

# Changing media landscape in Ireland between 2002-2008 and its implications for public opinion about the European Union

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## Introduction

Between the Nice 2 Referendum in 2002 and the Lisbon Referendum in 2008 we have seen a change in the Irish media landscape. The principal trends show:

- A growth in readership and distribution of Eurosceptic British press
- The outsourcing of editorial by indigenous Irish titles to UK and other syndicated news services
- The development of a conservative religious press
- The proliferation of the internet as a magnet for anti-establishment opinion formers (as well as the introduction of viral communication)
- The shift away from state television and radio towards smaller private radio stations that have a greater focus on entertainment than news

The main trend is that newsrooms have become victim to cost pressures and objectivity has been reduced. Print, TV, and Radio have all come under financial pressure, leaving them to invest less time in getting to the heart of the story and editors more inclined to buy content from UK titles.

## Print Press- *Increase in Eurosceptic titles*

Since 2002 we have seen an increase in UK with "Irishised" editorial of titles. 41% of all Irish people read one or more of the following; the Irish Sun, Irish News of the World, Sunday Times, People, Irish Mirror, Sunday Mirror, Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday. These have proven to be significant opinion formers which in general have been more Euro-hostile.

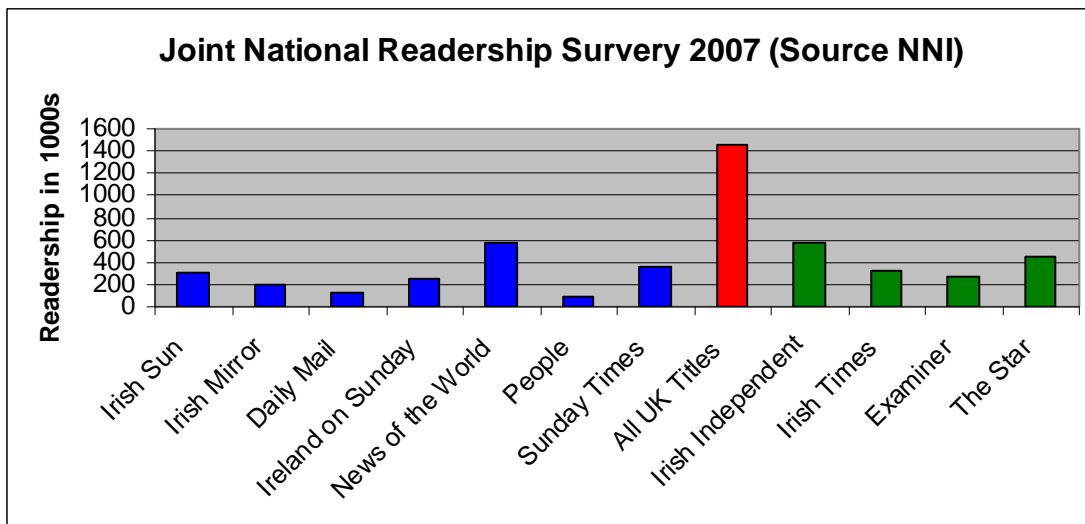


**Figure 1. The Sun Tuesday 10th June**

The Rupert Murdoch-controlled media group News International has increased its influence over the tabloid and Sunday paper market. Editorial is highly critical of the European Union and even more so of the Lisbon Treaty. What has changed is that these papers were previously printed in the UK but now they are printed in Ireland. Also more of its editorial content is produced by Irish journalists on Irish issues – but subject to the London editorial line.

The core readership of the Sun is young working class males. There are approximately 309,000 readers of this title. The Sun has taken a campaigning Europhobic stance in line with its UK sister title.

The Sunday Times is read by 363,000 middle class, well-educated readers, who would traditionally have been European supporters. Not only has the editorial been largely critical of Europe, it is rumoured that it has been refusing contributions from staff that are pro-Europe.



**Figure 2. Figures in blue "Irishised" UK Imports/ figures in green local Irish titles, red combined readership of all UK titles (41%). Note that no comparable figures exist for 2002**

The News of the World has approximately 571,000 readers and has had a muted Euro-scepticism. The reader base is mainly lower middle class, working class and people from a farming background.

The launch of the Mail on Sunday and Irish Daily Mail by Associated Press in 2004 and 2005 has also been a contributing factor. These papers have run intense Eurosceptic campaigns and employ a variety of right-wing journalists. These target primarily middle class, middle aged females, who tend to be a demograph that is widely more "Euro-hesitant".

Of less importance are the Irish Daily Mirror and the People. Both titles are owned by the UK Trinity group. In general their commentary has been fairly balanced.

### ***Buying in UK news***

While much has been made of the increase of UK tabloids and broadsheets, what has gone mainly unnoticed is the growth in reproduction of foreign news in indigenous Irish titles like the Irish Examiner, Irish Times and Irish Independent. The Irish Independent takes much of its European news from the Daily Telegraph. Despite being the largest national daily title, it no longer has a Brussels based journalist. The main reason for this is the cost cutting that many of the indigenous Irish titles underwent in the early part of the decade. Both the Irish Times and Independent reduced editorial staff numbers. This has created a dependency on outsourcing reporting to UK titles.

### ***The religious press***

A recent phenomenon has been the increase in religious press that is distributed free in Catholic churches and through subscription. These titles have an even more conservative viewpoint than the Church hierarchy on many issues. They are bitterly anti-European, supposedly because of liberal European attitudes on; church/State relations, homosexuality, abortion, stem cell research and various other social issues.

The main readership is amongst conservative, middle aged and older people. Circulation figures are unknown but the ALIVE group is claiming close to 365,000 copies a month are handed out. Other titles include the Irish Family and The Voice. Members of the radical group

Youth Defence are closely affiliated with these publications. Youth Defence morphed into 'Coir' who led an extreme anti-Lisbon campaign using appeals to nationalism and Catholic values.

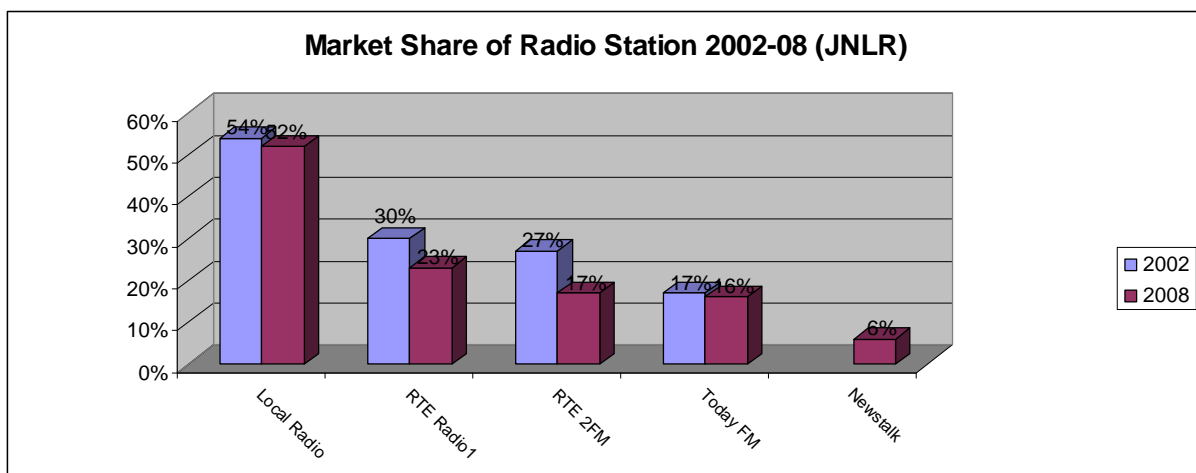
### **Radio -The move away from RTE and the State broadcaster**

Since 2002, we have seen the fragmenting of listenership from the state broadcaster RTE to smaller local stations.

These new local stations have emerged are essentially music based. This is at the expense of the RTE public service provider which has balanced news content. In Dublin we have seen the development of Spin, Phantom and Country FM, while across the country Red FM in Cork and Ocean in the North West.

Two new national stations, Newstalk and Today FM have emerged to challenge the monopoly of RTE. Both have discussion programmes but also a heavy entertainment/ light talk remit.

While editorial is strictly controlled by the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, there is a tabloid nature to many of the shows.



**Figure 3. Local Stations include all Independent Radio Stations (commercial local). Note that Newstalk did not exist in 2002**

### **Internet- A fragmented battle ground dominated by Euro-scepticism**

#### **Ireland and new internet media technologies**

Web based technologies have become more sophisticated and citizens adoption of these tools has increased significantly in Ireland since 2002. Ireland still remains 2-3 years behind the US in adoption of internet usage patterns.

In the past the core media presence online has been amongst the traditional media who generated media from their offline content. While they remain the dominant online, there has been a diversification as such phenomena as citizen journalism have taken off.

The internet has allowed increased communication between citizen groups away from Government and traditional media dominated sources. This horizontal flow of information is in contrast to the typical top down approach that previously existed.

In addition, the traditional 24hr news cycle has been broken. Constant flows of information to audiences are much more achievable.

Significantly technology which made professional, content rich communication has now been put in the hands of the average citizen allowing; podcasting, audio streaming and creative viral communications. While only "early adoptive" groups are making use of this, the overall uptake will increase in the future.

The internet has come of age as a forum for debate and a means of conveying information in Ireland. Blogging and bulletin boards have been used by many, some of whom are opinion formers, to relay their thoughts. Both sides of the Lisbon debate actively the web however it was dominated by the No side.

Category of Site	March Articles	April Articles	May Articles
Mainstream (Newspapers, Parties)	2845	1587	2156
Forums	1339	1101	1814
Official (Govt, EU)	50	47	53
NGOs (NGO, Business, Think Tanks)	45	75	79
Alternative (Pressure Groups etc)	63	84	109
Blogs	101	38	92
Informational (Aggregators, Resources)	109	25	35

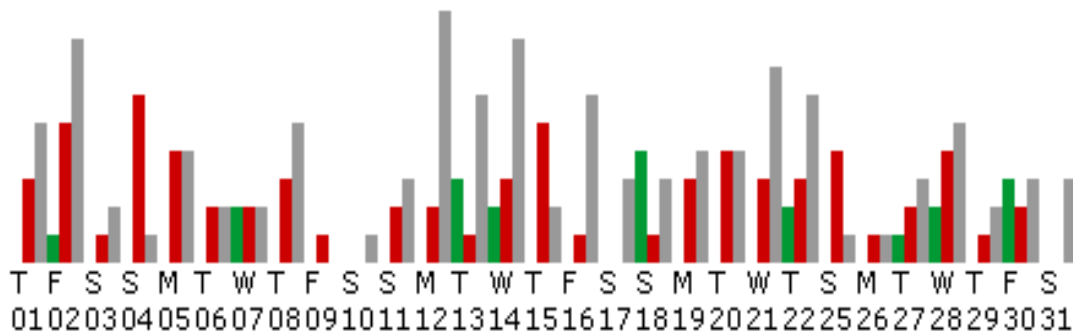
Source: IBIS Tracking Software

**Bulletin boards and blogs**

Bulletin boards like Politics.ie and Boards.ie are key forums for opinion makers such as journalists and bloggers to discuss and exchange opinions. The fact that Politics.ie is run and owned by David Cochrane, campaign manager of Libertas (one of the principal No campaign groups) meant that this debate was highly skewed. Left-wing groups like the Socialist Party, People Before Profit etc were dominant on sites such as Indymedia.ie.

Blogging is also seen as an anti-establishment activity. Few Yes campaigners came out with forceful counter arguments or were inspired to do so. Because of the many different sources of No campaigners on the internet, classic rebuttals is made impossible.

Blog activity remains overwhelmingly negative: Activity increased for May (unsurprisingly) after a lull in April where people turned their attention to the stepping down of Bertie Ahern as Taoiseach, which dominated the public arena through April.



The launch of the various Yes campaigns on the 12<sup>th</sup> failed to produce any spike in discussion.

No positive forums are shown. Although some debates may be overall positive in tone, discussions are classified as neutral except where they take place on boards with an entirely anti-EU population (irishnationalism.net, stormfront.org).

Category of Site	Lisbon Stance	March	April	May Articles
Alternative	Pro	54	0	0
Alternative	Anti		81	101
Alternative	Neutral	9	3	8
Blogs	Pro	6	14	20
Blogs	Anti	24	19	35
Blogs	Neutral	71	5	37
Forums	Anti	153	2	210
Forums	Neutral	1186	1099	1604
Informational	Neutral	109	25	35
Mainstream	Pro	768	608	569
Mainstream	Anti	160	140	481
Mainstream	Neutral	1917	839	1106
NGO	Pro	32	64	69
NGO	Neutral	13	11	10
Official	Pro	31	30	34
Official	Neutral	19	17	19

We tracked slightly more themes and key terms in the run-up to the vote:

Theme	Total	Pro	Anti	Neutral
IBEC call for Yes vote	81	22	13	46
Neutrality	364	63	84	217
Chamber s of Commerce	19	13	0	6

Libertas	313	50	59	204
Abortion	60	8	10	42
Sovereignty	104	6	45	53
Tax Harmonisation	199	21	24	154
Sinn Fein	302	41	171	90
Union Yes	26	11	2	13
Union No	46	5	17	24
EU militarisation	22	0	9	13
IFA	25	2	1	22
Immigration	7	1	1	5
Article 48	46	0	9	37
WTO	49	7	11	31
Total	1663	250	456	957

Of the various themes, neutrality and tax harmonisation are dominant, while Libertas continue to outshine Sinn Fein by a large margin in the mainstream press, but not amongst the actual No proponents.

### **Reviewing the online tone of the campaign**

The fragmented No campaign has had a very high internet presence on the Internet, achieving high rankings on Google and other search engines. The internet has allowed direct citizen-publisher interaction and works widely outside the standard news-cycle so has been the seeding source for many opinion formers.

A number of viral emails, videos, songs etc. were created by the No campaign which were creative, often humorous, and had a lot of "cut through". They made for simple, well-defined, entertaining points that registered well with younger demographics. Websites such as Youtube.com have allowed the transmission of audiovisual content at a very low cost.

Official bodies like The Referendum Commission and Government made extensive use of the internet to provide general background information to the public. While in previous referenda information was directly provided to the public through letter drops, advertising etc., during the Lisbon Referendum these groups relied heavily on people coming to them for info.

Given the complex nature of the discussion and the low broadband penetration in Ireland (about 21% according to Comreg) this leads to many assuming that these efforts were ineffective. Anecdotal feedback about the Referendum Commission leads one to conclude that uptake was low.

The official nature of the communication flow has made it very difficult to connect with younger, internet-savvy audiences. Official sources are using Mass Media communication techniques in areas that require a tailored niche approach.

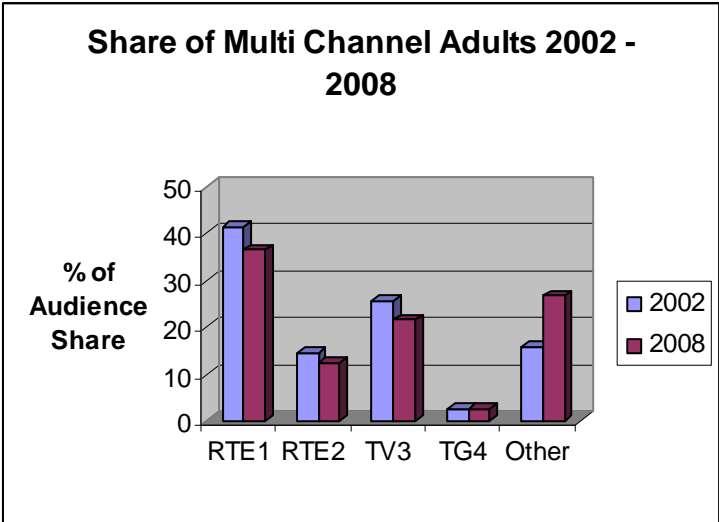
**Television – Moving towards a greater entertainment focus**

Since 2002 we have seen an erosion of RTE's market share towards more satellite entertainment stations. Irish TV viewership, especially of younger age-groups, is increasing with satellite and multi-channel stations.

RTE1, RTE2, TV3, TG4 had an 84% share of all TVR ratings for multi channel adults in 2002 this was reduced to 73% in 2008.

News content on the main commercial national station TV3 is of quite low quality.

The increase in market share of these newer stations has reduced the overall importance of RTE news bulletins.



**Conclusions- The new Media landscape buttressing a No sentiment amongst the Irish**

In the six years since the Nice Referendum, the media landscape in Ireland has been altered. Irish citizens and opinion formers are being given more choice of media from different news outlets. The mainstream traditional press, TV and radio outlets are competing for space with new niche outlets.

There has been a growth in Eurosceptic press in Ireland mostly from the UK, radical Christian groups and the standard left wing. This has acted as both an opinion former and "validator" of anti-EU opinion. Mainstream indigenous Irish media has tended to be critical but overall pro-European.

There is a shift away from the State news Radio and TV stations. This means that the quality of debate has suffered. Commercial radio and local radio are increasingly important to reach – and their style is different from the old State broadcasters.

Apart from official websites, the internet has largely been a space left to anti-European feeling. Given the ability to reach an audience at a much lower cost, and given the simplicity of the No campaign messages, it has proven to be easily malleable during the campaign and pre-campaign period.

### Matrix of Media Change

	<b>2002</b>	<b>2008</b>
Market penetration of UK tabloids	Low	High (41% of Pop)
Content of Irish Press	Mostly home developed	Cost pressures increase newspaper use of British and US syndicated news
Religious Press	Low	High
State TV and Radio	Dominant	Fragmenting. More satellite channels
Content on TV and Radio	High quality. Higher news values	Tabloidisation of Media
Internet	Low (Mostly mirror of mainstream media)	Increase in citizen media (radical) blogging, discussion boards etc.
Guerrilla communication	Viral communication low	Multiple platforms like Digit , Youtube, Facebook, etc allows personalised communication
Flow of communication	Top down from authorities and dominant opinion leaders	Increase of horizontal communication from citizen to citizen