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## Whose Development: Framing of Ireland's Aid Communities by Institutional Sources and the Media During and After the Celtic Tiger

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# WHOSE DEVELOPMENT: Framing of Ireland's Aid Communities by Institutional Sources and the Media During and After the Celtic Tiger

Cliona Barnes & Anthony Cawley

## Introduction

IN SEPTEMBER 2006 THE GOVERNMENT'S newly published White Paper on Irish Aid was presented to the media and the public as a statement of Ireland's new position in, and increased responsibilities to, the international community.<sup>1</sup> The economic success of the Celtic Tiger era had endowed the State not only with the means but also with the obligation to strengthen its aid commitments to developing nations. The White Paper outlined an ambitious strategy: Irish Aid would administer the overseas aid budget (OAB) to direct development assistance to nine 'programme' countries, seven in Africa and two in Asia. Smaller amounts of aid would go to 'other aid recipient countries' in Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia. In implementing the strategy, Irish Aid would develop partnerships with and allocate funding to non-governmental organisations (NGOs), multilateral organisations and the governments of developing countries. The White Paper committed the Government to raising the OAB to 0.7% of Gross National Product (GNP) by 2012. On reaching this level, Government projections anticipated an annual OAB of about €1.5bn.

However, supporting developing nations was not central to how the White Paper and the OAB were framed by Government sources or in the subsequent media coverage. Rather, the central frames were Ireland's growing 'status' and 'wealth' during the Celtic Tiger – economically, socially, and internationally. The OAB, in particular, was linked to 'what it meant to be Irish in the 21st Century'. The assumptions underpinning the frames originated with Government sources and passed through the media largely unquestioned and unchallenged.

Coverage of the White Paper highlighted the media's dependency on the Government as a provider of information and authoritative sources. It also illustrated

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<sup>1</sup> Section three of this article, which discusses media coverage of the White Paper on Irish Aid, draws on research conducted by the authors for Connect World ([www.connect-world.net](http://www.connect-world.net)). The authors wish to acknowledge the role of Connect World Director Katherine Meenan in commissioning and supporting the research. The authors also wish to thank Brian Trench, School of Communications, Dublin City University, and Michael Foley, School of Journalism, Dublin Institute of Technology, for their roles in the management of the project and assistance in drafting the final report. The report, entitled Media Coverage of the White Paper on Irish Aid and the Joint Consortium's Second Report on Gender-Based Violence, 2006, is available to download at [www.connect-world.net](http://www.connect-world.net).

the ability of institutional sources to set the frames for media reportage on issues and events. It confirmed, further, the media's tendency to report processes as fragmented, loosely connected events. The media set the borders of the White Paper coverage around the immediacy of its publication. Excluded, as a result, were two dimensions that would have placed the OAB into a more rounded, critical context: the past, and the Government's record of renegeing on previous aid commitments; the future, and the Government's capacity to raise the OAB to the historically high level of 0.7% of GNP.

Within two years the Government's capacity to meet its aid commitments would become a central theme in the media's coverage of the OAB. In July 2008, with the national economy in recession, the Government announced a €45m reduction in the OAB. A global credit crunch, a strengthening euro against sterling and the dollar, and a collapsing domestic property market, among other factors, were eroding large tracts of the public finances. Exchequer spending was cut across all departments. The Government's first raft of spending cuts – €440m of 'savings' – drew strong criticism and hostility from the media and the public, especially in how they applied to education and health.

The cut to the OAB – or 'reduction', as worded by the Government – received relatively little attention as the media focused on spending cuts in domestic areas. Nevertheless, the coverage marked a significant departure from how the OAB had been framed in 2006: from a Celtic Tiger symbol of 'status' and 'wealth' to Post-Celtic Tiger concerns about 'cost' and 'capacity to pay'. The media's approach shifted too, from a consensual and congratulatory tone to one of opposition and conflict.

In synch with this new tone was a swing in the media's treatment of Government sources: from 'positive' and 'lead' sources in 2006 to 'defensive' and 'respondent' sources in 2008. In many news-stories, Government sources were cast as respondents to NGO criticisms. Lewis et al., in a content analysis of British print and broadcast news, noted the media's tendency to quote NGOs as an 'opposing' viewpoint (Lewis et al., 2008: 13). Opposing viewpoints lay at the margins of the White Paper coverage, and NGOs barely featured as sources. In 2008, NGOs were granted greater prominence and legitimacy as sources.

Taking the aid agencies as broadly aligned, two sets of institutional sources were competing to frame the decision relating to the OAB in 2008. In its construction of news, the media presented this to the public as conflict. As with the White Paper coverage, however, the media continued to transmit frames that originated with supplied information and institutional sources. The coverage echoed Schudson's argument that news is often the story of institutions and bureaucracies talking to each other (Schudson, 2003).

Despite the conflict dimension, two overarching frames remained consistent between 2006 and 2008: first, the media orientated the OAB as primarily a domestic news-story; second, the OAB continued to be cast as a reflection of Ireland's economic status.

Individually, the samples of coverage from 2006 and 2008 raise questions about the media's relationship with institutional sources, particularly in its dependency on 'subsidised information' (Gandy, 1982). Collectively, the samples raise questions about the framing of public debate in Ireland, the unquestioned assumptions that can underpin it, and how the media's narrow focus on immediacy can decontextualise and simplify complex political, social and economic processes.

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### **Information Subsidies and Agenda Setting**

In the 1920s, the novelist and political commentator Upton Sinclair criticised American journalism for its growing dependency on information supplied by the government and various government departments (Sinclair, 2003; original publication 1928). Sinclair's wide-ranging argument presented, according to McChesney and Scott, 'a systematic critique of U.S. journalism, arguably the first one ever made' (2003: xii). Later scholars such as Schiller, Herman, Chomsky and Murdoch would refine the basic argument that was emerging from Sinclair's work: that elite groups in the capitalist and political systems held significant influence over what the media published as news.

Sinclair was one of the first scholars to use the word 'chill' to describe how newspapers would spike news that damaged the interests of the powerful, most commonly advertisers but also businessmen and politicians. To Sinclair's early political-economic analysis of U.S. journalism we can trace many of the challenges that have faced scholars since media studies began to be recognised as a distinct academic discipline: the relationship of the media to capital and to government, the independence of journalists and the values that underpin their selection of what is and what is not news. Linked to these concerns has been the growing dependency of the media on government and the public relations industry for pre-packaged information that can be, quickly and easily, presented as news.

Since 1934, and the establishment of the Government Information Bureau, Irish governments have had formal structures for transmitting information to the media (Horgan, 2001). Today's structures are elaborate. Departments and state agencies have press officers to respond to journalists' queries and to issue press releases and statements. Press conference schedules signal to journalists which ministers may be available for interview on a given day. Department websites are an additional information resource.

In the 1980s, Gandy (1982) offered the term 'information subsidy' to describe the media's increasing reliance on supplied sources of news. Be it in the form of a press conference, a press release or a briefing by a press officer, information subsidy holds many advantages for the media: it ensures a regular flow of news-worthy information; it reduces the need for journalists to dig up original information and check its accuracy; it facilitates easy and regular access to authoritative sources; it increases the productivity of journalists who can file multiple news-stories per day; and it lowers the costs of production by enabling fewer journalists to fill the news-hole.

The price of information subsidy is its close alignment to 'agenda setting' (e.g., Gandy, 1982; VanSlyke Turk and Franklin, 1987). Gandy recognised this when he argued that control of information implied control of decision-making in society. He believed that powerful groups within the capitalist system were motivated to subsidise the media's costs of (news) information production to try to ensure 'that [their] preferred message is faithfully reproduced' (Gandy, 1982: 198).

A normative discourse within the profession of journalism is that the media's institutional activities of gathering and distributing information are central to the functioning of democracy and the maintenance of an informed citizenry (Carlson, 2007). Embedded in this discourse is journalism's responsibility to challenge and question the communications of government and other powerful interests to report 'the truth' and protect the public interest.

Journalism as a professional practice is performed within tight constraints: pressure of deadlines, limited resources to pursue alternative sources of information, restrictions on space or airtime in which to tell stories, conformity to editorial policy, and socialisation into professional norms that value institutional sources as authoritative. Within such restrictions, the media often fails to filter out ideological bias or sectional interest from subsidised information before it passes to the public.

Lewis et al. have raised similar concerns about the British media. They measured the volume of public relations material – originating with government, industry, and the entertainment sector – that was published as news in a sample of UK print and broadcast media over a two-week period. They found that the media's reliance on such material was 'extensive' and called into question the UK media's independence and capacity to function as a fourth estate. Further, they argued: 'A political economy analysis suggests that the factors which have created this editorial reliance on these "information subsidies" seem set to continue, if not increase, in the near future' (Lewis et al., 2008: 1).

### **Framing of News**

Framing remains a somewhat loose concept in media studies, despite recent attempts to provide a tighter conceptualisation (e.g. D'Angelo, 2002; Johnson-Cartee, 2004; de Vreese, 2005; Vliegenthart and Roggeband, 2007). A common starting point is Entman's definition of frames as making perceived reality more salient through a communicative text (Entman 1993). We apply the concept in the manner of De Vreese, who regards frames as devices to present and define an issue (de Vreese, 2005). Frames, as applied to the media, are rooted in research on political economy, the sociology of news and the social construction of reality (e.g. Gans<sup>1</sup>, 1978; Tuchman, 1978). The concept of framing tends to be at odds with journalists' self-conceptions, which regard news as mirroring reality and their judgements of what is news as 'natural' or, at least, 'neutral' choices.

The media use frames to facilitate audience understanding of news by placing order on complex issues and events. D'Angelo argues: 'Frames that paradigmatically dominate news are also believed to dominate audiences' (2002: 875). Such domination is subject to negotiation, however, as audiences read the news through their own interpretative frames, i.e. their political allegiances can influence their reading of news-stories on policy issues.

Frames extend not only from the media to the audience. They extend back from the media to its original sources. In taking this approach, we regard the Government, NGOs and the media as institutional actors in the co-construction of news relating to the White Paper and the OAB. Our approach echoes that of Touri (2009). She argues that multiple social actors shape news frames: through sponsoring their preferred meaning, they can fashion news-stories into a 'platform for framing contests' (172).

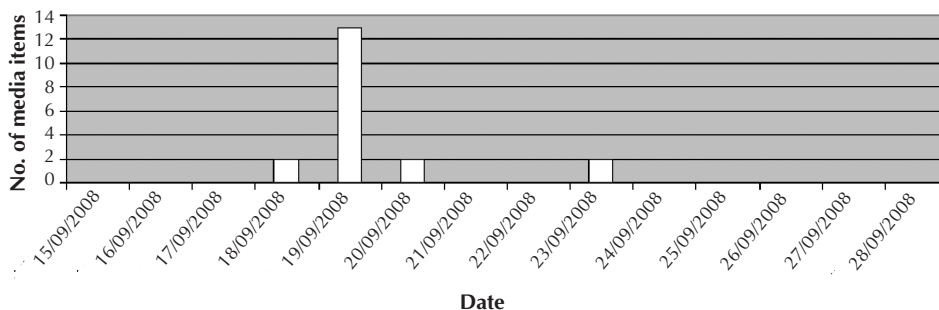
Our research suggests that information supplied to the media by institutional sources is encoded with frames, e.g. the sectional interests promoted in a press release and the ideological positions and assumptions underpinning them. The media can resist institutional framing by taking a different news-angle or by questioning and challenging encoded sectional interests. But, as our case-study demonstrates, the media is often a weak filter of frames encoded by institutional sources.

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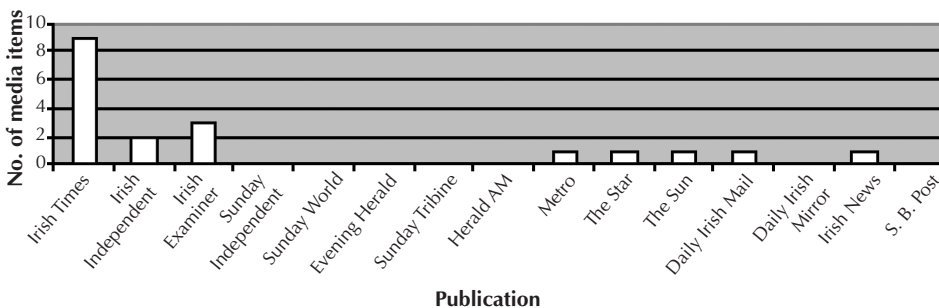
**Research Samples and Methodology**

Our research is based on a content analysis of print media material. For the White Paper we examined, in hardcopy, the main Irish daily and Sunday newspapers for a two-week period around the document's launch on 18 September 2006. The time-frame spanned three days before the launch, the launch day itself, and ten days after. It was configured to test the White Paper's durability in the news agenda. Our sample also included the Department of Foreign Affairs press release announcing the document's publication.

**Figure 1: White Paper on Irish Aid Coverage by Date and Volume, 2006**



**Figure 2: White Paper on Irish Aid Coverage by Newspaper**



Our second sample was of articles that, in whole or in part, discussed the Government's reduction in the OAB in 2008. The sample's timeframe was July to December. The longer timeframe was necessary to examine whether framing of the OAB shifted as the public finances deteriorated rapidly throughout the year. Because of the six-month timeframe, we lacked sufficient resources to examine the newspapers in hardcopy. Instead, we gathered our sample through the Nexis database.

Methodological questions have been raised about the 'push button content analysis' associated with online archives such as Nexis (Deacon, 2007). One concern is that archived articles are removed from the context of their original publication, i.e. from their position on the page and stripped of accompanying photographs. Another con-

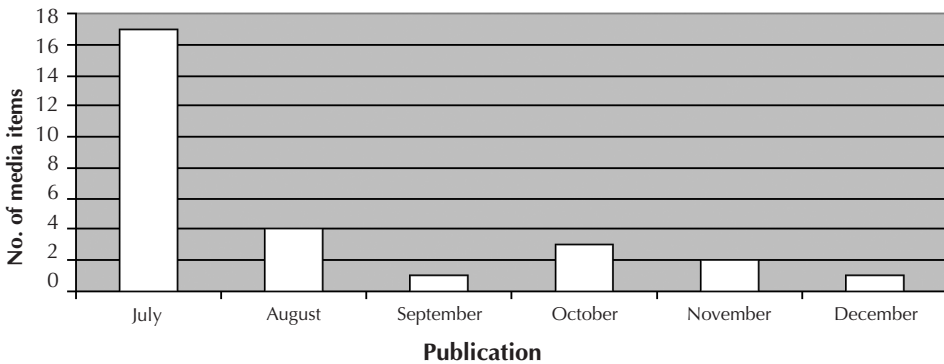
cern is that even the most comprehensive online archives may not capture everything published in a newspaper.

A strong consideration for our research was the reliability of word searches to capture all relevant material. We were also aware that word searches tend to throw up false positives. To guard against these weaknesses, we conducted a number of word searches within the ‘Irish publications’ parameter of Nexis: searches included Irish Aid, Overseas Aid Budget, Overseas Development Aid, Development Budget, Foreign Aid and White Paper. We collated the findings into a single electronic file. We then read through each article to determine whether it was relevant to our study.

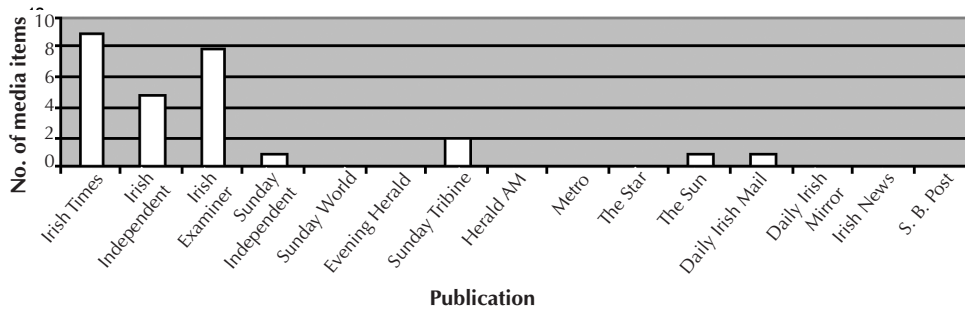
This search uncovered the bulk of our sample. However, we had to conduct a second search within ‘British newspapers’ to capture the Irish editions of UK titles. The second search returned articles from the Irish editions of the *Sun*, the *Mail*, and the *Sunday Times*.

Our sample included the Government’s press release issued on 9 July 2008. Because NGOs featured prominently as sources, we also gathered the press releases issued by the main aid agencies: Goal, Concern, Trócaire, and Oxfam Ireland.

**Figure 3: OAB Reduction Coverage by Volume and Date, 2008**



**Figure 4: OAB Reduction Coverage by Newspaper**



### Framing of the White Paper and OAB in the Celtic Tiger Era

With the publication of the White Paper on Irish Aid the government was making a pledge to the United Nations (UN) for the second time: to reach and maintain an annual overseas aid commitment of 0.7% of GNP. The original pledge was made in 2000. The government reneged after an economic downturn in 2001 and 2002. The downturn was short-lived, however, and the following years saw strong economic activity and growth in public spending. In 2006, the government again pledged to the UN to raise its aid commitments to 0.7% of GNP, a projected sum of about €1.5bn, with a target date of 2012.

The *Irish Times* welcomed the White Paper in its editorial of 20 September 2006, calling it 'excellent', and adding, 'There is no doubting the Irish public's interest in the subject.' The statement was defensible in the *Irish Times*, which carried the most in-depth and reflective coverage. However, the media often conflates *public interest* with *publishing news that journalists assume the public is interested in*. Reflected across the coverage as a whole, the media did not seem to judge a significant public interest in the White Paper. It had, effectively, fallen off the news agenda the day after its publication was reported. Neither did its small volume of coverage suggest that the media judged the subject to be of significant public interest, either, at least in how it applied to Irish Aid's development activities.

'What' the development issues were, 'where' they were occurring, and 'how' the aid programme would engage with them were generally not news. Articles tended to sum up development issues as 'humanitarian disasters' and identified their location as 'Africa' or, even broader, 'overseas'. The *Irish Times*, alone, listed the nine programme countries and reported that two of them were in Asia.

The dominant news-frame was modern Ireland's changing status – economically, socially, and internationally. The White Paper was framed to represent Ireland as a nation with the newly acquired wealth to afford an enlarged overseas aid programme; to represent what it meant to be Irish in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; to represent a new departure in Irish foreign policy, with the potential for the country to become a 'global leader' in bridging the divide between developed and developing nations.

The frames originated with government sources at the press conference to launch the White Paper and with the Department of Foreign Affairs press release. A number of news-stories were based on the press release alone. The two most prominent quotes in the media coverage were among the lead quotations in the press release. First, Taoiseach Bertie Ahern: 'I believe our aid programme is a practical expression of the values that help define what it means to be Irish at the beginning of the 21st century.' Second, Minister of State Conor Lenihan: 'This is the first time in our island history that we have both the money and the expertise to make a real difference.'<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on the frames encoded in the government speeches and press release, the media positioned the White Paper as a reflection of Ireland's wealthier economic status. 'A super-league Third World aid programme fit for a super-rich Ireland has been launched by the Taoiseach' was the opening sentence of the *Irish Independent's* (19 September) news-report. It was the sole description of the country as 'super-rich',

<sup>2</sup> The press release can be accessed at the Department of Foreign Affairs website: <http://www.dfa.ie/hom e/index.aspx?id=25159>



but even in subtler language the principal frame was Ireland's economic status and its attendant consequences – in the changes it brought socially (in the values of what it meant to be Irish) and internationally (in the duties and obligations of a wealthy nation to aid developing nations).

The *Irish Examiner* (19 September) described the White Paper as 'reflecting Ireland's newfound status as one of the richest economies of the developed world'. This statement captured neatly the tone of the coverage: the commitment of €1.5bn a year as reflecting status.

The *Irish Times* was the sole newspaper to highlight that, because of an economic downturn in 2001, the government had reneged on a previous commitment. The newspaper (23 September) added that, in the event of another economic downturn, the aid commitments would be 'bound to pinch'.

Beyond this, the print media did not engage with the issue of Ireland's capacity to reach and maintain an annual spend of €1.5bn on overseas aid if the economy suffered another downturn.

Within the overarching frame of Ireland's economic status, an important dimension was how the White Paper represented the 'values' of what it meant to be Irish in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It was prompted by a quote attributed to Bertie Ahern in the press release:

Speaking at the launch An Taoiseach said: 'I believe our aid programme is a practical expression of the values that help define what it means to be Irish at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It represents our sense of broader social concern and our obligation to those with whom we share our humanity.'

The quotation, with the first sentence re-cast as a paraphrased lead, was carried in the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Examiner*, the *Irish Daily Mail*, the *Irish News*, the *Irish Sun*, the *Irish Star* and *Metro*.

Another prominent frame was how the White Paper represented a new departure (third phase) in the country's foreign policy: a higher role in international relations. Speaking at the launch, Minister Dermot Ahern claimed that the country's first phase of foreign policy was the achievement of sovereignty and independence; the second was peace and prosperity; the third would be (potentially) the country's role as a bridge between the developed and developing worlds. Also speaking at the launch, Conor Lenihan contributed to the theme with the claim that Ireland had the potential to be a 'global leader' in the area.

In its coverage, the media drew on a narrow range of sources and source material: the three government speakers at the launch and the press release, with rare quotation of the White Paper's text. The likelihood of government sources being quoted was broadly in line with their seniority in the cabinet (and the running order of their quotes in the press release): Bertie Ahern featured in all news-stories; Dermot Ahern and Conor Lenihan were quoted in longer news stories but generally were excluded from shorter pieces.

Moving outside the parameters of easily available sources and supplied information was the exception rather than the norm in the coverage. The *Irish Times* was most likely to venture outside these parameters. It engaged in the greatest detail with the substance of the White Paper. It also carried a number of quotes, as reaction,

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from a Labour politician and members of various aid agencies, and it cited the perspectives of an academic. Further, it carried a comment from Liz O'Donnell of the Progressive Democrats that a White Paper was unnecessary because a full review of Ireland's overseas aid programme had taken place five years previously.

No newspaper carried a quote from anyone based in a 'programme' country.

Overall, our study suggested that the media was a weak filter of the frames encoded in the press release and promoted by government sources at the press conference. In transmitting the frames, the media generally did not challenge or question their underpinning assumptions: what it meant to be Irish in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the OAB as reflecting Ireland's rich economy, and the country's potential to become a global leader in development. The *Irish Times*, alone, situated the White Paper in the context of previous aid commitments and raised questions about the Government's capacity to meet future commitments.

### **Framing of the OAB in the Post-Celtic Tiger Era**

In 2008 the Irish economy fell into recession. The changed economic context illustrated sharply the limitations of the print media's coverage of the White Paper two years earlier. Focused on the immediacy of the document's publication within the context of a strong national economy, the media generally reported the government's future commitment – €1.5bn, 0.7% of GNP annually – as both a fixed sum and a fixed target. This created a distortion: 0.7% of GNP was a fixed commitment; the sum €1.5bn was a projection, vulnerable to changes in GNP. The distortion transmitted by the media originated with the Department of Foreign Affairs press release, in which the flexibility of the sum was suggested by a weak qualification: 'Reaching the 0.7% of GNP target of expenditure on overseas aid will mean spending *in the order of* €1.5 billion annually by 2012' (authors' italics).

The nuance was fudged in the media coverage. The *Irish Sun* (19 September 2006) reported: 'Ireland will be spending €1.5bn a year on overseas aid by 2012, the Government promised yesterday.' On the same day, the *Irish Daily Mail* carried the headline: 'Irish aid target set at €1.5bn.' And the *Irish Times* wrote: 'Ireland will spend more than €1.5bn a year on overseas aid by 2012.'

With the deterioration of the economy and GNP in 2008, €1.5bn no longer remained a credible projection for 2012. Such was the scale and speed of the economic corrosion that the shorter-term projection of GNP for 2008 was also off-track. The government had detailed a series of incremental rises in the years leading to 2012 to reach its target percentage of GNP. The target for 2008 was about 0.56%. However, with the economy in recession, the amount of money originally ear-marked for the OAB was rising above that figure as a percentage of GNP.

In this context, in July 2008, the government announced a 'reduction' in the OAB and the media reported a 'cut'. In response to the recession, the government introduced a number of measures to produce €440m in 'savings', of which €45m would come from the OAB. The decision left the media trying to reconcile a scenario that had been neglected in 2006: that the government could reduce, in real terms, the amount of money in the OAB and still remain on course to meet its commitments as a percentage of GNP. By now, the figure of €1.5bn – so prominent in headlines and lead paragraphs two years earlier – was absent from government communications and media reportage.

The 'reduction' was a small proportion of the €914m allocated to the OAB at the time. A difficulty, though, was measuring whether it also represented a fall as a percentage of GNP. The 2006 fudge on whether the government's commitment was to a fixed sum or to a percentage of GNP persisted in the media's initial response to the 'reduction'. In 2006 the media quoted government sources as speaking of the 'obligation' to give; in 2008 the media prioritised NGO sources arguing for the 'principle' of not taking away.

With two sets of institutional sources competing to frame the OAB 'reduction', the media shifted its approach from the consensus reporting of 2006 to conflict and oppositional reporting in 2008. In news stories, government sources generally were cast as defensive respondents. NGO reaction was likely to be positioned as the lead quote and accorded moral authority.

However, the struggle to frame the OAB was between three broadly aligned actors, not two: government sources, NGO sources, and the media itself. The struggle was evident in the recurring words used by government sources (reduction, savings, preserve), NGOs (principle, appeals, disappointed, expresses disappointment), and the media (cut, cutback, chopped, slashed, shaved, under the knife).

As the economy fell farther during the year, the government continued to defend and reaffirm its commitment to reaching 0.7% of GNP by 2012. However, it introduced a malleability in how it would reach the final target: first, government sources claimed that 'reductions' in 2008 and 2009 did not represent a retreat on the overall commitment as long as the 2012 target was delivered; second, government sources argued that smaller amounts of money in the OAB could be justified on the basis of falling GNP.

However, the framing of the OAB continued to be tethered to the immediacy of Ireland's prevailing economic condition. In 2006, in a strong economy, the OAB was framed as status and wealth. In July 2008, in the first raft of cutbacks after years of plenty, the OAB 'reduction' was framed through government defence of its commitment and NGO hostility and criticism. By October 2008, the national economy had worsened: a further, albeit smaller 'reduction' in the OAB in the national budget was framed as the government showing restraint.

The national budget reduced the OAB by €9m for 2009. The media drew on press releases from Concern and Trócaire to frame the decision as an affirmation of the government's commitment to its aid programme in a rough economic climate. (Although the press releases also acknowledged that any reduction of money in the OAB was regrettable.) Media coverage, by this stage, was more attuned to the government having committed to a percentage of GNP that would fluctuate as the economy did.

Again, the dominant news-frames originated with institutional sources and in information supplied to the media. The government remained the primary supplier of information and, particularly, of authoritative sources. The four most prominent government sources were Minister for Finance Brian Lenihan, Taoiseach Brian Cowen, Minister for Foreign Affairs Micheál Martin, and Minister for Overseas Development Peter Power. Competing NGO frames tended to emerge from press releases issued by GOAL, Concern, Trócaire and Oxfam Ireland in July, and from Concern and Trócaire at the time of the national budget in October. Quotes from representatives of NGOs, e.g. GOAL director John O'Shea, were usually sourced from press releases.

In reporting the OAB 'reduction' as news, the media was not a passive transmitter of frames from institutional sources. Through selection and prioritisation of supplied information and institutional sources, the media moulded the competing frames of government and NGOs into conflict. The pattern of media selection and prioritisation of frames tended to favour the NGOs as sources, particularly in July and August. NGO sources were more likely to be cast as lead sources and the government as defensive respondents. By October, with the economy worsening, the frames emerging from NGO sources were less critical of government decisions. This was reflected in the media coverage for the remainder of the year, with conflict being a weaker narrative force in articles. Throughout the sample of coverage, however, the government, NGOs and the media itself were actors engaged in the co-construction of what was presented to the public as news.

The media coverage for each month of the study is summarised below:

*July 2008:*

On 8 July the government announced €440m in 'savings', of which €45m would come from the OAB. The *Irish Times* (9 July), across four news-stories, used the words 'reduction', 'savings', 'cut' and 'cutback' to describe the impact on the OAB. The newspaper linked the reduction in the OAB to the reduction in GNP. It carried a quote from the Minister of Finance, Brian Lenihan, who argued that the OAB would still reach 0.56% of GNP in 2008. The newspaper also quoted Taoiseach Brian Cowen as saying the cutbacks were a 'downpayment' that would protect future commitments.

The government sources were balanced with reaction from NGOs. In its main news story focused on the OAB, The *Irish Times* led with quotes from two NGOs condemning the decision. GOAL director John O'Shea, who prior to the announcement had spoken of the 'principle' of not taking money away from the OAB (*Irish Independent*, 5 July), described the government's move as 'morally indefensible'. Colin Roche of Oxfam Ireland argued that the poorest of the poor should be the last to be hit with such cuts. The quotes were sourced from press releases issued by GOAL and Oxfam Ireland on 8 July.

The *Irish Examiner* (9 July), across two news stories, reported that €45m was being 'shaved' and 'cut' from the OAB. The newspaper quoted Minister Peter Power as arguing that the decision did not 'dilute' the government's commitment, and that the targets of 0.6% of GNP for 2010 and 0.7% target for 2012 would still be met. The quote was sourced from a Department of Foreign Affairs press release. The press release did not mention the amount of the 'reduction'. Instead, it referred to how 'decisions' taken that day would protect future resources available to Irish Aid.

The *Irish Independent* (9 July) reported the government as having 'slashed' €45m from the OAB. Its main news-story on the OAB led with quotes from John O'Shea condemning the decision. The quotes were sourced from a GOAL press release issued on 8 July.

The next day, the *Irish Sun* (10 July) described the OAB as having been 'slashed'. It carried a further condemnation by John O'Shea of the government's decision. The quote was sourced from a GOAL press release issued on 9 July.

The *Irish Times* (10 July) quoted former President Mary Robinson as opposing the reduction of the budget. She said that maintaining the commitment was a 'litmus

test' for the country, and it should stick to its 'principles'. The news-story led with Robinson and it cast as a defensive response the government's assertion that, even without the €45m, the OAB would exceed the projected percentage of GNP for the year.

*August 2008:*

In a news-story on funding to the Rapid Response Corps, the *Sunday Tribune* (10 August) referred to 'savings' of €45m in the OAB. A spokesperson for the Department of Foreign Affairs linked the funding to 'value for money'.

The *Irish Independent* (28 August) reported that Minister Peter Power was unable to guarantee that the OAB would not be cut. To coincide with the publication of Irish Aid's annual report, Power was quoted as arguing that, because the OAB was tied to GNP, the 2012 target could be met without providing additional funds. The newspaper highlighted that the government's pledge of reaching 0.7% of GNP had been broken before.

The *Irish Examiner* (28 August) also reported that Power 'refused to rule out' cuts to the OAB. Again, the Minister emphasised that the budget was tied to the prevailing economic conditions as a percentage of GNP. The news-story, through quoting Power, also referred to the OAB as representing 'taxpayers' money'. The news-story quoted the Taoiseach as arguing that the overall goal was fixed, but the incremental increases to reach it were malleable: 'He [Cowan] indicated that the next few budgets may not see the increases promised to reach that goal.'

*September 2008:*

The *Irish Examiner* cast the government as defending its 'credibility' on aid commitments ahead of a UN meeting in New York on international efforts to halve world poverty by 2015. On the 26 September, it described the OAB as a 'major loser' in the July round of spending cuts. It wrote: 'Foreign Affairs Minister Micheál Martin insisted the Government's credibility at the UN is intact despite slashing €45m from the Irish overseas aid budget in July.' The newspaper quoted the Taoiseach as saying that the 2012 commitment remained intact but intervening overseas budgets may not rise by as much as promised.

*October 2008:*

The government brought forward the traditional November national budget to October in response to the deteriorating public finances. In its pre-budget coverage, the *Irish Times* (7 October) wrote that a fall in GNP would probably be reflected in a fall in the OAB. It also reported the Taoiseach as re-affirming the government's commitment to the 2012 target of 0.7% of GNP.

The *Irish Times* (14 October) reported that the OAB would 'fall' by €14m in 2009. However, as a percentage of GNP, the level of spending would equal that of 2008. The following day, the newspaper (15 October) reported that the government remained on track to meet its incremental commitment of 0.56% of GNP for 2009.

October marked a shift in the tone of coverage. The national economic situation had worsened significantly since July, and there was little of the hostility to the 'fall' in the OAB that was evident with the €45m 'reduction' three months earlier. The *Irish Examiner* (15 October) reported the reaction of Trócaire Director Justin Kil-

cullen, who praised the government for holding to its aid commitments despite the recession. However, the newspaper also reported a qualification from Concern chief executive Tom Arnold, who said the national budget still represented a cut in the amount of money Ireland was spending on overseas aid. The quotes originated in press releases issued by Trócaire and Concern on 14 October.

*November 2008:*

The *Irish Times* (5 November) reported that the OAB would receive 'only minor cuts' in 2009. It added that, even with less money (€891m), the OAB would rise as a percentage of GNP. The newspaper noted, also, how the social partners, ICTU and IBEC,<sup>3</sup> were positive towards maintaining the Irish Aid budget amid cutbacks in other areas. The news story highlighted that the projected 0.56% of GNP, if held, would be a record.

Alone in the print media, the *Sunday Tribune* (9 November) argued that the government should have implemented deeper cuts to the OAB. In an editorial, the newspaper criticised the government for cancelling a programme to vaccinate 12 year-old girls against cervical cancer. It identified others areas in which cuts could have been made, including 'cutting back on the overseas aid budget, which has remained generous and untouched'.

*December 2008:*

In a news review of the year, the *Irish Times* (29 December) noted, again, how the OAB had received only 'minor cuts' in the national budget, even though 'many in the development sector awaited the October budget with some trepidation'. It added that the government remained on track to meet its 2008 increment as a percentage of GNP.

### **Concluding Comments**

The coverage of the White Paper in 2006 and the OAB 'reduction' in 2008 raises significant questions about the Irish print media's relationship to institutional sources and the dynamic of how news and public debate are framed. In particular, the coverage highlights the media's dependency on the government and other institutional bodies as suppliers of information and authoritative sources. Such information subsidies as the media tend to be encoded with frames aligned to an institutional source's sectional interests or ideological biases.

The media, in our study, was a weak filter of such frames. This created a situation where, instead of performing a watchdog function of challenging and questioning institutional sources, the media acted as a transmitter of pre-packaged frames. This was most notable in news stories based on re-written press releases.

A key function of a journalist is to draw on their professional judgement to question institutional sources to disclose information in the public interest. However, control of this function is ceded when journalists repackage supplied information as

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<sup>3</sup> ICTU is the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. IBEC is the Irish Business and Employers Confederation. In certain contexts, they are referred to as the social partners. In the late 1980s, with the Irish economy in recession, the Government, the trade unions and employers' groups came together in a process known as social partnership to negotiate a national wage agreement and to formulate measures to support economic growth. Seven such Social Partnership Agreements have been reached since 1987. The current agreement is Towards 2016.

news. The consequences of this are significant. Press release quotes do not originate from a journalist asking a question; the quote is based on what the institutional source wants the public to know; and a quote encoded with frames aligned to the institutional source's sectional interests may pass unfiltered through the media and to the public.

In coverage of the White Paper, the media acted as a weak filter of frames set by government sources. Commonly, journalists did not question institutional sources directly but lifted quotes from prepared speeches or, more often, from the press release. The press release and prepared speeches framed the White Paper as representing Ireland's wealthier economic status, with subordinate frames relating to the values of being Irish and the country's enhanced international standing. The frames encoded in the press release and supplied-information, and the assumptions underpinning them, passed with little resistance through the media and out to the public. The *Irish Times*, alone, questioned Ireland's capacity to reach 0.7% of GNP when a previous commitment had been reneged upon.

With few dissenting voices, the 2006 coverage was consensual and facilitated a clear flow of information from government to the media and, finally, to the public. The 2008 coverage added a broad alignment of NGOs as a third actor in the co-construction of news. (This was an alignment that the media tended to present as a homogenised, united entity rather than as an NGO community comprising a broad range of social actors, views and development strategies, and with varying relationships to Irish Aid.) The media, through its prioritisation and selection of frames, presented the competing viewpoints of government and NGO sources as conflict in the OAB coverage in July. For that month, the media favoured NGOs, casting government sources as defensive respondents. By October, the government was being cast less defensively. However, the frames – whether defensive from government, critical from NGOs in July to September, or NGOs cautiously acknowledging government restraint in the remainder of the year – still tended to originate with the information institutional sources were supplying to the media.

Both samples orientated the OAB as an inward reflection on Ireland's economic condition. In 2006, in a strong economy, the OAB was framed as a symbol of wealth. In July 2008, in the first raft of cutbacks after a period of prosperity, the OAB 'reduction' was framed through the government's affirmations of its capacity to meet aid commitments and NGO hostility and criticism. By October 2008, the national economy had worsened: a further, but smaller 'reduction' in the OAB in the national budget was framed as the government showing restraint. The fluctuations in framing the OAB suggest the limitations of how the media report long-term processes through the prism of immediacy.

In both samples, the prevalence of quotes originating in press releases, and the relative lack of independently acquired quotes, raises questions about media diversity in Ireland: not in the number of media outlets operating, but in news content. Genuine diversity in news is difficult to achieve when journalists from different outlets gravitate to a narrow range of pre-packaged sources of information.

### **Post-Study**

The deterioration of the Irish economy and the administration of the OAB are contemporary and ongoing issues. The struggle to frame the OAB has continued since

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our study ended. In February 2009, as part of a drive to cut €2bn from public spending, the government announced a €95m reduction in the OAB. Although it is outside the scope of the current study, the authors scanned the media coverage surrounding the announcement. The frames originating with government sources had shifted considerably. They no longer promoted the defence of aid commitments holding as a percentage of GNP. Instead, government sources made the broader argument that Ireland remained a generous donor of foreign aid. The NGOs took up the frame of percentage of GNP to criticise the government, arguing that a reduction of €95m would drop the OAB from 0.56% to 0.53% of GNP for 2009. The frames transmitted in media coverage continued to originate with supplied information (mainly press releases) from government and NGO sources. A further cut of €100m in April's supplementary (emergency) budget reduced the OAB for 2009 to €696m, an estimated 0.48% of GNP, and a figure some €225m lower than had been in the budget when the government announced the first 'reduction' in July 2008.

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