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# ‘The Irish Folly’: The Easter Rising: the Press; the People; the Politics.

Talk given as part of ‘Reflecting the Rising’, the commemorations of the Easter Rising at the Dublin Institute of Technology, Monday March 28<sup>th</sup>

This paper aims to examine the coverage of the 1916 Easter Rising and the impact of that coverage on the political aspirations of Irish people in the aftermath of the Rising. It is examined here as a media event within the context of modernity and as an event that aimed to amplify on an international stage through the press the aims of the insurgents and so redefine Irish nationalism.

If the 1916 Rising was a failure, with its leaders executed, its volunteers imprisoned, the republic dead and Dublin in ruins, it was definitely in modern media terms a glorious one, if it was a failure at all. If success in our media age can be judged by column inches and visibility then the Rising was a media success. For 14 days from April 25 to May 8<sup>th</sup> the *New York Times* alone devoted front-page news to Ireland and the Rising. As well as in New York, the events in Dublin were covered through the US as well as internationally.

In Ireland, destruction of some of Dublin’s newspaper offices, or the occupation by the volunteers in the case of one newspaper office, meant newspapers did not appear for a few days as the events unfolded and so coverage did not occur until the rising had ended. There was, as the historian Joe Lee observed ‘no strict contemporary newspapers reporting from the actual scene’

Overseas, however, millions of people were aware that an Irish Republic has been proclaimed; that a provisional government established and that a force known as the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army had taken over major landmarks in the centre of Dublin.

One of the reasons for the media success was the blunder, again in media terms, by the British forces in deciding to execute the leaders and so draw upon themselves a revulsion, they could hardly have expected, though probably they should have, that eventually leads to a war of

independence, the Sinn Fein victory in the 1918 election, and independence for the 26 counties in 1922.<sup>1</sup>

In 1916 Europe was in the middle of a war. It was fought by soldiers using new, and devastating weapons; and by nation states and their increasingly urbanised and industrialised citizens. It was fought over nationalism. In other words it was a war fought in the context of modernity and a further factor in that modernity was growth of societies linked by mass media that had proliferated and helped define the world people lived in.

The role and place of the press was well understood by 1916. As Maurice Walsh noted: ‘The first world war was a total war; a conflict where the whole populations were mobilised in an enormous collective effort and for the first time the press was sustained as a weapon of war’ (Walsh, 2008: 15). Modern public relations is one of the outcomes of the war. It was those engaged in press relations in the armies who become the first public relations professionals.

Public opinion was seen as the same as morale and propaganda a means of control. The press was not always happy with its wartime role, having already, over previous century, a sophisticated understanding of its place and role in a modern democracy.

By the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century newspapers, especially those in Britain, had begun to redefine themselves. Many now claimed to reflect the views of their readers rather than trying to influence and elevated them. They were owned by press barons and highly commercial<sup>2</sup>. They were less overtly politically partisan and more commercial, though powerful they emphasised entertainment and human interest. It was the age of mass circulating newspapers. TR Harrington, the editor of the *Irish Independent* had been sent to London by its proprietor, William Martin Murphy to learn from the Northcliffe newspapers how to produce a modern paper full of human interest and attract a mass audience (Larkin 2011).

The rebels were modern insurgents who understood the importance of media and also symbolism that feeds it. Some historians have suggested

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<sup>1</sup> See Townshend, Charles (2015) Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion, for an interesting discussion on this.

<sup>2</sup> See discussion on how the British popular press moved from a radical one to a mass press owned by media magnates. Curran and Seaton (1997) *Power Without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting in Britain*.

the GPO was, militarily, a bad choice of headquarters and that it failed to have the symbolic importance of, say, Dublin Castle (see Townshend 2015). But the GPO has its own symbolic importance, that of reaching out, of the postal and telegraph services, of being at the heart of a web of communications. Chris Morash in his *History of the Media in Ireland* sees Ireland as at the centre of a developing media world, between America and Europe rather than on a periphery (Morash 2009)<sup>3</sup>.

Ironically the detachment from the Irish citizen Army, under its commander, Sean Connolly, failed to take the seat of British power in Ireland, Dublin Castle, even though there was a very small detachment to defend it. Instead they did take the offices of the *Dublin Daily Mail*.

But whatever about the GPO as a military stronghold there is no doubt it was an impressive stage for the political and military drama that the military Committee, now the Provisional Government had prepared.

In a very modern way the Rebels sought to tell the world about the rising using the very latest technology, the Radio. Clair Wills in her book on the 1916 Rising writes:

By Tuesday the men at Reis's had managed to get the Radio transmitter working. A first communiqué was sent out stating that the Irish Republic was proclaimed and that Dublin city was in the hands of Republican troops. This message was apparently picked up and relayed to the United States by ships at sea. A series of numbered communiqués were sent out in Morse code on Tuesday and Wednesday, but by Wednesday evening Reis's was on fire and the wireless contingent had to return to the GPO (Wills, 2010: 51-52).

Reis's was a jewellery shop further down Sackville Street.<sup>4</sup> This action is meant to be the very first radio broadcast to a general audience rather than to a specific receiver.

Like the Famine 60 years earlier, at the beginning of the media revolution that defines the modern world, the Rising was reported and analysed. It

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<sup>3</sup> Clair Wills (2010) discusses the symbolic role and the place of the GPO in Dublin her *Dublin 1916: The siege of the GPO*

<sup>4</sup> Listen to interview with Irish Volunteer Fergus O'Kelly who was interviewed for the RTÉ Television project 'Portraits 1916' on 12 December 1965 at: <https://1916.rte.ie/relevant-places/on-tuesday-night-we-started-transmitting/> O'Kelly recounts how he and six comrades broke into the radio school, made the transmitters operable and sent out messages.

was a colonial-style conflict that erupted only 300 miles from London, in the Empires backyard and news could travel fast. As soon as security allowed the London papers dispatched reporters. Within a few days the newsreels arrived in Dublin.

What is fascinating is the image we often have of 1916 is of the rhetoric that people like Pearse used which was often quite self-consciously archaic, images of Cuchalainn, the legendary Fianna or blood sacrifices and so on, but that use of legends, religious imagery and other ways of summoning up an ancient nationhood was also oddly modern and they were also very modern in terms of the way in which they thought of media and also the power of symbolism.

The leadership of the rising were well aware of the symbolic and media importance of the Rising. If they really thought military victory was possible surely they would have waited in order to deal with the debacle of the cancellation order from Eoghan MacNeill and the lack of weapons following the failure of weapons to arrive from Germany?

Instead we hear of Desmond FitzGerald telling his wife that the first sight of the flag flying above the GPO was 'worth being wiped out for.' FitzGerald later led, very successfully, the press operation of the First Dail and the War of Independence.

Tom Clarke, the oldest signatory who embodied link to the Fenians and probably the main inspiration behind the Rising. In a witness statement to the Bureau of Military History, Mary Josephine Mulcahy nee Ryan (Wife of Richard Mulcahy) wrote:

Then I had a talk with Tom Clarke in the kitchen that Tuesday night. ... Tom Clarke told the same story to each of us. I could not remember it all. The gist of it was - that people naturally now would be against them for rising and coming out like this; that one of the reasons for people being against them would be because of the countermanding order, but that they had come to this conclusion that it was absolutely necessary that they should have this Rising now, because if they did not have it now, they might never have it; that when the men had been brought to a certain point they had to go forward; that, in any case, a rebellion was necessary to make Ireland's position felt at the Peace Conference so that its relation to the British Empire would strike the world. I asked him: "Why a republic?" He replied: "You must have something striking in order to appeal to the imagination of the

world". . "Of course" he added!, "we shall be all wiped out". He said this almost with gaiety. (Witness statement to the bureau of Military History of Mary Josephine Mulcahy nee Ryan (Wife of Richard Mulcahy) (W S 399) (23<sup>rd</sup> June 1950)

So what of that coverage's 'appeal to the imagination of the world? Oddly the criticism of the British decision to execute the leadership did not emanate from the Irish media. Only one Dublin newspaper *The Freeman's Journal*, condemned the executions. By *The Freeman's*, now almost the semi official voice of the Irish Parliamentary Party, had condemned the rising, along with the other three Dublin newspapers, it was, it stated 'an armed assault against the will and decision of the Irish nation itself constitutionally ascertained through its proper representatives', who were, of course, those elected members of the Irish party at Westminster committed to Home Rule.

However, it saw that the death sentences passed on the leaders of the Rising meant sympathy was being aroused with the victims, where it had not existed before.

*The Freeman*, already in serious decline, was the only Dublin paper that showed a degree of prescience in that it realised harsh treatment would turn public opinion towards the rebels.

The unionist *Irish Times*, unsurprisingly, called for harsh treatment: 'Sedition must be rooted out of Ireland once and for all' while the Unionist *Daily Express*, later absorbed into the *Evening Mail* which was eventually bought by *The Irish Times* was occupied by the Irish Volunteers and it ran detailed accounts of its retaking by British troops.

The other nationalist newspaper the *Irish Independent* took a harsh line against the rebels and supported the executions. It was thought that the harsh line was because its owner, William Martin Murphy favoured the death penalty for the labour leader, James Connolly, but it would appear it was written by the editor, TR Harrington as Murphy was in London. However a good editor, especially one working for a proprietor with a history of using his newspaper for his own ends, as Murphy did during the Dublin lockout of 1913, would probably be able to read his proprietor's mind, even when separated by the Irish Sea. He did, though, misread the shifting public mood. As Felix Larkin, writing in the *Irish Independent* quoted Harrington as saying later, somewhat ruefully that

"the crowd cried out for vengeance and when they got it they howled for clemency."

Meanwhile in the US the rising was seen as a significant development, not only because of the number of Irish Americans and therefore of interests in its own right to many readers but also because of its links to the unfolding drama of the Great War, which the US entered the following April.

The leaders of the Rising would have wanted to capture American public opinion. If Ireland was to have a seat at the post war peace conference that Tom Clarke alluded to, it would need America as an ally.

American isolationism was at its height in 1916 with many resisting any attempt to force the US into war in Europe. President Woodrow Wilson had been reelected in 1916 on a peace ticket with the slogan 'He kept us out of the war'.

It was probably that very isolationism that provoked such interest in the Easter Rising<sup>5</sup>

For fourteen days – from 25 April through 8 May – the *New York Times* devoted front-page news to Ireland and the Rising, with one of those days (Saturday, 29 April) featuring eight articles on page one, eight more on page two, and an editorial and a commentary column tucked inside the paper. Every word of news copy on page two was about the Rising. But the *Times* was not alone in recognising the importance of the Rising and its aftermath. Other New York newspapers, along with the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe* and the *Chicago Tribune* – not to mention Irish-American and Catholic periodicals – gave sustained prominence to events taking place in Dublin and elsewhere in Ireland.

For many American newspapers it was Roger Casement who was the main news interest rather than the leaders of the Rising itself. Looking back that was hardly surprising, given the nature of Sir Roger Casement, his secret landing, his knighthood, the German assisted plot against the British in Ireland. As a former distinguished diplomat he was the sort of human-interest story few editors could resist. The *Boston Globe* on April 30<sup>th</sup> published a long profile on him and the *Washington Post* ran an essay by Casement under the headline, guaranteed to raise debate about

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<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to an article by Prof Robert Schmuhl on the US coverage of the Rising that appeared in the *Irish Communications Review* for much of the American analysis.

entering the was under the headline: ‘England Seeking US Aid to Dominate all Europe, Says Sir Roger Casement’.

For similar human interest reasons Countess Markievicz attracted similar coverage with the *The Evening World* in New York reporting that she had shot six rebels who refused to follow orders, and also that “in mans clothing and flashing a brace of revolvers” she had led an attack on the Shelbourne Hotel.’

The stories that did appear tended to carry mistakes and misspelling of names for instance. One newspaper reported the GPO recaptured on day two. Pearse’s name did not emerge in the American papers until the day after the surrender. There was also confusion as to who and when any of the leaders were executed. However, Irish newspapers, which would have been a source of news, were not easily available and many missed days, *The Irish Times* lost two editions, the *Independent* seven and the *Freeman’s Journal* ten days.

*The Irish Times* published all the contemporary reportage a year later in the *Sinn Féin Rebellion Handbook*, together with maps of the battle sites and lists of those killed or taken prisoner.

The source of much of the information about events in Dublin or many newspapers around the world were London newspapers. Those newspapers were, of course critical, but often more nuanced than their Dublin counterparts. The *News Chronicle* and *The Manchester Guardian* urged moderation on the British Government, while *The Times* criticized the Irish administration.

In America while much of the coverage was full of errors prominent Irish Americans were called in to give context and they and the reaction of Irish American was covered well. *The New York Times* published on May 7<sup>th</sup> this written by the poet Joyce Kilmer<sup>6</sup>, who was on the staff of the paper.

A poetic revolution – indeed, a poets’ revolution – that is what has been happening in Ireland during the last two weeks, says Padraic Colum, himself an Irish poet, now in New York. The sudden rise and fall of the Irish Republic, the event which has made Dublin crowd Verdun off the front pages of the newspapers, was peculiarly literary in character ...

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<sup>6</sup> Joyce Kilmer later joined the Fight 69<sup>th</sup> the New York regiment with close Irish connections and died in France in 1918.



The leaders of the revolutionary forces were almost without exception men of literary tastes and training, who went into battle, as one of the dispatches phrased it, 'with a revolver in one hand and a copy of Sophocles in the other.'

However generous and romantic the Joyce Kilmer article was, much of the coverage in *The New York Times* was in the main anti the rising and even anti-Irish

An editorial of 29 April begins: 'Ireland in a state of rebellion is Irish. Never was it otherwise.' Later in the same editorial, this sentence appears: 'Rebellion has been the chronic, almost to say the natural, condition of Ireland, being now and then only a little more acute than usual.' The final paragraph ends with a flourish:

Never has Ireland been free, and yet she has all the more passion for freedom. What these present rebels want is not to be free of England. They pursue an ideal of freedom. England is the symbol of restraint. If it were not England, it might be a King. If it were not a King, it might be fairies that go about in Ireland, assuming fantastic shapes, to frighten people and make them do all the things they do not want to do. (*New York Times* April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1916)

*The New York Times* talks of 'The Irish Folly' (*New York Times* May 2<sup>nd</sup> 1916) and extends blame to the Irish in America. It suggests 'sterner censure' for those in America who encouraged the rising and suggested the motive was to seek popularity in the US and that the motive was a domestic political motive rather than sincere sympathy for the Irish cause.

However, it was, again, the execution of the leaders that caused a slight change of heart. It was 'unworthy of England. Leave that sort of thing to Germany', said *The Times* (May 12<sup>th</sup>)

Other newspapers took a slightly different and more sympathetic view. Both the *Washington Post* and the *Chicago Tribune* asked was England about taking too harsh a measure against the Rebels.

The uprising, abortive as it proved to be, is nevertheless a reminder that the Irish question remains to be settled. Ireland must have a greater measure of home rule. If the British government has not entirely lost its balance, it will not make fierce reprisals in Ireland, but will deal tolerantly even with the ring- leaders of the insurrection. . . . History is too full of instances of brutal and excessive measures by England in dealing with Ireland, and it ought to serve as a warning against such a policy now.

(*Washington Post* May 2<sup>nd</sup>)

*The Chicago Tribune* in an editorial also advised: ‘It would be a wise England that saw the Irish revolt compassionately’.

A story in the *Bridgeport Evening Farmer* of Ct, give an indication how things are viewed in the US (Slide 16)

A few days later after Pearse, MacDonagh and Tom Clarke have been executed the *Chicago Tribune* suggested:

It might have been far more effective to turn the three men loose in Dublin. Their heroism would have oozed away a little every time a citizen looked at the wrecked post office. The practical result of their fury would have established them in the mind of the comfortable, practical citizens as wild dreamers.

Dispatches from and about Ireland became a staple of the American news agenda and, immediately and over time, support from the US would help sustain the cause of Irish independence.

If censorship meant news from Ireland was often distorted, not so was the news generated by the Irish in America. ‘Irish pay ‘Tribute to Dublin Rebels. Throngs at Carnegie Hall Memorialize them As Martyrs of Race’ ran a headline in the *NY Times*. It reported that the crowd demanded there be no settlement of the war in Europe ‘which did not include a plan for the freedom of Ireland.’”

President Wilson’s administration avoided the issue, with John Devoy in his memoirs branding Wilson ‘the meanest and most malignant man who ever filled the office of President of the United States’ (1929: 470).

There is no doubt that in the middle of war the news from Ireland had a impact in the US, with Americans and Irish Americans looking to find ways to help. Relief funds were established. That assistance continued right up to independence and afterwards and that was due in no small measure to the reporting in American newspapers about the rising and its aftermath.

Commenting on the impact of American coverage Prof Robert Schmuhl noted: ‘The “wild dreamers” did indeed become “martyrs” and during that transformation American public opinion changes to the benefit of the rebels and their cause’ (Schnuhl 2010: 43)

Some of the coverage was bizarre and reflected American fears rather

than an Irish reality. Jim Larkin was assumed to have a big hand in the Rising, though he had left Dublin in 1914. He was feared among some in the US as a labour agitator and member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) or Wobblies.

But it was not just the American press that covered events in Ireland. There was extensive coverage in Canada, New Zealand and Australia. The coverage was in places extensive: in France, incredibly, the Paris-based *Le Petit Journal* ran sixty-five pieces on the Rising (including thirteen illustrations, three maps and two cartoons) at a time when French newspapers were diminished due to war time restrictions.

After 1916 Rising press censorship was strictly enforced. Partly this was done to limit reporting the American newspapers. As Townshend commented the government was worried about the situation in the US ‘where criticism of the army’s repressive methods was sharper than in Ireland itself’ (Townshend 2015: 299). On 1 June, General Sir John Maxwell, commander-in-chief of military forces, established a Press Censor’s office in Dublin, and on 5 June the Censor, Lieutenant-Colonel Lord Decies, issued a confidential directive, to every newspaper in Ireland. Newspapers were ordered to give careful consideration to a number of factors before publications. These included; ‘Extracts from American newspapers, or private letters sent you from individuals received from America.’

Of course the directive did not remain Confidential, as instructed, and it was published in the *Gaelic American* on 8 July 1916, with an editorial comment as a headline: “How the Irish Press is Gagged”.

Some months later, the *Roscommon Herald* published an article taken from the *New York Times*. The article recounted the story of Moira Regan, who served in the GPO and then moved to live in America. The office of Lord Decies warned to newspaper:

I am further instructed to warn you that the publication of Press matter of this description renders your paper liable to suppression under the Defence of the Realm Act. You are advised in future to submit articles of this nature to the Press Censor before publication.

The article celebrated the rebellion’s success in awakening Ireland’s national spirit. ‘I felt that the evening when I saw the Irish flag floating over the Post office, that this was a thing worth living and dying for. I was absolutely intoxicated’ (quoted in Townshend 2015: 308)

I came to this subject matter of the press and 1916 with the idea of developing a critique based around the concept of Propaganda of the Deed. Propaganda of the Deed is the political viewpoint that suggests ideas spring from deeds and those deeds could be acts of the terror, but also robberies, strike actions and insurrections, all designed to be amplified by the press throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup>. It is usually associated with anarchists and its most famous exponent was probably Gavrilo Princip, who assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, an action that created the spark that started the First World War. Its growth as a political action coincides with the growth of mass media. With 1916 it was Connolly's syndicalism, the formation of the Citizen Army and the influence on Connolly of the Paris Commune of 1871 that leads one to this. Connolly was also willing to rebel before the IRB and Irish Volunteers considered.

Whether Propaganda of the Deed fully describes the Easter Rising is probably a moot point. One problem is that, other than Connolly, the leadership was conservative. The men and women of 1916 were not radical. Unlike so many socialists, anarchists and communists, the Volunteers were not challenging the idea of a state monopoly on political violence, but wanted to establish an Irish state that would itself have a monopoly on power and the Irish nationalists who rebelled during Easter week included all the trappings of what the anarchist bombers would see as bourgeois power, uniforms, military ranks, flags, a 'provisional government' and wanted, as far as was possible, to engage the British authorities in conventional combat.

What the rebels did undertake, though, was a very modern action. They showed an understanding of modernity and the press; they understood the place of media in a shrinking world, the speed at which news travels; they were nationalist and wanted to build a nation state; they were in the main urban and literate.<sup>7</sup> The point was the stories that appeared in the *Boston Globe* and the *Chicago Tribune* and *Le Petit Journal* appeared because the rebels wanted that to happen. It can be argued that through the coverage of a small uprising, 1916 became a hugely significant act that achieved world attention, transformed Irish nationalism and turned the focus from debates in Westminster to the streets of Dublin, changed the nature of Irish nationalism and led to the creation of the Irish Free State. The outcome of the rebellion was the death of home rule and the recognition of a republic as an ideal. That was what was reported and that reporting meant it became the new reality.

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<sup>7</sup> For a general discussion about nationalism and the press see Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Community*

As for the importance of news; one of the first photographs taken within days of the ending of the Rebellion is that of a newspaper seller outside the ruined General Post Office. Dubliners needed newspapers in order to make sense of what they had just been through.

A postscript. Uprisings were as much a danger to journalists in 1916 as they are today. Three journalists lost their lives over the week. On Tuesday April 25<sup>th</sup> two journalists, Thomas Dickson and Patrick MacIntyre, along with the pacifist Francis Sheehy Skeffington, who had edited the *Irish Citizen* newspaper and had earned his living as a freelance journalist were arrested. The three men were taken by soldiers under the command of Capt JC Bowen-Colthurst to Rathmines Barracks. The following morning Bowen-Colthurst ordered them to be taken out and shot by an ad hoc firing squad. He was Court Marshalled and found guilty but insane and was in a mental hospital for a short while before emigrating to Canada on full pension.

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The New York Times, 1916

The Boston Globe, 1916

The Washington Post, 1916

The Irish Independent

The Irish Times