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THE IRISH PUNDITOCRACY AS CONTRARIAN VOICE: Opinion Coverage of the Workplace Smoking Ban

Declan Fahy

THE JOURNALISM OF COMMENTATORS and columnists has remained a lacuna in media studies. Their work has received so little sustained critical attention that it has become something of a 'black box', even as the space devoted to opinion coverage in newspapers has expanded significantly over the past three decades (Duff, 2008: 230; Bogart, 1985; Glover, 2000). The section of the newspaper devoted to opinion journalism has traditionally been the op-ed page, so-called because of its usual placement opposite the section containing editorials. Viewed as a forum for the articulation of diverse viewpoints about current social issues, the page aims to provide a space in the 'marketplace of ideas' for the expression of opinions not found in news and editorial sections of newspapers (Salisbury, 1988 cited in Day and Golan, 2005: 61).

This page has been virtually ignored in mass communications research, however. (Day and Golan, 2005; Ciofalo and Traverso, 1994). The few topics addressed in studies of op-ed content have included the advertisements printed there (Brown et al., 2001), the public relations strategies used to argue stances on specific issues (Smith and Heath, 1990) and the political preferences between publishers and editorial page editors (Kapoor and Kang, 1993). A study that examined the op-ed pages of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* found limited diversity in the selection of sources and stances in discussions of gay marriages, affirmative action and the death penalty (Day and Golan, 2005).

There has been little critical agreement on how to define more precisely the collective of opinion writers that contribute to the op-ed page. One of their number, David McWilliams, categorised them as 'the commentariat ... the aristocracy of commentators, opinion makers and editorial writers' (2005: 18). The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defined op-ed writers as a punditocracy: 'an elite or influential class of experts or political commentators' (Soanes and Stevenson, 2008). Duff defined the punditocracy more narrowly as columnists writing about politics (2008). Hitchens conceptualised the role of the generalist writer as being a free-thinking or intellectual contrarian, although he noted this role has been often described using pejorative labels, including 'maverick', 'loose cannon', 'rebel', 'gadfly', 'iconoclast', 'fanatic', 'troublemaker', 'malcontent' or 'dissenter' (2001: 1-3). Columnists are different from more traditional notions of the public intellectual, writers who are usually experts in one field, but have engaged consistently over time with various audiences outside their academic specialism (Collini, 2006).

While critical writing has neglected the contents of opinion journalism generally, there has been a broad consensus on the theoretical role of one type of opinion writer, the columnist, in a newspaper. Columnists comment in national newspapers on political affairs. They are generalists who move between frequently specialised topics that they present from their distinctive worldview. Columnists are part of an 'interpretative elite' that describes complex reality in ways that contribute to readers' evaluation of political issues. Columnists aim for scoops by interpretation. They earn their reputations and readerships through 'the boldness of their remarks' (Duff, 2008; Glover, 2000; McNair, 2000: 208; Young 2003; Tunstall, 1996: 180).

Columns do not fulfil the same functions, argued Holmes (2005), who divided them into five categories. There are: columns that build up geographic, political or socio-economic communities with shared interests; columns that use experts or famous or controversial writers for commercial reasons; columns that use writers to reinforce the publication's editorial viewpoint; columns that allow a writer to go against a paper's editorial position to create an impression of pluralism; and finally, columns that provide an extension of a dominant ideology, expressing views more extremely than those found in an editorial column.

Several leading UK columnists said their role was to defend the individual against the growing power of large-scale organisations and the increasing government interference in citizens' lives. The columnists said there has been a growing pressure to be more opinionated, and there has been a move away from the idea of the 'sage commentator' as the population becomes less deferential to traditional knowledge (Duff, 2008: 238).

The contribution of a columnist to a title's circulation has been uncertain. There has been no discernable difference in circulation when a columnist has left or was dismissed (Glover, 2000), yet it was estimated that the presence of a particular writer increased a title's sales by one per cent (Tunstall, 1996), and columnists have been frequently used in the promotion of particular titles.

The possible influence of columnists has been linked to the wider agenda-setting theories of media and the policy impact of journalistic coverage (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). A columnist's power in the public sphere has been linked to their 'themativity, the willingness to remain focused on a theme' (Duff, 2008: 242). The writers find and identify problems and issues but also 'convincingly and *influentially* thematise them, furnish them with possible solutions' so they are addressed by parliaments and government (Habermas, 1996 cited in Duff, 2008: 242).

Irish Opinion Writers: Ideologically Jaundiced or Preactionary?

The thematic concerns of columnists have been the focus of the very brief research within Irish journalism studies on opinion writing. David McWilliams, a columnist with the *Sunday Business Post*, argued in *The Pope's Children* (2005) that the Irish commentariat had under-reported the positive social effects of the expansion of the middle class that occurred during the Celtic Tiger years. The commentariat was an 'ideologically jaundiced' collective of left-wing writers that suffered from 'status neurosis', perhaps because their authority and values have been eroded by the mass 'upward social mobility' of the boom years (2005: 18). This argument was generalised from a single quoted *Irish Times* article.

In a more empirically grounded analysis, Titley (2008) found a consistent pattern of right-libertarian discourse among selected Irish columnists in their interpretations

of immigration policy. The writers surveyed included Kevin Myers, then of the *Irish Times* (he now writes for the *Irish Independent*), John Waters, *Irish Times*, and Ian O'Doherty, *Irish Independent*, as well as selected columns from the *Sunday Independent*. These commentators were not simplistically anti-immigrant. Instead, they agreed, with different levels of emphasis, that controlled migration was needed to prevent the unchecked influx of radicalised minorities that would create fundamental democratic change in Europe.

Titley characterised this writing as '*preactionary* discourse', a neologism that described a view that was not only reactionary but was 'a *pre-action*' based on the anticipation that policy elites would insist on pre-determined liberal responses to complex issues. These responses would restrict the opportunities for genuine pluralist debate. These imagined liberal orthodoxies have not been established in Ireland so the columnists' arguments were 'emblems of deeper currents of ideological worry' (2008: 95).

These columnists positioned themselves as speaking out against a perceived consensus of political correctness, a notion 'commonly invoked to suggest that honest conversations are being curtailed by a liberal establishment intent on imposing its beliefs on an unwilling public' (Younge, 2006: 31). The preactionary discourse of columnists studied by Titley displayed an 'anxiety of erosion' of traditional values. The discourse was inconsistent, contradictory and elusive. Their arguments were not empirically grounded and were presented instead as 'self-evident truths'. The columnists seemed to view themselves as 'visionary contrarians', with a constant desire to be 'positioned as victims of consensus' (2008: 107–08).

McWilliams and Titley are directly contradictory in their characterisations of Irish commentators: their studies conclude that opinion writers adopted either ideologically left-wing or right-libertarian perspectives. Although Titley was explicit in his choice of commentators to analyse, neither study addressed the potential diversity of viewpoints in newspaper commentary and McWilliams, in particular, presented the perspectives of the entire commentariat as uniform, reflecting perhaps a tendency to conceptualise commentary journalism as being a unified whole.

Commenting on the Workplace Smoking Ban

This paper presents an analysis of the opinion coverage of another contentious and multifaceted Irish policy issue, the workplace smoking ban, implemented on 31 March 2004. The decision to make Ireland the first European Union country to implement a law of this kind, the first national ban of its type in the world, was addressed in thousands of Irish newspaper articles from its first announcement by the then Minister for Health, Micheál Martin, in January 2003. Its enactment marked the culmination of decades of anti-tobacco campaigning and legislation (McElvaney 2004; Howell, 2004).

This paper aims to:

1. identify the dimensions of the ban that were explored by commentators;
 2. determine whether the areas of interest for opinion writers were the same as the areas explored intensively by news reporters and editorial writers;
 3. test whether a diverse range of viewpoints was expressed in commentary on the tobacco ban;
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4. examine whether the precautionary discourse identified by Titley (2008) in opinion writing on immigration emerged in the commentary of selected writers on a different policy issue;
5. examine if Irish columnists had an influence on the enactment of the smoking ban legislation.

This study analysed the writings of columnists as part of the wider journalism of commentary, which included opinion pieces written by newspaper reporters and invited contributors, who were usually experts in an area of public life affected by the tobacco legislation. This inclusive approach to what constituted opinion writing aimed to capture as many diverse viewpoints as possible, coding those opinions expressed, as in the OED definition of the punditocracy, the one used in this study, by ‘an elite or influential class of experts or political commentators’. The definition of the commentariat is the one used by McWilliams (2005): it expands the concept of the punditocracy to include editorial writers. Commentary pieces and opinion pieces are used as interchangeable terms in this paper.

Duff (2008: 242) noted that to prove whether columnists managed to thematise an issue, a study needed what he called ‘hard data’, which presumably meant quantitative data. This demand has been answered in the current study, which used content analysis as the principal method of analysis to examine opinion coverage in four newspapers, *Irish Times*, *Irish Independent*, *Ireland on Sunday* and *Evening Herald*, selected to represent a cross-section of the Irish newspaper market, with different target readerships and varying methods of presentation. The study’s timeframe was 20 months, from 30 January 2003 (the first public announcement of the legislation) to 30 September 2004 (six months after implementation). During this time, five three-month key episodes¹ were selected for analysis in depth, episodes that were estimated to yield rich data when analysed.

The analysis was informed by a theory of issue-framing, which acknowledged that the media have two main roles in the policy formation process: they inform the public about important national issues and they shape public thought about these issues through framing or characterising an issue in a certain way (Magzamen, Charlesworth and Glantz, 2001; Champion and Chapman, 2005; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Menashe and Seigel, 1998). The definition of issue-framing used in this study was taken from Nisbet and Lewenstein (2002), who wrote: ‘These media “frames” offer a centralising organising idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding series of events, suggesting what the controversy is about, and the essence of an issue’ (2002: 361).

Based on framing typologies used in previous studies referenced above, this study categorised all opinion items into one of six frames – domains of public life with which the writers associated the ban exclusively or primarily. The frames were: 1. *democracy*: the ban was described as a democratic rights and civil liberties issue; 2.

¹ These five key episodes were identified through an examination of a pilot sample of newspaper material that aimed to show the changing levels of media interest in the smoking ban over the study’s timeframe. It was estimated that a close analysis of these time periods would yield rich data with which we could address the research aims effectively. The key episodes were: 1. The ban is announced (30 January–30 April 2003); 2. The opposition forms (30 May–30 August 2003); 3. Seeking public support (30 August–30 November 2003); 4. The ban comes into effect (28 February 2004–30 May 2004); 5. Publicans’ revolt (30 May to 30 August 2004).

economics: the ban was characterised as a policy affecting the hospitality trade, in particular, and the economy as a whole; 3. *health*: the ban was covered as a story of health effects on individuals, workers, and society; 4. *technical*: the ban was written about as a story of technical issues surrounding the ban, including the scope, implementation and enforcement of the legislation; 5. *politics*: the ban was covered as a political story with emphasis on the political actors involved and the lobbying efforts to influence policy; and 6. *society*: the ban was reported as a story of Irish societal change and Irish cultural habits.

There were 74 opinion articles coded in the key episodes over the study's timeframe and each was assigned a single frame, an approach that has precedent (Nisbet and Lewenstein, 2002; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Hansen, 1998). Each item was assigned a value stance: whether it was pro, anti, or neutral towards the ban. It was possible to assign all opinion articles to a frame and value stance to an acceptable level of reliability.² The opinion articles, comprising columns and invited writers, were a sub-set of a large content analysis of all genres of newspapers coverage of the ban: news reports, features, editorials and letters to the editor. The total sample comprised 1154 articles.

Results

1. Commentators focused on democratic, social and political issues more intensely than news reporters and editorial writers.

Table 1: Total Opinion Articles by Frame

<i>Frame</i>	<i>No. of opinion items by frame</i>	<i>Percentage of opinion items by frame (n = 74)</i>	<i>Percentage of news sample (n = 586)</i>	<i>Percentage of editorials (n = 39)</i>	<i>Percentage of total sample (n = 1154)</i>
Democracy	14	19	4	8	9
Economics	3	4	17	5	14
Health	6	8	8	28	16
Technical	4	5	47	31	31
Politics	28	38	15	23	16
Society	19	26	10	5	14
Total	74	100	100	100	100

The most significant frames through which opinion writers viewed the smoking ban were politics (38 per cent), society (26 per cent) and democracy (19 per cent) (see Table 1). All of these frames were represented more prominently in opinion coverage than in cov-

² Intercoder reliability was obtained between two researchers (the author and an external coder) using Cohen's kappa (k) using SAS software, version 9.1. Rosner (1995: 426) said a kappa rating above 75 per cent denoted 'excellent reproducibility', between 40 and 75 denoted 'good reproducibility', and below 40 per cent denoted only 'marginal reproducibility'. For issue-frames in this study, the k rating was 82 per cent, and for value stance the k rating was 75 per cent. All results were highly significant ($p < .0001$).

erage overall, in news reports, and in editorials. The democratic and society frames, in particular, were represented to a substantially higher degree in opinion articles than in news or editorials – indicating that these issues had a special appeal for commentators.

Commentary pieces coded under the democracy frame examined the legislation's effect on civil rights and civil liberties. These pieces also explored the tension between individual versus collective rights, and examined whether the law was a manifestation of a 'nanny state' government. These topics featured in the four per cent of total news stories coded under democracy, indicating they had little news value for journalists. These topics were the focus of eight per cent of editorials, showing the democratic dimension had more appeal for editorial writers than economic or societal aspects, but significantly less than the health, technical or political dimensions of the ban.

Opinion articles coded under the society frame featured discussions about the legislation's effect on Irish social and cultural life, including a perceived destruction of Irish social and cultural values. Opinion pieces coded under the society frame also featured contrasting arguments about whether the ban was a manifestation of political correctness or a piece of socially progressive legislation. These topics featured as most prominent in ten per cent of news stories coded under society, illustrating that these issues were more interesting to news journalists than the health and economic dimensions to the ban, but less newsworthy than technical, economic or political aspects.

The two most strongly represented frames under which news stories were categorised were technical (47 per cent) and economics (17 per cent), demonstrating their high news value for news reporters. However, these dimensions of the ban held little interest for commentators, as demonstrated by the comparatively minor presence of opinion items coded in these frames.

Although the opinion items were concentrated in the democracy, politics and society frames, the presence of commentary articles in all frames indicates that all dimensions of the ban coded in this study's framing typology were addressed by commentators.

The high concentration of opinion items coded under the political frame would seem to show that this was a significant terrain on which the issues surrounding the ban were argued. However, closer analysis shows that these commentary pieces were different to those coded under the democracy and society frames because, as the next section will demonstrate, they did not, for the most part, argue in favour or against the legislation *itself*. Instead, the ban was used as a political issue on which the performance of the Minister and the Government could be evaluated.

2. Commentators predominantly opposed the legislation, mainly on democratic grounds.

More opinion writers argued against the anti-tobacco legislation than argued in favour of it, as indicated by the value stance of each article (Table 2). The majority of opinion articles that argued in favour of the ban were coded under the health and society frames, mirroring the central characterisation of the ban as a worker health and public health issue by the Government and non-governmental organisations ASH Ireland, the Irish Cancer Society and the Irish Heart Foundation (Donnellan, 2003).

The majority of political commentary was not concerned with arguments for or against the legislation: just over two-thirds of the opinion articles coded under the

Table 2: Opinion Articles by Frame and Value Stance

VALUE STANCE	PRO-BAN		ANTI-BAN		NEUTRAL	
	<i>No. of Items</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>No. of Items</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>No. of Items</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Democracy	0	0	13	49	2	6
Economics	2	13	1	4	0	0
Health	4	27	2	8	0	0
Technical	0	0	3	12	1	3
Politics	2	13	4	15	22	67
Society	7	47	3	12	8	24
Total	15	100	26	100	33	100

political frame were neutral towards the ban. The articles largely focused on the handling of the ban as a measure of Micheál Martin's ministerial performance, the intra-Fianna Fáil dispute over whether the ban should be implemented, and the potential political problems the ban raised for the then Fianna Fáil-PD coalition government.

Irish Times political reporter Mark Hennessy, for example, wrote that 'in simple terms, Martin is betting his career on his proposal, because his political capital will not be worth a fag butt on the pavement if he does not get it through' (2003: 14). Similarly, Alison O'Connor in the *Irish Independent* noted: 'with the vagaries of the health brief as they are, the Corkman will want to leave at least one lasting impression from his time in the Department of Health' (2003:10). Sam Smyth in the *Irish Independent* said 'the grassroots have told rural TDs that the cabinet's refusal to consider any compromise [in the ban's scope] is as arrogant as it is intolerant' (2003: 14).

No opinion pieces argued in favour of the legislation on democratic grounds. Almost half of the commentary pieces that argued against the ban were coded under the democracy frame, indicating that this was an area of particular concern for commentators. Commentators whose articles were coded under the democracy frame, and as being against the ban, argued that the legislation was an infringement of smokers' rights, a manifestation of a "nanny state", and a restriction on civil liberties. Opinion articles coded under the society frame, and as being against the ban, argued it had harmed the traditional Irish way of life, manifested in the conceptions of the Irish pub, and was a form of extreme political correctness. Their specific anti-ban arguments will be analysed in the next section.

3. Anti-ban commentators used civil-liberties and individual-rights arguments.

This section presents a closer analysis of the 13 commentary pieces that were coded under the democracy frame and as being against the ban. A selection of writers across the four sampled newspapers argued consistently over time against the ban, and a rhetorical analysis of their arguments showed that their anti-ban arguments centred on individual rights and civil liberties issues.

Two commentators analysed by Titley (2008), Kevin Myers and Ian O'Doherty, argued against the smoking ban. Their persuasive appeals on this different policy terrain contained strains of preactionary discourse. O'Doherty argued in the *Irish Independent* that 'the crusade against smoking is merely the first front in a broader crusade against the things that the state and the intelligentsia have decided are bad for us' (2004: 13). Writing in the *Evening Herald*, he said 'given the fact that Martin is Minister for Health and Children, maybe he has become a little confused. Perhaps he should let some grown-ups deal with the big issues' (2003: 15).

Myers in the *Irish Times* said 'there are good libertarian grounds for arguing that pubs and restaurants should be licensed to allow smokers ... That is my choice; smokers, surely, are entitled to a choice of their own' (2003b: 13). In another Irishman's Diary column he wrote for the paper, he professed to detest smoking, but also asked, 'is there any real civil liberties lobby in Ireland at all? Do many people think that the State should not automatically have the right to decide whether or not people enter a pub at three in the morning or to enjoy a cigarette there?' (2003a: 15). In another article, he referred to 'anti-smoking zealots' and said 'the central issue about cigarette smoking is freedom. It's irrelevant whether or not it shortens your life-span' (2003c: 17).

Commentators in other newspapers echoed these arguments. *Ireland on Sunday's* Eamon Dunphy said that the ban 'made no provision for tolerance or common sense' (2003: 14). Writing on an aspect of the ban that would make it an offence to smoke in a company car, Dunphy noted: 'learning of this law my first reaction was disbelief' (2004: 17). In the same paper, Mary Carr said 'the blanket ban intentionally negates all choice and removes from us, as citizens, the onus of responsibility for our own lifestyle choices' (2004: 19). She referred to 'anti-smoking zealots' who have campaigned against 'social freedom' (2003: 17). David Quinn in the *Irish Independent* said the ban was a manifestation of the view that 'healthism' – the idea that people should all be healthy whether they like it or not – 'is fast becoming the new moralism' (2003: 11).

These selected commentators successfully thematised the smoking ban as a civil rights and civil liberties issue. Their opinion writing contained elements of preactionary discourse, specifically in their characterisation of the ban as being a product of a liberal political establishment, introducing legislation that was an affront to common sense and an unwanted encroachment on personal liberty.

4. Commentators presented a spectrum of viewpoints overall

These anti-ban opinion items have been analysed within the overall journalistic commentary on the legislation, which presented a vortex of competing viewpoints. The four newspapers published roughly similar numbers of opinion pieces on the ban, demonstrating that the overall sample of anti-ban commentary pieces was not due solely to a uniformly hostile view towards the ban in one paper. The data in Table 3 demonstrates the diversity between, and within, newspapers, regarding the stance of their opinion writers towards the ban. The opinion coverage in each publication contained mixed views towards the ban, but more writers argued against it than for it in *Ireland on Sunday*, the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent*. Only the *Evening Herald* published more pro-ban than anti-ban opinion pieces, making the paper –

Table 3: Value Stance Of Opinion Items in The Sampled Newspapers

<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>Total opinion columns on ban</i>	<i>Opinion columns for ban</i>	<i>Opinion columns against ban</i>	<i>Opinion columns neutral on ban</i>
<i>Irish Times</i>	18	4	5	9
<i>Irish Independent</i>	22	3	9	10
<i>Ireland on Sunday</i>	17	3	10	4
<i>Evening Herald</i>	17	5	2	10
Total	74 (100%)	15(19%)	26(35%)	33(45%)

which has a larger proportion of readers in lower socio-economic groups, and these groups tend to smoke more – predominantly pro-ban.

Columnists not only addressed the ban in articles coded under each available frame (see Table 1), but each newspaper also presented a diverse set of stances towards the ban, providing further evidence that a variety of viewpoints was accommodated by each publication. The amount of neutral opinion articles in each publication, with the exception of *Ireland on Sunday* perhaps, was explained by the emphasis on political commentary, a high proportion of which was value-stance neutral.

The pro-ban arguments were diverse and sometimes argued on the same democratic terrain as some anti-ban columnists. For example, Chris Lowry in the *Evening Herald* argued that the ban was socially progressive for Ireland: ‘If the ban works, we will transform ourselves from a grimy provincial backwater to a role model for the western world’ (2004: 14). Disparate views sometimes occurred in the same publication. Three days after a column coded as being anti-ban under the democratic frame by Ian O’Doherty, another column writer Alison O’Connor wrote in the *Irish Independent* of the ‘joy of sipping your morning cappuccino without some smoking boor causing you to come out smelling like an astray at 11 am’ (2004: 12). A representative piece of pro-ban commentary coded under the health frame was an article by Kathy Sheridan in the *Irish Times*. She argued that the scientific justification for the ban was overwhelming, writing that ‘Big Tobacco’s products kill ... and it kills the poor in disproportionate numbers’ (2003: 14).

The cohort of anti-ban commentators were selected for analysis in depth in this study because they offered a chance to test whether the punditocracy, as per the OED definition, was an influential elite. Commentary pieces were predominantly anti-ban (see Table 3) and argued against the ban mainly on democratic grounds (Table 2). Across the four sampled papers, more columnists argued against the ban than for it, yet the legislation passed successfully without compromise or change to its initial scope. This offers evidence that the views of commentators were, ultimately, not influential in affecting the tobacco legislation’s passage through the policy process.

5. Commentators did not always echo their paper’s stance on the ban.

The stances of columnists towards the ban did not mirror consistently their papers’ overall perspectives on the legislation. A newspaper’s editorial column is regarded,

Table 4: Editorial Coverage of the Ban in the Sampled Newspapers

<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>Total editorials on ban</i>	<i>Editorials for ban</i>	<i>Editorials against ban</i>	<i>Editorials neutral on ban</i>
<i>Irish Times</i>	11	9	0	2
<i>Irish Independent</i>	10	3	1	6
<i>Ireland on Sunday</i>	3	0	3	0
<i>Evening Herald</i>	15	8	0	7
Total	39 (100%)	20 (51%)	4 (10%)	15 (38%)

by convention, as containing the publication's view on current matters in the public domain, and is usually written by specialist editorial writers or senior editorial executives on a newspaper. There were 39 editorials coded under this study, and there was a variety of perspectives on the ban between different publications and within an individual publication.

The figures in Table 4 show the *Irish Times* and the *Evening Herald* could be judged to be, editorially, in favour of the ban: neither ever argued against it in an editorial. The *Irish Independent* seemed to have a mixed stance towards the ban in its editorials, as its opinion writers did also, while *Ireland on Sunday* was uniformly opposed to the ban in its editorials, and in the majority of its opinion pieces.

More editorials overall argued in favour of the ban than against it, but as the previous section demonstrated, commentators on the smoking ban often adopted positions on the ban that were contrary to their paper's editorial line, illustrating again the importance of diversity in newspaper content across different sections and formats.

Discussion

This study demonstrated that the Irish punditocracy provided a variety of viewpoints on the smoking ban. The op-ed pages featured a mix of perspectives between, and within, the sampled newspapers. A further discussion of characteristics of commentary on the ban must be situated within this demonstrated plurality of opinion coverage.

The punditocracy concentrated on dimensions of the ban that featured less prominently in news reports and editorials, indicating that the professional role of commentators was to raise issues not featured in other journalism genres. The punditocracy fulfilled its function as an interpretative elite by focusing on large-scale, conceptual, thematic aspects of the ban that had implications for Irish public and cultural life. By approaching the ban from perspectives neglected by other news professionals, the punditocracy can be seen as having a contrarian role within the journalism.

This contrarian role emerged also in the predominantly anti-ban stance of commentators. The writers frequently took positions that were contrary to the Government that proposed the legislation and contrary to the editorial standpoints of the newspapers for which they wrote. This indicates that commentators see it as their professional role to adopt contrarian and controversial positions on current public issues.

Anti-ban commentators successfully thematised the ban under the democracy frame, characterising it chiefly as an individual rights and civil liberties issue. The columnists analysed closely in this study had a distinctive worldview. Like their

counterparts on UK newspapers, a coterie of Irish columnists seemed to have an ongoing preoccupation with guarding against what they view as the continued curtailment of personal liberty by a benign, but misguided, state motivated by a vague idea of political correctness.

The right-libertarian perspective held by Kevin Myers and Ian O'Doherty was not confined to their writing on immigration. A similar type of precautionary discourse emerged in their writings on the tobacco legislation. Like their imagined fear of the potential consequences of immigration, the smoking ban was presented as another manifestation of the expected unquestioning liberal response of the Government to emerging political issues. The study suggests that immigration policy and anti-tobacco legislation were comparable terrains on which their distinctive worldviews could be articulated. In addition, the writings of Eamon Dunphy and Mary Carr can be added to the list of commentators whose journalism can be interpreted using the useful analytic term of precautionary discourse.

It must be noted that the articles on the ban from these writers accounted for a small proportion of their overall journalistic output over the study's timeframe. Further research might examine their commentary on other issues to see whether the same worldview emerges. The columnists could also be interviewed in a structured or semi-structured format to examine how they conceptualise their journalistic role – and whether their self-reported views confirms or contradicts the current study's conclusions.

This study has supported empirically the view of Glover (2000: 295) that newspaper editors believe columnists are 'an ingredient in a mix, one element among many that make a successful newspaper'. Any claims to characterise the position on a single policy issue of the commentariat or the punditocracy *as a whole*, as McWilliams (2005) did, needs to be closely examined. The current study found no evidence for such a uniform stance of the Irish commentariat or the punditocracy on the smoking ban.

The study adds empirical evidence to categorisations of the punditocracy as a contrarian voice: contrarian in its journalistic role, contrarian in the issues it addressed, contrarian in the perspective taken by a majority of its writers, and contrarian in its perspectives compared to editorial writers. It is beyond the scope of this paper to determine the overall political impact of the Irish punditocracy, but as the pioneering anti-tobacco legislation was passed successfully, this study offers some evidence that claims about commentators' perceived influence may tend to be overstated.

AUTHOR

Declan Fahy is a PhD candidate at the School of Communications, DCU. This paper is based on research commissioned by the Research Institute for a Tobacco Free Society.

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