

Hybrid Media and Movements: The Irish Water Movement, Press Coverage, and Social Media

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In 2010, as part of the Troika intervention into Ireland, the then government agreed to the imposition of domestic water charges and the creation of a centralized water company. The imposition of charges for domestic water, which was until then universally available, met spontaneous militant action, including mass protests and the blockading of districts to prevent meter installation. The campaigns were quickly dubbed “violent” and accused of being “infiltrated” by “dissidents” and other “sinister” elements, while minor acts of disobedience, such as pickets and sit-down protests, were recast as violent. In response, water activists used social media networks to disseminate opposition and as a critical media literacy tool. This article offers a comparative analysis of legacy print media and activist-driven social media coverage of a politically important court case involving water activists as an example of how the hybrid media system operates in a political conflict.

Keywords: social media, activism, Ireland, water, Facebook

The relationship between state and media has been of interest to scholars for many decades. Since the 1960s, the construct of a “fourth estate” watching over the government for the public has been under severe strain (McNair, 2009). More critical accounts see the media as part and parcel of the capitalist system, sometimes keeping check on excesses of individual ministers, businesses, and even governments, but when push comes to shove, the media tend to act as a bulwark to protect the system (Miliband, 1969). Moreover, the continued processes of media integration and monopolization have seen smaller news companies taken over by large conglomerates, and journalists themselves facing a far more precarious existence alongside a decline in working conditions (Cohen, 2016). This has led to a huge increase in atypical and freelance contracts while more expensive investigative journalism is in decline. Meanwhile, the further concentration

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Date submitted: 2018-02-26

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of media, including its integration with wider industry, arguably acts to narrow critical discourses (Hayes & Silke, 2019).

Ireland is no exception to these structural changes, with large media conglomerates strengthening their grip—the most notable being the O’Brien-controlled Independent News and Media (INM) newspaper stable and his Communicorp radio station group. The links between O’Brien’s business interests and the Fine Gael Party are well documented (Moriarty Tribunal, 2011), as is the controversy over O’Brien’s acquisition of Siteserv and its winning of major Irish Water contracts (see details to follow). Meanwhile, the advent of both the Internet and social media has offered an alternative to legacy media and has allowed a way for movements, both progressive and reactionary, to bypass traditional gatekeepers and reach audiences in a more direct fashion—albeit via channels also controlled by their own logics of commodity production and political economy. Ireland was no exception, with its very quick growth in and mass use of social media, primarily Facebook (Ipsos MRBI, 2017).

The business logic of media corporations may feed into their coverage of political disagreement and protest. Since at least the 1960s, media scholars have investigated the coverage of protest. Early studies focusing on the Vietnam movement noted how journalists tended to look for (and often found) violence at protests. The outcome had obvious political consequences: It cast protesters as violent discontents acting merely as a mob that had to be controlled by police and the wider establishment to protect society (Gitlin, 2003). In the case of Irish Water, a politicized and partisan journalism appears to have lost much of its credibility. In this article, we argue that social media can not only function as tools to disseminate subaltern views, but also may encourage users to have a more critical look at mainstream media. This article is primarily interested in three questions; First, how did the legacy print media cover the Jobstown Trial and the Irish Water movement associated with it? Second, how did activists use Facebook during the trial? And, finally, how did legacy and online activist media interact with each other?

We begin by providing a brief description of the issue around water commodification in Ireland and the spontaneous, noncentralized nature of the protest movement that grew from its implementation. We focus on a key event: the coverage of a trial that developed from a sit-down protest in a working-class district on the outskirts of Dublin, where a government minister, Joan Burton, was blockaded by protesters for several hours. The protesters were arrested and accused of “false imprisonment” (kidnapping) and faced a potential of life imprisonment. Activists maintained that this was a political trial aimed at discouraging future militant protest. In providing a theoretical backdrop to this study, we review some of the more salient literature on the relationship between movements and the mainstream as well as social media, with specific reference to the treatment of the water movement in the Irish media. After discussing our methodology, we go on to discuss our data. Finally, we discuss how activists are bypassing traditional media by distributing news via social media networks while at the same time using such networks as an organizing tool and as a method for critical media literacy.

Background: The Irish Water Movement

In 2010, as part of the bailout agreement between the Irish government and the “Troika” (European Union/European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund), a section included within its memorandum

of understanding the introduction of household water charges to begin by the end of the bailout program (Hearne, 2015a). Many people, most notably political activists from leftist and community groups, considered this to be yet another austerity measure implemented post-2008. Included in the memorandum was the establishment of a new public utility. In the spring of 2012, the contract was awarded to Bord Gáis Éireann (Irish Gas Board), of which Irish Water, the new utility, would become a subsidiary. The charges were to be introduced in 2014 with water meters installed that year. On December 19, 2013, The Water Charges (No. 2) Bill was rushed through all stages of the parliament to implement water charges from January 1, 2014 (Hearne, 2015a).

A major issue around Irish Water was that of privatization. While this was often denied by the government (McDonnell, 2016), a generalized suspicion existed that the real agenda at stake was not environmental or an issue of sustainable economics, but rather an exercise in using the crisis as an opportunity to both commodify and privatize the service. As early as 2011, an “inaugural water metering summit” was held in the Croke Park Conference Centre involving private companies, which was picketed by Anti-Water Charge protesters (Flood, 2011). Moreover, the parent company of Irish Water, An Bord Gáis, was itself rebranded Ervia and privatized in 2014 with little or no media comment (Graham & Silke, 2017).

A major issue around the suspected privatization of Irish Water involved a meter installation contractor named Siteserv. The company was bought in 2012 by tax exile Denis O’Brien, at the time Ireland’s most important private media actor. As part of the deal, the state-owned Irish Bank Resolution Corporation—formerly Anglo Irish Bank—wrote off €110 million of the Siteserv €150 million debt (Finn, 2015). The issue of the terms of the deal and the awarding of meter installation contracts has remained controversial throughout the crisis.

O’Brien is of interest to communication scholars because at the time, he had controlling interests (29.9%) in Ireland’s major print media company INM and continues to own Ireland’s largest privately owned radio company, Communicorp. Activists and others saw a major conflict of interest in the coverage of water charges by news outlets owned and controlled by O’Brien. There are numerous cases of attempts by O’Brien to influence media coverage via legal means (suing for defamation; Silke, 2015), which is said to have had a “chilling effect” on journalism in Ireland (Gallagher & Booth, 2016).

It is against this backdrop that in September 2014, the broad umbrella group Right2Water was established by more left-leaning trade unions, including Unite, Mandate, the Communications Workers’ Union, the Civil and Public Service Union (CPSU), and the Operative Plasterers and Allied Trades Society of Ireland (OPATSI), as well as the left parties: Sinn Fein, The Workers’ Party, People Before Profit, and the Anti Austerity Alliance (Hearne, 2015a). It is worth emphasizing that this was a broad coalition that managed to act without a great level of organization or agreement. While the public strategy of the Right2Water was to remain strictly within legal frameworks, further left parties actively promoted a tactic of non-payment (Adshead, 2017). The trade unions, possibly for legal reasons, did not publicly support or oppose the tactic, while Sinn Fein was opposed to it (O’Connell, 2014).

It became obvious that the water charge movement was going to be a mass campaign after the first Right2Water mass mobilization in Dublin on October 11, 2014. An estimated 100,000 people took to

the streets, a very large number for a country as small as Ireland and for an event that was not particularly well advertised or well supported by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions or the Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU, Ireland's largest trade union and the only movement capable of organizing such numbers previously). It far exceeded the expectations of the organizers and also took the media by surprise, thus receiving little coverage. Following this, on November 1, 2014, Right2Water, which had now become the de facto leadership of the movement, called for a round of local protests to take place in approximately 90 locations around the country; it is believed that these protests included up to 200,000 people (Power, Haynes, & Devereux, 2016). Right2Water would go on to hold numerous mass mobilizations over the next two years (see Cox, 2016, for details).

Localized militant blockades of water meter installation, which had begun at the start of 2014, spread sporadically all over the country. These blockades saw the entrance to estates blocked by activists who would prevent contractors from setting up sites, digging, and installing meters (Cox, 2016). These self-described "water warriors" were locally organized and established and often had no party/political activist involvement (differing it from the typical political campaigns in Ireland). Meetings were called locally by activists and, as will be investigated later, social media tools were often used, especially Facebook (Hearne, 2015b). It was often these local groups that would come under attack by the media (Power et al., 2016).

The government introduced a number of concessions, including a €100 "conservation grant" to those who registered with the new utility (Finn, 2015). The government continued in this manner with a series of stand-downs and postponements of the deadlines to pay the charge and fines. Mass nonpayment proved to be a successful strategy, and in July 2015, Irish Water finally released its own figures and was forced to acknowledge that well over 50% of households had not paid the charges (Finn, 2015).

A key event was an incident in Jobstown in West Dublin. The Minister for Social Protection, Joan Burton, was to confer awards at a ceremony. Jobstown, one of the least well-off districts in Dublin, had borne the brunt of austerity measures in that period. Locals, once hearing of the minister's arrival, staged a spontaneous protest; this led to a sit-down protest in front of the minister's car that lasted approximately two hours. There was some shouting and name-calling, and at one point, a water balloon was thrown; however, by most standards, the protest was by no means a riot. The minister was surrounded by police the entire time and was never in any danger. In fact, in the footage of a police helicopter that was used during the court case, police are heard saying that there "was no hassle," and a jeep in which the minister was situated could have "reversed out" earlier. However, this incident was recast as violent in the press, and protesters were even compared to ISIS by one government backbencher (Carroll & O'Halloran, 2014). Some of the rather dramatic and hyperbolic coverage in the press included front full-page banner headlines such as "Democrats Who Believe in Mob Rule" (*Irish Daily Mail*). Protesters were described as an "angry mob" (Woodhouse, 2014), "parasites" (O'Halloran, 2014), and "hooligans" (Carr, 2014). The "ugly protest" (McCormack, 2014) was described in the *Sunday Independent* as a "sinister escalation" (McCormack, 2014). One particularly dramatic article in the *Irish Daily Mail* ("Mob Incident Echoes," 2014) compared the sit-down protest to an incident during the Northern Irish conflict in which two plainclothes British soldiers were pulled out of their car by mourners after driving into a funeral; the soldiers were then stripped and shot dead by the IRA (Silke, 2014a, 2014b). On November 18, it was reported that Prime Minister Enda Kenny described the incident as "almost a kidnapping" (Kearns, 2014).

Following this incident, a major investigation was launched by the *Gardaí* (police) including an incident room and dedicated team of investigators. This led to the arrest, months later, of 27 people (including minors) on a variety of charges, including "violent disorder" and "criminal damage"; 13 of the activists were charged with "false imprisonment" (in other words, kidnapping), a charge that could theoretically lead to life imprisonment (Cox, 2016). The first seven adults¹ accused endured a full jury trial lasting more than 40 days in June 2017. In light of the this, this article holds that this trial was an important political event and a "critical discourse moment" because the right to protest was under direct attack from the state. Carvalho (2008) defines critical discourse moments as periods that involve specific happenings, which may challenge the "established" discursive positions.

Media and Social Protest

The Mainstream Media, Journalism, and Social Protest

News media anticipating, interpreting, and then depicting protest through a frame of violence and as a fringe movement has been observed elsewhere (e.g., Halloran, Elliott, & Murdock, 1970) and has been suggested to arise from both journalistic work practice and the structures of news organizations alongside wider issues of political economy (Cottle, 2008).

In particular, as discussed by Andrews and Caren's (2010) long-established scholarship on news-values alongside the constructivist school's analysis of journalistic news practices and routines (Hall et al., 1978; Tuchman, 1978), journalists' reliance on so-called official sources, such as the police, put grassroots political movements at a disadvantage in terms of both coverage and representation. Moreover, few, if any, mainstream news organizations have social movement "beats," and in recent years, the numbers of industrial beats who may have followed the trade union movement have declined. Hence, reportage often goes no deeper than a superficial recount of statements or sometimes no more than a consumerist framing of strikes, with the primary focus often on the effects on customers rather than staff or wider issues (Harmon & Lee, 2010).

Hence, in relation to the case of water charges, we maintain that we are in a period of waning media power arising from both a lack of coverage at the beginning of the movement, and the negative coverage later. Moreover, this occurred in a context in which media's gatekeeping monopoly has been greatly weakened by the emergence of social media. Likewise, the ability of legacy media to frame issues, although still powerful, faces competition from citizen journalism and activist media. Power et al. (2016) explored one particularly salient and negative discourse in the coverage of the Irish Water movement, the so-called sinister fringe in the movement. The term was coined by Irish conservative (Fine Gael) politician Leo Varadkar, who went on to become Prime Minister in 2017. In a radio interview, he stated that while the water movement included "a lot of people protesting legitimately and reasonably," it also contained a "a very sinister fringe" that he described as "nasty" and "violent" (Power et al., 2016). This, according to Power and colleagues (2016), significantly shaped public and media discourse over the

¹ A teenager had been convicted but was given a suspended sentence.

following months, which both divided the movement (between the sinister fringe and reasonable people) and separated it from wider society.

The spectacle of the marches and other more militant activities themselves, alongside the movement's own media networks, had far more centrality to activists and their supporters than the mainstream media (Hearne, 2015a). This can be explained by the fact that the "lived reality" for hundreds of thousands of people who attended protests of various types did not tally with the hyperbolic coverage. Social media, in turn, disseminated reports from protests (including blockades), often with pictures and video without the framing of violence accompanying print media coverage.

The Role of Internet/Social Media: A Changing Media Landscape

The so-called communication revolution may represent a paradigm shift in communications as new forms of broadcasting through the Internet have allowed for new forms of mass media, new forms of audiences, and alternative forms of communication (Castells, 2000, 2009). The contemporary media sphere sees numerous "entry points" that can be used by producers/writers/reporters, but also witnesses or political activists, and such entry points (blogs, tweets, etc.) have the potential of a mass audience. Cottle (2008) argues that the changed media ecology, not least the advent of Internet publishing, has allowed for the disruption of the vertical top-down flows of information and therefore contains far more opportunities for political dissent. It has also been argued that the online alternative media are at the core of (rather than simply reporting) the alternative social movements, because they act as a force for organization rather than simply reporting their actions and opinions (Coyer, Dowmunt, & Fountain, 2007). Hence, the technological shift might herald the advent of an open and inclusive "public sphere" (Schuler & Day, 2004). However, it is important to remember that dominant groups have successfully usurped (or more commonly co-opted) such potentials many times before. For example Kperogi (2011) argues that there is a process of co-option by mainstream channels, such as CNN, of citizen journalists; as he puts it,

CNN has sought to win over non-professional citizen journalists first by making its news values seem like, as Gramsci would say, the "common sense" values of all and then by legitimizing these values not so much by manipulation as by active consent. (p. 324)

Two theoretical perspectives have been pivotal in contributing to our understanding of the new media landscape and political protests: Chadwick's (2013) hybrid media system and Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) idea of connective action. Chadwick developed a theoretical account of the media system as a dynamic assemblage that develops hybrid norms and practices, drawing on its component parts. In practice, this means that both mainstream, legacy media and social-media-based outlets compete for dominance and mutually adapt to one another. In this hybrid system, which blends old and new media logics, power is defined as the ability of agents to create, tap, or steer information flows in ways that suit their goals (Chadwick, 2013). As such, power is not already an attribute of certain actors, but emerges from within the network and among media, publics, and political actors.

When it comes to the relationship between new media and protest, Bennett and Segerberg (2012; 2013) identified a new logic, which they refer to as connective action. Instead of the standard kind of collective action that takes place on the basis of shared identities, interests, and group affinities, new media have ushered in a new kind of political organizing based on individualization and personal action frames. Connective action does not need any kind of strong identification that coalesces around a common interpretation of the issues at hand; rather, it operates in a looser manner, without a common ideological denominator and on the basis of weak individual commitment. Connective action relies on the low costs of digital communication, on co-production, and on the ease of sharing personalized expression. Bennett and Segerberg do not argue that connective action has replaced collective action, but that they coexist—although newer movements tend to be characterized by the kinds of weak commitment and personalized action associated with connective action. Importantly, the authors recognize a hybrid position, in which existing organized networks of activists will employ connective action frames and avoid imposing strong collective identities.

While both Chadwick (2017) and Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 2013) are, on the whole, positive about such developments, if the focus shifts from that of political actors toward the political economy of the new media landscape, a somewhat bleaker picture emerges. As Chakravartty and Schiller (2010) put it, it would be naïve to assume that authority and power can be undone through blogs, social networking, and user-generated content. Moreover, the increasing monopolization of the Internet by a set of powerful corporations points to the continued importance of power asymmetries. Similarly, Siapera (2013) warns that some of the windows of opportunity for citizens and political activists opened by the new forms of media production and distribution are closing. This is due to the development of a new online media ecosystem that sees an increased concentration of distributive power on platforms such as Facebook or Google (Siapera, 2013). Moreover, whereas previously, activists attempted to establish their own media networks, more recent movements have tended to use commercial platforms that operate under a market logic (Hintz, 2016). Among other issues, such as censorship, the logic of the commodification of user data leads to a historically deep level of surveillance with obvious implications (Morozov, 2011). In this context and given the ambivalence of the political role of social media, their impact becomes a question to be examined empirically on an ad hoc basis.

Rory Hearne (2015a) sheds some light on this process by looking at attitudes toward media among water activists and the use of social media as an organizing tool. This gives some empirical evidence of waning media power among a significant segment of the population. Hearn (2015) surveyed more than 2,500 anti-water charge activists on their reasons for becoming involved, their attitudes toward the current government, tactics, and future political preferences. The findings highlight the mistrust of mainstream media, described by the activists as biased and supporting the government. Activists further indicated their preference for social media as their principal source of information. Moreover, the findings point to the view that social media has been used effectively to provide information that the mainstream media have not covered, discrediting mainstream media and at the same time educating people. One key interest of this article is the relationship among radical online-based media, via Facebook, and that of legacy media, particularly print. In terms of hybridity, how do radical online media and legacy media interact, if at all?

Methodology

Taking into account the preceding discussion, the article is concerned with three main research questions:

RQ1: How did the legacy print media cover the Jobstown trial and the Irish Water movement associated with it?

RQ2: How did activists use Facebook during the trial?

RQ3: How do legacy and online activist media interact with each other?

In relation to the print media's role during the trial, a content analysis of 154 articles from the *Irish Press* published between April 26 and July 6, 2014, was undertaken. The data were gathered using the LexisNexis database for the entirety of the trial, and one week after, using the search word "jobstown." In total, articles from seven newspaper titles were analyzed.²

An early definition of content analysis is offered by (Berelson, 1952), who describes the method as a technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. According to Deacon, Pickering, Golding, and Murdock (1999), the purpose of content analysis is to quantify salient and manifest features of a large number of texts to make broader inferences about the politics of representation. We analyzed all articles covering the case. These were coded as primarily covering the prosecution case or the defense cases, or focusing on both evenly. Second, we coded op-eds posttrial to see whether they editorialized for or against the defendants, who had been acquitted. We then performed a brief framing analysis (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007), with the main focus of the article as the unit of analysis. Here we coded the focus of each article—for example, if the focus was on social media, or problems with *Gardaí* testimony.

In terms of social media, the focus here is on Facebook, by far the most popular social media platform in Ireland. Facebook is used by 64% of people in Ireland, whereas Twitter is only used by 27% (Ipsos/MRBI, 2017). We focused on the public pages of the Right2Water (31,751 likes) movement and of the JobstownNotGuilty (14,167 likes), which formed as a response to the prosecution of the activists. We downloaded all posts in the period of the trial (from April 25 to July 6, when the not guilty verdict was returned) and the engagement with these (likes/comments/shares/reactions). The posts were collected with the tool Netvizz (Rieder, 2013). The JobstownNotGuilty page was much more active in this period, posting 238 posts; Right2Water posted 65 times.

Using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), we developed a set of coding categories. These capture the main activities of the pages and allow for a meaningful comparison with the mainstream media coverage. The two pages were quite different in terms of what they were posting, hence

² *The Irish Times, Irish Independent, Irish Daily Mail, The Irish News, Irish Examiner, Sunday Independent, and Sunday Business Post.*

the need to develop two different coding schemes. These are tabulated in Tables 1 and 2 for the JobstownNotGuilty and the Right2Water pages, respectively.

Table 1. Coding Scheme, JobstownNotGuilty.

Code name and description	Sample contents
Act: posts that concern activism, calls to action, solidarity with the water movement, information about events	Come to our rally to demand the drop of the rest of the charges this Saturday! www.facebook.com/events/1960342517578236
Act/Trial: activism focusing on the trial itself	From tomorrow (20th June) at 10:30am the closing arguments will be heard in the Jobstown Not Guilty case. It's EXTREMELY important that people come down in numbers at this critical point to show their solidarity with the Jobstown defendants - to defend our right to protest! We are expecting the jury to be back for the closing arguments and the judge s charge from Wednesday of this week. We want to have the courtroom packed out for then. So if you can please do what you can to get down to court on Tuesday Wednesday Thursday or Friday (or all four!).
MediaCrit: posts criticizing the media	The mainstream media's narrative of the Jobstown protest is one which turned wild of a mob - but where did the violence really come from? [Video showing Paul Murphy manhandled by the police]
PolCrit: political criticism, posts that criticize the political establishment, including the police	New logo same shit. Kind of looks like a red drain with water swirling down. NO MORE LABOUR PAINS. [photo showing the new Labour Party logo]
Trial: posts on the trial mostly containing opinions and solidarity with the defendants	The Jobstown accused are found guilty for up to three hours of false imprisonment (even though the accuser could walk away at anytime escorted if necessary) Does that mean that a clamper is committing false imprisonment when totally preventing their victim from moving until they decide to release them which can well be up to and over three hours
Trial/Info: posts reporting on the trial	This morning the court proceedings centred mostly around Frank Donaghy's statement to the Garda- and his arrest. Frank was arrested in the early hours of the morning at 7:15am by 4 Garda-. 2 Garda- came in and 2 Garda- sat in the car. The Garda on stand said he did not know if any Garda were armed during the arrest. This for a 71 year old man with no previous convictions! He was never warned that he was a suspect in any ongoing investigation and so his arrest was the first he knew of it. Frank Donaghy took part in a sit down protest for several minutes - the Garda- claim that Joan Burton and her assistant were Falsely Imprisoned for 71 minutes. So for the vast majority of the time where this alleged false imprisonment went on Frank Donaghy was not involved - he was just holding a banner! . . .
Trial/Media: activists producing their own media,	These trials have huge implications for the trade union movement. The right to effective picketing to strike and the many basic methods of the trade

posting videos with interviews	union movement would be criminalised or limited by the precedent set by a guilty verdict. Representatives from various trade unions including the NBRU CPSU TUI NUJ SIPTU as well as representatives from the Dublin Council of Trade Unions came out yesterday afternoon and helped fill the courts. Listen to what some of them had to say. [Video]
Other: all other posts	Any news?

Table 2. Coding Scheme, Right2Water.

Code name and description	Sample contents
Act: posts concerning activism, calls to action, solidarity with the movement, information about events	Canadian PM Trudeau is here to sell CETA. An opportunity to oppose it. Apologies for short notice but this was organised in a rush [link to event]
MediaCrit: posts criticizing the media	The Irish Times HATES water protesters. So much so that when the #JobstownNotGuilty verdict was arrived at by a jury of their peers the Irish Times couldn't handle it and scrambled to find a reason they were acquitted . . . because they simply couldn't be innocent! So it's the fault of social media apparently. It's not like the mainstream media (including the Irish Times) or establishment politicians had tarnished water protesters in the run up to the trial by referring to them as dissidents a sinister fringe thug the equivalent of ISIS or anything. How dare ordinary people express the opposite opinion to their elitist nonsense. We can thank our lucky stars that juries are selected from our peers and not from well-to-do politicians journalists editors judges or former journalists judging by the reaction on Twitter and in the Irish Times today. . . .
PolCrit: political criticism, posts criticizing the political establishment	Varadkar...The Challenges Ahead [photo with superimposed text criticizing the PM]
Trial: posts concerning the Jobstown trial	Brilliant news Ken! Now for the rest of the Jobstown defendants. Charges against one of seven men accused of the false imprisonment of former Tánaiste Joan Burton and her adviser during a water charges protest in 2014 have been dropped. The decision followed legal argument by lawyers for 50-year-old Ken Purcell from Kiltalown Green in Tallaght. Prosecuting Counsel Sean Gillane told Judge Melanie Greally the Director of Public Prosecutions was not proceeding with the prosecution of Mr Purcell.
Water: posts concerning the importance of water as a public good, water policy	Privatised water costs consumers £2.3bn more a year study says Consumers in England are paying £2.3bn more a year for their water and sewerage bills under the current privatised system than if the utility companies had remained in state ownership according to research by the University of Greenwich [Link to article]
Other: all other posts	Ryan Rubridy interviews Mickey Twee. June 2017. [photo]

The findings of the research, starting with the print media analysis and then going on to social media, are presented later.

Comparison of Print Media Treatment With Facebook Posts

Print Media

The analysis uncovered a number of clear issues within the coverage. First, on the court reporting—that is, noneditorializing articles that should be straight reporting, without opinion. In total, there were 83 such articles; 21 of these focused on both prosecution and defense arguments, 33 focused on the prosecution case, and 29 focused mainly on the defense case. This, at surface view, is relatively even. However, when we looked at the word count—that is, the length of the articles—we found that articles with a focus on both cases made up 7,940 words, or 21% of the coverage; articles focusing on the defense made up 12,279 words, or 32% of the articles; and articles focused on the prosecution side made up almost half of the total coverage, with 17,768 words, or 47% of the total word count. Moreover, articles focusing on the prosecution case had far more dramatic and emotive headlines, often quotes, such as, “‘I was running for my life,’ Burton tells Jobstown trial”; “Former tánaiste said TD [Member of Parliament] Paul Murphy ‘was looking pretty happy with himself’ at protest” (Shane Phelan, *Irish Independent*, April 28, 2017); “I was terrified I was going to fall. . . I felt I was running for my life”; and TD Joan Burton tells Jobstown trial of her “‘distress’ during protest” (*Irish Daily Mail*, April 28, 2017). Defense-centered articles tended not to be as dramatic, apart from two articles describing the arrest of one defendant. An explanation for this is that the prosecution arguments, by their very nature, were more exciting and emotive, and editors will naturally forefront such stories; however, the word count issue is less defensible.

Editorializing

A more obvious bias found in the coverage was that of the editorializing articles on the Jobstown incident and trial. These are feature-based or opinion articles that are not objective, but give the view of the journalist or commentator. Here, a substantial and extremely unhealthy bias was found. In all, of 16 articles (published between July 1 and July 6), 14 very clearly argued against the defendants and in many cases argued that the defendants were in fact guilty—if not of false imprisonment, then of any number of other offenses: “Paul Murphy and his acolytes were free to go, without a stain on their characters. But being innocent of this particular crime does not, however, mean they had done nothing wrong” (Mark Dooley, *Daily Mail*, July 1, 2017).

These articles were as hyperbolic as previous coverage of Jobstown; for example, one article by Brenda Power began by comparing the sit-down protest to a scene in the dystopian *Handmaid’s Tale*, in which characters are executed by public stoning (*Irish Daily Mail*, July 4, 2017). Other issues raised were denunciations of “hard” left politics; for example, an article written by Joan Burton’s former chief of staff denounced Trotskyism (*Sunday Independent*, July 2, 2017), branding Solidarity (the political party³) “the forces of darkness.”

³ The Anti-Austerity Alliance political party (whose activists and elected representatives were arrested) changed its name to Solidarity between the incident and trial.

O'Hanlon (2017), in the *Sunday Independent*, returned to the trope of the "sinister fringe." In a classic example of news construction—that is, the constructing of a news frame, repeated continually until it becomes "fact"—O'Hanlon stated, "There was an ugly mood in the air during 2014 and 2015. Protests against water charges had escalated into a rowdy free-for-all, in which the threat of violence lurked menacingly beneath the surface" (*Sunday Independent*, July 2, 2017).

None of this is borne out, in fact; throughout the numerous mass demonstrations and the clear majority of smaller demonstrations, there was never a "threat" of violence. Any arrests that had occurred were for contempt of court rather than any violent acts.

Another former Labour Party strategist and columnist for the *Irish Examiner*, Fergus Finlay (*Irish Examiner*, July 4, 2017), mocked any idea of there being any political issue to the trial and compared Paul Murphy to Donald Trump because both "talk about right-wing media conspiracies." This is an interesting and rhetorical tactic common in the coverage: By critiquing the media coverage of an event, you are termed a "conspiracy theorist," dismissing the critique. Moreover, it reduces critique of media and journalism to a simplified organized conspiracy rather than the much more nuanced area of political economy, power, ideology, and discourse uncovered by decades of research.

In contrast, only two articles made arguments close to supporting the defendants, or at least not denouncing them outright. Fintan O'Toole (*Irish Times*, July 4, 2017) argued that the trial was not political in an overt sense, but rather part of the structural class relations within Irish society. Although not supporting what he termed the "intimidation and misogynistic abuse," he maintained that the jury did not convict because of double standards in the administration of justice. Martina Devlin (*Irish Independent*, July 1, 2017) argued that there was neither kidnapping nor rioting in Jobstown on the day and that the Director of Public Prosecutions and "the State lost some of [their] authority by pressing such an unlikely and intemperate charge against the deputy and five other men."

In total, the anti-Jobstown defendants editorializing articles made up 15,349 words, or 89% of such coverage, while the two articles that did not attack the defendants made up 1,947 words, or 11% of the articles.

Issues Posttrial

We coded articles published after the trial ended that covered various issues (excluding the previously discussed opinion and editorial articles). As shown in Figure 1, the issue of the role of social media was found in 13 articles focusing on the trial. Here, there was much disquiet on the reporting of the trial via social media, including what the *Independent* reported was evidence not heard by the jury ("Trial will speed up moves to regulate the use of social media during court cases," June 30, 2017. Other articles (e.g., *Irish Times*, June 30, 2017; "Protesters turn to social media to make the case; Despite the offence of contempt, the tweets just kept coming") discussed the issue of Twitter campaign #jobstownnotguilty and what they termed biased online reporting of the case by supporters. Many articles maintained that this was an act of contempt, illegal under Irish law. However, none of these articles seemed to consider the effect of media reporting on the case at the time of the incident, which, as discussed, was often biased against the

defendants. Although the *Independent* did at least cite a distrust of mainstream media, it did not discuss the coverage.

The second major issue was the question of whether the trial was political, as asserted by the defendants and their supporters. This issue was covered in opinion articles, with some considering the issue a “conspiracy theory.” The issue of whether the defendants were “overcharged” was found in five articles. However, it is worth pointing out that many articles, especially the op-eds, did not see a problem with the overcharge of false imprisonment itself or a moral issue of any potential of miscarriage of justice. Rather, they saw it as a strategic issue—that is, the state should have pushed for lesser charges because these were more likely to bring a conviction. Problems with Garda evidence was the focus of five articles, and TDs fearing for future safety was the main theme of two articles.

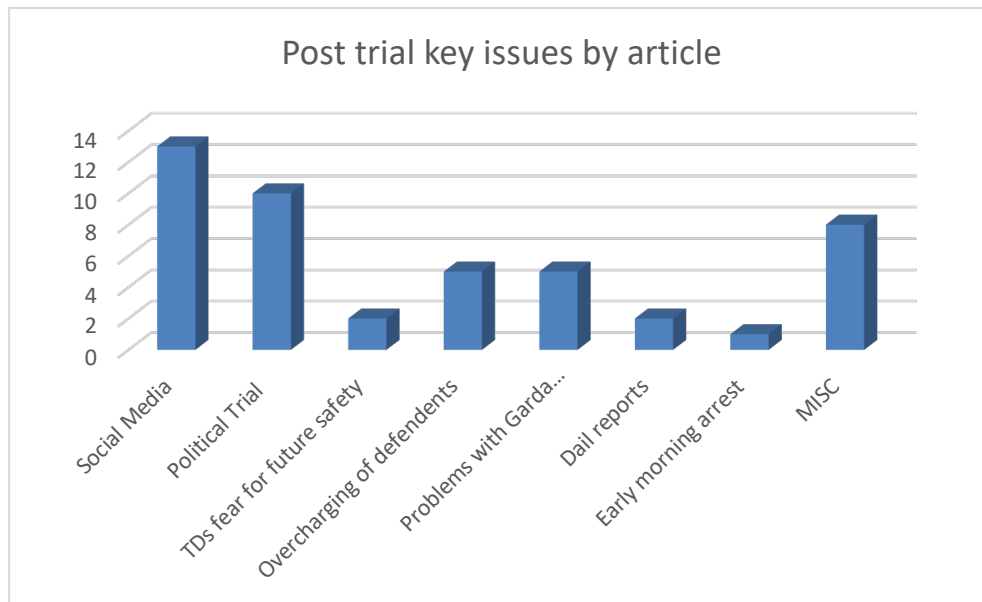


Figure 1. Posttrial articles by issue.

Social Media

The main finding emerging from the social media analysis is the existence of a disconnect between the mainstream media and those involved in these Facebook pages. The trial was immediately framed as an assault against protest and, as such, having importance far beyond the specific case. Specifically, the JobstownNotGuilty page was very critical of the mainstream coverage; for this reason, activists from the Socialist Party⁴ established this page and developed their own media, shooting videos and posting explanatory articles about the case, but also more widely about the issue of protest, the impact of austerity,

⁴ The Socialist Party is the core organization behind the electoral party the Anti-Austerity Alliance/Solidarity.

and the role of corruption. In these videos, they gave voice not only to those on trial, but also to others who were present at the protest or who supported the water movement. Additionally, the activists reported from the trial itself, describing what went on, but also providing some explanation as to the meaning and implications of what was said in court.

A key feature of the trial was that protesters themselves had videos of the protest in Jobstown. The videos circulated widely on the JobstownNotGuilty page, along with comments on exaggerations and outright untruths of some of the witnesses. Comments also expressed disappointment with the coverage of mainstream media, because they did not meet the expectations associated with their investigative and watchdog roles. Figures 2 and 3 show the distribution of the various categories of the posts on the JobstownNotGuilty page and the engagement they received.

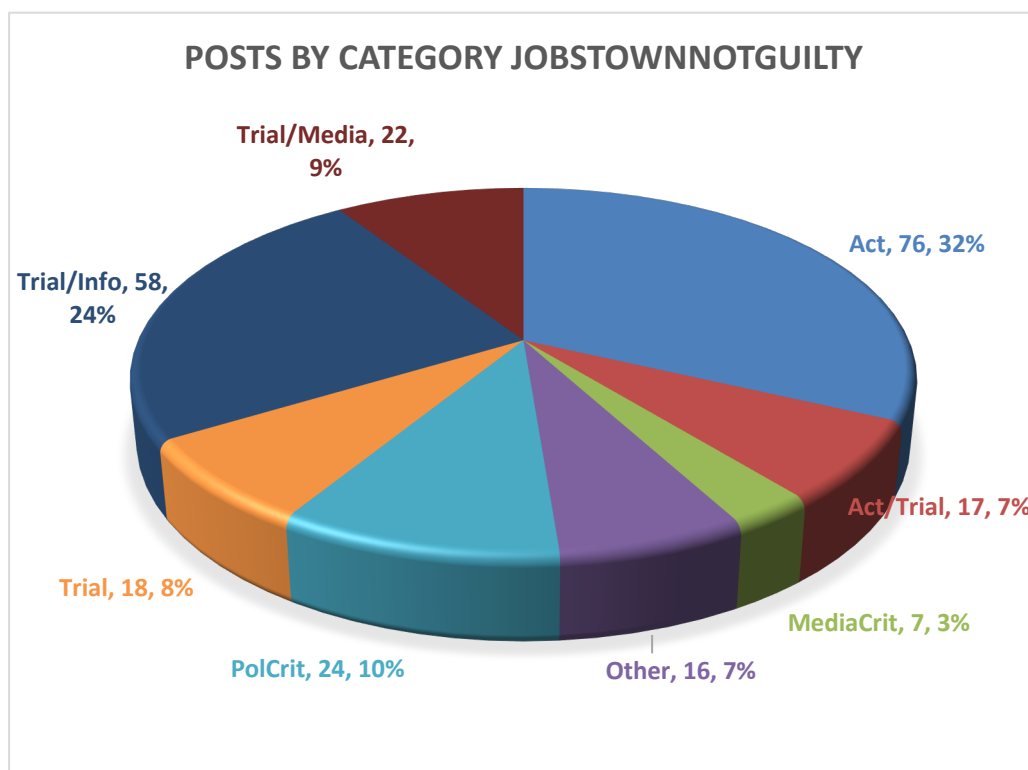


Figure 2. Frequency of post categories: JobstownNotGuilty.

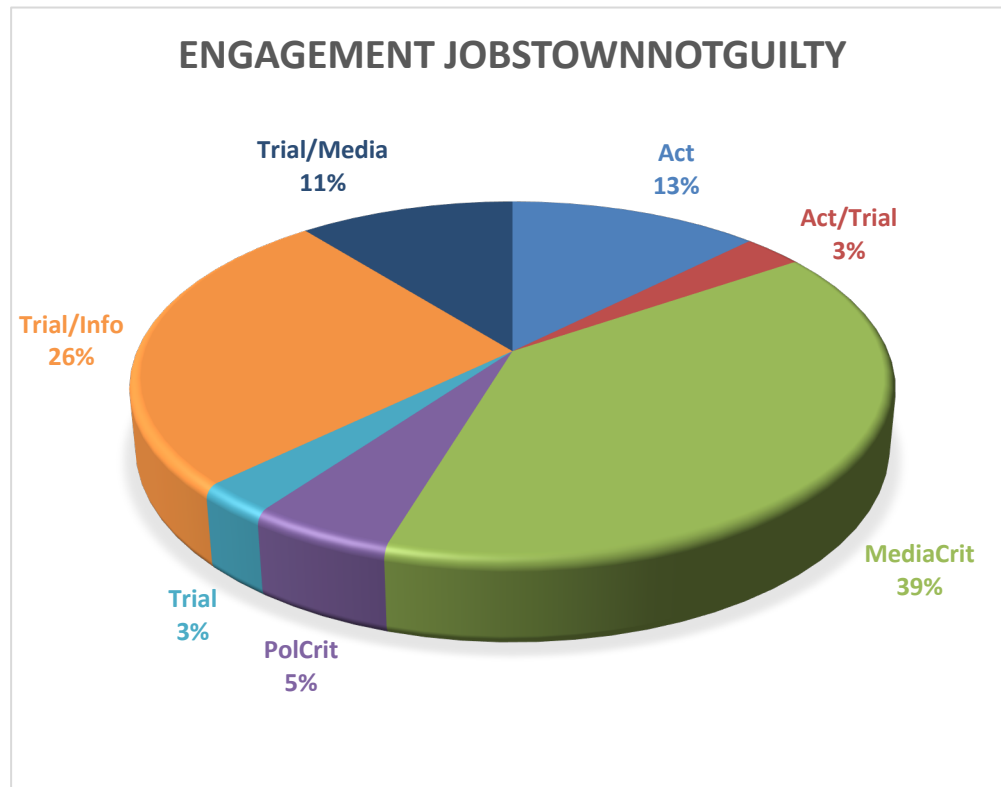


Figure 3. Engagement by category: JobstownNotGuilty.

Engagement, which includes all kinds of reactions (like, love, sad, angry, etc.), as well as comments and shares, shows the degree of resonance between the posts and the users of the page. The post category that attracted the higher levels of engagement were those classified as media criticism (39% of the total engagement, corresponding to a total of 27,872 likes/shares/comments/reactions for the seven posts that were classified under this category). This was followed by posts that reported from within the court, which were more numerous than the media ones—58 in total. The high levels of engagement reflect a high degree of resonance between activists and page users. Additionally, these posts were implicitly critical of the mainstream coverage, which they sought to replace. Because of the perception that mainstream media were not fair, expressed in the posts that were critical of the media, activists turned toward the production of their own reporting, offering voice to those silenced or misrepresented by the mainstream. It is significant here that the posts that users engaged with the most display a high degree of skepticism toward the media. In contrast, activist posts did not receive much engagement even though this was the largest category.

It is worth noting the single post that generated the largest number of reactions, classified as media criticism and reproduced in Figure 4:

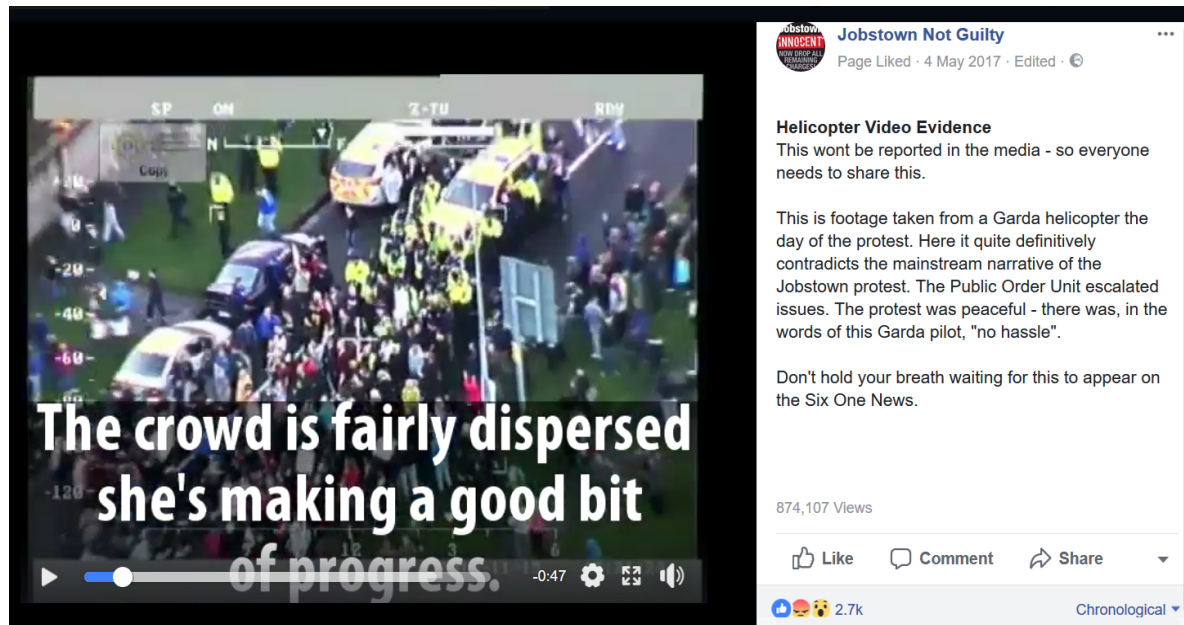


Figure 4. The most engaged-with post, JobstownNotGuilty page.

The video was viewed more than 874,000 times and shared 14,024 times. Captioned by the JobstownNotGuilty, it makes clear the contradictions between what took place, as recorded by the *Gardaí* themselves on the day, and what the witnesses from the *Gardaí*, as well as Joan Burton herself, reported during the trial. It also raises questions as to why this kind of evidence was not picked up by the media at any stage. But crucially, it also shows that for an increasing number of people in Ireland, the mainstream media are not the main or most credible sources of information.

Figures 5 and 6 present the findings of the content analysis of the Right2Water page.

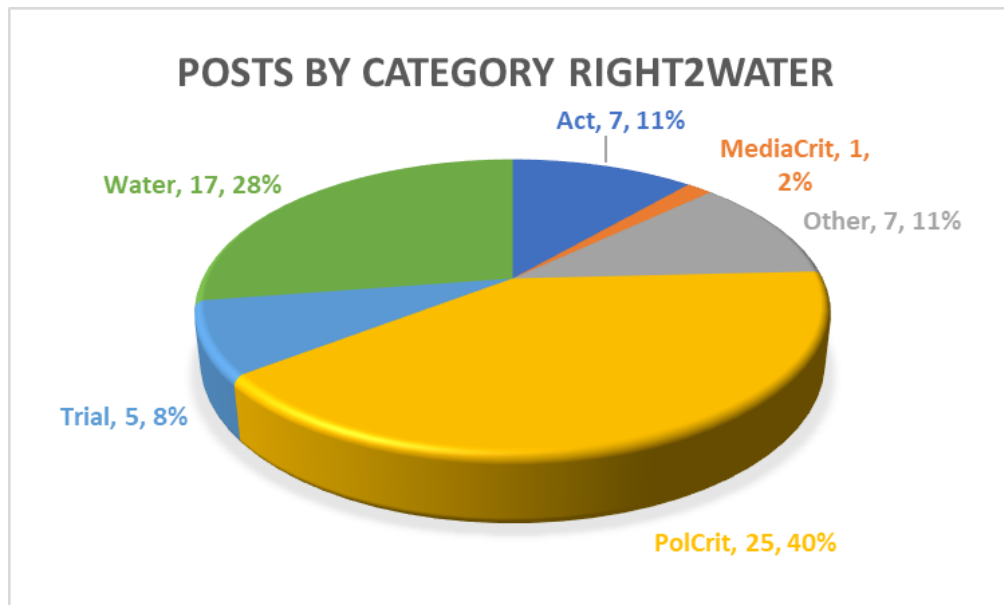


Figure 5. Post categories on the Right2Water page.

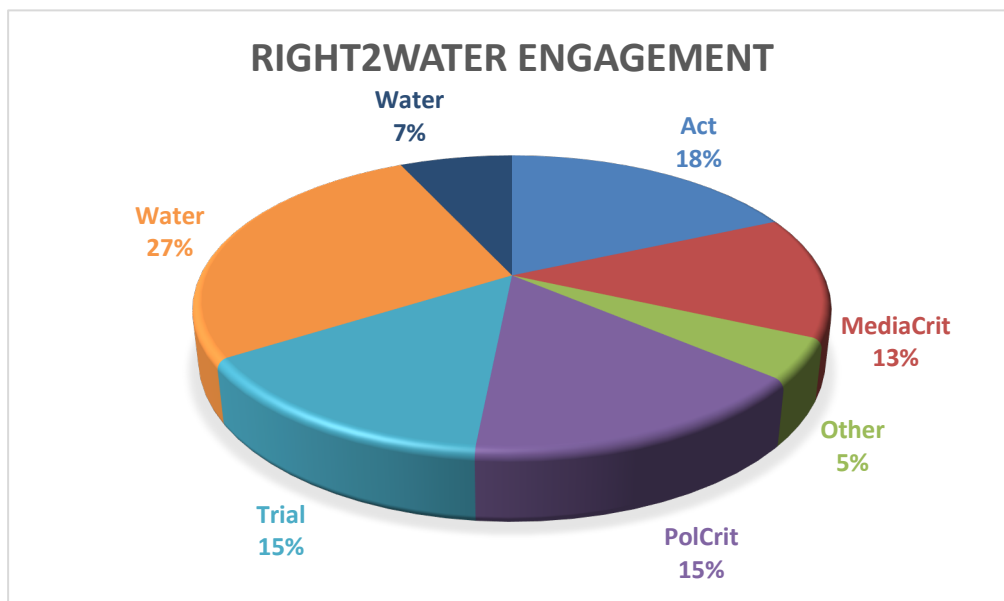


Figure 6. Engagement by post category, Right2Water page.

The Right2Water page was much less active during this period, and most of the posts were uploaded by the page users rather than the administrators. The majority of the posts contained criticisms toward the political establishment, mainly leveled against Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, but also against the EU and austerity policies. But the page users also posted on matters concerning water as a public good and on water policy in Ireland and elsewhere. There were only five posts on the trial, and these were mostly from users rather than the admins.

What is notable here is that one post, coded as media criticism, in fact attracted proportionately the highest number of shares/comments/likes. It is worth reproducing the post here because it sums up the position of the movement toward the trial and the media role in it. The post criticizes the media's framing of the water protests as fringe and marginal, discrediting the protesters and taking sides with the political establishment. The post further highlights the increasingly important witnessing role of citizens with smartphones, especially in contentious cases such as this one. The emotive tone of the post and the word *hate* in capital letters highlight the disappointment with the media, even—or perhaps especially—those designated as progressive, such as the *Irish Times*, whose role in holding those in power to account was not fulfilled.

Right2WaterIreland
@Right2WaterIreland

Home
About
Photos
Events
Videos
Posts
Community
Livestream
Create a Page

Right2WaterIreland
30 June 2017 · @

The Irish Times HATES water protesters.

So much so that when the #JobstownNotGuilty verdict was arrived at by a jury of their peers, the Irish Times couldn't handle it and scrambled to find a reason they were acquitted...because they simply couldn't be innocent! So it's the fault of social media, apparently.


It's not like the mainstream media (including the Irish Times) or establishment politicians had tarnished water protesters in the run up to the trial by referring to them as 'dissidents', 'a sinister fringe', 'thugs', 'the equivalent of ISIS' or anything. How dare ordinary people express the opposite opinion to their elitist nonsense.

We can thank our lucky stars that juries are selected from our peers, and not from well-to-do politicians, journalists, editors, judges or former journalists, judging by the reaction on Twitter and in the Irish Times today.

Congratulations to all of the defendants for the courage, patience and dignity shown over the last two and a half years when the full force of the state was thrown at them. Dawn raids, constant trial delays, attacks by the media and politicians, millions spent on a ridiculous prosecution claim...the effect on their mental and physical health must've been enormous.

While the #JobstownInnocent verdict does give some level of satisfaction, justice has not been done. This trial and the intimidation that went with it should never have taken place. We need all other charges dropped immediately and stop wasting vital taxpayers' money on this show trial and we need an investigation into the biased and deeply worrying synchronised claims made by Gardai against the accused which were contradicted by actual evidence.

Lesson of the day: when in a difficult situation or at a peaceful protest, keep your phone and video camera handy. It just might protect you from facing a life sentence in prison.



Jobstown acquittals: jury trials under strain
Social media was used to criticise and impugn the motives of witnesses
IRISHTIMES.COM

Like Comment Share

Noreen Murphy and 371 others

182 shares 26 comments

Figure 7. The most engaged-with post, Right2Water page.

In short, the social media analysis showed that in the case of the trial of the Jobstown protesters, framed as "violent," the pages and users deconstructed this narrative and focused on two things: first, the problems and biases of mainstream media coverage, and second, the continued importance of protest, given the stakes involved in keeping water as a public good and not a market commodity. The focus on and engagement with posts that criticized the media suggest a new function of these activist pages: that of enabling a critical media literacy among their readers by highlighting what they view as the "spin" or bias of mainstream media accounts.

Discussion

Theoretically, this article understands the media landscape in terms of Chadwick's hybrid media theory, which suggests a more fluid and dynamic media system that allows for both old and new forms of media to operate. This proposition resonates with our findings here in the open contestation of mainstream media frames of the protest as violent and for the trial accused as violent and unruly. In terms of organizational capabilities, we saw the formulation of the ad hoc group JobstownNotGuilty, which operated through a Facebook page, a Google microsite, and a Twitter account. The group was successful in creating and circulating widely oppositional frames, understanding the trial as a miscarriage of justice, and supporting the defendants' right to protest. In parallel, the Right2Water page, which represents the formal front of an umbrella organization, sought to highlight the importance of water as a public good, hence justifying the need to protest in order to safeguard it. Right2Water was similarly critical of the media and political establishment that sought to criminalize protest. Our findings support our contention for a gap or disconnect between mainstream media and citizens. This is for two probable reasons. First, Irish Water was a spontaneous mass movement with numerous marches involving tens and often hundreds of thousands alongside hundreds of local groups engaged in various activities. This means that hundreds of thousands of people and their families have direct experience of the movement. Second, media has lost its monopoly of distribution and broadcasting, and thousands of videos and blogs were shared across social media, challenging the framing of the movement as violent.

The extent to which this social media activism feeds back into the mainstream media is questionable. As discussed earlier, the not guilty verdict was followed by a series of editorials that did not reflect in any way on the role of the media and that turned against the defendants and their supporters and against social media as such. If anything, this shows that the disconnect is likely to widen because the media refused to take on board any criticism. In fact, the print media took a defensive attitude to the intrusion of social media into a previously held monopoly. In this manner, Chadwick's idea of power from the bottom up is something that may not be applicable here because the water movement did not succeed in steering information flows to its advantage, notwithstanding its relative popularity in social media. Furthermore, it shows that old-fashioned media power in the gatekeeping and agenda-setting sense is still in operation; the mainstream media frames still reach a much larger percentage of Irish citizens than the social media pages of the activist groups.

All categories of posts found on the Facebook pages under study show an ideological coherence: They revolve around the idea of water as a public good and the right to protest as a fundamental democratic right. The posts are critical of the media and political establishment because they find that they are not

keeping up with their role in a democratic society, which is to serve the people. From this point of view, this clear ideological alliance, as well as the involvement of unions and political parties of the left in the movement, shows that this constitutes an instance of collective rather than connective action.

Finally, there is no evidence to suggest that mainstream media heeded any of these criticisms, showing that there was almost no communication between the movement's activists and the media. The Facebook pages we analyzed seem to contribute to political action in two ways: first, by activists publishing their own media and disseminating information from their own perspective, and second, by enabling the development of critical media literacy skills among their users through making clear where the media bias lies.

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