

PUBLIC REPRESENTATIONS OF A PRIVATE CHOICE: IRISH DAILY NEWSPAPERS AND THE REFERENDA ON ABORTION OF 1992 AND 2002

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In Ireland, as elsewhere, the press has always considered the formation of public opinion of great importance, although its effects are difficult to define with any degree of precision. Almost thirty years ago, Fred Hirsch and David Gordon, in a book called *Newspaper Money*, had already written that

the influence of the press on particular events including general elections is notoriously limited. Much more important is the broad influence over the climate of opinion, an influence which sets the boundaries and, to a large extent, the agenda of political action. (Hirsch & Gordon 35)

In other words, newspapers have come to influence more what the public thinks *about* rather than *what* it actually thinks. This is already a lot, of course, and, because of the social essence of the topics they propose to their audiences, it gives newspapers a strong responsibility for bringing (or not bringing) essential issues to the forefront of public debate. In the case which I propose to study here – the two Irish referenda on abortion of 1992 and 2002 – this responsibility was probably increased by the fact that abortion, unlike divorce for example, did not mobilise the public (Hug 200), and was consequently not likely to boost the sales of newspapers. According to a survey published by *The Irish Times* on 18 November 1992, abortion was only ninth on the list of people's preoccupations, far behind unemployment or health questions. Therefore, what I will try to evaluate is how Irish newspaper editors showed some sense of responsibility in stimulating the public debate, setting the agenda and playing their part in the forming of public opinion. In order to answer this question I have conducted a comparative analysis of the print editions of the five Irish morning newspapers in circulation in 1992 – *The Irish Independent*, *The Irish Times*, *The Irish Press* (until May 1995), *The Star*, and *The Cork Examiner* – over a period of two weeks (one before polling day, one after) in November 1992 and March 2002, concentrating on how they reflected this issue.¹

1 One could argue that Irish versions of some British papers on sale in Ireland, such as *The Irish Sun* or *The Irish Mirror* – which, together, sell almost 200,000 copies every day – should be considered alongside their Irish rivals. Indeed, these two newspapers only remain British from a strictly economic point of view, since they are edited and produced in Ireland, by Irish people, for an Irish audience and dedicate an ever-expanding portion of their contents to Ireland. I decided, however, not to include them, because they have only recently been integrated into the Irish market (in 1996).

The first of the two referenda on abortion considered here took place on 25 November 1992, the same day as the general election. The voters were asked to vote on three questions: (1) the freedom to travel between Ireland and another state, (2) the freedom to offer or obtain information on services available in another state, and (3) the acknowledgement of the right to life of the unborn with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother. The referendum came as a consequence of the so-called X case. In this case, the Supreme Court had overturned a decision made by the High Court, which had prohibited a fourteen-year-old girl from travelling to the UK for an abortion. The reason given by the Supreme Court was that the girl was liable to commit suicide if her pregnancy was not terminated. However, the court also made the decision that there was no absolute right to leave Ireland if the intention was to get an abortion. As the two decisions caused considerable confusion about the interpretation of the constitutional amendment of 1983, the Catholic Church and the anti-abortion lobby demanded a new referendum in order to secure an absolute ban against abortion. Liberals, on the other hand, were strongly critical of the restrictions on a woman's right to travel implied by the decision. The political situation in 1992 was complicated by the fact that the controversy coincided with the campaign for the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. In order to avoid a coupling of the two issues, the recently elected Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds, insisted on two referenda: first, a referendum on the Treaty, in which a special protocol had been included securing the protection of Article 40.3.3 (outlawing abortion), and, later, a referendum in which the questions raised by the Supreme Court ruling could be addressed. The government ended up proposing three amendments. The first two amendments (the right to travel and the right to information) were supported by the Catholic Church, but the polemical wording of the third amendment alienated both sides of the campaign.²

Over the two weeks covered by this study, between 18 November and 2 December 1992, Irish daily newspapers showed great differences in the importance given to the referendum. While *The Irish Times*, for example, dedicated four editorials exclusively to it, and *The Cork Examiner* three, *The Irish Press* only mentioned it on three occasions, *The Star* once and *The Irish Independent* not at all. This variation in the importance given to the event is also reflected in the occurrences on the front page or the number of articles, especially of opinion, as the following table reveals:

2 The third proposal of the 1992 referendum stated that "it shall be unlawful to terminate the life of an unborn unless such termination is necessary to save the life as distinct from the health of the mother where there is an illness or disorder of the mother giving rise to a real and substantive risk to her life not being a risk of self-destruction." Unlike the first two amendments, which were approved by 62.3% and 60% of the voters, respectively, the third proposal was rejected by 65.4%.

Table 1: Front pages, editorials and articles devoted to the referendum on abortion by Irish morning newspapers between Wednesday, 18 November 1992, and Wednesday, 2 December 1992

Title (Year of foundation)	Circulation (July-Dec 1992)	Issues analysed	Abortion on front page	Editorials on abor- tion	Total articles on abortion (information/opinion)
<i>Irish Inde- pendent</i> (1905)	149 000	13	4	-	29 (26/3)
<i>Irish Times</i> (1859)	93 000	13	6	4	41 (33/8)
<i>Star</i> (1988)	85 000	13	-	1	7 (6/1)
<i>Cork Ex- aminer</i> (1841)	56 000	13	6	3	22 (16/6)
<i>Irish Press</i> (1931)	50 000	13	1	3 (mentioned)	17 (10/7)

First of all, we can suggest two reasons why *The Irish Times* was the Irish newspaper to give greatest emphasis to the referendum on abortion. On the one hand, and from a journalistic point of view, this newspaper has always given great importance to its public mission, which was, for example, made official by its Memorandum of Association in 1974.³ On the other hand, according to *The Irish Times*, what was at stake on a more political level, was much more than abortion. In the name of progress, maturity, and honesty, the newspaper urged its readers to accept the first two amendments, but refuse the third:

There is much to be learned from our EC neighbours who [...] have put in place a legislation which spells out precisely the circumstances [– not least the time limits –] within which abortion may be available. This is the route of maturity and honesty, and it is the route most likely to ensure the rights of women to health and to life. The first step in that direction is to vote the approval of the amendments on travel and information on Wednesday, while voting no to the third proposal. (*Irish Times*, editorial, 21 Nov 1992)

On the whole, while giving clear instructions to its readers through its editorials (as it had on other moral issues, but not for general elections in the previous thirty years), *The Irish Times* obviously strove to bring the issue into the public debate, to give voice to both sides of the question and to provide its readers with documents de-

3 Article 2, (d), (ii), C (1), (2) & (3) of the Memorandum of the Association of the Irish Times Trust Company established in 1974 reads as follows: "The objects for which the company is established are [...] in pursuance of the foregoing end and to enable the readers of *The Irish Times* to reach informed and independent judgements and to contribute more effectively to the life of the community to ensure that the following principles govern the publication of *The Irish Times*: (1) that news shall be as accurate and as comprehensive as is practicable and be presented fairly; (2) that comment and opinion shall be informed and responsible and shall be identifiable from fact; (3) that special consideration shall be given to the reasonable representation of minority interests and divergent views."

signed to help them understand the issues involved - for example, a guide entitled "From Conception to Birth" or "A Voting Guide on the Three Issues in the Three Referenda" (*Irish Times*, weekend supplement, 21 Nov 1992). By doing so, the editors obviously seized the opportunity of the referendum to reinforce the reputation of the *Times* as a quality newspaper or a newspaper of record.

The Irish Press, although it was already going through serious difficulties which would eventually lead to its closing down three years later, sought to play the part that was assigned to it by Eamon de Valera in 1931: of representing de Valera's vision of Ireland as rural, Gaelic, Catholic, and republican. While concentrating on the general election, in which it urged its readers to vote Fianna Fáil, the editors of *The Irish Press* approached the issues of the referendum from the stated conviction that "abortion in any but exceptional cases is abhorrent to most Irish people. [...] A vote for the amendment will [...] ensure that abortion cannot become widely available" (*Irish Press*, editorial, 25 Nov 1992).

The Irish Independent showed a degree of indifference to the referendum and chose instead to concentrate on the general election, probably because it was considered much more likely to attract readers. It gave, for example, great emphasis to the polemic between leaders of Fine Gael and Labour about who should be the next Taoiseach.⁴ It was not likely, therefore, to have had much influence on the outcome of the referendum other than by encouraging a general indifference in its readers.

The same could be said of *The Star*, Ireland's only tabloid daily newspaper, which was also partly owned by Independent Newspapers (as well as by Britain's Express group).⁵ Apparently, the issue of abortion was no longer as important for the selling of newspapers as the general election. For both of these titles, the questions of who would win/lose and who had won/lost were much more newsworthy than trying to evaluate the positions on a complex moral issue which puzzled most readers.

In the end, the biggest surprise probably came from *The Cork Examiner*, the Republic of Ireland's oldest daily paper. Besides giving more importance to the referendum on abortion than most of its rivals, *The Cork Examiner* did its best to make up for the lack of information and consequent confusion among the voters. However, what was most striking was that it denounced the referendum in all of its three editorials on the subject. Its editor, Fergus O'Callaghan, also showed great clear-sightedness by ending his comment of the results with this prediction: "We could be facing into a third referendum in something like ten years" (*Cork Examiner*, editorial, 27 Nov 1992).

Indeed, a second referendum on abortion was to take place in March 2002, although in quite a different context. Following the narrow 'Yes to Divorce' in November 1995,⁶

4 In the end, however, it was neither John Bruton nor Dick Spring, but Albert Reynolds who was elected.

5 Property of Richard Desmond since 2000.

6 Yes: 50.3%, No: 49.7%.

the debate on abortion was reopened in 1997 with the C Case, when a teenager, pregnant after a rape, was allowed to travel to the United Kingdom for an abortion against her parents' will. In the following years, Bertie Ahern's Fianna Fáil government prepared the ground for a new referendum on abortion, which was finally announced in October 2001. Supported by the Catholic Church and the pro-life movement, Bertie Ahern personally committed himself to the campaign, while all the other parties as well as the Alliance for a 'No' vote, an umbrella group for several political and civil groups, and other associations⁷ supported the 'No.' The referendum proposed to remove the threat of suicide as a ground for abortion, but, unlike in 1992, it did not coincide with a general election. This probably put greater responsibility on the press since the mobilisation of the public seemed very low from the beginning. As far as their coverage of the event is concerned, the newspapers more or less doubled the space they devoted to the referendum.

Table 2: Front pages, editorials and articles devoted to the referendum on abortion by Irish morning newspapers between Wednesday, 27 February 2002, and Wednesday, 13 March 2002

Title	Circulation (January-June 2002)	Issues analysed	Abortion on front page	Editorials on abortion	Total articles on abortion (information/opinion)
<i>Irish Independent</i>	170 000	13	5	1	73 (66/7)
<i>Irish Times</i>	120 000	13	7	4	84 (60/24)
<i>Star</i>	105 000	13	1	2	15 (13/2)
<i>Irish Examiner</i>	64 000	13	5	3	41 (25/16)

In the absence of *The Irish Press*, I will begin with *The Irish Independent*. Although it did not dedicate a single editorial and only one front page to abortion during the week preceding the referendum, it did give it one full-page report every day. On the whole, however, it seemed too busy reporting rapes, sex abuses, assaults, and murders to give abortion more than an accumulation of snippets of news – what John Merrill once called “supermarket journalism”: a little bit of everything for everybody (Merrill, 6). In particular, great importance was given to the rapist involved in the X case in 1992, who was again sentenced for other sexual assaults ten years later.

The most interesting characteristic of *The Independent's* coverage, however, lies in its sudden change of attitude from polling day onwards. First of all, on the day of the

7 Such as the Irish Family Planning Association, the National Women's Council of Ireland, or the Mother and Child Campaign.

referendum, it dedicated almost half of its front page to the photograph of a dog with the title: “One Dog One Vote: Now Charlie is a Ballot Boxer,” after a dog received a polling card bearing its name. Beyond being provocatively trivial, the choice of this news for a front page on such a day may be interpreted as: what is the point of talking about abortion to people who want to hear about something else? Obviously, while *The Independent* must have felt it could not possibly avoid mentioning the referendum, it deliberately chose to make as light of it as possible. As if to confirm this logic of entertainment, on the day the results came out, *The Independent*, after a week of indifference, suddenly put great emphasis on the referendum. On Friday, 8 March 2002, for instance, most of the front page was about the victory of the ‘No,’ under the huge title “Backlash for Bertie.” Above all, only then did *The Independent* dedicate an editorial to the vote putting the blame on the government, reporting that “the demand for another poll was a figment of politicians’ and campaigners’ imagination” (*Irish Independent*, editorial, 8 March 2002). Accordingly, no less than seven full pages – 30 articles – gave every possible detail about the results and the leaders’ reactions. Rather than the satisfaction of seeing the personal defeat of a Taoiseach whom *The Independent* supported in the 1997 election,⁸ this sudden interest may be explained by finally having the opportunity to put a face on the ‘Yes’ campaign and to criticise a personality rather than evaluate a moral issue.

On the whole, *The Independent’s* attitude over the two weeks seemed to rely on a typical characteristic of the so-called sensationalist press: exploiting people’s emotions afterwards instead of trying to shape their opinions beforehand. In doing this, *The Independent* was not very far from *The Star*, which, however, gave somewhat more importance to the referendum than ten years earlier. This time, it dedicated two editorials to it (on the day of the vote and of the results) and its front page after the results (with the headline “Oh NO Bertie”). To be fair, however, some credit must be given to *The Star* for encouraging its readers to “make their voices heard,” as its editorial stated on voting day, when they were obviously not the most likely to be interested in this issue. In a more sensationalist style, *The Star* did the same as *The Independent* by focusing on personalities rather than on ideas, as can be deduced from both newspapers’ habit of calling politicians by their first names among others.

As in 1992, *The Irish Times’* coverage of the 2002 referendum was quite different. First of all, it devoted four of its editorials (two during the previous week, one on polling day and one on the day of the results) and seven consecutive front pages to the issue. Again, this is in no way surprising for a newspaper which had always given great importance to moral issues and, once again, took the opportunity to put in practice its motto: “to give our readers a reasonably complete service not only of the news they want to hear but of the news which we think they should hear.”⁹ One could ar-

8 By means of a famous front-page editorial on polling day, which declared: “It’s payback time!”

9 Extract from *The Irish Times’* editorial in its centenary edition (8 June 1959).

gue, of course, that a comparative analysis shows a real correspondence between the profile of the readers of *The Irish Times* and of the so-called liberal electorate and that it is easier for *The Irish Times* than for any of its rivals to insist on serious issues without risking to put off its readers. Nonetheless, it is true that as far as the 2002 referendum was concerned, it did make a particular effort not only to bring the issue to the forefront of public debate, but also to cover both sides of the campaign – for example by showing, on the same page, two doctors defending opposing views (4 March 2002) and on another the Taoiseach defending the ‘Yes,’ while a former Taoiseach, Garret Fitzgerald, explained his reasons to vote ‘No’ (2 March 2002). In addition, we should not forget that *The Irish Times* came closest to giving precise voting instructions to its readers – although not as openly as in 1992 – by warning them against the dangers of a ‘Yes’ vote: “Ireland’s time-honoured, hypocritical policy of pass-the-parcel would continue. [...] It would extend the fudge, enshrining it in the Constitution” (2 March 2002). After the results – a very close victory of the ‘No’¹⁰ – *The Irish Times* did not hide its satisfaction of seeing “hardline conservatism vanquished as never before,” to quote Fintan O’Toole (5 March 2002). There is no doubt that the newspaper thought it had played an important part in what it presented as the victory of progress over obscurantism.

However, calling on its readers to do their citizens’ duty and trying to help them make up their minds is – at least in the context of the 2002 referendum – not only the privilege of *The Irish Times*. Indeed, *The Examiner*, now known as *The Irish Examiner*,¹¹ also played its part as a potential actor in public life in its own way – more humbly and in a less sophisticated manner. While not giving the referendum as much coverage as *The Irish Times*, it did bring it to its readers’ attention, not least by publishing no less than sixteen opinion articles over two weeks – an impressive total in comparison with the *The Independent’s* seven. Above all, as ten years earlier, it gave great emphasis to the confusion felt by the electorate, blaming both the lack of information given to the public and the divisions within the medical profession, the churches, and even parties. While urging its readers on the eve of the referendum to vote (in its editorial entitled “Go Out and Vote,” 5 March 2002), it explained that

in keeping with the long-established policy of this newspaper, we do not presume to tell our readers which way to vote on this complex political and moral question. On the contrary, by commenting on the eve of such a crucial vote, our aim is to inform voters, to help people make up their own minds, so that they can vote according to their convictions.

Besides, it is probably in *The Examiner* that we can find the most realistic and sensible conclusion: “Whatever its outcome, it is painfully clear the referendum will not stop a

10 Yes: 49,6 %; No: 50,4 %.

11 The newspaper first changed its title from *Cork Examiner* to *Examiner* in 1996, to *Irish Examiner* in 2000, in order to reflect a growing national dimension. In spite of these changes, over 95% of *The Irish Examiner’s* readers in 2002 came from the Munster region.

single Irish woman from going to England for an abortion, a tragic journey undertaken by thousands every year" (*Irish Examiner*, editorial, 6 March 2002).

What conclusions should we draw from this brief study of the attitudes of Irish daily newspapers at the time of the two referenda on abortion of November 1992 and March 2002? First of all, although I have tried to avoid resorting to the usual clichés and stereotypes often applied to Irish newspapers (*The Irish Times* is 'good,' *The Irish Independent* is 'not so good,' *The Star* is 'even worse,' *The Irish Press* is 'partisan,' and *The Examiner* is 'provincial'), each newspaper seemed to reveal quite a lot about itself. The independent newspapers, for example, proved to be "commercially rather than politically or ideologically driven," to quote an expression used by John Horgan (Horgan 51). After all, both obviously have to follow a logic of entertainment. *The Irish Press* has, once again, shown that it may have had "its finger on the pulse of ordinary people," as its last editor, Hugh Lambert, once put it (Kenny 157), but its main objective nonetheless remained propaganda. In the end, only the widely respected *Irish Times* and, in a more unexpected way, *The Examiner*, may be said to have fulfilled their role as platforms for debate and forum of opinions, by basing their coverage of the referenda on ideas and issues and not merely on facts, and by refusing to give up any attempt at reflection for the sake of entertainment. My point has neither been to present an elitist and Manichaeian view of the press of the Republic of Ireland, nor to argue that every newspaper should be an intellectual institution rather than a commercial undertaking. Instead, I have tried to show that, considering that two out of three national newspapers sold every day in Ireland are now controlled by the same group¹² and given the circulation of Irish versions of British tabloids (which do not seem to bother much about their contribution to the public debate),¹³ maintaining a capacity to live up to their social responsibilities may represent the greatest challenge of Irish daily newspapers in the future.

12 Tony O'Reilly's Independent News and Media owns *The Irish Independent*, *The Evening Herald* and half of *The Star*, which together represented 64.6% of the total circulation of Irish newspapers between January and June 2003, or 48.8% including British newspapers on sale in Ireland.

13 For instance, between January and June 2003, 79,000 for *The Irish Mirror* and 114,000 for *The Irish Sun* against 63,000 and 77,000, respectively, in 1996. On the whole, over 30% of daily newspapers sold in the Republic of Ireland in 2003 were British.

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