The Agenda Setting and Framing Functions of Irish Online Media in the Build-up to and Aftermath of the 2020 General Election

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Abstract: *This article offers a critique of mainstream media coverage of the 2020 Irish General Election. Informed by the work of McCombs and Shaw (1972), Entman (1993), Druckman (2001) and Gross (2008), it undertakes a comparative agenda setting and framing analysis of two major Irish media outlets in the build-up to, and immediate aftermath of the election: RTE (Ireland's national public service broadcaster) and The Irish Independent (the country's largest selling daily newspaper). The original version of this article was submitted as an essay for the CM382 'Applying Communication Theory' module.*

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The Irish political landscape is at its most divisive in years, with social media and the growth of online news sites playing a huge role in this. A browse through the comments under most political posts in Ireland today will be littered with phrases like 'Spin Féin' '#ConcannonBot' or 'Fianna fail'. Political polarisation is occurring more frequently nowadays due to social media users only being exposed to the sites they follow, serving to just reinforce their existing beliefs, rather than engage in online discourse that may change their opinion (Sunstein, 2001). Newspapers and news broadcasters have always had their own political biases, and online news sources are no different. These biases can be expressed inconspicuously with the use of agenda setting and framing. These tools are used by the media to influence what issues the public think about and how they think about them. The 2020 General Election was a historic election for Ireland, as it was the first time ever there were three major parties topping the polls, and this essay will analyse how the Irish mainstream online media used agenda setting and framing differently for the coverage of each of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, and Sinn Féin in the week leading up to the election, and the immediate aftermath.

In order to thoroughly analyse the agenda setting and framing functions of the Irish mainstream media, clear definitions of each are needed. The term "agenda setting" was coined by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in "Agenda Setting of Mass Media" in 1972. It means that journalists shape the political world by being gatekeepers, deciding what the public are going to hear about and what they are not going to hear about. Not only are the public told by the news media what issues are important, they are also told how much importance they should attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

If agenda setting is leading or directing an audience to focus on and think about a particular issue, then framing is how that audience is led and positioned to understand it. As Entman advances, framing (or agenda extension) is the ability journalists have to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient" (1993, p.52). The frames function by highlighting "some bits of information about an item that is the subject of a communication, thereby elevating them in salience." (ibid. p.53). As such, frames have the ability to guide narratives and organise experience (Schwalbe, 2013). Moreover, there are two main types of framing: equivalency framing, which alludes to an equivalence between two separate things; and emphasis framing, which emphasises a certain aspect of a story out of a number of information points that could be key as well.

The same information can cause different reactions in people depending on whether it's portrayed positively or negatively (Druckman, 2001). These frames can then be either thematic or episodic. According to Gross (2008, p.171), episodic frames "present an issue by offering specific examples, case study, or event oriented report". Whereas thematic frames "place issues into a broader context" (Gross, 2008, p.171). Episodic frames are more likely to be used by news sites because they're seen to be more emotionally compelling and more likely to connect with their audience. However, the public interprets frames through their own values and belief systems and framing alone can't change a person's opinion.

To get a general sense of Irish mainstream media at the time of the election, it was decided to focus analysis on the respective outputs of RTÉ and the Irish Independent. RTÉ is Ireland's national broadcaster, most viewed channel, and many of the leaders' debates or election day coverage was broadcasted on RTÉ1. The Irish Independent is Ireland's largest-selling daily newspaper, and now accounts for more than half of the daily newspaper sales in Ireland (MediaHQ, 2019). I used exclusively online media for the ease of access over sourcing physical newspaper prints from the time of the election, so every article was found on either RTE.ie or Independent.ie, and all election broadcasts were accessed through RTE.ie or the RTÉ Player. Articles were accessed through online archives by searching the names of Leo Varadkar, Micheál Martin, and Mary-Lou McDonald for the month of February.

One of the most talked about topics a week before the election was RTÉ's controversial decision to omit Sinn Féin from the final leaders' debate. RTÉ previously explained that the inclusion of leaders from smaller parties limited the amount of topics the bigger parties could cover. However, the previous two weeks of polling showed that Sinn Féin were now a major party for the 2020 General Election, and would have a share of votes similar to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's (The Journal, 2020). After backlash from the public over censorship and legal threats from the party, the Sinn Féin leader Mary-Lou McDonald was offered an invitation the night before the debate (RTÉ, 2020). Following this, RTE.ie published a profile on each of the leaders of Ireland's major political parties; Mary-Lou McDonald of Sinn Féin, Micheál Martin of Fianna Fáil, and Leo Varadkar of Fine Gael. While detailing McDonald's education, RTÉ utilised emphasis framing when highlighting the fact that she attended a "Catholic private fee-paying school" (RTÉ, 2020). However, in the profile of then-Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, RTÉ omitted the fact that he also attended a private fee-paying school in The King's Hospital, Palmerstown. Going on the figures from recent years, Varadkar's school is almost twice as expensive as McDonald's (The King's Hospital Official Site, 2020). RTÉ chose to omit this information from the public agenda to give it out-of-frame status, and decided to make the Sinn Féin leader's private education more salient. Since McDonald's party would have more of a working-class following than Fine Gael, RTÉ is subtly implying the narrative that Sinn Féin are not the working-class voice for change that they claimed to be. This frame was episodic, as the broadcaster just highlighted the frame individually, and never talked about the broader context of class associated with it.

RTÉ framed Martin as a one-dimensional principled hero in comparison to the profile of the other two leaders. It highlighted how Martin went against the grain of his party twice by voting no confidence in the then-leader of Fianna Fáil Brian Cowen, which resulted in him resigning as minister for foreign affairs when Cowen won the vote, and then again in the "journey to eventually backing yes" during the Repeal the 8th movement (RTÉ, 2020). RTÉ episodically framed Varadkar's similar voting stance as much less like a journey, and more as a crafty move, with RTÉ stating he "only made known his pro-choice views on abortion in the run-up to the historic referendum" (RTÉ, 2020). Despite the leaders' two situations being very similar, the subtle differences in phrasing means Martin is portrayed as innovative and pioneering, while Varadkar is the equivalent of a 'flip flopper' - prone to changing his position. Then in the Fine Gael leader's profile, RTÉ rather fairly mentioned both Varadkar's lowlights regarding housing and healthcare, and his highlights during Brexit negotiations

before the article ended. When analysing the agenda set in the Fianna Fáil leader's profile, there is zero mention of the lowlights of his career, blatantly ignoring where he was during the biggest economic crisis in Ireland's history and the controversy that followed him (RTÉ, 2020).

The final Prime Time major party leaders' debate happened the next day on the 4th of February. Co-hosts Miriam O'Callaghan and David McCullagh set the agenda with the issues of healthcare, housing, the pension age, and climate tax. Varadkar, McDonald and Martin were all given time to speak on each key topic and explain their related manifestos. RTÉ utilised their agenda-setting ability even more by bringing key individual news stories into the debate. During the debate on housing, O'Callaghan confronted Leo Varadkar with a recent news headline about a homeless man who was critically injured by an industrial vehicle while it was clearing out tents, and then thematically framed it around the wider picture of how his government had failed the homeless. Later on in the debate, McDonald was also questioned on an individual event in which her TD Conor Murphy controversially claimed the 2007 murder of 21-year-old Paul Quinn was related to the victim's criminality. O'Callaghan episodically framed this, asking McDonald to personally take blame for Murphy's 2007 comments, and for his failure to apologise for them since. Where these two incidents differ is the time difference between them. RTÉ set the agenda on Fine Gael with an event that happened less than a month prior to the debate, while an issue that happened over twelve years before the election was made more salient for Sinn Féin in this campaign. During the 1 hour and 29 minute run-time, the Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin was not confronted with an individual news story, neither episodic or thematically framed.

The Irish Independent is a news site that did not try to hide their right-leaning political tendencies in the days before the 2020 General Election, with a number of articles setting a negative agenda against Mary-Lou McDonald, and none against the other major party leaders. In the week before the election, an article titled "Mary Lou McDonald Could Well Be the Irish Version of Donald Trump'' was posted, which constantly equivalency framed the Sinn Féin supporter as "disillusioned" and the "disenfranchised angry voter" in an attempt to alienate their voter base (Ryan, 2020). By equivalency framing the left wing McDonald to the right wing Donald Trump, the article was attempting to make McDonald's mannerisms more salient than the policies her supporters are actually interested in. The article also never actually mentions where Sinn Féin's support is coming from - i.e. the 18-34 age range of voters (Business Post Poll, 2020). Here, the Irish Independent dispels the equivalency frame of the delusional outsider, and replaces it with regular young people who are just trying to keep their head above water.

Two days later, another Irish Independent article titled "Mary Lou sticks to SF heartlands as she tries to brush off the shadows of the past" was published, which agenda-set past connections with the IRA into the forefront of Sinn Féin's campaign (a common topic for the 2020 General Election) (McQuinn, 2020). None of the articles the Irish Independent posted on Leo Varadkar brought Fine Gael's past and their fascist beginning as 'The Blueshirts' into the public agenda, though it was 30 years prior to the start of The Troubles. The phrasing of comments in this article like "the few people she did meet, she urged to get to the polling stations" or "'don't lose heart," she told them before posing for a photo with the placards and moving on" portrays McDonald as disingenuous for the camera, and disconnected from the people she met while canvassing (ibid). To emphasis frame 'few' or her 'posing' for a photo suggests that there's a phoniness behind the facade. With this in mind, when analysing The Irish Independent's story about Micheál Martin's campaign trail, we see that the exact opposite narrative is framed. Titled "Micheál Martin setting a frantic pace on the streets where every vote will count", the Fianna Fáil leader is depicted as a man who just can't wait to meet everyone, and has time for them too, all while McDonald is focused on posing with placards and not connected with the people (O'Connell, 2020). The emphasis on "SF Heartlands" implies that McDonald is playing it safe for the press, while Martin's agenda is "every vote will count, hence Mr. Martin's

desire to get on as many doors as possible" like he's bravely in the middle of a battle for votes. Meanwhile, since Fine Gael's polling was so low at the time, Varadkar's article set the agenda as a "frantic bid to save FG", emphasising worry and desperation in the Fine Gael party (ibid).

The aftermath of the election followed a similar pattern in coverage. One day after Sinn Féin's landmark 37 seats won and 24.5% of first preference votes, the Irish Independent set the public agenda with the headline "So Why Didn't Younger Voters Care About Sinn Féin Crimes?" and brought the IRA into the conversation again immediately, despite the paper not questioning why the public voted for any of the other parties (O'Hanlon, 2020). Aside from this, Independent.ie largely omitted Sinn Féin from their headlines in the following weeks and focused on how Fianna Fáil should build a coalition, despite Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil having the same amount of elected seats (with Fianna Fáil's 38th TD being the Ceann Comhairle Seán Ó Fearghaíl who was re-elected automatically). By omitting Sinn Féin from their headlines, the out-of-frame status delegitimizes their claim to be included in government talks.

The following week, the Irish Independent published two articles written by Eoghan Harris, a long time Fianna Fáil affiliate who was nominated for the Oireachtas by former Fianna Fáil leader Bertie Aherne in 2007. In these articles, he spends the majority of time lambasting Sinn Féin, before agenda setting that Fine Gael's Varadkar and Coveney are partly to blame for the rise of Sinn Féin for doing such a poor job regarding health and housing (Harris, 2020). However, in the next line he praises the Fianna Fáil leader for "loyally backing Fine Gael on Brexit" (ibid). Harris emphasis frames this in such a way that the public should praise Micheál Martin for backing Fine Gael during their successes, but should take none of the blame for backing them for their disastrous handling of health and housing over their government. This is a common double standard from the Irish mainstream media in which Fine Gael are given the blame for the failures of their confidence-and-supply government with Fianna Fáil, but split the praise for its successes.

This analysis of the agenda setting and framing function in RTÉ and the Irish Independent around the 2020 General Election points to three main findings. First, there is an apparent media favouritism towards Fianna Fáil, in terms of the amount of coverage they received after the election, and the general positivity of the agenda set about them throughout. Second, there is a slight bias against Fine Gael, largely because Fianna Fáil often shares the successes of their confidence-and-supply government, but Fine Gael are the only ones held accountable for the failures. Third, there is a strong bias against the newcomers of the major parties, Sinn Féin, who were the only party the Irish Independent wrote outright negative articles about, set the agenda with episodic frames from 2007, and who RTÉ almost omitted from the debate.

These three findings regarding agenda setting and framing can be explained by two factors: party popularity, and party policy. The mainstream media would generally try to appeal to the largest audience they could, and the poor polling of Fine Gael throughout the 2020 campaign would indicate they were a party on the decline and not the side to be supporting. Since Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin were polling close to each other for most of the campaign, the second factor, policy, is the reason the mainstream media would agenda-set and frame a bias against them. Sinn Féin's policy on taxing the higher wage bracket more would include the people who run The Irish Independent and RTÉ, and many of their presenters. Fine Gael's unpopularity and Sinn Féin's tax policies went against the interests of the Irish mainstream media, and Fianna Fáil were the party that reaped the rewards of this through favouritism. The Irish Independent and RTÉ both utilised equivalency framing and emphasis framing extensively, while episodic framing occurred more often than thematic framing as would be expected.

The conversation around the biases present in our news sources will always be an important discussion to be had. When the world is already on a path towards further political polarisation, it is important to be aware of the potential biases of any individual news source. Agenda setting and framing are two very powerful tools that not only shape the political world around us, but every aspect of society around us too.

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