

What the papers said: Analysis of Media Coverage of 2004 European Elections

by Paula Clancy and Teresa Brannick
with Angela Flanagan

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'I believe that it is the journalist's role to inform public opinion. That in a self-governing society, the daily press is the only widely available system of education we have. If the voters are to receive the information they need to make informed choices on issues which confront them, it must come from the press' (Kovach, B, Former editor of the New York Times, 1990)'

Introduction

"They're all the same, always bickering and only in it for themselves."

This widely-held view of politicians, regularly reinforced in the media, is thought to be one of the main reasons why participation rates in Irish elections are in steady decline. It might be assumed that during election campaigns, when politicians have their best opportunity of engaging the public in dialogue on policy issues and in communicating what their profession is about, this situation would improve. After all, even the more sceptical of us know that somebody will be elected and that their decisions will affect us for good or ill. But nothing seems to affect the downward trend.

So, what has happened? The nature of election campaigns has certainly changed. There is much less emphasis on, or opportunity for, direct contact between voter and politician. Favourable media coverage is the single most important/pursued campaign weapon/objective. A casual observer can see that policy debate has taken a back seat and more superficial image-related elements have come to dominate the campaigns.

Who, then, is at fault? The focus must be on the two principal actors: the politicians/parties and the news media. Both agree that politics is important, that participation in election campaigns is essential to our democracy and that an understanding of the issues is at least as important as the personality of the candidate. Each protagonist tends to blame the other. The constant complaint of the politician is that s/he can't get coverage of all the useful work s/he does and the serious policy proposals s/he puts forward. The media, in defence, will claim that most politicians have little of interest to say, that their statements are boring and often stupid; and that their readers have no interest in a straightforward reporting of their thoughts and activities. The parties and candidates will claim that they are forced to engage in gimmickry to some extent in order to draw attention to their more serious objectives while a prominent part of the media's election coverage is the ridiculing of the candidates as circus clowns for doing precisely that.

The purpose of this study is to examine in detail how the national print media covered the European Election campaign 2004. It will analyse the extent to which the important policy issues were teased out and presented to the electorate. It will analyse the statements and press releases from the parties/candidates having regard to the "issues" versus "gimmickry" charge. Finally, it will apportion responsibility for the low quality of public debate of the issues, the failure to engage the electorate and, ultimately, the low voter turnout, which only came close to respectability by being combined with local elections and a national referendum.

Media and Politics

It is a sine qua non that the media should facilitate individual participation in collective self-government through provision of information on the political process and on policy issues. In a system of political representation such as we have in Ireland where the opportunities for the citizen to make a contribution are minimal, such information is not in fact adequately provided. (Honohan, 2002). The failure of the media to fulfil one of its primary functions presents us with a problem. This is exemplified in the way in which the print media deals with elections: First, there is an increasing trend for information on policy and candidate positions' on policy to be replaced with a presentation of politics as trivial entertainment. This means that powerful negative messages are transmitted about politics and the political process. Second is the absence of hard information on policy issues which leaves the electorate with little opportunity to make informed choices. Third is a lack of diversity of perspective which includes the failure to give equal voice to candidates.

Commercial and Political Context of the Press in Ireland.

'Every democratic society should interrogate itself continuously. The media is central to that ethos of interrogation. But the media itself is a central constituent component of society. It too requires interrogation' (J.J. Lee)

Most Irish broadsheets² have a middle class orientation³ and are heavily revenue dependent on advertising.

Independent Newspapers PLC is the dominant actor in the Irish newspaper industry; around eighty percent of Irish newspapers sold in Ireland in 2001 were sold by companies which are fully or partially owned by Independent newspapers. The group publishes the Irish Independent, two of the five national Sunday newspapers (Sunday Independent and Sunday World), the national evening newspaper, Evening Herald, approximately twenty percent of the regional/local press and the Irish edition of the Daily Star. Despite the official conclusion that the Irish newspaper industry shows sufficient editorial diversity not to warrant intervention in the Irish newspaper market⁴, fundamental concerns remain. Horgan summing up the position says, *'the print media in Ireland, in which one organisation at present has an overweening role, is (partly because of this fact) subject to forces which limit its agenda, impoverish it culturally and render it more vulnerable to external forces, both commercial and ideological'* (2001 :54). According to Horgan all of these factors have an *'inevitable effect, not only on the choice of topics deemed suitable for treatment, but often on the treatment of these topics as well'* (2001:52)

Media influence on political choices

The evidence concerning influence of print media on political choices presents strongly opposing research findings: some conclude that there is a limited influence on voting behaviour of readers while others find considerable impact. Rather than getting entangled in attempts to measure the direct causal effect of particular media coverage on particular election outcomes, a more useful approach might be to consider the media as having the power to put a set of ideas into circulation. This set of ideas comes to represent what we regard as normal, a collective ‘common sense’. The media may not be the cause of specific voting patterns, particularly in the intense period of an election campaign but they ‘may be responsible for legitimating the operation of particular agendas and ideologies’ (Street, 2001:87). Through the media, dominant, albeit contested, perspectives on the political world are articulated in a way which gives little breathing room or air space for alternative perspectives from less powerful voices. And, because political actors understand and cannot afford to ignore the power of the media, a great deal of election campaign energy is used, and arguably wasted, attempting to influence and shape how the media treat the parties, candidates and messages of the campaign. (Lloyd, 2004; Holmes, 1998)

Press Attention to the Campaign

The Irish media unquestionably have always taken elections seriously in the sense of devoting considerable coverage to them. (Brandenburg and Hayden , 2003) . For the 2004 European election, similar amounts of

Table 1: Amount of Press coverage for the 2004 European Election

Paper	Number articles	%
Irish Times	74	25.7
Irish Independent	77	26.7
Examiner	85	29.5
Sunday Independent	17	5.9
Sunday Tribune	17	5.9
Sunday Business Post	15	5.2
Sunday World	3	1.0
	288	100

coverage were provided in each of the three daily broad sheets. For the three-week period prior to polling day on 11 June, 2004 between 75 and 85 articles⁵, were carried, averaging four per day. The day before polling there were 22 pieces carried. The three Sunday broadsheets carried between 15 and 17 articles on the euro election campaign on each of the three Sundays prior to polling.

From Monday May 24, eighteen days prior to polling day, the lowest total number of articles was eleven and the highest, peaking on Sunday June 6, was twenty-three. The vast majority of coverage was located in either one or two pages dedicated to the elections. Most frequently coverage included material on local elections and the citizenship referendum campaign and, more occasionally, articles on European

election campaigns in other jurisdictions. Less frequently coverage of the elections appeared in other sections of the paper. Just less than ten per cent was contained in the general Irish news or opinion pages while it hit the front pages just 16 times (5.6%) across seven newspapers.

The format of the election coverage pages was very similar in each of the newspapers. It most often consisted of a main article covering up to half a page with a large banner headline, usually accompanied by a photograph - most frequently of one of the candidates. Very often this article was either a constituency profile, or a candidate's profile. All of the papers included offbeat snippets which were frequently satirical or cynical in tone.⁶

What the Media Covered

Political campaigns in general, and this one was no different, are primarily treated as contests and also as subjects for entertainment. For national general elections this type of coverage now surpasses the attention given to policy issues. Drawing from a content analysis of the Irish Times' coverage of four general elections between 1973 and 1992, Farrell (1993) shows how the nature of campaign coverage has changed in Ireland, with an increase in coverage devoted to the 'Game' over the 20 year period and a corresponding decrease of space devoted to policy issues. In the period prior to the 1973 general election almost sixty percent of coverage was devoted to policy issues. The percentage was fifty-four percent for the 1987 election and fifty-two percent for the 1989 election. The downward trend continued into the 1992 election where the figure was just less than forty-nine percent. Findings from Brandenburg and Hayden (2003) in their study of the media treatment of the 2002 general election campaign were consistent with this downward trend. Arguing that the general pattern of press coverage can be deduced from a rough count of the topics of a newspaper's lead articles, their analysis showed that forty-five percent of these articles were devoted to policy issues.

The evidence from our study of the coverage of the 2004 European election is consistent with this downward trend. Indeed the lack of attention to policy issues is more accentuated, something which must be accounted for in part because we are dealing with a European Parliament election rather than a national general election.⁷

Just over eleven percent of articles had as the primary topic⁸ a reference to an issue of direct relevance in either a European, national or local context. Surprisingly, given that the campaign was for the European elections, an even smaller proportion - less than six percent - focused primarily on a European issue. Slightly more than one-third of articles dealt with either party and/or candidate canvassing or campaigning. In some cases this took the form of a short political profile of an individual candidate. A small number of these (7) were lifestyle pieces of a particular candidate. Almost a quarter of campaign coverage was primarily concerned with some aspect of inter-party or inter-candidate rivalry or criticism. A quarter of the articles were concerned primarily with the election process itself, i.e. issues of poll findings, expected voter turnout, analysis of vote management strategies, voting information. See Table 2 below.

Table 2**Primary Topic of Article**

Type	Number Of articles	%
Candidate campaigning/ Profile /Personal/lifestyle	100	34.7
Inter-Party/Inter-candidate Rivalry	67	23.3
Election Process/Poll findings	74	25.7
Policy issue		
Europe	17	4.5
National	13	5.9
Local	3	1.0
Other	14	4.9
	288	100

To obtain a richer perspective on the coverage the data on primary topic was also aggregated with the data documenting the second and third topic of the articles. Aggregating the data in this way shows that a total of forty-five articles made at least some reference in the course of the article to a European policy issue. (See Table 3).

Table 3**All References to policy issues ***

	Number Of articles	%
Reference to Policy issue		
European issue only	25	8.7
European + Local or National issue	20	6.9
National or local issue only	47	16.3
National + local issue	2	.7
	94	32.6
No reference to policy issue	194	67.4
	288	100

Thirty-nine of the forty-five articles were from the three daily broadsheets, Irish Times (10), Irish Independent (15) and Examiner (14). These three papers account for more than eighty percent of the total coverage analysed. Using this expanded coding of the articles brings the proportion of up to just over fifteen percent of coverage. A further sixteen percent made some reference to a national or local issue.

When we focus in on the three daily broadsheets and look at how they treated the issues we find a broadly similar pattern with some minor variations. Almost two out of every five Irish Times articles dealt with a policy issue of some kind and just over eight percent provided in-depth coverage. The Irish Independent has a lower overall coverage of policy issues (thirty-one percent) it almost never provided in-depth coverage, although almost sixteen percent offer some discussion of an issue. The Examiner provide least coverage overall: just twenty-five percent of its articles on the election cover a policy issue, but when they do they are as likely as the Irish Times to do so in-depth.

Table 4 Variations in Coverage of Policy by Daily Broadsheets

Paper	Irish Times		Irish Indep		Examiner		Total	
	N*	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Coverage of Policy								
In-depth coverage	6	8.1	1	1.3	7	8.2	14	5.9
Brief Outline of issue	5	6.8	12	15.6	3	3.5	20	8.4
Sound bite	17	23.0	11	14.3	11	12.9	39	16.5
Non-policy coverage	46	62.2	53	68.8	64	75.3	163	69.0
Total N of articles	74	100	77	100	85	100	236	100

N* = number

What the Papers said

To supplement the quantitative analysis of the topics covered in the articles and to give a flavour of the coverage provided, representative excerpts from each of the papers were selected. These excerpts exemplify the dominant discourses during the election campaign and are consistent with the observations made both in Ireland and elsewhere that elections are framed as entertainment. The Sunday papers in particular almost universally addressed the election solely in terms of a contest between parties and candidates. The most analytic pieces were concerned with the political landscape: the positioning of the parties and the implications for the next general election.⁹

Frequently, either in the headline or prominently in the body of the article the language of war was used to describe the election campaign; the word ‘battle’ is probably the most frequently used descriptive noun.

The Battle

'FG sees five seats in epic Euro battle' Irish Independent 5/6

'Turf war flares between rival FF candidates' Irish Independent 25/5

'Battle for the East: head to head' Irish times, 26/5

Closely related to the 'battle' narrative is that of the 'contest', and more particularly the rivalry between any given two candidates belonging to the same party or, as in the case of Marian Harkin and Dana Rosemary Scallon, between two prominent independents in the same constituency. From the outset the campaign was cast in terms of a series of duels. However, the context provided was never policy or political differences. Instead the spin was the ill-concealed rivalry between two opponents, formally required to present themselves as running mates. The greatest glee came from unmasking the candidate's 'hidden' antipathy to his/her party colleague. Thus we had

The Contest

'FG rivals ordered off each other's patch' Irish Independent, 27/5

'Proinsias de Rossa and Ivana Bacik are locked in a titanic struggle for supremacy' Irish Independent, 3/6

'Brady tipped to clinch Eur. seat for FF', Examiner, 2/6, Front Page

Associated with the first two themes is the positioning of the election as horserace or boxing match, thus we had

The Race

'Candidates vie to be first past the post' Irish Times, 26/5

'Gloves off as contestants push for final seat'. Examiner, 8/6

'With less than a week to polling, four sets of running mates are neck and neck in three constituencies with little between them' Examiner, 5/6

Far removed from informing the reader of the political positions taken by candidates on any kind of policy issue, the nature of the coverage of individual candidates was most often concerned with features of their personality and other aspects of their personal and professional lives.

The Personality

'Ivana [Bacik] dazzles the eye, yet gives nothing away' Sunday Independent, 23/5

Easy Listener Mary Lou[MacDonald] keen to make hard sell, Irish times 27/5

'All kinds of everything for a vote' [Dana Rosemary Scallon] Irish times, 28/5

'The modest fianna failer [Seamus Kirk]' Examiner 29/5.

'Wooing voters is simple for our Simon [Coveney]' Irish Independent, 3/6

Politics Trivialised – Who is to blame?

Journalists paid considerable attention to the attempts of politicians and their campaign strategists to win media support and interest through gimmickry and marketing techniques of various kinds. Media criticism of the lightweight nature of campaigning was a recurring theme of the campaign coverage. Below are some examples from commentators:

'Poster Boys and girls for a new generation' by Michael Clifford, Sunday Tribune, 23/5. The subhead reads *'Bertie's election-winning poster grin is nowhere to be seen, and the rest of this year's election posters are a sight to behold'*.

'Politics as soap opera – more boyband audition than election'.... John Drennan, Sunday Independent, 23/5. The subhead was even more caustic *'Royston Brady has captured the essence of modern politics – utter pointlessness'*.

The opening lines of the article begin with *'this is a politician who makes a positive virtue out of the fact that when it comes to Europe, he stands for nothing and knows nothing'*. The article continues in this vein about a number of the other candidates.

'The candidates speak little of Europe, although they complain that this is because the press doesn't ask them about it. Their slogans range from the banal to the vacuous. Yet they almost all come from political parties with published European manifestos. These parties belong in turn to European Parliament groups with very specific positions on the key European issues.'
(Mark Brennock, Irish Times, 4/6)

However, while frequently complaining about media coverage, politicians also collude with the media narrative which frames politics and politicians as objects of disparagement. Thus we have:

‘McKenna attributed her poor [poll] result to the late start of her campaign and to ‘American-style’ campaigning of her opponents whom she accused of indulging in ‘media stunts every five minutes’....(Irish Independent, 24/5)

‘With less than three week left until the June election [Green] Party leader Trevor Sargent said his party will be ‘more focused on the issues than soap opera spats between candidates’. (Irish Independent, 24/5)

‘Ahern and Cowen concede FF facing uphill battle this week’ (Brian Dowling, Irish Independent, 7/6)

Quote from article ‘The opposition have run the most relentlessly negative campaign seen in this country in recent years. Their approach has been cynical and arrogant. They have refused to engage in any real debate and have talked about everything but the issues actually before the people’ he [Brian Cowen] added.

Evidence from other research suggests that the Media do engage in self-reflection not only about the way in which the political system manipulates and manages the media relationship but also about the media’s own handling of spin (Brandenberg and Hayden, 2003:192-194). However, the data from our study does not reveal much of the latter, with the exception of some examples of media self-satire. For example, consider the following comment from Miriam Lord of the Irish Independent in a lead article on the election pages *‘Earnest Trevor does his bit but Bertie still gets the girls’*. The article deals first with the Green Party Policy Document entitled *‘Women’s Participation in the Political Process – Planning for a Culture of Change’*. The article comments *‘There were a lot of empty chairs. And no photographers. That’s what you get when you try to introduce a serious topic into this campaign. It’s all very fine to address the lack of women in top-level Irish politics, and ponder how the absence of a strong female input into the decision-making process is not good for society. But where’s the angle? Now, had Patricia McKenna engineered a long-distance spat between herself and somebody like Dana, there might have been more interest....*

All of the papers included offbeat snippets which were primarily satirical, cynical and, at times, contemptuous in tone. For example, *BrassTacks* in the Examiner consisted of a daily full page side column, the tone of which was set by its subhead: *‘The Examiner’s concocted, contorted and collaborated catch on Elections 2004.’*

A similar tone was struck in the Irish Independent’s *Election Round-Up*. On the 31 May an article by Miriam Lord under the headline *‘You thought it was all about subsidiarity and enlargement and stuff’* begins *‘The election campaigns are past the half-way mark and all over the country people are gathering to debate crucial issues such as EU subsidiarity, qualified majority voting and enlargement. Well not quite.’*

Many other articles engaged in actually trivializing the political process.

For example, *‘It’s a toss-up who’ll win the Cheesy and Chalky show’* by Miriam Lord in the Irish Independent on June 1, while in a light heartedly mocking series of pieces under I Spy again in the Irish Independent (Tabloid version) on June 3 we read *‘Joe Higgins – a sex object? Proof that democracy just doesn’t work.* Other examples include the article in The Sunday World on May 23 where the one page devoted to the election had one article with a headline taking as much space as the text *‘Fruity*

posters pickle voters – Tomato Party go for Green’ . The article was accompanied by a photograph of the Green Party poster highlighting the GM-free food issue. The article begins *‘By now we are becoming well and truly sick of the sight of the nice people running for office in both the European and the local elections ‘* and goes on to ridicule the Green Party poster campaign. The article continues *‘I see what they are trying to do and it’s a nice idea but it makes no sense whatsoever at this level of politics to have these airy-fairy arty farty idealistic and yet utterly naïve images displayed alongside the faces of the other candidates....*

In the Sunday Independent there was a feature lifestyle article on Avril Doyle *‘The country kitchen is a wonderful antidote to the hi-tech lifestyle that is Europe’* While the Sunday Tribune in its property section on May 30 gave us a description of Ivana Bacik’s house.

Populist, exaggerated language with tenuous connections to a story of any substance was liberally used: *‘Bacik not fazed by reality TV bonk or busty Jordan’s bum’*; *‘Mayor vandalised radio station desk’* ; *Royston’s media mumblings make even Bertie sound good .*

What the politicians offered the media

We have seen the kind of trenchant criticism of politicians and candidates offered by the media. But a review of a sample of the press releases issued by the candidates and or the political parties during the period do not support these allegations. On the whole, compared with the performance of the media, the political parties and candidates made a much more creditable effort to address issues. Almost sixty per cent of the primary material conveyed in the 156 press releases analyzed for this study addressed a substantive discussion of either a European or a National issue, while a further four per cent focused on a local issue.

Table 5 Content of Press Releases from Political Candidates

Content	Number Of candidate Press Releases	%
Policy issue		
Europe	45	28.8
National	45	28.8
Local	7	4.5
Call for discussion of issues	4	2.6
Inter-Party/Inter-candidate Rivalry	25	16.0
Personal/party campaigning	18	11.5
Election Process	3	1.9
Other	8	5.1
	155	100

While sixteen per cent were focused on some aspect of inter-party rivalry or political critique less than twelve per cent were concerned to promote a candidate or party. To the credit of the candidates less than eighteen per cent of the press releases could be termed an example of negative campaigning.

Policy issues

The box below provides a sample of some of the headlines addressing policy. More frequently the discussion of relevant policy issues was confined to anything from a few lines buried in the middle of text to a soundbite. Serious coverage by political correspondents was almost entirely about the respective positions of political parties and implications for the political landscape. For example, the Irish Times coverage of the election rarely led with discussion of issues. On the 4 June Mark Brennock wrote an article of roughly one-third of a page in size devoted to an analysis of the issues in the context of the European election. Notably the article leads with a critical comment on the way in which political parties address the issues: *'The candidates speak little of Europe, although they complain that this is because the press doesn't ask them about it. Their slogans range from the banal to the vacuous. Yet they almost all come from political parties with published European manifestos.'*

Parliament may have greater say on farming, fishery issues (Examiner, Ann Cahill European Correspondent)

EU battles to find common immigration policy (Examiner, Ann Cahill, European Correspondent).

Sinn Fein warns of European federal state by (Irish Independent 2/6 Gene McKenna)

SF shoots down the notion of an EU superstate (Irish Independent, 25/5 Alison O'Connor)

Anytime, anywhere, Tanaiste challenges Rabbitte over tax [on different positions on taxation] (Irish Independent. 25/5, Gene McKenna and Brian McDonald)

De Rossa highlights epidemic of domestic violence (Irish Times, 26/5 26/5)
FF block debate over jobs move [decentralisation] lead article on election page
Irish Independent, Gene McKenna]

Bush visit to become major plank in Labour campaign (Irish Independent 3/6, Senan Moloney)

Astoundingly the Sunday papers virtually ignored European political issues in their coverage of the European election campaign. Of the Sunday papers the closest

discussion of serious policy concerns was in the Sunday Business Post, with the focus on pro-business issues. An article carried on May 23 was headlined ‘*Ryan says left-wing parties will drive away big business.*’ On the final Sunday before the election the Sunday Business Post’s Technology Supplement carried a large piece detailing the response (or lack of same) to a survey of candidates on IT issues. The paper asked candidates *to outline their positions on four key regulatory and IT industrial issues that continue to be debated extensively in the European Parliament....Despite these issues being of far more relevance than bin charges, regional hospital beds or traffic congestion, just seven (of almost 50) felt knowledgeable enough to respond. At least one candidate from each party responded, save for Sinn Fein, all of whose candidates declined to respond...Candidates submitted responses on the understanding that longer, more thought –out positions would result in more column space.*

Box at end of article read:

‘Of the almost 50 European Parliamentary candidates in Ireland (including Bairbre de Brun in the North to which this survey was also put), seven responded with positions. Here are the main apologies for declining to comment.

- *“well now, asking them to respond to technical issues like that, you know....”*
- *They’re very busy on the canvass at the moment...”*
- *Spam? That’s broadband, isn’t it ? Yes, we’re looking into that at the moment.”*
- *I’ll be honest with you – I don’t have a clue.”*

One candidate’s press officer attempted to link the IT issues listed with classroom sizes. Another suggested that the issues raised were of less value than regional hospitals (over which the European Parliament has no influence) in the election. One personal assistant said that his candidate would be highlighting bin charges ahead of any IT issue.

Finally, Royston Brady was uncontactable.

This extract is provided in considerable detail as an example of just what can be done in providing politically relevant information. The article tells the reader about the issue, it tells us of candidates views and it tells us which candidates neither have views nor feel any requirement to respond to legitimate media requests– all useful information when we try to make up our minds as to who to vote for.

An example of candidate or party efforts to discuss relevant policy issues seriously is that of the attempt by the Green Party to launch a policy position paper on women in politics. With the exception of Miriam Lord’s satiric piece covering the launch event for the same paper, Alison O’Connor was alone in covering this for the Irish Independent under the headline *Sargent calls on opposition parties to end deals with FF* on May 31. It was, however, two-thirds into the article before we find the reference to the launch of the Green Party’s position paper *‘Planning for a culture of Change – Women’s participation in the Democratic Process’*.

Role of Journalists

The way in which the news is reported and commented on by individual journalists cannot be divorced from the political or commercial interests of the newspaper for

which they write. Questions of career advancement mean that journalists have good reasons to write the stories which they know will be welcomed by their editors. (Horgan, 2001:53). According to Joe Duffy ‘journalists are part of ‘the golden, cosy, smug elite that controls Irish society’. He believes that they are now ‘...one of the most powerful groups – if not the most powerful – in Irish society’. (2002: 101)

Table 6 Journalist coverage of European election

Coverage

More than 5 articles by any one journalist	10
At least one article By any one journalist	72
Multi-authored articles	36
Non-attributed articles	56

A total of seventy two individual journalists had their names on the byline of at least one election coverage article but just ten journalists, across the seven newspapers covered for this research, authored more than five articles. Roughly one-third of the articles were either not credited to a particular journalist or were authored by two or more. The fact that the bulk of press coverage is written by journalists who do not normally focus on political affairs is not unusual, after all the coverage required during an election campaign is intense compared with normal political coverage. But it does mean that they are temporarily stepping into a world in which a variety of political actors have been working full time and probably day and night for the months preceding a campaign. Even the best, most dedicated journalist under such circumstances is at a disadvantage at the beginning of such a campaign.(J Lloyd, 2004; Kovach,1990)

A number of individual print journalists have become ‘players’ or ‘media stars’ in their own right. Their views carry weight and they are sought after as expert commentators in their own newspapers and as part of talk shows, news and political affairs programmes on television and radio. This handful of political correspondents are part of an insider political class. The evidence presented in this paper shows that their focus is predominantly on the ‘game’ of politics, and in particular on Dail politics. Where issues are mentioned it is as soundbites with very little in-depth coverage. Much of the material which would be the stuff of policy coverage outside election time is the preserve of other specialist correspondents. The fragmentation of politics and policy in this way becomes obvious in the run up to an election when the focus is either on implications of events and polls for the political positioning either of parties or individual personalities or both. We have seen how the actions and words of political actors are treated as moves in the game rather than dissected to reveal how these actions/ words will impact on real issues facing real people in real time.

What this means in practice is that there is a disconnection between what interests journalists and politicians and what concerns the voter.

As Fawcett and Wilson (2004: Section 6.2) point out, the media can take their cue in election coverage entirely from the political class or they can try to ascertain what are the major issues for the electorate and seek to provide them with information on the approach of the different parties and candidates to these. There is evidence that when citizens have a chance to pose questions to politicians, they rarely ask about the game of politics: instead they want to know how the reality of politics will affect them (Fallow, 2001:50). When journalists ask questions only their fellow political professionals care about, Joe or Josephine Public is left without the necessary information on the real issues which would enable rational choices between parties and candidates.

Treatment of individual candidates/parties

As we have seen, this election was one in which the press treated candidates almost entirely as personalities, usually portrayed as sporting protagonists – with some leaning to satire and treatment of individuals as buffoons or at least objects of amusement. Against this background it is valuable to examine how the different parties and individuals were treated.

Influence of party and constituency

The coverage of the 2004 European election was characterised by a clear distinction between what were deemed the ‘main’ and the ‘smaller’ parties and between the Dublin, and to a lesser extent the East constituency, and the South and North West constituencies. (See Table 7 below).

Regardless of a candidates’ membership of a particular political party or the constituency in which the party candidate was standing, some individual candidates attracted more attention than others. Despite almost universal expressions of contempt by journalists, Royston Brady was accorded the highest coverage. However, this example also offers a telling indicator of the way in which media affect cannot be fully controlled. Despite the extent of media coverage and the general rule of thumb that there is no such thing as bad news, Royston Brady was not elected and polled very badly.

Six other candidates were also frequently covered. These six were MaryLou MacDonald, Ivana Bacik, Proinsias de Rossa, Patricia McKenna, Mairead McGuinness and Avril Doyle – five of whom are women and four of whom were subsequently elected. A further five party candidates had in excess of 30 references – four of these were the FF candidates in Munster and North West.

Coverage of Independents

With two-thirds of the media coverage going to Party candidates and a further one-fifth providing coverage of all candidates, including Party candidates, there was little space dedicated to independents, and most of this went to the high-profile independents. Such was the frustration felt by the less well-known independents that, four days before polling day, four of them resorted to staging a protest in Dublin to complain about what they described as a "complete lack of publicity" in the national media. This protest was covered by the Irish Times in a small article.

Table 7 : Coverage of Party Candidates by Constituency

Name	Mentioned	Some detail	Primarily about	Total	
	Number	Number	Number	Number	%
Dublin					
Brady (FF)	41	20	18	79	9.3
Ryan (FF)	30	26	10	66	7.8
MacDonald (SF)	35	13	8	56	6.6
Bacik (L)	34	10	7	51	6.0
DeRossa (L)	34	9	7	50	5.8
McKenna (G)	31	11	6	48	5.6
Mitchell (FG)	27	5	5	37	4.35
Higgins (S)	17	4	2	23	2.71
East					
McGuinness (FG)	31	7	7	45	5.29
Doyle (fg)	31	6	8	45	5.29
Cassells (L)	26	4	2	32	3.77
Alyward (ff)	21	1	-	22	2.59
Kirke (ff)	19	2	2	23	2.70
Whyte (G)	13	3	1	17	2.00
Dwyer (SF)	11	1	0	12	1.4
Munster					
Collins (FF)	22	8	7	37	4.35
Crowley(FF)	16	7	8	31	3.65
Coveney (FG)	20	2	2	24	2.82
Ryan (L)	14	2	1	17	2.00
Cullinane(SF)	10	-	-	10	1.18
OLeary 5		-	-	5	0.59
Nth. West					
Doherty (SF)	16	4	2	22	2.59
Higgins f(FG)	17	1	-	18	2.12
MacDaid (ff)	19	10	2	31	3.65
ONeachtain (ff)	21	8	5	34	4.00
Quinn (FG)	9	1	2	12	1.41
Baxter (L)	2	1	-	3	0.4
				850	100

Table 8: Relative coverage of Party and independents Candidates

Ref to Candidates	Number Of articles	%
Party and/or Party candidate	190	66
Mixture of Party and Independent candidates	64	22.2
Independent candidates only	17	5.9
No candidate	17	5.9
	288	100

Good to be a woman

Women candidates received more than their share of coverage when account is taken of the disparity between numbers of male and female candidates (seventy-three percent of candidates were men). Excluding coverage referring to both male and female candidates, there was an average of four articles per woman candidate compared to less than three on average for men. These proportions are reflected in the election results where five of the thirteen successful candidates were women, a forty-two percent success rate compared to twenty-five percent for men. This may be because the majority of female candidates were running on a party ticket and/or were high profile candidates, and as we have seen party candidates received significantly more media coverage than independents. Nonetheless, this finding is contrary to the position found in other elections (either national/local elections in the Republic, the recent NI assembly election etc) and since it is unlikely that there has been a sudden feminization of politics in Ireland we can only speculate on what has brought it about on this occasion. There certainly seems to be a link between the nomination of women to winnable seats – both as high-profile independents and by the political parties, subsequent extensive coverage by the media of these candidates and the unusually high success rates. It is also worth a comment that women candidates were more likely than male candidates to be the subject of articles dealing with policy issues. Forty-four per cent of articles in which only female candidates were referred to dealt with a policy issue compared with just twenty-eight percent in which only male candidates were referred to. Does the greater level of coverage and the relative success of women candidates in the election mean that both media and voters were responding to a higher standard of political practice and commitment to issues among the female candidates? Certainly, the fact that the new female candidates prospered, both during the campaign and when the votes were counted, may prompt all the parties towards a better gender balance of candidates in future elections.

But gender balance in terms of nomination is unlikely to be sufficient. From the earlier discussion of the dominant narratives of the campaign coverage there was also a clear gender disparity in relation to the ‘masculinist language of electoral

journalism' (Wilson and Fawcett, 2004). The metaphor was the horserace or the battlefield, suggesting that there is some way to go on this question.

Table 9. Gender of candidates referred to in articles

Gender Coverage	Number Of articles	% percentage
Both male and female	127	44.1
Male	93	32.3
Female	50	17.4
Neither	18	6.3
	288	100

Conclusion

This research makes clear that the Irish media take elections seriously in the sense of devoting considerable coverage to them, but challenges the assumption that they perform an important role in supporting the functioning of democracy. The evidence from our study bears out national and international trends in coverage of political elections: increasingly the media does not perform the serious task of acting as public educators on our political choices. Instead, in the 2004 European election, the print media's focus was primarily on personalities. In the process the election campaign was trivialised and the functioning of democracy itself damaged.

It is also clear that in the blame game for this state of affairs, the considerable criticism by journalists of those politicians who focus on gimmickry and marketing techniques of various kinds, is justified. However, many politicians make considerable effort to raise serious issues but to little or no avail. It is also true that given the considerable and increasing power of the media to control the dominant narratives together with the politicians' dependence on media for access to the public, the balance of power and therefore of responsibility rests with the media. The lack of serious public discussion of the media's role in creating and sustaining this situation acts to further suppress the necessary debate about the relationship between the media, the political class and democracy and raises serious questions as to how the citizen is in fact supposed to inform him or herself. Regardless of where blame rests this minimal discussion of issues is something which should concern us as a real diminution of our capacity as citizens to participate in political decision-taking.

¹ The research for this paper was undertaken by a team comprising Paula Clancy, Teresa Brannick, Angela Flanagan, Molly Curran and Andrew Dobos.

It consists of a content analysis (both quantitative and qualitative) of press coverage of the European election which took place on 11 June, 2004, and of a selection of campaign materials issued by political parties and candidates during this period. The analysis was confined to the European Election although Local Elections and the Citizenship Referendum were held at the same time. It covers the three week period from the 23 May up to and including election day 11 June. The three daily broadsheets, Irish Independent, Irish Times and Examiner were covered. For reasons of resources the daily tabloids were excluded. The analysis also covered three of the broadsheet Sunday papers: Independent, Tribune, Business Post and the tabloid News of the World. In all this extends to seventy per cent of newspaper readers.

A sample of press releases issued by the candidates from the political parties were also analysed.

² The press in Ireland consists of four national dailies and two national evening newspapers, five national Sunday newspapers. A further 50 or so regional and twelve local newspapers as well as approximately thirty-two, mainly urban-based free (advertising financed) newspapers are published on a weekly basis. The only Irish tabloid newspapers are the Ireland on Sunday, Sunday World and The Star, an Irish edition of the British Daily Star.

³ Figures for social class composition of readership in the 2003/2004 Joint National Readership Survey conducted by Lansdowne Market Research and made available by National Newspapers of Ireland (NNI) show that the readership for the three daily broadsheets is overwhelmingly drawn from the uppermiddle and middle classes.

⁴ A number of reviews were conducted by the Irish Government and the Irish Competition Authority.

⁵ In almost two-thirds of cases (60.1%) articles were accompanied by a photograph. In one third (36.5%) it was text only while a total of nine pieces (3.1%) were photographs only, unaccompanied by text.

⁶ Brasstacks in the Examiner, Briefs in the Irish Times and Election Round up in the Irish Independent.

⁷ European elections have been classified as second-order elections, a concept developed by Reiff and Schmitt (Reiff, 1997). The conceptual difference between first-order elections and second-order is that the former are assumed to 'offer voters a critical choice of who should govern the country' while the latter are 'less important'. Taken from Barbara Schipfer 'The European Parliament in Political Science, 12/12/1997, <http://www.duke.edu/~bs5/Bso3.html>

⁸ The first, second and third topic was coded separately for each article. The topic which the coder judged the article content was primarily about was coded as first topic, the second was the next most important topic.

⁹ A typical example was the coverage in the Sunday Tribune on the 23 May. Three large articles across two pages – with liberal use of major banner headlines and lots of campaign photos. Articles are by Michael Clifford, Stephen Collins and Ann-Marie Hourihane and all three deal with the election entirely in the context of the campaign contests. The main election article in the Sunday Tribune on the 30 May was by Stephen Collins, its political editor. The headline readSub head: *Elections are a real test of whether there will be a FF-led govt in the future*. The article was accompanied by a photograph of Enda Kenny and the text was a discussion of electoral positioning of parties and likely alliances.

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