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IRISH COMMUNICATIONS REVIEW

ARTICLES

Ireland's Alternative Press: Writing from the Margins

Lance Pettit

Introduction

[Alternative media are those that] avowedly reject or challenge established and institutionalised politics, in the sense that they all advocate change in society, or at least a critical assessment of traditional values.[...] Often founded to campaign on one particular issue, alternative media face considerable problems of survival, given their tendency to be under-financed, and unattractive to advertisers and the mass commercial market.(O'Sullivan, 1994: 10)

Given the relative scarcity of published sources on the press in Ireland, it is perhaps not surprising that there is little writing on alternative publications. *An Phoblacht/Republican News (AP)*, *Gay Community News (GCN)* and *The Big Issues (BI)* might appear to exemplify O'Sullivan's definition of 'alternative media'. This article provides an examination of the term using examples that are specific to the social and political context of Ireland in the 1990s. The material presented here is largely based on three, hour-long interviews carried out with the editors in October 1996. [Table 1](#) below provides some key facts about the publications for reference and comparison. The aim of this article is to understand these publications in relation to, and indicators of, the wider cultural dynamic of contemporary Ireland and its mainstream press.

Table 1. Ireland's Alternative Press: KEY FACTS

	An Phoblacht	Gay Community News	The Big Issues
Founded	1978 but dates back to 1920s	1988	1994
Head Office	Parnell Square, D 1	1988-97 Hirschfield Centre, D2	Amiens St, Dublin 1
Editor	Brian Campbell	Cathal Kelly	Niall Skelly
Circulation (1996) (multiple readers per copy) Estimated Readership	20-23, 000 3-4 60,000-92,000	9, 000 (2.3) 20, 700	33-34, 000 (3-4) 99,000-136,000

Readership			
Frequency (Oct. 1996)	Weekly	Monthly	Fortnightly
Size (Oct. 1996)	Tabloid	Tabloid	A4
Visual Features	Newsprint with two colour print on cover	Newsprint: full colour cover and selected features	Glossy, full colour throughout
Page Numbers	20pp	32pp	40pp
Price Additional Financial Support	IR£0.50 No adverts (1996)	Free Advertising sales for production + FÁS support for staffing	IR£1.00 Advertising (small business + corporate), state start up grant and FÁS support for staffing
Distribution Spread	Ireland nation-wide, Internet Page since 1995 1200 postal subscribers	Ireland nation-wide, 300 postal subscribers abroad	Ireland nation-wide Postal subscribers (no figures)
Distribution of Hard Copy	Six vans to regions; sale door to door by AP vendors	Rail to outlet venues around Ireland; by hand trolley within Dublin	Rail to regional centres; sold on street by vendors working patch
Motto or Masthead	'Equality: it is new strung and shall be heard' [Harp Emblem]	'Ireland's National Lesbian and Gay Newspaper'	'A Hand up not a Hand Out'
Production Technology	Apple Mac Industry-standard software	Apple Mac, QuarkXpress, Adobe Photoshop	Apple Mac, Adobe Photoshop
Printed	Location information withheld	<i>The Meath Chronicle</i>	Smurfit Web Press, Dublin
Staffing	30 part-time volunteers	2 full-time, 21 part-time FÁS-funded	Dublin Office: 6 full-time, 6.5 part-time, FÁS funded + 1 staff photographer. Countrywide: 120 employed

AP, *GCN* and *BI* articulate and contest various forms of political and social marginalization experienced by different kinds of subordinate groups in Ireland. Written from the margins these publications remain significant to the lives of their

workers and many of their readers in material and social terms in ways that differ from mainstream press. For the volunteers, part-timers and core readers of *AP* and *GCN* in particular, these newspapers remain vital sources of information and identity. For the vendors and FÁS workers on *BI*, the magazine represents an immediate source of income, an introduction to self-help enterprise and a way to 'get themselves on the road to mainstream society'. For the cultural analyst, these publications are significant because they are products of subcultural activity and 'sub cultures have tended to be envisaged as disenfranchised, disaffected and unofficial' (Gelder and Thornton, 1997: 2), terms that describe the socio-political location of homeless people, homosexuals and socialist republicans in Irish history. However, to designate these publications as 'alternative' does not infer that this term has static boundaries. As Stuart Hall has put it: 'there is no fixed content to the category of "popular culture"'. (Hall, 1981: 238-9) Instead it is better to think of 'alternative' as a relational concept, defined in process within and against a dominant culture and subject to change over history. To deem a publication 'alternative' is to make a provisional judgement, ascribing it a location within a particular context. The degree to which a newspaper or magazine may be judged 'alternative' at any given historical moment is therefore dependent on an examination of the interaction between different factors. These are principally concerned with the production process, distribution of the publication and its differentiated readerships.

The Mainstream Newspaper Industry

Given that 'oppositional cultural values are formed and take shape only in the context of their struggle with the dominant culture' (Bennett, 1986:19), this section provides a critical examination of the mainstream press in Ireland. The recent government-commissioned *Report of the Commission on the Newspaper Industry in Ireland (Report)* provides a valuable insight into an official view of the national newspaper industry. Against a background of a seven per cent drop in Irish newspapers between 1990-1995 (p.16), the 'Preface' to this study identified a set of wide-ranging terms of reference including amongst other things: the importance of the press in maintaining a distinct national identity, plurality of ownership and diversity of editorial viewpoint, the competition from British newspaper imports, taxation levels on Irish newspapers, the challenge of new technologies, editorial independence, law on libel and concentration of media ownership. Among its conclusions it recommended that the 12.5 per cent rate of VAT levied on Irish newspapers should be zero-rated in order to off-set the 'dumping' of British newspapers on the Irish market. (p.35) It also noted the continued concentration of ownership of media in Ireland, within the press. The closure of the *Irish Press* in 1995 and the short-lived existence of *The Evening News* in 1996 emphasize the dominance of the Independent Newspaper Group titles in both broad sheet and tabloid forms. Although the *Report* suggested that there is not an 'automatic connection' between plurality of ownership and diversity of viewpoint (p.29), it could only record 'a satisfactory diversity of editorial viewpoint and of cultural content' (p.29) in the Irish national press. In an 'Introductory Chapter', outlining the role of the press in Ireland's national culture, the *Report* stressed the importance of representing minority views and interests in a fair and compassionate way. Later (Chapter 5) it reiterates that the indigenous newspaper industry 'has a clear responsibility in its coverage to reflect minority interests and minority aspects of Irish identity.' (p.49)

While several prominent individuals, trade unions, interest groups and institutions involved in journalism and the press industry (local and national) were approached by the Commission for submissions, none of the editors of the three papers discussed in this article were contacted. Equally, the *Report's* Appendices indicate that none of the editors submitted material to the Commission, though some submissions were received and accepted from travellers, poverty action and community groups for instance. The marginalization of socialist republican politics from the mainstream of Irish life is endorsed by the *Report's* failure to acknowledge *An Phoblacht/Republican News* as a national weekly newspaper which has circulation figures (20-23,000) comparable with or greater than many local newspapers and three weeklies addressing specialized readerships: *Anois*, an Irish language weekly 'niche

publication', *The Irish Catholic*, with a circulation of 27,000 and *The Sporting Press*, providing coverage of greyhound results with a circulation of 8,000. (*Report*, pp.15-16) However, there is no mention in the entire *Report* of other nationally-distributed (albeit it monthly) newspapers like *GCN*. Small, independent newspapers representing important minority views and cultural perspectives seem to be less significant to the official 'national life' than press coverage of Gaelic and greyhounds.

The Alternative Press: Historical Emergence and Financial Survival

As O'Sullivan (1994) has already pointed out, there are particular difficulties of survival faced by the alternative press. Yet *AP* has a pedigree going back seventy years, takes no advertising and maintains a principled distance from Irish state funding. Historically the paper can be traced back to the 1920s (Patterson, 1989: 26-68), has always endorsed a socialist republican ideology and been coercively censored periodically since then. The present paper was formed from a merger with *The Republican News* in 1978 and is run from its inner city, Northside Dublin office. It remains doggedly 'socialist, Republican, left-wing' but 'while not an arm of Sinn Fein' (SF) it provides the kind of political analysis associated with SF policy. In fact in the issue on sale at the time of interview, the newspaper carried a two-page centre spread of an abridged version of SF's submission document to the British government on procedures concerning Loyalist marching. *AP* raises finance entirely through sales (drawing in approximately £10,000 a week on current figures) and claims some 1,200 postal subscribers. The newspaper has been available on the Internet since 1995, 'paid for by supporters'. The paper receives no money from SF but received money from the US organization 'Cairde Sinn Fein' to help set up an office in Belfast.

GCN represents a different kind of alternative newspaper in Ireland. Established in 1988 as a free paper published by the National Gay Federation, it remains Ireland's only indigenous national paper for lesbians and gays. Its finance is raised through advertising sales (some thirty four per cent of its pages comprise adverts: see [Table 3](#)) and most of the staffing costs are met through government FÁS/CE (Community Employment) training schemes. The emergence of *GCN* corresponded with the growing momentum for lesbian and gay rights and the decriminalization of homosexuality in the 1988-1993 period. Indeed *GCN* had a crucial role in articulating the growing confidence of a subculture, which formed itself into a workable community. The 'community' comprises a complicated, overlapping set of interests and activities including health work organizations, commercial 'scene' businesses (pubs, clubs and saunas) organized support and social groups and those interested in political activism and lobbying. *GCN* embraced this 'alternative family', expressed its needs, celebrated its existence and provided a visible presence of homosexuality in Irish society.

Big Issue (BI) was set up in 1994, moving quickly from the front room of its founders, via a temporary base in the Ormond Multi-Media Centre to its present head offices in Amiens Street, near Connolly railway station on Dublin's inner city Northside. In addition there are fifteen regional offices around the country. *BI* was set up as an Irish version of John Bird's London-based *Big Issue* street magazine (Mitchell, 1995:3-5), except that it has 'the social initiative', a skills and training scheme for homeless and long-term unemployed. *BI* received a IR£15,000 government 'pump-priming' grant and mainly on-going government FÁS/CE schemes fund its staffing. It also raises revenue from 50 per cent of sales (the other 50 per cent remains with the street vendor) and income generated from advertising. 25 per cent of the magazine's forty pages are given over to adverts (see [Table 4](#)) raising on average IR£7,000 per issue to offset printing costs and office overheads. Customers include large business corporations like AIB, Bank of Ireland and Cablelink, government bodies like Bord na Gaeilge, international charities (Amnesty International), food and 'alco pop' products and smaller local businesses. *BI* also has to run 'an occasional fund-raiser each year in order to be able to keep going' financially. Economically, therefore, areas of the *BI* enterprise are closely tied into state employment schemes and its list of advertising clientele suggest the magazine has carved a niche in the buoyant, mixed capitalist economy which characterizes Ireland in the mid-1990s. But the wealth produced in

this boom has not been equally distributed. The 'hard news', which BI seeks to highlight, like long-term unemployment, the associated social problems of poverty and crime, and homelessness, all, remain features of Irish society. The magazine circulates as a popular media product within the economic system which re-produces these features as an 'insoluble', problematic by-product.

News Sources & Human Resources

All three publications claim to be investigative though all have differing perspectives on news coverage, which are explained only partly by their different frequency of appearance. In terms of quantity, the weekly *AP* has the highest news content (42.5 per cent), the monthly *GCN* has 13 per cent and the fortnightly *BI* the least with just 10 per cent. [See [Tables 2-4](#)] *GCN* 'strives to report the news independently, objectively - from a lesbian and gay perspective'. Its editor stressed that press releases received were checked out and not accepted on face value. The paper has also printed an editorial since Kelly was appointed in 1995. Brian Campbell says: '*AP* always looks for accuracy, for the truth and if we have political analysis, it has to stand up on its merits.[...] We aren't obviously the same as any other paper, I think that papers which say that they don't have certain political lines are entirely wrong. We are just more honest and up front about our politics'. *BI* claims to 'tackle issues from a slightly different way than you would get in the mainstream print media' but since 58 per cent of the magazine is given over to listings, reviews and advertising, the space in which it has to do this is limited. The cover story and features appearing in the sample were concerned with the link between mobile phones and prostitution, a dissident priest and Romanian orphans. The alternative press is at a disadvantage to the mainstream papers since newsgathering is costly: it takes time and money to develop contacts and follow up enquiries. 'Investigations are down to resources, not to a lack of will' commented Campbell.

Although all publications have at least some *bone fide* NUJ (National Union of Journalists) members none of them have been allocated official press passes to attend Daíl Éireann for political briefings. As a weekly, *AP* is seriously impaired in its political coverage and admitted that it picked up story lines from the *The Irish Times*. All the editors cited lines of communication with trade unions, press releases from state departments, business and other institutions and other informal contacts as sources. Skelly claimed that the non-official reputation of the magazine allowed his journalists access to a situation involving local Dublin residents evicting drug pushers where mainstream journalists and Gardaí were excluded, though this is disputed by the magazine's staff photographer. For *GCN* and *BI*, reliant on advertising and state funding, the question of editorial independence does arise. Kelly was emphatic that he receives no editorial interference from FÁS: 'they are squeaky clean on that'. Despite the fact that one major gay venue had withdrawn advertising and refused to stock the paper for a short period, *GCN* has established that it 'will report independently of advertisers on events and venues.[...] A right of reply is always extended.' *BI* has lobbied politicians for funding and support but Skelly emphasized that the magazine strives to be objective: 'what we want to tackle are the issues. If the issues happen to relate to a politician, his view and things are against what should be done; we have to tackle it'.

It would be fair to say that all three publications were curtailed in their investigative reporting because of human resource limitations. All relied to varying degrees on voluntary work often by people with no formal journalism training; much of the staffing was part-time and nearly all of it was on a temporary contract basis. (See details in [Table 1](#).) These factors produce a lack of continuity, which has implications for quality of work possible, and hinder the longer-term development of the publication. All the full-timers are NUJ members and a proportion of the part-time workers may have affiliated membership with the NUJ though *BI* did report initial problems in the union recognizing membership. Given *AP*'s anti-establishment stance, it does not receive nor has it applied for FÁS/CE funding. The editors themselves have varied backgrounds: Kelly was a professional copy editor prior to work on *GCN*; Campbell had written for newspapers and edited a book in the US; Skelly had a background in social work. A few of the staff on the newspapers and magazine had training in

journalism but most learned skills on the job.

Censorship Issues

None of the papers is subject to the direct, coercive suppression by state agencies that is sometimes associated with alternative or underground publications. In the past *AP* has been raided by the Special Branch at its Parnell Square offices, its fleet of distribution vans has been harassed and copy destroyed on the road. Indirect censorship takes other forms such as the exclusion from the Daíl and *AP* has long been subject to an embargo by one of Ireland's largest retail outlets, Easons, curbing that form of distribution. As a result of some of its crime investigations, the *BI* has reported threats of physical violence from illegal taxi drivers. As has been mentioned, neither *BI* nor *GCN* felt that its editorial independence was in any way infringed by its links with government agencies or its commercial advertisers. Perhaps the most interesting points raised about censorship concern the internal editorial processes through which particular issues are filtered out or marginalized by the publications themselves.

AP maintains that it follows normal conventions on accuracy and truth in its reporting. It would not publish material which was racist as a matter of principle, but it would run a pro-Unionist feature. This would be set in the context of other articles putting forward opposing points of view to interrogate and answer the Unionist case. *AP* is a newspaper with a clearly Republican stance, a significant but subordinate ideological position in the politics of contemporary Ireland: 'All papers have to speak to their readers, have to weed out stuff that they think their readers aren't going to be interested in, or even I suppose, they only write about stuff they want to write about.' The editor of *GCN* recognized that there were tensions within the gay community about the role of the paper in running investigative news stories about politically sensitive areas concerned with representatives of gay health organizations and government departments:

I know that a number of organizations are pissed off because we have said things either in the way (sic) or at all that they don't want us to say but I think in a way that's servicing the broader readership.

Kelly continued that:

There are issues going on behind the scenes within the community, individuals and organizations, who are doing things that I feel people should be aware of and that they don't want made public and it's an issue of dispute and debate within the paper as whether or not or how we should cover them.

It is revealing that *GCN* should be experiencing this dilemma four years after the law changes in Ireland took place. Some figures within the gay community are not used to having their actions reported in such a rigorous fashion by its 'own' newspaper. Since gay life has been conducted behind closed doors for so long, it might be felt that certain negotiations on government policy should go ahead in a similar fashion. In this new era lobbyists and representatives might have to get used to 'community' accountability that includes open, independent press coverage from *GCN*. The editor noted that 'at the moment, under instructions from my employers, we have not dealt with [the issue]' and Kelly argued that it would be far better for *GCN* to be proactive and cover the story to at least give the issues a fair, objective airing before the story leaked to popular tabloids like *The Sunday World*. Complaining that there was too often a narrow-minded 'political correctness around the term "diversity"', Kelly felt that a maturing and developing *GCN* should address a much wider range of tastes and issues. It was a challenge for a small paper to provide for a spectrum of interests, from people 'who want to see pretty pictures of naked or semi-naked men to those who want an in-depth analysis of the Equality Bill'. The paper is also waking up to the fact that it needs to tackle issues that are awkward for the gay community, like the question of the unconscious sexism of gay men, the morality of 'outing' or the tactics of the Lesbian Avengers.

Technology and Visual Styles

All the publications use Apple Macs in their day to day work and software that is compatible with mainstream industry. As *BI* put it, 'we do everything here except print

the magazine'. The alternative press - particularly the more recent publications - have adopted electronic, desktop publishing practice from the start and have not had to overcome the inertia of old-fashioned print technology traditions represented in the mainstream newspaper industry. As with staffing patterns, the mainstream adoption of computer technology may be seen in some ways to be following trends in the alternative press. Independent publications have the advantage of being flexible because small and (providing they can raise the finance) they are able to change relatively easily compared to larger commercial enterprises. However, in the last stage of the production cycle - printing the final product - the alternatives are forced by cost to tap into the existing printing and reprographics industry, *GCN* using the *The Meath Chronicle* press for example.

The editors interviewed were all self-critical about the visual appearance of their publications and spoke candidly about the problems of achieving acceptable standards of photography and layout. Brian Campbell admitted that 'layout is not the strongest element' even though it was given a 'partial re-design' in 1995 and Cathal Kelly noted that since the departure of its half-time photographer (Kelly Green) 'the October and November 1996 issues are way down in visuals for news stories'. *AP* and *GCN* relied on being sent publicity photos, used amateur photographers (*AP* has two volunteers dedicated to photography) or bought-in pictures from established photographic agencies. The photography of *AP* and *GCN* lack the quality of image and polish associated with the mainstream and the layout is dated. Recent attempts by *GCN* to run fashion and lifestyle features (April 1997) have misfired because an attempted a 'retro' look has been poorly designed and reproduced. Only *BI* has a full-time staff photographer (Marc O'Sullivan) and the magazine is largely successful in attaining a mainstream look with its full-colour, glossy finish and the considered design of its visuals. Niall Skelly argued pragmatically that *BI* needed to have an attractive front cover since it is sold on the street and has to grab the potential buyer's attention in a moment.

Distribution Networks

All three publications are distinct from the mainstream press in Ireland because they are not generally sold through the established system of retail outlets. *AP* is distributed around the country using a fleet of its own vans. The paper is picked up by vendors who mostly sell it door to door in particular local patches. It is also sold in some pubs, at football matches, public meetings or some individual news stands. It can sometimes be obtained off the shelf in some inner city, independent newsagents, but it is not generally available on retail. The *AP* also has 1,200 postal subscribers and went on to the Internet in 1995 which represents a considerable expansion of its readership worldwide. *BI* uses rail and van to shift it around the country to the regional centres where bundles are collected by vendors who sell it exclusively on the street. The vendors of *BI* are carefully controlled in their activities, being allocated a particular street pitch. They are also required to sign a legal document agreeing to conditions of conduct whilst selling the paper and are encouraged to open bank accounts for their own safety and to facilitate re-entry into a more settled life. The main distribution outlets for *GCN* in Ireland are pubs and clubs on the gay scene, gay-friendly cafes, community and arts centres, University and college Student Unions (SUs) and one or two of the more progressive book shops. *GCN* is a free paper but its limited distribution can hamper it being more widely read. In colleges 'because the SU staff change each year it may vary whether *GCN* gets stocked appropriately or if at all'. Especially in non-gay venues, people may be reluctant to be seen reading it openly. Kelly pointed out that for those not 'out' the paper provided a valuable source of basic information for lesbians and gays - pubs, groups, services - and for many was the first point of contact to the 'scene culture' and the networks of the gay community. *GCN* has some three hundred postal subscribers abroad.

Readership and Markets

There are a complex set of relations between alternative publications and their readers. The groups of people who buy and read *AP*, *GCN* and *BI* do not provide the straightforward indices of political affiliation or social location that one might expect.

The majority of *BI*'s readers are not homeless or unemployed, people other than Republicans read *AP*. *GCN* perhaps has the most tightly-defined readership, being read almost exclusively by lesbians and gays according to the paper's own readership survey.

Although *BI* campaigns on behalf of those who are socially excluded, its aim is 'to produce a magazine that the mainstream people want to buy [...] people still have this misperception that it is made, sold and read just by homeless people. That wouldn't make any sense. It's read by the ABC1 consumer in our readership survey'. In aiming at this sector of the advertising market and its associated readership, the publication represents reformist rather than radical politics: 'we realize that we live in an economic world, you have to do something in order for a reward, so people who sell *The Big Issues* get that reward'.

In contrast to this consumerist-led definition, *AP*'s core readership is more likely to be defined by class politics, principally a political-class formation which is socially, economically and politically marginalized in both states of Ireland: 'I would say that 90 per cent of our readership is working class, that's who we aim at'. But Campbell is keen to stress that the survival and expansion of the paper depends on its 'role as an arena of debate. Y'see it's not only news, opinions and analysis, it's a forum for Republicans to debate ideas.' However, the paper is also read by people with an interest in Republicanism who may not be members of SF or who vote Republican in elections. Indeed, he argues, '*AP* is read surprisingly by an enormous number of people in that broad (sic) political movers and shakers, the media, they all read *AP*'. *AP* has had to confront political change in the recent cease-fire period and subsequent lifting of broadcasting restrictions on SF.

The ceasefires meant that sales of *AP* rose by 2,000 for the first two months but then levelled out. More significant to the paper itself was the lifting of Irish 'Section 31' broadcasting censorship in early 1994 (followed in September 1994 by loosening of restrictions in British television and radio). In effect, *AP* lost what was 'a world exclusive'. Prior to these changes, interviews with banned Republican leadership figures like Gerry Adams were a major selling point for the paper. In the North, *AP* is in competition with the weekly local Belfast paper the *Andersonstown News*, but in the Republic *AP* has been facing competition from a more unlikely source: *The Sunday Business Post (SBP)*! Launched in 1989, its engaging coverage of Republican politics has included an interview with Martin McGuinness (October 1996). Despite its primary aim to cover financial news for Irish business readers, Campbell had found the *SBP* editorial line difficult to pin down:

you would expect it to have a right-wing agenda and be anti-republican but it's not. I still haven't really worked it out but it would appear to me that in Ireland there is room within the business world, there is a view that a united Ireland would be good for them as well.

AP has responded to these challenges by trying to increase its coverage of 'modern culture' and to get more columnists to write for the paper, but admitted that this was difficult since contributors were not paid. It is perhaps for this reason that *AP* is considering advertising as a way of raising further revenue.

Whereas *BI* and *AP* do reflect an element of crossover in readership, *GCN* is hardly read outside the lesbian and gay community. *GCN* also faces a degree of commercial competition since US and British gay publications are available on retail. However, to such titles, 'Ireland is a nice addition to their markets rather than an exclusively Irish market. It wouldn't be big, sufficiently large for a commercial paper'. The limitations of market size means that 'there is only room for one paper really as the attempt to set up a competitor (*Dublin Guyz*) showed last year. And that can be a limitation. There isn't an outlet for people to criticize us apart from the letters page.' It seems for the foreseeable future that the development of the gay press in Ireland reflects some of the problems acknowledged to exist in the mainstream industry.

Conclusions

The extent to which these publications may be termed 'alternative' has been shown to vary across a range of criteria. Economically, *AP* has so far survived in the margins due to readership loyalty and postal subscribers in the tradition of a radical

press. *BI* and *GCN* survive through a combination of state-funded support, sales and advertising revenue. *BI* is able to court the commercial mainstream, while *GCN*'s range of advertisers remains narrow. In terms of production, all three publications use industry-standard computer software to produce copy for re-production by conventional, mainstream printers. Apart from scale, the production cycles and organization of work by journalists is similar to mainstream practice. One exception to this concerns staffing: the alternative press rely on mainly untrained, often voluntary staff, most of who work part-time. All of the publications are distributed in alternative ways including hand-cart, selling on the streets and the World Wide Web. None of the publications is innovative or alternative in design or visual style. Indeed, all editors aspire to 'professional' photographic norms and conventional, rather dated layout is typical in the newspapers, while *BI* mimics the mainstream look of a glossy, current affairs magazine.

Politically, *AP* is clearly the most oppositional. Its news coverage (see [Table 2](#)) highlights what it views as a military war in the North of Ireland and engages in an ideological war with the dominant political parties in Ireland, North and South, particularly focused on the issue of partition. Conscious that such a politics must engage with the mainstream at some level, *AP* recognizes that it must be flexible and develop an alternative struggle as a newspaper, to build up its cultural coverage 'to make it more relevant to people's every day lives'. It is 'a struggle which may borrow some of its resources from that [dominant] culture and which must concede some ground to it if it is to be able to connect with it'. (Bennett, 1986: 19) Politically, *BI* seems to have conceded considerable ground to the mainstream. Although the magazine's ethos is self-empowerment for the disadvantaged, its social initiative aims to help those who want 'to get back into the mainstream society', i.e. on its normative terms. Working 'holistically', the *BI* project of rehabilitation and re-entry *does* implicitly critique past attempts by state and charitable organizations to improve a hitherto hidden social problem but Skelly's portrayal of *BI* as part of an 'international street papers movement' is less radical than it sounds. His vision for its future is limited: 'it is something that will have to be looked at by the European Parliament *so that it can be accommodated*'. [my italics] In terms of its investigative agenda, *BI* seems to have joined in a popular battle against crime in Ireland (it launched a 'Crime Supplement' in November 1996), terrain long-occupied by the mainstream press and intensified with the killing of the journalist Veronica Guerin. Given the lead by editorial remarks that 'crime is taking over in Ireland, it's ruling everyone's lives' and 'there could possibly be a serial killer in Ireland which we have never had', *BI*'s journalism is in danger of sounding not unlike the populist, campaigning tabloids or the middle-class alarm of the broad sheet mainstream. (McCullough, 1988: 7-10) Ironically, this role is criticized in Eamonn McCann's column ('Write Arm of the Law') in the issue of *BI* current at time of interview.

Although *GCN* is 'Ireland's national lesbian and gay paper', the editor admitted that 'there isn't clarity about the paper's role' for the future. Until recently, its role was mainly confined to servicing the immediate needs of a diverse community of people, but during Kelly's editorship attempts have been made to re-shape the paper politically and journalistically: 'reporting things to lesbians and gays that they are entitled to know, including covering things that they may pick up in the mainstream media but reporting them from a lesbian and gay perspective.' *GCN* is in an important period of transition, re-structuring to adapt itself to the changes brought about by the legislation of 1993 and a shift in social attitudes. The problem for *GCN* comes from the tension between wishing to enhance its journalistic resources to achieve a consistently professional standard and remaining essentially a part-time, 'free' newspaper.

To have survived during a period of declining newspaper sales and immense political and social change, these publications have been forced to adapt to the terrain of the dominant culture and its mainstream press. Despite this, all three publications continue to represent different kinds of political and social alternatives that are possible in contemporary Ireland. The alternative press in Ireland has to some extent had to absorb elements of the dominant values, attitudes and styles of mainstream newspaper production in order to stay in contact with the potential readers of the

future.

Tables

Here follows three tables detailing the content breakdown from; *AP*, *GCN*, and *BI*.

Table 2. *An Phoblacht*: Content Breakdown 24 October 1996

Generic Category	Details of Content	No. of Pages	As %
News	Headlines: 'Deceit: Apprentice boys lied about march'; Pat Kelly Released' News: London, Derry, Belfast Europe + Nicaragua	8.5	42.5
Political Document	Abridged version of S.Fein policy on Marching Season	2	10
Book Extract	Extract from new History of the IRA 1916-1922	2	10
Feature Article	'Good News: The Irish Just Don't Get it': on threats to Press in Ireland	1	5
Book/Film Reviews	Two history books and a new Irish film reviewed	1	5
TV and Sport	'Surfing the Set' Sports View	1	5
Deaths Notices	Anniversaries of relatives	1	5
Letters/Remembering the Past	Bloody Sunday, Repatriation, Bombing Campaign; 1641 Rising	1	5
Gaeilge	Articles on Irish language TV and 'Foinse' newspaper	1	5
Editor's Desk, Cartoon, Contents	Snippets of news and 'Cormac' featuring an Orangeman	1	5
Editorial	Unionism, opening of British Parliament, sectarianism and Sport in NI	0.5	2.5

20 pages 100%

Table 3. *Gay Community News*: Content Breakdown 16 October 1996

Generic Category	Details of Content	No. of Pages	As %
Advertising	Gay/Lesbian Clubs, Pubs, Phone Lines, Accommodation, Magazines, Videos, Solicitors	10.5	33

News	Headlines: 'Pink paper Arson' + 'Govt Suicide Committe to Meet Gay Group', home news, news feature, International	4	13
Lesbian Pages	Features, articles and 'Dyke Forum'	2.5	8
Health/Lifestyle	Interview with LEN Report on AIDS conference	2	6
Book Reviews	Gay/lesbian interest: fiction and non-fiction	2	6
Arts Pages	Film, music and video reviews + Interview with choreographer	2	6
Classified Ads	Personal Adverts, goods and services	2	6
Feature Articles	Evening Classes and Queer Choir	2	6
Media Watch	TV, newspapers, radio reviewed	1	3
Arts Feature	Dublin Theatre Festival	1	3
Social Life Coverage	Cork Women's Weekend	1	3
Listings, Community Information	Venues and organisations in cities and towns nationwide, Britain and world.	1	3
Editorial	Picks up on Official recognition of suicide rates	0.5	2
Practical Advice	What to do if beaten up	0.5	2

32 pages 100%

Table 4. *The Big Issues*: Content Breakdown 16 October 1996

Generic Category	Details of Content	No. of Pages	As %
Listings/Reviews	'The Buzz' includes reviews of: pop music, comedy, fashion, books, cinema, theatre; listing of events and gigs; plus 'Rant: on Catholic Church and Celibacy'	13	32.5
Advertising	Bord na Gaeilge, AIB, B of Ireland, Food, Alco Pops, Charities, Cable Link	10	25
Cover Story	Feature on mobile phones and sex industry in Ireland	2	5

News : Ireland	'Exploitation of Homeless Children'; 'Aliens in Leitrim'; 'Stop Playing Politics'	2	5
News International	Romanian Orphans	2	5
Vendors' Contributions	'Street Life'	2	5
Feature Articles	'New Lads Mentality'	2	5
Front Page	'Mobile Phone/Sex feature: Visual	1	2.5
Letters Page	Cultural Snobbery, Welfare Fraud.	1	2.5
Interview	'Focus': Prominent Priest interviewed	1	2.5
Missing Persons News	Details + photograph	1	2.5
Opinion Article	E. McCann on crime reporting in the Media	1	2.5
Initiatives	Information about 3rd Level funding, an exhibition and professional women's network	1	2.5
Contents		1	2.5

40 pages 100%

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