

The Media View of the 1979 European Election Campaign

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Abstract: This paper argues that the television presentation of the first direct election to the European Parliament in Ireland was more domestic in orientation than either the parties' own presentations on television or voter attitudes might have led one to expect. It seeks to understand how this pattern of coverage emerged by examining the timing of the European election in Ireland; the pre-campaign newspaper speculation regarding the European elections and the extent of the press's subsequent agenda-setting functions; the programme formats within which the European election campaign was presented on RTE; and finally the attitudes of broadcasters to this election and to the audience for European election programmes.

I INTRODUCTION

This paper looks at how the media, and in particular television, defined the 1979 European election campaign in Ireland. In doing this it draws on the results of a nine-nation comparative research project into broadcasting coverage of the European elections.¹ The research included interviews with senior party campaign organisers and broadcasters, both before and after the elections; videotaping and subsequently analysing all election news, current affairs, documentary programmes and party political broadcasts transmitted on television during the campaign period; and carrying out a limited piece of audience research with, in Ireland, a national sample of 1,276.

The paper examines and attempts to answer a question highlighted by the comparative content analysis of programme coverage. Why did the coverage

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1. For a report of some of the comparative findings see *Television in the European Parliamentary Elections of 1979: Final Report of a Cross-National Analysis*, IIC, London, 1982.

in Ireland tend to raise and discuss themes and issues which drew on a European frame of reference less frequently than in any other EEC country? (Schulz, 1982, pp. 279-282) Such a lack of emphasis does not appear simply to "reflect" a higher degree of ethnocentrism among the Irish electorate in general, relative to other European voters. Responses to the post-election sample survey indicated that the Irish electorate, when responding to questions regarding their attitude to the EEC, held views about Europe and the European elections which placed them in a middle position relative to other European countries (Table 1).

An explanation of the domestic in the Irish coverage must thus be sought somewhere other than in assumptions regarding the greater provincialism of Irish voters or their negative attitudes to Europe. It is argued in this paper that it may be better understood by examining four factors: the timing of the European election in Ireland; the pre-campaign newspaper speculation regarding the European elections and the extent of its subsequent agenda-setting functions; the programme formats within which the European election campaign was presented on RTE; and finally the attitudes of broadcasters to this election and to the audience for European election programmes.

Examining how television covers election campaigns is of central importance if we are adequately to understand the dynamics of contemporary voter behaviour and mobilisation. It is perhaps indicative of the power of election television in Ireland that heavy viewing of television coverage of the European elections was found to be significant in increasing the voters' willingness to turn out to vote on June 7. The other most important factors contributing to turn-out were found to be: being a party partisan,² being interested in the European elections, and being over 45 years of age (see Kelly (1983) for details). Heavy television viewing was found to be particularly important in increasing turn-out among those who stated they had been only marginally interested or disinterested in the European elections. It is perhaps of interest to note that, whilst watching the television coverage of the elections contributed to an increased tendency to vote, having being canvassed did not, nor did reading party election literature (*ibid*).

III THE TIMING OF THE ELECTION

"As long as the national parties are the same parties putting forward candidates for the European election, it is very likely that the election result will

2. Partisan voters were defined as those who had voted for one of the three main parties in the last general election and who stated that they would vote for the same party in the next general election (n = 701, non-partisans = 306).

Table 1: *Attitudes to the EEC among national electorates*

	<i>Ireland</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>Great Britain</i>	<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Belgium</i>
% very or quite interested in the European Elections	33	39	39	30	36	29	46	26
% who feel own country's membership of the EEC is a good thing	56	49	38	37	52	75	59	51
% who feel that the move- ment towards the unifi- cation of Europe should be speeded up	29	34	7	23	24	64	42	32
% who think the European Parliament will have at least some effect on their lives	49	45	49	52	31	57	43	29

Source: Blumler and Fox, 1982, pp. 31 and 56.

be taken as a test of party strength." (Siune (1982)). In Ireland this situation was compounded by the fact that the Euro-election came at the mid-term point in the national election cycle, and was thus likely to be contested strongly by the opposition on an anti-government platform (see Reif and Schmitt, 1980, pp. 9-10). Moreover, the EEC elections coincided with local government elections, which are traditionally seen as a "test" of the government. Being at such a point in the national election cycle undoubtedly motivated parties to organise and run vigorous campaigns. Indeed, from party responses to interviews before the elections, an index of party motivation so to organise was developed which placed Ireland at the top of the list, followed by France (see Brants *et al.*, 1982, pp. 121-132). Other dynamics may also stimulate campaign organisers. A commitment to Europe appeared to be the main stimulant in Germany, which followed next on the list, and significant political debate regarding membership of the EEC, the main stimulant in Denmark which was fourth.

To return to the campaign in Ireland, Irish parties, especially at the early stages of the campaign, did not confine themselves to domestic issues only. They also highlighted as possible election issues alliances with European groups and the future powers of the European Parliament – although as noted below, both newspaper and television journalists had a tendency to question the credibility of these as "issues". Indeed, the content analysis of the television coverage of the election indicated that politicians tended to raise and discuss themes drawing on a European frame of reference more frequently than did journalists. In this analysis, each theme raised was categorised according to whether it was treated within a purely or mainly domestic perspective, purely or mainly European perspective, or in a mixed manner.³ It was found that when politicians spoke they framed 56 per cent of the themes they raised within a domestic context but journalists did so for 71 per cent of the themes they raised (Siune, 1981, p. 113). Furthermore it was also found that party political broadcasts were rather less domestically oriented than broadcaster-generated programmes (see Table 2).

In explaining the domestic orientation of the television coverage, the timing of the election thus seems to be but part of the story. Political parties were apparently more willing to raise and discuss issues within a European frame of reference, especially in party political broadcasts over which they had full control, than were journalists. The other part of the explanation, it

3. In the quantitative content analysis of television programmes the unit of analysis was each individual speaker until interrupted by another. This unit was analysed in terms of a wide range of speaker types, forms of communication, references made and themes raised and discussed. In the quantitative content analysis of newspapers, the article was the unit of analysis. A similar coding frame relating to references and themes was used in the analysis of television and newspaper content.

Table 2: *Domestic/European orientation in themes raised on television*

<i>Party political broadcasts</i>					<i>Broadcaster-generated programmes</i>			
<i>Fianna Fail</i>	<i>Fine Gael</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Total*</i>		<i>News</i>	<i>Constituency Profiles</i>	<i>Studio Discussions</i>	<i>Total**</i>
					<i>Per cent</i>			
Domestic	63	38	28	50	77	77	43	69
Mixed	14	31	20	20	9	9	13	12
Oriented to EEC	22	32	51	30	14	13	43	20
Total	99	101	99	100	100	99	99	101
Total no.	196	117	82	413	385	674	254	1,750

* Includes The Workers' Party's broadcast.

**Includes *Count Down to Europe* and *World Week* programmes transmitted during the campaign.

is argued below, is the power of the media to select and define, to highlight certain aspects of the election and to play down others.

III SETTING THE AGENDA

Research into the influence of the media on US Presidential elections has suggested that the media, and especially newspapers, contribute to setting the voters' agenda in terms of the tenor of the elections, election issues and candidate images, although this varies at different times over the election campaign, as well as according to different types of issues and differences among voters (Weaver *et al.*, 1981; Patterson, 1980). Election coverage on television, it is further argued, tends to respond to, and be influenced by, the agenda of newspapers as formulated and organised early in the campaign (Weaver *et al.*, 1981). The agenda of politicians, however, may be somewhat different from that presented by the media, as media themes and issues tend to be selected according to journalistic norms and assessments as to audience interests (Patterson, 1980).

An analysis of the pre-campaign coverage of the European elections in the three papers, the *Irish* (and *Sunday*) *Press*, *Irish* (and *Sunday*) *Independent* and *Irish Times*, from November 1978 to April 1979, indicated that, from the outset, these papers, and especially such central figures as their political correspondents, defined the "political reality" of these elections in terms of the domestic political system. This system was their central focus of interest and linchpin of their analysis. The European election was, to them, about

the distribution of domestic party power, a party contest, a potentially "newsworthy" event in which the stakes might be assessed and the outcome speculated on in terms of domestic party politics. The domestic scene was thus presented as more worthy of attention, more "real", and presumably more interesting to the audience, than the "political reality" of Europe. A consequence of this definition was that European issues tended to be marginalised, to be defined as party ploys in the election game, rather than as having any substance in themselves.

Thus, long before the television coverage of the European elections had got under way, political correspondents in the press had set the domestic parameters for this campaign. As the *Sunday Independent* correspondent noted on January 14, 1979, having first speculated on the possible share-out of seats:

There is little doubt however, that domestic political considerations will hold the key, if only because on every key EEC matter . . . the parties here hold pretty identical views. Of course there will be some attempts at political point scoring by the parties (regarding Euro party alliances) . . .

Again the political correspondent in the *Irish Press* (January 18, 1979), outlined a domestic scenario:

The opposition parties will be working on the assumption that Fianna Fail's popularity of 18 months ago will not be sustained and that the reaction to what is expected to be a tough budget next month and to the recent decision to phase out the food subsidies will be reflected in a change in the voting pattern.

By April, these definitions had become a self-fulfilling prophecy:

On June 7, both [opposition] parties will be able to test whether or not the economy and other troubles of the government have started a wind of change. A weakening of the government's 1977 level of popularity will be indicated in Fianna Fail getting fewer than 9 of the seats in the Euro-Parliament, or if they cannot hold onto, or win, control of key local authorities. (*Irish Independent*, April 23, 1979).

As agenda-setting theory would envisage, this early coverage contributed to setting the tone for subsequent campaign coverage in both press and on television. Detailed quantitative content analysis of all election and European Community coverage in the press and on television during the campaign period (May 12-June 6), indicated a predominant emphasis on the domestic, a highlighting in particular of the mechanics of electioneering and domestic party conflict, and a high level of agreement on the priority and rank ordering of themes in all the media. This latter point is exemplified by Table 3.

Table 3: *Themes presented in newspapers and on television*

	<i>Press</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>Times</i>	<i>Television*</i>
	<i>Per cent</i>			
Election campaign	28.0	24.7	24.5	28.8
Party political matters	6.3	8.7	5.8	11.9
Ideas regarding European economic and political development	5.8	3.8	7.6	8.2
European Parliament/Institutions	6.2	6.5	8.4	9.5
European party alliances	4.9	2.8	3.0	6.0
Economic	23.1	29.8	23.3	19.7
Agriculture	6.8	5.4	6.0	7.3
Energy	5.8	6.3	5.9	1.1
Social and other issues	14.3	12.0	15.7	7.4
Total %	100.2	100.0	100.2	99.9
Total no.	1,325	1,120	1,546	1,750
<i>Correlation Matrix</i>				
(Spearman's Rho)		<i>Independent</i>	<i>Times</i>	<i>Television</i>
<i>Press</i>		+0.87	+0.72	+0.62
<i>Independent</i>			+0.75	+0.73
<i>Times</i>				+0.67

*Broadcaster-generated programmes only.

IV TELEVISION ELECTION PROGRAMMES

The importance of the domestic political context of the election was accepted in the main by television. However, it was found that the newspaper definition of the event may have *confirmed* existing broadcaster expectations rather than necessarily setting the television agenda. As early as the end of 1978, there appears to have been consensus regarding the thrust and focus of these elections among senior broadcasters in the RTE European Election Study Group, as they discussed possible forms of Euro-election coverage. These elections, they concluded, were the first public contest for the parties since the 1977 general election, party prestige was going to be centrally involved, and this, along with the fact that the local elections were being held on the same day, might create a mini-general election situation. The major consequence for television, it was concluded, was the need to maintain the same sensitivity and balance in its coverage as it did in a general election. To facilitate this, coverage of domestic issues, and of Irish candidates

and constituencies, was to be limited to news and current affairs programmes on RTE 1. By April 1979, the great majority of the Irish broadcasters interviewed (12 of the 15) expected the RTE coverage to be primarily national in focus (see Table 4).

The main outcome of this consensus – both regarding the need for general election type controls to ensure balance and the domestic thrust of the election coverage – was, in programme terms, the usage of traditional and customary general election formats for the presentation of the European elections. These included: in news, an election news desk and filmed coverage of leaders' tours; in current affairs, the constituency profile and studio discussion. The more European oriented programmes *Count Down to Europe* and *World Week*⁴ were not allowed, due to election coverage procedures, to cover the Irish political scene and were transmitted by the less frequently viewed RTE 2.

Traditional formats produced traditional content – more staid and less exciting than a general election, and indeed “a bit of a yawn” as some broadcasters saw it. The election news desk concentrated on reporting party electioneering activity around the country, selecting comments from candidates' speeches, especially if peppered with inter-party conflict and accusations. Along with constituency profiles, it tended to be very domestic in emphasis, as can be seen from Table 2 above.

The constituency profiles concentrated on local party campaigns, the face-to-face interaction of candidates and voters at the hustings, speculated

Table 4: *Broadcasters' expectations regarding the national or European focus of election coverage*

	<i>Ireland</i>	<i>Great Britain</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Other EEC Countries</i>	<i>Total</i>
	<i>Per cent</i>						
Primarily national	80	78	47	31	4	17	33
Primarily European	7	4	18	28	63	24	31
Both	13	9	24	22	25	52	25
Neither/other	—	8	10	20	9	7	10
Total %	100	99	99	101	101	101	99
Total no.	15	23	38	36	57	29	198

4. Two of the four *Count Down to Europe* programmes, one comparing industrial relations in Denmark and Ireland, the other looking at women in Ireland, were transmitted during the campaign and included in the content analysis. Likewise, one *World Week* programme on the European election campaign in France and Germany, transmitted during the campaign, was analysed.

at the possible outcome of the election, and assessed voter disinterest and the domestic nature of the campaign. The election news desk and constituency profile did perhaps accurately reflect the fact that the personalism, localism and clientelism of Irish local politics and electioneering may not be the most fertile ground for an internationalist perspective. Canvassing and the handshake on the doorstep, a much more prevalent electioneering form in the Irish elections than elsewhere,⁵ is certainly not traditionally the most conducive forum for raising European issues. As the media never failed to remark: "what with rubbish on the door step, a petrol shortage . . ." The studio discussions appeared to offer a more congenial forum. Politicians, when given the opportunity to debate European issues, found little difficulty in doing so. Thus, while 77 per cent of the themes discussed in news and constituency profiles were purely or mainly domestic in orientation, this was so for only 43 per cent of the themes raised in studio discussions.

The trend in early newspaper speculation about the election, suggesting that European issues were but "party ploys" to "steer" the public's attention away from the "real", i.e., domestic, issues, also emerged in both journalists' and politicians' comments on television. As a political correspondent stated from the election news desk: "The campaign is now at its peak with almost no attempt any longer to disguise the fact that the central issues are almost exclusively domestic ones." A particularly extreme example of such suggestion was in the information programme which introduced the *Frontline* coverage. This began with the EEC ballot-box advertisements for the European Parliament with the presenter's voice-over stating:

All over the EEC ads like this try to drum up election fever for what many see as one of the non-events of the year. As a challenge for the advertising trade to persuade electorates the European Parliament is worth voting for . . .

The questioning of the "political reality" of the European elections pervaded the subsequent discussion, with a "vox pop" chorus to echo the presenter's interpretation:

Presenter: So perhaps the big sell campaign is paying off — or is it?

Vox Pop: I don't know a thing about them.

Farcical.

Know damn all about it.

The presenter distanced and questioned the possibility of European issues as

5. In Ireland, according to the results of the national survey, more people had been canvassed (30 per cent) than in any other European country, where the proportion canvassed averaged 10 per cent.

he introduced each such issue:

- *If* there are EEC issues in this election . . .
- Another *apparent* sparring point is the friends the Irish parties sit with in the European Parliament . . .
- . . . slight party differences [regarding CAP] *could* be made an issue . . .

Commentators were not alone in questioning the “reality” of European issues. Opposition parties were quite willing to take up this early media definition, as the following extract from a studio discussion shows:

Chairperson: Alan Dukes, what is your come back on this one [the Fianna Fail claim made by R. Brugha that the extension of European Parliamentary powers by Fine Gael would damage Irish interests by cutting across Irish sovereignty and giving the socialists in the Parliament too much power regarding CAP] ?

Dukes: Well I think that this issue is being raised partly as a smoke-screen. We saw on the film [The Leinster Constituency Profile] that the main issues that are in people’s minds are the national issues. They are talking about the petrol situation, talking about the postal strike . . .

Chair: Yes, but *we’re* talking about the extension of powers. Now, in fact is Fine Gael committed and how far do you want to go?

Dukes: On the extension of powers for the European Parliament . . .

V BROADCASTER ATTITUDES AND THE AUDIENCE

Despite overall agreement, or at least acquiescence, among broadcasters as to how this election would be covered — i.e., within traditional formats and with a mainly domestic emphasis — interviews with broadcasters indicated that there was, in fact, much ambivalence among them regarding how best to cover the European elections. Many felt that their public service responsibilities obliged them to cover an event which they perceived as lacking both “newsworthiness” and intrinsic audience interest. This ambivalence was found to be due more frequently to their perception of the audience and its needs and interests, than to the projection of their own personal attitudes regarding Europe. Indeed, broadcasters were found in our research to favour the speeding up of European integration (50 per cent) more frequently than the population in general (29 per cent). In these attitudes to Europe, broadcasters were directly comparable to similarly highly educated respondents in the population in general, who tended to be one of the groups most

favourably disposed towards the EEC.

Yet broadcasters did not at all push the European perspective in their programmes. Their decisions in this respect tended to be related to their views of the audience rather than their own personal interests. They foresaw coverage of the European elections as involving four main problems – and after the elections few felt that these had been completely resolved. One problem was the level of voter/audience interest. A second was the perception that the electorate were defining the elections as a national/domestic event due, some felt, to insular attitudes and the nature of Irish political culture. A third problem was the level of voter information regarding Europe and the fact that direct didactic programmes were thought neither to be very effective nor likely to hold the interest of the audience. The final problem was how to present the role and powers of the European Parliament itself. These powers were not seen as very extensive and yet voters were being asked to come out to vote. In this situation it was considered quite a delicate task to get just that right balance between informing the public on the one hand, and on the other possibly over-glamorising the European Parliament and engaging in propaganda favouring Europe.

As well as this rather general ambivalence among broadcasters, there were also two relatively distinct broadcaster groups holding different attitudes on the need for more “informative” programming on Europe. The first, and in relation to the European elections the more important group, as they made overall decisions regarding broadcasting coverage, were senior executive and editorial staff. These broadcasters felt that while there was some need for information programmes, care had to be taken regarding “over-kill”, that many members of the audience, for example farmers, already knew of the importance of European matters and their relevance to their lives, and that too much coverage which preached at the audience would simply turn viewers off. A somewhat different approach was taken by the producers and presenters interviewed. They felt that many viewers did not at all know how the EEC influenced their lives, that there was need for more extensive programming, in general, on European matters highlighting how much membership influences everyone’s lives, and, while broadcasters should not take a pro- or anti-EEC stand, more adequate reporting of EEC affairs would itself generate greater interest in Europe.

The audience survey indicated that, in their perception of audience, both broadcaster groups might paradoxically be correct, but focusing on, or taking as their reference group, different audience segments. The survey highlighted significant differences in attitudes to Europe among different social-class and gender groups. Those who held the most positive attitude to Europe and who most frequently felt that the European Parliament was of relevance and would influence their lives were upper middle class respondents, large farmers

(both 63 per cent) and males (56 per cent). On the contrary, only 38 per cent of the unskilled and semi-skilled, and 45 per cent of women, felt the European Parliament was in any way relevant to their lives. Thus, with regard to broadcaster attitudes to the European elections it was not so much that "too many messages failed to reach them" from a large and changing electorate, as Farrell (1978) has stated of media coverage – and miscalculation – of the 1977 elections, but rather that divergent and conflictual messages were being received.

Differences in extent of interest in European matters among various class and gender groups may indeed continue to be a problem for broadcasters. These differences were again apparent when respondents who had seen at least some of the election coverage on television (69 per cent) were asked to assess the adequacy of the amount of time given to the European elections on television. Forty-six per cent of these respondents stated they felt the amount of coverage was "about right", while 13 per cent stated that there had not been enough coverage. Together these two categories constituted what might be seen as a relatively positive and interested group. The remaining 40 per cent stated that there had either been "far too much" or a "bit too much" coverage, thus constituting a relatively more luke-warm and disinterested group. Among the most interested and positive of the viewers were: males (66 per cent in contrast with 52 per cent of females), those with third-level education (73 per cent in contrast with 40 per cent of those who had left school at 14), and those in upper middle class occupations and large farmers (both 65 per cent in contrast with 51 per cent of the semi-skilled and unskilled respondents who had seen some of the coverage).

VI DISCUSSION

This paper has been concerned to analyse the public definition of a new and unprecedented event: who in this instance defined what the "political reality" of the European elections "really" was? What factors contributed to the domestic definition so evident in the Irish coverage? To what extent and in what ways did the media, political groups and the electorate influence this definition?

The timing of the election at the mid-point of the national election cycle undoubtedly set the stage both for vigorous party campaigns and for media emphasis on the domestic. This paper has examined the process whereby the domestic orientation became established and confirmed by the media as *the* appropriate and relevant agenda. Early newspaper "informed speculation" about the election authoritatively established the domestic party context and the mid-term test for the government as the relevant and "reasonable"

political idiom in which to speculate and "report" about this election, and in terms of which the "reality" of European issues and policies might be questioned. These parameters and this idiom were taken up in television coverage of the election campaign and increasingly came to dominate the political debate.

The decision by broadcasters to use general election programme formats tended to increase ethnocentric tendencies in election coverage. This was especially so in constituency profiles with their built-in localistic and personalistic biases, and in the election news desk, geared up to highlighting elections as national party contests. Attitudes among broadcasters to the European election coverage, reflecting differences among various audience segments, were ambivalent and potentially divisive. No doubt in such a situation, tried and tested election programmes, accepted norms of "balanced coverage", and known audience interest in existing election formats provided an easy passage – and perhaps even a "successful" one in terms of contributing to turn out.

Three questions are raised in this article which clearly require further research. All concern the notion of "agenda-setting". One is the process whereby newspaper and television agendas tend to converge. A second is the relationship between media agendas and those of politicians. A third is the question of the agenda-setting effects of media coverage on the electorate.

The evidence of this paper indicated a high level of convergence between newspaper and television agendas in coverage of the European elections, as well as an early and continuing consensus among press and TV personnel regarding its essentially domestic thrust. However, the whole interactive relationship between journalists from different media, as well as that between journalists and politicians might well be fruitfully investigated in greater depth. What are the dynamics of agenda-setting between various media and between media and politicians, and in what contexts does it tend to flourish? It might be expected that the context in which Irish journalists work – the very limited number of such central gatekeepers as political correspondents as well as the lack of strong inter-media or inter-party ideological differences – would offer a particularly conducive context for the establishment of media-political consensus.

The idea of a symbiotic, interdependent and consensual relationship between politicians and the media and a tendency for their agendas to interact closely is not, of course, new (see Farrell, 1978; Whale, 1977; Schlesinger, 1978 and Golding and Middleton, 1982). However, it has also been argued that journalistic norms and the need to meet audience and commercial interests lead the media to focus on certain types of themes rather than others, with the consequence that the media's agenda at election times may be markedly different from that of the political parties (Patterson, 1980).

The research on the European election coverage in Ireland suggested that there were some such variations in emphasis in media and party agendas, especially in terms of the greater willingness of politicians than journalists to raise and discuss themes within a broader European context. Looking at US Presidential elections, Patterson (1980, pp. 31-42) has argued that differences occur between media and political agendas because of the tendency of political parties to prefer "diffuse issues" which define broad policy approaches and general goals, and which appeal to the greatest number of voters (e.g., "stabilising the economy"), while the media tend to prefer highly specific issues over which there are inter-party differences and conflict. These can be rapidly summed up – ideally in a pithy headline phrase – and which do not require detailed explanations. Instead of focusing on the diffuse policy issues of the political parties, news journalists tend, he argues, to focus on specific "clear-cut" campaign issues (e.g., the immediate difficulties of a party, campaign mistakes and incidents and the responses of other parties to these) thus constructing "news stories" and developing "news angles" which fit journalistic norms as to immediacy, the administrative, time and space requirements of print and television news; as well as the supposed interests of their audiences.⁶ It would thus appear that neither convergence nor divergence between media and party agendas can be assumed but that we need detailed investigation in specific situations, as well as greater understanding of the social contexts which tend to support or inhibit these processes. Gans (1980, p. 81) has noted that the inter-relationships between politicians, news organisations, journalists and audiences should be seen, not so much as a functionally inter-related system with a pre-defined outcome, but as "tugs of war" with different interests attempting to exercise and establish their power and their definition of the situation.

The final question is the influence of media agendas on the audience. This question requires a more elaborate research design than was financially feasible in this study. It requires a panel of respondents interviewed periodically during the campaign, over which time changing media agendas are also examined and consequent changing audience agendas – if any – analysed. It might be expected that in the European elections, a high media profile in the pre-campaign period for European aspects of the election might have been particularly important in placing this perspective on the electors' agenda. Weaver *et al.*, (1981) have found that newspapers tend to be influential in placing "unobtrusive" issues (i.e., those of which electors have no direct experience, unlike "obtrusive" or bread-and-butter issues) on the voters' agenda in this early period. This is in line with much other media

6. For an analysis of the emphasis on inter-party conflict and on campaign strategies in the European election coverage see Kelly, *op. cit.*

research which suggests that the media are influential in setting the agenda regarding areas of knowledge about which individuals do not have direct personal or social experience. This whole area of agenda-setting indeed requires much further investigation if we are to begin to understand the dynamics linking party campaigns, media coverage and audience response in that central contemporary phenomenon of "media elections".

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