brandenburg, with a substantial amount of policy-related content (44.1 percent). This was the biggest share of policy content out of all the newspapers in the sample. The *Daily Mail's* focus on policies in 2005 is not entirely surprising as Brandenburg found the paper made similar editorial choices during the 1997 election campaign (2003: 141).

The previously discussed “presidentialisation” of the election campaign in the UK has also manifested itself in the media reporting. Almost all papers focused more on the questions pertaining to the leadership than horserace issues in their process coverage. Eight percent of the text lines were coded as referring to horserace and ten percent discussed the leadership issues.

Table 5 presents the media issue agenda in detail. We see that the top six policy dimensions in seven national newspapers from the sample were the economy, Iraq, social welfare (which included the issue of healthcare), immigration, crime/justice and education. Overall the economy was mentioned in the 9.6 percent of all the text lines. The share of text lines devoted to Iraq was 5.4 percent; social welfare was mentioned in five percent of all the lines; immigration in three percent of them; crime/justice in 2.7 percent and education in 1.9 percent of all the lines.

Table 4-5 Issue coverage in newspapers. UK, 2005 election (percentage of total campaign-related coverage). N = total number of standardised text lines. In brackets position in the top five ranking of policy issues on media agenda.

	Mail	Mirror	Telegraph	Guardian	Independent	Sun	Times	Total
Political system	2.1	0.3	1.8	1.6	1.2	2.1	2.1	1.7
Justice	4.0	1.8	2.3	3.0	1.6	3.6	3.1	2.7 (5)
Defence	1.7	0.7	0.8	1.3	1.6	0.5	0.6	1.1
Economy	12.6	7.5	12.2	9.8	8.4	5.0	8.8	9.6 (1)
Agriculture		0.4	0.1	0.4	0.3	0.0	0.2	0.2
Social welfare	6.0	9.1	4.6	4.9	4.8	2.0	4.6	5.0 (3)
Immigration	4.9	2.9	1.6	3.2	3.0	5.0	2.2	3.0 (4)
Education	1.5	2.1	2.9	1.4	2.0	1.0	2.1	1.9
Arts/Culture	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.5	0.2
Infrastructure/Technology	0.2	0.7	1.0	0.3	0.6	0.2	0.9	0.6
Environment		0.1	0.4	0.7	2.4	0.4	0.9	0.9
Foreign affairs	0.9	0.7	1.8	2.2	2.6	0.9	1.3	1.7
Iraq	10.1	2.2	4.6	5.0	7.1	5.2	3.3	5.4 (2)
Northern Ireland			0.3	0.2	0.6		0.2	0.2
Policy issues sub total	44.1	28.6	34.6	34.0	36.3	26.0	30.8	34.1
Campaigning	30.6	46.1	29.5	32.2	30.7	40.0	34.7	33.3
Polls/Horserace	4.6	5.8	9.6	9.9	8.0	6.8	6.8	7.8
Leadership	8.2	10.2	9.0	7.6	8.9	8.5	8.8	8.6
Political ethics	4.1	1.8	1.4	1.8	2.3	1.2	2.9	2.3
Non-political	0.4	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.5	5.4	0.6	0.9
Election	8.1	6.7	15.3	13.9	13.3	12.1	15.4	13.0
Process sub total	56.0	71.4	65.4	66.0	63.7	74.0	69.2	65.9
N	66,787	39,740	90,353	122,883	101,732	34,333	122,205	578,020

Examining the media agenda further, we see that there was some variation between the intensity of issue treatment between newspapers. The *Mail* and the *Telegraph* devoted more than 12 percent of their coverage to the economy, whereas in the *Sun* this was only 5 percent. The papers differed also in their treatment of the issue of the war in Iraq. The *Mail* focused more than ten percent of its campaign-related coverage to that issue, while the *Times* had only 3 percent of the text lines coded dedicated to Iraq and the *Mirror* only two. Looking at issue agenda dynamics throughout the campaign, we do not observe any significant changes amongst the top three issues. Figure 5 shows that the newspaper treatment of the Iraq war slightly intensified over the course of the campaign and the prominence of the economy issue decreased.

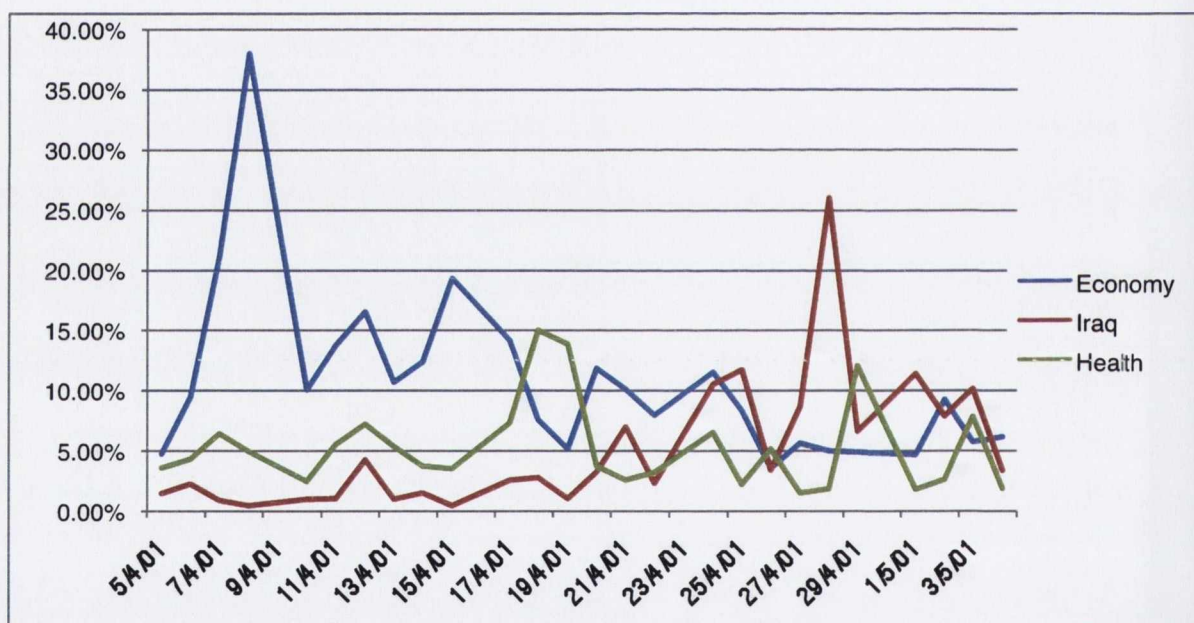


Figure 4-6 Issue dynamics on the media agenda. Three top issues (Economy, Iraq war and healthcare).

Table 6 presents the issue agenda of political parties as presented by the newspapers during the campaign. We observe that the Conservatives had the highest proportion of text lines devoted to the issue of immigration (6.2 percent). Labour had the highest proportion of lines focused on the war in Iraq, which once again can be explained by the fact of being the governing party. Labour also had the biggest proportion of lines devoted to policy issues, while the Liberal Democrats were written about mostly in terms of the campaign process (80.3 percent of their total coverage).

Table 4-6 Parties' issue coverage (percentage of campaign-related coverage). UK 2005 election. N = total number of standardised text lines.

	Labour	Conservatives	Liberal Democrats
Political system	1.3	0.9	0.9
Justice	2.1	2.3	1.6
Defence	0.7	0.5	0.3
Economy	9.2	7.9	6.3
Agriculture	0.2	0.2	0.2
Social welfare	4.8	4.7	3.4
Immigration	1.5	6.2	0.5
Education	2.1	1.5	1.7
Arts/Culture	0.1	0.3	
Infrastructure/Technology	0.4	0.4	0.3
Environment	0.4	0.4	0.5
Foreign affairs	2.1	0.9	0.7
Iraq	7.5	1.1	3.2
Northern Ireland	0.1		
Policy issues sub total	32.5	27.3	19.6
Campaigning	35.0	41.1	46.8
Polls/Horserace	7.4	9.8	13.7
Leadership	12.7	9.6	10.0
Political ethics	2.5	3.4	0.8
Non-political	0.5		0.1
Election	9.3	8.9	8.9
Process sub total	67.4	72.8	80.3
N	220,027	113,928	50,630

The results from the study of media data collected by Brandenburg can be compared to the findings of Deacon et al. (2005: 25). Although their methodology³² is different from the one employed by this study, it is still interesting to see whether their results are substantially different from the ones derived from Brandenburg's dataset.

They too found the process coverage to dominate the campaign coverage. Overall 44 percent of all campaign coverage dealt with the electoral process itself. Although the prominence of process coverage in campaign reporting has been a long-established truth, some of the results are nevertheless striking. Deacon et al. found that "the majority of items in all national media sectors contained either no or negligible descriptive policy-related information (i.e. this content constituted less than four percent of the entire length of the item) (2005: 30). There was more information on policies in the broadcast media than in the national press, but all in all the picture is dispiriting for anybody wishing for a more informed public/media-discourse.

Interestingly the list of the most prominent topics in the election coverage according to the Loughborough University researchers is quite different than Brandenburg's one. While according to his data, the economy dominated the issue coverage, for Deacon et al. it was "political improprieties³³" and Iraq, which were the two most prominent topics. Iraq was mentioned in ten percent of all national broadcasts and eight percent of

³² The differences include selection of the coded material and the unit of analysis. Deacon et al. analysed election related news stories from the two first pages of the domestic news section (in addition to the front page, two first pages of the specialist election section and the pages containing papers' editorials), whereas Brandenburg coded all articles which talked about the election. The researchers from the Loughborough University used column inches to measure the prominence of the theme in a news story, which was coded for one main theme (which had to occupy at least two full sentences) and two subsidiary themes. Brandenburg coded for all issues which appeared in a news article or TV news broadcast and looked at a line of text as his unit of analysis.

³³ This theme included sub-themes, such as: fraud concerns, integrity of leaders, corruption, scandals and sleaze, amongst others.

articles in the up market press but the populist press devoted only four percent of their coverage to that issue). Mid-market and populist titles focused more on, presumably more scandalous and therefore easier to sell, political improprieties. Mid-market newspapers dedicated 17 percent of their coverage to these issues and the populist press six percent. The list of the top three topics which grabbed mass media's attention according to Deacon et al. is completed by the issue of asylum/immigration. They also observed that apart from those three top issues, other topics received scant media attention. Such issues as the economy (only four percent in all media); the National Health Service (also four percent overall and six percent in the populist press) and education (similarly four percent of overall coverage) remained low on the list of media priorities.

The differences between the findings of the two datasets discussed above might have to do to the differences in methodologies. They cannot be compared in a like with like manner, as, on the very fundamental level, they have different units of observations. They have been contrasted here only for illustrative purposes and to paint a more detailed picture of both the media reporting during the campaign and also various research endeavours.

4.7 Statement bias

4.7.1 Tone of the campaign

Earlier on in this chapter the fact that the British press is highly partisan was discussed at length. Although the nature and the strength of party support expressed by the press has changed over time, it is still very much of a feature of the media behaviour in the UK. The party endorsements have been studied using qualitative methods by examining the editorial content published by newspapers during the 2005 election. There is, however, another way of looking at press partisanship in a more quantitative

way. One of the characteristics of the content-analysis method used in this study requires coding newspaper editorials and opinion pieces in terms of statement bias. Every time a party leader is mentioned in such a piece, one codes such a line of text as positive, neutral or negative towards the subject. Thanks to this data, one may assess clearly not only the general attitude of newspapers towards politicians, but also the political leanings of a particular newspaper.

Overall, using Brandenburg's dataset, we see that there was very little positive commentary. Less than six percent of the lines coded for statement bias were favourable towards political actors. The share of positive statements varied between titles and ranged from less than four percent in the *Daily Mail* and *The Times* to almost 14 percent in the *Daily Mirror* and nine percent in the *Sun*.

Some newspaper were more negative than others. For the *Daily Mail*, more than half of its editorial coverage, which was coded for bias, was negative. For the titles owned by Rupert Murdoch – the *Sun* and *The Times* – the share of negative commentary oscillated around 44 percent. Two broadsheets – the *Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph* – displayed a more neutral approach with more than 60 percent of their op/ed content classified as being neither positive nor unfavourable. Looking at overall shares, there were seven times more negative text lines than positive ones (Brandenburg 2006: 173).

This apparent negativity of the 2005 editorials is at odds with previous research into media and political campaigns in the UK. Norris et al. (1999: 26-29) showed that in 1992 and 1997 there was more balance between the positive and negative statements. Brandenburg points out, however, certain methodological differences between his studies and the ones conducted by Norris. If we put those aside and use Norris' data to look at the long term trends, we see a decrease in the number of positive stories printed.

This might reflect the growing disillusionment with politics in the press “which by now seems to have been replaced by disillusionment and negativity” (Brandenburg 2006: 174).

These quantitative findings illustrating the negative/positive balance in the British press are confounding. If papers decided to endorse political parties – however weak or strong such an endorsements might be – then one would expect there to be more positive commentary. One possible explanation of the lack of positivity in the editorials published in the British papers during elections, could be the fact that official endorsements are usually printed towards the end of the campaign. Newspapers might want to create an image of impartiality, of “speaking in their own voice / speaking their mind / speaking for the public.” This might prompt them to publish more negative commentary. They might react to the general mistrust of the political class felt by the public. In July 2003 an Ipsos MORI poll showed that 75 percent of adult population in the United Kingdom would not trust a politician. So the editors have to navigate skilfully between the opinions of their readers, the historically established links with political parties and the political class in general and the practice of party endorsements. By showing their readers that they still criticize politicians during the campaign and by endorsing political parties just before the polling day, the editors keep both of their important constituencies happy.

What is remarkable is the fact that in Ireland – a country which does not have official party endorsements – Brandenburg found comparable levels of negative statements in the press. In 2002, 40 percent of the opinion and editorial pieces published during the campaign were of a negative nature. This has changed in 2007, as we found that the majority of the op/ed pieces were neutral in the Irish press. This will be discussed at length in Chapter 6.

Although differing in methodology, Deacon et al. (2005) discovered similar patterns while examining the media content for “directional balance.” They found a high proportion of “bad news” associated with the news about Labour in the mid-market press. Overall the news about the Labour party had negative implications. This remains puzzling, if we remember that Labour received endorsements from the majority of the British press in 2005.

So far we have looked at the negative / neutral / positive balance in the British press’ commentary. To investigate the press’ partisanship further, a mean score for the partisan editorial content about each party was calculated across all seven newspapers from the sample. The scores range from +1 (all statements were positive) to – 1 (all statements were negative). Table 7 presents the results.

Table 4-7 Average mean score bias for commentary about parties. UK election 2005. N = total number of standardised text lines coded for statement bias (opinion and editorial articles).

	Average	Mail	Mirror	Telegraph	Guardian	Independent	Sun	Times
Labour	-0.36	-0.61	0.14	-0.35	-0.24	-0.35	-0.25	-0.47
Conservatives	-0.3	0.04	-0.64	-0.06	-0.44	-0.31	-0.36	-0.27
Lib Dems	-0.34	-0.26	-0.17	-0.4	-0.28	-0.14	-0.7	-0.44
Average (all)	-0.34							
N	90,844							

Once again we see that the negative approach to politics dominated in almost all newspapers. When positive mean scores appear (for the treatment of the Conservatives in the *Daily Mail* and Labour in the *Daily Mirror*), they are very modest. They corroborate our previous statements about partisanship of the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror*, as both titles showed support for the expected party. One important observation to make is the fact that, although the Conservatives were commented on positively in

the *Daily Mail* (mean score of +0.06), the party was only present in less than 15 percent of the commentary coded. More than three-quarters of the paper's partisan editorial output was dedicated to criticizing Labour (mean score of -0.62). We can therefore conclude that British newspapers show their endorsement more by criticizing their preferred party's opponents, rather than writing positively about it. This trait is also visible in the balance of commentary published in the *Daily Mirror*. While the balance between parties' shares of the partisan op/ed content is more even than in the *Daily Mail* (47 percent devoted to Labour; 48,5 percent to the Conservatives) the mean scores reveal the paper's political leanings. Labour-related commentary achieves positive mean score of 0.17, while the Tories' mean score are negative at -0.65.

Looking at the *Daily Telegraph* we find that it behaved as expected, taking into account its official endorsement of the Conservatives. Michael Howard's party is treated almost in a neutral manner (mean score of -.05). Labour, on the other hand, receives harsh criticism with a negative mean score of -0.37.

The *Guardian* and the *Independent* were two newspapers put by Brandenburg (2006: 164) in the "partial endorsement" category. They advocated both for the Labour party as well as Liberal Democrats. This split approach is visible in the tone of their partisan commentary too, at least in the case of the *Guardian*. The mean scores for both parties are negative (which once again highlights the negativity towards politics in the British press and, perhaps, the disillusionment with the New Labour government), but they are almost at the same level: -0.22 for the partisan commentary about Labour and -0.27 for the Liberal Democrats. The *Guardian* was much harsher towards the Conservatives with the average negative score of -0.43.

The *Independent* gave a substantial share of its partisan commentary to the Liberal Democrats (16 percent, second only in this respect to the *Sun*, which devoted 22 percent of its op/ed content to the Lib Dems) and also wrote about them most neutrally out of all the newspapers analysed. The mean score of the partisan commentary related to the Lib Dems in the *Independent* was -0.14. The paper criticized Labour and the Conservatives almost equally (-0.37 and -0.34 respectively), but devoted twice as much opinion text lines to Blair's party (54.5 percent) than to the Tories (26.5 percent).

The *Sun* has been evoked at several occasions in this chapter and indeed in this thesis as the prime example of the partisan tabloid newspaper. Results show that it afforded a substantial amount of its partisan editorial coverage to the Labour party (65.1 percent). In fact, there was only one other newspaper with a larger share – the *Daily Mail* – but they used it to criticize the government. The *Sun* might not have praised Labour, but it was the least critical of it. The average bias score for Labour-mentioning editorial content published in the *Sun* was -0.21. Perhaps because of fear of losing Labour seats if people choose the Liberal Democrats in marginal constituencies, the *Sun* was highly negative about the party led by Charles Kennedy. Not only was the share of partisan commentary awarded to the Lib Dems the biggest in the *Sun* out of all newspapers (22 percent), but it was also the most negative (average bias score of -0.70).

In line with its lukewarm partisan endorsement, The *Times* was critical of all the main parties. The paper might have advocated for Labour's return to power, but at the same time, they were highly critical of it in their partisan commentary (mean score for Labour-related content was -0.47). They wrote more positively about the Conservatives (average bias score of -0.27).

Overall commentary about all three main parties during the 2005 UK general election was negative with some variation across newspapers, which usually followed their official endorsements.

We also investigate the treatment of the party leaders (Table 8). As with the statement bias for parties, the commentary was on average negative (average mean score of -0.40). There was some variation across newspapers, however. The commentary about Michael Howard was slightly positive in the *Mail* (0.11), but rather negative in the *Mirror* (-0.69) and the *Guardian* (-0.67). The only newspaper who wrote favourably about Tony Blair was the *Mirror* (0.13). Charles Kennedy received a uniformly negative coverage in terms of opinion and editorial pieces coded.

Table 4-8 Average mean score bias for commentary about leaders. UK election 2005. N = total number of standardised text lines coded for statement bias (opinion and editorial articles).

	Average	Mail	Mirror	Telegraph	Guardian	Independent	Sun	Times
T. Blair	-0.43	-0.61	0.13	-0.43	-0.43	-0.41	-0.15	-0.52
M. Howard	-0.50	0.11	-0.69	-0.29	-0.67	-0.44	-0.41	-0.50
Ch. Kennedy	-0.37	-0.17	-0.21	-0.45	-0.33	-0.25	-0.40	-0.76
Average (all)	-0.40							
N	46,930							

4.8 Public agenda

As we have already discussed agenda setting theory links the media agenda with the public one. According to the theory, parties or mass media do not necessarily seek to change people's voting intentions, but they do want to highlight the importance of certain issues, issues which would be comfortable to deal with for political parties, so

they can fight the election on “home turf” (Norris 2006: 8) or issues which news outlets deem important for their consumers. What was on the collective mind of the British voters in April 2005? Have their concerns changed over the course of the campaign? The following part of this chapter examines the nature of the public agenda in the United Kingdom during the general election campaign in 2005, studies the changes which occurred and attempts to make informed comparisons with the media agenda as outlined in the previous sections. We shall proceed to examine two British Election Study datasets and compare their results with those of other public opinion surveys conducted around the time of the 2005 general election. This section will finish with a short discussion on the nature of the public agenda in Britain and the changes we observed during the period of the election campaign in April and May of 2005.

4.8.1 Most important problems facing Britain

We shall begin our investigation into the issues that made up the public agenda for the British voters in 2005 by studying the results of the two waves of the 2005 British Election Study face to face survey. The survey used the same, open-ended question asking the respondents to name the single most important issue facing the country. The answers were unprompted. Table 9 presents the results.

Table 4-9 Public agenda (face-to-face panel survey). UK, election 2005. Source: British Election Study 2005 Pre-Post election panel survey (NatCen). Weighted by PANWTGB. Top ten issues from the pre-campaign panel.

	Pre campaign	Post campaign	Change
Asylum seekers	19.6	7.3	-12.3
Other	15.7	10.6	-5.1
NHS	14.7	16.9	+2.2
Law and order	10.1	14.1	+4
Iraq war	7.3	5.0	-2.3
Education	6.8	6.5	-0.3
Terrorism	5.6	2.1	-3.5
Immigration	4.7	14.0	+9.3
Economy	4.1	7.7	+3.6
Unemployment	2.3	1.9	-0.4
N			2,959

Looking at Table 9 we can see that the issue that Britons deemed the most important facing their country in February and March 2005 was the problem of asylum seekers (indicated by 19.6 percent of respondents). Other issues in the top five were the NHS (14.7 percent), law and order (10.1 percent), Iraq war (7.3 percent) and other, non-specified issues (15.7 percent). Turning our attention to the issues on the public agenda post-election, the picture is somewhat different. Topping the public agenda is the issue of the National Health Service (16.9 percent), which was followed by law and order and immigration (14.1 and 14 percent respectively), economy was indicated by 7.7 percent of respondents and slightly more than ten percent mentioned other issues. Perhaps the most interesting observation can be made by looking at the third column in Table 9, which gives us an overview of the changes which happened over the time between the pre-campaign survey and the post-election one (so between February/March and May 2005). We observe that the biggest change occurred in the proportion of people, who thought that the issue of asylum seekers was the most important problem facing Britain

at that time. It changed by 12.3 percent and went down from 19.6 percent to a little above seven percent in the post-election wave of the survey. Another considerable change was the rise in the share of people in the UK who were concerned about immigration: before the election campaign slightly less than five percent of respondents stipulated that this was an important issue for the UK, while in May 2005, this number grew by more than nine percent to 14 percent. The issue of the European Union and the Euro was another one which seemed to occupy the minds of more people after the election than before it. It changed by more than five percent, from a bit more than two percent in February/March of 2005 to 7.3 percent in May. We can also see that the proportion of people who mentioned law and order as the most important issue also grew over time, with more than 14 percent share of the public agenda post-election (a positive change of four percent).

To examine the public agenda in a comprehensive manner, we also investigated the findings of another survey conducted for the British Election Study in 2005. The Internet rolling campaign survey was administered by YouGov with a pre-campaign baseline of 7,793 respondents. They were contacted before the campaign started and then a random sample of ~270 respondents were requested to do follow-up interviews every day of the campaign.

We observe (Table 10) that there are some differences between the rankings of the top ten issues on the public agenda measured by the two BES surveys. For the Internet rolling campaign survey the top five issues were: immigration (almost 18 percent), NHS (13 percent), Crime (12.5 percent), terrorism (5 percent) and economy (4.5 percent). Looking at the amount of individual change from pre to post campaign we can report that less than a third (29.8 percent) of those surveyed gave the same issue response on each occasion. Examining the case of the issue of asylum seekers, we see that for the

face-to-face survey the change was rather striking with a 12.3 decrease in prominence on the public agenda, whereas according to the Internet rolling panel survey there was slight increase (+0.53) in the share of people indicating that the asylum seekers were the most important problem facing Britain at that time. Another difference concerns the issue of immigration. In the face-to-face survey the share of people mentioning it as a most important issue after the campaign increased by nine percent. For the Internet survey the share actually decreased by almost 2 percent. We observe, however, that the issue was on top of the public agenda (according to the Internet survey) in the pre-campaign panel too. This was not the case for the face-to-face survey.

We also examine the dynamics of the top three issues on the public agenda throughout the campaign (Figure 6). As we concluded above the change in issue prominence on the public agenda were not dramatic. The tree top issues (Immigration, NHS and crime) seem to move largely in parallel.

Table 4-10 Public agenda (Internet rolling panel survey). UK election 2005. Source: British Election Study 2005 rolling campaign panel survey (YouGov). Top ten issues from the pre-campaign panel.

	Pre-campaign (%)	Post-campaign (%)	Change (%)
Immigration	17.73	15.74	-1.99
NHS	13.39	9.62	-3.77
Crime	12.64	14.25	+1.61
Terrorism	5.37	2.02	-3.35
Economy	4.54	8.52	+3.98
Asylum seekers	4.43	4.96	+0.53
Education	3.82	3.56	-0.26
Taxation	3.50	2.69	-0.81
Iraq war	3.07	2.02	-1.05
Labour leadership	2.94	2.85	-0.09
N	7,793	5,910	

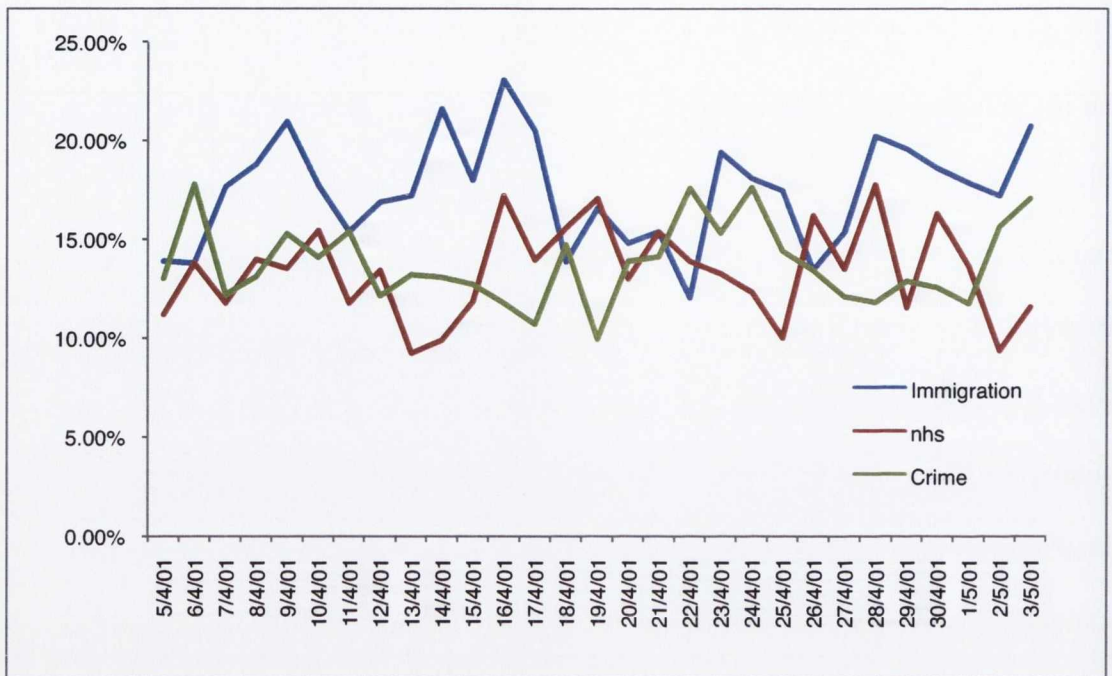


Figure 4-7 Issue dynamics on the public agenda. The three top issues from the pre-campaign panel. UK 2005 election. Source: British Election Study Internet rolling campaign panel.

4.8.2 Media and public agendas

Datasets used in this study enable us to look at the day-to-day dynamics of media and public agendas during the 2005 general election campaign in the UK. Figures 8 to 12 show how these dynamics changed over-time and how the agendas related to one another. We investigate such issues as economy, Iraq, immigration, NHS/health and crime.

We observe that crime, health and immigration were less visible in the media than on the public agenda. We can also see that this did not change during the course of the campaign. Newspapers paid more attention to the issue of economy for the first two weeks of the campaign, but then the agendas stayed almost parallel to each other. The

Iraq war climbed on the media agenda during the last week of the campaign, but we see that this did not transfer into a similar movement of the public agenda (Figure 12).

We also observe that for some issues, at certain times of the campaign, the public agenda seems to be following the media one. For example, between April 18 and 19 for the issue of health (Figure 9) or between April 22 and 24 for the issue of immigration. At the same time, we can see that at times, the media agenda seems to follow public opinion. For instance we observe such a movement between April 9 and 11 for the issue of immigration. Correlation coefficients (reported in the captions for figures 4-8, 4-9 and 4-10) calculated for the relationship between the and public agenda were not significant. These observations remind us of the difficulty in establishing the causal mechanism of the agenda setting process. They also show that sometimes dramatic movements on the media agenda do not seem to have an impact on the public in the short term. A longer time frame of such observations would help to examine issue dynamics and the nature of relationship between the media and public agendas better.

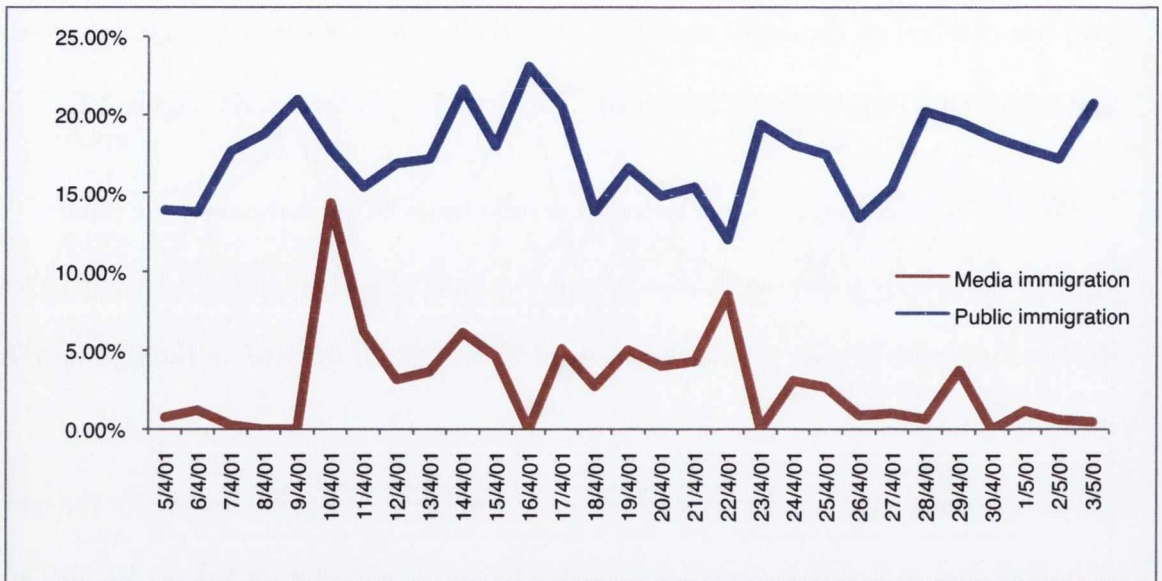


Figure 4-8 Media and public agenda dynamics: immigration. UK 2005 election. Source: British Election Study 2005 rolling campaign panel survey (YouGov). Pearson correlation = -0.0272.

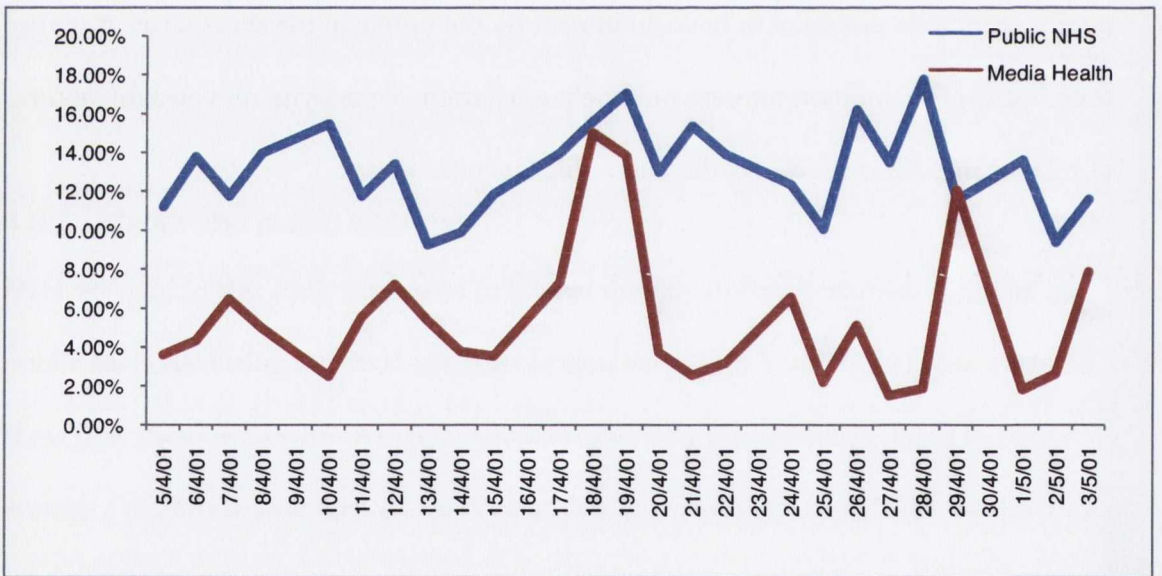


Figure 4-9 Media and public agenda dynamics: NHS/Health. Source: British Election Study 2005 rolling campaign panel survey (YouGov). Pearson correlation = 0.1863.

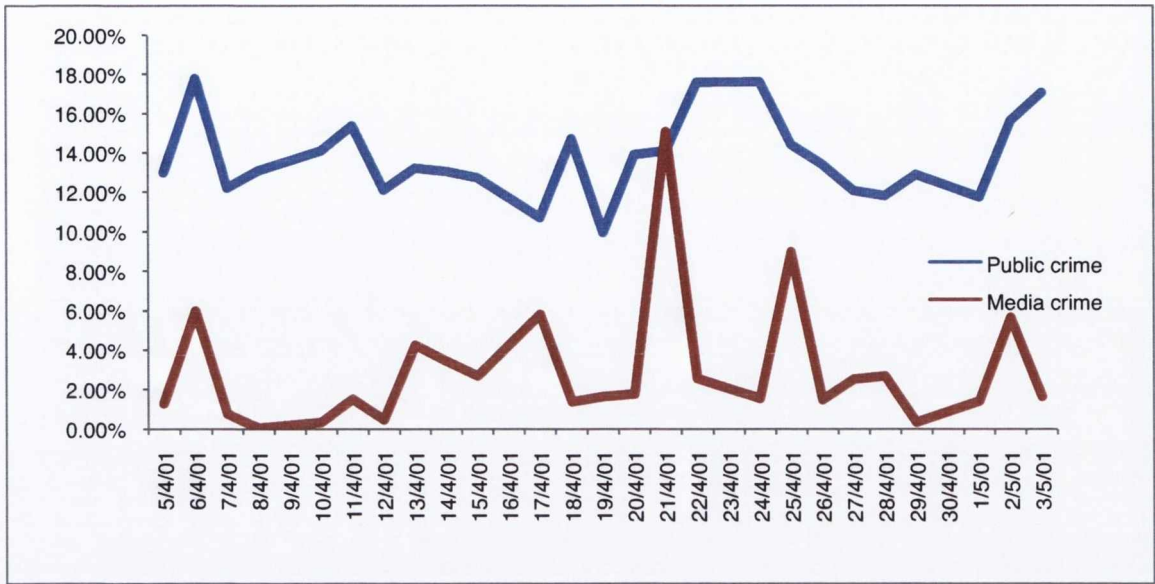


Figure 4-10 Media and public agenda dynamics: crime. Source: British Election Study 2005 rolling campaign panel survey (YouGov). Pearson correlation = 0.1321.

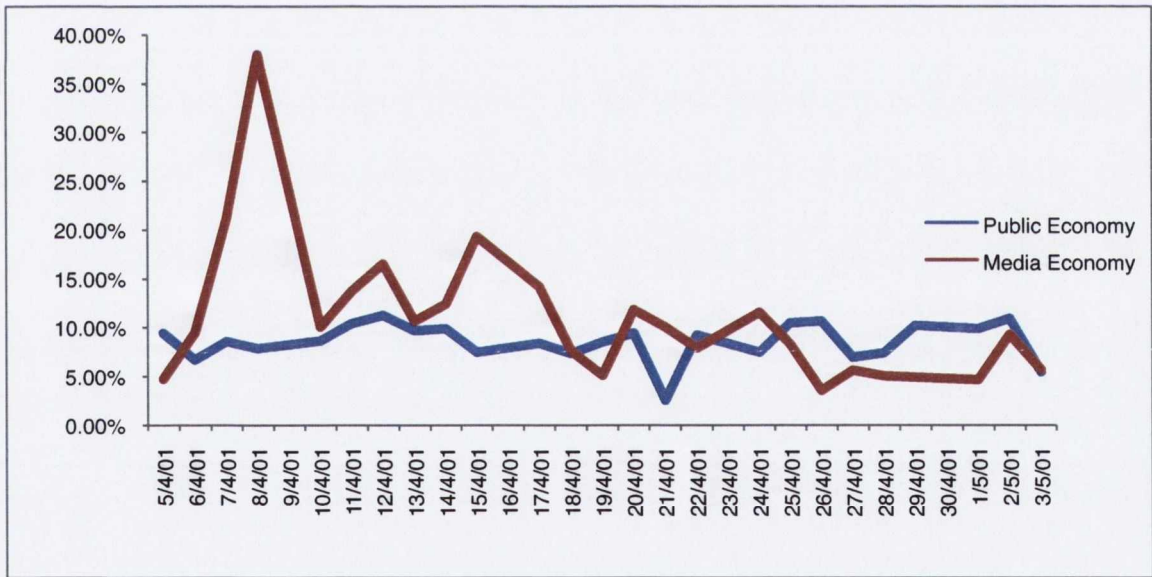


Figure 4-11 Media and public agenda dynamics: economy. Source: British Election Study 2005 rolling campaign panel survey (YouGov).

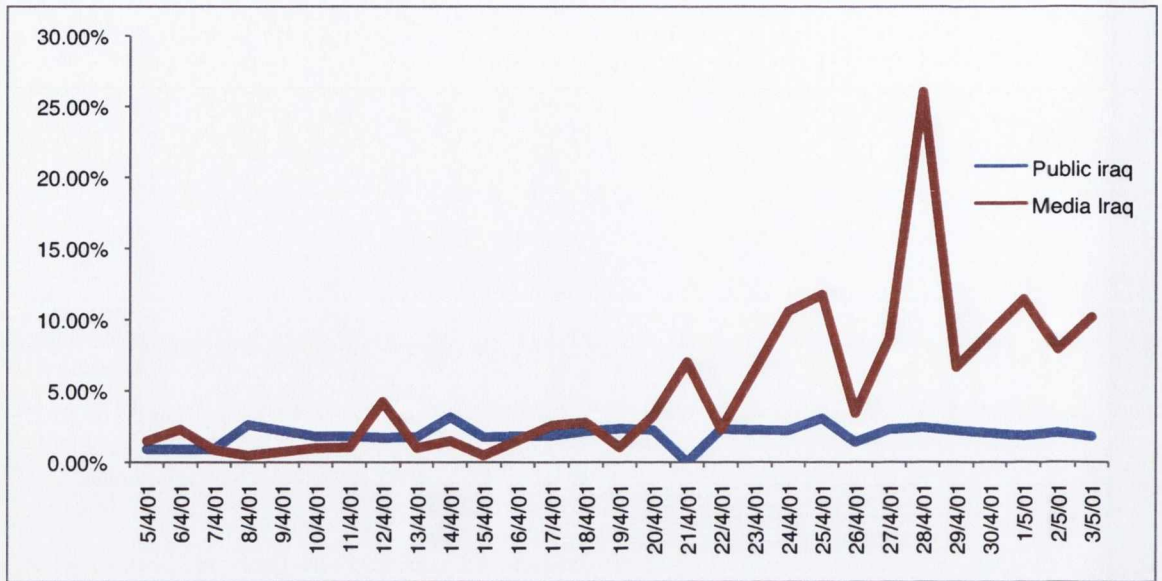


Figure 4-12 Media and public agenda dynamics: Iraq. Source: British Election Study 2005 rolling campaign panel survey (YouGov).

Table 4-11 Media and public agendas (top five issues). UK election 2005. Source: British Election Study Internet rolling campaign panel. British Election Study 2005 Pre-Post election panel survey (NatCen).

Ranking	Media agenda	Public agenda (Internet)	Public Agenda (Internet post-campaign)	Public agenda (face-to-face)	Public agenda (face to face post-campaign)
1	Economy	Immigration	Immigration	Asylum seekers	NHS
2	Iraq	NHS	Crime	Other	Crime
3	Health	Crime	NHS	NHS	Immigration
4	Immigration	Terrorism	Economy	Crime	Other
5	Crime	Economy	Asylum Seekers	Iraq	Economy

Table 11 brings together the top five issues on the media and public agendas as discussed in the sections above. We see that the three top issues on the public agenda – as measured by the BES surveys employed by this study – were immigration, NHS and crime. The ranking on the agenda differed depending on the survey. The issues

prominent in the media, on the other hand, were somewhat different. Economy and Iraq war received the most newspaper coverage out of all policy content coded. Immigration and crime took fourth and fifth spot respectively.

4.9 Conclusions

This chapter provided a systematic examination of media content and public opinion during the 2005 general election campaign in the United Kingdom. The first part looked at the British media market and focused on the question of the partisanship of the British press. In the second part we presented and discussed the results of the quantitative analysis of the media and public agendas. The following section provides a brief summary of results.

We find that British citizens get most of their political information from the mass media. Television is by far the most popular with almost 90 percent of Britons indicating TV as their main source of political information, ahead of conversations with friends and family (58 percent), local newspapers (54 percent) and broadsheet and tabloid newspapers (both at 43 percent). We also observe a high level of trust in the media. Television is the most trusted news source and the BBC is the most trusted institution in the UK. We also note a close relationship between the British print media and politics. This is expressed by newspapers' party endorsements. They have been a mainstay of British political culture for decades and have been often viewed as important to parties' chances of winning an election. We observe that indeed since 1979 the party with the backing of the larger share of newspapers (measured as proportion of total newspaper circulation) won the election. There were, however, exceptions, like the 1974 election when the Labour party won despite the Tories being endorsed by 70 percent of the press.

Examining the media agenda in detail, we can conclude that there is a substantial difference in the amount of text lines devoted to the campaign between different types of newspapers. Broadsheet newspapers give more attention to the campaign compared to tabloid press. For example the *Sun* had four times less lines about the campaign than the *Guardian*. Looking at the treatment of political parties, we examined the notion of strategic or incumbency-driven bias. We see that incumbency was a strong factor with more than a half of all campaign-related text lines in the newspapers analysed speaking about Labour. The Conservatives had 28 percent of newspaper party coverage, while the Liberal Democrats 12.5 percent. Labour received an over-proportional coverage when compared to their share of the popular vote in 2001, whereas Tories and the Liberal Democrats were under-represented. We also looked at newspaper party endorsements and can conclude that the British press did generally follow their endorsements.

As indicated by previous research into the role of media during election campaigns, the process coverage is more prominent than the reporting and analyses of policy issues. This was also the case in Britain in 2005. More than half of the campaign-related coverage focused on the process issues (campaigning, polls and horserace, leadership qualities). For tabloids this share was even greater as some of them devoted three quarters of their campaign articles to the process coverage. In terms of policy coverage the five top issues in the British newspapers during the 2005 campaign were the economy, Iraq war, social welfare/health, immigration and crime.

We also looked at the tone of the newspapers' commentary and opinion pieces. On average the commentary about parties and leaders was negative (for parties the average mean score bias was -0.34, for leaders -0.40). We observe some variation between newspapers. The *Daily Mail* was quite negative in their commentary about Labour (-

0.61), while the *Mirror* was critical about the Tories. This was in line with their editorial endorsements.

Our investigation of the public agenda shows that the campaign had some impact on what the people thought were the most important problems facing Britain at the time of the 2005 campaign. Some issues, such as asylum seekers, were high on the public agenda before the campaign, but went down afterwards. Other concerns intensified slightly, for instance crime, NHS or economy. In summation the top five issues on the public agenda after the campaign were immigration, crime, NHS, economy and asylum seekers³⁴ and NHS, crime, immigration and economy.³⁵ This study also looked at the relationship between the dynamics of the media and public agendas during the campaign. We conclude that there were some indications that for some issues, at certain moments of the campaign the public agenda might follow the media agenda, but for others the opposite is the case. For other issues, such as Iraq or the economy, sudden changes of their prominence in the media do not result in similar movements of the public agenda. We argue that future research could look at the issue dynamics on media and public agendas over a longer period of time, which would allow for a more sophisticated statistical analysis.

The following chapter starts the part of the thesis which focuses on the 2007 Irish general election campaign. This part starts with a brief overview of the Irish media market (Chapter 5), which is followed by quantitative analysis of the media agenda and public opinion. In Chapter 7 we explore the alternative ways of measuring agendas and

³⁴ According to the Internet Rolling Panel data from the British Election Study group.

³⁵ According to the results of the BES Face-to-Face panel data.

in Chapter 8 we report on data gathered in the interviews with Irish media practitioners.

Chapter 5

Irish media and election campaigns

It's showtime!

[PJ Mara – Communications Director for Fianna Fáil]

5 Irish media and election campaigns

5.1 Introduction

This thesis is divided into three parts. In Chapters 1, 2 and 3 we discussed the theoretical foundations of the agenda setting research as well as the research methodology adopted by this study. The second part (Chapter 4) examined the news media agenda and the dynamics of the public agenda during the 2005 general election in the United Kingdom. The third part of this research focuses on the second case under investigation: the 2007 general election campaign in Ireland. It presents a comprehensive study of the news media agenda during the election campaign and offers a comparison with the 2002 election. The public agenda is also studied and the possible agenda setting function of the mass media is discussed. The results of the Irish study are also compared to the findings of our investigation into the media agenda in the UK in 2005.

The Irish part of this dissertation is divided into four chapters, each examining the news media and the public agenda from a different perspective, using various research methods. In Chapter 6 we discuss the Irish media market and the election coverage provided by print and electronic media. It offers a general overview of the Irish media market and its response to the challenge of providing the public with political news during an election campaign. This helps to tease out some peculiarities of the Irish media and also sets the scene for the quantitative analysis presented in Chapter 7. In that chapter we present the results of the quantitative study of the news media data gathered by the author during the general election campaign in 2007. Chapter 8 explores the alternative methods of measuring the media and public agenda using computer software. We also discuss latest technological advances into the semantic

analysis of textual data, which might lead to future research. The final chapter exploring the media and the public agenda during the 2007 general election in Ireland is based on interviews with experienced media practitioners. It examines the role of the media during general election campaigns and its relationship with the public from the perspective of journalists, senior managers working for the public broadcaster, public relations experts and party officers. This is followed by final conclusions, implications of the study and the discussion of possible future research.

5.2 Media and election campaigns in Ireland

5.2.1 Dawn raid

Mass media had a rude awakening at the very start of the general election campaign in Ireland in 2007. And we do not mean it metaphorically, but in a very real, 6am on a Sunday morning wake-up call sense of the word. Rumours about the possible date for the election were circulating throughout the first months of 2007 and they intensified at the beginning of April of that year. Newshounds and political commentators across different Irish media were trying to predict the next move of then Taoiseach Bertie Ahern. “The press were half demented from weeks of waiting,” writes Leahy (2009: 268). But with quite a PR masterstroke, Taoiseach Bertie Ahern still managed to surprise almost all of them. It was very early in the morning on a Sunday, April 29, 2007, when he went to *Áras an Uachtaráin* to ask President of Ireland Mary McAleese to dissolve the 29th *Daíl* and to call for the General Election to be held four weeks later: on Thursday, May 24 2007.



Figure 5-1 the *Irish Times* front page, April 30, 2007. Source: ProQuest.

Ahern did not want to involve the media in his dash to Áras an Uachtaráin. He wanted to issue a press release, but was persuaded otherwise by his press secretary Mandy Johnston. Journalists were informed about this sudden and seemingly rushed decision by text messages. Bertie Ahern later explained that he wanted President McAleese to sign the document before she went off on a state visit to the United States. Although her role in this process is symbolical, nevertheless had she gone to the United States without dissolving the Daíl, it would have been the first time

in the history of the Irish State that the President would not be present to sign all the necessary documents. But Ahern's decision also allowed him to start the election campaign in a spectacular fashion. It also gave sub-editors a chance to hone their headline-writing skills. The *Irish Examiner* reported on its front page that "Bertie leapt out of his Mercedes at 7.57am, knowing the president was due to leave for the airport just 13 minutes later. So while the head of state was busy running around the Áras trying to find her passport and checking she had cancelled the milk, the Taoiseach was mithering her to dissolve the 29th Dáil" (Connolly 2007).

One could also hazard a guess that there was another reason for Bertie Ahern's "dawn raid" on Áras an Uachtaráin. The following Monday the Mahon Tribunal – established to investigate payments to politicians, including Ahern – was scheduled to recommence its work. Although Ahern denied this was the reason behind his decision, one could speculate that he hoped for the Tribunal to cease its investigation for the duration of the campaign. And indeed this is precisely what happened. On Monday,

April 30 2007, the Mahon Tribunal suspended its public hearings, which were to resume on May 28, four days after the general election.

Political parties and their candidates were roaring to go. Someone must have tipped them about the early start to the campaign too and Ireland woke up to a landscape changed by hundreds of election posters attached to lampposts and in some cases... trees. Harry McGee, political journalist of the Irish Times, captured the spirit of that Sunday morning quite succinctly (although at that time in Portugal himself). He wrote on his blog:

Ireland woke up yesterday morning to discover that the tactics of the pre-dawn police raid had been transferred to the world of Irish politics. As the citizens rubbed sleep from their eyes, they opened their curtains to see a changed landscape. Like a fresh fall of snow, almost every lamp-post in the country has now been commandeered and festooned with somebody's beaming portrait (McGee 2007).

For the next 25 days – to paraphrase the famous quote from Fianna Fáil strategist PJ Mara – it was showtime.³⁶

5.2.2 Previous studies

The role of the mass media during general election campaigns in Ireland and also the relationship between the mass media and the public during such events has not been extensively researched so far in the Irish context. There have been no explicit studies of the agenda-setting function of the mass media during general election campaigns either. It seems that although comprehensive studies of voting behaviour, the nature of party competition or portraits of Irish voters have become the norm, research into the role the

³⁶ P J Mara is reported to have used this expression at the start of Fianna Fáil's 2002 election campaign, when he was Director of Elections for the party.

mass media play in the political arena has been neglected. This is rather curious as studies of agenda-setting function of the mass media and more general research into the relationship between the mass media and the political actors have become an established part of the political science literature in other European countries and in the USA.

In terms of systematic research into media and politics, there are media and the campaign chapters in three out of six books published in the *How Ireland Voted* series (Farrell 1990; Brandenburg and Hayden 2003 and Brandenburg and Zalinski 2007). The quick writing process, necessary for these books to hit the bookstore shelves as soon as possible after the election, means that their media chapters have a more general approach. They provide a solid overview of the mass media and the campaign question, but are short on detail or laborious quantitative analysis.

Past arguments declared that the nature of Irish elections and their localised nature meant that the media question was less pertinent in Ireland than in other countries. It might have traditionally been so, but is most definitely no longer the case. Although it has been argued that Irish voters are influenced by local concerns (Marsh 2000), they are also influenced by the more partisan national campaign. In fact the way the election campaigns have been run for the past two decades have been changing and political parties have been increasingly concentrating on general and national issues. The importance of the campaign is also dependent on the type of elections, with voters paying more attention to the national campaign during the European and general elections (Brandenburg 2005: 299). The 2007 general election campaign was the most partisan and national yet. The contest focused on the governing Fianna Fáil led by Bertie Ahern and the rejuvenated opposition of Fine Gael and Labour represented by Enda Kenny and Pat Rabbitte. The spotlight shone on the leaders, which also meant

that the campaign became more national and in turn one can argue that the mass media might have played a bigger role.

While the relationship between the mass media and politics might have been under-researched in the Irish context until the beginning of this century, Brandenburg has written on the topic of media, election campaigns, agenda-setting and political parties in Ireland since then (Brandenburg & Hayden 2003, Brandenburg 2005). In fact this thesis was inspired by Brandenburg's work and benefitted in numerous ways from his generous help, experience and advice. The methodology adopted by this study follows content-analysis method devised by Brandenburg in his studies, both those focusing on the general election in the UK and his research on Ireland.

In his paper entitled "Political Bias in the Irish Media: a Quantitative Study of the Campaign Coverage during the 2002 General Election" (Brandenburg 2005), he examined different forms of media bias: agenda bias, coverage bias and statement bias. The article used manually coded media data (TV newscasts and newspaper articles) and concluded that Irish media favour the government parties (Fianna Fáil and Progressive Democrats) by giving them coverage larger than that given to their opponents. It also appeared that in 2002 there was a general anti-politics bias in the Irish media.

Brandenburg asserted that:

on average, the commentary in the papers throughout the campaign had a negative tendency towards almost all parties. In total, 42 per cent of all comments about parties were negative, only 8 per cent positive, and the remaining 50 per cent neutral. Hence, one might argue that if a persistent bias exists in Irish campaign reporting, it amounts to a general anti-politics bias. (Brandenburg 2005: 312).

We shall present a 2007 comparison to these findings in Chapter 6. In the following sections we discuss the media election coverage available in Ireland during the 2007 election campaign.

5.2.3 Print media

There are seven national newspapers published in Ireland. Readers can choose between three broadsheets (though the *Irish Independent* comes both in a broadsheet and in a tabloid format): the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Independent*, the *Irish Examiner* (formerly the *Cork Examiner*, also based in that city); and four tabloids: the *Irish Daily Star*, the *Irish Sun*, the *Irish Daily Mail* and the *Irish Daily Mirror*. The last two are altered versions of their UK counterparts, prepared for the Irish market. Dubliners³⁷ can also enjoy an evening newspaper: the *Evening Herald* and two free newspapers: *Metro* and *Herald AM*³⁸. The freesheets as they are called, are distributed across Dublin in the mornings from Monday to Friday and at the time of writing were reported to have a joint circulation of 140,000 (Luft 2009). Figure 2 shows the circulation and readership figures of Irish newspapers.

³⁷ There are 1,187,176 people living in and around the capital city, according to the Central Statistics Office, 2006 figures. That is around a quarter of the country's entire population.

³⁸ The papers have since joined and there is one freesheet distributed in Dublin.

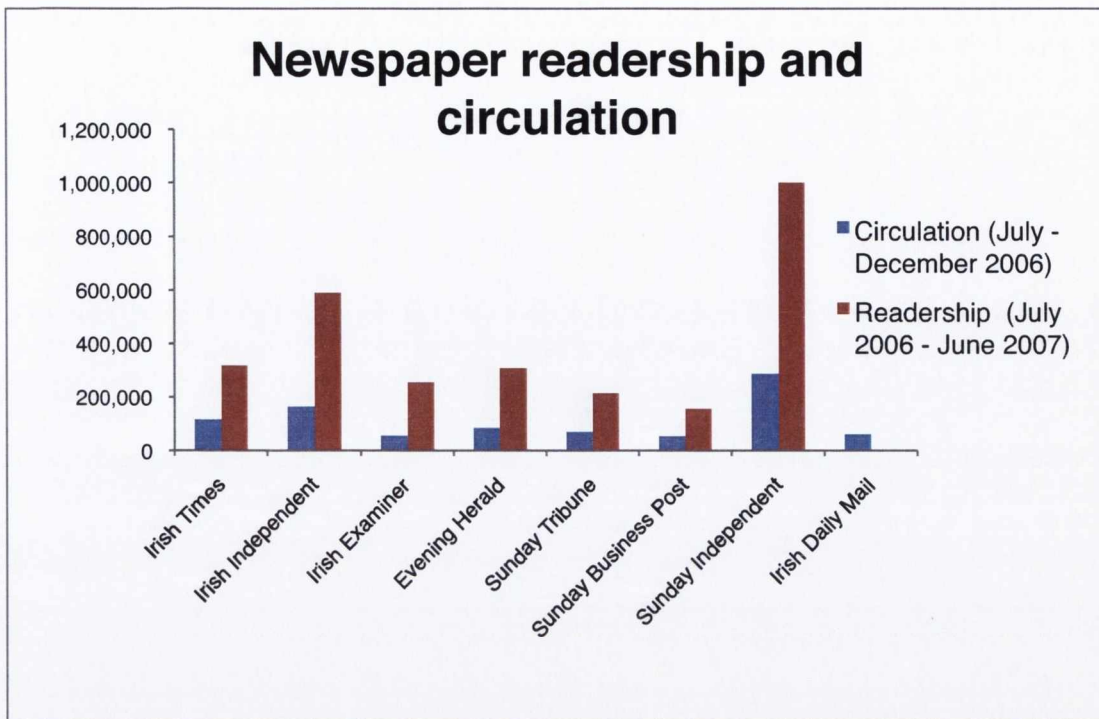


Figure 5-2 Newspaper readership and circulation in Ireland.

In addition to daily national newspapers (which are published six times a week, from Monday to Saturday), Ireland also has a healthy market for Sunday newspapers. The *Sunday Independent* is a weekend newspaper from the Independent News and Media company; other titles available on Sunday are: the *Sunday Business Post*; the *Sunday Tribune*; *Sunday World*; *Irish Daily Star Sunday*; *Irish People*. There are also Irish versions of UK Sunday newspapers, which include extensive Irish news coverage. They are the *Sunday Times*, the *Irish News of the World*; *Irish Sunday Mirror* and the *Irish Mail on Sunday*. Figure 2 gives the readership and circulation figures of the main Sunday titles. It is worth noting though that the total readership of Sunday titles in 2007 was quite a remarkable 3,938,000 with the *Sunday Independent* in the lead with the readership figures of 1,019,000.

There are other print titles to be found on the newsstands across Ireland, such as the *Irish Farmers Journal* (circulation of 68,017 and readership of 239,000) and *Weekend Herald*

(circulation of 48,050). One can also buy various magazines, which carry political news and commentary. Among them the *Village*, which is published monthly, *Magill* (until May 2007 published monthly, and from June 2007 onwards bi-monthly) and the satirical fortnightly *Phoenix*. All the newspapers carried specific, election-related content during the 2007 campaign. All of them had special, clearly marked sections devoted to the election coverage. Table 1 shows the prominence of campaign coverage in the eight national daily newspapers.

Table 5-1 Prominence of campaign coverage in the Irish press. Note: *Averages are based on the tabloid version of the Irish Independent. ** Six issues missing (11,12,14,15,17,19 May). Percentages and averages based on coded issues only.

	Issues published between April 30 and May 24, 2007	Campaign on front page	Front page main header on campaign	Mean inside pages with campaign coverage	Standard deviation inside pages with campaign coverage
Irish Independent	22	21 (95%)	18 (82%)	11.9*	2.5
Irish Times	22	22 (100%)	19 (86%)	4.7	1.1
Irish Examiner	22	21 (95%)	13 (59%)	3.8	0.7
Irish Daily Star	22	11 (50%)	3 (14%)	2.8	0.9
Irish Daily Mirror	22	10** (63%)	5** (31%)	2.1**	0.3
Irish Daily Mail	22	17 (77%)	15 (68%)	4.2	1.4
Irish Sun	22	9 (41%)	1 (5%)	2	0.3
Evening Herald	22	7 (32%)	2 (9%)	2.9	0.9
Total	176	108 (61%)	71 (40%)		

The *Irish Sun*, the *Irish Daily Star* and the *Evening Herald* devoted hardly any front page headlines to the campaign, and gave no mention at all to the election on their front pages on more than half of the days of the campaign. On the other hand, the three broadsheets, the *Irish Independent*, *Irish Times* and *Irish Examiner*, almost invariably mentioned the campaign on front pages, as they did in 2002, and more often than not allocated their main header to the campaign – the *Examiner* less regularly so than the *Times* and *Independent*, who only on rare occasions, for example the Paisley/McGuinness inauguration, led with anything but the campaign.

Compared with 2002 then, attention levels remained constant for broadsheets, but were considerably down for tabloids, despite the more competitive election. Broadsheets tend to treat an election campaign as a generically important event while tabloids appear to become ever more non-political (or even anti-political) over time. In particular the *Irish Daily Star* confirmed this judgment by demoting almost all campaign coverage to the inside pages two days into the race, at best providing readers with headlines unaccompanied by text which read, for example, “McDowell is a big girl’s blouse: see page 12.”

One of the main differences between the Irish media market and the British one is the partisanship of the press. While in the UK, as we saw, party endorsements are very much the norm, in Ireland they almost never happen. We also reported that the levels of media-party parallelism are exceptionally low at 1.6³⁹ (van Kempen 2007: 310). The *Irish Independent* did call for a vote for Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in 1997 in their “It’s Payback Time” editorial, published on the front page, but that was an exception to the rule, rather than a beginning of a regular practice. Nevertheless,

³⁹ Where 0 = no parallelism and 100 = maximum parallelism.

quantitative analysis of the media content conducted by Brandenburg and also by this thesis reveals different types of political bias existing in the Irish press. This issue will be explored in more detail in Chapter 6.

In Chapter 2 we highlighted the importance of comparative research into political communication and we looked at the literature on comparative media systems.

Following Hallin and Mancini (2004) we developed questions which explore the media system effects on agenda setting. Is the low level of press-party parallelism reflected in the newspaper campaign coverage in Ireland? Does the perceived lack of partisanship of the Irish press manifest itself in the tone of the campaign coverage? Is the electoral system at work in Ireland reflected in the amount of media coverage devoted to political parties?

5.2.4 Broadcast media

Radio is an important and still very popular part of the Irish media landscape. In fact, each weekday, 2,913,000 people (85 percent of the adult population of Ireland) tune into various national and local radio stations [Joint National Listenership Survey July 2006 – June 2007]. 1,718,000 people (50 percent of the adult population) listened to a national radio station and 1,837,000 (53 percent of the population) to any regional or local radio station. RTÉ Radio and all the stations under its umbrella (RTÉ Radio 1, 2FM, Raidió na Gaeltachta and Lyric FM) are arguably the most listened to in the country with 1,339,000 tuning in every day (39 percent of the population). For more detailed data on radio listenership (both station reach and share), please see Figure 3 below.

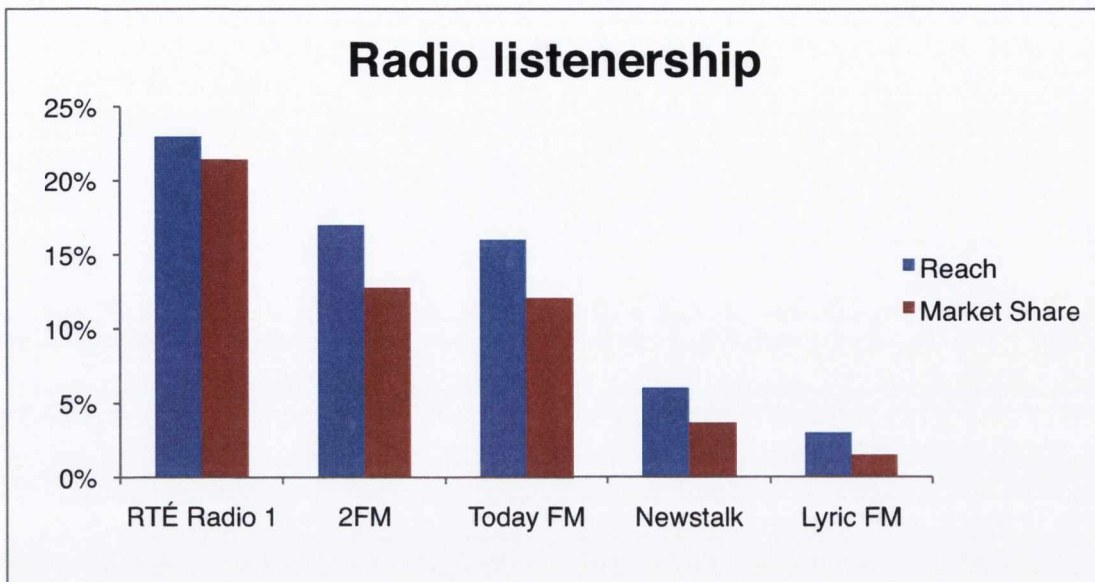


Figure 5-3 Radio listenership in Ireland in 2007. Source: JNLR.

RTÉ Radio had enough human and financial resources to provide an extensive and comprehensive campaign coverage. Its commercial competitors would be hard-pressed to match it and frankly it would be unfair to expect them to do so.

The election-related coverage started even before the official start of the campaign. Between October 2006 and April 2007, RTÉ Radio presenter Rachel English and editor Nick Coffey produced *The Constituency*. The programme travelled to all 43 constituencies in Ireland and discussed the issues most important for each of them. Material from the show was included in RTÉ's Election Book. The most listened-to programme on the Irish airwaves – *Morning Ireland* – had special editions, which focused on key elections issues and was broadcast from different parts of Ireland. The issues discussed in the programme, included crime, quality of life and the economy. All current affairs and news programmes on RTÉ Radio discussed and analysed important election issues and interviewed main players of the campaign. A radio documentary was also produced about three female candidates in the election. In *Patricia, Mary and Mary Lou Too* producer Ann-Marie Power followed Patricia McKenna from the Green Party,

Mary Fitzpatrick from Fianna Fáil and Mary Lou McDonald from Sinn Féin. It looked at their campaign efforts from the weeks before the election was called until midnight hours of the count. They all fought for a seat in Bertie Ahern's constituency of Dublin Central. None of them won a seat.

Although they could not compete with the scope of RTÉ's election coverage, the two main commercial national radio stations – Today FM and Newstalk – also offered a lot of campaign coverage. Programmes such as *The Last Word with Matt Cooper*⁴⁰ on Today FM or *The Right Hook* presented by George Hook on Newstalk, featured interviews with the main candidates and party leaders, discussions on the key election issues and day-to-day commentary on the campaign.

The 2007 Election campaign was also a watershed moment in terms of the use of new media. This will be discussed in more detail in a separate part of this chapter. Radio used the Internet too, with many programmes available to download as podcasts, so one could listen back to them after the live broadcast. This worked as a handy reference library for all those who wanted to keep abreast of all the latest developments in the campaign.

5.2.5 Television

The discrepancy between the varied print media and radio offered in Ireland and the relatively limited TV choice can be easily explained. TV is expensive to produce and requires much larger set up costs than print media. Also the TV market is much more crowded, with satellite and digital TV offering hundreds of channels to subscribers. Without a language barrier, Irish viewers can enjoy programmes produced by the UK

⁴⁰ The show had 215,000 listeners in 2007, according to the JNLR survey for the period of January – December 2007 and was ahead of *Drivetime* on RTÉ Radio 1 by 8,000.

and US-based TV stations, such as BBC, ITV, Channel 4, CNN and many others. This makes the Irish TV market more open to external influences, than perhaps a French or an Italian one.

There are four national TV channels in Ireland: RTÉ One, RTÉ Two (public service broadcaster), commercial TV3 and TG4 – the Irish language television channel⁴¹. As mentioned above, Irish TV audiences can choose from a multitude of other, international channels, but for domestic news and political analysis RTÉ and TV3 are still the only players on the market.

Similarly to the situation explained in the radio section, commercial broadcasters (in this instance TV3) cannot compete with the public broadcaster in terms of programme output. They just do not have the same newsgathering and production capacity. RTÉ Television has provided extensive election coverage during the 2007 campaign.

The first port of call for any viewers looking for campaign-related information would be the news bulletins. Indeed, even those who might not be actively seeking political information would find it hard to avoid when watching TV news during any political campaign and the Irish campaign in 2007 was no exception.

The main TV news bulletins on Irish TV are broadcast in the evenings on RTÉ One (the 6:01 news and the 9 o'clock news). The same channel also has a lunchtime bulletin at 1pm. RTÉ Two has its own news programme broadcast on weekdays, usually between 10:30 and 11:30 in the evening. Even the children's news on RTÉ Two (called News2day and broadcast at 5:10pm) included election news. TG4 broadcasts news in Irish at 7pm and TV3 broadcasts its news at 5:30 in the afternoon.

⁴¹ TG4 became an independent statutory entity on April 1, 2007.

One of the flagship current affairs programmes on RTÉ One – *Prime Time* – was broadcast four times a week during the campaign. It included segments such as *Fact Checker* and *Behind the Spin*. In *Fact Checker* Donagh Diamond examined the differences between what the politicians said and the reality. This recalls an attempt to contrast the parties' agenda with the facts, undertaken by Channel 4 during the 2005 British election on their web site called Factcheck. These are examples of the media actively trying to engage with and challenge the parties' agenda, which presents another important twist in the agenda setting process. In *Behind the Spin* Katie Hannon looked at the shifting focus of the media agenda, which is quite an interesting exercise in terms of mass media auto-reflection. The programme also zoomed in on big issues such as health, the economy, Bertie Ahern's personal finances and stamp duty.

Prime Time was the programme with the biggest coup of the campaign: the live debates between party leaders. Figure 4 shows the figures for a national audience share of the debates and compares them with the 2002 figures. It also presents the exit poll data on respondents who said that they had watched the debate in 2002 and 2007.

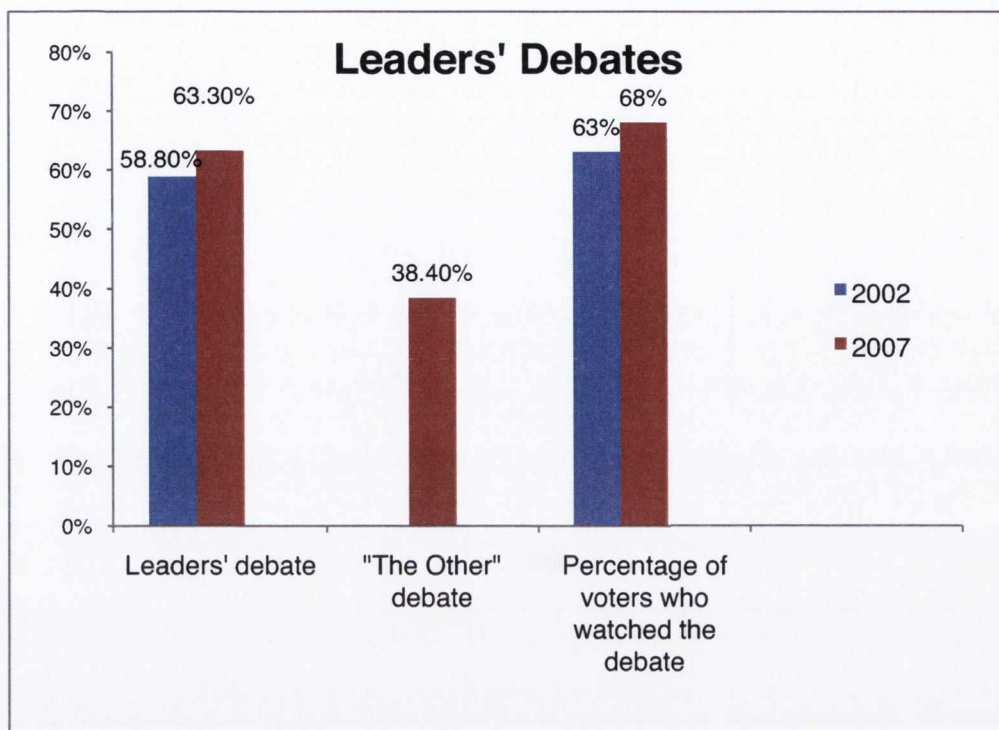


Figure 5-4 National audience share for leaders' debate broadcast on RTÉ One in May 2007. Percentage of respondents who watched the debate according to the exit poll carried out by RTÉ.

The first debate (entitled *Prime Time Debate: The Other One*) featured Pat Rabbitte (Labour), Michael McDowell (Progressive Democrats), Trevor Sargent (the Green Party) and Gerry Adams (Sinn Féin). This debate was broadcast on Wednesday, May 16 and attracted 581,000 viewers, a 38.4 percent share of the total TV audience (RTÉ 2007). The following day, RTÉ broadcast *Prime Time Debate: The Big One* – the live confrontation between Bertie Ahern – leader of the Fianna Fáil party – and Enda Kenny, leader of the opposition party Fine Gael. It was moderated by journalist Miriam O'Callaghan and had an average audience of 941,000. This corresponds to a national audience share of 63.3 percent. It had a reach of 1,4 million viewers throughout the duration of the programme. In comparison, the 2002 debate between Bertie Ahern and Michael Noonan had an average audience of 835,000 with a national audience share of 58.8 percent. Keeping in mind these figures, it does not come as a surprise that 68 percent of the respondents in the exit poll conducted by RTÉ said that they had

watched the debate. In 1997 and 2002 this figure was 57 and 63 percent respectively. The importance of the debate and its timing, should not be underestimated. In the part examining the 2005 British election, we learnt that in the UK a quarter of the electorate decided on how they were going to vote at the later stages of the campaign. It could also be so in Ireland in 2007, especially with the parties being so close in the polls. More than ten percent of the respondents to the Irish National Election Study survey replied that they decided on their voting preference in the second half of the campaign. We will discuss the importance of the debate in more detail in Chapter 8, which is based on the interviews with media practitioners.

Other campaign-focused programmes on RTÉ television included *Campaign Daily*, *The Week in Politics* and *Questions and Answers*.

Campaign Daily was presented by Mark Little and Bryan Dobson. It started on May 3 and continued until May 22. It was broadcast between noon and 1pm between Monday to Friday and was also available to watch on-line. It brought all the campaign news and relevant analysis.

For those viewers who could not keep up with the campaign daily, *The Week in Politics*, broadcast on Sunday evenings and presented by Sean O'Rourke provided a round up of all important campaign updates. Altogether six programmes were devoted to campaign issues.

One of the more curious elements of RTÉ's pre-campaign political coverage on television was a three-part series of special editions of *The Week in Politics*, which introduced American pollster Frank Luntz to the Irish audiences. Luntz worked with three focus groups in Dublin, Clonmel and Boyle in order to get a perspective on what the voters were thinking about the parties, the leaders and the issues. The programme

mixed the footage from the focus groups' discussions with analysis from the panel of experts (PR specialist and media pundit Terry Prone⁴², Ivan Yates, former Government minister, and Noel Whelan – political analyst and author). On first glance this sounds like an interesting idea, but the inclusion of Luntz proved to be controversial. Luntz is a polarizing figure – he was behind the Republican Party's 1994 Contract for America campaign platform and is also a partisan Republican (Media Matters for America). Interestingly, Contract for Ireland was the cornerstone of Fine Gael's campaign in 2007. More importantly, Luntz's methodology has been questioned and in 1997 he received a reprimand from the American Association for Public Opinion Research for refusing to release documentation in support of his comments. He has not been received well in Ireland either. Popular columnist and PR specialist Terry Prone (who herself was a panellist on the show) wrote in the *Irish Examiner* on April 16, 2007:

Luntz passionately believes that gathering 30 people selected by Red C into a room and barracking them with questions about politicians will throw up infallible predictions about what's going to happen in the election. He's wrong. What you get when you put those 30 people in a room is pub talk, made seem more significant than it is by inspired editing of four hours of material so the dross ends up on the cutting-room floor. (Prone 2007).

Questions and Answers – one of RTÉ's flagship news and current affairs TV shows – provided a space for discussion of essential campaign issues. Questions debated every Monday during the election campaign ranged from analysing opinion polls, reviewing the style of the campaign to stamp duty reform and healthcare reform.

Apart from its 5:30 news, commercial TV station TV3 also produced special political programmes during the campaign in May 2007. The most high-profile one was *Polls*

⁴² Terry Prone was also interviewed for this thesis, please see Chapter 8.

Apart, presented by aforementioned Today FM radio presenter Matt Copper and media personality Eddie Hobbs. The weekly, 30-minute long programme showed interviews with all the main actors of the campaign. TV3 also had a weekly round up of election news with *The Political Party*, presented by Ursula Hannigan, who is also the political editor of the station. *Ireland AM* – TV3's breakfast show – included some election coverage, but with a rather soft focus. It concentrated on entertainment-like information, for example best posters or best-dressed candidates.

As part of its role as a state broadcaster RTÉ is obliged to show party political broadcasts. In 2007 there were 16 PPBs in total, averaging 487,500 viewers per broadcast. Looking at Figure 5, we see that Fianna Fáil's six broadcasts were watched by an average of 423,000 viewers, Fine Gael's four by 456,000, Labour's two by 550,000, the Greens' single broadcast by 667,000, Sinn Féin's by 556,000, the PDs by 564,000 and Christian Solidarity's by 562,000 viewers. All PPBs were also available to watch on RTÉ web site. The on-line availability highlights the growing trend of cross-media convergence during the 2007 general election campaign, which would be explored further in the Internet section below.

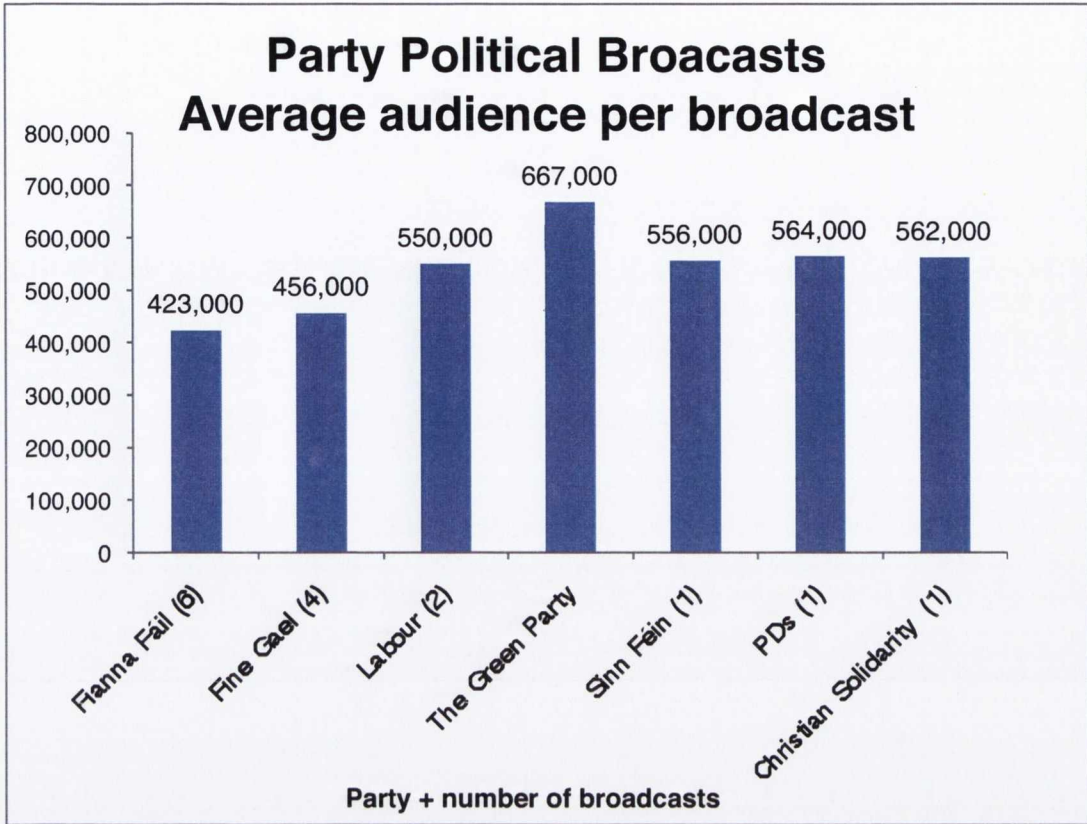


Figure 5-5 Average audience of Party Political Broadcast. Source: RTÉ.

The above section provided us with a detailed overview of the TV election coverage during the 2007 campaign. Its aim was to paint a fuller picture of the amount and variety of programmes offered to the Irish viewers during the election campaign. We thought it was important to provide a comprehensive context to the quantitative data analysis, which follows in chapters 6 and 7. Also we note that, according to data gathered by the Irish National Election Study, almost 60 percent of respondents indicated that they watch TV news daily and that this is their primary source of political information.

5.2.6 The Internet and new media

One could safely assume that in 2007 the Internet was a part of a daily media diet for a number of Irish voters. At the end of 2006, there were 430,000 broadband subscribers in Ireland and 638,500 people used the Internet at least once a day. On the other hand,

examining the data gathered by INES, we observe that only 12 percent of the respondents used the Internet daily to get their political news. Nevertheless, the Internet played an important role during the election campaign, even as a sign of the parties' or candidates being in touch with the changing world and younger voters⁴³. As it was briefly mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, many traditional media outlets utilized the Internet along with their more traditional communication channels. RTÉ offered radio programmes as downloadable podcasts and TV shows were available to watch online (both live and after the actual broadcast). In fact RTÉ had an entire web portal devoted to the campaign (still available to browse at the time of writing at <http://www.rte.ie/news/elections> 2007). This web site contained a lot of factual information, latest polls, guides for voters and audio and video content. Most of it was taken from radio and TV programmes, but there were also web-exclusive events. For example on May 9, 2007 Noel Dempsey (Minister for Communications), Tommy Broughan (Labour's spokesperson on communications) and Eamon Ryan (Green Party's spokesperson on communication) engaged in a first-ever web debate. Anybody who wanted to keep up with the campaign on the go could subscribe to RTÉ's SMS service and receive news updates on their mobile via text messages. One of the examples that an election campaign makes voters information-hungry could be the number of visitors to RTÉ's main web site. On the day of the debate between Bertie Ahern and Enda Kenny, it registered 1,504,597 hits (RTÉ 2007).

It was not only mass media that used the Internet, but parties and candidates too. 2007 saw a slow, but visible move from static and formulaic web sites to a more interactive use of the Internet. The Web 2.0 approach to the Internet puts stress on

⁴³ Almost 16 percent of respondents aged 18 to 33 used the Internet daily to get their news, according to Irish National Election Study.

user-generated content and social networking. The Internet users have been transformed from passive recipients of information to more engaged participants who can publish their thoughts on blogs, comment on newspaper articles and connect with their favourite politicians. The 2007 general election campaign in Ireland was still rather traditional with newspapers, TV and radio being the preferred media of majority of voters. Looking at the INES data we see that 60 percent of respondents declared they watched TV news daily, 50 percent listened to the national radio news every day, ten percent less read a newspaper everyday and, as we reported above, only 12 percent turned to the Internet to get their news fix. With the percentage of the Irish population using broadband Internet connections steadily growing⁴⁴, it is safe to assume that the next campaign will see even more use of the Internet both by traditional media, by parties and by citizens.

Ciarán Cuffe – the Green Party candidate for Dún Laoghaire – was one of the election hopefuls who used the Internet more extensively than others in his campaign. He maintained a blog during the campaign (Cuffe Street. Musings from Ciarán Cuffe, Green Party TD for Dún Laoghaire) and a comprehensive personal web site. Cuffe also used the video sharing web site YouTube to distribute his video messages to potential voters. There were only four posts on his blogs in May 2007, however the frequency of updates might have been affected by the amount of canvassing. His post-election entry, dated May 29, 2007, starts with a bold statement asserting that “the deal with Fianna Fáil would be the deal with the devil. We would be spat out after 5 years and decimated as a party. But,... would it be worth it? Power is a many faceted thing.” The power of

⁴⁴ The percentage of people connecting to the Internet using a high-speed broadband connection grew by 12 percent, from 31 to 43 percent, between 2007 and 2008, according to the latest available figures from the Central Statistics Office.

hindsight is hard to resist while reading this particular entry (and Ciarán Cuffe's blog is used here for illustrative purposes) as the Green Party did eventually seal the "deal with the devil," but the above passage also shows that political blogs can serve a useful research purpose, as they take the political temperature as it is/was. Perhaps this information will be used more by historians than political scientists, but it would be impossible and imprudent to avoid this phenomenon, as blogs are a big part of the modern media landscape.

The Greens tried to project an image of a modern party, which is up to speed with the new technologies. Taking a leaf out of Hilary Clinton's book, they showed their party political broadcast first on the Internet.

With news, comment and analysis at times rivalling traditional media, citizen journalism became an integral part of the media coverage of the 2007 general election campaign. While blogs cannot compete with established media outlets in terms of newsgathering, their strength lies in supplying timely comment and offering a new public space for discussion. Often blogs can also react quicker to events as it takes hardly any time to publish your writings and they do not have to go through the laborious production process of TV or print news. The speediness and trigger-happy nature of blog publishing might attract criticism too, with people expressing doubts as to legitimacy of commentators and the amount of trust one can put into political blogs' contents.

Examples of enormously successful American political blogs, such as the Drudge Report or the Huffington Post, show that blogging has become integral part of the modern media landscape. From their humble origins, the web sites mentioned above carry content, which in its variety and depth rivals the offering of the "old" media. In

fact the on-line presence of traditional media (for example the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Irish Times* and others) has been heavily influenced and altered in response to the popularity of blogging and citizen journalism. It is considered as standard for a respected title and its well-known journalists and commentators to publish their thoughts on blogs as well as in print. Comment is Free – a section of the Guardian web site – is an example of blogs' influence on traditional media and also the fast-changing role of newspapers. As it is hard for newspapers to compete with the 24-hour cycle of rolling TV news, they increasingly see their added value in supplying comment and analysis. While this is still evolving, it could have an interesting effect on the agenda-setting function (and its strength) of newspapers.

In Ireland, Irish Election would be one of the most-visited and well-known political web sites. Started by Cian O'Flaherty it is a collaborative effort with opinion pieces written by contributors "from around the world, from different walks of life and with very diverse political views."⁴⁵ Following standards of the blogging community, Irish Election is open to a debate with its readers and encourages them to leave comments to "tell us what *you* think."

Another interesting and innovative idea that emerged during the 2007 campaign was the Vote Tube web site where users could upload video clips related to the campaign.

5.3 Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was twofold. First, we wanted to provide an overview of the media market in Ireland. As this thesis is a comparative case study, an examination of the Irish media market was necessary in order to compare it against the British media

⁴⁵ "About Us" section of the Irish Election web site.

(see Chapter 4). Second, it was thought important to look at what the mass media offered to their Irish consumers specifically during the 2007 election campaign. This helps to present a more rounded picture of the relationship between the mass media, election campaigns and the public. Such an overview also allowed us to set the scene for the quantitative and qualitative analysis, which follows in the next three chapters.

Ireland might be a country with a small population,⁴⁶ but it has a healthy and varied media market. There are eight daily and six Sunday national newspapers. Irish readers can also add British titles to their daily or weekend media diet. Looking at public opinion data, we observe that newspapers are a relatively popular source of political information with 40 percent of INES respondents indicating they read one daily. Radio is also very popular with 85 percent of the adult population tuning into any national or local radio station every day at the time of the 2007 general election. Radio is also a popular source of political information with 50 percent of those surveyed by INES indicating they listen to the national radio news every day. Although there are only four national TV channels, television is the most popular out of all the media form in Ireland. Data gathered by INES reveals that 60 percent of people watch TV news daily. Programmes of strategic importance to the campaign, such as the live TV debate between Bertie Ahern and Enda Kenny were very popular amongst the TV viewers (the programme had an average audience of 941,000 and a national audience reach of almost 64 percent, as we saw).

There are two big differences between the role media play during election campaigns in Ireland and in the UK. In Chapter 4 we wrote at length about the partisanship of the British press and also about the unique role of the BBC. The situation in Ireland is

⁴⁶ 4,5 million, according to the population estimate from the Central Statistics Office.

somewhat different. Print media does not take political sides as overtly as newspapers in the United Kingdom. Also the Irish public broadcaster carries advertising, which makes it more open to the influences of the economic market and the demands of advertisers to deliver impressive viewership figures. This, in turn, might have an influence on the type of political coverage they prepare and broadcast. These topics will be explored in more detail in Chapter 6, which focuses on the analysis of quantitative data and Chapter 8, which is based on interviews with Irish media experts.

Chapter 6
Media agenda and public opinion:
quantitative analysis of the 2007 election in
Ireland

6 Media agenda and public opinion: Quantitative analysis of the 2007 election in Ireland

6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 5 we provided an overview of the Irish media market and the media content, which was available during the 2007 general election campaign. We also presented statistics about the media consumption in Ireland around the time of the election. In doing so, we hoped to give the reader a more thorough understanding of the Irish media landscape. The aim was also to set the scene for the results of the quantitative analysis, which we report in this chapter.

The main objective of this thesis is a cross-country, comparative study of the media agenda and the public agenda during general elections in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Following the research methodology of traditional media agenda setting studies, we decided on a quantitative approach to media content analysis. This enabled us to move the research into political communication in Ireland beyond the realm of an anecdote and into a more scientifically rigorous territory. In Chapter 4 we reported our findings from the research into the 2005 British election. This chapter will examine the data gathered during the 2007 general election in Ireland. Our findings will allow for comparisons between the media agendas in both countries, which are the focus of this thesis.

This chapter is broken down into two main parts. First, we present our findings from the analysis of media data. Second, we look at the public agenda during the 2007 election campaign in Ireland. The chapter starts with questions under investigation and

a synopsis of the data and research methods. We finish with a conclusion and a brief discussion on the role Irish media play in election campaigns.

Before we present the findings of the data analysis, we would like to present general questions regarding our expected findings. The main objective (dependent variable) of this study is to measure the role of the mass media campaign coverage during the general election campaign in Ireland in May 2007. We shall be looking at the amount of campaign-related media coverage received by political actors or devoted to policy dimensions and the factors (independent variables), which influenced it. These include, among others, such variables as type of text, newspaper name, date or publication or broadcast, party or leader mentioned. We shall also like to find out whether the role of the mass media campaign coverage in 2007 was significantly different to the situation in 2002 and also make some comparisons with the media agenda in the UK, during the General Election in 2005.

6.1.1 Questions

The general questions examined in this chapter are as follows:

QUESTION 1: Was there a coverage bias in the mass media coverage of the campaign? Was there, similarly to 2002, a lack of proportionality in the media reports on political parties and their leaders?

Did the government parties (Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats) and their leaders (Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and Michael McDowell) receive an over proportional news coverage in 2007?

QUESTION 2: Did the policy issues constitute a smaller share of media campaign coverage than reporting on the campaigning process itself? Was the news coverage of elections in Ireland more interested in the process rather than the issues?

To examine the media agenda focus in more detail, we also ask: Did broadsheet newspapers, because of their profile and status among readers, contain more issue coverage than the tabloid newspapers and TV news?

Did real life events have an impact on the amount of coverage related issues received in the media?

QUESTION 3: Was there a statement bias in the Irish newspapers? The dataset collected and content-analysed for this study contains a measure of the tone of the campaign-related opinion and editorial newspaper content. We can therefore study whether the opinion on parties and leaders was on average negative, neutral and positive.

Was there a difference in the average tone of the opinion coverage between newspapers?

Were some leaders more prominent in their parties' opinion coverage than others?

Looking at opinion polls, we know that the 2007 general election was a closer race than the previous Irish election. Therefore we ask whether the newspapers had more of an incentive to take more pronounced negative or positive stance towards parties or leaders in their editorial content.

QUESTION 4: Were there similarities between the items on the media agenda and those on the public one?

Previous agenda setting studies focused on the relationship between the two agendas and we explored this in this thesis too, in the context of the 2005 British election. In this chapter, however, the focus is on the media coverage. So to examine the similarities or differences between media and public agendas, we shall simply compare the order of the two agendas, while drawing some tentative conclusions.

Were the issues of the public opinion agenda similar to those on the media agenda? Did issues on the public opinion agenda follow the same order of priorities as the media agenda?

6.2 Data

Original data was collected to look more closely at what exactly was on the mass media's agenda during the general election campaign in Ireland in May 2007. What follows is a brief description of the data collected, the data-collection process and a brief synopsis of the methodology used for content analysis.

6.2.1 Print Media

The campaign started on the Sunday morning of April 29, 2007 and lasted for 26 days until the polls opened on Thursday, May 24. During this time all daily newspapers (published between Monday and Saturday) available in Ireland were collected. They were: the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Independent*, the *Irish Examiner*, the *Irish Sun*, the *Irish Star*, the *Irish Daily Mail*, the *Irish Daily Mirror* and the *Evening Herald*. Some issues of various Sunday newspapers were also collected, but they were not a part of the main body of the data. The Sunday editions were used for anecdotal evidence throughout this thesis. The newspapers were stored in the Department of Political Science in Trinity College and manually content-analysed between September 2007 and June 2009. For more

detailed description of the manual content analysis process, please see Chapter 3 and for a brief synopsis, please see the relevant paragraph below.

6.2.2 TV News

For the purposes of this thesis TV news programmes were chosen as representatives of the electronic media. This decision has been taken with the knowledge of the time and labour needed to manually content analyse media data and with the view that including more media material might have pushed the completion date of the study further away and thus render it less relevant and interesting for the reader. Some radio news programmes were recorded and archived, but (as with the Sunday editions of newspapers) these were used for anecdotal evidence only. They also helped the author to paint a broad and more nuanced picture of the election campaign in the media.

As for the TV news programmes, all the main TV news bulletins broadcast on terrestrial, freely available channels, were recorded by the author using a DVD-Hard Disk recording device. TG4 news (broadcast in Irish) was excluded from the dataset, because the author does not speak the language and would therefore be unable to content-analyse them. After the election, the recordings were transferred onto DVD discs. The TV programmes were recorded seven days a week, starting on Monday, April 30 2007. They were: RTÉ One lunchtime news; RTÉ One 6:01 news, RTÉ One nine o'clock news; RTÉ Two news and TV3 5:30 news. The recordings were analysed for content with the help of Dr. Heinz Brandenburg.

6.2.3 Content analysis

After the data had been collected, the process of manual content analysis started. For more detail on its methodology, please refer to Chapter 3, as what follows is just a brief synopsis.

Six newspapers were analysed for content: three broadsheets (the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Examiner*); two popular tabloids (the *Irish Sun* and the *Irish Daily Star*) and one afternoon paper (the *Evening Herald*). These newspapers were selected on the basis of their circulation and readership figures, geographical reach (national vs. regional) and perceived importance.

The *Irish Times* is seen as the most serious and influential daily newspaper in Ireland. It is held in high regard especially among the political and media elites, which are mainly concentrated in Dublin. The *Irish Independent*, on the other hand, has higher circulation figures and its readership is not concentrated on the capital. It is also available both in a broadsheet and a tabloid format and can be called the one truly national daily. The *Irish Examiner* (formerly known as the *Cork Examiner*) is a newspaper of record in the Southwest region of Ireland with editorial offices in Cork. The *Irish Daily Star*, The *Irish Sun* and the *Evening Herald* were chosen as examples of popular tabloid newspapers with The *Evening Herald* being an afternoon newspaper concentrated mainly on the Dublin market.

All campaign-related material and editorial content was selected and coded. The author received coding training from Dr. Heinz Brandenburg, who also helped with coding parts of the media data and supervised the coding procedure. The unit of analysis was a line of text. As column widths vary between newspapers, there was a need to come up with an easy to understand and standardized unit of observation. To allow for comparison of text units between newspapers two new variables were created: size of text and standardized column line. The former was computed by multiplying text units by column width, which resulted in a measure, which could be described as centimetres of text. Standardized column line was computed by dividing the size variable by the average column width across all six newspapers.

Each line from a campaign-related article was coded for policy dimension/issue references and for political party/party leader content. The codebook had 12 policy dimensions (for example political system, economy, social welfare, etc. For the comprehensive list, please see Appendix 1) and several issues for each policy dimension (for instance the economy issue had seven dimensions, such as tax, finance, economic development, etc. Please see Appendix 1). There were also five process dimensions (such as campaign, leadership, political ethics, elections) with corresponding issues. This policy/process distinction enabled for an interesting comparison of the focus of mass media coverage. Photos were measured and coded with the corresponding number of lines of text. During the content-analysis process additional and more detailed data were also collected, such as rank of the article on a page and type of text (whether it was a headline, sub-headline, photo, graphic or a basic text). Editorial content (any articles clearly marked as opinion or comment) was coded in terms of its positive, neutral or negative approach to the subject matter, whenever a party or a candidate was mentioned.

The dataset was firstly compiled in Microsoft Excel and then transferred into statistical software (SPSS and STATA) to carry out necessary analysis.

There are two national TV stations in Ireland: public service broadcaster Radio Teilifís Éireann and its commercial rival TV3. Both of the stations covered the election campaign extensively, especially in their news bulletins. Two news programmes were chosen to be content analysed on the basis of their viewership figures: RTÉ's 9 o'clock News and TV3's 5:30 news. They were recorded using a hard-drive DVD recorder with data backed up on DVD discs. The unit of analysis for the TV content is a story second, but the same content-analysis rules apply as in the case of newspapers.

6.2.4 Irish National Election Survey

This chapter also used data collected by the Irish National Election Study (INES) in 2007. INES is a five-wave panel survey encompassing the 2002 general election, local elections and European election in 2004, and the general election in 2007. The survey initially had 2,663 respondents. The principal investigators were Professor Michael Marsh (Trinity College Dublin and also supervisor of this thesis) and Professor Richard Sinnott (University College Dublin).

The 2007 wave of the survey asked questions about the relationship of the Irish voters with mass media. There were 17 questions related to the mass media and they can be divided into two groups: media habits and trust in mass media. Media habits questions asked the respondents about the sources they get their political information from (newspaper titles, TV, radio, the Internet) and how often they use them. Media trust questions queried the respondents about the amount of trust they have in different media outlets. Data from other, more general questions is also used throughout this chapter.

6.3 Media and the campaign

6.3.1 Coverage bias: parties

According to a self-imposed rule (Brandenburg and Hayden 2003: 189; Brandenburg 2005: 302) campaign coverage in the Irish media should be proportional to the number of seats a political party holds in the Dáil. This is something that greatly exercises political parties who often claim that they are under represented in the media. In his study of the 2002 campaign Brandenburg (2005: 302) concluded that there was a general lack of proportionality. Figure 1 shows that one of the most striking cases was the over representation of Progressive Democrats, who received almost as much newspaper coverage as Labour. Newspapers devoted 10.9 percent of their campaign

coverage to the Progressive Democrats and 12.6 percent to Labour in 2002. This was at odds with PD's then Daíl representation of four seats (as compared to Labour's 21 seats). Apart from the Progressive Democrats, however, coverage of other parties in 2002 was relatively proportional with Sinn Féin being the other exception. They received substantially more coverage in proportion to the number of seats held in the Daíl (4.1 percent of coverage and 0.6 percent seats in the Daíl) but they were under-represented if we take into account their opinion polls figures during the 2002 campaign (5.6 percent) and their share of the vote (6.5 percent).

Figure 1 shows the percentages of newspaper campaign coverage political parties received in 2007 and compares them to the percentage of the First Preference Votes cast for them in 2002. The biggest party – Fianna Fáil – was somewhat under represented in the media with 44.2 percent of the overall party coverage as compared to 48.8 percent of Daíl seats won in 2002. This difference should not be seen as a big problem by a governing party, as they were still by far the most visible in the 2007 campaign coverage. They also actually managed to get more coverage in 2007 than in 2002 (see Figure 2), when they also dominated the coverage, but with 41.4 percent. The opposition party – Fine Gael – took second place, but was trailing a substantial 25 percent behind Fianna Fáil. While Fianna Fáil gained three percent in 2007, Fine Gael lost 2.3 percent: in 2002 they received 21.5 percent of all the newspaper campaign coverage devoted to parties, whereas in 2007 this number was 19.2 percent. This is at odds with an initial impression (corroborated by the polls during the election campaign) of a party which could pose a credible threat to Fianna Fáil. Their coalition partners – Labour – also received less coverage in 2007 than in 2002, with 9.9 and 12.2 percent respectively.

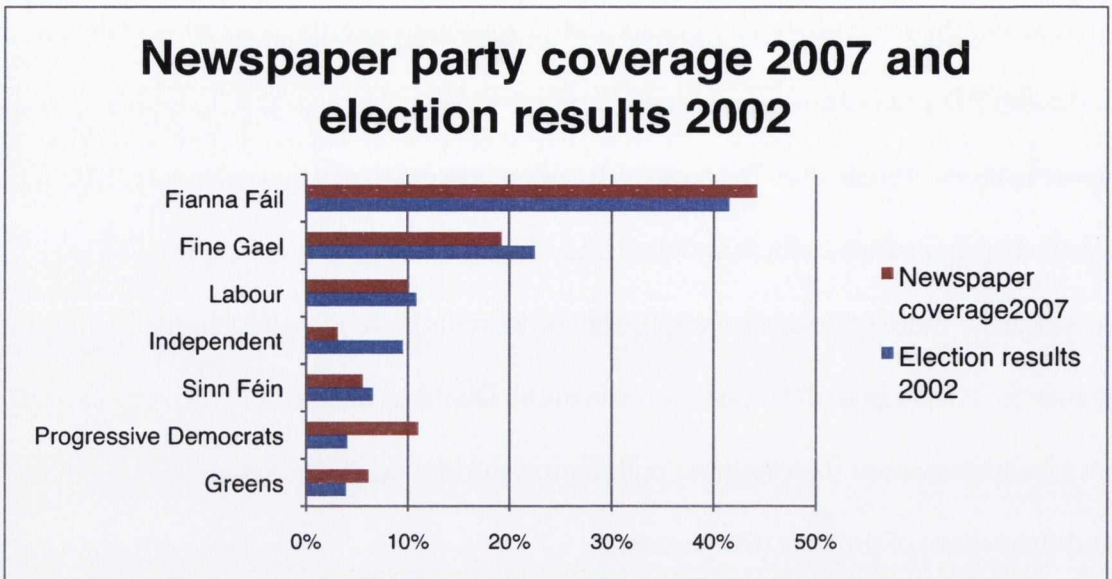


Figure 6-1 Comparison of newspaper party coverage in 2007 with 2002 election results (percentage of First Preference Votes cast for the parties).

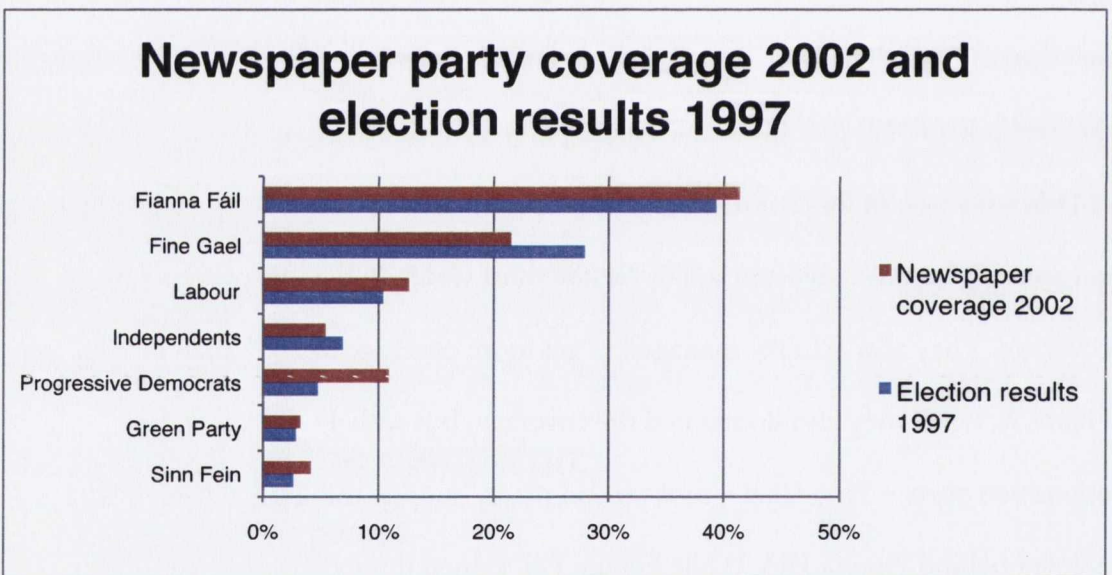


Figure 6-2 Comparison of newspaper party coverage in 2002 with 1997 election results (percentage of First Preference Votes cast for the parties).

Similarly to 2002 the coverage received by Progressive Democrats in 2007 was quite inflated. They had more coverage than Labour (11 percent to Labour's 9.9) with only 4.8 percent of the seats in the 2002 Dáil (compared to Labour's 12.7 percent). The party was at the time of the 2007 election campaign still in government with Fianna Fáil, which can be seen as an explanation of their overexposure, but we argue that it is a sign

of a coverage bias in the newspaper coverage of the campaign. Another interesting case was the relatively high number of text lines mentioning the Greens (6.1 percent) who held only 3.6 percent of the seats in the Daíl. Newspaper campaign coverage referring to the Greens rose by almost 3 percent compared to 2002. Independents, on the other hand, received less coverage (3.1 percent) in proportion to the number of seats (7.8 percent) won back in 2002. There was also slightly less coverage referring to the Independents overall in 2007 (3.1 percent) than in 2002 (5.4 percent).

When we compare the actual results of the 2007 election with the percentages of newspaper coverage parties received, the picture gets even more remarkable. With 11.2 percent of the coverage Progressive Democrats could surely hope for a result better than 1.2 percent of the seats in the 30th Daíl (this translated into two seats with a loss of six TDs including the party leader Michael McDowell). Fine Gael might not have featured in the newspapers as much (19.2 percent), but it still managed to win 30.9 percent of the seats. The Greens had more lines of text written about them in 2007 than in 2002, but their election result was identical. The situation was similar for Sinn Féin – the coverage (5.5 percent) did not translate into Daíl seats (2.4 percent / four seats).

Figure 3 shows the results of the TV news content-analysed for this study and the figures are not substantially different from the newspaper analysis: 44.2 percent of the campaign news pertained to Fianna Fáil, 18.6 to Fine Gael, 13.6 to Progressive Democrats, 11.1 to Labour, 5.7 to the Greens and 4.8 to Sinn Féin. Independent candidates managed to get only 1.4 percent of the TV coverage in 2007.

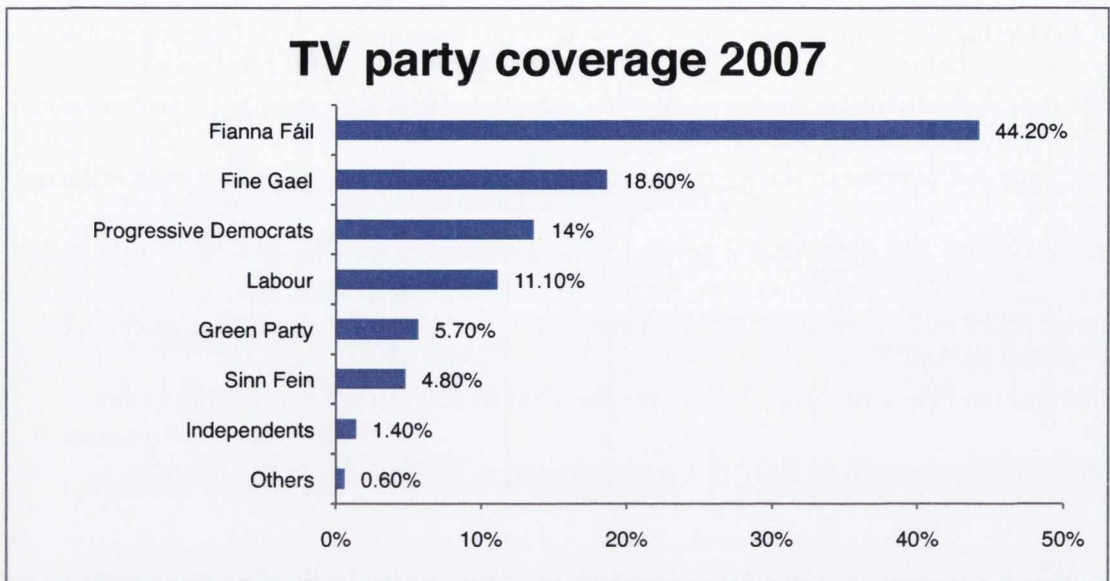


Figure 6-3: TV news party coverage: Ireland 2007 election campaign.

RTÉ decided to perform their own media monitoring exercise during the election campaign (for more discussion on this, please see Chapter 8). Figure 4 shows the time allocation for RTÉ's contributor tracking. While this study examined content from the TV news broadcasts, RTÉ monitored all their TV output. Altogether 38 hours 15 minutes and 23 seconds of RTÉ TV output were devoted to coverage of political parties. Figure 4 presents the results in detail. There are some differences between the results of our analysis and the one conducted by RTÉ. We can see that according to RTÉ monitoring, 14.3 percent of party coverage focused on Labour and 12.5 percent on Progressive Democrats. Also Sinn Féin received more coverage than the Green Party (7.6 percent and 6.4 percent accordingly). If we compare these results with the 2002 election results, we can see that the big parties (Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael) were somewhat under represented. FF got 32.6 percent of TV coverage, but had 41.5 percent of the First Preference Votes in 2002; for FG these figures are 20 percent of TV coverage and 22.5 percent of the First Preference Votes in 2002. Smaller parties, however, were over represented – 14.3 percent of RTÉ TV party coverage focused on

Labour (10.8 percent of FPV in 2002). Progressive Democrats received a 12.5 percent share of RTÉ TV party coverage with four percent of FPV in 2002.

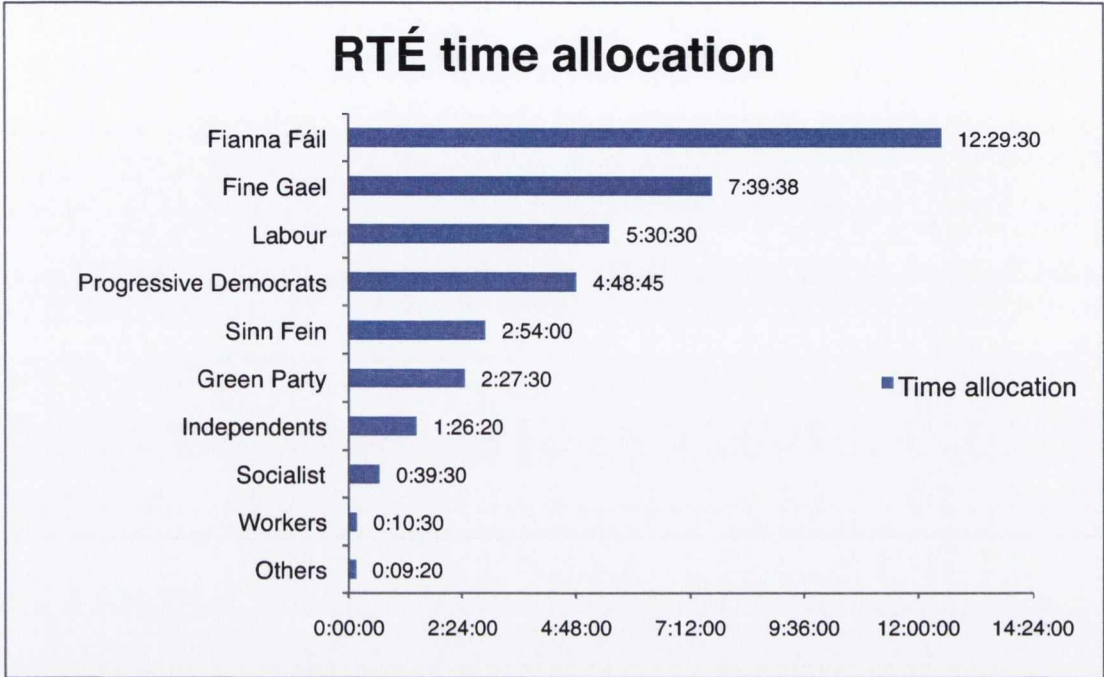


Figure 6-4: Allocation of time to each party on RTÉ Radio and TV election coverage
 Notes: Period covered is between 29 April 2007 and 22 May 2007. Total of election coverage on all the RTÉ Radio and TV programmes: 38:15:23.

As this study builds on Brandenburg’s 2002 exploration, it is of interest to compare the extent of parties’ newspaper coverage during election campaigns in 2002 and 2007. Figures 1 and 2 show that overall the amount of coverage parties received in 2007 was similar to figures in 2002. Quite surprisingly both Fine Gael and Labour received less coverage in 2007 than five years previously. We believe that the rise in the number of text lines devoted to Greens (from 3.2 percent in 2002 to 6.1 percent in 2007) is in line with the rising interest in environmental politics. On average, those surveyed by INES said that environmental issues were fairly important to them personally.

Table 1 offers a more detailed look at the news coverage focused on parties during the 2007 election campaign. We present results broken down by media outlet. The results are consistent with the ones discussed above. Fianna Fáil commands the biggest

share of the news coverage devoted to parties across all media. In the *Irish Sun* and the *Daily Star* their share was even more than a half.

Table 6-1 News coverage devoted to parties, newspapers and TV. Ireland 2007 election. N = number of standardised newspaper lines and seconds of TV news broadcast. Pearson Chi-Square = 7663,806 (df=35); Sig. (2-sided) = .000. For TV: Pearson Chi-Square = 112,573 (df = 7); Sig. (2-sided) = .000.

If		Irish Times	Irish Independent	Examiner	Herald	Sun	Star	RTÉ	TV3
we	Fianna Fáil	38.8	46.9	42.0	41.9	60.2	55.6	43.6	45.0
look	Fine Gael	19.0	20.5	19.7	17.4	17.0	16.6	19.7	16.9
at	Labour	11.5	8.0	12.1	9.0	7.8	5.6	10.7	11.7
the	Sinn Féin	6.3	5.4	5.2	9.1	2.0	2.8	4.7	4.8
cove	Green Party	7.5	4.3	6.6	5.2	5.8	6.2	5.8	5.5
rage	PDs	12.4	10.8	9.9	13.5	6.0	10.3	12.8	14.7
in	Independent	2.8	3.7	3.4	4.0	0.7	2.0	1.5	1.3
even	Other	1.8	0.5	1.1	0.0	0.4	0.8	1.0	0.1
more	N	90,877	80,144	59,798	16,555	15,893	16,211	13,142	8,687
detail		100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

l, we will see that there are obvious benefits to being the governing party. Fianna Fáil grabbed 54.4 percent of the headlines and 44.7 percent of all the photos. Table 2 presents the findings in more detail. No other party came even close to Fianna Fáil's figures with Fine Gael having to do with 15.6 percent of the headlines during the election campaign and 21.6 percent of the photos. Once again Progressive Democrats were over-represented across these categories, commanding almost ten percent of all the headlines and photos devoted to political parties. Table 3 shows the proportion of TV news headlines focused on political parties during the 2007 election campaign in Ireland.

Table 6-2 Party newspaper coverage by text type. Ireland 2007 election campaign. Percentages of campaign related party newspaper party coverage. N = number of standardised lines coded for party. Pearson Chi-Square = 7607,232 (df = 35); Sig. (2-sided) = .000.

	Headline	Sub Headline	Text	Photo	Graph	Cartoon	Total
Fianna Fáil	54.4	47.1	40.4	44.7	33.5	62.7	44.2
Fine Gael	15.6	19.7	19.4	21.6	18.0	8.3	19.2
Labour	7.6	8.3	11.0	9.5	11.0	7.5	9.9
Sinn Féin	4.8	5.5	6.0	4.7	9.7	5.2	5.5
Green Party	5.4	5.8	6.8	5.3	9.1	1.3	6.1
PDs	9.9	11.0	12.0	9.6	9.7	14.0	11.0
Independent	1.8	1.8	3.2	3.9	2.5	0.5	3.1
Other	0.6	0.8	1.1	0.7	6.5	0.5	1.0
N	41,601	4,830	139,041	80,999	7,045	5,959	279,475
% of Total	14.9	1.7	49.8	29.0	2.5	2.1	100.0

Table 6-3 Parties in TV headlines. Ireland 2007 election campaign. Percentages of campaign related party TV news coverage. N = number of seconds of TV news broadcast.

	TV headline coverage		
	RTÉ	TV3	Overall
Fianna Fáil	43.1	54.8	45.4
Fine Gael	20.5	14.9	19.4
Labour	6.3	7.7	6.6
Sinn Féin	0.4	0.0	0.4
Green Party	7.9	1.2	6.6
PDs	21.4	21.4	21.4
Other	0.3	0.0	0.2
N	168	682	850
% of Total	19.8	80.2	100

The question of partisan bias is one of the most pertinent one in all discussions of mass media election campaign coverage, and it has often become the focal point in the discussion about the role (and the power) of the media in the political process. Political

parties argue for impartial and proportional coverage, while commercial media organization need to sell their products and are guided by the interests of the public. One must also be mindful of the fact that proportional coverage does not necessarily mean equal treatment and while overall visibility might be important, the tone of the coverage is significant too. This will be discussed later on in this chapter.

6.3.2 Coverage bias: leaders

As party leaders have become the engines of Irish election campaigns – criss-crossing the country, endorsing local candidates and allowing their faces to become part of the party brand – their visibility in the mass media is of tremendous importance for the parties. Have Irish general election campaigns become more personalized over the years? This claim is supported by the fact that almost 40 percent of overall campaign coverage mentioned one of the six leaders of the main parties. One can look at the question of personalization of campaigns from two angles. We might investigate the proportion of the leader coverage within the overall campaign coverage and within the coverage focused on leaders. One might also examine the share of the parties' coverage taken by their leaders. This is done in detail in the section below. We also look closely at the treatment of leaders within the editorial content of newspapers and whether they stirred negative, neutral or positive sentiments. This is done in a separate section of this chapter, which deals with the tone of the campaign coverage.

Unsurprisingly Bertie Ahern – who was Taoiseach at that time – swept the boards (Table 4). Quite remarkably one fifth of overall newspaper campaign coverage referred to Ahern in 2007. He commanded even a bigger share of coverage if we look at all the text lines referring only to party leaders. In that case more than a half of all the coverage was devoted to the Fianna Fáil leader. Enda Kenny – leader of Fine Gael – was in second place with 21.6 percent of the leaders' coverage. Michael McDowell was over-

represented (as was the party he led) with almost 11 percent of the lines, while Pat Rabbitte received 9.5 percent.

Table 6-4 Leaders newspaper coverage. Ireland 2007 election. N = number of standardised lines.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Bertie Ahern	76,870	20.7	52.2	52.2
Enda Kenny	31,837	8.6	21.6	73.8
Pat Rabbitte	13,930	3.8	9.5	83.3
Gerry Adams	4,588	1.2	3.1	86.4
Trevor Sargent	4,002	1.1	2.7	89.1
Michael McDowell	15,982	4.3	10.9	100
N (leaders)	147,211	39.7	100	
N	370,654	100		

Out of all the lines of text coded as headlines, which referred to party leaders in 2007, Ahern was mentioned in 64.3 percent of them with Enda Kenny coming in second place with 17 percent. Kenny was a bit more visible in terms of photos published (25 percent to Ahern's 48.8 percent), but if we remember that he was often representing a coalition of Fine Gael and Labour, this number should have been higher if we stress the idea of campaign coverage in the Irish media is about being proportional. Table 5 gives detailed results of the leaders' newspaper coverage.

Table 6-5 Leaders' newspaper coverage by text type. Ireland 2007 election. N = standardised line of text. Pearson Chi-Square = 3662,527 (df = 25); Sig. (2-sided) = .000.

		Headline	Sub Headline	Text	Photo	Graph	Cartoon	Total
Bertie Ahern	% type	64.30	65.20	48.80	48.80	59.50	63.70	52.20
	% Total	10.10	1.20	19.80	17.90	0.90	2.30	52.20
Enda Kenny	% type	17.00	20.70	21.60	25.00	20.70	8.00	21.60
	% Total	2.70	0.40	8.80	9.20	0.30	0.30	21.60
Pat Rabbitte	% type	6.80	4.20	10.20	10.40	4.60	8.50	9.50
	% Total	1.10	0.10	4.10	3.80	0.10	0.30	9.50
Gerry Adams	% type	2.00	1.00	3.10	3.60	5.50	3.90	3.10
	% Total	0.30	0.00	1.20	1.30	0.10	0.10	3.10
Trevor Sargent	% type	1.30	0.70	3.60	2.50	4.30	1.40	2.70
	% Total	0.20	0.00	1.50	0.90	0.10	0.00	2.70
Michael McDowell	% type	8.50	8.20	12.70	9.80	5.40	14.40	10.90
	% Total	1.30	0.20	5.20	3.60	0.10	0.50	10.90
Total	% type	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
	% Total	15.70	1.80	40.60	36.70	1.60	3.50	100.00

Table 6-6 Leaders' TV coverage. Ireland, 2007 election. N = total number of seconds of TV news broadcasts devoted to leaders.

	Frequency	Percent
Bertie Ahern	5972	47.7
Enda Kenny	2497	20.0
Pat Rabbitte	1408	11.3
Gerry Adams	380	3.0
Trevor Sargent	482	3.9
Michael McDowell	1768	14.1
N (=standardised column lines)	12,507	100.0%

The picture was similar on TV (Table 6) where Bertie Ahern once again took the lion's share of the leaders' treatment with 47.7 percent share of the election news

airtime. Enda Kenny was almost 28 percentage points behind with 20 percent and Michael McDowell came in third with 14.1 percent.

As campaigns have become more national, leaders also became increasingly important for the political parties in Ireland. It is, therefore, important to examine, what was their share of the overall coverage their parties received. In other words how big an asset were the leaders to their respective parties? Figure 5 show that the pattern does not deviate much from an overall picture, with the most coverage devoted to the three main parties (Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour), with Progressive Democrats being an outlier. It is interesting to note, however, just how important Bertie Ahern was for Fianna Fáil. Out of all the newspaper text lines, which mentioned the governing party, more than 60 percent featured Ahern. This does not come entirely as a surprise if we take into account the fact that Ahern was the leader of the biggest party and also a Taoiseach, with a lot of coverage devoted to him, not only because of his campaign activities, but also because of his financial problems (for more discussion on that, please see section on agenda focus of the campaign) and his work as prime minister. The dominance of the governing party and its leader could also be attributed to the media skills Fianna Fáil politicians acquired while leading the country. Indeed one of Bertie Ahern's first decisions after winning the 1997 General Election was to introduce a media-monitoring unit in the Government Buildings (McCarthy 2004). It has also been estimated by British government officials that the Irish government employed more spin doctors in 2002 than its counterpart in the UK (McNamara 2005: 4) and that in the 12 months leading up to the 2002 General Election the government spent 11 million euro on the services provided by PR firms and press officers. Figure 5 shows the proportion of each party newspaper coverage focused on its leader.

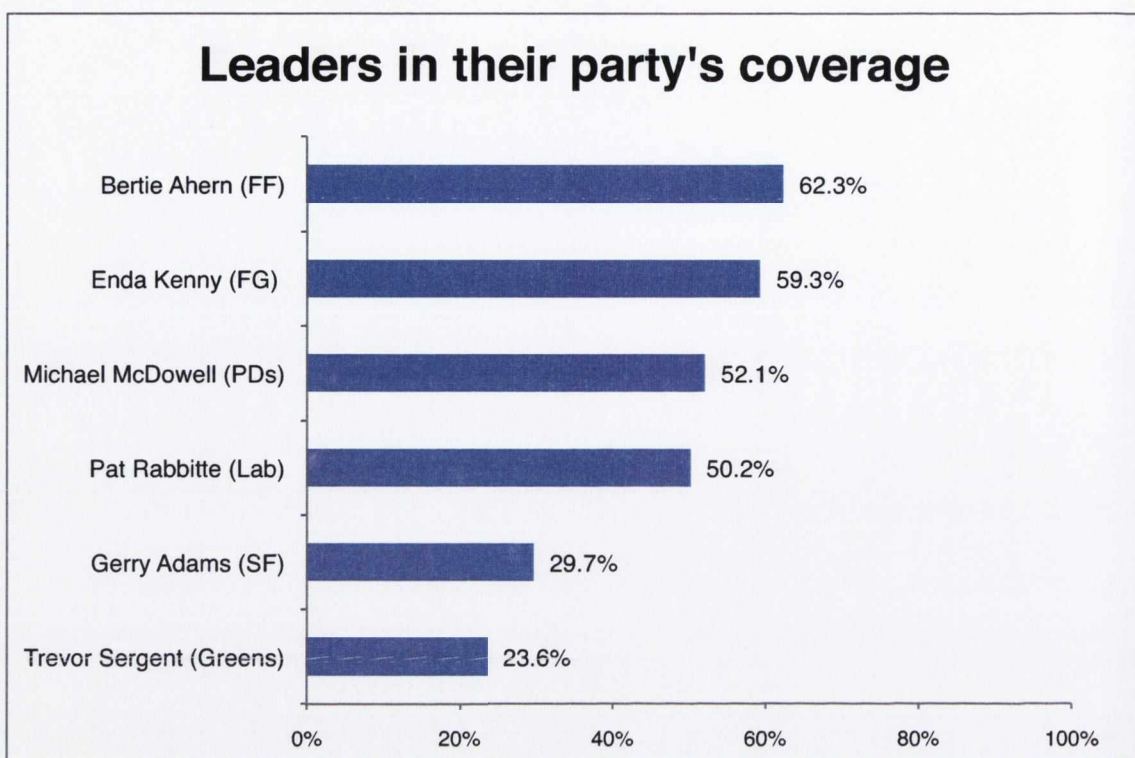


Figure 6-5: Leader's coverage as a percentage of an overall newspaper party coverage. Baseline is the total number of campaign-related text lines which mentioned a political party. Ireland 2007 election.

One can only speculate at the moment, but it will be interesting to see how big Fianna Fail's coverage will be during next elections, fought without Ahern at the helm. No other party leader featured as prominently within the party coverage as Ahern. For some parties the opposite scenario was the case and the leader was considerably less visible in their party's coverage. That was the case for Greens' leader Trevor Sargent (he had a 23.5 percent share of the party's newspaper coverage) and Gerry Adams of Sinn Féin (with 30 percent of the share). The other three leaders (Rabbitte, McDowell and Kenny) made up half or more of the campaign coverage afforded by newspapers to their respective parties. Table 7 shows the proportion of both newspaper and TV coverage devoted to leaders broken down by type of media.

Table 6-7 Leaders' coverage in newspapers and on TV. Ireland, 2007 election. N = standardised lines of text and seconds of TV news broadcast. Pearson Chi-Square = 4801,523 (df = 25); Sig. (2-sided) = .000. For TV: Pearson Chi-Square = 172,994 (df = 5); Sig. (2-sided) = .000.

	Irish Times	Irish Independent	Examiner	Herald	Irish Sun	Daily Star	RTÉ	TV3
Bertie Ahern	46.6	55.0	45.4	51.3	68.0	65.7	44.3	52.1
Enda Kenny	21.6	23	22.6	20.0	17.8	18.3	21.6	17.8
Pat Rabbitte	11.6	8.2	11.9	8.9	6.5	3.3	10.9	11.7
Gerry Adams	3.2	2.6	4.4	6.4	0.7	1.2	3.9	1.9
Trevor Sargent	3.8	2.0	3.8	2.5	0.4	1.0	5.2	2.2
Michael McDowell	13.1	9.2	11.8	10.8	6.5	10.5	14.1	14.2
N	43,520	44,720	28,537	8,550	11,141	10,740	6,997	5,510

Prominence of the coverage is one of the measures employed by this study. Further on in this chapter we will examine in more detail the topics that had the biggest share of the media coverage during the election campaign. Also we will look at how friendly, or not, was the editorial stance of the newspapers towards parties and leaders.

6.4 Media agenda focus

The previous section focused mainly on the pure amount of newspaper coverage received by political actors during the 2007 election campaign in Ireland. This general overview enabled us to look at the proportionality of the media coverage received by political parties and their leaders and the possibility of coverage bias in the Irish media. This section explores the second question as outlined at the beginning of this chapter. We expect that policy issues constitute a smaller proportion of news coverage during an

election campaign than articles and broadcasts reporting on campaigning, polls and horserace.

Although sheer media visibility and presence is important and might have an impact on both political actors and the voting public, it is essential to delve into the actual content of media coverage more deeply. After all, it is not only important that the media are talking about us (as seen from the political actors' perspective) or talking to us about them (as seen from the perspective of a voter), but for an agenda setting study, it is imperative to investigate what they are talking (to us) about.⁴⁷

Political parties look for more than just simple media exposure – the number of text lines referring to them during an election campaign. They also seek to be associated with particular policy initiatives and issues and they run their campaigns to get their particular message across to the voters via mass media. In one of the interviews conducted for this research, Terry Prone spoke about the “grid campaign.” Party media strategists prepare a grid of topics they would like to “push” on each day of the campaign. This is echoed by Rawnsley (2010) who, writing about the British elections, asserts that

for roughly the last 30 years, British elections have been a battle of the grids. Labour might decide that the campaign day should be about health and, beginning with its morning conference, would try to impose its agenda. The Tories might endeavour to put the focus on tax. The news cycle would be won by the party which achieved dominance for its issue and arguments.

⁴⁷ This is of course a take on Cohen's statement that «the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about» (Cohen 1963: 13).

Such efforts show that the parties, consciously or not, understand theories such as Petrocik's issue-ownership voting theory (Petrocik 1996). According to Petrocik, parties have reputations as far as "their" issues are concerned and can be more successful in attracting votes by sticking to the issues they are commonly associated with and avoiding issues owned by their rival parties. According to the ownership-based issue voting theory, voters would choose a party or candidate on the basis of their ability to handle a specific issue better than their opponents. It is, therefore, of crucial importance for political actors to know what issues they are associated with in the mass media reports.

The actual content of the mass media during an election campaign is important to the voters too. They get their information cues from the newspaper and TV political news coverage and make up their minds accordingly. This is underlined by the agenda setting theory (Rogers et al. 1993) and also by research into issue salience (Budge and Farlie 1983; Wlezien 2005). Issues, which gain prominence in the media, can have an impact on voter's choice. Previous agenda setting studies found high degrees of correlation between the media agenda and the public agenda. Our investigation into the media and public agendas during the 2005 election in the UK showed that the agendas for some issues at some stages of the campaign can parallel each other very closely, giving an indication of a possibility of agenda setting effects.

6.4.1 Agenda focus: policy vs. process and media's need for dramatization

As we stated above issues (and the media coverage they receive) are vital both for parties and candidates and for voters, but often mass media focus more on the campaign itself (horserace, canvassing, day to day activities of the candidates, etc.) than on matters pertaining to health, crime or the economy. Figure 6 attests to that and we see that overall only 19.6 percent of newspaper campaign coverage referred to various issues, such as justice (1.8 percent), social welfare (5.4 percent) or the economy (4.8 percent).

The vast majority of text lines in newspapers coded for this study revolved around the campaign process. As we can see in Table 8, 42.6 percent of the text lines dealt with campaigning, 9.5 percent spoke about polls and horserace and 15.8 percent referred to the election.

Table 6-8 Newspaper agenda. Ireland, comparison between 2007 and 2002. N = total number of standardised lines. In brackets position of the policy issue on a ranking order.

		2007			2002		
		Number of lines	Percent	Cumulative percent	Number of lines	Percent	Cumulative percent
Policy	Political system	3249	0.9	0.9	9345	2.7	2.7
	Justice	6567	1.8 (4)	2.6	13589	4.0 (3)	6.7
	Defence	574	0.2	2.8	1088	0.3	7.0
	Economy	17938	4.8 (2)	7.6	29362	8.6 (2)	15.6
	Agriculture	972	0.3	7.9	1395	0.4	16.0
	Social welfare	19996	5.4 (1)	13.3	33114	9.7 (1)	25.7
	Education	5443	1.5 (5)	14.8	8486	2.5 (4)	28.1
	Arts/Culture	1373	0.4	15.1	3616	1.1	29.2
	Infrastructure/Technology	7251	2.0 (3)	17.1	7179	2.1 (5)	31.3
	Environment	3323	0.9	18.0	2400	0.7	32.0
	Foreign affairs	2238	0.6	18.6	2074	0.6	32.6
	Northern Ireland	3739	1.0	19.6	959	0.3	32.9
Process	Campaigning	157982	42.6	62.2	126254	36.9	69.7
	Polls/Horserace	35371	9.5	71.8	54666	16.0	85.7
	Leadership	16089	4.3	76.1	7509	2.2	87.9
	Political ethics	29712	8.0	84.1	13684	4.0	91.9
	Non-political	334	0.1	84.2	2077	0.6	92.5
	Election	58505	15.8	100.0	25760	7.5	100.0
	N	370,654	100.0		342,556	100.0	

These results should make an uncomfortable reading for any Irish citizen who would like their mass media to be part, or even better the initiator of a proper public debate, a debate focused on important issues of the day, rather than mundane stories about canvassing, hand-shaking, photo-op happy politicians on the campaign trail. On the other hand, this is not surprising as previous academic studies (Capella and Jamieson 1997) showed that at the time of an election campaign, journalists tend to describe politics as a game of strategy. The complicated political matters are reduced to the simple questions of winners and losers, campaign strategy and relationships between political actors. "Politics tends to be reduced to a contest for power, where power is treated as an end in itself rather than a prerequisite to enacting policy," (Pettersson et al. 2006: 74). The media's reporting of political events is influenced by "structural bias," which has been described as "a situation where journalists' professional norms, routines and news values steer the media's reporting" (Harnes 1978; Asp 1986; Gulati, Just and Crigler 2004; Graber 2006; for more discussion on this issue, please see Chapter 8). Behind the structural bias in the media we find their need to compete for the fractured attention of readers and viewers, their reporting culture, existing formats and available resources (Pettersson 2006: 71). Lipmann wrote about this as early as in 1922, when he observed that "(...) the problem of securing attention is (...) a problem of provoking feeling in the reader, of inducing him to feel a sense of personal identification with the stories he is reading.... In order that he shall enter he must find a familiar foothold in the story, and this is supplied to him by the use of stereotypes," (Lipmann in Graber 2007: 50). To sell newspapers and to attract viewers, media need to "package" the news in an easily digestible and attractive format. Treating election campaigns as games and races full of twists and drama, mass media can paint a much more vivid picture, than if they concentrated on issues. Issues, which usually have remained the same over a number of previous elections and with which readers and viewers are usually already

overly familiar. That is one of the main reasons why media campaign reporting is much more likely to focus on the dynamic process than on dry policy analyses. This need for dramatization of the campaign coverage was clearly visible in Ireland in 2007 and as we will see from comparisons with previous elections, the process coverage has gotten bigger over time.

6.4.2 Policy vs. process: results

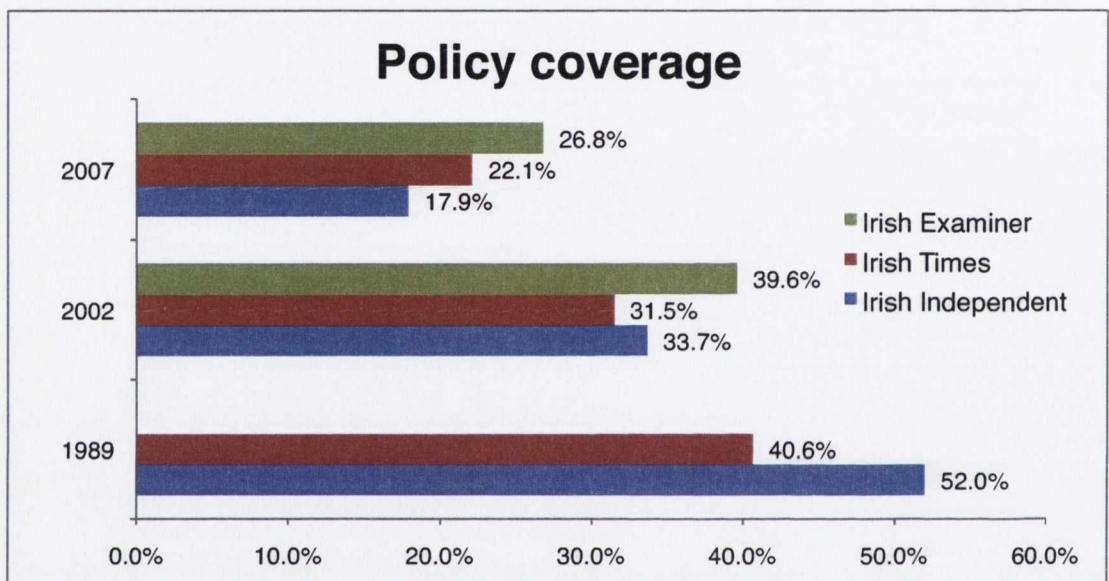


Figure 6-6 Broadsheet newspapers policy coverage. Ireland, 2007, 2002 and 1989 election. Source for 1989: *How Ireland Voted 1989* (Gallagher and Sinnott 1990).

Looking back at previous Irish general elections, we can see that the amount of policy-focused media coverage has declined overtime. Table 8 shows that in 2007, 19.6 percent of the newspaper election coverage was devoted to policy issues and a staggering 80.4 percent to writing about the campaign process. We can compare it with previous Irish general elections (Figure 6). Farrell content-analysed broadsheet coverage during the 1989 general election. Making an assumption that his measurement is comparable to the one used in this study, we note that back then the *Irish Times* devoted 40.6 percent to policy-reporting, while for the *Irish Independent* this figure was at 52 percent (Farrell 1990: 39). For the 2002 campaign Brandenburg discovered that for the same

newspapers these figures were at 31.5 percent and 33.7 percent (Brandenburg 2005: 308). We can make a direct comparison with Brandenburg's study as this thesis followed the same content-analysis methodology. We find that 22.1 percent of text lines were devoted to policy issues in the *Irish Times* and only 17.9 percent in the *Irish Independent*. Between 2002 and 2007 the coverage of policy-related issues declined by 9.4 percentage points for the *Irish Times* and 15.8 percent for the *Irish Independent*. In 2007 the *Irish Examiner* was the newspaper which had proportionally the biggest number of text lines devoted to policy issues at 26.7 percent, but this figure was still considerable smaller than in 2002, when the Cork based paper devoted 39.6 percent of its election coverage to policy issues.

Our analysis of tabloid newspapers makes for a depressing reading. In 2007, less than eight percent of the election coverage in the *Irish Sun* mentioned any issues. For the *Irish Star* the share was nine percent and for the *Evening Herald* 12 percent. This meant a drop of ten percentage points for the latter paper, compared to the 2002 figures.

Popular thinking would be that newspapers during election campaigns, especially in the age of the Internet, can allocate more space to opinion and policy analyses than to the news. On the other hand TV, with its more immediate reporting, should focus on the latest news. This was not so during the 2007 campaign, as television reporting carried more policy content overall than the newspapers. Almost 32 percent of the campaign-related airtime was spent on discussing policy issues, with remaining 68 percent on process. This means a 12 percentage points difference between the newspaper and TV policy reporting. This differed quite substantially, however, between the two TV stations (Figure 7). RTÉ's share of issue coverage was almost 38 percent. For their commercial rivals – TV3 – it was 15 percentage points less. Five years before, Brandenburg reported that this difference was only 1.6 percentage points. The

2007 results confirm the view that TV3 is a more of an infotainment station than its public service rival.

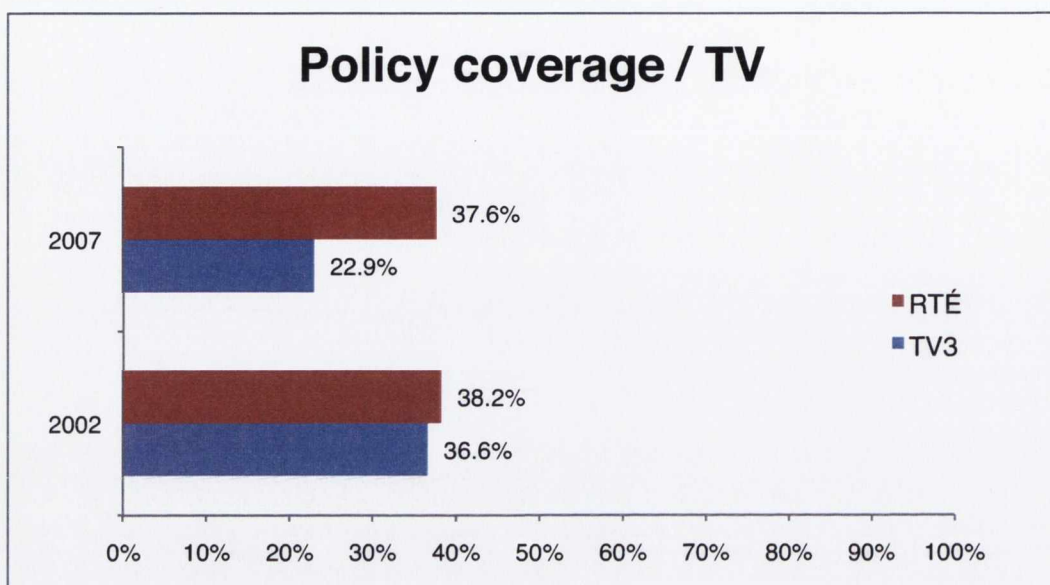


Figure 6-7 TV news policy coverage. Ireland, 2007 and 2002 elections. N = number of seconds of TV news broadcast.

But is the relatively small share of policy content within the campaign coverage, a specifically Irish phenomenon? Comparing the focus of Irish newspapers with campaign coverage in British press during the 2005 election, we find that the amount of policy reporting is overall bigger in the UK. Using data gathered and content-analysed by Brandenburg (2005), we see that overall policy reporting constituted 34.7 percent of all the text lines coded, while pure campaign reporting was at 33.2 percent in 2005. This differed by type of newspaper of course, but still the figures indicate that the Irish press was more preoccupied in 2007 with the campaign and the process (42.6 percent of all coverage) than policies (19.6 percent of the coverage). The differences between the UK and Ireland could be a reflection of media system effects. The partisanship of the British press could mean that campaign coverage of political parties focuses more on their positions on issues, rather than campaigning itself. Also the differences between the Irish and British electoral systems might mean that in the UK, the media focus only on two

parties and can devote more space to issues and less to campaigning itself. In Ireland the campaign reporting has to encompass a bigger number of parties. The campaign itself is also more localized than in the UK, which can have an impact on the amount of space newspapers devote to policy and process reporting.

Contest and race approach to campaign reporting is common in other countries too. Research has found that a game/contest or a race narrative is a popular device used by journalists in Sweden, USA and Spain. 51 percent of the media content in Sweden, 67 percent in the United States of America and 52 percent in Spain, was focused on the contest aspect of politics (Stromback and Dimitrova 2006; Stromback and Luengo 2006 in Petersson 2006: 77).

6.5 Agenda focus: issues and events

The previous two sections of this chapter provided a general overview of the news media coverage of the Irish general election campaign in 2007. They explored the possibility of a partisan bias in the election coverage in the Irish mass media and the general focus of the media agenda in May 2007. The following part will investigate the actual issues that were most prominent within the media agenda.

In Chapter 2, discussing the agenda setting theory, the important difference between *issues* and *events* was highlighted. It is important to reiterate it here before we explore the findings. Academic literature and research have looked at media agenda as comprising both of issues and events. Events, as defined by Shaw (1977), are separate incidents with a specific date and time. Issues, according to the same scholar, are quite distinct, as they are built around cumulative news coverage of related events, bound by a broad category (Shaw 1977, Rogers and Dearing 2007: 85). Agenda setting research has studied both events and issues in the past, but overall the focus of the research has been on broader

issues. Such a distinction however might be difficult to grasp as real world events reported by the news media often fit within the broader context of an issue. They might also be coded as a part of coverage of an issue in a content analysis scheme (as was often the case during the coding process for this thesis). The content analysis method adopted by this study used 12 broad policy dimensions and a number of narrowly defined issues within each dimension. These enabled us to capture the general themes of the election coverage, but also offered us a chance to look at it in much more detail. As we can examine the data on a number of levels, we can also look at which issues had the most coverage within their policy dimension categories.

The size of the coverage an issue receives at any time in the mass media is often related to, and influenced by, one-off events. For example a strike action can bring into sharp relief the state of a whole industry and therefore economy, a natural disaster can alter the amount of environmental issues covered by the media and personal scandal usually means more time devoted to the discussion of leadership qualities. Also dramatic events – especially if they occur during an election campaign – might grab media's attention and shift it from political coverage. Increasingly political actors have to compete for media space with celebrities and a whole variety of soft news and lifestyle items. Not only have we seen that the political coverage is more interested in the game than the issues, we have also witnessed the tabloidization of newspapers with broadsheets changing their format, adding more light-hearted supplements and aiming to entertain rather than inform and educate.

EVENTS. The 2007 campaign also had its share of notable events, which might have influenced the amount of coverage certain issues received. Some of them were of a political nature, some were human-interest stories. The actual start of the campaign was overshadowed by the decision of the Mahon Tribunal (set up to investigate planning

decisions and possible political corruption) to suspend its hearings for the duration of the campaign. This was announced on Monday, April 30, 2007. Other big events of the campaign were of a non-political nature. On May 3, a young British girl – Madeline McCann – disappeared from the hotel she was staying at with her parents in Portugal. Her story dominated the front pages of newspapers for weeks in May 2007. In Ireland, a more local news story – the case of Miss D – captivated media’s interest in the second week of the campaign. The story involved a teenager who was fighting for the right to travel to the UK to have an abortion. The High Court ruled in favour of Miss D on May 10. On May 15 Bertie Ahern was the first ever Taoiseach to address joint chambers of the British Parliament. This historic event definitely helped to boost the Fianna Fáil’s leaders’ visibility. Irish nurses were on strike in 2007 and during the first two weeks of May 2007 their industrial dispute was widely reported in the media. Naturally it became one of the big stories of the campaign. On May 16 nurses called off the threat of work stoppages and we will be able to see whether this event had any influence on the coverage of the health issue in the Irish media.

6.5.1 Media agenda: policy dimensions and issues

Although we have established that the Irish media were more interested in reporting on the process and horserace aspects of the campaign than the issues, it is nevertheless vital to see which policy dimensions and issues managed to get onto the media agenda in May 2007.

In Table 9 we report the details of the newspaper agenda in 2007 and the comparison with the period of the 2002 election campaign. The five policy-specific dimensions (out of 12) which received the most coverage out of all the campaign-related articles coded for this study were: social welfare (5.4 percent), economy (4.8 percent), infrastructure and technology (2 percent), justice (1.8 percent) and education (1.5

percent). Almost all of them failed to reach the levels of coverage of most of the process-focused dimensions (campaigning, polls and horserace, election, etc.). Within that category campaigning took the lion's share of the coverage with 42.6 percent, followed by election (15.8 percent), polls and horserace (9.5 percent) political ethics (8 percent) and leadership (4.3 percent). The picture was somewhat different five years earlier. In 2002, social welfare was topping the newspapers' policy agenda with 9.7 percent of the campaign coverage (Brandenburg 2005: 309), followed by the economy (8.6 percent), justice (4 percent), political system (2.7 percent) and education (2.5 percent). The main difference is not in the placing of the top issues, but in the proportion of text lines speaking about them. In 2002 the top five policy dimensions (excluding campaign process coverage) received 27.5 percent of the newspaper coverage – 12 percent more than in 2007. The five issues making up the media agenda both in 2002 and in 2007 are mostly consistent with the picture in the media in other countries. During the 2005 general election in the UK, economy topped the agenda too in the newspapers with 9.7 percent of the campaign coverage. It was followed by social welfare (5.1 percent), immigration (3.1 percent), justice (2.9 percent) and education (1.9 percent).

The results from 2007 once again confirm earlier findings that policy reporting was considerably down compared with prior general elections. In 2002 newspapers devoted 36.9 percent of their election coverage to campaigning (5.7 percent less than in 2007), but they did pay more attention to polls and horserace. This dimension was mentioned in 16 percent of the lines, whereas in 2007 this figure was 9.5 percent. This goes against an initial expectation, as the 2007 election was a closer race if we look at the poll numbers of the opposition. Perhaps other issues grabbed media's attention in 2007.

Bertie Ahern's finances were one of the big news stories throughout the whole election campaign in May 2007. Indeed the political ethics dimension (which contained

the sleaze issue) received eight percent of overall coverage. There were proportionally twice as many text lines devoted to that issue in 2007 than in 2002. Five years previously political ethics constituted four percent of the coverage. In the UK in 2005 this dimension received only 2.3 percent of the overall campaign-related newspaper coverage.

6.5.2 Media agenda: broadsheet newspapers

Earlier in this chapter we discussed the disproportionality between the policy and process reporting in the newspaper election coverage in Ireland. The process coverage has been growing over the years, while less space and time has been devoted to reporting and discussing policies. It was also shown that there is a difference between the amount of text lines referring to various policy dimensions in broadsheet newspapers and in the tabloids.

In the policy vs. process section we concluded that the newspaper which carried the biggest number of text lines focussed on policies during the 2007 campaign was the *Irish Examiner*. When looking at the policy dimension coverage in the three Irish broadsheet newspapers, we see that indeed the Cork-based newspaper had more coverage of some policy dimensions than the *Irish Times* or the *Irish Independent*.

Justice received 3 percent of the campaign-related coverage in the *Irish Examiner*, which was twice as much compared to the *Irish Times* (1.4 percent) and the *Irish Independent* (1.1 percent). Education was another topic that got more attention in the *Examiner* (more than 3 percent of campaign coverage), than in the other two papers (less than one percent in the *Irish Times*, 1.4 percent in the *Independent*). The *Examiner* also gave more attention to the environmental issues (1.7 percent) and infrastructure and technology (almost four percent) than the other two broadsheets.

Table 6-9 Broadsheet newspapers agenda. Ireland, 2007 and 2002 elections. Percentages of campaign related newspaper coverage. N = standardised number of lines.

		2007			2002		
		Irish Times %	Irish Independent %	Irish Examiner %	Irish Times %	Irish Independent %	Irish Examiner %
Policy	Political system	1.2	0.6	0.9	2.7	2.6	2.1
	Justice	1.4	1.1	3.0	2.6	4.8	5.3
	Defence	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.5	0.5	0.1
	Economy	6.8	4.6	5.0	10.1	11.7	5.8
	Agriculture	0.1	0.3	0.5	0.5	0.2	0.7
	Social welfare	6.0	5.9	5.5	9.3	7.1	15.4
	Education	0.9	1.4	3.1	1.0	2.0	5.3
	Arts/Culture	0.3	0.2	0.9	1.0	1.2	0.6
	Infrastructure/Technology	2.1	1.1	3.8	1.8	2.0	3.3
	Environment	0.8	0.6	1.7	0.8	0.7	0.3
	Foreign affairs	0.8	0.8	0.6	0.8	0.6	0.5
	Northern Ireland	1.2	0.8	1.3	0.4	0.3	0.2
	Issue coverage subtotal	21.8	17.5	26.4	31.5	33.7	39.6
	Process	Campaigning	36.3	43.9	36.1	37.8	39.2
Polls/Horserace		11.7	11.5	9.6	14.7	15.1	20.7
Leadership		5.7	5.2	4.5	1.9	2.4	2.0
Political ethics		7.7	10.4	7.7	4.6	3.7	2.2
Non-political		0.0	0.2	0.0	0.4	0.3	1.2
Election		16.4	10.6	15	9.1	5.6	7.8
Process coverage subtotal		78.2	82.5	73.6	68.5	66.3	60.2
N		112,902	99,998	84,276	86,494	99,023	87,294

Looking at the process category, we note that once again the *Irish Examiner* was somewhat of an outlier. Proportionally, it had the least amount of text lines discussing the campaigning process and also polls and horserace (36 percent and 9.6 percent respectively). The *Irish Independent*, on the other hand, had 44 percent of its election coverage focussed on the campaigning process and 11.5 percent on polls and horserace. Political ethics was one of the big stories of the campaign, mainly because of “Bertiegate” – the story of Taoiseach’s complicated personal finances. This has been reflected by the amount of coverage this policy dimension got in all three broadsheet newspapers. The *Irish Times* and the *Irish Examiner* dedicated around 7.5 percent of their campaign coverage to this issue, while the *Irish Independent* more than ten percent. The 2002 figures are in some measure different, with the broadsheet newspaper giving the political ethics issue less thought. Its share of the campaign coverage in the *Irish Examiner* was 2.2 percent, in the *Irish Times* 4.6 percent and in the *Irish Independent* only 3.7 percent. This substantial difference confirms the importance and impact of “Bertiegate” on the election coverage in the Irish media in 2007.

6.5.3 Agenda focus: TV

One of the surprising results of this investigation is the fact that the TV journalists talked more about policies and issues than their print colleagues. Policies were afforded more airtime on RTÉ and TV3, than in broadsheet or tabloid newspapers. Almost 32 percent of the TV campaign coverage focused on various policies, but still 68 percent of the TV content coded referred to campaign process. Table 10 reports the detailed findings of our analysis.

Table 6-10 TV news issue agenda. Ireland, 2007 and 2002 elections. Percentages of campaign related TV news broadcasts. N = total number of seconds of TV news broadcasts.

		2007			2002	
		RTÉ %	TV3 %	Overall TV %	RTÉ %	TV3 %
Policy	Political system	0.7	0.9	.8	1.4	2.0
	Justice	1.8	1.3	1.6	5.2	6.3
	Defence	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.2	0.2
	Economy	13.9	4.5	10.2	14.7	9.9
	Agriculture	0.1	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.2
	Social welfare	12.2	8.8	10.9	12.8	11.2
	Education	2.8	1.1	2.1	1.2	1.2
	Arts/Culture	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.8	0.2
	Infrastructure/Technology	3.6	1.6	2.8	0.9	2.9
	Environment	1.1	0.3	0.8	0.3	1.9
	Foreign affairs	0.8	0.3	0.6	0.1	0.1
	Northern Ireland	0.6	3.5	1.8	0.4	0.5
	Issue coverage subtotal	37.6	22.8	31.8	38.2	36.6
Process	Campaigning	24.9	38.0	30.0	28.4	33.6
	Polls/Horserace	11.0	9.3	10.4	18.8	15.1
	Leadership	7.2	9.0	7.9	0.3	0.6
	Political ethics	13.5	16.6	14.7	9.2	9.1
	Election	5.7	4.3	5.2	5.2	4.9
	Process coverage subtotal	62.4	77.2	68.2	61.9	63.3
	N	21,583	13,938	35,521	34,533	31,522

The top five policy dimensions discussed on TV were the same as in the broadsheet newspapers, but the proportion of coverage they received was larger. This was especially visible for the top two issues: social welfare and economy. They took the top two spots on the media agenda with 10.9 and 10.2 percent of the coverage respectively.

Infrastructure and technology had 2.8 percent of the coverage, education 2.1 percent and justice 1.6 percent. As far as the process categories are concerned, overall TV news spent 30 percent of their airtime on campaigning and 10.4 percent on horserace. The share of policy coverage might have been larger for TV news, compared to print news, but it was still down on 2002, when for example the share of the economy as part of overall campaign reporting on RTÉ was almost 15 percent and social welfare 13 percent.

The political ethics coverage on TV in 2007 was also substantially more prominent in 2007 than in 2002. Almost 15 percent of the overall campaign coverage referred to this policy dimension in 2007. In 2002 the share of this issue within the election coverage was lower: for RTÉ it was 9.2 percent and for TV3 9.1 percent.

6.5.4 Agenda focus: leaders, parties and issues

The media agenda is a result of a complicated process and relationships between political actors, the mass media and the public. For their part political parties try to shape the media agenda by engaging in typical public relations activities. They send out press releases, organize events and photo-ops for their candidates; they brief journalists (on and off the record). Indeed in his study of the relationship between the parties' agenda and the media one, Brandenburg found high positive correlation between them (Brandenburg 2005). Parties and political candidates strive to convey a certain image and it is important to them to be associated with particular issues. What were the images of the parties and the leaders in the media during the 2007 election campaign?

We have already established that political ethics featured prominently on the media agenda. Was it all connected to Bertie Ahern? Table 11 shows that indeed the vast majority of the political ethics coverage focused on the leader of Fianna Fáil. Overall 81

percent of all the leaders' coverage of political ethics in newspapers was about Ahern. It also constituted almost a quarter of all his coverage. There were days when more than 90 percent of the newspaper campaign coverage about political ethics was related to Ahern. We can see that there was more coverage of this particular issue in the first few days of the campaign, but it remained high in the following days nonetheless. One might also argue that the majority of the political ethics coverage associated with the other leaders was in fact about Ahern too. This could be because other leaders were commenting on the Bertiegate and their comments were coded accordingly with their names. Perhaps because he tried to build political capital out of Ahern's troubles, Michael McDowell – leader of the Progressive Democrats – was in second place in terms of the amount of newspaper political ethics coverage (9.4 percent of the policy mentions and almost 14 percent of his overall coverage).

At times parties' efforts to secure 'on-message' coverage do not translate into numbers of text lines. Such was the case with leader of the Greens – Trevor Sargent. Because of the profile of his party, we could assume that he should have the biggest number of lines in the environment category. This was not the case. Quite surprisingly he came second with 31.3 percent of the lines, after Michael McDowell with more than 40 percent of the lines. One needs to remember, though, that environment (and most of the other policy dimensions) constituted only a fraction of overall reporting on the leaders. Most of it was concerned with the process dimensions. For example, campaigning took 57 percent of overall leader coverage, while poll and horserace got more than six percent. If we compare it with policy reporting, we see that only two dimensions got more than two percent: economy and social welfare (with health being responsible for the lion's share of social welfare coverage).

Table 6-11 Leaders' issue coverage in newspapers. Ireland 2007 election. N = number of standardised text lines.

		Bertie Ahern %	Enda Kenny %	Pat Rabbitte %	Gerry Adams %	Trevor Sargent %	Michael McDowell %
Policy	Political system	26.2	26.6	19.4	2.6	9.8	15.4
	Justice	13.2	30.8	10.1	0.4	0.3	45.3
	Defence	16.1	0.9	2.7	30.5	2.7	47.1
	Economy	39.4	19.2	18.6	3.2	5.3	14.3
	Agriculture	75.3	17.2	0.0	0.5	0.5	6.5
	Healthcare (social welfare)	30.5	42.9	16.6	3.3	1.4	5.3
	Education	23.6	44.7	23.2	1.3	6.7	0.5
	Arts/Culture	66.3	17.7	15.5	0.0	0.6	0.0
	Infrastructure/Technology	26.8	19.1	21.5	4.0	9.6	19.0
	Environment	12.4	11.5	3.5	0.6	31.5	40.6
	Foreign affairs	82.7	7.6	7.9	1.2	0.4	0.3
	Northern Ireland	60.3	14.3	2.4	11.5	0.3	11.2
Process	Campaigning	47.2	26.6	10.1	3.6	2.4	10.1
	Polls/Horserace	42.8	19.1	17.7	4.2	5.0	11.3
	Leadership	43.6	23.4	6.4	3.4	3.1	20.1
	Political ethics	81.0	4.5	2.7	0.3	2.0	9.4
	Election	64.9	13.4	8.1	3.1	3.0	7.4
	N	76,869	31,836	13,930	4,589	4,002	15,981

Although the proportion of policy coverage was small in 2007, the amount of policy reporting varied between parties (Table 12). Overall, the news about the two big parties - Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael - was overwhelmingly about process rather than about their proposed policies. Newspaper lines mentioning Fianna Fáil referred to its policies only in 11.7 percent of cases. For print content concerning Fine Gael, this number was slightly higher, but still only 15.7 percent. Smaller parties fared better in this respect, as the newspapers wrote about them in a more policy-focused fashion. In the case of Sinn Féin, Greens and Labour, their share of policy coverage was more than 20 percent. The differences in the parties' treatment were even more noticeable in the TV coverage.

More than 30 percent of the coverage was policy-oriented for the three parties mentioned above. Sinn Féin had the largest share; almost 38 percent, while only 12 percent of the TV news about Progressive Democrats mentioned their policies.

As far as issue portrayal of the parties was concerned, there were obvious benefits to being the governing party. Out of all the party coverage in the newspapers, Fianna Fáil commanded 42 percent of text lines mentioning the economy, with Fine Gael coming in a distant second at 14 percent and Labour third at 13.5 percent. A similar pattern emerged with the coverage of the education policy dimension: Fianna Fáil had almost 35 percent of the coverage, while its opponents had 22 percent (Fine Gael) and 19 percent (Labour).

In other categories, however, the opposition parties managed to get their messages across and made a stronger impact on the media agenda. Fine Gael was mentioned in the 32 percent of the newspaper lines pertaining to justice (19 percent of the lines dealing with that issue referred to Fianna Fáil). Enda Kenny's party was also marginally ahead of Fianna Fáil when it came to social welfare. Almost 29 percent of the lines coded for that particular policy dimension spoke about Fine Gael and 28 percent about Fianna Fáil.

Table 6-12 Parties and issue coverage in newspapers. Ireland, 2007 election. N = total number of standardised text lines. In bold typeface highest number in each row.

		Fianna Fáil	Fine Gael	Labour	Sinn Féin	Green Party	PDs
		%	%	%	%	%	%
Policy	Political system	16.8	20.0	19.6	2.7	14.2	15.2
	Justice	19.1	32.6	16.6	6.9	3.5	19.1
	Defence	17.6	3.0	4.6	41.1	2.6	21.4
	Economy	42.1	14.4	13.5	8.8	9.9	10.1
	Agriculture	47.6	28.0	0.4	1.2	6.2	13.9
	Healthcare (social welfare)	27.6	28.8	14.3	6.5	6.1	14.9
	Education	34.7	22.3	19.4	8.8	5.6	8.2
	Arts/Culture	56.1	12.8	13.9	6.6	0.7	8.6
	Infrastructure/Technology	23.6	11.3	14.0	8.6	19.9	19.9
	Environment	15.1	7.5	3.5	2.9	48.5	20.9
	Foreign affairs	65.1	9.2	13.6	7.2	2.7	1.3
	Northern Ireland	47.5	10.8	2.2	25.8	1.4	1.4
Process	Campaigning	43.9	22.0	9.7	5.1	5.1	10.3
	Polls/Horserace	35.3	21.0	13.6	7.1	8.2	9.7
	Leadership	40.4	18.9	6.7	4.4	5.5	21.2
	Political ethics	76.8	5.5	3.3	0.6	2.7	10.3
	Non-political	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	Election	41.7	17.3	10.2	6.3	6.6	7.6
	N	123,435	53,709	27,775	15,444	16,975	30,647

The Greens were over-represented in the coverage of infrastructure and technology and environment. Almost the same amount of lines coded for the infrastructure and technology policy dimensions mentioned Fianna Fáil as the much smaller Greens. In the case of environment the Greens were clearly ahead of the pack, commanding 48.5

percent of the coverage of that policy dimension. This should not come as a surprise, though, as environment was the Greens' core message.

We have already seen that the smaller parties (with the exception of Progressive Democrats) must have found it difficult to compete with the juggernaut of Fianna Fáil's press coverage. Not only did it have the biggest proportion mentioning it in the newspapers, it also was the leader in a number of policy dimension categories. Fine Gael received more coverage than Fianna Fáil only in two categories: social welfare and justice. Although this could be considered a relative success for the opposition party, it could also be seen as a sign of what an impossible task it was to try and match the governing party in terms of media visibility.

6.6 Tone of the campaign

6.6.1 Drowning in the sea of neutrality

Our exploration of the media agenda during the 2007 Irish general election has so far included the overview of the news coverage bias and the analysis of the campaign's main issues. We have observed that the share of policy reporting diminished in 2007, compared to 2002; Progressive Democrats and their leader Michael McDowell were once again over-represented in the media and that political ethics were one of the issues to which mass media paid a lot of attention. We have also noted that being the governing party brought benefits in terms of overall media visibility.

It was also mentioned earlier on in this chapter that political actors' prominence in the media is one of the measures which could be employed to look at the role newspapers and TV news play during political campaign. The following part looks at the particular tone of newspaper coverage. Were the opinion and editorial pieces on the

campaign favourable, neutral or openly negative towards the main parties and their leaders?

The dataset used for this study contains measures of the tone of the coverage for all the text lines from articles clearly marked as opinion, analysis or editorial. The scores can range from +1.00, which means that all statements about a party or its leader were positive, to -1.00, in which case all statements were negative and 0.00, when the sentiment expressed by the newspaper is neutral.

Examining the op-ed articles and content analysing them in terms of tone is especially useful given the special position such pieces have among other texts published in newspapers. They not only represent closely the political leanings of a publication, but it is also often argued that they are indeed more powerful than “ordinary” articles. Editorial and comment pieces might be read by a small number of people, but this group might consist of opinion-makers, who can pass the commentators’ views further on to their friends and family. British journalist and author Peter York said: “Educated middle-class people are fantastically impressionable. I believe I could change the minds of most of them with a column, or a dinner party conversation” (Hobsbawm and Lloyd 2008: 14). In their report into the influence of commentators, entitled *The Power of the Commentariat*, Hobsbawm and Lloyd list several features of newspaper opinion pieces, among them setting the agenda. They argue that:

All journalism runs on a series of meetings, at which ideas for stories are put up, discussed, dismissed or pursued. Many of these are reportage of the main events of the day, which the news outlet believes it should cover; others are the result of investigations by reporters; others will be analyses or features. All, however, especially the latter, work within a framework constructed, in part, by commentators who shape the way in which their fellows see the world. (Hobsbawm and Lloyd 2008: 20).

Journalists themselves have echoed this observation. In the report mentioned above we find a quote from Mick Fealty, who is also known as the man behind Slugger O'Toole – a blog about politics in Northern Ireland. He said that “a Belfast news editor once told me that I was setting the agenda every day in Northern Ireland. Yes, the commentariat is powerful. Commentators can amplify what news journalists are reporting” (Hobsbawm and Lloyd 2008: 20).

In 2002, Brandenburg found that overall the general sentiment of Irish newspapers towards parties and leaders was negative; 42 percent of all statements about parties were coded as unfavourable in tone. Only eight percent of the statements were positive and the remaining 50 percent neutral. He argued that “if a persistent bias exists in Irish campaign reporting, it amounts to general anti-politics bias” (2005: 312). The situation was different five years later.

In 2007 we found that in general the media coverage of the campaign was tame and on average 80 percent of the parties' treatment was neutral. There were two exceptions to this: Sinn Féin and the Progressive Democrats; a third of the opinion pieces written about them were negative in tone. The two parties in question had also the highest negative mean scores of the tone treatment: -0.34 for Sinn Féin and -0.27 for Progressive Democrats (Table 13).

Table 6-13 Average mean scores of tone of opinion and editorial pieces about parties published in Irish newspapers in May 2007.

	Irish Times	Irish Independent	Irish Examiner	Evening Herald	Irish Sun	Irish Star	Total
Fianna Fáil	-0.19	0.1	-0.04	-0.04	-0.35	-0.39	-0.12
Fine Gael	0.4	-0.6	-0.4	-0.6	-0.1	-0.58	-0.3
Labour	0.01	-0.03	0.03	0	0	0.01	0
PDs	-0.27	-0.17	-0.1	-0.35	-0.08	-0.8	-0.27
Green Party	0.03	0.03	-0.11	0		0	-0.02
Sinn Féin	-0.42	-0.24	-0.46	-0.22		0	-0.34
Others	0.04	0.11	0			0	0.03
Independent	0.1	-0.02	0	0		0	0.02
Average	-0.14	-0.1	-0.07	-0.09	-0.29	-0.61	-0.12

The attention given to the parties was also disproportionate with almost 58.7 percent of the opinion and comment lines given to Fianna Fáil and less than 16 percent to Fine Gael. The mean score of the tone of the coverage devoted to Fianna Fáil was at -0.12. The newspapers were less critical of Fine Gael with an overall mean score for the commentary about the party at -0.03. There was twice as much commentary about the Progressive Democrats, than about Labour (11.6 and 6.5 percent respectively). Especially interesting is the difference in the negative/neutral/positive distribution between 2002 and 2007. Whereas in 2002 there were many cases in which there was an equal amount of negative and neutral coverage, with little positive commentary, in 2007, we find the share of neutral treatment of all parties had risen significantly. There were similarities between the two campaigns too, as in 2002 Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats received disproportionate amounts of opinion coverage

corresponding to the figures for 2007. In fact all percentages of parties' share of commentary seem very similar, apart from the Independents who got quite some substantial space in editorials and commentary in 2002 but virtually none in 2007.

6.6.2 It's personality, stupid!

The 2007 Irish election campaign was much more personalized than in 2002, or the UK general election of 2005. We have already shown that leaders played a crucial role in the media coverage of their parties. This was also true when we look at the opinion/comment section of the dataset. Commentary about Fianna Fáil was primarily about Bertie Ahern – almost three quarters of all opinion lines concerning the governing party mentioned its leader too. The mean tone of the commentary about Ahern was only slightly negative at -0.10 (Table 14). One of the more surprising findings of this study is connected with the tone of the treatment of Fianna Fáil and Ahern. We have already discussed the fact that the coverage of the political ethics policy dimension (and the sleaze issue within that category) was more prominent in 2007 than in 2002 and concerned mainly Ahern. This was because of the media discussions and analyses of aforementioned 'Bertiegate'. Although often superficial and usually tongue-in-cheek, nicknames might characterize a person correctly. Bertie Ahern has been nicknamed the Teflon Taoiseach, as negative comments about him never seemed to stick. The Irish general election in May 2007 and its media coverage was yet another proof of this.

The opposite was true for Michael McDowell of the Progressive Democrats – 70 percent of all criticism directed at the party was directed personally at him. Only 40 percent of the party's positive treatment mentioned McDowell. The overall mean score of the tone of the commentary about McDowell was -0.34, which was one the highest figures for all the leaders. The Irish Daily Star had the highest negative mean score of -0.94 for their opinion articles about Michael McDowell.

Table 6-14 Mean bias scores for the opinion and editorial newspaper content about leaders. Ireland 2007. Pearson Chi-Square = 138,8178 (df = 10); Sig. (2-sided) = .000.

	Irish Times	Irish Independent	Irish Examiner	Evening Herald	Irish Sun	Irish Star	Total
Bertie Ahern	-0.18	-0.1	-0.01	-0.04	-0.4	-0.22	-0.1
Enda Kenny	0.05	-0.06	-0.02	-0.1	-0.16	-0.47	-0.02
Pat Rabbitte	0.01	0.02	0.12	0		0.02	0.03
Michael McDowell	-0.33	-0.29	-0.06	-0.45	-0.2	-0.94	-0.34
Trevor Sargent	-0.01	-0.04	-0.15	0		0	-0.07
Gerry Adams	-0.8	-0.38	-0.16	-0.21		0	-0.4
Average	-0.16	-0.1	-0.02	-0.07	-0.35	-0.67	-0.11

Another leader who did not seem to have any friends in the mass media was Sinn Féin's Gerry Adams. He was the only leader with no positive coverage associated with him whatsoever and the mean score of his treatment was -0.40. Half of the negative commentary about Sinn Féin was about Adams, though. There were also leaders who did not stir media's interest at all, be it in a positive or a negative way. While all the other leaders were mentioned in significant portions of opinion content about their parties, Trevor Sargent of the Greens received very little coverage. Only a quarter of all lines commenting on his party were also about him and he only accounted for around four percent of anything positive written about his party. Although of little consolation to him personally, this was a slight improvement on the 2002 figures, when he was not mentioned by name once in editorial or opinion pieces (Brandenburg 2005: 314). Sargent might not have had such a detailed data about the coverage he got, but he must have felt he was not up to the job and he resigned after the general election. The only

leader with a positive mean score (a rather unimpressive +0.03) for the opinion pieces written about him in 2007 was Pat Rabbitte of Labour.

We can conclude that with two thirds of all opinion content directly aimed at leaders, the newspaper coverage of the 2007 election campaign was more personalized than in 2002, when 43 percent of the commentary was focused on party leaders. Nevertheless the overall mean score of the tone for all the opinion pieces was negative at -0.11.

6.6.3 Who disliked whom and why?

Earlier on in this chapter we investigated the possibility of a partisan bias in the Irish media coverage of the 2007 election campaign. We looked at the share of the campaign news coverage received by the main parties and their leaders. We observed that for some parties the amount of coverage was disproportionate to their shares of seats in the 2002 Dáil. In the section above we examined overall tone of the opinion coverage in the newspapers during the period in question. In the following part we shall focus on the tone of opinion in particular newspapers and also on the differences between the campaign in 2002 and 2007. This will help us to further our argument about the possible existence of a partisan bias in Irish media.

Sinn Féin and the Progressive Democrats were at the receiving end of the harshest treatment by almost all the newspapers in 2007. When we look at the mean scores for the tone of statement (Table 13), we can see that all three broadsheet newspapers were negative in their comments about Gerry Adams' party. For one of the newspapers – *Irish Examiner* – this represented a u-turn when compared with their stance in 2002. Back then, they were the only ones to write positively about Sinn Féin. The Cork paper was also the only paper to publish strongly positive opinion pieces about Labour and the independent candidates. This positive attitude almost disappeared five years later, with

only a handful of favourable statements about Labour and with a lower mean score than in 2002.

There was no change in the tone of the treatment of the Progressive Democrats. They were uniformly criticised in 2002 and this continued in 2007. The *Irish Daily Star* was the harshest in their evaluation of the coalition party, with a mean score of their opinion coverage for the Progressive Democrats at -0.8. Out of the three broadsheets, the *Irish Times* was the most severe in their views on the Progressive Democrats with the negative mean score of -0.27.

We can also see that in 2007 the *Irish Times* wrote in a positive way about the opposition parties: Fine Gael, Labour and the Greens. In fact they were the only newspaper in the dataset to present a favourable stance towards Fine Gael, which might give us the grounds to say that it was some form of an endorsement. Fine Gael was, however, criticised in all the other newspapers analysed for this study; especially in the *Irish Daily Star*. The opinion and editorial pieces which mentioned the party in this tabloid had the negative mean score of -0.58.

Fianna Fáil had the largest share of the campaign news coverage, but when it came to the tone of the opinion pieces, overall they were negative towards the governing party. The mean scores of Fianna Fáil's treatment for all the newspapers are negative and once again the tabloids (the *Irish Sun* and the *Irish Daily Star*) were the most vitriolic in their assessment.

Almost all newspapers stayed neutral or wrote in a slightly positive way about Labour in 2007. The *Irish Times* and the *Irish Examiner* were the most positive in their commentary about Pat Rabbitte's party, while the *Irish Independent* was the only

exception with the mean score of their Labour opinion coverage at -0.03. It was also the newspaper, which commented the most on Labour.

Tabloid newspapers had relatively few lines coded as commentary, compared to their broadsheet rivals. Also they focused almost exclusively on the three main parties: Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Progressive Democrats. They were also less balanced in their views. For example, mean scores for the *Irish Daily Star* were at -0.58 for their treatment of Fine Gael and -0.80 for their commentary about Progressive Democrats. The overall mean score for their commentary pieces was -0.61, which would confirm an assumption that views expressed in tabloid opinion pieces can be of a more extreme nature.

6.7 Voters' campaign

Classic agenda setting studies attempted to measure the strength of a relationship between media agenda and the public agenda. Researchers have been interested in media effects since the very beginning of political communication studies. This study also explored the possibility of a relationship between the media and public agendas in the context of the general election in the United Kingdom in 2005 in Chapter 5.

In the Irish case, the focus of our investigation so far has been on the news media campaign and particularly on the analysis of the content of newspaper and TV campaign coverage. In the last part of this chapter, we shall explore the campaign from the voters' perspective. Firstly, we will analyse the issues on the public agenda in Ireland at the time of the general election in 2007. Secondly, we shall look into what media were popular among the voters and examine how much trust Irish voters place in them.

6.7.1 Public agenda

In Chapter 2 we established that the most common (though not without its problems) measure of public agenda is the answer to a survey question about the most important

issue facing the country at a particular time or in a period in the future. This question was included in the Eurobarometer survey 67.2 conducted in Spring 2007. It was also asked by the Irish National Election Study. Table 15 shows all the issues which occupied public opinion in 2007.

Table 6-15 Public agenda according to the Irish National Election Study. MIP column includes percentages of respondents answering the Most Important Issue Facing Ireland question. The 'Personally' column reports the percentages of respondents' personal concerns. In bold: some of the most striking differences. Source: INES.

	MIP	Personally
Crime	18.2	6.5
Northern Ireland	1.0	0.5
Corruption	2.8	0.5
Transport	1.7	6.3
Healthcare	28.3	40.4
Inflation	2.2	1.2
Unemployment	6.4	3.6
Taxation	0.7	2.5
Environment	2.9	3.5
EU	0.7	0.1
Immigration	9.4	0.8
Economy	11.5	5.9
Housing	2.3	3.3
State of politics	1.0	2.4
Don't know	10.7	22.6
N	1069	1326

The issue on top of the list of respondents' concerns, according to all the surveys, was healthcare. The Irish National Election Study asked its respondents two questions to investigate their concerns. One of them was the often used general Most Important

Problem question⁴⁸. The other one was designed to explore issues which were personally important to people⁴⁹. Using these two questions we can address some of the methodological concerns about measuring the public agenda using the traditional MIP questions, which were discussed in the earlier part of this thesis. We distinguish between the contextual and personal salience of issues. It has been argued that when asked the MIP question, people respond by relying on information from the media or the elite debates (Zaller 1992; Alvarez and Brehm 2002; Johns 2008). Wlezien (2005) highlights the difference between the “what seems to matter to people at the moment” and the “what matters to me” approach of respondents, which influences our interpretation of survey results. Johns (2008) argues that “personal salience and contextual salience are not only theoretically distinct but also likely to diverge significantly in practice.” The section below will explore such an assertion.

Examining the two public agendas which emerge from the analysis of results of the INES survey, we observe that the issues can be put into two distinct groups. First, we have a group of issues, which were prominent on the general, contextual public agenda, measured using the MIP questions, but appeared less important on the agenda of issues important to respondents personally. Second, we see a smaller group of issues, which were important for people personally, but were considered as less important for Ireland in general.

Crime was reported as the most important problem facing Ireland by 18.2 percent of respondents, while 6.5 percent regarded it as an issue important to them personally.

⁴⁸ The full wording of the question was: What do you think is the most important political problem facing Ireland today?

⁴⁹ The full wording of the question was: What has been the issue most important to you personally in this election?

Only 0.8 percent of those surveyed by INES thought that immigration was important for them personally, but at the same time 9.4 percent reported it as the issue most important for Ireland. The public opinion also differed on its stance towards economy: 11.5 percent of people thought it was the most important issue facing Ireland, but it was of personal importance to 5.9 percent of them.

In the second group we gathered issues which were important for people personally, but considered less so for the country in general. Healthcare was mentioned as the personally most important issue by 40.4 percent of respondents, compared to 28.3 percent who cited it as the most important problem facing Ireland. Transport was personally important to 6.3 percent of those surveyed, but regarded as an important problem in general by 1.7 percent. We also note that it was easier for people to name the most important problems facing Ireland, than the issues personally important for them. 22.6 percent answered “Don’t know” to the personal question and 10.7 percent gave that answer to the MIP question.

We can also look at the differences between the proportions of answers to the two public opinion questions organized by the newspaper read regularly by respondent (Table 16). We observe similar differences as outlined in the section above. Across different titles, both broadsheet and tabloid, we observe that for some issues the proportion of people who thought it was the most important problem and the percentage of those who thought it was the most important issue for them personally, differs quite significantly. For example, we note that for the *Irish Star* readers the issue of crime seems to be regarded as a national problem (20 percent chose it as their answer to the MIP question), but not an issue to them personally (4.4 percent chose crime as their answer to the MIIP question). We also note that crime was quite prominent within the issue-related campaign coverage published by the *Star* with 12.8 percent of standardised

lines devoted to that issue in May 2007. Looking at the readers of the *Irish Examiner*, we see that for 11.8 percent of them transport was the most important issue for them personally, while 3.8 percent of the paper's readers chose it as the most important problem facing Ireland. The proportion of the *Irish Examiner* readers who indicated that transport was the issue important for them personally was the largest out of all newspapers analysed. This newspaper also wrote the most about transport out of all broadsheet newspapers during the 2007 election campaign. We find that almost half of the lines published in the Irish newspapers in May 2007 about transport were printed in the *Examiner*.

These results offer a glimpse into diverging public agenda, which might be created as a result of different cues. We have already discussed that, when asked the MIP question, people might rely on media cues and not necessarily reveal what is important to them. Looking at our results we observe that indeed there were some significant differences. Issues which people had a chance of having a more direct impact on people's lives (healthcare, transport) were more prominent on the personal agenda than on the general one. On the other hand, issues of a more general nature (crime, immigration, economy) were considered to be important problems for the country. We also note the different wording of the two questions, which has been suggested to be of importance (Wlezien and Norris 2005; Wlezien 2005). By using the word *problem*, the MIP question might encourage a contextual interpretation. The word *issue*, however, invites a more personal interpretation (Johns 2008).

Table 6-16 Answers to the Most Important Problem question (MIP) and Most Important Issue to you Personally (MIIP) question organised by newspaper read regularly to get political information. In bold: some of the comparisons. Source: INES. For MIP: Pearson Chi-Square = 65,0308 (df = 56); Sig (2-sided) = 0.191. For MIIP: Pearson Chi-Square = 96,1083 (df = 60); Sig. (2-sided) = 0.002.

	Irish Times		Irish Independent		Irish Examiner		Irish Star		Evening Herald		None of them	
	MIP	MIIP	MIP	MIIP	MIP	MIIP	MIP	MIIP	MIP	MIIP	MIP	MIIP
Crime	15.0	7.1	18.2	7.6	15.1	5.5	20.0	4.4	25.8	14.7	19.4	5.7
Northern Ireland	0.9	0.4	1.0	0.4		0.9	1.0		1.1	1.0	0.9	0.9
Corruption	3.7	1.1	4.1	0.4	2.8	1.8	3.0		3.2	1.0	2.4	0.4
Transport	4.1	9.4	1.4	5.7	3.8	11.8	3.0	5.3	3.2	5.9		7.5
Healthcare	26.9	39.3	29.5	46.6	25.5	44.5	29.0	51.3	27.9	49.0	28.9	47.6
Inflation	1.8	1.9	1.7	1.1	5.7	1.8	3.0	2.7	2.2		1.9	0.4
Unemployment	2.7	1.5	3.8	3.9	9.4	4.5	6.0	5.3	3.2	1.0	7.6	5.7
Taxation	0.9	4.1	0.7	3.7		3.6		0.9		2.9	0.9	0.9
Environment	5.5	6.4	3.8	2.8	1.9	3.6	2.0	2.7	4.3	3.9	2.4	3.5
EU	1.8	0.4	0.7	0.2								0.5
Immigration	11.0	0.4	9.6	0.7	7.5	0.9	9.0	2.7	5.4	2.9	10.4	
Economy	14.6	9.4	13.7	8.7	15.1	4.5	8.0	4.4	8.6	1.0	7.6	4.4
Housing	2.3	3.0	1.9	3.7	0.9	0.9	1.0	2.7	2.2	3.9	1.9	4.8
State of politics	1.8	2.6	1.2	2.4		3.6		2.7	1.1	1.0	0.5	2.6
Don't Know	6.8	13.1	8.6	12.0	12.3	11.8	15.0	15.0	11.8	10.8	14.7	15.4
N	219	267	417	459	106	110	100	113	93	102	211	227

To establish whether the reported answers to the MIP and the MIIP questions differed by newspaper read, we looked at the Pearson chi-square tests (reported in the caption for Table 6-16). We observe that for the relationship between the answers to the MIP question and the newspaper read the chi-square statistic is not significant. For the relationship between the answers to the MIIP questions and the newspaper read the

statistic is significant. We conclude that there might be a possibility of a relationship between the newspaper one reads and the answers to the MIIP question.

6.7.2 Public and media agendas

The discussion on the differences between contextual and personal interpretations of the responses to the MIP question touched on the importance of the media. This relationship and transfer of issue salience between the media and public agenda has been the cornerstone of agenda setting research since the early 1970s. Table 17 brings together the top five issues on public agenda and media agenda in Ireland and in the UK.

Table 6-17 Top five issues on public and media agenda in Ireland and in the United Kingdom. Source: INES and Brandenburg 2005.

Ranking	MIP	Personal	Media 2007	Media 2002	UK 2005
1	Healthcare	Healthcare	Healthcare	Healthcare	Economy
2	Crime	Crime	Economy	Economy	Iraq
3	Economy	Transport	Transport	Crime	Healthcare
4	Immigration	Economy	Crime	Education	Immigration
5	Unemployment	Unemployment	Education	Transport	Crime

We can see that many of the same issues appear on different agendas, but we also observe some interesting differences. We have already discussed the differences between the contextual and personal public agendas. There were also differences in the ranking of issues between the contextual public agenda and media one. Some of the issues considered by the public as the most important problems facing Ireland and the ones prominent on the media agenda are the same, but the order of priorities is slightly different. Healthcare is on top of both lists, in fact healthcare is the top issue on all

agendas in Ireland. Crime was considered to be the second most important problem generally for Ireland and personally for the people asked by the INES survey, but it was less prominent in the media in 2007. Also, the fourth most frequently problem cited by the public was immigration was present in the media coverage, but not to such a degree. The Eurobarometer survey conducted in Spring 2007 reported that housing was one of the concerns of the Irish public opinion. The content analysis for this study had a special category for this issue, but looking at the frequency table for all issues, we note that only 0.8 percent of all campaign-related newspaper text lines mentioned this particular subject. Citizens of other EU countries did not think the housing issue as important as the Irish, with only eight percent of respondents throughout the EU indicating this as the most important issue.

There were other significant discordances between the agenda of the public and the media one. Immigration was another issue on the public agenda in 2007, which received little media coverage. Out of all Eurobarometer respondents asked about the most important issue facing Ireland in the following 12 months, 12 percent indicated immigration (compared to 15 percent throughout the EU). This was also an important problem facing Ireland according to INES respondents (indicated by 9.4 percent). We note, however, that the campaign-related content in the Irish newspapers did not reflect this, as only 0.3 percent of all the coded text lines referred to the issue mentioned above.

In summation, comparison of the issue ranking of the public agendas and the media agenda shows that most of the top five issues are the same, but at the same time we can observe some differences. Crime was cited more frequently by the public opinion as an important problem and issue in 2007 than by the media. Also the public seemed to have regarded immigration and housing as pressing issues, while the media did not feature those topics quite so prominently. Education was the fifth most prominent issues in the

campaign-related issue coverage in Irish newspapers in May 2007, but it was not considered important by public opinion. Reading a particular newspaper might result in a different public agenda for its readers. To test this, we looked at the relationship between the newspaper agenda and the agenda of its readers across eight different issues. For the *Irish Times* we observe a moderate degree of correlation between the agendas with the Pearson's correlation of 0.4320. For the *Irish Independent* the degree of correlation was lower with the Pearson's correlation coefficient of 0.2632 and for the *Irish Examiner* the correlation coefficient was the highest at 0.4854.

The preceding paragraphs attempted to compare the two agendas in order to offer a fuller and more detailed picture of various agendas in Ireland in the first half of 2007. In the following part, we will look at the relationship between Irish voters and the media, by analyzing the data collected by the Irish National Election Study.

6.7.3 Where do voters get their political information from?

So far in this chapter we have examined the role of the media campaign coverage during the 2007 general election in Ireland. The media do not exist in a vacuum, however, and their relationship with the voters is of crucial importance to further our understanding of the relationship between the mass media and the public during elections. In 2007 the Irish National Election Study asked for the first time a number of questions related to voters' media habits. We can therefore look beyond readership, circulation and viewership figures, and see what the voters read and watch and whom they trust.

We have established earlier on in this chapter that for a small country with a population of only around four million, Ireland has a robust print media market, with seven national newspapers, numerous local papers and a handful of general interest

magazines. The readership figures in Ireland are quite high, but how big is the percentage of people who pick up a newspaper to access political information? And how often do they do it?

Looking at the answers of the respondents to the Irish National Election Study in 2007 (Table 18), we can see that a substantial share of voters – almost 40 percent – reads a newspaper every day of the week; nine percent more listen to national radio news. Local radio news was less popular – slightly less than 35 percent of those who responded to INES questionnaire said they listened to it everyday. Not surprisingly TV was most popular with almost 60 percent of those questioned by INES watching TV news seven times a week.

Table 6-18 Percentages of answers to the INES question: On a scale from 0-7 where 0 means 'Never' and 7 means 'every day' how often do you watch news on TV/read a newspaper/listen to radio/browse on-line for news? Source: INES.

	Newspaper %	TV %	Radio %	Local radio %	Internet %
1 (never)	7.0	1.7	4.2	7.6	14.5
2	7.0	2.6	5.1	8.7	7.8
3	10.4	5.5	4.9	8.4	7.2
4	9.5	4.6	5.9	6.8	7.2
5	7.8	8.6	10.1	9.5	6.7
6	6.8	7.2	6.1	5.4	4.6
7 (every day)	39.3	59	49.0	34.8	12.0
Don't know	0.1	0.2	0.6	0.9	7.1
Did not answer	11.6	10.2	13.7	17.5	32.5
N	1343	1410	1254	1107	563

For all the discussions about the rising importance of the Internet, both in scholarly work and in mainstream media, examining the answers to the question about Irish voters' Internet usage offers a bit of a surprise. Only 12 percent browsed on-line for news seven times a week and a substantive 32.5 percent did not answer or deemed the question not applicable to them. Here level of education played an important role and the more educated respondents got, the more often they used the World Wide Web to get the news.

Labour voters seem to have the healthiest paper-reading habit, with 44 percent of them reading a copy seven times a week. Those voting for the Green Party read newspapers less frequently; only a quarter of them do so every day. Increase in age meant an increase in the share of people reading a paper every day. Interestingly, level of education had little bearing on how often the respondents read a newspaper.

Which newspapers were the most popular for getting political information from? Table 19 shows the share of people who get their political information from one of the six daily newspapers included in the INES questionnaire.

Table 6-19 Percentages of INES respondents, who answered the question: Do you regularly use 'name of a newspaper' for political information? Source: INES.

	Irish Times	Irish Independent	Irish Examiner	Irish Star	Evening Herald	Irish Sun	None of them	Other
Regular use	20.3	34.6	8.5	8.2	7.2	4.5	17.7	10.7
N								1435

Out of the three broadsheets, the *Irish Independent* was indicated by 35 percent of those surveyed, the *Irish Times* was favoured by 20 percent of respondents and the *Irish*

Examiner was a source of political information for only eight and a half percent of those asked. The comparison between the proportion of the party coverage within a particular newspaper and the percentage of the voters of said party using such paper for political information is rather inconsistent. For example, the *Irish Times* devoted almost 39 percent of its campaign party coverage to Fianna Fáil, but only 14 percent of those surveyed by the INES used the paper for political information and identified themselves as Fianna Fáil voters. The difference was even more striking for Labour-voting readers of the *Irish Independent*. Labour received only eight percent share of the overall party campaign coverage, but more than 39 percent of Labour voters used the paper for political information. Exploring these differences poses an important question: do Irish voters really choose newspapers consistent with their voting behaviour? This, however, can only be partially answered by looking only at the proportion of the coverage parties received. After all, even though the *Evening Herald* had given the largest share of its party coverage to the Progressive Democrats, we might assume with confidence that this coverage was largely negative in nature. In fact when analysing the opinion pieces published in the *Evening Herald*, which mentioned Progressive Democrats, we note that they had a negative mean score of -0.35, the lowest of all the newspapers analysed. And perhaps that is one of the reasons why Progressive Democrats voters stayed away from the *Herald*: more than 90 percent answered no when asked whether they use it for political information.

Tabloid newspapers, although popular, do not seem to be used by many voters for political information – eight percent of respondents chose the *Irish Daily Star* and only 4.5 percent mentioned the *Irish Sun*. The *Star* was most popular among Fianna Fáil voters and least for those voting for Progressive Democrats. This is somewhat consistent with the coverage given to those parties by the *Irish Star*. It had one of the largest shares

out of all analysed newspapers of campaign coverage devoted to Fianna Fáil (over 55 percent, second only to the *Irish Sun*) and a relatively small share of text referring to the Progressive Democrats.

6.7.4 In media we trust?

In 2006, a major public opinion poll looking into trust in media in ten countries was conducted for the BBC/Reuters and the Media Centre. The research found that on average more people trusted the media than their governments (61 percent vs. 52 percent). Trust in media also increased over time, for example in the UK from 29 percent to 47 percent, when compared with figures for 2002. Such results underline once again the importance of the mass media and their role in people's lives. Trust people place in the media has been recognized as one of the crucial variables by communication research, especially important for media effects (Tsfati, 2003). It is particularly significant when we consider political information. If the voters want to get informed about an election or about political candidates, without trust in the mass media, they might discard the information altogether and turn to other news or opinion sources, such as party literature, candidates themselves or friends and family. Additionally, a trusting relationship between mass media and their consumers, means that readers or listeners, might attach more weight to cues from some media over others. This, however, might be undermined by the fact that voters, quite naturally, might trust news media, which would reflect their political views.

Irish National Election Study also inquired about the trust people have in the mass media. The questionnaire asked: "On a scale from 0-4 where 0 means 'Never trust' and 4 means 'Always trust' how much do you trust political information from the newspapers/radio/TV/the Internet?" Table 20 reports the findings.

Radio and TV were the most trusted media according to the INES findings. Almost 58 percent of respondents scored near the top of the available scale for TV and almost 55 percent for radio. It seems that traditional electronic media are more trusted, at least in Ireland, than their print rivals. There was almost a 20-percentage point difference between the levels of trust in TV or radio and in newspapers (36 percent). The proportion of people who do not trust newspapers at all was also more significant at 12 percent. Sinn Féin voters were the most distrustful of print media: more than a quarter of them answered that they never trust newspapers. This, perhaps, was because of the overwhelmingly negative portrayal their party received in the campaign coverage in May 2007. It could also be argued that the electronic media are dominated by RTÉ, which, as a public broadcaster, is legally obliged to provide an impartial, objective and fair political news coverage. There is no such obligation for the print media, which might display a more partisan take on the news and in their comment pieces. Perhaps this is why the levels of public trust in TV and radio and in newspapers are different.

Table 6-20 Level of trust in various media in Ireland in 2007. Source: INES 2007.

	Newspaper	TV	Radio	Internet
	%	%	%	%
0 (never trust)	12.0	5.2	8.7	43.3
1	10.0	5.9	6.7	3.9
2	39.5	30.0	27.6	15.2
3	27.0	38.7	36.7	8.7
4 (always trust)	8.9	18.8	17.5	3.3
Don't know	2.5	1.4	2.7	25.6
N	1287	1278	1252	1201

The Internet was not only the least popular medium to get political information from, but it was also the least trusted. A significant 43.3 percent of people surveyed by the Irish National Election Study said they never trusted political information found on-line and only 12 percent had a high level of trust in the Internet news. Although one might view these figures as surprising in the context of the importance of the Internet nowadays, we could also look at them from another perspective. When asked about their Internet usage and levels of trust in the medium, it is possible that respondents made a distinction between traditional media brands available on-line (like newspapers or the RTÉ web site) and other news content available on the Internet (blogs, forums, news aggregators). They might have focused their answers on their relationship with these Internet-only media, hence the low levels of trust detected by the INES survey. These observations are consistent with the results of aforementioned survey on trust in media conducted for the BBC in 2006, where Internet blogs were the least trusted news source. According to Edelman Trust Barometer for 2008, trust in blogs in Ireland has declined from 22 percent in 2002 to only 14 percent in 2007. Conversely, in the world of consumer opinion, recent polls suggest that people trust consumer opinions posted on the Internet more than the ones found in magazines or newspapers. In April 2009, Nielsen Global On-Line Consumer Survey found that 70 percent of respondents had some degree of trust in consumer opinions posted on the Internet, while 61 percent trusted the ones from newspapers.

6.8 Conclusions

We could state with some certainty, that if we conducted a survey at the end of 2009 and asked Irish voters about their memories of the 2007 general Election campaign, we could get a wide variety of recollections. After all, memories are of a fickle nature and one should not rely too often on humans' ability to recollect events with confidence. The

portrait of the campaign would also differ depending on the person we would survey. Voters might focus on abandoned campaign pledges, political actors on lost opportunities or mistakes in their election strategies. Journalists and editors might find it difficult to look at their role in the campaign process objectively. They also rarely have quantifiable data on the amount of coverage they devote to parties, leaders and particular political dimensions and issues. Such a survey would surely be of interest, but it would not render an accurate picture of what the 2007 General Election campaign in Ireland was like. In fact it would be a tall task for any study, scientific or journalistic, to give a definite account of a political campaign. Election campaigns are far too complicated and involve too many players with intertwined relationships, to give themselves easily to generalizations and easily drawn conclusions.

This chapter looked at one of the pieces of a puzzle that is a modern political campaign. It attempted to measure the role of the media campaign coverage during the 2007 General Election campaign in Ireland. To this end media data was collected during the time of the campaign and content-analysed afterwards. The study followed methodology employed by Brandenburg in his analyses of the 2002 general election campaign in Ireland and the 2005 campaign in the UK. Thus we were able to make meaningful comparisons of the role of the media campaign coverage across time and also between two countries with different media markets and political systems.

After careful and extensive analysis of the available data, several main findings emerged and they will be summarized below.

No issues

The media coverage of the campaign focused heavily on the process, rather than on policies or issues. Admittedly this is a feature of other campaigns analysed by this study,

but it was more pronounced in 2007 than five years previously or in the UK in 2005. Policies and issues had only 19.6 percent share of the overall campaign coverage in 2007, with the remaining 80 percent of the reporting discussing the campaign itself. Interestingly policies and issues had a larger share of the coverage on TV news than in newspapers. Broadsheets wrote less about issues in 2007 than ever before.

Some parties have more issues than others

The focus of newspaper reporting differed by party. Some of them were written about with more attention given to their policies, while coverage of others dealt mainly with the campaign process. Smaller parties, such as Sinn Féin, Labour and Greens attracted a larger proportion of text lines referring to their policies, than larger ones. Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Progressive Democrats were seen by the media mainly through the prism of their campaign activities.

Personalized campaign

Political scientists have examined the role of a party leader extensively. We have also seen it has grown in importance over the years. European elections have become more like American presidential contests, with a lot of media coverage focusing on party chiefs. We note that this was indeed the case in Ireland in 2007. Almost 40 percent of the campaign coverage analysed for this study mentioned one of the leaders of the six main political parties. Leaders also featured heavily in the coverage of their respective parties. Four of them (Ahern, Kenny, McDowell and Rabbitte) commanded more than a half of campaign related newspaper coverage of their respective parties.

Docile campaign

One of the features of the methodology employed by this study is a possibility of looking at the tone of newspaper campaign coverage. We found that in 2007 an overwhelming

majority of opinion and editorial pieces about the campaign were neutral in tone. This was in contrast with the campaign in 2002 when a larger proportion of such articles was negative. This goes against an initial assumption that a closer race in 2007 would prompt media to take more of a stance.

Political ethics

If we conducted an aforementioned imaginary survey about what people might remember from the 2007 campaign, the issue of Bertie Ahern, his finances and the Mahon Tribunal would surely come up. It was *the* story of the campaign, especially in the first week of it, but staying on the media agenda throughout. The political ethics dimension was the second most discussed in the TV news content analysed for this study. Newspapers wrote more lines about political ethics and sleaze (eight percent of overall campaign-related content) than they did about discussing economy or social welfare. There were, proportionally, twice as many text lines concerning this particular issue in 2007 than in 2002. Rather remarkably it did not seem to affect the opinion about Ahern, who still managed to be an asset to his party, as was discussed in the findings of campaign's tone.

Irish Times anti-government

In this chapter we attempted to discover a possibility of a partisan bias in the Irish media. This was done by looking at the proportion of the coverage received by parties and their leaders and also by analysing the tone of the opinion and editorial content.

In 2002 the analysis of the mean scores of coverage tone showed that the *Irish Times* opined positively only about the Greens and the Independents. In 2007, however, we note that it also took a positive stance towards the opposition parties – Fine Gael, Labour and the Greens – while writing negatively about the government parties: Fianna

Fáil and Progressive Democrats. This enables us to say that the *Irish Times* maintained its anti-government position, while showing a positive leaning towards the rainbow coalition.

Irish Examiner u-turn

The *Irish Examiner* and its campaign coverage stood out from the other broadsheet newspapers in two ways. It was a newspaper with the biggest share of its campaign content devoted to writing about policies and issues. The analysis of the tone of its opinion and editorial content also showed that five years after the 2002 election, it changed its stance on some of the parties. In 2002 it was the only newspaper with a (very modest) positive mean score for the opinion pieces it wrote about Sinn Féin. In 2007, this was no longer the case and the Cork paper seemed to be the harshest critic of Gerry Adams' party.

More issues on TV

A common assumption would be to expect broadsheet newspapers to assign a larger portion of their campaign coverage to the discussion of policies and issues. TV news programmes with their need for up-to-the minute news coverage, would not be expected to spend too much of their airtime on issues. This assumption was proved wrong by this study, as in 2007 one found, proportionally, more issue content while watching the news on RTÉ One or on TV3, than by reading newspapers. Print media referred to policies and issues in slightly more than 19 percent of their campaign coverage, while on TV this figure was 32 percent.

Media and public agendas at odds?

The main aim of this chapter was to carefully examine the role of media agenda during the general election campaign of 2007. To add to that picture, we have also looked at

the public agenda, using the findings of the Eurobarometer public opinion survey conducted in Spring 2007. The main concern both in the media coverage and for the public was healthcare. When one looks beyond the top spot, a comparison of the order of the priorities in the media and according to the public revealed some interesting differences. The public was more preoccupied with crime than the media, but less with the state of the economy. While the papers and TV news spoke a lot about the economy, the public thought rising prices and inflation were the most important problems facing Ireland in the following 12 months. Also, a significant proportion of the public opinion cited issues, which did not make an impact on the media agenda; for example 15 percent of the public thought the immigration was one of the two most important problems facing Ireland, while the newspaper campaign coverage devoted only 0.3 percent of overall text to this issue.

It is important to note that the differences between the media and the public agenda might be a result of the selection of stories for the media sample. This study focused on the election-related news stories and looked at the campaign agenda in the mass media. Newspaper readers and TV viewers are exposed and can consume a more varied mix of news and topics. That might be one reason why, for example, crime appeared high on the public agenda, while it did not make such an impact on the news agenda.

* * *

This chapter attempted to provide quantifiable measures of the role of the news media coverage during the General Election campaign in Ireland in 2007. Using carefully and extensively analysed media data, we arrived at general measures of coverage bias, media agenda and the tone of the campaign. These were supplemented by a more in-depth research into, among others, the portrayal of parties and leaders and

main issues of the campaign. The findings were compared with those from the Irish general election in 2002, which helped us to highlight changes in the campaign coverage in Ireland and also further our understanding of what constitutes media agenda in Ireland during major political campaigns.

In the following chapters we shall look at the 2007 campaign and the media agenda from two different angles. We will examine other possible methods of content analysis, such as the Internet media databases. We will also look where media practitioners themselves think they fit in the media agenda setting puzzle.

Chapter 7

Human versus machine

Alternative ways of measuring media and public agendas

7 Human versus machine

Alternative ways of measuring media and public agendas

Introduction

One of the crucial problems of agenda setting research is the methodology used for measuring media and public agendas. Traditionally media agenda has been examined by means of content analysis, also employed in this thesis. Meaning is quantified and the variable is operationalized as the number of a unit of observation (for example a single article, headline or a line of text). Many agenda setting studies use manual content analysis conducted by an expert coder or a group of media researchers. This was also the case for the Irish media data gathered and analysed in this research. There are several problems with manual content analysis, but the main one is the time it requires to code a sufficient amount of material. It is especially problematic for longitudinal studies.

Measuring the public agenda throws up further methodological questions. Are we, by asking the Most Important Problem question⁵⁰, really capturing the public opinion? The public's response might rely heavily on the most recent cues from the media and therefore, the agenda setting effects could be a part of the MIP measure. We argue that such a measure sees the public as passive and we agree with Trumbo (1995) that more dynamic measures capturing a more active audience should be developed.

⁵⁰ The exact wording of the question by Gallup is: "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?"

The aim of this chapter is to address some of these concerns by exploring the use of alternative research tools to measure the media agenda and the public one. Firstly, it suggests that using the volume of Internet searches on Google could be used to measure the public agenda. We argue that it could help to capture the opinions of the more active media audience. We examine the volume of Internet searches for key, pre-defined terms in Ireland in 2007 and in the United Kingdom in 2005.

The second part of this chapter focuses on measuring the media agenda using an Internet-based media database: Factiva from DowJones. This enables us to draw some tentative conclusions about the possibility of the use of such methods in future research. We compare some of the characteristics of the Irish news media agenda obtained from the manual content analysis with the patterns emerging from the examination of the media content using Factiva.

The chapter finishes with conclusions and a short discussion and examples of the possible future methods of measuring the agendas.

7.1 Public Agenda

Measuring the public agenda is one of the important problems of agenda setting research. Traditionally it has been determined by using the results of public opinion surveys and specifically, the answers to the MIP question. This approach, however, has come to be viewed as problematic. Are we really capturing the public sentiment by using the answers to the MIP questions or are the respondents just reflecting on what they think they *should* see as an important problem. Funkhouser (1973) observes “the only way that people would estimate the most important problem *facing America* would be to take their cues from the media.” Therefore, their answers could indicate not their own agenda of important problems facing the country but just a reflection of the media

reality surrounding them. Agenda setting research has been successful in showing that it is indeed the latter case. Hundreds of academic articles have shown the positive correlation between the media agenda and the public one. This thesis too followed the traditional research methodology associated with agenda setting studies. But Funkhouser goes on to say “The correspondence between news articles and public opinion (...) may be nothing more than the public's regurgitating back to the pollster what is currently in the news, with little or no relationship to what the respondent himself feels is important.”

Habermas also observes problems with the concept of the public opinion. He observes:

Although objectively greater demands are placed on [public opinion], it operates less as a public opinion giving a rational foundation to the exercise of political and social authority, the more it is generated for the purpose of an abstract vote that amounts to no more than an act of acclamation within a public sphere temporarily manufactured for show or manipulation” (Habermas 1991: 222).

In the following section Google Insights - an Internet analytics tool - is employed to look at the public agenda during the 2007 general election campaign in Ireland. We also evaluate its usefulness in assessing the public agenda.

7.1.1 Public agenda in the age of Google

Google search engine has become *the* success story of the Internet and, arguably, the defining technological development of the 21st century. With the amount of information available on the World Wide Web, the ability to find what is of interest to us is crucial. Google is the leading search engine globally, but it is also a media organization thanks to its Google News aggregator. It collates the news from various sources and enables

users to either specifically search for them (by choosing the news tab on the main search web site) or by presenting the news results alongside the ordinary answers to users' queries. Therefore Google has become, for many, not only their starting point for any Internet-related question or task, but also a major provider of news. If one of the main problems with the MIP question is that it puts the respondents into a passive mode (what was described by Funkhouser above as "regurgitating back (...) what is currently in the news") how could we measure the public opinion from a more active perspective. We treat the act of an Internet search as a manifestation of personal interest in a particular issue. By typing a term or a question into the search engine we actively seek services, answers or knowledge. It shows that such a query is sufficiently important to us to engage in a pursuit of more information about it. We argue that looking at the volume of Google searches on particular items could help the agenda setting research to explore a different method of measuring the public agenda. This idea is quite different from the traditional way of measuring public opinion: the latter looks at answers while the former uses people's questions to measure the public agenda.

7.1.2 Google Insights for Search

Google Insights for Search is a search engine which helps to find out the search volume for a particular item. According to Google "the numbers on the graphs reflect how many searches have been done for a particular term, relative to the total number of searches done on Google over time." The data is normalized and presented on a scale from 0 to 100. On a basic level it operates in the same way as any other Internet search tool: one inputs the requested search term and the engine provides the answer. Google Insights for Search, however, offers a number of additional features, amongst them graphs, categories, top and rising searches and geographical data pertaining to our query. Most importantly the results are of a search volume for our item. This means

that Google Insights looks at the number of worldwide searches for our query, relative to the total number of global searches over time. The tool offers an opportunity to examine not only what the people are searching for, but also when, where and what the most popular search terms were.

To introduce our analysis of the search volumes for selected items during general election campaigns in Ireland in 2007 and in the UK in 2005, let us illustrate how Google Insights work with a simple example. By typing the term “voting” into the search window we obtain results as shown in Figure 1.

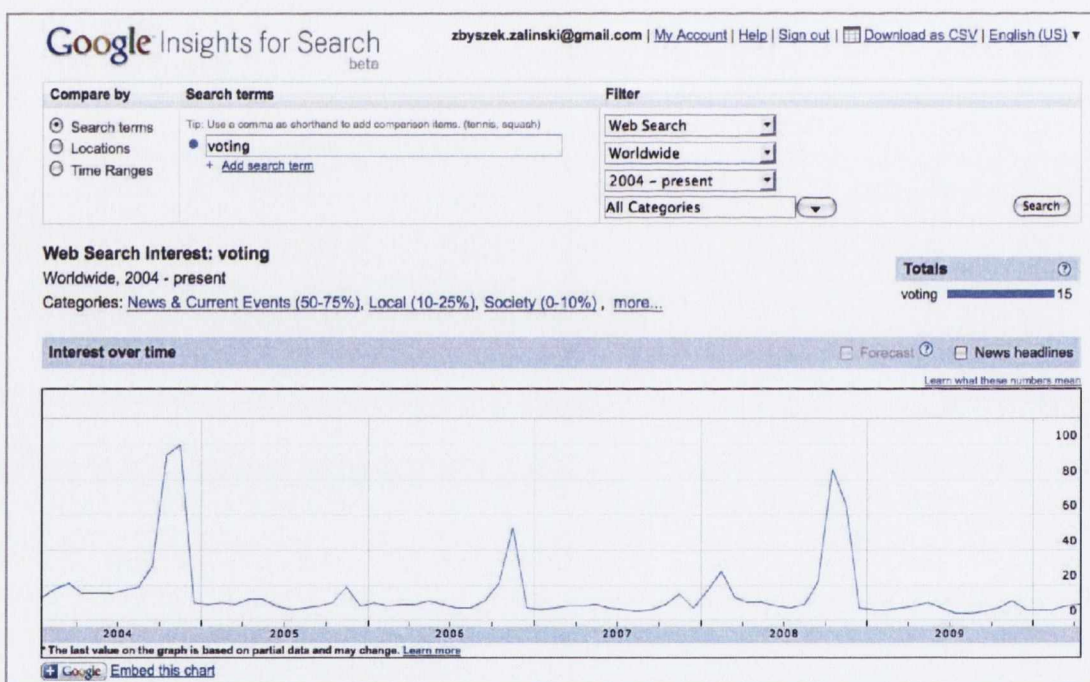


Figure 7-1: Search volume for the term “voting.” Source” Google Insights for Search.

We can clearly see three spikes in the number of Google searches for the term. The first one in October 2004, the second in November 2006 and the last one in November 2008. The visible rise in the number of people interested in finding more about voting corresponds with two presidential elections and the 2006 elections to the American Congress. We do not argue that voting became the most important problem facing the United States at those times, but one could surmise that it was sufficiently important for

enough individuals to propel it to the top of Google searches. This could mean at these occasions, the issue which was important for them centred around voting. This is, perhaps, unsurprising, as we selected the search term ourselves and it is to be expected that the interest in voting would be higher during election campaigns. If we examine the top Google searches in 2008 we observe that it was the state of the economy that people were interested in. The five searches with the biggest volume in the US were: the financial crisis, depression, bailout, mortgage crisis and Wall Street. These results correspond well with the public opinion data gathered by Gallup in November 2008 (Gallup 2008). Asked what the most important problem facing their country was, the state of the economy was indicated by 58 percent of Americans.

For the analysis of Google search volumes in the United Kingdom in 2005 and in Ireland in 2007, we selected a number of items based both on the public opinion data available and on the media agenda, which emerged from our content analysis.

7.2 Searching for... British public and Google searches in 2005

The public opinion panel data gathered by the British Election Study during the 2005 general election campaign in the UK indicated that the top five issues in March 2005 were: asylum seekers, the National Health Service, law and order and the war in Iraq. The data let us track the changes which occurred in the public opinion after the campaign. The issue of asylum seekers went down on the public agenda, while concern about immigration rose. Concern about the European Union also rose and so did the proportion of respondents who mentioned law and order. We will look at the search volume for these issues which the public changed its opinion about the most: asylum seekers, immigration, law and order, NHS and the European Union. For our analysis we will look at the volume of searches for these items between January and December

2005. The longer time frame will help us to present a bigger picture of the over-time trends.

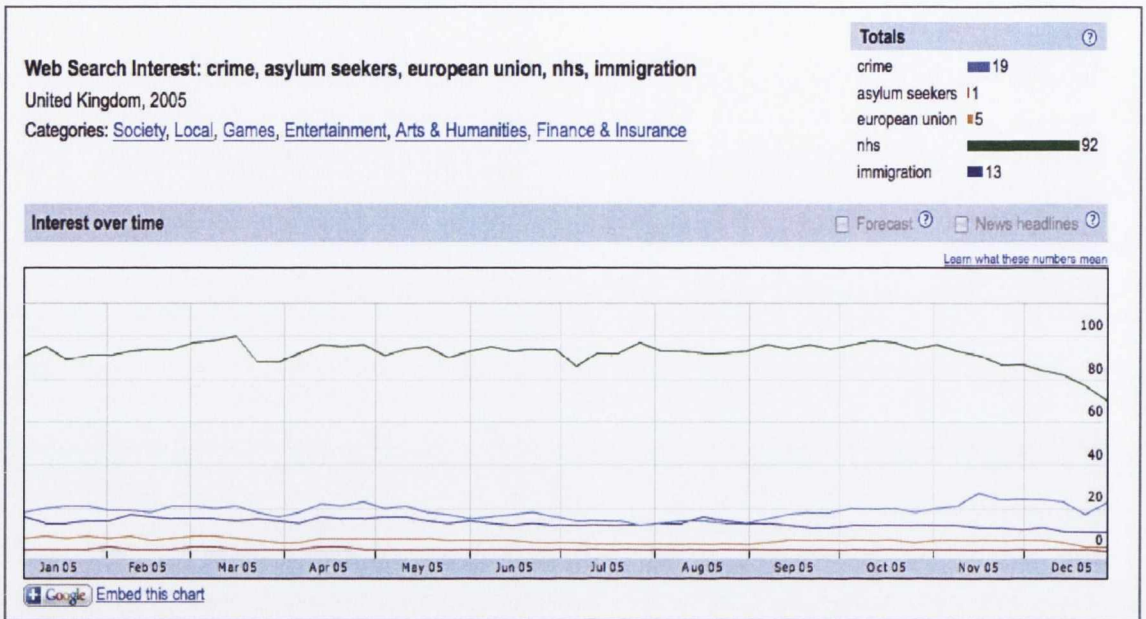


Figure 7-2: Search volume for the web searches for the terms "crime," "asylum seekers," "European Union," "NHS" and "immigration." UK 2005.

Asylum seekers

Figure 3 shows the volume of searches for the term “asylum seekers” in the United Kingdom in 2005. We see that there was more interest in the topic in the first half of the year. We observe a decline from the peak of 100 between April 17 and 23 (during the election campaign) and only 42 between May 29 and June 11. Such a change appears to be in line with the reordering of the issue on the public agenda according to the British Election Study data. There the proportion of people who thought that the issue of asylum seekers was the most important problem facing Britain at that time changed by 12.3 percent and went down from 19.6 percent to a little above seven percent in May 2005. We compared this new measure with the traditional one and ran correlation between normalized score for Google searches (as reported above) and the percentage of those who regard an issue as the Most Important Problem (from the Internet Rolling

Cross Section dataset gathered by the British Election Study). The Pearson's correlation coefficient for the comparison between the Google searches for the term "asylum seekers" and the percentage of those surveyed by BES who viewed it as the Most Important Problem facing Britain at that time is 0.0767.

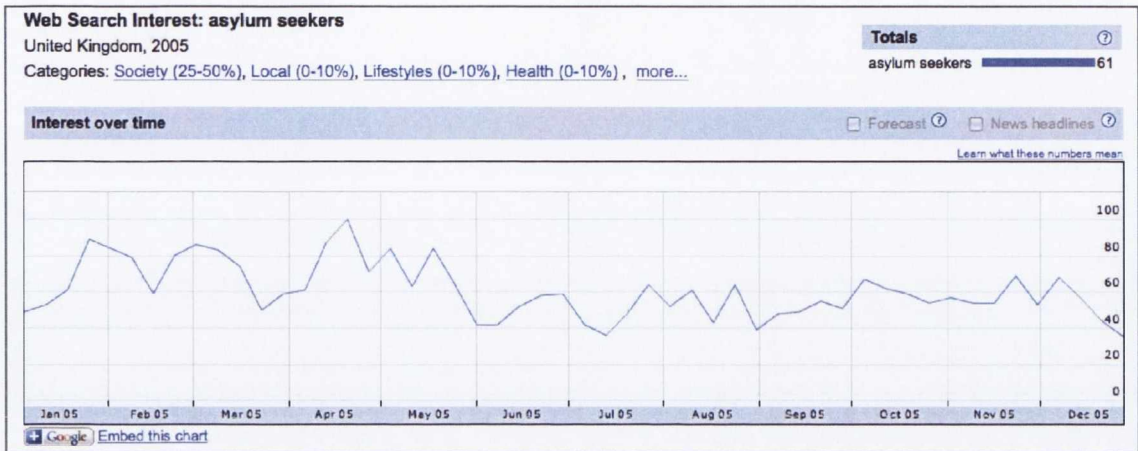


Figure 7-3: Search volume for the web search for the term "asylum seekers." UK 2005.

Immigration

For immigration the picture is less clear. As we see in Figure 4, the search volume had declined over the 12 months of 2005. It remained high in the first half of the year with a peak of 100 in February and immigration was a popular search term during the election campaign. This picture is somewhat different to the BES findings. There concern about immigration grew between March and May 2005. We cannot see such a change by looking at the search volume for that particular issue on Google UK. The correlation coefficient for our comparison of the new and traditional measures of public opinion for the issue of immigration is -0.1923. We observe a low degree of correlation between the

two measures.

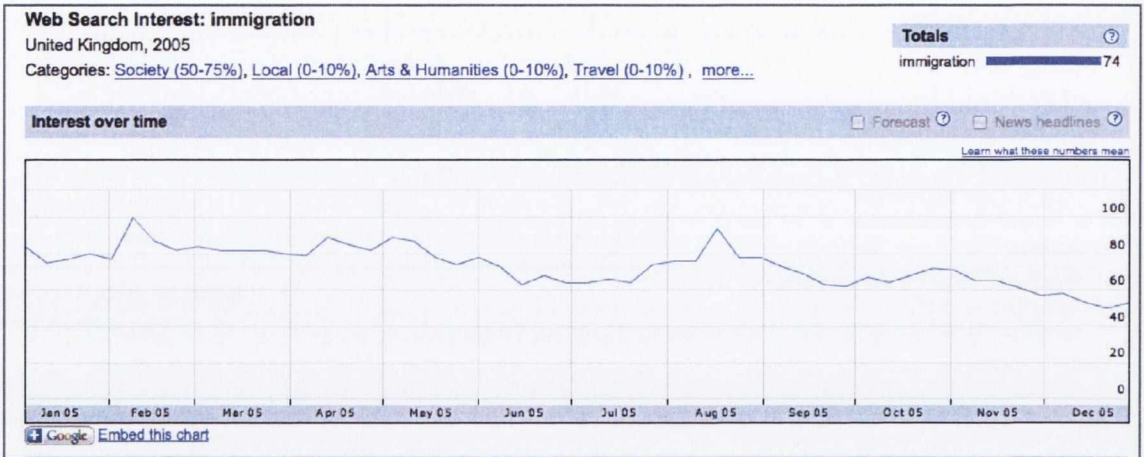


Figure 7-4: Search volume for the web search for the term "immigration." UK 2005.

Law and order

In the BES panel data survey, 10.1 percent of the respondents indicated their concern about law and order in the United Kingdom in March 2005. This number grew by four percent after the election, in May 2005. For our analysis of the popularity of the issue of law and order, we chose the term "crime." Looking at Figure 5 we see that "crime" was a popular search query on Google from January until May/June 2005. There was a dip in the interest between March and April, but the searches on crime were popular during the weeks of the election campaign. We can see that there is a visible decline in the volume of the Internet searches for crime from the end of the campaign (May 1-7) until the end of August. This might have coincided with the summer holidays, which bring less hard news in the mass media or perhaps a general over-saturation with news about crime, which was prominent in the media coverage during the election campaign. The correlation coefficient between normalized score for Google searches (as reported in Figure 5) and the percentage of respondents to the British Election Study survey who

saw the issue of crime as the Most Important Problem is 0.0144.

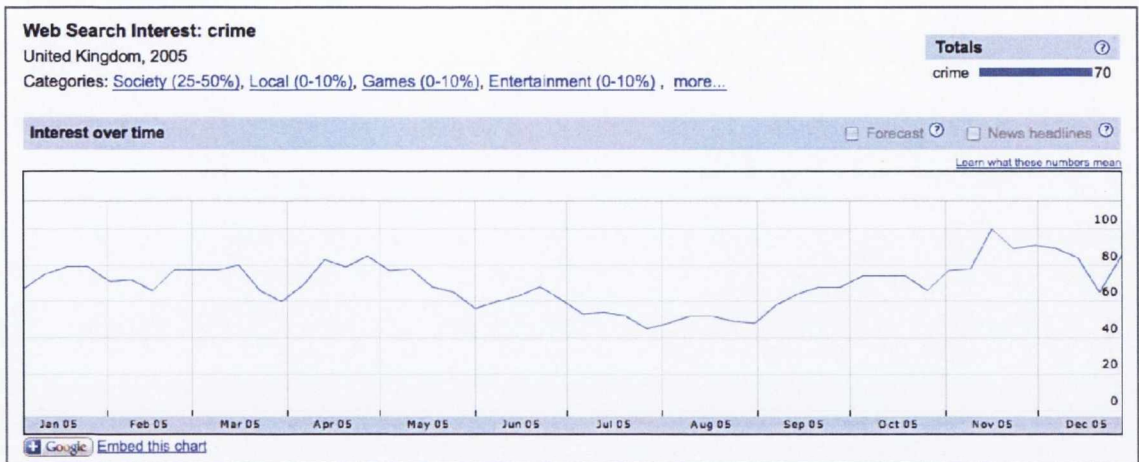


Figure 7-5: Search volume for the term "crime." UK 2005.

European Union

We can clearly see (Figure 6) a rise in the volume of searches for the term European Union between March (total of 55 in the week of March 27 - April 2) and April (total of 86 in the week of April 17 - 23). We can also, as with the issues examined above, see that this particular search term remained popular from January until the end the election campaign and note its declining popularity in the summer months. The correlation between normalized score for Google searches and the percentage of people who thought that the EU was the Most Important Problem facing Britain when surveyed by the British Election Study is -0.2081. We observe a low degree of correlation between the new and traditional measures of public opinion.



Figure 7-6: Search volume for the term "European Union." UK 2005.

7.3 Searching for... Irish public and Google searches in 2007

In Ireland, according to the Eurobarometer Survey 67.2 conducted in the Spring of 2007, the top three issues for the Irish public were: healthcare (indicated by 50 percent of respondents), crime (47 percent) and inflation (27 percent). Media agenda was different in places. Healthcare topped the media agenda too, but other top issues included transport and social welfare (which in our content analysis method included the issue of healthcare). This section will look at searches on five issues, which became apparent from our earlier study of media and public agendas. They include economy (including inflation and housing market), healthcare, crime, transport and social welfare. We look at each of those issues in detail below. Figure 7 presents a comparison of the search volumes for these terms over 12 months of 2007.

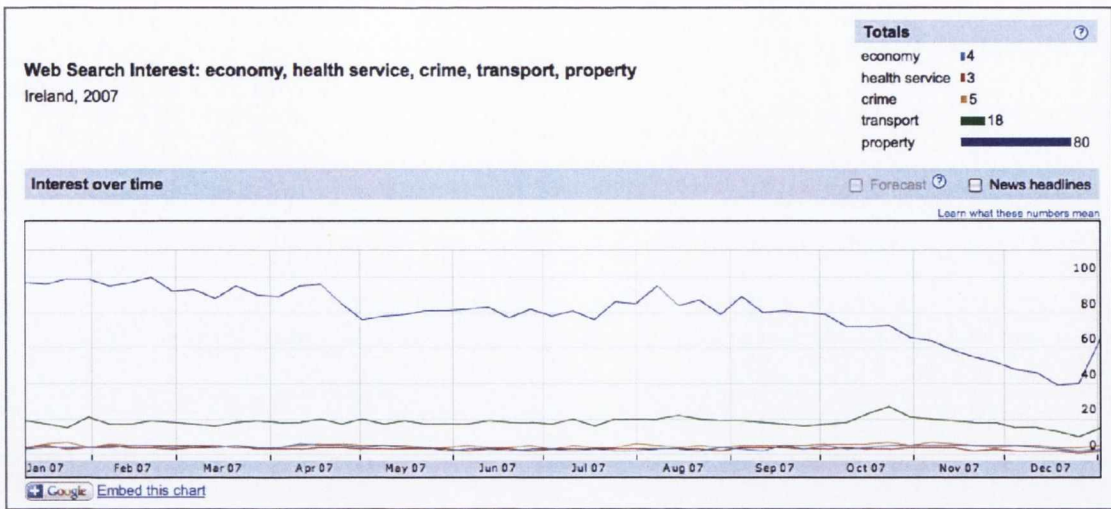


Figure 7-7: Comparison of search volumes for the terms "economy," "health service," "crime," "transport" and "property." Ireland 2007.

Healthcare

Healthcare was both on the media and the public agenda in Ireland at the time on the 2007 general election. Was it also popular in terms of the volume of the Internet searches on the topic? Figure 8 shows that healthcare, as a search query was popular all throughout 2007, steadily rising from January until the peak in interest in August and October. We also observe an increase in the volume of searches from the start of the election campaign (end of April 2007) until the end of May 2007.

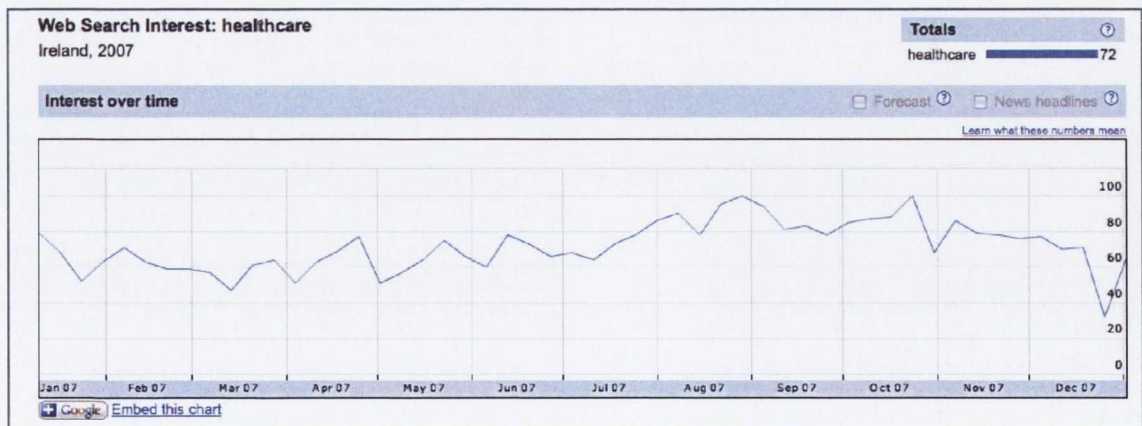


Figure 7-8: Search volume for the term "healthcare." Ireland 2007.

In the first months of 2007, there was a threat of an industrial action from the Irish Nurses Organisation. This might have informed both the answers to the Eurobarometer

survey as well the media data content analysed in this dissertation. We decided to include a search term “nurses” to see whether there were visible fluctuations over time.

Figure 9 shows that indeed the search term “nurses” was popular at the height of the industrial dispute (April/May 2007) and that after the matter was resolved the volume of searches declined steeply and remained low for the remaining months of 2007.



Figure 7-9: Search volume for the term "nurses." Ireland 2007.

Crime

Even though crime was second on the public agenda as measured by the Eurobarometer survey before the election campaign, the analysis of the volume of searches for “crime” using Google Ireland, shows that the interest in the term actually declined during the election campaign. Overall Irish Internet users were quite interested in crime and the average number for “crime” searches in 2007 in Ireland was 67.

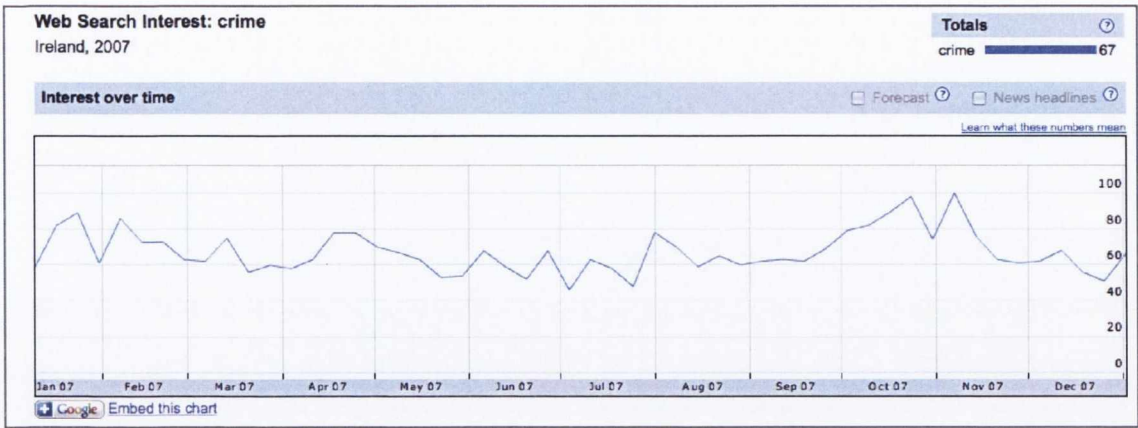


Figure 7-10: Search volume for the term "crime." Ireland 2007.

Economy

The issue was near the top of the media agenda during the 2007 election campaign in Ireland. It also ranked high on the public agenda: 28 percent of those who took part in the Eurobarometer survey in Spring 2007, indicated their concern about the state of economy (inflation and rising prices were areas of particular concern). When we look at the number of searches for the term "economy" over the 12 months of 2007, we see that its popularity actually declined during the campaign weeks. It went from the peak of 100 in the week just before the start of the campaign (April 22 - 28) to the second lowest point in the whole year (35 in the week just after the polling day - May 27 - June 2).

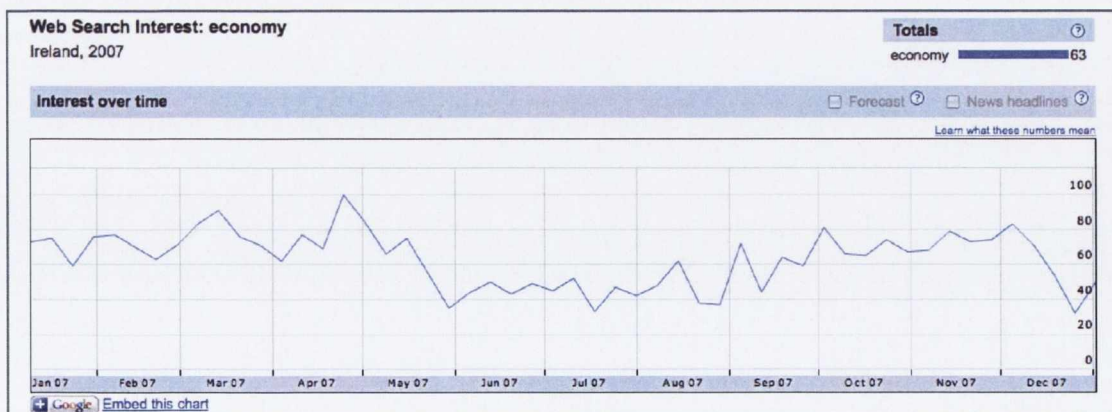


Figure 7-11: Search volume for the term "economy." Ireland 2007.

As those surveyed by Eurobarometer expressed their concern about inflation and rising prices, we decided to investigate the popularity of the search term “inflation” on Google Ireland in 2007. Figure 12 shows that, while people might have been concerned about the inflation, they were not concerned sufficiently to actively search for more information and news on it using Google. The popularity, or query share, of “inflation” as a search term declined during the election campaign from the total of 72 in the first week of the campaign (April 29 - May 5) to 33 in the week after the end of campaign (May 27 - June 2).

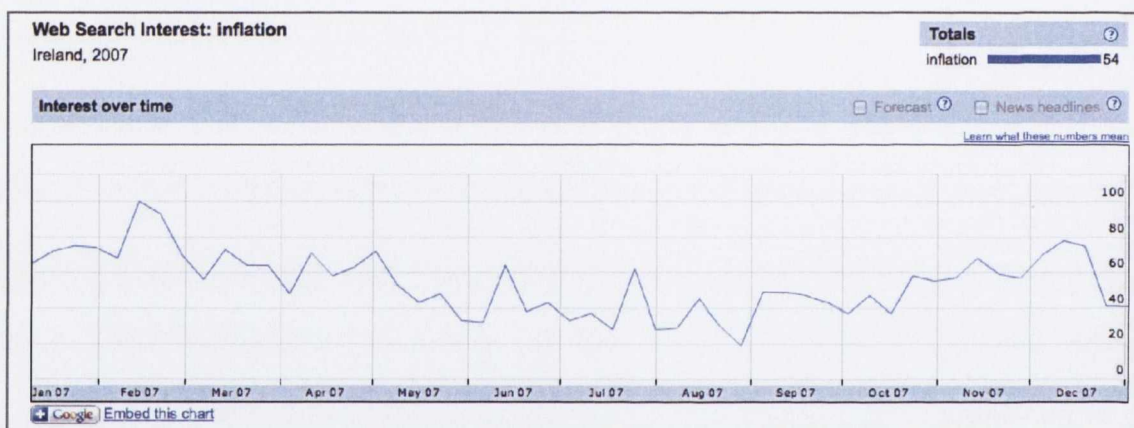


Figure 7-12: Search volume for the term "inflation." Ireland 2007.

Transport

The issue of transport ranked high on the media agenda, which emerged from the manual content analysis employed in this research. And by looking at Figure 13, we see that “transport” was also a popular search term amongst the Irish Internet users. In fact, the average of all the points on the graph (on the scale ranging from 0 to 100) was 67, higher than the average for economy, crime or inflation. When we looked at the search

volume of the term “traffic” it proved to be less popular with the average of 34 in 2007.

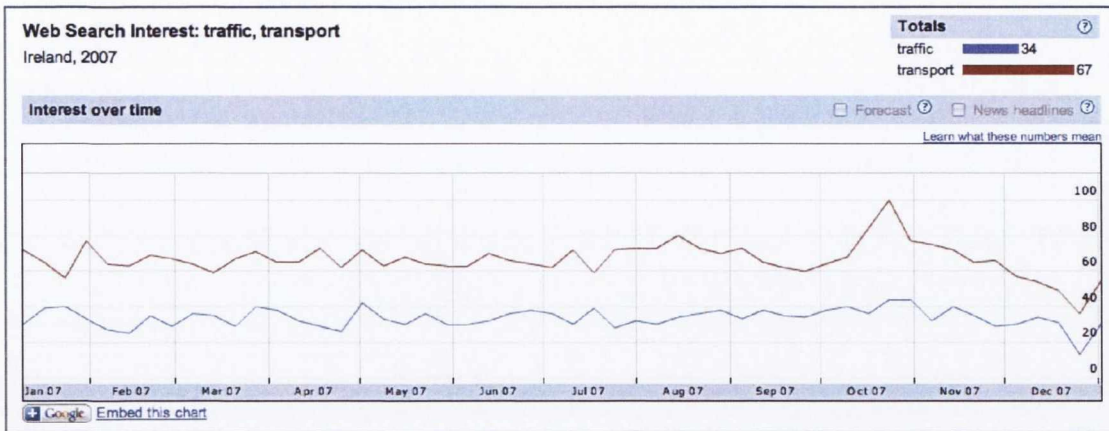


Figure 7-13: Comparison of search volumes for the terms "transport" and "traffic." Ireland 2007.

Social welfare

Articles and news broadcasts discussing or reporting on the issue of social welfare were popular in the Irish media during the 2007 election campaign. As the coding category for our manual content analysis included the issue of health service, we decided to use the term “unemployment” to examine the public’s view on social welfare.

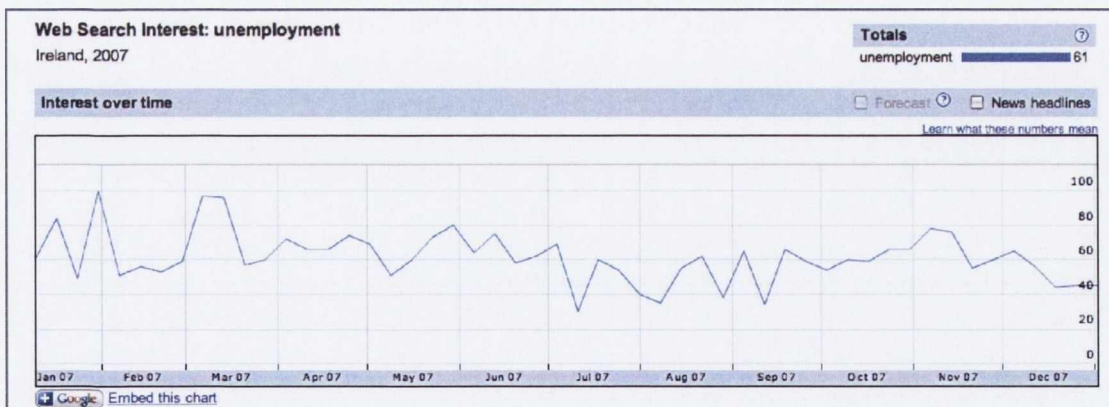


Figure 7-14: Search volume for the term "unemployment." Ireland 2007.

Figure 14 shows that it was also a popular issue for the public. The share of the search volume for the term “unemployment” was high and it was popular all through 2007 without any clear declines, apart from the Christmas week, which is to be expected. The average query share for the term was also high at 76 for the whole year.

Property/Housing market

Housing was the fourth issue on the public agenda in Ireland as measured by the Eurobarometer survey. We presume that people who chose this response were thinking about the state of the housing market, property prices and the general state of the property market. We base such a presumption on the overall preoccupation of the Irish public with property, especially during the Celtic Tiger era.

Figure 15 shows the pattern of popularity of the term “property” in 2007. Although it declined over time, it peaked just before the start of the election campaign (it tops the scale in the week of April 15 - 21). This might have been connected to the speculation about parties’ plans for the stamp duty property tax.

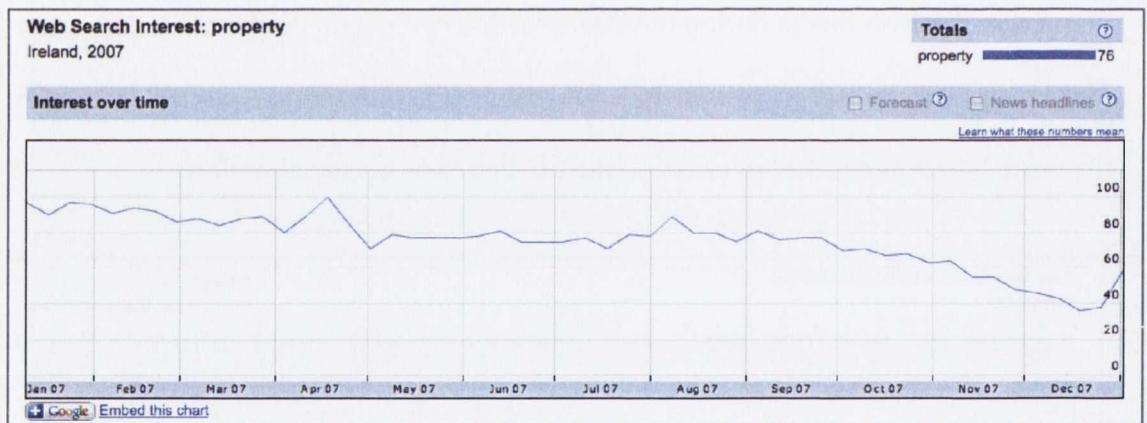


Figure 7-15: Search volume for the term "property." Ireland 2007.

7.4 Media Agenda

To measure the media agenda, the agenda setting research uses content analysis. Media content is operationalized by measuring a number of a “countable unit” (Dearing & Rogers 1996: 35). For example, the content analysis used in this research used a standardized line of text or a second of a TV news broadcast as a unit of analysis. Such an analysis is traditionally done over a period of time. In the case of this thesis it was the period of an election campaign, from the day it was called until the polling day. The

time frame for the analysis of the Irish media was between April 30, 2007 until the day of the elections, May 24; and for the British general election in 2005, it focused on the period between April 6 and May 5, 2005. Manual content analysis, especially a detailed one which examines the media data across many factors, is lengthy, if done by an individual, or requires funding to set up a group of expert coders. That is why we decided to explore the possibility of using Internet-based, searchable media databases to see whether they can help agenda setting research with the difficult but essential task of content analysis. For the purpose of this study we had access to such a news media database: Factiva from DowJones.

7.4.1 Factiva Insight from DowJones

During the general election campaign in Ireland in 2007, we had access to the data gathered and analyzed by Factiva Insight from Dow Jones⁵¹. This web-based research tool enables users to track and monitor changes in the levels of media coverage of chosen search terms. It has been customized for the use during the 2007 election by Dow Jones for RTÉ. It used text mining and database search technology to code thousands of stories, which appeared in a variety of different media. These included content published in the Irish newspapers (the *Irish Times*, *Irish Examiner*, *Irish Independent*, *Evening Herald*, *Sunday Independent*, *Sunday Tribune*, *Sunday Business Post*), as well as web sites, blogs and the Internet discussion boards. The chosen variables were: parties, parties' spokespeople, and regions. Issues coded included economy, health, education, environment, crime, immigration, tax, trustworthiness, government spending, housing, transport, childcare/carers and pensioners. Factiva Insight enabled customized

⁵¹ The author would like to express his thanks to Eibhlin Ni Oisin – Manager of RTÉ's Research Library for her help with gaining access to the Factiva database.

reporting, which is used in this chapter. This made it possible to include only relevant sources and examine the period between April 30 and May 24, 2007.

The analysis of the top issues occupying the media agenda during the 2007 election campaign, using Factiva Insight, reveals that the top issue was healthcare. 23 percent of articles searched and coded by Factiva focused on this issue. There were twice as many articles about health as the number of stories concerned with the second issue on the agenda: tax. Housing occupied the third place on the media agenda according to Factiva. Figure 16 offers a detailed look at the media agenda during the 2007 election campaign.

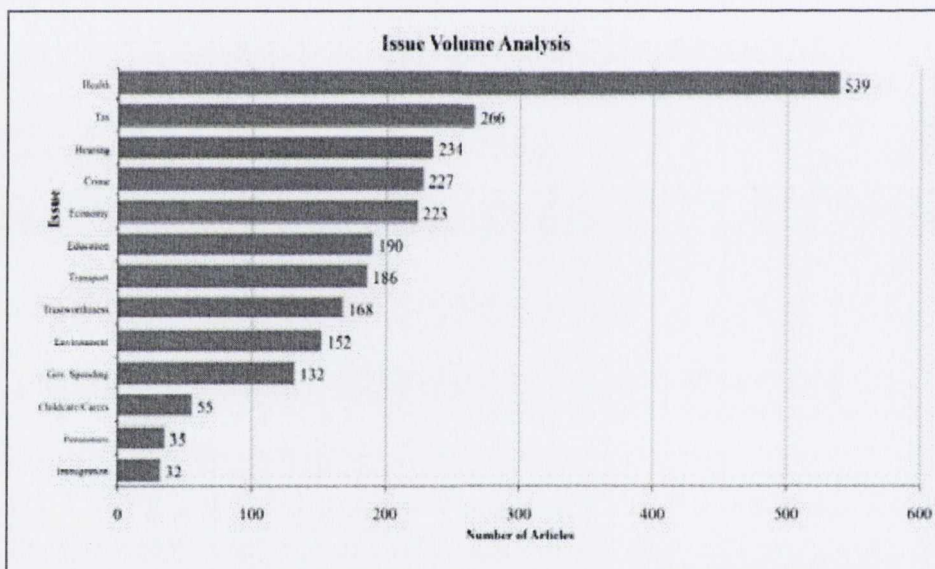


Figure 7-16: Newspaper issue agenda, April 30 - May 24, 2007. Source: Factiva Insight.

What is interesting is the fact that there was little change in the issue agenda over the course of the campaign. The three top issues (health, tax and housing) moved in parallel to each other, as shown on Figure 17, and there were no dramatic changes over time. The volume of the attention given to particular issues changed, but not their ranking on the agenda. An over-time comparison between data from Factiva DowJones and the manually coded media data was conducted. Pearson's correlation coefficient for the

issue of health is -0.0740; for the issue of tax it is 0.0844 and for the issue of housing we observe a moderate correlation between the traditional and the new measures of media agenda with the Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.4565.

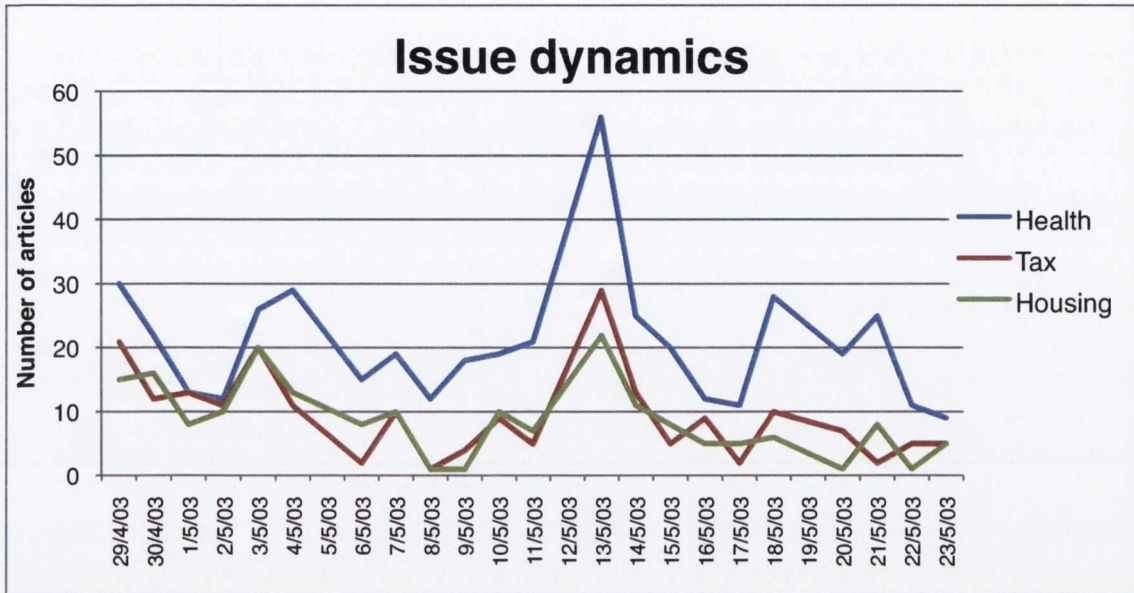


Figure 7-17: Coverage of the three main campaign issues over time. Article counts from the *Irish Times*, *Irish Examiner*, *Irish Independent* and *Evening Herald*. Source: Factiva Insight from DowJones.

In contrast with the results of the manual media content analysis conducted for the 2002 Irish elections by Brandenburg (2003), economy was only in the fifth place on the media agenda in 2007.

The media agenda obtained using the Factiva Insight database is also rather different from the agenda, which emerged from our own, manual content analysis. In Chapter 8 we concluded that the top five policy-specific dimensions (out of 12) which received the most coverage out of all campaign-related articles were: social welfare (5.4 percent), economy (4.8 percent), infrastructure and technology (2 percent), justice (1.8 percent) and education (1.5 percent).

Figure 18 shows the amount of newspaper coverage devoted to political parties during the 2007 election, according to Factiva. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael occupy the two top spots. There were 844 articles, which mentioned Fianna Fáil and 716 referring to Fine Gael, published in the four national newspapers examined. Comparison with the results of the manual content analysis reveals one interesting difference between the rankings of the parties' newspaper coverage. According to Factiva, Labour's coverage was slightly more extensive than the one focused on the PDs. This was not so when we looked at the material coded manually. In Chapter 6 we reported that the Progressive Democrats received slightly more of the campaign-related party coverage than Labour.

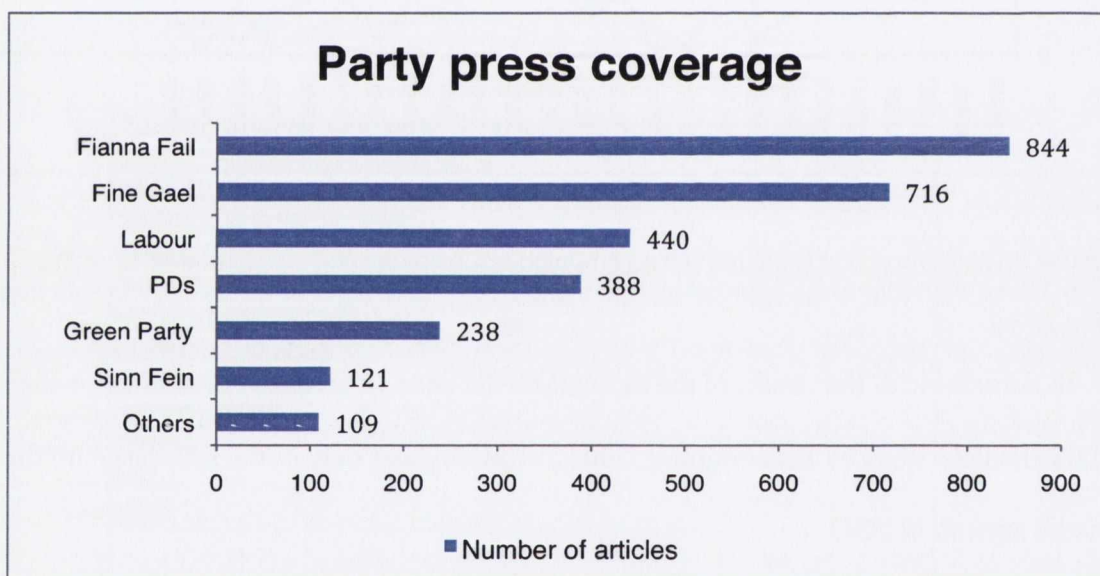


Figure 7-18: Extent of coverage of each party in national newspapers. Article counts from the *Irish Times*, *Irish Examiner*, *Irish Independent* and *Evening Herald*. Source: Factiva Insight from DowJones.

These variations are rooted in several important methodological differences in the way the media material was coded. Firstly, the methods used different units of observation. For the manual coding, a standardized line of text was the unit of analysis, while for Factiva Insight it was an entire article, which included at least one mention of a pre-defined search term, or a combination of words. Secondly, the manual content analysis scheme adopted by this dissertation focused only on the material related to the

campaign. Factiva Insight scanned all published content, which meant that its database was larger and included Sunday newspapers too. Thirdly, the coding categories were slightly different for each of the methods.

It is, however, interesting and worthy of a scholarly investigation to look at the possibility of using tools such as Factiva Insight for the purpose of media content analysis. Of course a more rigorous comparison between the results of manual and electronic content analysis would have to be done, to ensure that the results are reliable. But the speed and customization possibilities of tools such as Factiva mean that it is an area worthy of further investigation.

Databases, such as Factiva, could also be used to construct samples of media data for further analysis using traditional techniques. Advanced text mining and search capabilities of such databases include possibilities of looking for terms in the same sentence, in the headlines or in the same paragraph. One could then quickly look at all the articles containing a particular word and code them manually.

7.4.2 Factiva

Data and results examined in the section above came from the Factiva Insight tool, which was set up by RTÉ's Reference Library to monitor the media during the election campaign in 2007. Some of those findings were reported on RTÉ's election web site. We decided to further this analysis by using the Factiva search capabilities, but with the search terms and time frames specified only for this thesis. While Factiva Insight was semi-automated for our analysis⁵², in the following section we used all the options of Factiva's news search engine. By doing so, we were able to tailor the searches to the

⁵² The search/coding categories were partly pre-defined before the election campaign, while the dates and sources could be adjusted for our analysis.

particular needs of this chapter, as Factiva offers a number of precise search options. The option to carry out a search within the news content published in Ireland was particularly important. This Ireland-specific database contains news articles from such publications as: the *Irish Times*, *Irish Independent*, *Irish Examiner*, *Sunday Business Post* and *Sunday Independent*.

To make the results as comparable as possible between the ones obtained from Factiva and the findings from our own content analysis, we chose a sample based on the same time frame of the election campaign.

In addition we also compare the extent of newspaper coverage of selected issues, parties and political actors in May 2007 and May 2006. This enables us to investigate whether political coverage and coverage for selected, important issues increases during election campaigns. We split our analysis into three parts: coverage of the parties; coverage of the party leaders and media agenda focus on issues. All six major political parties and their leaders were included in the analysis. For the list of issues we turned to the results of the manual content analysis reported in Chapter 6. We also looked at the issues on the media agenda according to Factiva Insight. We investigated the coverage of such issues as: economy, crime, health service, social welfare, transport, and housing market/property. The results of the investigation and comparison with the two other media agendas can be found in the sections below.

7.4.3 Coverage bias: parties

In order to examine the newspaper coverage of political parties during the 2007 Irish general election, we developed two general questions:

QUESTION 1: were the government parties over-represented in the newspaper coverage in 2007?

QUESTION 2: did the news coverage of the political parties increase in May 2007 as compared to May 2006 because of the campaign effect?

To investigate the above questions, we used the name of each political party as a search term in Factiva and chose the period of May 2006 and May 2007. We looked at the number of articles containing the term in six major newspapers published in Ireland: the *Irish Times*, *Irish Independent*, *Irish Examiner*, *Sunday Independent*, *Sunday Business Post* and *Sunday Tribune*.

Figure 19 shows the number of articles referring to each of the six major Irish political parties in 2006 and 2007.

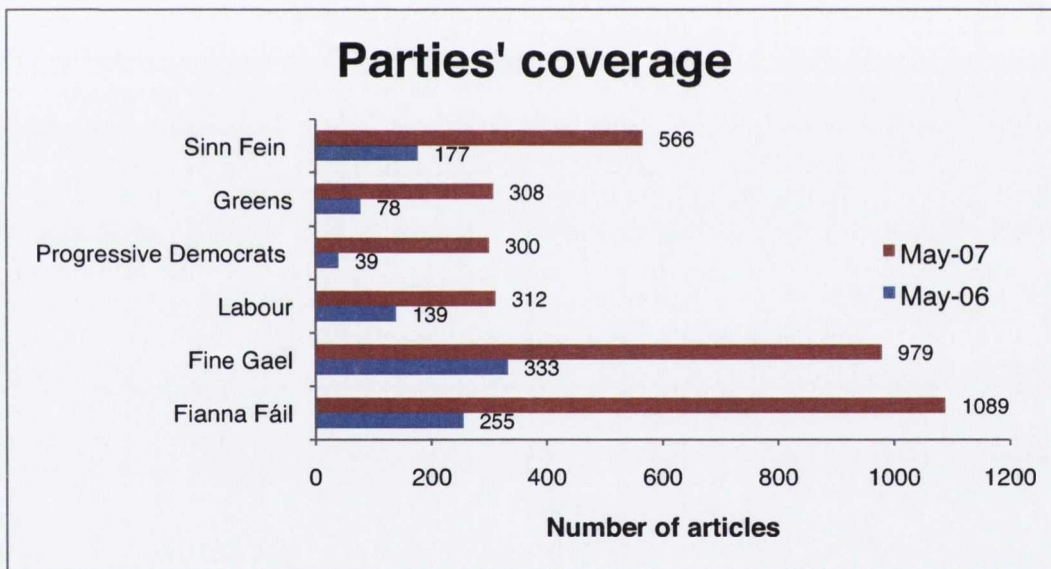


Figure 7-19: Newspaper coverage of parties in May 2006 and May 2007. The *Irish Times*, *Irish Independent*, *Irish Examiner*, *Sunday Business Post*, *Sunday Independent*, *Sunday Tribune*. Source: Factiva.

We can see that for all the parties the number of articles referring to the party increased in May 2007 as compared to May 2006. The party with the biggest difference between the amount of coverage it received in May 2006 and in the same period in

2007 were the Progressive Democrats⁵³. In May 2006 there were 39 articles mentioning PDs published in the Irish newspapers. 12 months later, there were 300 – almost an eight-fold increase. We can attribute it to the rise in the interest in political parties, especially the ones in the government, during the period of the election campaigns. We observe that Fianna Fáil had the second biggest increase in the amount of newspaper coverage. The number of articles referring to the governing party increased four times in May 2007, as compared to the same period in 2006 (255 articles published in May 2006 and 1089 in May 2007).

We can also see that the Progressive Democrats received an over-proportional newspaper coverage in May 2007. There were 300 articles published referring to Michael McDowell's party and only 12 articles more mentioning the Labour Party. The results of the 2002 general election show that Labour got almost 11 percent of the first preference votes, while the PDs got four percent. This would suggest that, to achieve proportionality of party coverage, there should be a wider gap between the number of articles written about the two parties. This observation is in line with our earlier findings about the bias in the media coverage of political parties during elections in Ireland and the over-representation of the government parties, especially the PDs.

The Greens were another party that was over-represented in the newspaper coverage in May 2007. There were 308 articles referring to the party published in the six newspapers analysed in May 2007. In 2002 they received 3.8 percent of the first preference votes, almost the same as Progressive Democrats, therefore we can conclude that both parties received an over-proportional newspaper coverage in May 2007.

⁵³ The search term used for determining the newspaper coverage of the party was: "Progressive Democrats OR PDs."

We also observe that the Green Party received a substantial boost to their coverage in May 2007 as compared to May 2006. There were four times as many articles published referring to the party in May 2007 than in May 2006 (308 in May 2007 to 78 published in May 2006).

A headline is one of the visually most prominent elements of any newspaper. Using Factiva's option to limit our search to content within the headlines, we examined the parties' newspaper coverage from this perspective too. The results are visualised by Figure 20.

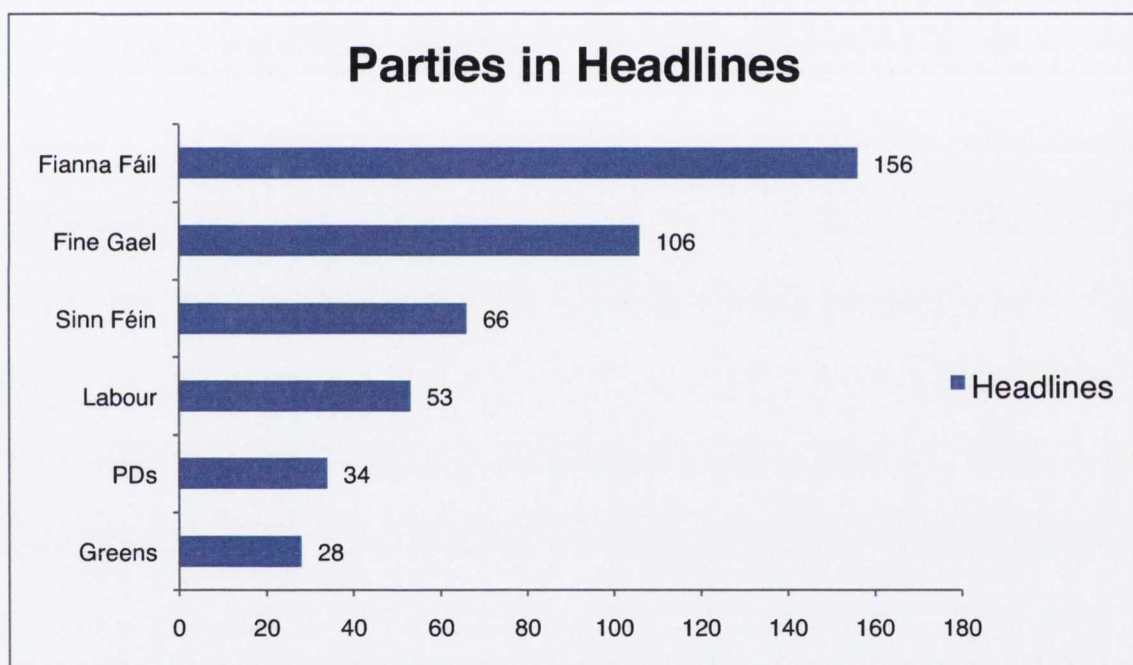


Figure 7-20: Parties in the newspaper headlines. Ireland, May 2007. Source: Factiva. Visualisation by ManyEyes.com.

We see that in terms of visibility in the headlines, Sinn Fein was in the third place, just behind the two biggest parties: Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Gerry Adams' party was also ahead of both Labour and the Progressive Democrats. This is in keeping with the number of articles mentioning SF by the Irish newspapers (566). The size of newspaper

coverage of Sinn Fein could have been an effect of external events and the return to power sharing in Northern Ireland in May 2007.

7.4.4 Coverage bias: leaders

We developed three general questions to investigate the extent of newspapers' coverage of political leaders during the 2007 general election in Ireland:

QUESTION 3: was the number of articles referring to leaders of the two government parties significantly larger than the number of articles mentioning other leaders?

QUESTION 4: was there an increase in the number of articles referring to Taoiseach's Bertie Ahern personal finances in May 2007? Did they constitute a significant proportion of the newspaper's coverage of Ahern?

QUESTION 5: was there an increase in the newspaper coverage of all the leaders in May 2007 as compared to their coverage in 2006 because of the campaign effect?

We have argued in the previous chapters that political campaigns in Ireland and in the UK are getting more and more focused on the leaders of the parties. Leaders provide a focal point for the media to focus their campaign coverage on, they are the public faces of their parties.

The results of the media content analysis reported in Chapter 8 showed that almost 40 percent of overall campaign coverage mentioned one of the six leaders of the main parties. Taoiseach Bertie Ahern commanded the biggest proportion of the coverage referring to leaders. More than a half of all the coverage referring to party leaders in Irish newspapers was devoted to Ahern. Enda Kenny was in second place with 21.6 percent and Michael McDowell was in third place with 11 percent. The picture is

pretty much the same when we examine the number of articles mentioning party leaders analyzed using Factiva.

Figure 21 shows the amount of leaders' coverage in six Irish newspapers in May 2007 and May 2006. Bertie Ahern had the most articles referring to him during the election campaign. There were five times as many articles mentioning Ahern than Trevor Sargent.

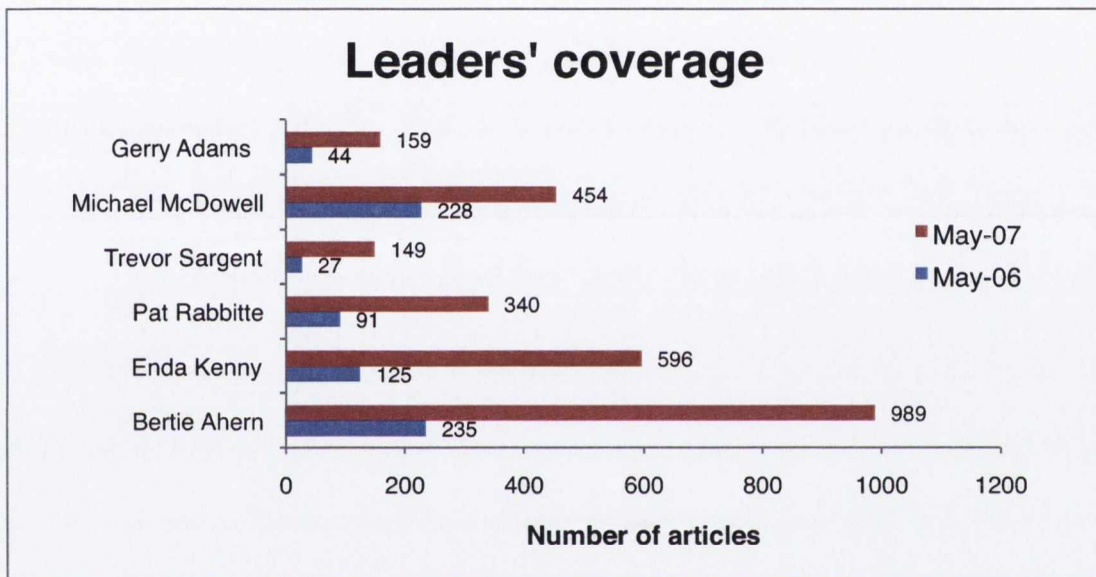


Figure 7-21: Newspaper coverage of party leaders. The *Irish Times*, *Irish Examiner*, *Irish Independent*, *Sunday Independent*, *Sunday Business Post*, *Sunday Tribune*. Source: Factiva.

Enda Kenny enjoyed an almost five-fold increase in the number of articles published about him in May 2007 as compared to 2006, but he still trailed behind the Fianna Fáil leader by 178 articles.

Michael McDowell had 454 articles mentioning him in May 2007 – twice as many as in May 2006. When we compare the attention of the press to the leader of the Progressive Democrats with the coverage of Pat Rabbitte, we can clearly see that McDowell was over-represented in the media. His party received four percent of the first preference votes in 2002, while the Labour party got 10.8 percent. There were,

however, more than one hundred articles less referring to Rabbitte than to McDowell (340 to 454).

When we compare the numbers between May 2006 and May 2007, we conclude that one leader in particular received a significant increase in the number of articles written about him. Only 27 articles mentioned the Greens' leader in May 2006, while in May 2007 this number increased more than five times to 149. Although the increase was significant, the total number of articles was not. In fact Sargent – according to the analysis done using Factiva – was the leader newspapers wrote the least about. This result is not surprising in the light of our earlier conclusions. While most of the leaders were very visible in their own party newspaper coverage and took up more than a half of it, Sargent had only 23.5 percent share of his party's newspaper coverage.

We conclude that the data supports the expectations posed in question 3. The number of articles referring to leaders increased during the campaign and leaders of the governing parties received more coverage than other leaders. We also observe that Michael McDowell was over-represented, especially when compared to Pat Rabbitte's coverage.

Earlier in this thesis we observed that political ethics was one of the big stories of the 2007 campaign. The three broadsheet newspapers examined (the *Irish Times*, *Irish Independent* and *Irish Examiner*) devoted a substantial proportion of their campaign coverage to this issue. For the *Irish Times* and *Irish Examiner* this figure was around 7.5 percent and for *Irish Independent* more than ten percent. There was a significant difference between the amount of coverage afforded to the issue of political ethics in 2002 and 2007. We argued that, most likely, such an increase had to do with the

investigation into Taoiseach Bertie Ahern's personal finances. We found that 81 percent of the leaders' coverage of political ethics was about the Taoiseach.

To examine question 4 we first looked at all the articles containing any mention of Ahern. In total there were 989 articles published with some reference to the Fianna Fáil leader in May 2007. We then modified the search, using the same sample, by looking for a search term designed to capture the full extent of the coverage of "Bertiegate." The search term read: "Bertie Ahern AND (friend OR personal OR finances OR friends OR associates OR associate OR Beresford OR (Celia Larkin AND house)). The choice of key words was based on our earlier analysis of the campaign media coverage and the most popular choice of phrases used in newspaper reports into the investigation of Ahern's personal finance irregularities. Figure 22 offers a visual comparison of the number of articles referring to Ahern and the articles, which mentioned his personal finances.

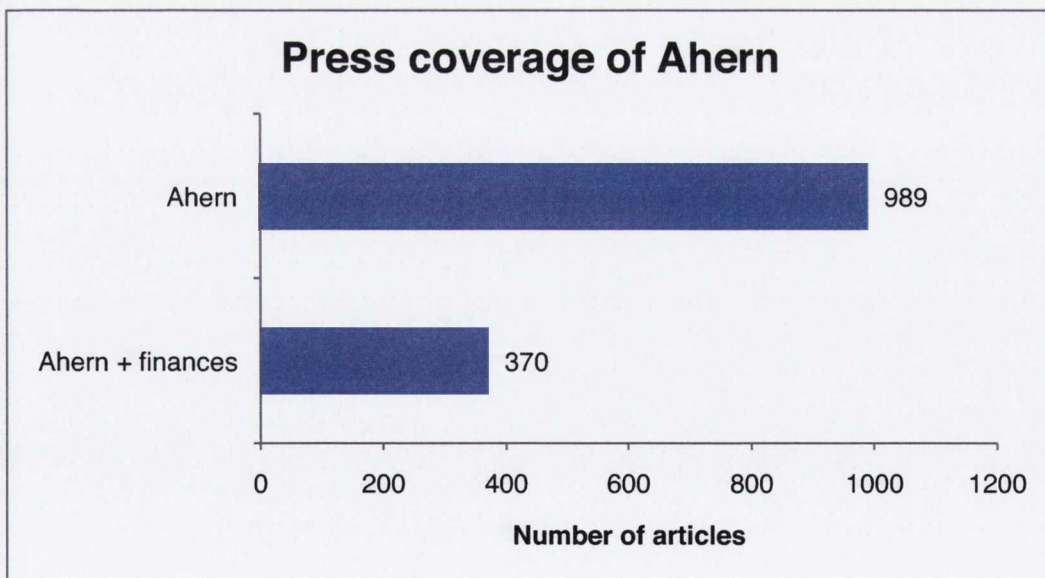


Figure 7-22: Comparison of the number of articles referring to Bertie Ahern and to Ahern and his personal finances. The *Irish Times*, *Irish Examiner*, *Irish Independent*, *Sunday Independent*, *Sunday Business Post*, *Sunday Tribune*, *Evening Herald*. Source: Factiva.

There were 370 articles published containing the specified key words in May 2007. This means that almost 37.5 percent of newspaper articles referring to Bertie Ahern during the 2007 campaign also contained some reference to his personal finances. There were only 37 articles, which contained the above mentioned key words published by the selected newspapers in May 2006.

Following on from our investigation into the visibility of parties in newspaper headlines, we examined the leaders' headline presence too. The results are shown by Figure 23.

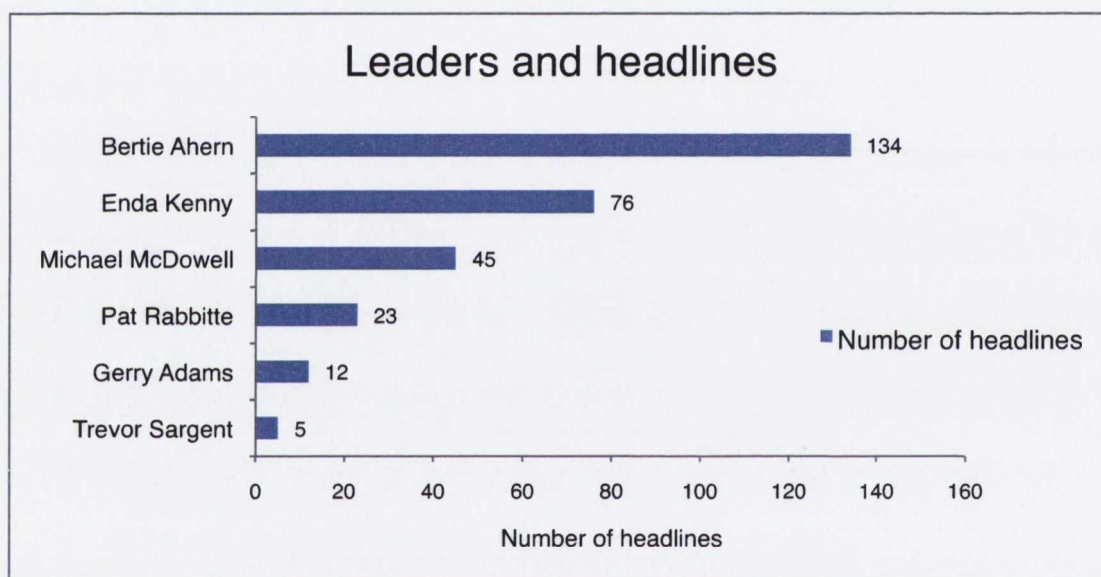


Figure 7-23: Number of newspaper headlines referring to party leaders. Ireland, May 2007. Source: Factiva.

Once more we observe that Michael McDowell was over-represented in the headlines – there were almost twice as many headlines referring to the leader of the PDs than to Pat Rabbitte in May 2007. We can also see that Gerry Adams was not as prominent in the headlines as his party.

7.4.5 Agenda focus: issues

To measure the media agenda focus on particular issues, we looked for the answers to the following questions:

QUESTION 6: are there similarities in the order of the media agenda obtained using Factiva as compared to the media agendas resulting from manual content analysis and the examination done using Factiva Insight news search engine?

QUESTION 7: was there an increase in the newspaper coverage of selected important issues in May 2007 as compared to May 2006 because of the campaign effect?

Analysis of media content in Chapter 6 showed that the top five policy-specific dimensions (out of 12 included in the code book) which received the most coverage out of all the campaign-related articles were: social welfare⁵⁴, (5.4 percent), economy, (4.8 percent), infrastructure and technology (two percent), justice (1.8 percent) and education (1.5 percent).

The picture is somewhat different when we look at the results of the content analysis conducted using Factiva. We searched for all articles, which included pre-defined terms such as: economy, crime, health service and transport. To make sure that Factiva searched for the most relevant articles, we constructed a number of search terms. They included words associated with the broad issues outlined above. For example when searching for election-related articles about health we looked for: "Election AND (health OR HSE OR Health Board* OR hospital OR hospitals OR nurse* OR INO OR patient* OR doctor* OR waiting list* OR hospital consultant* OR medical consultants' report OR IHCA OR social services OR suicide OR Liam Doran OR A&E OR

⁵⁴ This dimension included the healthcare issue.

emergency services OR health insurance OR VHI OR BUPA OR Quinn Health OR risk equalisation OR MRSA).” This enabled us to find to be as precise as possible in the analysis using Factiva. For all the other search terms, please see Appendix 2.

Out of the issues mentioned, the biggest number referred to health (658 articles; Figure 24), this was followed by 389 articles mentioning crime, 354 referring to education and 346 on tax. Economy closed the ranking taking the fifth spot with 327 articles referring to it.

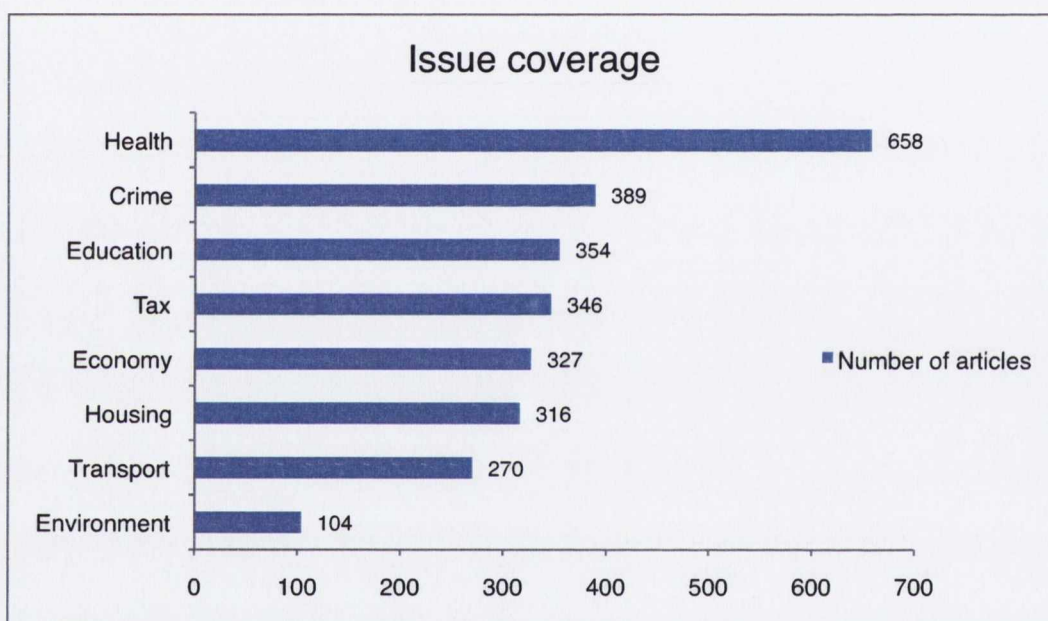


Figure 7-24: Newspaper issue coverage in May 2006 and May 2007. The *Irish Times*, *Irish Independent*, *Irish Examiner*, *Sunday Independent*, *Sunday Business Post*, *Sunday Tribune*, *Evening Herald*. Source: Factiva.

Investigating question 6, we conclude that there were in fact some significant differences between agendas resulting from different measuring methods.

We also looked at the number of articles referring to political parties and major issues of the campaign. Figure 25 shows that the election coalition of Fine Gael and Labour worked in favour of the latter. The party led by Pat Rabbitte received an issue-related coverage comparable with its bigger partner. Following from our earlier results, we were

expecting that the Green Party would have more articles referring to it in terms of environmental issues. This analysis does not support it, as the number of such articles was not significantly different for the Greens, as compared to other the PDs or Labour.

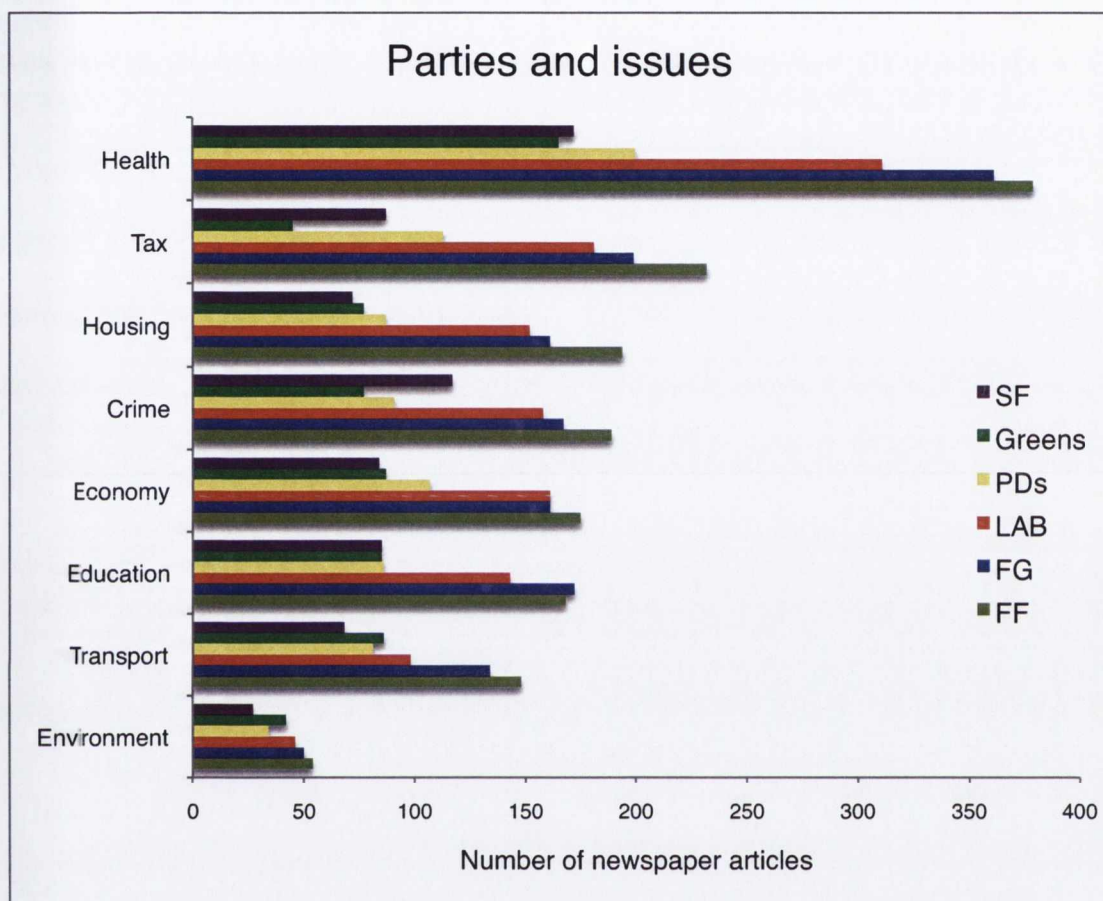


Figure 7-25: Comparison of newspaper articles referring to political parties and selected issues. Ireland, May 2007. Source: Factiva.

We note that any comparisons between the two agendas are limited, because of methodological differences and are done here for illustrative/exploratory purposes. Firstly the media samples are different. The manual content analysis focused on all campaign-related media coverage; Factiva searched through all articles published by the newspapers in the same period. The sample was also different in terms of newspaper titles it contained, as Factiva analyzed three Sunday publications, whereas these were not included in the sample used for investigation in Chapter 6.

Another limitation to a more precise comparison is introduced by the analysis approach. On the one hand, searching a database of news publications requires a pre-defined list of key words. This introduces a possibility that an investigator might miss a “breakout” issue. This could be a topic, which has not been on the media before, but suddenly rose to prominence during the campaign. Also there is a question of how such a list of search terms should be compiled and what it should be based on.

On the other hand, manual content analysis (at least in the form used in this thesis) looks at the material explicitly related to the campaign. This could mean that the analysis might miss an issue that dominated the straightforward news coverage, but was not included in the campaign reporting and analysis. The manual expert coder also works with a list of dimensions and issues to help with the coding process. However comprehensive, such a list poses a risk of narrowing the interpretation of some articles or opinions.

7.5 Conclusions

This chapter explored two methods of measuring the public agenda and the media agenda, different from the ones used in the traditional agenda setting studies. The chapter also provided a comparison of results obtained using traditional methods of analysis with their alternative counterparts in the context of the Irish 2007 general election.

In the first part we suggested using statistics of the volume of the Internet searches to measure public opinion. We argue that switching from the traditional, survey-based, passive model of estimating public opinion to a more active one, based around the level of respondents' interest, can be an interesting alternative. We looked at the changes in

the volume of web searches overtime in Britain and Ireland. This novel approach could lead to future research.

Second part of this chapter examined the media agenda during the 2007 general election campaign. The newspaper agenda emerged from the analysis conducted using a news media database from Factiva/DowJones. We suggest that using such a database to construct media samples and as a tool for simple content analysis might help in future of agenda setting research. Such a method could be used on its own or alongside manual content analysis.

Public agenda: a new approach

We used Google Insights for Search to measure the public agenda in the UK and Ireland during election years. Such an approach enabled us to examine the fluctuations in the volume of searches over time and relate them to our earlier analyses of public agendas.

In the UK we chose to investigate four search terms: “asylum seekers”, “immigration”, “crime” and “European Union.”

We observed that selected searches were more popular in the first half of the year. After the election campaign finished on May 5, 2005, the volume of selected searches declined.

We also saw that the volume of searches for the term “asylum seekers” declined during the election campaign. This finding corresponds to the results of the public opinion survey conducted by the British Election Study Group.

The volume of searches for the term “European Union” increased during the campaign. This observation is also in line with the conclusions drawn from the BES data.

Changing the approach to measuring the public agenda helps to address one of the methodological problems of the agenda setting research. Public opinion scholars have argued extensively about the limitations of interpreting the answers to the Most Important Problem question as the best measure for the public agenda. It also looks to the Internet as the new public sphere and analyzes the public’s active involvement with the selected issues. The Internet with its ease of communication and self-expression could become a 21st century equivalent of the Greek agora. It could provide a sphere for a truly public social engagement and discussion, away from the public sphere of today, which is dominated by the big media. Looking into the Internet for new ways of operationalizing the public agenda variable also acknowledges the fact that “the Internet is now setting the agenda with the press now forced to judge the importance of the story by how much coverage it has had on the Internet” (Bénilde 2010).

We are aware, however, of the limitations of this approach. The search terms are pre-defined by the investigator (although this could be addressed by looking at all the Google searched during a particular time). Also the sample of the public is not representative as not everybody uses the Internet or uses Google for their searches. Also, as we learnt from our studies of the public opinion data from the UK and Ireland, only a small proportion of voters looks to the Internet to be educated about important, social issues. With these limitations in mind, we believe that it is a research opportunity that could be explored further.

Media agenda with Factiva DowJones

In this chapter we used an on-line database of news content from Factiva DowJones. In the investigation we used the Media Insight tool, which was set up for the Irish public broadcaster during the 2007 general election campaign, and Factiva iWorks for further analysis.

According to the results obtained using the Factiva Insight tool, the top three issues on the media agenda during the campaign in 2007 were: healthcare, tax and housing. We conclude that there was little movement on the issue agenda during the course of the campaign. The issues moved in parallel and only the amount of attention given to them changed over time.

Comparison of the media agenda obtained using the manual content analysis with the Factiva one revealed few similarities, which could be the result of the differences between content methodologies used.

We conducted a further analysis using Factiva iWorks. Our unit of analysis was a newspaper article with at least one mention of our pre-defined search terms. We compared the coverage for those terms between May 2006 and May 2007 in order to test for campaign effects.

We conclude that the newspaper coverage of certain topics increases during the general election campaign. Also, we find that there is a significant increase in the number of articles written about the party leaders during the campaign. This highlights that the focus of the campaign coverage is firmly on the leaders.

Some of the leaders, however, received an over-proportional newspaper coverage in 2007, as in the case of Michael McDowell – the leader of the Progressive Democrats. If

we look at the share of first preference votes at the previous election and take these results as a guide for proportionality (as it is done by RTÉ for example), then the number of articles referring to McDowell, compared to the coverage focusing on the Labour leader Pat Rabbitte, supports our expectations of over proportionality. This is also in line with the findings of the manual content analysis reported in previous chapters.

Analysing the leaders' coverage, we notice that the Green Party leader Trevor Sargent was one of the leaders with the smallest number of articles referring to him in May 2007. Although his coverage received a significant increase when compared with the situation in May 2006, it still did not change his placing in the leaders' coverage ranking. We also observed that he was not visible in the coverage of his own party, or in newspaper headlines, which supports our earlier findings.

In Chapter 6 we noted that the investigation into Taoiseach's Bertie Ahern personal finances was one of the big stories of the campaign. The analysis of the newspaper coverage conducted using Factiva supports that. Almost 40 percent of all the newspaper articles referring to Ahern also referred to his personal finances.

7.6 Discussion

Man versus Machine

This thesis, as a comparative study of election news coverage, used a multimethod approach to analyze the data. In Chapter 6, the media data was analysed using the manual content analysis method developed by Brandenburg. In this chapter we decided to compare those results with the examination of the news coverage conducted using an on-line news database. We also explored the possibility of using the volume of web searches on Google as an indicator of public opinion. This helped us not only in studying

the election news coverage, but also enabled us to test other research methods. We compared the new measures with the traditional ones by running correlations between them. For the comparison between the normalized score for Google searches and the percentage of people surveyed by the British Election Study who indicated that a particular issue was the Most Important Problem facing Britain at that time, the Pearson's correlation coefficients ranged from 0.0144 (for the issue of crime) to -0.2081 (for the issue of the EU). For the comparison of media agendas in Ireland in 2007, the Pearson's correlation coefficients ranged from -0.0740 (for the issue of health) to 0.4565 (for the issue of housing).

We conclude that using a tool such as Factiva could help agenda setting studies in terms of the speed of analysis. The criticism would be that it delivers a rather crude measurement and quite a general picture. While we partly agree we would also like to observe that the sophisticated search capabilities of Factiva and other such databases (LexisNexis for example) allow for a more detailed analysis. The ease of use also means that one could easily look at media agenda over longer time periods. Research has already embraced computers as a text coding tool (Benoit, Laver and Gary 2003; Benoit, Laver and Mikhaylov 2009; Danke et al., 1997; Fan & Tims 1989; Kleinnijenhuis & Fan 1999) and we think this approach could be developed further. It could be especially successful if used alongside manual content analysis of smaller samples.

Limitations

There were three aims before the analyses presented in this chapter were conducted: comparison, test and exploration. We wanted to make tentative comparisons of the results reported in the previous chapters with the ones obtained using different methods. We also wanted to test alternative research methods using tools available on-line. Finally

we thought there was a scope for exploration of new research techniques to advance the methods used in agenda setting studies.

We are, however, aware of the limitations (which were reflected by the results of correlation tests reported above) of the analyses reported on in this chapter. Firstly the samples used for them were different from the media sample used in Chapter 6. Also, we used pre-defined key search terms based on the results of manual content analysis, which narrowed down the scope of the investigation. Also the article as a unit of observations is useful for a general overview of a media agenda, but does not allow for more detailed observations (see also Kennamer 1989; Stevenson 2002).

New horizons

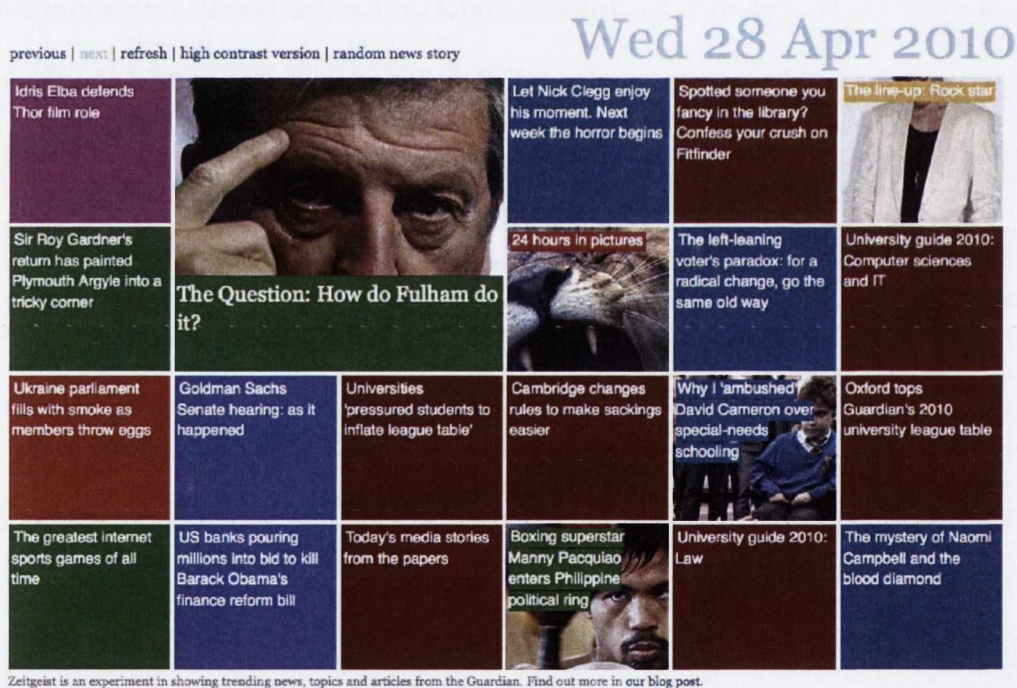


Figure 7-26 Zeitgeist – a visual record of readers' interest on guardian.co.uk web site.

The fact that almost all media outlets have an Internet presence nowadays offers new possibilities, which have not yet been explored by agenda setting research. As the amount of meta-data about newspaper articles, photos and on-line videos grows, this

The OpenCalais Web Service is another technological development in analysing media content. It creates rich semantic data for any text you input. To test it, we submitted the three editorials we used previously and examined the results. Figure 28, shows the range of information obtained from OpenCalais about the editorial published in *Irish Examiner* on May, 24, 2007. Figures 29 and 30 show the topics and tags derived by the programme from the editorials published in the *Irish Times* and *Irish Independent*.

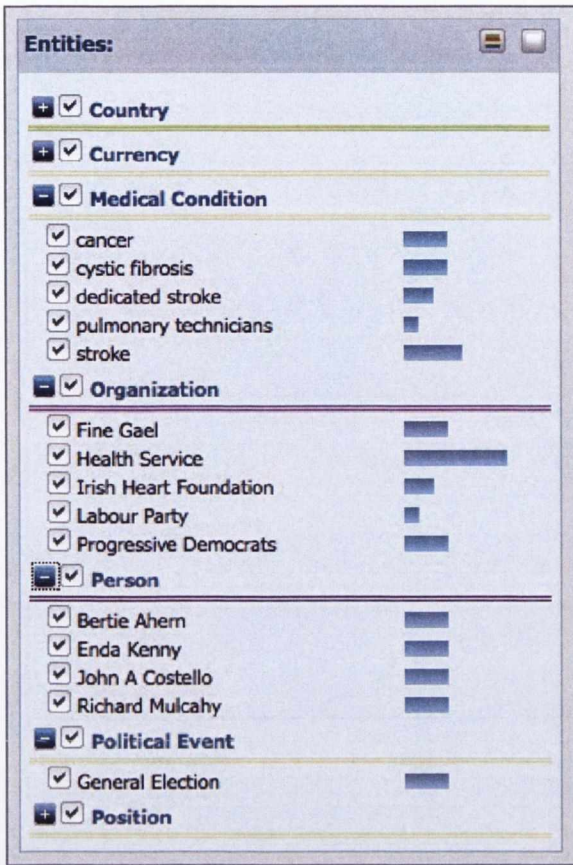


Figure 7-28 Analysis of the *Irish Examiner* editorial (May 24, 2007). Source: OpenCalais.



Figure 7-29 Analysis of the *Irish Times* editorial (May 24, 2007). Source: OpenCalais.

Topics:	
Business Finance	81%
Social Tags:	
Business Finance	☆☆☆
Northern Europe	☆☆☆
Europe	☆☆☆
Geography	☆☆☆
Democracy	☆☆☆
Multinational corporation	☆☆☆
Republic of Ireland	☆☆☆
Northern Ireland	☆☆☆
Economic history of Ireland	☆☆☆
Celtic Tiger	☆☆☆
Macroeconomics	☆☆☆
Elections	☆☆☆
Western Europe	☆☆☆

Figure 7-30 Analysis of the *Irish Independent* editorial (May 24, 2007). Source: OpenCalais.

We can see that OpenCalais does analyse the textual data rather thoroughly picking up the general content (health from *Examiner's* editorial; politics from the *Irish Times'* one; business from *Irish Independent*); people and organisations (parties and leaders) and detailed tags and facts (for example health, cystic fibrosis, overstaffing in the health service). This is just a glimpse of what content analysis tools could offer to agenda setting research in the future.

We believe that in the future agenda setting research will face a growing number of media agendas, as individuals will create their own, flexible and customizable media platforms bringing together text, audio and video from various sources. These individual-level agendas will be in constant flux. This will mean difficulties in conceptualizing *the* media agenda. At the same time, the meta data contained within the Internet content will help to track these new agendas.

Chapter 8

Interviews

8 Interviews

In the previous chapters of this dissertation we have explored the agenda setting function of the mass media from a quantitative perspective. We have content analysed election-related newspaper articles and TV news bulletins and took a forensic look at the resulting data. We have also compared the data from manual content analysis with the results of computer-aided coding process. Throughout the chapters examining the news media agenda election coverage in the United Kingdom during the 2005 general election campaign and in Ireland in 2007, we discussed and looked at the relationship between the media agenda during general election campaigns and the public one.

One of the aims of this dissertation is to explore the role of mass media during general election campaigns. So far we have looked at the media coverage and the resulting media agenda through the perspective of quantitative data. These results tell an interesting story and help to advance our understanding of the role of mass media during important political events, but looking at the tables and graphs, one cannot help but ask further questions. Who is behind the decisions that shape mass media's election coverage? What do political parties think of the media? How do mass media organizations deal with the pressure exerted on them by political parties during election campaigns? How do editors and journalists see their role in the agenda-setting process? The questions are numerous and even an attempt at answering them will give us more insight into the agenda setting puzzle. That is why in the research design for this thesis we have decided to add a qualitative element of interviews with media practitioners to the quantitative analysis of the media election coverage.

The following chapter is based on the interviews with a number of media professionals in Ireland, who all have first hand experience of working during various

general election, and other, campaigns. They have been selected on the basis of their position in the industry and knowledge of the inner-workings of the mass media. They are political editors of newspapers, senior management of Raidió Teilifís Éireann - Ireland's public broadcaster; former senior party staffers and public relations specialists. Through the semi-structured interview process they have all given their views on the role of mass media during general elections. All interviewees spoke on the record to the author. They include: Peter Feeney, Head of Broadcast Compliance and Secretary to the Election Steering Group in RTÉ; Pat Leahy, political editor of the *Sunday Business Post* and author of *It's Showtime*; Michael Good, Managing Editor of radio news - RTÉ; Martin Mackin, general secretary for Fianna Fáil from January 1998 until 2003. He was responsible for the party's election campaign strategy and is currently working in the public relations sector. The final interviewee was Terry Prone, one of Ireland's leading social and political commentators, author of a weekly column for the *Irish Examiner*, also a public relations specialist who worked with a number of political candidates and parties.

The relationship between political actors, mass media and the public is rather complicated and poses a lot of problems for social scientists. The sheer number of intervening factors and the bi-directional relationships between the various parts of the puzzle, make it difficult to distinguish clear causal relationships. We might attempt to examine the media coverage of elections by looking at newspaper and TV content, but this would only tell us a part of the story. We should not forget that there are people – editors, journalists, managers, reporters – who are part of the agenda setting process. The following chapter went behind the scenes and asked them for their opinions.

The chapter starts with a look at how Ireland's biggest media organisation – the public broadcaster Raidió Teilifís Éireann – responds to the challenges of reporting an

election campaign. This is followed by a more general look at the role of media during political events and their relationship with political parties and the public as derived from the interviews. The chapter finishes with a discussion of how the interviews fit with the results from the quantitative part of the thesis and whether they helped to provide an answer to the agenda setting puzzle.

8.1 RTÉ and the election campaign - a view from inside

Raidió Teilifís Éireann is by far the largest media organisation in Ireland. It comprises of two TV channels: RTÉ One and RTÉ Two, four radio stations (RTÉ Radio One, 2FM, Lyric FM and Raidió na Gaeltachta), a number of digital radio stations, a publishing house and a comprehensive web site. In Chapter 4 we discussed at length the unique role and position of the BBC in the United Kingdom. We also examined the problems of a public service broadcaster, especially in the view of recent suggestions of BBC's Director General calling for a wide-ranging reform, cutbacks and general scaling down. The situation in Ireland is somewhat different as RTÉ is a public service broadcaster “owned by the Irish people” (RTÉ 2010) with funding coming both from the compulsory TV licence and advertising revenue⁵⁵. One of the most pronounced differences between the BBC and RTÉ is the size of the media markets available to them and also the size of the organisations themselves. While RTÉ may appear big for a country with 4 million inhabitants and only a handful of commercial competitors, the BBC is by its own admission “the largest broadcasting corporation in the world” (BBC 2010).

⁵⁵ For comprehensive breakdown of the TV licence fee, please see Appendix 3.

As a public service broadcaster RTÉ is regulated by the Broadcasting Act of 2009. In regards to its news and current affairs output, Article 114 states that RTÉ is required to “provide comprehensive, independent and impartial news and current affairs programming on television, on radio, online and via mobile” (Broadcasting Act 2009). This becomes especially important during such important national events as general elections. Many public service broadcasters around the world have been seen by the governments as a perfect tool to disseminate their message. Examples abound of political tug-of-war for top managerial positions in Polish public TV; we have also observed the recent ban on political programming prior to regional elections on Italian public television. That is why covering an election campaign independently and impartially could be a difficult balancing act for a public broadcaster. The first part of this chapter focuses on the response of RTÉ to such a challenge and is mainly based on interviews with Peter Feeney and Michael Good.

Peter Feeney is the Head of Broadcast Compliance and he also works as the secretary to the Steering Group, which is set up every time there is an election or a referendum. As we have already stated above, impartiality is one of the objectives of RTÉ's news and current affairs coverage. Feeney agrees and goes back to the original Broadcasting Act from 1960, which set up RTÉ as a broadcasting organisation independent from the Government⁵⁶, and which introduced the need for RTÉ to be impartial, objective and fair in its news reporting. The same was repeated in the 1976 Broadcasting Act, but with an addition that the goal of impartiality could be achieved in one or more related programmes. This statement has been repeated in all broadcasting laws in Ireland ever since, both for the public media and the commercial ones, when they were introduced

⁵⁶ RTÉ was a part of the civil service up to that point.

in 1988. In 2009 both the public broadcaster and independent, commercial media were brought together under the umbrella of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland and the same regulations were repeated again. We can therefore see that impartiality, objectivity and fairness have been enshrined in the Irish law for many decades and have become a natural part of the broadcasting landscape.

The introduction of the new Broadcasting Act in 2009 brought major changes to the Irish media market by setting up a new regulatory body – the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland – and bringing the public broadcaster and its commercial rivals together under its supervision. Prior to 2009, the independent broadcasters were regulated by the terms and conditions of their separate licenses, while RTÉ was largely self-regulated. Feeney recognises the “need for an independent body,” but points to an interesting difference between Ireland and the UK. While RTÉ has moved from being self-regulated to the current arrangement, in Britain, according to Feeney, “there is a separate recognition for the independence of the BBC, which allows them a far greater degree of independence for their journalism. Much of the rest of their activity is subject to Ofcom. But for their journalism they are independent.” He goes on to say that “RTÉ would have liked some kind of a solution along those lines, but it wasn't to be. Our journalism is regulated in exactly the same way as TV3's, Newstalk's or anybody else's.” This remark does pose an interesting question: is the role of a public service broadcaster so fundamentally different that it requires more independence for its journalism than its commercial rivals? Should it be protected from any direct or indirect influence of the government? The current regulatory situation in Ireland is relatively new and Feeney envisages that “we will have to wait and see what this means in practice. (...) we're going to be discovering how things are for another year or two.”

8.1.1 RTÉ's approach to election coverage

When asked about the approach of Ireland's public broadcaster to the election coverage, Feeney recognises the importance of such events and that public service broadcasting “must be a source of reliable, accurate, impartial and objective information about political life.” He is also aware of the fact that people receive their political information increasingly from the electronic media, which might influence their opinions. The role of a public service broadcaster is therefore “enormously important,” as it fills “the public space where public debate takes place and (...) this should be done without an agenda by the broadcaster.” It is clear that Feeney regards the election coverage as the ultimate test for RTÉ. He stresses that “it must be the best election coverage available to the public to justify calling ourselves public broadcasters.”

Chapter 5 showed that RTÉ did indeed offer a variety of campaign-related programming in 2007, across its TV, radio and on-line channels. Is there a single body within the organisation, which oversees the election coverage? A steering group is set up as soon as an election is called or is likely to be called - confirms Feeney. It is chaired by the Director General and brings together all the key people in radio, TV, news and current affairs, on-line and facilities. The group usually meets twice a week, but the meeting might also occur on a daily basis. The steering group has two functions: it coordinates the planning of the election coverage and reviews the output which has been broadcast. He goes on to explain the workings of the steering group in more detail:

One of the things the election steering group does is to coordinate overall coverage to ensure there is a reasonable balance between programmes and the programmes coordinate with each other. We also provide for a monitoring service where we employ somebody to look at and listen to all our programmes just to ensure there isn't something happening that we are not quite aware of.

(...) There is quite a high degree of central coordination at election time and at a referendum time.

Feeney also meets with representatives of political parties during the election campaign if they are unhappy with the coverage they receive. The steering group as a whole also acts as a gatekeeper between political actors and the public broadcaster; as its secretary, Feeney would be the first point of contact. He calls himself a “conduit that political parties come to if they are unhappy.”

Parties are naturally very interested in the election coverage and one would expect them to exert a certain amount of pressure on RTÉ. Feeney thinks that such pressure as a “neutral term” and views it as something that journalists “expect” in a daily grind of election coverage. Press officers and political handlers contact programmes, offer people for interviews, express their views on items, accuse programmes of bias, etc. “There is a constant flow of views and comments between political parties and editors and producers,” explains Feeney.

Political actors also try to apply pressure more centrally, by contacting the Director General or the steering group. The group meets with representatives of political parties or lobby groups to discuss what they are unhappy about and decides whether such concerns need “to be passed on to our programme makers.” Feeney stresses, however, that senior management also wants to make sure that “they [producers and programme makers - Zalinski] are protected from bullying or harassment by political handlers and by press officers.”

RTÉ is required to achieve impartiality “over a number of related programmes,” and Feeney regards this as an advantage both for the broadcaster and for the listener or a

TV viewer. If all programmes had to present every single viewpoint, “this can be either very boring or result in dull broadcasting.”

This thesis used data from both manual and electronic content analysis of mass media election coverage. RTÉ has been monitoring its output closely too and has been doing so for about 20 years, according to Feeney. It is another example of how serious (and also how cautious) the public broadcaster is when it comes to its election coverage. The monitoring system has evolved from quite a rudimentary approach using a stopwatch, to a more sophisticated one used during the 2007 general election. Feeney explains that they decided to introduce weights to the measurements, so the number of viewers or listeners would have been taken into account. The baseline weight for both radio and TV programmes was set at thirty thousand listeners or viewers. This resulted in two measures: one with the total number of minutes for each party and another one, weighed according to the audience. Feeney concludes that RTÉ was “very reassured to find that there wasn't a great deal of difference between the weighed and the unweighted measurement for the parties.” The proportion of first preference votes from the previous general election is used as a guide for the proportionality of the campaign coverage.

Theoretically this puts new parties and the independent candidates in a difficult position, but Feeney assures us that “we do weigh it slightly so that the new parties and the independents get a disproportionate amount of attention.”

Counting minutes, whether with or without employing the weights, gives only part of the picture. One would expect that the tone of the coverage, the line of questioning, the approach of the presenter, this all might influence the impartiality of the election coverage too. The steering group does not shy away from investigating that side of the

election items. There are debates about the tone of questions, their fairness, whether an interview was soft or tough. They also discourage programme makers who are not involved with news and current affairs from inviting politicians on their shows. Feeney clarifies this last point and says that if “they [politicians - Zalinski] turn up in news and current affairs programmes, where they can expect to get a tougher interview than if they talked about their favourite sportsmen or their favourite music.”

8.1.2 Setting the agenda?

“There is always the accusation that the media set the agenda” - begins Feeney. This creates tensions between the media and politicians, who “may feel a bit sore” that the media drive the agenda. He also recognises the important role of *Morning Ireland*⁵⁷. “It is the first programme each day and it gets the biggest audience. So if *Morning Ireland* decided today we're going to deal with health cuts then it is quite likely that a lot of the agenda of the day for politicians reacting would be about health cuts.” And such a claim is supported by Michael Good (Managing Editor of RTÉ Radio News) who says that “we certainly do sit down and say: what do we think the issues of this campaign are going to be.”

While it might be true, that with such a big listenership and an established position on Ireland's media map, *Morning Ireland* has the power to set the agenda for the day, it is vital to remember that the programme also reacts to the news from the previous evening and responds to the stories published in newspapers. Once again isolating the cause and effect relationship between the agenda setter (in this case a radio programme and its editors) and agenda followers (politicians reacting and commenting on themes from that

⁵⁷ *Morning Ireland* is a breakfast news programme broadcast between Monday and Friday on RTÉ Radio 1 between seven and nine am. It is the most listened to radio programme in Ireland with the listenership of 464,000 (Source: Joint National Listenership Figures, February 2010).

morning's programme, other media picking up and following up on stories broadcast on *Morning Ireland*) could prove difficult, if not impossible. We live in the age of twenty-four hour news cycle, when government ministers, party press officers and political candidates are expected to be available for comment all throughout the day and with news stories recycled by various media outlets. Thus it becomes more and more difficult to discern who broke a particular story and where it originated. In this dissertation it has already been argued that, rather than a sequential chain of events, where information cues (and therefore influence) are transferred in a linear fashion from one actor to another, it is a much more complicated, multi-directional relationship between a growing number of participants operating in a world with a much more fragmented, and often personalized, media.

Being the biggest media organisation in Ireland should bring a lot of responsibility and this is reflected in Feeney's observations on the role of RTÉ as an agenda setter. "We are in the very powerful position as the biggest broadcasting player (and) we have to be in a position where we don't decide what the election is going to be about." Our earlier argument about the complicated nature of the agenda setting process is echoed by Feeney who underlines the importance of balance between the media agenda and the agenda of political parties. One resolves this "on a practical rather than on a theoretical level. In theory you could say that the politicians should decide the agenda, but in practice broadcasters need to prepare reports (...) you're working ahead."

He also recognises the outside influences, which have an effect on the election coverage. It is not only the political parties and the constant stream of press releases that inform the editorial decisions; it is also the other media and the public: "you're listening to the public a lot because we're also influenced by opinion polling. (...) You will also get things like letters to the editor, you get the general newspaper coverage."

One of the breakthroughs in the agenda setting research was the discovery that the print news media “might be stunningly successful telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen 1963:13). While not rejecting such an approach, Feeney is more cautious in admitting that the media can decide what the agenda is. He concedes that they might influence it, but he also illustrates his point with an interesting historical aside:

20 years ago there was a series of major hunger strikes in Northern Ireland. RTE in the Republic misjudged the public mood; we didn't think it was as big an issue for the general public as it was. We were out of touch. The media's agenda was not the same as the public agenda and ultimately the public agenda was the more important one.

The impression we get from this interview is of an organisation which is very much aware of its important role within the Irish society, even more so during an important national event, such as a general election. RTÉ also emerges as very much aware of the interplay of various external influences and pressures on its electoral coverage, while at the same time trying to shield its journalistic staff from them. The interview with Peter Feeney and his views on the agenda setting function of the mass media corroborate statements from earlier chapters of this dissertation about the complicated and nonlinear nature of the agenda setting process. This process also appears to be driven much less by a thought through, conscious agenda setting decision making, and more by more natural, organic, day-to-day journalistic practices. What might appear as a set agenda from the investigation of quantitative data, for media practitioners is a by-product of their work, rather than an ideological goal in itself. Feeney says:

I counter people who argue that there is a conspiracy; that media has an agenda. (...) My own instinct from being around elections in RTÉ for 30 years is that there is actually very little ideology amongst journalists. What we end up with is much more to do with the amount of resources allocated, the pressure and time rather than the personal views of journalists. (...) I do encounter

people who talk about the whole thing as a conspiracy. (...) they would see it as the establishment (trade unions, employers, well-paid public servants) and those out of power (unemployed, the dispossessed, those excluded from the process). I would have some sympathy for that view, but I wouldn't see it as a conspiracy. I would see it as a rather inevitable consequence of the way politics is structured and the way it influences society (...) and I suspect it is very similar in other societies as well.

8.2 Other media

The first part of this chapter focused on the role of the Irish public service broadcaster – Raidió Teilifís Éireann – as seen by two senior members of its management and editorial staff. The following part will tackle the issues of the agenda setting function of the mass media during general elections using the material gathered from the interviews conducted with print journalists (Pat Leahy - political editor of the *Sunday Business Post*), former general secretary of Fianna Fáil (Martin Mackin) and a public relations specialist (Terry Prone). This material will be complemented by views on relevant topics expressed by the two interviewees already mentioned in this chapter.

8.2.1 Media and their role during elections

The interview process followed a semi-structured approach. There was a set list of themes that were discussed with all participants, but, when necessary and appropriate, supplemental questions were added for the sake of clarification or to pursue a point relevant to the objectives of the thesis. All interviews started with a general question on the interviewees' take on the role of mass media during general elections.

There is an interesting difference between the approach of Mackin and that of Prone and Leahy. The latter two see the role of the mass media during such a particular time as, largely, an extension of their ordinary reporting, while Mackin begins by stating that it is ‘hugely important (and) getting more important. (...) there's a cliché in politics:

there's a ground war and there's the air war. (...) you've got campaign that's fought across the airwaves." The media are seen as a channel, a tool for getting the votes and to "magnify your message." But, according to Mackin, it can also be an "opponent."

As a journalist, Leahy starts off by underlining that the role of media during the election campaign is to report on the campaign. But he adds that the second part of the role of mass media is to "present (and) to varying extent set the agenda; to pose particular questions that they believe are relevant (...)." This gives us an insight into the question of media self-awareness when it comes to the question of their power and their agenda setting function. Prone views that role from a more business-like perspective. She comments that "the role of media doesn't change from the owners' point of view [during the election campaign - Zalinski] – it is still delivery of profit, therefore you must entertain, attract and inform." And she is not alone in such an approach as Martin Mackin also remarks that "newspapers have to sell copies, television stations and radio stations need listeners. I'm always conscious of that imperative there as well. I'm not saying it distorts the coverage, but it certainly informs it to a great degree."

In the previous chapters we pointed to some differences between the 2002 and the 2007 general election campaigns in Ireland. Pat Leahy agrees and admits that political journalists were more aggressive in 2007, particularly in their treatment of Fianna Fáil. He notes that

There was very much a feeling among political correspondents that they had been, they allowed themselves to be managed by Fianna Fáil during the 2002 election. (They) were determined not to let it happen and to be more aggressive during the 2007 election. (...) the media in 2007 was determined to be more aggressive, interrogative and agenda setting than it had been in 2002.

Leahy's thoughts once again indicate a level of self-awareness among journalists; they are alert to their role in the democratic process. His views also show that media do react to (and against) political parties' attempts at manipulation. Prone agrees with that and adds that in 2007 the journalists "were not willing to be led by the Fianna Fáil."

The interviewees see the media as important, self-aware and able to respond to, and fight, the influence of political parties. Political parties, on the other hand, have to "navigate a tricky set of waters," according to Mackin, as they both seek the help of mass media in spreading their message, but have to often fight them at the same time.

Leahy suggests that the print media are quite aware of their role in terms of the mass media agenda setting function. But is it a conscious decision on their part to make some topics more prominent than others? Or is the media agenda, as it was argued by Peter Feeney in the first part of this chapter, shaped in a more organic, less structured way? Is the media agenda more a product of journalistic processes (news gathering, reporting, responding and analysing press releases, a synergy of sorts with the parties agenda) or is it a result of a more systematic approach? Leahy observes:

How this process evolves is specific to each media organisation. In our paper, which is a small paper, the processes are more informal. I'm talking to my editor, to one or two of my colleagues. Certain things were set out at the beginning of the campaign. (...) one is sitting down at the beginning of the campaign with the editor and discussing what should be the shape of our campaign [coverage - Zalinski]. What issues should be important to us.

8.2.2 Process vs. issues

The fact that campaign process coverage in the media overshadows the articles and news broadcasts dealing with issues has been discussed at length earlier in this thesis. Peter Feeney highlighted the fact, later repeated by Terry Prone, that media offer a

product that needs to sell. A media organisation, such as RTÉ, has to reconcile its role as a public broadcaster with a mission to objectively inform its viewers and listeners, with its need to attract and entertain, in order to increase its market share, which helps them attract advertising. He mentions the importance of candidates' personalities during the campaign⁵⁸ and that this is what people are interested in. Feeney states that:

By concentrating on personalities, we also narrow the parameters in which policy is discussed. There is evidence that a fair amount of voters are not interested in policy. There are interested in competence, integrity or attractiveness of candidates. If broadcasters and journalists were to ignore that, they would find that their reports would get less attention.

Good concurs with Feeney that personalities are important in the campaign coverage and that it is an issue “we [editors – Zalinski] debate all the time.” He also suggests that the 2007 campaign was less personality driven than the previous ones. The editors also made a strategic decision not to place such an importance on the leaders' campaign. While during the previous elections key reporters were assigned to cover the Taoiseach's campaign for example, this was not so in 2007. Good also points to the democratic role of the public broadcaster. Although it is easier to regard elections as a race, “if one takes it [democratic role – Zalinski] seriously,” then issues have to come into play. Trying to avoid the horse race element of any campaign cannot be easy. One of the ways to limit

⁵⁸ We can observe this growing trend in the UK, where the pre-election campaign in early 2010 seemed to be focussed on Gordon Brown, David Cameron and their spouses. We can see the extent of mass media focus on the leaders if we look at the exclusive coverage they received in the first three months of 2010. Labour's leader Gordon Brown appeared in *Attitude*, *News of the World*, *Tesco Magazine*, *London Evening Standard*, the *Observer*, *Financial Times*, the *Sunday Sun*, *Independent on Sunday*, *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, the *Economist*, *Shortlist*, *Wales on Sunday*, the *Tribune*. He was also interviewed on BBC Radio 5 Live, by Reuters, on Piers Morgan's *Life Stories* (ITV), Real Radio, British Forces Radio and on Channel 4 News. David Cameron gave interviews in the *Newsweek*, *Gloucester Citizen*, *Liverpool Daily Post*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *Attitude*, *Glamour*, *Daily Express*, the *Sunday Times*, *Shortlist*, *Brighton Angus*. The Conservative Party leader was interviewed by Sir Trevor McDonald, appeared on Sky News, the *Andrew Marr Show*, BBC's *Woman's Hour*, Heart FM, the *Alan Titchmarsh Show*, MSN.com and GMTV.

the process coverage, according to Good, is a rule of not opening a news bulletin with the results of a latest poll.

Prone, on the other hand, sees the relatively small coverage of issues as a “professional failure of the media.” She observes that it used to be a part of journalists' job to make policy matters interesting for the reader, but nowadays such matters are perceived as “not sexy enough.” And journalists see election campaigns as political dramas rather than events that have a possibility to shape the nation's future and change people's lives. They need strong characters: heroes and villains. Leahy admits that his paper tries to achieve a balance between process and policy stories, but ultimately “the human drama of politics is one of the things that people follow. The excitement of horse race is what people find compelling.” If newspapers concentrated on the analysis of policy documents, this would make the election coverage “dull” for both journalists and the readers, he notes.

In Chapter 6 we concluded that coverage of the process issues during election campaigns would take priority in the media because of the inherent nature of the mass media, journalistic training and institutionalization. Comments from those interviewed for this chapter support such statements. Mass media and especially news media, daily newspapers and TV news bulletins are focused on the up-to-the-minute reporting; news itself has a very short shelf life. Election campaigns themselves are also short, so quite naturally there is not much space for considered reflection, thorough analysis and balanced comment. While some might say that is regrettable, as it deprives the voting public of information on which to base their vote choice, a more realistic approach could suggest that such analysis does not belong to the news media. Perhaps political parties should seek new ways to get their policy initiatives across. In the age of the

Internet and social networking, when connecting with voters should (at least theoretically) be easier than ever, this could certainly be explored.

8.2.3 Media and the public

Research into the agenda setting function of the mass media has been exploring the nature and strength of the relationship between the media agenda and the public one since the 1972 article on the subject written by McCombs and Shaw. This has also been explored in the previous chapters of this dissertation, but what do professionals think about it? Peter Feeney stressed how seriously the public broadcaster sees its role in the democratic process. Also, nowadays media can stay in touch with their consumers in a number of ways: through text messages, e-mail, or phone calls to the programmes. This can help them to gauge the public mood. Good adds that Ireland's public broadcaster also has an on-line panel, which covers both radio and TV output. Such a tool enables the editors and producers to read what people think about the programmes and what issues are important to them. When a clear pattern emerges, then programme makers could take the viewers' opinions into account.

But what about other, commercial media? Do newspaper editors think about their readers and their needs in terms beyond the simple "will it sell?" mantra?

Pat Leahy of the *Sunday Business Post* suggests that there is a certain notion of a mission even in a commercial media enterprise. He remarks that "our role (...) is to ask questions of the parties that we think (...) the public does or should, deserve to know." As his paper concentrates on economic and business matters, such issues take prominence in its coverage. In the earlier section dealing with the question of news media election coverage, we concluded that such a process might be the result of the way media operate and not conscious decisions on the part of journalists and editors. According to

Leahy this might not be so straightforward. When asked about the relationship between newspapers and the public, he reveals that:

we would have a particular view of what are the most important issues. (...) Myself and the Editor would say: this is the most important issue of this election and we would put that to our readers; party A says this, party B says that, this is what we think. This is not to say that all other issues are not important, their coverage gets crowded out.

We can therefore observe that both the editor and the political correspondent of this particular newspaper do make an informed decision about what the most important issue of the campaign is. Such a decision does not seem to follow news pattern, but is more thought out. This could be the result of the *Sunday Business Post's* distinct profile – the decision to focus on the economic issues comes easy and naturally to the editorial team. The fact that it is a weekly publication might also influence the quality and depth of their coverage, as they do not have to chase the news of the day as do their daily competitors.

When asked about the relationship between the public and the media, Terry Prone tries to clarify what the public is, whether one should even talk about one public, or just focus on the voting public which is a much smaller group. Thinking about what people wanted from their parties and from the media coverage in 2007 she points to the failure of the media to provide for their consumers, she argues that “the floating voter, and they were the ones that mattered in the 2007 election, they wanted to find something interesting. (But) when the floating voter wants things to be interesting – media respond at the level of trivia. You have colour pieces: on gaffes, on amateur psychology, that kind of nonsense.” Once again we see that the media trivialize their political coverage, because they want to appeal to their consumers. And we have already learnt that the media professionals agree that the public *wants* horserace and perceives politics through

the lens of sensation and the fight between big personalities. The theme of entertaining the public comes back again and again. Prone says that the readers and viewers “just want to be entertained” and Leahy concurs: “voters didn't want sad stories.”

8.2.4 Setting the agenda?

One of the issues we were interested to ask the professionals interviewed for this chapter was whether they thought that the media were self-aware of their function as agenda setters. Is this process natural and unconscious or is it an outcome arising from editorial discussions? Earlier on in this thesis we have written about the collaborative and democratic way the *Guardian* shapes its most important election editorial. Are there similar processes behind the scenes in the Irish media? And do Irish journalists think they have the ability to influence public opinion?

The opinions on the subject of the agenda setting function of the mass media are cautious. As a representative of print journalism Leahy does not think “the Irish media has it in its collective power to decide an election. It may very well decide how the campaign is fought.” Michael Good does not see mass media as that powerful either. He argues that by studying election results we can see that media do not have a strong influence in Ireland. “You can look back at elections and referendums over the years and you can see that (...) there was a political consensus (...) reflected in our coverage which didn't match the outcome of the election.” We can see a similar approach in the words of Pat Leahy who says that the Irish media might not be as successful in influencing their consumers as media in the UK or in the US and that “Fianna Fáil won the last election in the face of the overwhelmingly negative coverage.”

Prone is also sceptical about the notion of mass media agenda setting power. Some newspapers are quite clear in their desire to tell people what to think about, but they do

not succeed in the Irish market. She singles out one particular title, the *Irish Daily Mail*. “It tells its small readership everyday what to think. And it doesn't tell them, it bellows at them. The *Daily Mail* has remarkably little traction in the way of influencing how public thinks in Ireland.” Is it because the title has been trying to transplant some of the British media culture? There might be another reason for the lukewarm reception of the *Irish Daily Mail* by the readers in Dublin, Cork or Galway – Irish politics is much more local than in the United Kingdom. The importance of localism came up with our conversations with both Leahy and Prone. Leahy points out that “as long as localism remains so strong in Irish electoral politics, then that acts as a break on the power of the media.” He adds that for voters “local issues are more important and who their local representative is, (...) is more important than the national issues.” Prone adds that one of the starkest differences between Ireland and other countries is the “closeness to politics which doesn't characterize any other European country (...) We all know an individual politician. If we want to reach any politician in the Dail, we can do it.”

One interviewee thought differently. Martin Mackin describes the Irish media as being “keenly aware” of their ability “to shape campaign” or even “to make or break a campaign,” although he does admit that the latter observation “might be too strong.” According to Mackin the media establish “the mood music for the campaign.” With his experience in political campaigning on the side of a major political party, he argues that political parties need to monitor the media, precisely because of their “considerable shaping influence.” He recalls the 1997 campaign in which Fianna Fáil introduced a very basic media monitoring system, which, come the 2002 campaign, has evolved into a more sophisticated operation. The party and its press office were even monitoring local media.

The opinions on the ability of the mass media to influence voters were quite diverse. Some of those interviewed for this chapter were quite doubtful of the media agenda setting power. Prone goes as far as to say that when she talks to individual journalists “they all reject the idea that they have the power to influence.” Peter Feeney offers an interesting insight into the question of whether journalists' are self-aware of their power: they might simply not have enough time to think about it. Their main goal is the deadline and “it doesn't matter how good your product is, you've got to make your deadline.” In the fast-paced world of news journalism, and one would think the pace gets even more frenetic during an election campaign, there is little room for reflection. Journalism is a “rather unreflective profession” concludes Feeney.

Although the Irish news media might behave like in any other country, the response they receive and the way people interact with newspapers and TV might be different. They might not see their national newspaper as the only way to connect with politics or their representatives. They might meet their TD or a hopeful candidate in their local pub. This closer proximity to political life is also reflected in popularity of local media in Ireland explored in previous chapters.

8.2.5 Partisan media?

The question whether mass media are partisan is an integral part of the agenda setting puzzle. If a newspaper or a TV news programme explicitly endorses a political party or a candidate, it is a clear sign that they are trying to influence the public opinion. Such an endorsement is therefore a sign that the media are self aware of their possible power and that they want to use it. This thesis looked at two neighbouring countries with quite different media markets. While the partisanship of the British press is well documented and has been analysed in this thesis, the Irish press has been for years considered as fairly non-partisan. Newspapers published in Ireland have never really come close to the

overt partisanship of the *Sun* or other British titles, although slight changes in this behaviour have been detected by Brandenburg (2003) and by this thesis.

There was, however, one notable exception in the history of election campaign coverage in the Irish press. During the 1997 campaign, one day before the election, the Irish Independent took an unprecedented step and published an editorial endorsing Fianna Fáil on its front page.



Figure 8-1 *Irish Independent* front page with the “it’s payback time” editorial.

“For years we have been bled white - now it's payback time” said the title and the article finished with a straightforward call to vote for the coalition between Fianna Fáil and Progressive Democrats. “On any objective analysis, it is a vote for Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats tomorrow which offers the better chance of securing our future. We have had decades of harsh tax regimes. Let us start to enjoy some payback” (*Irish Independent* 1997). Although our interviewees recalled this event, it is seen more as

a one-off occurrence in the history of the Irish media. It did not start a move of the Irish press towards more explicit partisan positions. Martin Mackin, for example, “never got the fuss about it,” and he opines that “newspapers are allowed to have opinions and they express those opinions all the time through a range of editorializing instruments.”

From the interviews and their responses to the question about the partisanship of Irish media, we conclude that there is an awareness of the partisanship of the British press and how different in this respect Irish media are. Leahy describes the Irish press as

“fairly non-partisan.” His newspaper, although conscious to the amount of space it devotes to particular parties, “reserves the right to devote as much space to whatever issue.” The political editor of the *Sunday Business Post* admits that they do not behave in the same way as the *Irish Times* for example, where column inches are measured to ensure balanced coverage. He also remarks that because of the paper's freedom in shaping their coverage, smaller parties might get crowded out. Partisanship could stem from editorial decisions (as with the 1997 example), but it could also be a result of an individual choice. Prone puts forward an argument that partisanship is at an individual level. Quite simply, she says that the “journalists like people who deliver them stories.” This observation highlights the fact that bias in the media or the way media agenda is formed could arise from practical, day-to-day decisions taken by individual journalists and not only from centralized and deliberate decisions of editors, managers and owners. But we also know that owners can play an important role in shaping the agenda of their newspapers as we have demonstrated when discussing the influence of Rupert Murdoch on British politics.

8.2.6 Bertiegate

In Chapter 6 we examined the impact of the investigation into Bertie Ahern's personal finances, referred to in the media as Bertiegate, on the election coverage. We concluded that the coverage coded as “sleaze/political” ethics according to our content analysis method constituted a much bigger proportion of the coverage of the 2007 election campaign than five years previously or in the UK in 2005. We argued that it was clearly visible that the media were preoccupied with the Taoiseach's finances, but the analysis of the editorials and opinion pieces showed that it did not mean they were writing about him in a negative manner. In fact, the more they wrote about Ahern, the more positive the coverage got.

The investigation into Ahern's finances had an impact on the campaign coverage, especially at the beginning of the campaign. It meant that the 2007 campaign was certainly different to the 2002 one. Good observes that “comparing this with the previous elections where Bertie Ahern was everywhere, your problem was trying not to use him, because you had so much of him.”

The people interviewed for this chapter agree that Bertiegate was important “to the conduct of the campaign,” according to Leahy. While it might have been important and prominent, it did not seem to affect people's voting choice and it was not because they thought that it was not important, but “it was that they decided that it wasn't as important as the media thought it was.” Prone says that one should look at the issue from three different angles: there was the issue, the coverage of it and the public's attitude to Ahern. Ultimately she does not believe that the coverage “greatly influenced the election.”

Bertiegate adds an interesting dimension to our discussion of the agenda setting function of the mass media in Ireland during general election campaigns. Agenda setting research argues that the time frame is an essential part to any investigation into media effects. The relatively short period of an election campaign might not be sufficient to detect mass media influence on the public, especially in terms of broad, general issues, such as economy or social welfare. Voters' usually have long-held positions on such issues and might not be open to an outside influence. But an introduction of a highly controversial issue about a party leader, and in this case the prime minister, could sway the public in a short term. Quantitative evidence presented in earlier chapters showed that the issue did command a significant proportion of the news media election coverage. The evidence obtained from the interviews suggests that, while important and visible, Bertiegate did not have a big impact on the voting public.

This brings us once again to the argument that while media might set the agenda for the election, and such an agenda might be correlated to the public agenda, its influence is much more difficult to detect.

8.3 Conclusions

The interviews conducted for this chapter complement the quantitative data analysed in the previous parts of this thesis. Throughout this investigation into the election news coverage in Ireland, a number of questions about the nature of the process and mass media view of it, remained. Posing these questions to journalists, editors, senior managers and political campaign organisers added an interesting dimension to this study. It helped to prepare a more vivid and rounded picture of media agenda setting in Ireland; a picture which emerged from a quantitative study supplemented with evidence obtained thanks to the above interviews. Though interesting, and at times surprising, patterns from the content analysis of the print and TV media data only gave us part of the whole picture. The qualitative data enabled us to look beyond the tables and graphs. The conversations with people with such a vast knowledge and experience of the media industry and election campaigns in Ireland show what happens “behind the scenes” and what these people think of their own role in the agenda setting process.

After having analysed the interviews in detail, we can draw conclusions about the importance and predominance of the process coverage during election campaigns, the partisanship of the Irish media, the role of the mass media during elections, journalists' view of the agenda setting process and finally, the role of the public broadcaster during a general election campaign. These issues are summarized in more in the final section of this chapter.

8.3.1 Process

The interviewees agreed that media perceive politics, and this is especially visible during election campaigns, as human drama. The public is seen as not interested in issues, but captivated by personalities and horse race. Reporting on this side of the campaign helps the mass media to sell and attract readers, listeners and viewers and, ultimately, sell the newspapers and raise viewership and listenership. An issue-heavy coverage was seen as “dull” and unattractive for the public. Such an approach is true both for the public broadcaster and commercial media. This supports established findings presented earlier in this thesis that process issues dominate the election coverage in Ireland.

8.3.2 RTÉ takes elections seriously

RTÉ is the biggest broadcaster in Ireland and its role cannot be underestimated, especially amongst other electronic media in the country. The interviews with Peter Feeney (Head of Broadcast Compliance and Secretary to the election steering group) and Michael Good (Managing Editor of RTÉ Radio News) gave us a clearer picture of how the public broadcaster sees its role during election campaigns.

Firstly we take note of the impartiality and objectivity stipulations which have been part of Broadcasting Acts since the 1960s in Ireland. These are the guiding principles for RTÉ election coverage. We can also see that the public broadcaster takes its democratic role seriously and sees itself as an important part of the social space, providing the public with the most objective reporting on the candidates, political parties, etc. To this end a steering group is set up for the time of any election campaign comprising of senior management and editorial staff with the task of monitoring the election coverage across radio, TV and on-line operations. The steering group is also responsible for dealing with queries from political parties and protecting programme staff from the pressure exerted

by election candidates and their teams. RTÉ also conducts its own media monitoring to ensure their election coverage is balanced.

Interestingly, RTÉ was praised by Martin Mackin, who worked for the Fianna Fáil campaigns in 1997 and 2002, who said that in his experience he “would see them as fair.”

8.3.3 Irish media are not partisan

The question of Irish print media partisanship is interesting to explore from two angles: comparing the situation to the case in the United Kingdom and looking at the evolution of partisanship in the Irish media.

The partisanship of the British press is well documented and was also examined in this thesis. It is thought provoking then, when we look at the Irish newspapers, which, at first glance, have no overt political affiliations. This has been highlighted by Brandenburg in his research into the Irish media, but he also argued that we are witnessing subtle changes and that the Irish press is getting more partisan. This thesis showed some evidence of that in the previous chapters.

The interview data shows that the media practitioners are aware of the partisanship of the British press and the apparent lack of political endorsements in newspapers published in Ireland. The front-page editorial printed by the *Irish Independent* in June 1997 (previously mentioned “Its Payback Time”) was the only instance when our interviewees could recall an evidence of such an open partisanship. Some of them suggest that partisanship might be happening on a more individual level (Prone), but this cannot be seen as conclusive, as Feeney says that journalists are very rarely ideological. Mackin makes a point that, although we cannot see press partisanship similar to the British model, there is plenty of scope for editorializing and that one can

have a very clear idea of the political leanings of any newspaper as soon as we glance at the front page or read its opinion pieces. This last point corroborates our findings about the statement bias visible in opinion and editorial content published in print media during the 2007 general election in Ireland.

8.3.4 Media's role is to report (and meet the deadline)

Perhaps quite understandably, the topic which proved the most difficult during the interviews was the one enquiring about the role of mass media during election campaigns and their possible agenda setting influence on the voters. The notion that media are powerful does not sit comfortably with journalists and editors (only Mackin described media as having a “shaping influence”). They see themselves as important parts of the democratic process (Leahy, Good, Feeney), they supply their readers and viewers with objective reports and they aim to un-spin political parties' messages (Feeney, Good). They view their duties as mainly reporting the news and while a distinct media agenda is inevitably set, it is rarely a result of a deliberate decision. Some of the interviewees admitted that they think about the topics they would like to cover beforehand and reflect on the issues that are most important for the public (Good, Leahy), but they did not seem to place too much emphasis on that. Ultimately, journalism had one goal: to meet the deadline (Feeney). Prone claimed that individual journalists do not see themselves as powerful at all.

Why are representatives of the mass media so cautious about the notion that they might possibly have an agenda setting influence? We can see several explanations of this. Firstly, the common perception of the media as the “fourth estate,” as manipulative and subservient to the needs of their powerful owners, is negative. Therefore those working in the media do not want to perpetuate such stereotypes by proclaiming that they are conscious of their possible power. Secondly the nature of the communication

effects and relationships between political actors and the media is fraught with tension. Candidates need the media to spread their messages, but the media need the human drama of the campaign to sell. Even the public broadcaster is not free from such commercial constraints – viewership figures are the basic measure of programmes' performance. This creates an interesting situation where the worlds of politics and media are separated and very closely aligned, often both at the same time. Thirdly, our interviews show that the relationship between politics, the media and the public is seen as complicated and nonlinear. There is a perception of possible effects, but also a realization that it could be difficult to prove them. Let us conclude with a quote from the interview with Pat Leahy who avers that “Politics is the most human of professions and I think human relations tend to be messy, complicated and inconsistent. So it is with the relationship between media and politics.

Chapter 9

Conclusions and discussion

9 Conclusions and discussion

It is a widely-held belief, supported by scientific research that news media play an important, if not crucial role, during election campaigns. With their omnipresence and the way they are integrated into people's daily lives, the mass media have evolved from being "merely a channel of communication to being a major actor in the campaigning process" (Butler and Ranney 1992: 283). This has been recognised by political parties, who organise their campaigns around a "media grid," pushing important messages at their morning news conferences, so they can have the biggest impact on the media. The centrality of the media to the political process is also supported by the findings of public opinion surveys, which indicate that voters get their political information primarily from TV, radio and newspapers. And finally the significance of the media for election campaigns has been researched thoroughly by social scientists all over the world.

Agenda setting has been one of the most popular and enduring theories exploring the importance and possible influence of the media in the political process. Since the first agenda setting study in 1972, hundreds of studies examined the agenda setting process and found evidence of media effects. The theory helped political communication to shift from the paradigm of limited media effects into a new research tradition and a different take on media influence. Systematic studies of political, media and public agendas and the interaction between them have become commonplace in the fields of political communication and political science. They employ a vast variety of different research methods, which have been constantly evolving to incorporate the latest technological advances.

There are still, however, some unexplored territories as far as media and public agenda studies are concerned. Some countries, such as the United States and Britain, have developed a comprehensive body of agenda setting research. Media and public agendas have also been examined in some European countries, for example Germany (Brosius & Weimann 1996), Spain (McCombs, Lopez-Escobar & Llamas 2006), or Sweden (Asp 1983; Hinnfors 2007). In Ireland, so far systematic agenda studies have been few and far between. While Irish elections and voters' behaviour have been on the academic radar for decades (Penniman & Farrell 1987; Laver et al., 1987; Gallagher & Sinnott 1990; Gallagher & Laver 1993; Marsh & Mitchell 1999; Gallagher et al. 2003; Gallagher & Marsh 2007), researching the importance of the media in the political process has been largely neglected. Brandenburg was the first to conduct a quantitative study of the campaign coverage during the Irish 2002 general election (Brandenburg 2005). At the same time, there have been no cross-country comparative studies looking into the similarities and differences between Ireland and other countries. It has been noted that there is too little research into news media election coverage in different countries with de Vreese arguing that "evidence from cross-national comparisons of national elections is virtually non-existent" (2003: 184). The purpose of this study was to address these two gaps in political communication research.

First, it advanced the study of the role of media in election campaigns in Ireland. It did so by building on Brandenburg's research and by adding new elements to it. A new quantitative dataset of media content has been compiled for the purpose of this inquiry. This allowed for the first systematic comparison of the news media election coverage in Ireland. This present study also explored the role of mass media during elections in Ireland from another angle. Thanks to a number of interviews with key industry insiders and decision-makers, we examined how people working in mass media see their role

during election campaigns. Finally, we addressed some methodological problems of media agenda setting research by considering and testing the use of new technologies to measure the media and public agendas.

Second, we focused on the cross-country comparative aspect of the study. We examined and compared the media and public agendas in Britain and in Ireland during general election campaigns. We were able to make direct comparisons in terms of media agendas in both countries as the data was content analysed using the same methodology. Choosing the United Kingdom and Ireland as the case studies also helped us to tackle another problem of election news coverage studies. So far, most of such studies have used the most different system design (Stromback & Aalberg 2008) with few focusing on the most similar system design. The differences and similarities between Ireland and Britain, in terms of their political systems, their media markets and the levels of public trust in the media, place this research in between the most similar and most different approaches. This thesis is also the first comparative study of the media and public agendas in Ireland and in another country.

In this chapter we shall bring together all the findings of our study into media and public agendas during general elections in Ireland and Britain. First we outline the principal findings from the country-specific studies. Then we present the comparative aspect of the inquiry. We also consider the implications of the study, both in terms of future research, as well as policy ones. The chapter finishes with a brief discussion on the future of agenda setting research in the ever-evolving world of mass media.

9.1 Ireland 2007

The preconceived picture of the Irish media painted them as sacerdotal, proportional and “obsessively impartial,” (Bowman 1987; Brandenburg 2005: 318). The Irish print

media, although not legally obliged to do so, were supposed to offer an election coverage, which was distributed “proportionally across the different parties, reflecting their current parliamentary strength” (Brandenburg 2005: 298). Stemming from this view, there has been a long standing belief that the Irish media, contrary to their British counterparts, are non-partisan. Brandenburg observed that, perhaps because of such an understanding of the role of the Irish media in national elections, there has been little research interest in studying them. But he questioned such notions in the first quantitative study into the role Irish media played during the 2002 general election campaign. His findings, methodology and the existence of the media content dataset gave rise to this study. Our aim was to build on Brandenburg’s research experience and by doing so further the study of political communication in Ireland. We also wanted to expand and test the alternative methodological approaches to the study of news media and public agendas in Ireland.

For the investigation into the role of media during the 2007 general election we gathered a dataset of media content, which comprised of daily newspapers and TV news bulletins. This data were then analysed for content using the methodology analogous to the one employed by Brandenburg in his study of media agenda in the United Kingdom in 2005 and in Ireland in 2002. We also examined the public agenda, principally using the data gathered by the Irish National Election Study. In addition to the quantitative study, we conducted qualitative research to better the understanding of the mechanisms behind the agenda setting process. The interview process also allowed us to question whether the media are aware of their possible ability to influence voters.

Questions

To examine the role of mass media during the 2007 general election in Ireland, we developed and looked for answers to a number of general questions. These were as follows :

QUESTION 1: was there a coverage bias in the mass media coverage of the campaign? Was there, similarly to 2002, a lack of proportionality in the media reports on political parties and their leaders?

QUESTION 2: did the policy issues constitute a smaller share of media campaign coverage than reporting on the campaigning process itself? We expect that news coverage of elections in Ireland is not significantly different in this respect, than in other countries examined by academics before, and that mass media were more interested in the process rather than the issues. Were there differences between the approach to election coverage of different types of media?

QUESTION 3: was there a statement bias in the Irish newspapers? The dataset collected and content analysed for this study contains a measure of tone of the campaign-related opinion and editorial newspaper content. We can therefore study whether the opinion on parties and leaders was on average negative, neutral and positive. Was there a difference in the average tone of the opinion coverage between newspapers?

QUESTION 4: were there similarities between the items on the media agenda and those on the public one?

We also explored the effects of the media systems in Ireland and in the UK and whether such differences might explain some of the variations between the extent and nature of media agendas in the countries examined by this study.

Findings: quantitative study

NO ISSUES. We found that campaign-related media coverage in 2007 was dominated by articles and reports on the campaign process itself, rather than issues or party policies. According to our analysis, issues constituted an even smaller proportion of the overall campaign coverage than in the United Kingdom in 2005 and during the 2002 general election in Ireland. Policies and issues constituted only 19.6 percent of the overall campaign. Interestingly, there was more space for the policy-related news on TV news than in newspapers. These results are in line with the findings of media agenda studies from other countries, where process also dominates the election coverage. They are, however, rather alarming if one subscribes to the belief that the role of the media is not only to entertain, but also to inform and educate about the world, society and politics.

Although the focus of the campaign coverage was on the election process itself, some parties were portrayed more in terms of their policies than others. There was more attention given to the policies of smaller parties (Sinn Féin, Labour and the Green Party), than the bigger ones (Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Progressive Democrats).

PERSONALITIES. Research into agenda setting and political communication has shown that the role of party leaders in national elections cannot be underestimated. We found evidence of this in Ireland too. Out of all newspaper coverage related to the campaign content analysed for this thesis, 40 percent spoke about one of the six leaders. Fianna Fáil's Bertie Ahern commanded one fifth of all election coverage published in newspapers during the campaign and more than a half of the lines written about any of the leaders. Enda Kenny (Fine Gael) came second with 21.6 percent of the coverage. We also found that Michael McDowell (Progressive Democrats) was over represented with 11 percent of the lines devoted to leaders, especially when compared to 9.5 percent

focused on Labour's leader, Pat Rabbitte. We also conclude that there were significant differences in the level of prominence of leaders in the coverage of their respective parties. While Bertie Ahern commanded 62.3 percent of Fianna Fáil's coverage, Trevor Sargent seemed to be less of an asset for the Green Party with only 23.5 percent of the coverage focusing on him. These figures, analysed together with a record-high viewership figures for the leaders' TV debates show that leaders were indeed a focal point of the campaign, but also suggest that some performed better for their parties than others.

DOCILE CAMPAIGN. The coding methodology employed by this thesis allows for a measure of the tone of the campaign. All opinion and editorial pieces were coded for statement bias. We conclude that in 2007 a majority of such pieces were neutral in tone (average mean of -0.12). This contrasts with the previous election. In 2002, Brandenburg found that a larger proportion of opinion articles were negative (average mean of -0.34).

IRISH TIMES - STATEMENT BIAS. By analysing the media agenda and looking at the tone of the opinion and editorial coverage, we investigated the possibility of a partisan bias in the Irish media. Generally Irish newspapers are perceived as being impartial and objective, especially when compared to their British counterparts. Evidence presented by this thesis suggests that in some cases the assumption about the non-partisan nature of the Irish press might be wrong.

In 2002 the analysis of the mean scores of coverage tone showed that the *Irish Times* opined positively only about the Green Party and the independent candidates. In 2007, however, we observed that it also wrote positively about the opposition (Fine Gael, Labour and the Greens). At the same time, the paper's opinion pieces were negative

about Fianna Fáil and Progressive Democrats. We conclude that the *Irish Times* held an anti-government position and wrote more positively about the Rainbow coalition.

IRISH EXAMINER. The *Irish Examiner* emerged as a paper different to the rest from our analysis. First, it carried the biggest share of policy related coverage out of all daily newspapers (26.4 percent of overall campaign coverage). Second, we found that the paper changed its stance on some of the parties between the 2002 and 2007 elections. In 2002 it was the only newspaper with a positive mean score for the opinion content it published about Sinn Féin. It also wrote positively about the party leader – Gerry Adams (mean score of +0.40). Analysing the mean scores for such content in 2007, we found this no longer the case. In fact, the *Examiner* was the harshest critic of the party with a mean score for the opinion coverage of -0.46 and -0.16 for their writing about Adams.

BERTIEGATE. The inquiry into Taoiseach Bertie Ahern's personal finances was one of the biggest stories of the campaign, especially in its first week. Examining the media agenda, we found that the political ethics dimension (which contained the sleaze issue) received eight percent of overall campaign coverage. There were, in fact, twice as many lines published in newspapers devoted to this issue in 2007 than in 2002. We argue that this was because of the investigation into Ahern's personal finances. Out of all the lines written about political ethics, 81 percent focused on the Taoiseach. It also constituted almost a quarter of all his newspaper coverage.

PUBLIC AGENDA AND MEDIA AGENDA. The main objective of this thesis was a quantitative study of the news media agenda during national elections. We found that in 2007, the media focused the most on the social welfare dimension (which included the issue of health care). There was no change in the top spot on the issue ranking between

2007 and 2002. In fact, the top five issues occupying the media agenda remained the same for both elections compared in this study. Healthcare was also the top issue on the public agenda, but further investigation of the public opinion data revealed some notable differences between public and media agendas. The public was more preoccupied with crime than the media, but less with the state of the economy. Also, some issues were significantly higher on the public agenda than on the media one. We found that 15 percent of the public thought that the immigration was one of the two most important problems facing Ireland, while the newspaper campaign coverage devoted only 0.3 percent of overall number of lines coded to this issue.

MORE ISSUES ON TV. Electronic media are the most popular sources of political information in Ireland. 70 percent of those surveyed by the Irish National Election Study indicated TV as their daily source of political news. At the same time, a common assumption would be that TV news is preoccupied with the process coverage, while broadsheet newspapers would devote more space to the analysis of issues. We found evidence to the contrary. In 2007, there was, proportionally, more issue related content in RTÉ One and TV3 news bulletins, than in broadsheet newspapers. Print media referred to policies and issues in slightly more than 19 percent of their campaign coverage, while for television news this figure was 32 percent.

IRELAND / UK. Comparing the media agendas during election campaigns in Ireland and in the United Kingdom we observed interesting differences as well as similarities. In terms of the balance between the coverage of the campaign process and the issues, we note that overall policy reporting during the 2005 election campaign in the UK constituted 34.7 percent of all the campaign-related lines coded. Text lines devoted to pure campaigning were 33.3 percent of the overall campaign coverage. In Ireland, during the 2007 general election campaign, the gap between the process and issue

reporting was wider with 42.6 percent of all campaign coverage devoted to process and only 19.6 percent to issues. This could be explained by the differences in the Irish and British media systems as well as differences in the electoral systems. The partisanship of the British press could have an impact on the amount of coverage focused on issues rather than campaign process. Newspapers are more interested in reporting on the party they endorse from the issue/policy perspective rather than just reporting on their campaign. Also the fact that in the United Kingdom the press can focus mainly on two political parties means that they can devote more lines to policy and issue reporting. In Ireland, on the other hand, the press has to cover a campaign of a larger number of parties. Also the campaign itself is often more localized than in the UK and therefore requires more of a straightforward process reporting.

Looking at the one of the campaign reporting in the United Kingdom in 2005 and in Ireland in 2006, we note that the tone was more negative in the UK than in Ireland. In Ireland the tone of the campaign was neutral and the average mean score of tone of opinion and editorial pieces published in newspapers in May 2007 was -0.12 for comments about parties and -0.11 for comments about leaders. The average mean score for the comments about parties published in the British press during the 2005 election campaign was -0.34 and for the comments about leaders this figure was -0.40. We argue that this is quite a clear indication of the media system effects. High levels of media-party parallelism in the UK (7.1 according to van Kempen (2007: 310), compared to 1.6 for Ireland⁵⁹) is reflected in the tone of their campaign coverage. The lack of clear party endorsements in the Irish press is reflected in the rather docile campaign coverage. We also note some similarities between the campaign media agendas in Ireland and in

⁵⁹ On the scale where 0= no parallelism and 100 = maximum parallelism.

the UK. In both countries the coverage of parties and leaders was incumbency-driven with the government parties over-represented in the press campaign coverage. We also observed that the leaders were pivotal to their parties' campaigns.

Findings: qualitative study

In our research design we decided on a multi method approach to the study of news media agenda. In the section above we reported the findings of the quantitative analyses of media data, which used manual content analysis technique and explored the possibilities of computer-aided media agenda study. In addition to the quantitative study, we conducted a small number of semi-structured interviews with some of the key media insiders in Ireland. They included senior managers from the Irish public broadcaster RTÉ, as well as print journalists, public relations specialists and former political campaign organisers. Our aim was to investigate what their take on the role of the media during national election campaigns was. We also wanted to explore what the approach of the public broadcaster to election coverage was. The semi-structured interviews were informed by the quantitative analyses, which helped to identify key themes, which were raised during the conversations.

We conclude that the data gathered during the interview process supported our earlier findings about the dominance of the process coverage during election campaigns. The interviewees saw the election coverage mainly from the perspective of human drama and they agreed that the public is not interested in issues. Representatives of both public and commercial media agreed that they need to attract viewers, listeners and readers and that too much issue coverage would make the content dull and unattractive for the consumers.

We also found that RTÉ takes its responsibility as a public broadcaster seriously when it comes to the election coverage. As they are obliged by law to provide an objective, impartial and fair news coverage, RTÉ tries to ensure they can do that, while maintaining high viewership and listenership figures. A special Steering Committee is set up for the time of an election, with members overseeing all campaign-related coverage and answering any queries from the public and political parties. RTÉ also conducts an internal media monitoring in order to see whether the impartiality objective is being met. We reported on their findings in Chapter 8.

One of the main questions relating to the role of Irish media during elections is their perceived lack of partisanship. Quantitative analysis showed quite clearly the existence of bias in the Irish press, both in terms of proportionality of news coverage and statement bias expressed in the opinion and editorial pieces about parties. We found that interview data did not support this claim. The interviewees did not see Irish media as openly partisan. They suggest that it might exist on an individual-level amongst journalists and that there is scope for editorializing of content.

Finally the interview process explored the general idea of the role media play in national elections. First, the media were not seen as powerful, although the interviewees did see themselves as important in the democratic process. Some of them agreed that they might help to shape the agenda, but did not think they wield a profound influence on the way people vote. They saw their role as primarily reporting the new and, while an agenda might emerge from such reporting, it is rarely a result of deliberate decisions.

In summation the interviews helped us to investigate the role of news media during election campaigns in Ireland from a different angle. We were able to ask the people behind the media data gathered for the quantitative analysis about their take on the

main themes of this thesis. We argue that such an approach could be explored and expanded on in the future to provide a more accurate picture of the media agenda and the process behind it.

9.2 Britain 2005

Chapter 4 investigated the role of mass media during the 2005 general election in the United Kingdom. Examining newspapers' party endorsements since 1945, we find that since 1979 the party with the backing of the larger share of newspapers (measured as a proportion of total newspaper circulation) won the election. There were, however, exceptions from this rule in the past, for instance in 1974 when Labour won with only 30 percent of the press endorsing it, as compared to 70 percent backing the Conservatives.

Looking at the media agenda in more detail, we can conclude that there was a substantial difference between broadsheet and tabloid newspapers in their share of election coverage. Tabloids' devoted a smaller number of text lines to the campaign; the *Sun* carried four times less than the *Guardian*.

There were significant differences in the visibility of parties too. We observe that the party coverage bias was incumbency-driven with Labour receiving more than half of all the campaign related text lines. Using the share of the popular vote from the 2001 general election as a guide for proportionality, we can conclude that the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats were under-represented in terms of their newspaper coverage. Looking at the official newspaper party endorsements, we find that the British press generally followed their own endorsements.

The process coverage was dominant in the newspapers during the 2007 general election in Ireland and it was also the most prominent during the 2005 election

campaign in the United Kingdom. More than half of campaign related newspaper coverage focused on the process issues, such as campaigning, polls and horserace or leadership issues. For some tabloid newspapers, reporting on process issues took almost three quarters of their entire election coverage. The top five most prominent issues within the policy coverage were the economy, Iraq war, social welfare/health, immigration and crime.

Assessing the tone of the newspaper commentary and opinion pieces about parties and their leaders, we see that on average it was negative. For parties the average mean score was -0.34 and for leaders -0.40. The picture was somewhat different in Ireland in 2007, where we found that majority of the opinion about parties was neutral. Perhaps, the British press with their overt partisanship is more inclined to really speak their mind about parties and leaders. We observe that the *Daily Mail* was quite negative in their commentary about Labour (-0.61), while the *Mirror* wrote critically about the Tories. These results are in line with their editorial party endorsements. We also note that the presence of neutral, balanced and heavily regulated approach to campaign coverage on the BBC does not have an impact on the other media in the UK. The press still publishes clear endorsements of political parties and newspapers follow them in their editorials and opinion pieces.

The ranking of the issues on the public agenda changed slightly over the course of the campaign. We examined the problems that were considered the most important by the public before and after the campaign. We observe that some of them (for example asylum seekers) went down in the ranking order, while others (immigration) became more prominent. This could, however, be because of the similarity of the two issues in question. In our study we used two surveys to measure the public agenda in Britain in 2005. We find that according to the British Election Study Internet Rolling Panel survey

the top five issues on the public agenda after the campaign were immigration, crime, NHS, economy and asylum seekers. According to the data gathered by the BES Face-to-Face panel survey, we observe that the top five issues were similar, but ranked in a different order NHS, crime, immigration and the economy.

In Chapter 4 we also looked at the issue dynamics on the media and public agendas throughout the election campaign. We find that for some issues, at certain points of the campaign there is an indication that the public agenda follows the media agenda. But we also observe that at times the media agenda seems to be following the public agenda. Sudden changes in issue prominence on the media agenda did not result in similar movements of the public agenda. We looked at the Pearson correlation coefficients for these relationships which did not indicate that there was a correlation between the media and public agenda (with an exception of the issue of health where we detect a low degree of correlation). We argue that a longer time frame is needed to conduct further analysis into the relationship between the media and public agendas.

9.2.1 Alternative methods of measuring agendas

This thesis also explored the possibility of using new technologies to measure public and media agendas. We examined the public agendas in the UK and Ireland using the volume of Internet searches on Google. We argue that such an approach is promising and could be used in further research to look closely at issue dynamics on the public agenda over a long period of time. For the study of media agenda we used Factiva from DowJones to analyse the media agenda in Ireland in 2007. We argue that using Internet-based searchable news databases could help political communication research to construct large samples of media data quickly and efficiently. We believe that growing technical sophistication of such databases as Factiva or LexisNexis could make them even more useful in the future.

Future research and policy implications

This thesis adopted a multi-method research design using both quantitative and qualitative data. We believe that to provide a comprehensive analysis of the mass media during campaigns and to examine their relationship with the public, we need to employ a variety of research methods. First, we would like to explore the possibility of alternative measuring methods for media and public agendas further. We would also like to develop a more comprehensive qualitative study of the impact of journalistic practices and media organisational culture on the emergence and shape of media agenda. In the future we would also like to study the potential of marrying quantitative, qualitative and experimental design. With the latest technological advancements it is more feasible than ever to construct an unobtrusive experiment, which could tell us what the impact of media agenda on public opinion is. We would also like to investigate the differences between issue dynamics in the traditional and new media. New ways of data visualization (some explored in Chapter 7) are a growing area of interest – making the data more accessible could provide a new interface between academia and the general public. Finally, as election campaigns might trigger the need for information in citizens, we would like to study how people construct their own media agendas during campaigns.

In terms of policy implications we believe that there is a need for permanent and independent media monitoring bodies, which would provide citizens with impartial information on what the media agenda is. This would enable people to see the bigger picture and over-time issue dynamics, and also learn the facts about the issues prominent on the media agenda. We argue that such information, if freely and easily accessible, is crucial for the health of modern democracy.

* * *

The 2010 election in the United Kingdom proved once again that the mass media play an important, if not crucial, role during campaigns. After a successful appearance in a televised leaders' debate, Nick Clegg – the leader of Liberal Democrats – changed the fortunes of his party almost over night. On the morning of the debate, April 15, 2010 the opinion polls gave the Liberal Democrats 19.5 percent of the vote. Three days after, the polls indicated a 10 percent surge in their support, with 29.8 percent of respondents indicating they would vote for Clegg's party⁶⁰. This is of course an anecdotal piece of evidence, but we believe it captures the power and the allure of the media. They report on the campaign news, they analyse candidates' policies, they comment and assess. At times they also openly endorse political parties, which is a sign of their own belief that they could influence their readers and viewers. The relationship between voters and the media, however, is much more complex than that. First, they might choose a newspaper or a TV news channel that best represents their political views, thus reinforcing their pre-existing political leanings. Second, the media might choose to back a candidate that is already popular among the public. We should not forget about the third part of this puzzle: political actors. They too try to influence (and are exposed to the influence of) the media. This tangled web of relationships makes research into the role of media during election campaigns challenging, but fascinating.

This thesis aimed at providing a systematic and detailed examination of media content during two election campaigns. We found evidence of coverage bias with governing parties being over-represented and we observed statement bias which followed the official newspaper party endorsements. We learnt that for the media campaign reporting is all about the drama and the excitement of the race and not about

⁶⁰ Aggregate of seven opinion polls. Source: the *Guardian*.

covering policy issues. But most importantly, we discovered that the more we examined the media, the more interesting, challenging and rewarding our research got. We believe that with the media's ever-changing nature and growing importance, systematic research into their role in the political process is crucial.

Appendix 1

Content analysis codebook

Code	Policy Dimension	Code	Issue
10	Political system	11	Political system (general)
		12	Political institutions
		13	Government control
		14	Participation
		15	Constitutional rights
		16	Public administration
20	Justice	21	Justice (general)
		22	Crime / Law enforcement
		23	Penal System
		24	Courts
30	Defence	31	Defence (general)
		32	Military spending
		33	Terrorism
		34	Intelligence
40	Economy	41	Economy (general)
		42	Finances
		43	Tax
		44	Labour
		45	Industry and commerce
		46	Economic development

Code	Policy Dimension	Code	Issue
		47	Housing market
50	Agriculture	50	Agriculture (general)
		51	Consumer affairs
		61	Social welfare (general)
		62	Health
		63	Pensions
60	Social welfare	64	Social justice
		65	Housing
		66	Immigration
		67	Social service other
		71	Education (general)
70	Education	72	Education opportunities
		73	Education (spending)
		81	Arts / culture (general)
80	Arts / culture	82	Arts / culture (spending)
		83	Sport
		91	Infrastructure / technology (general)
		92	Transport
90	Infrastructure / technology	93	Regional development
		94	Housing
		95	Science and ethics
100	Environment	101	Environment (general)
		102	Waste

Code	Policy Dimension	Code	Issue
		103	Energy
		111	Foreign affairs (general)
110	Foreign affairs	112	EU
		113	International involvement (other)
		114	Iraq
120	Country specific (Ireland)	121	Northern Ireland
		122	Traditional values
		131	Campaigning (general)
		132	Campaign activities
130	Campaigning	133	Stunts / gaffes
		134	Campaign strategy
		135	Nonpartisan
		136	Campaign pledges
		141	Polls / horserace (general)
140	Polls / horserace	142	Vote maximisation
		151	Leadership / competence
150	Leadership	161	Political ethics (general)
		162	Sleaze
160	Political ethics	163	Negative campaigning
		171	Non-political
170	Non-political		
180	Election	181	Election (general)

Appendix 2

Factiva search terms

Issues

Transport

Election AND (transport OR M50 OR motorway* OR Transport 21 OR LUAS OR DART OR tram* OR trains OR inter-connector OR subway OR NTR OR National Toll Roads OR toll road* OR toll bridge* OR Rail Procurement Agency OR RPA OR (transport AND inter-city) OR M3 OR (Tara AND motorway*) OR (commute* AND (traffic OR road* OR transport)) OR rush hour OR road deaths OR RTA* OR gridlock OR (traffic AND (roads OR driv* OR AA)))

Housing

Election AND (housing OR house prices OR property boom OR property developer* OR builders OR construction industry OR stamp duty OR first time buyer OR buyers' grants OR housing market OR auctioneer* OR construction industry federation OR (property AND (crash OR slump OR invest*)))

Health

Election AND (health OR HSE OR Health Board* OR hospital OR hospitals OR nurse* OR INO OR patient* OR doctor* OR waiting list* OR hospital consultant* OR medical consultants' report OR IHCA OR social services OR suicide OR Liam Doran OR A&E OR emergency services OR health insurance OR VHI OR BUPA OR Quinn Health OR risk equalisation OR MRSA)

Education

Election AND (school* OR class size* OR Leaving Certificate OR Junior Certificate OR examination* OR university OR universities OR third level OR third level fees OR secular schools OR school boards OR gaelscoil OR gaelscoileanna OR teaching OR teacher OR school re-furbishment OR pupil OR pupil-teacher ratio OR ASTI OR TUI OR VEC)

Tax

Election AND (tax OR income tax OR stamp duty OR tax credits OR tax bands OR tax net OR (tax AND 38) OR tax cut* OR tax reduc* OR corporation tax OR PRSI OR PAYE OR VAT OR tax relief OR mortgage tax relief OR tax allowance) NOT Gordon Brown NOT tax defaulting NOT tax evasion NOT tax irregularities

Crime

Election AND (crime OR gangland OR shooting OR sentencing OR mandatory sentencing OR rape OR murder OR theft OR drug deal* OR convicted OR criminal* OR Criminal Justice Bill OR GRA OR garda OR Garda Síochána OR Garda Siochana OR (garda AND policing) OR Noel Conroy OR Garda Commissioner OR Garda Reserve OR armed robbery OR robbery OR (garda AND ombudsman) OR trafficking OR guns OR arms OR smuggling OR (victim* AND witness* AND evidence) OR money-laundering OR (bogus non-resident AND account) OR kill OR killing OR killed OR paramilitar*)

Economy

Election AND (economy OR Celtic tiger OR (boom AND (property OR economic)) Or (economy AND (downturn OR bust OR shares OR ESRI OR IBEC OR IDA OR Enterprise Ireland OR Central Bank OR European Central Bank OR debt OR crash OR Book of Estimates OR Small Firms Association)) OR inflation OR interest rates OR mortgages OR social partnership)

Environment

Election AND (carbon tax OR nuclear power OR biofuel OR carbon emissions OR Kyoto OR incinerator OR land-fill OR illegal dump* OR ENFO OR (council AND waste management) OR renewable energy OR renewable energies OR (petrol AND Ireland) OR (oil prices AND Ireland) OR (water AND contamination) OR cryptosporidium OR national grid OR (electricity AND environment) OR (electricity and conserv*) OR (recycl* AND waste) OR (tax AND environment) OR environmental waste OR domestic waste OR wind power OR wave power OR cleaner environment OR global warming OR greenhouse effect OR (sellafield AND (Irish OR Ireland)) OR (greenpeace AND (Irish OR Ireland)) OR (green politics AND (Irish OR Ireland)))

Parties and issues

Transport

[Name of the party⁶¹] AND Election AND (transport OR M50 OR motorway* OR Transport 21 OR LUAS OR DART OR tram* OR trains OR inter-connector OR subway OR NTR OR National Toll Roads OR toll road* OR toll bridge* OR Rail Procurement Agency OR RPA OR (transport AND inter-city) OR M3 OR (Tara AND motorway*) OR (commute* AND (traffic OR road* OR transport)) OR rush hour OR road deaths OR RTA* OR gridlock OR (traffic AND (roads OR driv* OR AA))) NOT Gordon Brown

Housing

[Name of the party] AND Election AND (housing OR house prices OR property boom OR property developer* OR builders OR construction industry OR stamp duty OR first time buyer OR buyers' grants OR housing market OR auctioneer* OR construction industry federation OR (property AND (crash OR slump OR invest*))) NOT Gordon Brown

Health

[Name of the party] AND Election AND (health OR HSE OR Health Board* OR hospital OR hospitals OR nurse* OR INO OR patient* OR doctor* OR waiting list* OR hospital consultant* OR medical consultants' report OR IHCA OR social services OR suicide OR Liam Doran OR A&E OR emergency services OR health insurance OR VHI OR BUPA OR Quinn Health OR risk equalisation OR MRSA)

Education

[Name of the party] AND Election AND (school* OR class size* OR Leaving Certificate OR Junior Certificate OR examination* OR university OR universities OR third level OR third level fees OR secular schools OR school boards OR gaelscoil OR gaelscoileanna OR teaching OR teacher OR school refurbishment OR pupil OR pupil-teacher ratio OR ASTI OR TUI OR VEC)

⁶¹ For Progressive Democrats, we used their full name and the abbreviation: PDs.

Tax

[Name of the party] AND election AND (tax OR income tax OR stamp duty OR tax credits OR tax bands OR tax net OR (tax AND 38) OR tax cut* OR tax reduc* OR corporation tax OR PRSI OR PAYE OR VAT OR tax relief OR mortgage tax relief OR tax allowance) NOT Gordon Brown NOT tax defaulting NOT tax evasion NOT tax irregularities

Crime

[Name of the party] AND Election AND (crime OR gangland OR shooting OR sentencing OR mandatory sentencing OR rape OR murder OR theft OR drug deal* OR convicted OR criminal* OR Criminal Justice Bill OR GRA OR garda OR Garda Síochána OR Garda Siochana OR (garda AND policing) OR Noel Conroy OR Garda Commissioner OR Garda Reserve OR armed robbery OR robbery OR (garda AND ombudsman) OR trafficking OR guns OR arms OR smuggling OR (victim* AND witness* AND evidence) OR money-laundering OR (bogus non-resident AND account) OR kill OR killing OR killed OR paramilitar*)

Economy

[Name of the party] AND Election AND (economy OR celtic tiger OR (boom AND (property OR economic)) Or (economy AND (downturn OR bust OR shares OR ESRI OR IBEC OR IDA OR Enterprise Ireland OR Central Bank OR European Central Bank OR debt OR crash OR Book of Estimates OR Small Firms Association))) OR inflation OR interest rates OR mortgages OR social partnership)

Environment

[Name of the party] Election AND (carbon tax OR nuclear power OR biofuel OR carbon emissions OR Kyoto OR incinerator OR land-fill OR illegal dump* OR ENFO OR (council AND waste management) OR renewable energy OR renewable energies OR (petrol AND Ireland) OR (oil prices AND Ireland) OR (water AND contamination) OR cryptosporidium OR national grid OR (electricity AND environment) OR (electricity and conserv*) OR (recycl* AND waste) OR (tax AND environment) OR environmental waste OR domestic waste OR wind power OR wave power OR cleaner environment OR global warming OR greenhouse effect OR

(sellafield AND (Irish OR Ireland)) OR (greenpeace AND (Irish OR Ireland)) OR
(green politics AND (Irish OR Ireland))

Bertiegate

Bertie Ahern AND (friend OR personal OR finances OR friends OR associates OR
associate OR Beresford OR (Celia Larkin AND house))

Appendix 3

RTÉ License fee breakdown

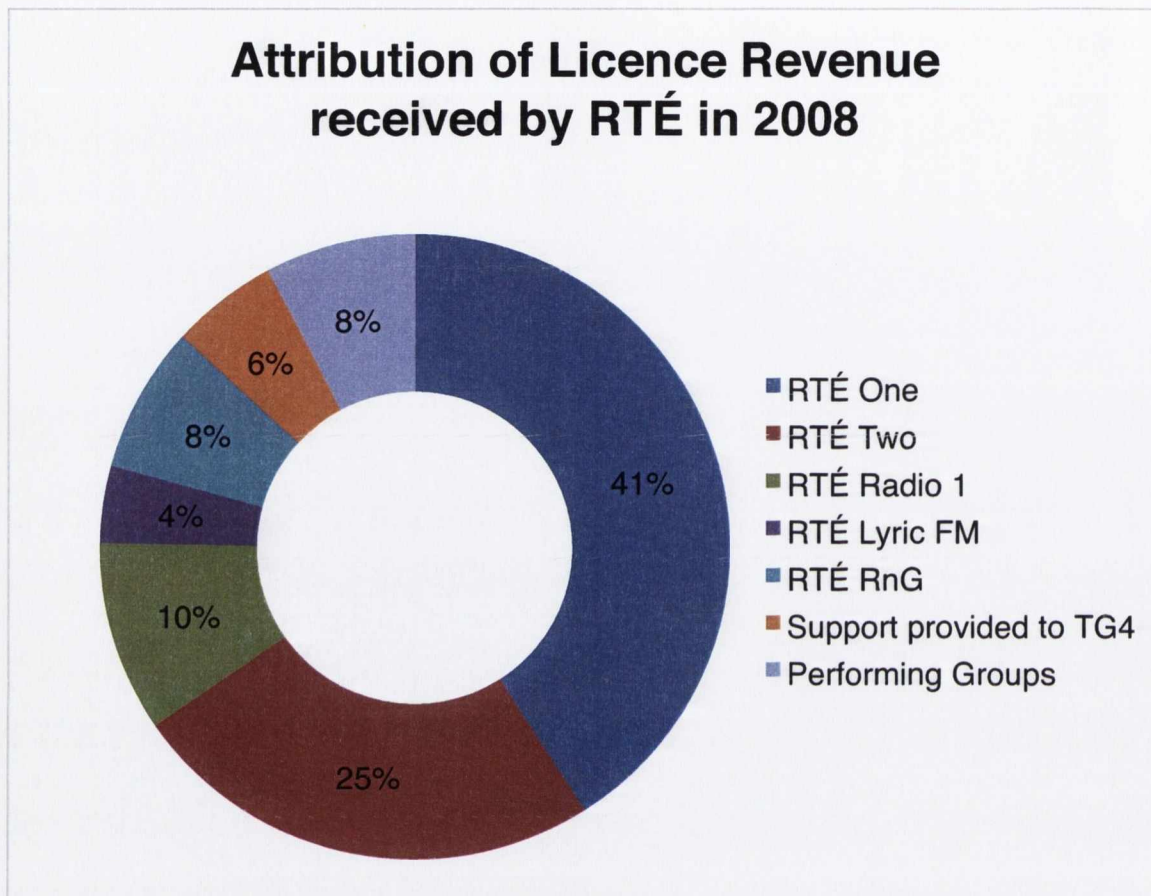


Figure 32 Attribution of Licence Revenue received by RTÉ in 2008. Source: RTÉ [<http://www.rte.ie/about/licence.html>].

TV Licence Fee breakdown

RTÉ does not receive all the money collected from the TV Licence Fee. Approximately 7 percent of the licence fee goes to the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland Fund. This is then distributed to independent producers and broadcasters for projects of public service nature. Also An Post is paid for collecting the licence fee.

(Source: RTÉ <http://www.rte.ie/about/licence.html>).

Appendix 4

BBC licence fee breakdown

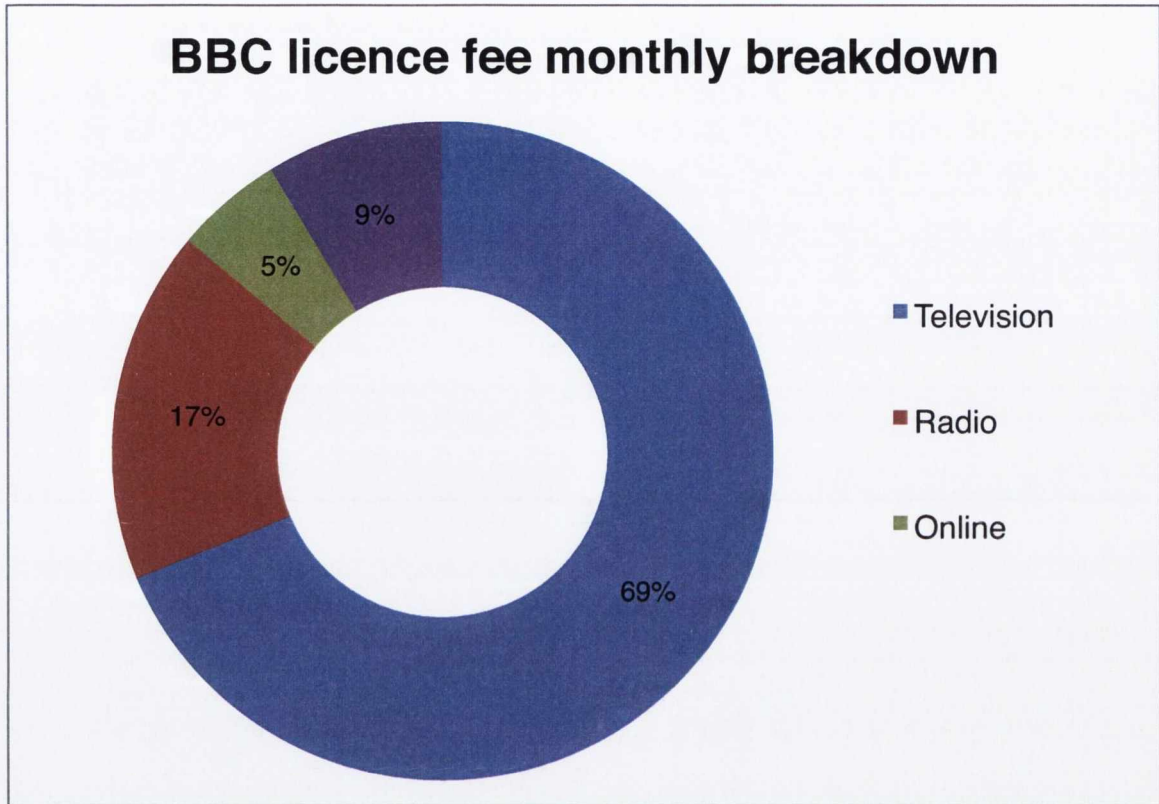


Figure 33 BBC licence fee monthly breakdown. Highlights from 2008/2009. In the financial year 2008-2009 the annual licence fee cost was £139,50. Source: BBC [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/licencefee/>]

Licence fee spending

Television

Money is spent on BBC One, BBC Two (programming). Also on BBC News channel, CBBS, CBeebies, BBC Three, BBC Four, BBC Parliament, regional versions of BBC One and BBC Two. BBC HD and Red Button interactive services.

Radio

The licence fee is spent on Radio 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 Live. Also digital radio stations 1Xtra, 5 Live Sports Extra, 6 Music, Radio 7 and Asian Network. National radio stations for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. BBC also runs 39 English local radio stations.

Online

The licence fee pays for the BBC web site and interactive iPlayer.

Digital switchover and other costs

The licence fee pays for investment in new technology, running costs and the costs of collecting the licence fee. It also supports the switchover to digital TV.

Appendix 5

Licensed operators: Ireland

Table 9-1 Licensed operators in Ireland. Source: Broadcasting Authority of Ireland [http://www.bai.ie/licensed_operators.html].

Type of broadcasting services	Name of operator
Independent national terrestrial television service in Ireland	TV3
Satellite content television services	Setanta Sports Ireland
	ESPN
Cable content television services	3e
	Chorus TV
	City Channel Dublin
	City Channel Waterford/South East
	City Channel Galway
Community content television services	DCTV
	P5TV
National independent commercial radio station	Today FM
Quasi national commercial Radio station	Newstalk
Regional radio	Beat FM
	Spin South West
	iRadio North West
	IRadio North East
	4FM
Local radio services	Dublin's 98
	Clare FM

	C103
	Dublin's Country Mix 106.8FM
	East Coast FM
	FM104
	Galway Bay FM
	Highland Radio
	KCLR 96FM
	Kfm
	Limeric's Live 95FM
	LM FM
	Midlands 103
	Mid West Radio
	Northern Sound Radio
	Ocean FM
	Phantom 105.2
	Q102
	Red FM 104-106
	Radio Kerry
	Shannonside 104FM
	South East Radio
	Spin 103.8
	Tipp FM
	WLR FM
Special interest radio	Dublin City FM
Community radio services	Cork Campus Radio
	Flirt FM

	Raidió na Life
	Wired FM
	Life FM
	Claremorris Community Radio
	Community Radio Castlebar
	Conemara Community Radio
	Dublin South FM
	Dundalk FM100
	Liffey Sound FM
	Near FM
	Phoenix FM
	Raidió Corca Baiscinn
	Raidió Pobal Inis Eoghain
	RosFM
	Tipperary Mid West Community Radio
	West Dublin Access Radio
	West Limerick 102
	Community Radio Youghal
	CUH FM Hospital Radio
	Mater Hospital Radio
Institution and temporary radio services	Regional Hospital Radio
	South Tipperary Genral Hospital Radio
	St. Ita's Hospital Radio

Appendix 6

Circulation figures for British newspapers in 2005

Table 9-2 Daily and Sunday newspapers circulation figures. UK May 2005. Source: Audit Bureau of Circulation. Figures exclude bulks.

Newspaper	Circulation
Sun	3,230,232
Daily Mirror	1,178,554
Daily Star	862,891
Daily Record	467,008
Daily Mail	2,259,109
Daily Express	837,217
Daily Telegraph	865,676
Times	643,375
Financial Times	397,567
Guardian	346,115
Independent	228,543
News of the World	3,653,068
Sunday Mirror	1,545,789
People	932,200
Sunday Mail	556,751
Daily Star Sunday	420,649
Mail on Sunday	2,172,193
Sunday Express	847,833
Sunday Times	1,335,645
Sunday Telegraph	629,689
Observer	412,345
Independent on Sunday	169,689
The Business	18,591

Appendix 7

Radio listenership figures: UK 2005

Table 9-3 Radio listenership figures in the United Kingdom. Period ending June 26, 2005.
Source: RAJAR/Ipsos Media.

Station	Weekly reach % ⁶²	Share % ⁶³
All Radio	90	100.0
All BBC	67	54.0
All BBC Network Radio	58	43.1
BBC Local/Regional	20	10.9
All Commercial	63	44.0
All National Commercial	26	10.2
All Local Commercial	52	33.8
Other Listening	5	2.0
BBC Radio 1	21	9.2
BBC Radio 2	27	16.0
BBC Radio 3	4	1.1
BBC Radio 4	19	11.2
BBC Radio FIVE LIVE	11	4.4
BBC 6Musc	1	0.1
1Extra from the BBC	1	0.1
BBC7	1	0.2
BBC World Service	2	0.5
BBC Asian Network UK	1	0.2

⁶² Weekly reach is the number of people aged 15+ who tune to a radio station within at least 1 quarter-hour period over the course of a week.

⁶³ The percentage of total listening time accounted for by a station in its Total Survey Area in an average week. This is obtained by dividing the station's total hours by the All Radio total hours in the station's TSA.

Appendix 8

Semi-structured interviews: list of questions

- According to you, what is the role of mass media during general election campaigns?
Media agenda usually consists of the same few issues and it's difficult for new issues to get onto the agenda. Why is it difficult for new and different issues to make it onto the mass media agenda?
- What do you think is the relationship between the mass media and the public?
- Do you think that the Irish press/Irish media are partisan?
- How do you perceive the notion of mass media's impartiality?
- How do we ensure it is maintained?
- What is the approach of your publication to election coverage
- Who is behind all the decisions related to the election coverage in your publication/in your company?
- How do you resist/fight the pressure exercised by political parties?
- Do you ever think of the power of the mass media while working as a journalist?
- Are political parties successful in driving the news agenda for the media?
- What did you think was the role of the "Bertiegate" during the 2007 general election?

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