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News Consumption in Ireland and the European Union: Traditional Media vs the Internet

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Television, radio, daily papers and the Internet all deliver news to viewers, listeners and readers. Which media are the most popular in Ireland and across the European Union? The Eurobarometer surveys offer journalism and communication researchers a very useful source of data about consumption of news in Ireland and across the EU. [1] This article analyses the latest Eurobarometer surveys, and earlier data from a national survey in Ireland, to develop a snapshot of patterns of news consumption and a profile of Internet use and users in Ireland and across the EU.

News consumption in Ireland and the European Union

Television news

Irish people prefer to receive their daily news via the television. According to the latest Eurobarometer survey (European Commission, 2002a), 68 per cent of people in Ireland watch the news on television every day, which is just under the EU average of 69 per cent. However 91 per cent watch it every day or several times a week - a percentage that has been rising steadily for the past four years and is now slightly above the EU average.

The EU Member States with the highest percentage of their populations watching the news on television every day are Finland (84 per cent), Denmark (80 per cent), and Italy and the Netherlands (both 78 per cent). Countries with the lowest rates of daily news viewership on television are France (55 per cent), and Belgium (57 per cent).

People in Ireland also have a high level of trust in what they see on television. Seventy-eight per cent tend to trust television media - making Irish people the most trusting of television in the EU, tied with Portugal. The EU average is 62 per cent.

The television is also the preferred method for receiving EU information, with 46 per cent of people in Ireland citing television for this purpose compared to 35 per cent for daily newspapers, 28 per cent for radio, and nine per cent for the Internet. Television is also the preferred source in Ireland of receiving information about EU enlargement.

Radio news

The percentage of people in Ireland who listen to news on the radio is lower than for television news but still considerably higher than the EU average. Sixty-three per cent of people in Ireland listen to the news on the radio every day, and 82 per cent every day or several times a week. EU averages are 38 per cent every day and 56 per cent every day or several times a week.

The levels of daily news listenership on the radio are the same in Ireland, Luxembourg and Austria. Only Denmark has a higher level of its population listening to the news on the radio every day (65 per cent). The lowest levels of daily news listenership on the radio are in Italy (21 per cent), Greece (23 per cent), and Spain and Portugal (25 per cent).

People in Ireland trust what they hear on the radio more than people in any other EU country, with 77 per cent tending to trust it compared to the 62 per cent EU average.

News in daily papers

News readership of daily newspapers in Ireland is also higher than the EU average,



with 47 per cent reading news in daily papers every day and 69 per cent reading it every day or several times a week (EU averages are 40 per cent every day and 59 per cent several times a week).

Countries with the highest levels of daily news readership in daily papers are Sweden (72 per cent), Finland (67 per cent) and Austria (58 per cent). Those with the lowest levels are Portugal (19 per cent), Greece and Spain (20 per cent) and France (28 per cent).

The press is less trustworthy than either radio or television, according to Irish people. However their trust level in the press is higher than the EU average.

News on the Internet

The Eurobarometer surveys do not include a question about news consumption on the Internet but a separate survey on Internet use across the EU was conducted at the same time as the most recent Eurobarometer survey, allowing some comparisons to be made (European Commission 2002b).

In Ireland, 56 per cent of people say they personally use the Internet, and of that number, 36 per cent use it every day or nearly every day. This means that 20 per cent of people in Ireland use the Internet every day or nearly every day, which is the average across the EU.

Across the EU, the countries with the highest percentage of their populations using the Internet every day or nearly every day are Denmark (39 per cent), Finland and Sweden (each 34 per cent) and the Netherlands (33 per cent). Those with the lowest percentage are Greece (5 per cent), Portugal (12 per cent) and Spain and Italy (each 14 per cent).

The survey found that of all Internet users across the EU, 71 per cent use it to look for news or topical items. This figure was not broken down by frequency of Internet use; however if 71 per cent of daily Internet users use it daily for reading news this would mean that about 14 per cent of people across the EU read the news on the Internet every day or nearly every day.

Profile of Internet Users

What is interesting and different about the Internet as a medium for news - compared to the mass media of television, radio and daily papers - is the distinct socio-economic profile of its users.

Internet users in the EU

The recent Eurobarometer report on Internet use (European Commission 2002b) provides an informative profile of the 48 per cent of Europeans who personally use the Internet and the 20 per cent who use it every day or nearly every day.

The most significant feature of Internet users is their youth: 81 per cent of Europeans from the 15-24 age bracket use the Internet and only 17 per cent of those age 55 and above. In the 25-39 age bracket, 64 per cent use the Internet; of those aged 40-54, 51 per cent use it.

Among daily Internet users, however, the age differences become much less pronounced, with 38 per cent of the age 15-24 bracket using it every day or nearly everyday compared to 34 per cent of those age 55 or over. Among those in the middle age brackets, 43 per cent use it daily or nearly every day.

Another significant feature of Internet users is their high level of education. Of Europeans who ended their schooling at age 21 and above, 77 per cent use the Internet; of those who ended school at age 15 or under, only 18 per cent use it.

This difference in levels of education persists somewhat with frequency of Internet use. Fifty per cent of Internet users who ended their schooling at age 21 and above use the Internet daily or nearly every day, compared with 32 per cent of Internet users who ended school at age 15 or under.

Gender is another significant feature of Internet users across the EU, with most men using the Internet (56 per cent) and most women not using it (40 per cent). Among



Internet users, 46 per cent of men use it daily or nearly every day compared with 33 per cent of women.

Internet users in Ireland

In October 2000, the Irish Information Society Commission (ISC) published the most comprehensive survey to date of patterns of Internet and computer use by Irish adults (ISC, 2000). The survey was conducted in June and July of that year by the MRBI, with a "nationally representative sample of 1408 adults aged 15+ years at 70 randomly-selected sampling points throughout the country." As a member of one of the ISC advisory groups, the author had input into the MRBI survey questions and was supplied by the ISC with some MRBI data sets to analyse independently for academic purposes.

The independent analysis of the MRBI data found three distinct categories of ICT users: a small group of early ICT adopters, a larger group of average ICT users, and the largest group - non-users.

Nine per cent of the Irish adults surveyed were early adopters of the Internet or other ICTs. The hard core of this group had monthly household incomes more than £3000, were from the upper and middle classes, had a third-level education and were working in managerial and support positions. The wider group of early adopters also included a high number of students, members of the lower middle class, people living in Dublin and other urban areas, men, and those aged 15-49.

The second category - 43 per cent of respondents - were more or less average users of the Internet or other ICTs. In this group were many people living outside Dublin, those with a leaving or group certification, those with monthly household incomes of £1,000 to £2,000, women, and members of the skilled working class.

Non-users were the largest category, with 48 per cent of respondents not using the Internet or most other new ICTs. Many of the hard core non-users were people with no qualifications, unskilled workers, "housewives", the unemployed, those with monthly household incomes less than £1,000, and over-65s. The wider group of non-users included a disproportionate number of people over age 50, and farmers and other agricultural workers.

The MRBI statistics include the following actual uses of the Internet by Irish Internet users in 2000 (and in 1999 and 1998 where available).

- Research - getting information: 66% (69% in 1999 and 1998)
- Sending or receiving email: 48% (51% in 1999 and 36% in 1998)
- Information on travel/leisure: 23% (22% in 1999 and 1998)
- Entertainment: 11% (17% in 1999 and 13% in 1998)
- Downloading/listening to music: 11%
- Participating in chat lines/making new friends: 9% (10% in 1999 and 9% in 1998)
- Reading magazines/newspapers online: 9% (13% in 1999 and 14% in 1998)
- Distance learning: 9%
- Online shopping/booking services: 8% (7% in 1999 and 5% in 1998)
- Job seeking: 5% (8% in 1999)

The MRBI survey asked respondents about their interest in using the Internet in the future. It would be misleading to suggest that respondents actually followed through with their projections but the data do indicate something useful about future trends.

The MRBI statistics include the reported future uses of the Internet by all adults in Ireland. Percentages below refer to adults who reported they were interested in each particular use.

- Educational purposes for self-children: 69%
- Email: 60%
- Accessing information from around the world: 60%



- Taking courses in distance education: 47%
- Accessing public services or voting: 46%
- Participating in online discussions: 40%
- Putting up a Web page: 31%
- Participating in policy-making online: 24%

The MRBI data sets allowed a basic socio-economic analysis on four indicators: employment status, class, gender and place of residence.

Employment status: The employment status of the respondents was the most significant socio-economic indicator regarding future uses of the Internet. Those respondents who were not working were significantly less interested in all future uses of the Internet, and especially so for email and accessing information from around the world. Respondents who were working were significantly more interested in using it for public services and voting.

Class: Class was also a highly significant socio-economic indicator. Respondents from the upper middle class were significantly more interested than the average for all future uses of the Internet, particularly for email, educational purposes, accessing information from around the world, accessing public services and voting, and putting up Web pages.

Those from the lower middle class were more interested than the average for all future uses of the Internet, and significantly so for using it for email, accessing information from around the world, distance education, and accessing public services and voting.

Respondents from the skilled working class were more interested than the average in using the Internet for distance education and less interested in the average in using it for accessing public services and voting, and putting up a Web page.

Respondents from the unskilled working class were significantly less interested in the average for all uses of the Internet, and especially so for email, accessing information from around the world, accessing public services and voting, distance education and educational purposes.

Gender: There was no significant gender difference. Both women and men respondents had similar interests for future Internet use, although women were slightly more interested than men in using it for distance education.

Location of residence: There was no significant difference between urban and rural respondents regarding future Internet use, although rural dwellers were slightly less interested in using it for educational purposes and for email.

Conclusion: news consumption and the public sphere

By 'the public sphere' we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body... Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion - that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions - about matters of general interest. In a large public body, this kind of communication requires specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it. Today [1964] newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere (Habermas, 1964 as cited in Sparks, 1998:110).

Many discussions and debates have been held about Habermas' vision of the public sphere, the Internet and the public sphere, and multiple public spheres (including, for example, O'Donnell, 2001). It can be safely said that in his vision, the ideal public



sphere includes at least four central elements: universal access, a place where opinions are formed, public access to information and the media, and provision of information by citizens for citizens. This latter element is the one most often highlighted as the contribution of the Internet to the public sphere.

The latest Eurobarometer surveys and reports found that only one per cent of the EU population never watches the news on television, 16 per cent never listen to the news on the radio, and 11 per cent never read the news in daily papers. However, 52 per cent of the EU population do not use the Internet.

To summarise data introduced earlier, the most recent Eurobarometer survey found that: 68 per cent of people in Ireland watch the news on television every day, just under the EU average of 69 per cent; 63 per cent of people in Ireland listen to the news on the radio every day, higher than the EU average of 38 per cent; and 47 per cent read news in daily papers every day, higher than the EU average of 40 per cent.

A separate Eurobarometer report found that in Ireland, 20 per cent of people in Ireland use the Internet every day or nearly every day, the average across the EU, and an estimated 14 per cent of people across the EU read the news on the Internet every day or nearly every day.

Internet users across the EU are younger and more highly educated than those not using the Internet. More men than women use the Internet.

Analysis of Internet users in Ireland in 2000 found that they have higher household incomes, are from more privileged classes, and have more educational qualifications; as well more men than women are using the Internet. Seventy-five per cent of people in Ireland are not using the Internet and the core of the non-users are those not working, "housewives", those on lower-than-average household incomes, older people, and farmers and other agricultural workers.

This review of statistics draws from the most comprehensive survey data currently available. Turning to international studies, Aurigi and Graham (1998), and Calabrese and Borchert (1996) who have analysed patterns of Internet use in, respectively, Britain and Europe, and the US, see three distinct groups emerging regarding relationships to the Internet public sphere: a small "transnational corporate class," highly mobile and relying upon interactive global computer networks to operate, and using the Internet to live where they chose while remaining connected to the economic mainstream; a larger group of less mobile and less affluent workers using the Internet largely for passive consumption; and a distinct group comprised of the marginalised groups living in poverty and structural unemployment excluded altogether from Internet public spaces.

From this review of the latest survey data, it is clear that the picture in Ireland is more complex and multilayered and somewhat less pessimistic. The Internet does present many new options for communications, and for information and news consumption and production in Ireland and across the EU.

However it is clear that Internet use is strongly shaped by social and structural relations. There is little to suggest from the latest surveys that Internet use will shift existing patterns of news consumption from the traditional media to the Internet. Levels of Internet use are much lower than for the traditional mass media of television, radio and the daily papers. In the foreseeable future the Internet will not profoundly reshape how opinions are formed in the public sphere in Ireland and across the European Union.

Notes

1. Eurobarometer public opinion surveys (Standard Eurobarometer surveys) have been conducted twice yearly since 1973. Since 2001, the surveys have been conducted on behalf of the Directorate-General Press and Communication of the European Commission. Each Eurobarometer report contains a summary of survey data on opinions across the European Union. Of more interest to researchers is the Annex to each survey containing a breakdown of responses by Member State, allowing analysis for Ireland and comparative analysis across the EU.

Each survey consists of approximately 1000 face-to-face interviews per Member



State. An identical set of questions is asked of representative samples of the population aged fifteen years and over in each Member State. In each of the 15 Member States, the survey is carried out by national institutes associated with the European Opinion Research Group. In Ireland, the latest Eurobarometer surveys have been conducted by Lansdowne Market Research.

Eurobarometer also publishes special reports based on in-depth thematic studies carried out for various services of the European Commission or other EU Institutions and also Flash reports on specific issues.

All Eurobarometer reports and annexes available to the public may be downloaded from the web from: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg10/epo/eb.html>

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