



Critical Social Thinking: Policy and Practice, Vol. 2, 2010

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Whose Frame Is It Anyway? A Semiotic Analysis of RTÉ Television News

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Abstract

This article serves as an exploration of the extent, if at all, to which RTÉ Television News disproportionately embodies the attitudes, beliefs and assumptions of particular worldviews. Using a multiplicity of theoretical paradigms, the project sought to examine to what extent RTÉ News output could be considered ‘system-maintaining’ or ‘system-challenging’, and to detail the means by which the ‘preferred meaning’ of news- if one exists- is generated. Informed by the framework of framing/agenda-setting theory and semiotics, a combination of analyses were chosen and applied to uncover latent meanings embedded within news texts. A small selection of news texts concerning the nationalisation of Anglo Irish Bank in January 2009 comprised the data sample. The textual analyses revealed a strong preponderance of system-maintaining frames; frequent editorialising; an absence of competing discursive positions; and a heavily episodic orientation that focused on personalities and near-term sequences of events rather than broader systems-level analysis.

Keywords: mass communications; semiotics; framing; television news.

Introduction

'Communication is too often taken for granted when it should be taken to pieces'
(Fiske, in Hartley, 1982, p.xiii)

The idea that the mass media possesses power over its audiences is not a new one, indeed, it has become a cliché. Identifying the precise nature of this power, however, is not an easy process. Given that the mass media has been called the 'consciousness industry' (Enzensberger, 1974), comprehensive research into precisely how this information is produced, disseminated and received by audiences is surely of the utmost importance.

In the inquiring spirit of John Fiske's exhortation above, this paper serves as an introduction to and a summary of a project that aimed at bringing to bear the insights of sociological perspectives in deconstructing the role played by the media in shaping public discourse around the pertinent and topical subjects of Ireland's recent and ongoing economic and political crises. That there has been such little examination of the role of the mass media in shaping and interpreting developments in these crises is deeply concerning, and reflects a general dearth of academic research on the practices of the Irish media. This project sought to contribute to the literature on the topic by refocusing the media effects debate through the prism of social constructionism.

Scope

Bearing in mind the need for a tightly defined focus for the research, the facet of the media that the project was confined to studying was television news broadcasts. This is a selection that can be justified in terms of the size of the audience that such broadcasts attract compared to many other forms of media and the high level of trust that is typically accorded to such broadcasts (BBC/Reuters/Media Centre, 2006). More specifically still, the project was confined to the study of Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ). My justification for selecting RTÉ Television News as the focus of the project is based on a number of factors. Firstly, despite the advent of the multichannel era,

RTÉ retains both a commanding market share in terms of viewership figures and an enviable record in terms of levels of public trust (TNS-mrbi, 2006). That survey's headline finding was that '77% of the Irish public regards RTÉ Television News as its main source of both Irish and international news.'

Furthermore, RTÉ's public service obligations mean that it has to operate 'in the public interest, providing News and Current Affairs that is fair and impartial, accurate and challenging' (RTÉ, 2008). This combination of extensive national audience penetration, aura of authenticity, and specific legal obligations for impartiality made RTÉ News an attractive prospect for study.

Theoretical Framework

The project is positioned within what McQuail (1994) called the 'social constructivist' tradition of media effects. This research paradigm emphasises the socially constructed nature of news, and attaches great importance to the processes by which it is produced and packaged. My methodology draws heavily from the highly influential work of the Glasgow University Media Group, who, following the social constructivist tradition, emphasised the centrality of the agenda-setting and framing powers of the media as critically important processes. These refer to the deliberate *or* accidental transmission of norms and ideological formations by emphasising some aspects of a news story and suppressing others. Edelman's observation that 'The social world is...a kaleidoscope of potential realities, any of which can be readily evoked by altering the ways in which observations are framed and categorised' (1993, p.232) highlights the interconnected roles of framing, salience and emphasis in shaping our understanding of events. Underpinning this is the idea that there is no such thing as a 'neutral' frame: *all* language is ideologically invested at some level. Thus, as highlighted by the influential contemporary frame theorist Robert Entman (1993, p. 52), a typical news report does not (and cannot) merely lay out the 'facts' in an objective fashion, but is framed in a way that typically 'defines problems', 'diagnoses causes', 'makes moral judgements' and 'suggests remedies'.

RTÉ's public service obligations entail requirements for impartiality and balance. This necessitates a carefully considered research methodology that focuses on the

production of meaning at its most elemental level. The perspective adopted here does not reduce media representation and production simply to blatant ideological bias, but rather recognises that the transmission of norms and ideologies can occur whilst remaining *within* the strictures of formal rules about balance and impartiality. My chosen methods are fundamentally oriented to pinpoint critical loci of meaning-making within television news.

Methodology

Formulating a Methodology

My stated aim is to investigate the extent to which RTÉ news is system maintaining, defined in this project as the implicit or explicit advocacy and/or preservation of taken-for-granted assumptions and prevailing orthodoxies. This will be explored through an investigation of Hall's (1977) assertion that the media frame events using a very limited 'ideological or explanatory repertoire'. A key supposition of this research is that the search for meaning within texts involves studying language use 'beyond the boundaries of a sentence, utterance, or statement' (Stubbs, 1983, p.1). If searching for meaning in texts is about reading between the lines as well as the lines themselves, quantitative analysis is evidently not fit for purpose. Yet, the difficulties with qualitative analysis of understanding how meaning is generated in media texts have been well documented. From the literature I have read on developing methodologies for studying framing, it has become apparent that identifying frames within texts can be a process fraught with guesswork, imprecision and inferential assumptions (Johnston, 1995). In an effort to avoid these pitfalls, my chosen methodology emphasises transparency and methodological diversity which substantially reduces the scope for the researcher's bias to influence and distort the results. However, it is vital to note that this project does not aim to somehow reveal objective truths from the mists of media obfuscation but rather explore, from a social constructionist perspective, the processes that mediate the production and representation of media messages.

Based on the recognition that all language is invested with ideology and meaning, I have chosen to augment 'traditional' content and discourse analysis with semiotic

analysis. Semiotics is based on the premise that like languages, texts of all kinds have codes, conventions, grammar and syntaxes that are the conveyors of meaning. Bignell (2002, p.112) notes that 'the representation of reality offered by TV news is not reality itself, but reality mediated by the signs, codes, myths and ideologies of news'. This project was concerned with identifying these processes of mediation that fundamentally shape the genesis of meaning within news texts.

Research Question

Reflecting this project's status as an undergraduate dissertation, the need for a tightly-focused research agenda was self-evident. My choice was also influenced by the desire to incorporate framing and agenda-setting theory into the methodology.

As already indicated, I wish to examine the output of RTÉ Television News to see what sort of frames, if any, predominate. I wish to study to what extent the 'doxa' (Bourdieu, 1977) or collection of beliefs and attitudes of RTÉ Television News incorporates a plurality of perspectives. My research question therefore seeks to examine to what extent is RTÉ Television News system maintaining? A more nuanced version of Gramsci's 'dominant ideology' thesis as elucidated by Kellner (cited in Gamson et al., 1992, p.381) serves as the theoretical underpinning for this question:

The hegemony model of culture and the media reveals dominant ideological formations and discourses as a shifting terrain of consensus, struggle, and compromise rather than as an instrument of a monolithic, unidimensional ideology that is forced on the underlying population from above by a unified ruling class.

Thus, the system-maintaining (as opposed to system-challenging) character of RTÉ News is the extent to which it disseminates and reinforces the dominant ideological discourses of the day. The advantage of this more developed version of Gramsci's concept of hegemony is that it incorporates the fact that television usually includes dissonant voices and alternative viewpoints, an imperative driven by both the legally

enforceable requirements of public service broadcasting and the journalism profession's desire for legitimacy.

Specific Area of Study

Selecting a sample for study required balancing the need for identifying a dataset that will enable me to produce methodologically sound and valid results, whilst remaining feasible within the context of an undergraduate research project setting. My deliberations on this led me to decide that I would study a single news topic in detail. I chose the announcement of the nationalisation of Anglo Irish Bank in January 2009 as the topic to be studied, for the following reasons: firstly, as Chandler (1994) argued, because semiotics focuses on signs and signifiers on a micro level, producing valid results does not require a fully representative or longitudinal sample. This is fortunate, because for feasibility reasons alone, the data-intensive and highly focused nature of semiotic methods meant that the selected sample would have to be extremely limited. Secondly, the selection of the topic for study is also guided by Gamson et. al's (1992, p.380) concepts of 'naturalised' and 'contested' content. They suggest that all news coverage fits into one of these conceptual categories. Topics with well-established and 'generally-agreed' causes, symptoms and solutions are demonstrative of 'naturalised' content. Topics where none of these certainties exist fit into the contested category. Given that the nationalisation of a bank is a highly unusual, 'contested' event (particularly within the context of a capitalist state), there are no established routines for covering news of this kind. Finally, Johnston (1995, p.229) argued that studying a small set of texts at 'critical junctures' offers the best opportunity for researchers to shine a light on the values and meanings implicit in texts. The issue of the nationalisation of Anglo Irish Bank cuts to the heart of a series of critically important economic, business and public policy issues that are not only highly 'contested' by different groups in society but surely represent a critical juncture too.

Procedures

For the researcher to be able to decode the multiplicity of signs and meanings within a text, they must first see how it has been encoded. I have chosen *three* key methods of

analysis that will be applied to each text- semiotic analysis, frame analysis, and frame categorisation. My semiotic analysis is broken down into three dimensions: Syntagmatic structural analysis (the breakdown of texts into their constituent pieces); narrative function analysis (pioneered by Hartley (1982), this is the examination of the ways in which the narrative structure of news inexorably leads to a 'preferred meaning' of news) and paradigmatic analysis (the elicitation of latent meanings by, for example, looking at absences of ideas, concepts or people in news texts).

Semiotic Analysis

The first element of the semiotic analysis toolbox that was used in this research is syntagmatic analysis. This involves breaking down each text into syntagms, or discrete structural units. Using a method similar to Hartley's (1982, p.120) approach, I chose to tabulate each syntagm according to its visual and verbal dimensions. This form of analysis not only offers a framework for other analyses to build on, it also enables the researcher to understand how discourse is, as Hartley (ibid) puts it, is 'inflected' throughout a text on a structural level. The position of a news story, for example, within the broadcast denotes the ascribed level of importance of a story. Similarly, the type of report used, the setting, background, camera angle, and the identity of speakers are all aspects of news texts that possess and transmit meaning.

News 'stories' are aptly named. Stories, by their nature, require narrative structure and consistency. Following from Propp's (1928) influential suggestion that stories of various kinds can be broken down into basic, recurring elementary building blocks, I chose to apply to each text Hartley's (1982, p.118-119) concept of news-specific 'narrative functions' that play a major role in the generation of meaning.

Narrative function	Description
Framing	How is the story introduced by the newsreader/reporter? What general category is ascribed to the story?
Focusing	How does the reporter draw attention to specific aspects of the story? What aspects of the story are made salient?

Realising	Who are the contributors who are invited to give their views on the story? Who are the 'accessed voices'? Do they confirm or disconfirm the frame?
Closing	The movement towards a 'preferred meaning'. Is there an absence of competing discursive positions?

Fig. 1: Hartley's 'narrative functions' of news

As well as identifying the above narrative functions, I have added my own additional criteria which I believe will help throw more light on to the production of meaning within the texts. Each text will be examined for the presence of naturalised assumptions- the concepts and ideas that are assumed to be understood and accepted by the audience, and therefore not explored critically. In a similar vein, texts will be searched for structural absences. Are events framed in such a way that build in such absences from the beginning?

Paradigmatic analysis, the final semiotic tool that will be applied to the texts, is founded upon the notion that meaning is created relationally- and, in the Saussurean tradition of semiotics, binary oppositions are the most important kind of relationship in meaning making. As Berger put it (2005, p.22), 'discerning meaning without finding polar oppositions is like listening to the sound of one hand clapping'. Every decision made in the production of a news text results in, by definition, the negation of other options. This reveals ideology and meaning. I intend to elicit meaning from the news texts by: (a) selecting a number of paradigms from each text, say, the camera angle used in a particular segment, or the type of questioning used in an interview; (b) I will then determine from the text what *is* signified (the persons, objects, or ideas that are being referred to) and then identify a selection of other potential elements from the same paradigm set that were *not* signified; and (c) finally, I will extrapolate the connotations suggested by the choice of signified in relation to the unchosen options.

Frame Analysis

In the interests of further methodological diversity, two frame analysis techniques will also be applied to the texts. News stories will first be categorised according to Iyengar's episodic/thematic classification (1991, p.18), based on the predominance of either an episodic or thematic theme. This will be done by examining the content of a story and determining if the primary focus is on a single event, person, decision or occurrence (episodic), or whether the focus is on abstract forces, institutions, societal conditions or historical trends (thematic). A detailed, evidence-driven explanation will be provided with every assessment. Finally, for each text, I opted to inductively generate a short list of potential frames reflecting a spectrum, from system-maintaining to system-challenging. The other key methodological tools employed in this project - the syntagmatic, paradigmatic and narrative function analyses - will have already been applied to each text. Therefore, having brought the latent meanings of texts “to consciousness” (Pines, 1982) my attribution of each text to a given news frame will be guided by my earlier findings.

Five separate segments pertaining to the impending nationalisation of Anglo Irish Bank over the period of 15 and 16 January 2009 on RTÉ’s Nine O’Clock News were subjected to the full range of analyses detailed above. Videos of all the below stories are accessible from <http://www.RTE.ie/news/2009/0115/9news.html> (coverage from 15 January 2009) and <http://www.RTE.ie/news/2009/0116/9news.html> (coverage from 16 January 2009) which is also the source for the individual news story titles listed below.

No.	Broadcast	Segment description
1	15 Jan 09	David Murphy, Business Correspondent, reports that the Government has announced that Anglo Irish Bank is to be nationalised.
2	15 Jan 09	George Lee, Economics Editor, reports that shares of the bank will be suspended ahead of trading tomorrow.
3	16 Jan 09	David Murphy, Business Correspondent, reports that shareholders were extremely angry at the EGM today.

4	16 Jan 09	Will Goodbody reports that the decision to nationalise Anglo Irish Bank has received a guarded welcome from politicians, business people and academics.
5	16 Jan 09	David Davin-Power, Political Correspondent, reports that the Taoiseach has said it would be business as usual at Anglo Irish Bank. David Murphy says Seán FitzPatrick spent some of the loans to buy shares in Anglo Irish Bank.

Fig. 2: Complete data sample

In this paper I will restrict myself to discussing broad themes that emerged from the application of the semiotic and framing analyses to the above texts, as well as providing examples of individual analyses. Furthermore, I preface this discussion of my findings with the significant caveat that I do not purport to be able to draw generalisable conclusions and apply them to the totality of RTÉ News output. Reflecting the aim of the project to be a proof of concept for a more rigorous and broader piece of research, I here present general conclusions drawn solely from the dataset that has been examined.

Results and Conclusions

The consequences of episodic orientation

My results revealed a strong tendency for an episodic approach to news framing. Four out of the five news stories I examined were adjudged to be representative of episodic framing, with only one (Story 4) displaying a thematic orientation. The tendency for episodic framing in the other stories was evidenced by a consistently narrow temporal focus and context in which news stories were placed, which focused events rather than ideas, sought to assign blame and responsibility to individuals, rather than institutions, and on several occasions resorted to emotive and sensational language to describe the events. Blame was laid at the door of an individual rather than at the organisational or system level. Although the locus of blame was firmly attached to Seán Fitzpatrick (former Chairperson and Chief Executive of Anglo Irish Bank), the way this was communicated throughout the texts is fraught with ambiguity. Story 3

provides the best example of this, with a wide range of language being used to describe Seán FitzPatrick's behaviour. His 'activities', principally the 'undisclosed loans' are typically described as 'misconduct' 'wrong' or 'unacceptable' (Story 1), all of which are legally ambiguous terms.

Yet, as demonstrated most clearly by Story 4, a thematic approach can be just as system maintaining as an episodic one. In this example, the correspondent's explanation of the causes, symptoms and cures for the economic crisis were simultaneously thematic *and* system maintaining, due to its selectivity, focus, and absence of alternative explanations. Therefore, I conclude that rather than guaranteeing it, thematic framing merely allows the possibility of system-challenging coverage. In general, the episodic nature of the coverage means that it gravitated strongly towards an event orientation. The clearest example of this was the strong gravitational pull exerted by the bank's Emergency General Meeting, which became the central locus of the coverage over the two days. It fulfilled all the requirements of 'good' TV news- the strong visual dimension, the well-defined nature of the event, and easy access to some of the players involved in the news. The focus on the EGM at the expense of the substantive event (the decision to nationalise) is strongly in accordance with the 'news values' discussed by Tuchman (1973, pp.110-131). I conclude that the adherence to these traditional news values inhibited coverage of the nationalisation by focusing on the 'sideshow' rather than the main event, which, as it happened behind closed doors, was unfilmable.

Politics 'from the top': Inequality in selection of accessed voices

Throughout the five segments, the focus on the potential implications of the bank's nationalisation invariably focused on the impact on shareholders and other banks. Part of the reason for this is the consistency in the make-up of the 'accessed voices'- the contributions from parties other than reporters and presenters. Analysis of the syntagmatic structure of each segment revealed that a total of eight separate accessed voices were used across the data sample, comprising the following individuals: Minister for Finance Brian Lenihan (appearing in four out of five segments), the Anglo Irish Bank board, a group of mainly elderly shareholders at the bank's

Emergency General Meeting, Anglo Irish Bank chairman Dónal O'Connor, Fine Gael finance spokesperson Richard Bruton, Frank O'Dwyer of the Irish Association of Investment Managers, Niamh Brennan, Professor of Management in UCD, as well as An Taoiseach Brian Cowen. Philo (2008) wrote that accessed voices in television news typically resemble a 'procession of the powerful', and given the principal make-up of this particular group- vested interests and political leaders- it is unsurprising that the views offered were highly system-maintaining and wholly reflective of the prevailing economic orthodoxy. The lack of dissonant voices throughout the course of the five news stories was practically total.

The 'vox pop' mechanism used to solicit the views of the elderly shareholders in Story 3 takes on a special significance, because it is here that the contributors, although advancing the narrative of blame and disgust that constitutes the organising logic of the segment, actually casted the net of responsibility for events wider than anybody previously, to include both the bank's auditors and management. However, these opinions were relegated to the role of mere 'fragments' that were not absorbed into the narrative, and reduced by David Murphy's voiceover to expressions of 'disgust' and 'anger', and not afforded the same level of respect offered to the opinions of 'experts' in the other news stories studied.

'Reputational damage': A case study in naturalisation.

It was observed that the explanation for why Anglo Irish Bank was nationalised slowly established itself throughout the course of the studied broadcasts. Minister Brian Lenihan set the tone, asserting in Story 1 that 'unacceptable practises within the bank had caused it serious damage'. Story 2 saw Economics Editor George Lee state that 'the Government *had* to... go the whole hog in relation to nationalisation' [emphasis added]. He further referred to 'reputational issues' that were at the heart of the matter, naturalising the idea that reputational damage was adequate justification for taking an institution like Anglo Irish Bank into full public ownership. The continued repetition of the phrase 'reputational damage', accessed by the newsreader in the introduction of Story 3 was again used by correspondent David Murphy's voiceover in his report- but crucially, it was not attributed to the Minister, but were

rather his own words. Thus, the Minister's explanation became further naturalised into the text- becoming the 'truth'. The conflation of the bank's reputation with Ireland's reputation as a whole was the next step in the naturalisation process. Frank O'Dwyer, the accessed voice in David Murphy's report in Story 4, referenced the 'reputational damage to Ireland'.

Story 5 saw the conclusion of the naturalisation process, where newsreader Eileen Dunne referred to what she described as the 'buzzword' of reputational damage, and asked business correspondent David Murphy about the potential impact of said damage to 'Ireland Inc.' This is the first conflation by an *institutional* voice of the bank's reputation with Ireland's reputation as a whole, and underlines yet again the primacy of business interests over the larger societal implications of the decision to nationalise the bank. It is important to note that the issue of 'reputational damage' is not an unfortunate side-effect, a secondary justification or an obscure irrelevance- it is in fact the central justification given for the nationalisation. With the exception of reporter Will Goodbody's explanatory account of events in Story 4 that mentioned the 'global financial crisis' and the 'property bubble' 'bursting', there is no substantial effort to justify the nationalisation, aside from the nebulous concept of 'reputational damage'. Indeed, the language in Goodbody's language connotes blameless *force majeure* and no place is afforded the role played by, for example, regulators and/or Government policy in Anglo's 'decline'. RTÉ's complicity in establishing this preferred meaning and failure to challenge it in any way cannot simply be dismissed.

Business as Usual?

Given that the nationalisation of a bank is by an measure a radical step for any Government to take- not least a capitalist state like Ireland- the extent to which the nationalisation was portrayed as an inevitability is quite remarkable.

Whereas public discourse on bank nationalisations in the United States demonstrated a degree of diversity, with the political right characterising nationalisation as 'socialism', here there was no such language used or ideological concept applied. Indeed, the way that the act of nationalisation was stripped of ideology by both institutional RTÉ and accessed voices and presented as mere 'pragmatic politics' and

even cloaked in the language of 'economic humanitarianism' in George Lee's analysis (Story 2) are all deeply ideological in themselves.

The alternatives to nationalisation were not countenanced by any journalist or accessed voice within the dataset, and indeed the assertions by correspondents David Murphy (Story 5) and George Lee (Story 3) that the nationalisation *was* a necessary step amounts to a serious abdication of responsibility for neutrality on behalf of the broadcaster, and has a strongly system-maintaining effect. This, combined with the previously-discussed naturalisation of 'reputational damage' as sufficient justification in itself for the nationalisation, paints a picture of collusion- whether deliberate or accidental- with both the established financial order and Government policy.

One of the most blatantly ideological pronouncements in the entire dataset came in Story 4, which was introduced by newsreader Eileen Dunne with the assertion that the decision to nationalise the bank 'has received a guarded welcome from businesspeople and academics'. The report that followed presented one accessed voice from the world of business, and one from academia. Interestingly, neither contributor voiced support for the nationalisation, with the UCD academic, Dr. Niamh Brennan, merely suggesting that the events made Ireland look like 'a riskier place to do business'. The fact that the content of their contributions does not bear out the initial proclamation of broad consensus reveals a variance between the actual contributions of the speakers and the established RTÉ narrative. Of greater concern is that the selection of accessed voices chosen by RTÉ- the head of an association of Investment Managers and a Professor of Management (who is also a chartered accountant) encoded and narrowed down the discourse to issues of management and process rather than issues of public import.

The narrative structure of news means that disconfirming or dissonant views tend not to be given a platform, or if they are present, to be treated differentially. This approach to news assumes that its role is to reflect a 'coherent reality'- an approach antithetical to a vision of news as providing a platform for a plurality of opinions and perspectives. Due to the tacit and explicit approval of the bank's nationalisation, the

lack of dissonant voices, the episodic orientation that precluded systems-level analysis, and the narrow attribution of responsibility and identification of implications, I concluded that the news coverage over the period studied was strongly- and almost exclusively- system-maintaining in nature.

What Next?

It is my assertion that given the reach and perceived authority of RTÉ Television News, my findings do not merely constitute minor infractions in impartiality and balance, but rather have far-reaching implications with relevance for wider debates on democracy, citizenship, the media's regulatory environment and the health of the wider public sphere. Suggestions as to how publicly funded media can better serve the interests of civil society and help combat the deepening crises of legitimacy plaguing politics seem increasingly urgent.

Our attention should turn, perhaps, to fundamentally re-examining our expectations of public service broadcasting. Lewis makes the point that that the health of a democracy and public discourse depends upon the quality of information that people receive about politics and public affairs. He argues that the 'contradictory impulses that shape modern journalism are a product of its identity as a public information service channelled into a commercial form' (2006, p.304). This tension between public service and market values that gives television news a bipolar nature has given rise, according to Lewis, to a fundamental fissure in television news that has serious implications for citizenship.

As far back as 1982, the Glasgow University Media Group issued a damning indictment of the partiality of public service television news in the UK (BBC and ITV), saying that its themes and content 'directly parallel those in the private and openly partisan press', and is 'distinguished from this mainly by its politer style and inclusion of token nods in the direction of alternative thought'. This, they argue, 'is a long way from being a public service' (1982, pp.16-17). This research project has demonstrated how news broadcasts, in the unspoken assumptions and framing processes of news, can disseminate, naturalise, and insulate the dominant culture and

ideologies from criticism- through process that are frequently invisible to the naked eye. How can deliberative, reflexive and pluralistic public discourse of the kind envisioned by Jurgen Habermas (1984) ever exist in this context? The challenge, if not the answer, is clear: we must somehow reclaim the notion of the public service function of news.

But before we begin proposing solutions, we need to have clearer picture of the nature of the problem, if one exists at all. The small scale of the research project's dataset means that it is impossible to generalise these conclusions to the totality of RTÉ Television news output, or to offer policy recommendations. However, given the array of evidence for editorial failures, comprising explicit and implicit bias as well as a lack of discursive plurality in the data I studied, the need for an expanded, comprehensive research project into the performance of Ireland's main public service broadcaster has taken on urgent importance. The precise form such a project should take is beyond the remit of this paper, but I wish to close this paper by making the case for a project that embraces the three central elements of mass communication- representation, production and reception. Whilst this paper has discussed a project that focused on representation, I believe that processes of production- the means by which journalists produce the news- and reception- the processes by which audiences interpret and are influenced by news- are critical elements of a project that seeks to holistically assess the performance of our public service broadcaster. If content analysis without semiotic analysis is akin to listening to the sound of 'one hand clapping' (2005, p.25), surely semiotic analysis without reception analysis is like listening to two hands clapping in an empty room. The alternative - failing to examine the output of our public service news organisations - would be akin to holding our hands to our ears and merely *assuming* that RTÉ News is 'fair, accurate, impartial and challenging' (RTÉ, 2008). The findings of this paper suggest this cannot be taken as read.

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