***Framing the HSE: A Print Media Analysis of the Irish Health Service Executive and its Employees.***

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# Framing the HSE: A Print Media Analysis of the Irish Health Service Executive and its Employees.

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Adopting a Frame Analysis approach, this research examines the representation of the Irish Health Service Executive (HSE) and its employees in the Irish flagship daily newspaper, the Irish Independent. It finds that coverage of the HSE is constructed in a predominantly episodic and negative manner, characterised by sensationalist headlines and inflammatory content. Moreover, this research indicates that the 'framing' of the HSE is reflective of the editorial ethos of the Independent News and Media Group.

**Introduction**

The Irish Health Service Executive (HSE) was established in 2005 under the auspices of the Department of Health and Children. The establishment of the HSE brought with it the centralisation of the former regional health structures in Ireland. Up until 2005 these regional bodies were each responsible for their own finances, administration and staffing etc (Curristine 2008). As a result of this amalgamation, the HSE is now the single body responsible for the delivery of Ireland's health care needs. It is Ireland's largest public sector organisation, employing approximately 100,000 people and expends an annual budget of €13 billion (HSE National Service Plan 2012).

In tandem with this, the Irish economy experienced severe instability as a result of a global recession. In response to the collapse of Ireland's public finances in 2009, the Irish government established a review board called the 'Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes' to identify where savings in public expenditure could be achieved. The report which ensued, (SGPSNEP 2009) coupled with the terms of the EU/IMF bailout agreement in 2010, advocated reform of the public service by substantially reducing employment numbers and the public sector pay-bill. The HSE being the largest entity within the public sector was a primary target for these cut-backs.

Since the publication of the SGPSNEP report, changes to the public service have been covered extensively in the Irish media. However, concerns were raised that the print media coverage of the public sector was becoming unduly negative. The Independent News and Media Group (INMG) was identified as the main perpetrator of what was deemed by two public sector unions, IMPACT and PSEU, to be inflammatory content that sought to both vilify public servants and single them out as one of the principal causes of Ireland's economic collapse. This belief existed to the extent that both IMPACT (2009) and PSEU (2010) tabled motions to encourage their members to refrain from purchasing publications owned by the Independent News and Media Group. With these issues in mind, a media frame analysis approach was adopted in this study to examine print media coverage of the HSE and its public sector employees in the broadsheet newspaper, the Irish Independent over a six month time period from December 2010 to June 2011. As Ireland held a general election on February 25th 2011, the analysis sought to capture the debates surrounding the Irish health service both in the period before its announcement in January and in the aftermath of this election.

**Framing Theory**

The concept of frames and framing theory is largely credited to the work of Goffman (1974). From this perspective, frames at their most basic level illustrate "how people rely on expectations to make sense of their everyday social experience" (Reese 2001, p.7). In keeping with this view, they are "schemata of interpretation" that permit us "to locate, perceive, identify and label occurrences or life experiences" (Goffman 1974, p.21). A sociological approach to frames and their uses in media and communication research has been used to convey the many ways subjects are both constructed and how meaning is derived. Kitzinger (2007, p.134) outlines that framing refers to ways in which we make sense of reality, how we categorize events in particular ways, by both "paying attention to some aspects rather than others, and deciding what an experience or event means and how it came about". As Lippmann (2010, p.20) explains, the world we live in is a highly complex place and as a result "we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage it".

A story is framed by what Entman (1993) refers to as a process of selection and salience, whereby an issue is chosen, a specific problem is outlined, a moral evaluation of that problem is discussed and a solution is provided. Entman's definition places considerable weight on the role of the 'communicator' in the construction of meaning. Frames are a vital tool in the journalist's repertoire for condensing complex information into a more accessible and understandable package for the audience. The very nature of both selecting and giving credence to some issues over others is indicative of the fact that the journalist is not simply a conduit that relays information, but instead plays an active role in guiding and shaping our understanding of the social world (Entman 2003; Kitzinger 2007). Consequently, frames demonstrate the many ways a communicating text can define a situation and can shape the boundaries of a

debate through the processes of selection and exclusion. In the hands of the powerful, frames can be used to perpetuate the status quo and to construct a social order based on the ideas of a few rather than the views of many. Therefore, the importance of undertaking a frame analysis is to expose those issues that are taken for granted, the ideas that are deemed to be common sense and the power structures in society that often seem inevitable.

**Theoretical Perspective**

This research draws upon Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, which posits that leading media organisations are naturally intertwined with other institutions through ownership and corporate management structures. In essence it is a symbiotic relationship that limits their capacity to remain independent of other dominant institutions in society. In effect the model asserts that the influences of the powerful seek to 'filter' what we read in our newspapers, in turn marginalising voices of dissention while simultaneously providing access to governments and large business corporations to disseminate their views to the wider public.

The model outlines five filters which influence the news: The size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms; Advertising as the predominant source of income for the mass media; The reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and 'experts' funded and approved by these sources and agents of power; 'Flak' as a means of disciplining the media; and 'Anticommunism' as a national religion and control mechanism. In turn these elements are interconnected and supportive of one another. As news passes through each filter it leaves a purified 'fit to print' version of the news (Herman and Chomsky 1988, p.2). Although the 'anticommunism' filter illustrates that this model was designed with the US in mind, this model is still applicable to the Irish media-scape in a

multitude of ways. With regards to the first two filters, there have been growing concerns, but particularly in the Irish print media sector, that increasing concentration coupled with a growing dependency on advertising (Tzersis 2007) has led to a narrowing in the range of discourses available to the Irish public. The extensive scope of the Independent News and Media group is arguably a quintessential example of this.

The INMG is currently the dominant actor in the Irish newspaper industry and its ascendancy in the Irish print media market has raised concerns about the impact this may have on the plurality of editorial content available to the Irish public. This issue is demonstrated by the fact that roughly eighty per cent of newspapers sold in Ireland are either fully or partially owned by the INMG (AGMM 2008, p.149). Moreover, it would be somewhat imprudent to suggest that the content produced within this environment would remain ignorant of the views of its owners or indeed, its acquired assets elsewhere. This, as McQuig (1995, p.12) argues, would be "equivalent to assuming that, should the entire media be owned by, say, labour unions, women's groups or social workers, this would have no impact on the editorial content" of a newspaper.

**Methodology**

As an approach, framing theory is located within a paradigm that views news as a socially constructed version of reality and draws attention to the idea that the processes of both creating and interpreting news discourses are far from neutral (Gamson et al. 1992; Lippmann 2010, p.317).

In order to analyse how frames operate, Reese (2001) suggests that one must view frames as "organising principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world",

(Reese 2001, p.11). Typically frames serve to organise on both a cognitive and cultural level. Cognitive frames persuade us to perceive and think about social issues in a particular way through the different ways a text can be presented. Frames also operate through symbolic devices which can be overt or embedded within a text. These devices consist of metaphors, myths, narratives, catchphrases, lexical choices or visual images, and their function is to increase the salience of a topic (Reese 2001; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Entman 1993). In this way frames operate on a cultural level. As Reese (2001, pp.13-18) indicates, they "distil and call up a larger world of meaning", a world, however, that comes with its own set of "strongly rooted assumptions and rules" that are both naturalised and resilient. Indeed this resiliency is a crucial element of framing analysis. The very purpose of a frame analysis is to unveil important patterns in news discourses that have persisted over time. Therefore, by conducting a frame analysis we are encouraged "to question what factors account for one frame's persistence over another" (Reese 2001, p.16). As a result, one must move beyond the manifest content and look beneath the surface of the text, focusing on "the generating principle that produced one way of framing a story, but that is at work in many others as well" (Reese 2001, p.7). In doing so, we are forced to both acknowledge the plethora of competing values and norms in existence in the current media-scape, and to question whose values are being included and therefore legitimised, or indeed, excluded and thus deemed irrelevant (Reese 2001).

In an attempt to understand these issues in the context of the HSE, this research sought to detect the seminal frames surrounding this organisation. Consequently, it examined how the Irish Independent has explained the HSE and its employees, what are the most common frames and framing devices utilised by media professionals in portraying this issue, who are the predominant voices, and are these voices system maintaining or system

challenging? Finally, this research assesses whether these frames are ideologically driven.

## Findings

Four frames were identified in the research and these are now discussed in turn.

## Inefficient, Overpaid and Privileged

This frame is comprised of fifty three articles which to varying degrees portray the HSE as inefficient. Within this discourse twenty five of the articles portray the HSE's employees as inefficient, overpaid and privileged. Simultaneously these ideas are consistently linked with the notion of both healthcare reform and public sector reform more generally. Within this discourse the HSE is consistently singled out as an organisation that needs to radically change its operations and as an area where cut-backs in staff numbers and pay bill savings must be achieved.

The overarching emphasis is that "crucial changes have yet to be made" (Irish Independent 29/04/2011) and underlines the idea that the process of reform is on-going. As a result the cut-backs within the HSE must continue. After all, "the shedding of 8000 staff, mostly through natural wastage is hardly huge given that it employs over 100,000" (Irish Independent 07/02/2011). The construction of HSE staff but more specifically HSE senior executives and consultant doctors as overpaid, inefficient and privileged provides the interpretive framework needed to rationalise this agenda. Headlines such as the ones outlined below are commonplace throughout this coverage.

> "*Five HSE staff got €200,000 in redundancy pay off
> deals*"(Irish Independent 15/03/2011).

> "*Ex-HSE chief got €50,000 in holiday pay*" (Irish Independent 15/06/2011).

"The very generous pay and conditions of the medical profession and the comparative luxury (and managerial impossibility) of the consultants contract", (Irish Independent 02/05/2011) is singled out and criticised in eleven articles. Consultants are commonly depicted as a group of greedy overpaid HSE employees who receive "generous additions to their salary", and who frequently 'top up' their public pay packets with private patient fees in excess of €250,000. Yet despite this they seemingly continue to demand "to be allowed treat their more lucrative patients" (Irish Independent 02/02/2011) in private hospitals leaving those who cannot afford care to languish on public waiting lists.

Criticisms of excessive bureaucracy and inefficiency were made salient throughout expert opinion and editorial articles which when consistently juxtaposed against "the cost of baroque management structures in the HSE", (Irish Independent 29/04/2011) serves to reinforce the argument that change is needed. This inefficiency has happened because "trade union pressure has ensured that many nurses and Gardaí perform routine clerical jobs that could and should be performed by clerical staff" (Irish Independent 09/02/2011). Another article stated that "Reilly has taken out the HSE's brain" but left behind

> "*the vast bureaucratic carcass of the leviathan beached somewhere in the department… Dr Reilly must feel like Frankenstein, confronted by the monster which, in a previous incarnation he helped to produce*" (Irish Independent 02/05/2011).

As Hertog and McLeod (2001) outline, myths and metaphors are some of the most effective framing devices, capable of conjuring up excess meaning and activating a range of culturally related ideas. In this case, the leviathan (i.e. a mythical biblical sea monster) and Frankenstein act on a symbolic level to

suggest that the administrative elements of the HSE are dangerously out of control, inefficient and unmanageable. Entman (1993) demonstrates that frames typically serve four functions i.e. to outline the problem, to provide a causal and moral evaluation of the issue and finally to offer a remedy. The problem as portrayed in this frame is evident, the HSE with its supposed "reputation for bonuses and bureaucracy" (Irish Independent 07/02/2011) is preventing free healthcare for all and on a broader level is stifling economic recovery. The responsibility is attributed to the overpaid, inefficient and privileged HSE employees. The moral justification provided is that everyone should have access to free care. The solution is clear. The "embattled Health Minister" (Irish Independent 29/04/2011) must slay the monster and "abolish the HSE" (Irish Independent 07/02/2011).

The strategy employed in the 'overpaid, inefficient and privileged' frame seeks to condense a complex issue into a unified graspable whole and encourages a one dimensional viewpoint. In line with Iyengar's (1991) view of episodic framing, this frame reduces the debate surrounding both healthcare and economic reform to the need to curtail HSE spending. While it simultaneously focuses the debate by placing emphasis on the issue of lavish HSE pay packets and inefficiency as a means to vindicate this idea. This, as Iyengar (2005, p.5) explains is a common feature of the emphasis frame which entails making salient "a particular subset of potentially relevant considerations". As they often appear universal and natural they can seem to be the only means of understanding available. Thus they can encourage people to attribute causes and solutions that 'naturally' fit with the prescribed problem.

Ideologically, this frame seeks a consensus by consistently reiterating the idea that if *'they'* were not paid as much, *'we'* would all have free GP care and

economically the country could recover. Within the twenty five articles that seek to argue for HSE reform all make reference to either direct quotes from government sources or make detailed reference to government plans for reform, it would seem that the agenda of pay and job cuts within the HSE rests with the Irish government. However, Herman and Chomsky (1988, p.18) indicate in their third filter that the reliance of the media on information supplied by the government, large businesses, and experts, is not uncommon. It is because of this reliance, that the media are drawn into a cooperative relationship with powerful sources because of both an economic need and reciprocity of interest. As a result, they tend to reiterate the official line, dominate the news and thus marginalise opposing viewpoints.

**The Incompetent HSE and HSE Worker**

The 'inefficient, overpaid and privileged' frame condenses the debate surrounding the HSE to that of the need for reform. It would seem that if one was left in any doubt of that need, the following two frames which construct the HSE and its staff as both incompetent and negligent would remove any uncertainty. McGaughan and Garrett (2011) and Garrett (2009) highlight that public sector social workers have typically been the centre of unremitting negative media accounts which tend to focus on 'scandals' into the alleged incompetence of practitioners in protecting children from abuse. In turn these representations often disregard any of the wider systemic issues within the social work system. Similarly, this frame portrays the HSE and its staff as incompetent and inadequately trained. The episodic nature of the coverage is evident given that seventeen of twenty one articles refer to specific health care 'scandals'. The uses of tabloid style sensationalist headlines are also a common feature within this frame.

> "*Mothers left in dark over misdiagnosis blunders*" (Irish Independent 20/04/2011).

*"Baby blunder doctors 'still not fully trained' Errors in 16 of 19 wards Mother tells of scan fears"* (Irish Independent 19/04/2011).

Additionally, the use of escalating devices such as 'blunder', 'scandal', 'debacle', 'frightening' and 'danger' are examples of terms which Entman (2003, p.417) outlines have considerable cultural resonance. These terms are particularly salient, "understandable, memorable and emotionally charged". They add drama to an event and, when used frequently, they have the ability to encourage either support for opposition to the parties involved. It is widely accepted that the final filter of the propaganda model is now indicative of an ideological belief in the free market. Moreover, Herman and Chomsky (1988) outline that this filter also highlights, how the media can perpetuate fear. As an ideological control mechanism, fear can serve to legitimate the social and political policies of the powerful (Mullen 2009). Discourses of fear permeated throughout the four frames generated from this research.

It was beyond the remit of this research to determine or judge the skill levels of the HSE staff. The purpose of this project was to assess how they are constructed in the Irish Independent newspaper. However, given that only four articles within the sample collected made any positive reference towards HSE staff, coupled with the use of sensationalist headlines and escalating devices, it does seem that this coverage borders on the alarmist rather than being objective and balanced.

**Victims of HSE Negligence**

Propp's analysis of the narrative structure of the fairy tale illustrated that stories often work through the creation of binary oppositions such as danger or safety, good and evil or villain versus victim (Propp 1968; Seale 2003). Van Gorp

(2005; 2010) demonstrates that media frames operate in a similar manner. The portrayal of the HSE suggests that the individual, who enters hospital for treatment, rather than being a patient, resembles more that of a victim who is at the mercy of the villainous HSE and its employees. This frame constitutes seventeen articles all of which appeared in the national news section of the paper. The prominent features of this frame were its emotive elements coupled with its striking headlines.

> "*I would give back EUR1.35m to watch Luke kick a football*" (Irish Independent 26/01/2011).

> "*Man's heartbreak at Bride's brain damage after surgery*" (Irish Independent 07/05/2011).

Seale (2004, p.70) argues that media representations of "villainy is often best revealed by contrasts with the purity or innocence of victims". Similarly, contrast was a commonly employed framing device used to illustrate how victims of HSE negligence were once "bubbly and vivacious" but are "now in need of almost round the clock care" (Irish Independent 07/05/2011). Nevertheless, all of these stories combined to portray the HSE and staff as "grossly inept in their treatment of patients" (Irish Independent 28/05/2011). However, as Fowler (1991) illustrates the news that we consume is carefully constructed according to an established set of criteria of 'newsworthiness'. A fundamental aspect of what determines the newsworthiness of a story is negativity and with regards to this frame it would seem that the current representation of the HSE as negligent, favours the old adage of 'if it bleeds it leads'. However, despite its melodramatic nature, the stories which constitute this frame are based on verifiable facts and as a result it could also be argued that it would be equally unjust of the media not to be forthright in its reporting of these cases of medical malpractice.

**The Overstretched and Under Resourced HSE Doctor and Nurse**

Haynes et al.'s (2005) frame analysis of print media coverage of immigrants revealed five negative frames which sought to 'other' immigrants by portraying them as a threat to the Irish population. Conversely their research also found three positive frames which sought to legitimise the presence of immigrants in Ireland. In this way their analysis reminds us that the media can act as a vehicle for change and can promote inclusion by challenging stereotypical social discourses. Although outnumbered in terms of the previous three negative frames outlined, this analysis identified a fourth frame which seeks to portray HSE doctors and nurses as overstretched and under pressure due to cut-backs in staff numbers. To a degree this frame design offers a more nuanced understanding of the problems within the health service and frequently makes salient the dangerous ramifications of these cut-backs for patient care. Elements of this frame appeared in twenty seven articles and in general this coverage is exemplified by headlines such as

> "*A & E's risk closure over water crisis and lack of staff*"
> (Irish Independent 04/01/2011).

> "*It's just not good enough - not in this day and age*" (Irish Independent 06/01/2011).

In comparison to the 'inefficient, overpaid and privileged' frame, this frame takes a more sympathetic approach towards HSE staff but particularly towards public health nurses who are consistently identified as the staff that are being overloaded with work as a result of cut-backs. This frame assigns responsibility for this problem to the Irish government moratorium on the recruitment of public sector staff within the HSE and in certain cases is critical of both the government and the HSE. The predominant voices permeating throughout this frame are those of hospital staff, patients and medical unions. In contrast, political input into this frame is scarce and in the event it does feature it follows

the political mantra put forward in the 'inefficient, overpaid and privileged' frame. However, to what extent this frame is sufficient enough to counter the more prevalent discourses of inefficiency, incompetency and negligence is questionable both in terms of its numerical disadvantage and also in terms of its depth.

**Conclusions**

This research indicates that the Irish Health Service Executive and its employees are 'framed' in the Irish Independent newspaper in a predominantly negative and episodic manner. It would appear from this analysis that the representation of the HSE is critically intertwined with a political agenda of reform, one which the Irish Independent seems, in the main, content to perpetuate. However, as Fowler (1991) illustrates, the media tend to seek an ideological consensus with government or big business elites out of an economic necessity and a natural alignment of interests rather than an inability to challenge these organisations. Lynch (2011, p.1) demonstrates that in Ireland "we have no newspaper that you could pick up and say this is different from the Fianna Fail and Fine Gael consensus - not a single paper has a consistently contrary view". This in itself is reflected in the episodic construction of the HSE, which this research argues, is indicative of an ideological standpoint that is more interested in maintaining the *status quo*, and one that is designed to deflect attention away from the system, rather than to challenge it. This research would further argue that this characteristic is reflected in the ethos of the INMG, Ireland's leading newspaper publisher.

This research utilised Herman and Chomsky's 'propaganda model' to explain the findings generated from this research. In doing so, it revealed that with regard to the representation of the HSE, the Irish Independent and in a broader sense, the INMG has not only sought to bolster a neoliberal and government

agenda, but it has also sought to propagate fear. In this way, it appears that the coverage circulated by the INMG is ideologically driven. Nevertheless, who the beneficiaries of this fear are, is debatable. Perhaps they are the health insurance companies who potentially profit on people's insecurities. Perhaps they are the advocates of for profit care or maybe they are the property developer who gained roughly €40 million in tax reliefs for every €100 million spent on the construction of private hospitals (ICTU 2007, p.14). Regardless of the answer, the frames revealed in this study are particularly worrying. While the audience has agency when engaging with these discourses, they can, however, only make a selection on the basis of what is offered by the media. Given the INMG's dominance in the Irish print media sector, serious questions remain surrounding the diversity of ideas available in the current Irish print media-scape, ideas which are vital in sustaining a democracy. At the very least these issues strongly indicate a need for further research into the operations and motivations of the Irish media.

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