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## Book Review of Irish Media: a Critical History (John Horgan & Roddy Flynn)

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## Book Review

# Irish Media: A Critical History (by John Horgan & Roddy Flynn)

**Four Courts Press, Dublin, 334pp, €24.95 (paperback)**

Michael Foley

Irish Media: A Critical History is a new edition, not a second edition. It is heir to the book of similar title, Media History: A Critical History since 1922, by John Horgan, published in 2001, over 100 pages shorter than this volume. This edition takes the story of Irish Media up to 2016, and it appears to have about 25 to 30 per cent new material.

This is a narrative history with a broad and long sweep, from the first newspapers to emerge in Dublin in the 17th century to online media and alternative modes of communications on offer today. That fact is both its strength and weakness. It is a strength in that for those seeking a major resource for Irish media history, and its place in Irish society, it's all there. As a resource for those interested in media, it is invaluable. Even before reading the current volume for review purposes, it had been used for research purposes, and is already dog-eared. Its weakness is that there is little point in asking why some things are missing or only covered

superficially. In a survey of some 400 years (the years before 1922 being context), it could not include everything, or in depth.

Unlike its first iteration, this volume joins a substantial body of media-history work published since Prof Horgan's book appeared back in a different world. In 2001, there was little idea of what was about to emerge – there was no Facebook or Twitter, and there was little else written about Irish media. There were a few studies of broadcasting, including some excellent studies by Robert Savage. There had been a number of important studies of censorship. Marie Louise Legg had written about the 19th century Irish provincial press, while Brian Inglis' beautifully written *Freedom of the Press in Ireland*, published in 1954 still stands as a rare study of the pre 1840 period. Historians, of course, examined newspapers, but nearly always as sources rather than actors or players themselves.

However, in the past ten years there has been a spurt of activity, with studies of periodicals; journalism history; and the radical and nationalist press. Mark O'Brien has written histories of *The Irish Times* and *The Irish Press*, and his history of journalism in 20th century Ireland appeared last year. Terrence Brown's history of *The Irish Times* appeared in 2015. Ray Burke wrote about the decline and fall of the *Irish Press* in 2005. Chris Morash published his cultural history of the Irish media in 2010. And Maurice Walsh's *News from Ireland* looked at the battle for public opinion during the revolutionary period.

Like its predecessor, the book is organised chronologically. However, a number of themes are discernible, notably the fraught relationship between media and government, from the strict censorship favoured by the Free State and the wartime governments, to the rather mealy-mouthed declaration guaranteeing a free press in the 1937 Constitution.

It is with RTÉ, or Radio Éireann as it was, that successive governments' commitment to a free press was tested. Sean Lemass asserted that RTÉ was an instrument of public policy and seemingly had planned to use Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act to order the RTE Authority to pay attention to Ireland's image and avoid 'stage-Irishism and playboyism'. Successive governments did use that legislation to impose strict censorship during the 30 years of political violence in Northern Ireland.

The print media was also targeted by government, but less directly. The thread of governments' plans to enact privacy legislation and avoidance of libel reform also runs through the book. While the 2009 Defamation Act was an improvement on what went before, the press was warned, even at the launch of the self-regulatory system of a press council and press ombudsman – John Horgan was, of course, the first press ombudsman – that privacy legislation had been prepared and was ready to go. Oddly the politicians' obsession with privacy has never been mirrored in the complaints received by the press ombudsman: by far the highest number of complaints are about accuracy.

RTÉ was always vulnerable because of the licence fee and successive governments' unwillingness to protect public service broadcasting by ensuring adequate financial support. Today, politicians still refuse to come up with a payment system that takes account of digital technology and how people consume content.

From 1922 until the 1990s the pace of change was slow. There were controversies of course: Civil War; World War II; the Troubles; the birth of RTÉ television; and not least the attempts to stem the influence of the British press. Northern Ireland has its own issues with its press, the birth of both the BBC and UTV, and how political violence was reported. Then the pace changes radically. In 1995 the Irish Press Group closed, but the new technology and computerised composition for printing allowed for a plethora of new titles, the Title, the Daily News and the Dublin Tribune among others. Commercial radio started, and TV3 finally went on air. Some titles collapsed, others limped along, but if the 1990s appeared frenetic, the buying and selling of newspapers and radio stations during the Celtic Tiger era appears bizarre at this remove. A media landscape that appeared to have changed little since the beginning of the 20th century was now totally unrecognisable. That, of course will continue.

In the face of revolutionary change RTÉ, The Irish Times, the Irish Independent and many local newspapers have remained and displayed a remarkable ability to adapt, even if print sales have declined persistently since 2008. Most media organisations have survived by radical cost cutting, including reducing their workforces, and while digital revenue is increasing, the speed of that increase is not enough to counter the losses in traditional advertising revenue.

Today digital media has changed our lives, from how we view the world, to how we work and how, through social media, we have become commodified. There are also enormous changes in how ownership works and how and if it can be regulated. Already laws introduced to deal with ownership only a few years ago are out-dated.

Elements within the Catholic Church worry about the influence of English newspapers, especially the News of the World, on Irish minds. That paper has now gone, but huge global organisations are now controlling media, whether the big social media companies, or Rupert Murdoch's News UK, which was once feared for the power of its newspaper titles only, but now it controls television distribution, through Sky TV. It also owns Sky News, Sky Sport and other Sky channels. It is the second largest owner of radio stations in Ireland and its newspaper sales are second only to INM. There is, however, a somewhat optimistic conclusion that suggests both legacy and online media will become increasingly interdependent, with social media needing content and legacy media needing audience.

This work does suffer from some editing errors, probably due to marrying much of an existing work with the new. Not even the most revisionist of revisionist historians would suggest the Great Irish Famine lasted only two years. The case of Jenny McGeever, who lost her position at RTÉ due to infringing Section 31, was never appealed to the European Court of Human Rights. The 2001 edition correctly stated that subsequent to the McKeever case the National Union of Journalists and SIPTU challenged Section 31 in Strasbourg, unsuccessfully. Elsewhere the book says defamation law was never addressed, which was correct when the first edition was written, but of course, as this volume says later, it was addressed in the form of the 2009 act. In the section dealing with media and journalist education no mention is made of the certificate courses at the College of Commerce in Rathmines, later DIT, from the 1960s. This reviewer, the third Media Correspondent appointed by The Irish Times in the mid 1990s, can report we did not specifically report for children, as is stated, though I and my predecessors would have welcomed any child who wanted to read our articles. The school student material that the authors alludes to was published as 'Media Scope' and edited by my former Irish Times and DIT colleague, Dr Harry Browne.

Such quibbles will hardly take from an impressive achievement. The work combines the rich scholarly traditions of media history with media studies and media sociology. It will be an invaluable resource for students of Irish media. Professor Horgan's work lasted about 16 years; given the rate of change taking place, I suspect it will be only a few years before a third edition will be required. In the meantime we have a work of erudition and scholarship that will be welcomed, and used by students and others for years, though one is unsure how many, to come.

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