

In the Know? Media, Migration and Public Beliefs

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Abstract:

Given our wider concerns as to the degree to which the mainstream mass media in Ireland constitutes a public sphere, we have undertaken our analysis in the context of the long-standing debates within media and communication studies focused on how media content shapes public perceptions and beliefs about socially contentious issues. This article presents an analysis of data regarding people's knowledge of and beliefs about migration into the Republic of Ireland. The data in question has been generated through an interviewer-administered survey conducted with participants primarily in the west, mid-west and south of the country. The findings address such topical issues as common knowledge and popular beliefs regarding: numbers and nationalities entering Ireland; reasons for inward migration; welfare entitlements of asylum seekers and people's perceptions about the relative ease with which diverse groups integrate. Our findings will be interpreted taking into account participants' age, education, religiosity, occupation and contact with immigrants. Popular beliefs will be contextualised by comparison to information from other data sources. Following on from our earlier work regarding media coverage of asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland, the findings will also address the question of where people source their information regarding immigration from and will examine the relationship between knowledge, belief and information sources.

Key Words: public beliefs; attitudes; immigration; misinformation; asylum seekers.

Introduction:

This article examines the role of mainstream mass media in Ireland in shaping the general public's understandings of inward migration. We begin by explaining the background contexts to our research and discuss our motivations for undertaking this project which is the first of its kind in the Republic of Ireland. Our discussion of the theoretical basis of the article is focused on debates concerning attitude formation, media effects, media content and the significance of knowledge. Having briefly described our article's methodological basis we elaborate on and discuss the implications of the key findings of our work.

Background Context(s) of Our Research

Traditionally, Ireland has been a country of emigration. Until the advent of the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' in the early 1990s, and with the exception of a short period in the 1970s, Ireland has been a site of net outward migration. During the improved economic climate of the 1990s, this trend reversed, driven in the main by three key phenomena – the return migration of former Irish emigrants, the inward migration of EU and non-EU economic migrants and the arrival of people seeking asylum under

the grounds of the Geneva Convention. The 2006 Census records that Ireland's population, previously quite homogenous, diversified rapidly during this period. Today, approximately 10% of the population of usually resident persons are non-Irish citizens. Although Ireland has always incorporated small ethnic minority populations, the largesse of this recent phenomenon has highlighted the need for policy responses to ensure the successful integration of ethnic majority and minorities, citizens and non-citizens (see Fanning 2002 and 2007). The Irish citizenry have manifested both positive and negative responses to new immigrants of all kinds and the extant research has recorded a rise in incidents of discrimination and harassment (see for example, NCCRI 2008 and FRA 2008, p.123).

Desiring to contribute positively to integration as knowledge-generators, we have, since 2002, been involved in researching and writing about public attitudes to ethnic minorities in, and new immigrants to, Ireland. Furthermore, we have placed a particular emphasis on the role of the mass media in public discourse on this subject, believing this to be a significant mechanism for the dissemination of understandings which inform public attitudes. In studying mass media coverage regarding a sub-set of Ireland's migrant population, we have been struck in particular by the inward-looking focus of many media organisations. Our earlier analyses concur with van Dijk (1991) in that we found that Irish media content reflects a focus on majority concerns, on their perspective, their understandings, their fears, and their experiences regarding inward migration (see for example Haynes *et al* 2006a). We found that, consequently, much media content fails to provide its audience with significant detailed information regarding new inward migrants, including the context(s) of their emigration. Furthermore, some media content was found to include misinformation even regarding the applicability of categorisations such as economic migrant, asylum seeker and refugee.

For these reasons, we determined to investigate the knowledge and beliefs of Irish residents regarding immigrants to their country. In this endeavour, our goals are to examine the veracity and level of their knowledge and to seek to connect differences therein to the information sources employed. Again, we give consideration to the media as a potential source of information, but we also consider the quality and quantity of knowledge available through direct experience and by word of mouth.

Public Attitudes To Immigrants

In recent years, studies of public attitudes to immigrants in Ireland have benefited from an increased availability of reliable data on this subject, often from large-scale European surveys. One such survey - the *Eurobarometer* study (2003) - indicates that Irish people are quite open to the idea of cultural diversity, with almost three quarters of a representative sample agreeing that "It is a good thing for any society to be made up of people from different cultures and religions" and more than half agreeing that "Ireland's diversity in terms of race, religion or culture adds to its strengths". However, in reality this tolerance of diversity is limited in scale. More than three quarters of the sample tended to agree that "There is a limit to how many people of other races, religions or cultures a society can accept" and more than two thirds tended to agree that "Ireland has reached its limits: if there were more people belonging to these minority groups there would be problems".

Reporting on the *European Social Survey* 2002/3, Semyonov *et al* (2008) find that, on a measure of views regarding the impact of foreigners on society, a somewhat higher proportion of Irish respondents view this impact in a negative light than the European average.

Analyses of the factors which predict more negative attitudes to immigrants by such authors as Semyonov *et al* (2008) and Coenders *et al* (2005) clarify that both individual and structural influences apply. Among individual factors, economic vulnerability, lower levels of education (particularly a lack of third level education), rural dwelling and conservative political views are linked to more negative attitudes. Structural factors, such as the national economic climate and the prevalence of right-wing ideologies in the national political sphere, also contribute to negativity (Semyonov *et al* 2008). The authors add that the larger the *perceived* sizes of the foreign population, the more negative the views of foreigners.

Theoretical framework:

Attitude formation

The factors identified by Semyonov *et al* (2008) and Coenders *et al* (2005) support theoretical understandings which emphasise the significance of perceived resource competition to informing and supporting negative attitudes to immigrants:

“...consistent with theoretical explanations negative views are likely to be more pronounced among socio-economically vulnerable populations (who tend to be threatened by competition generated by the out-group populations) and among those who hold conservative ideologies (who are more concerned with the national, cultural and ethnic homogeneity of the state)” (Semyonov *et al* 2008, p. 21).

Esses *et al* (2001, p.394) clarify that the perception of competition is not confined to economic resources, but also incorporates competition for social (including cultural) and political dominance. The perception of the limited availability of economic, social or political advantage, in combination with the presence of a group who are held to be (capable of) vying for these advantages leads to a sense of competition among these groups (Esses *et al* 2001, p. 394).

Perception is therefore significant to inter-group relations – perceptions of the economic climate, perceptions of the goals and capabilities of immigrant groups, perceptions of the size of the immigrant population – that which people believe they know to be true impacts on their attitudes towards immigrants. Semyonov *et al* (2008, p.22) agree that:

“Such attitudes are shaped and influenced not only by individual-level characteristics and structural sources of threat but also by perceptions and misperceptions. Thus, in an era of global migration perceptions and misperceptions of immigrant groups should become a major subject of concern to both policy-makers and social scientists”.

Media Effects

We hold that the media can play an important role in shaping these perceptions. The subject of media effects is, of course, highly controversial. Social scientists agree that the media do not simply proffer understandings that the audience uncritically absorb. However, they have failed to agree on whether and by what mechanisms the media

does shape our public discourse and private understandings. We fall on the side of those who continue to argue that the media do hold influence (see Kitzinger, 2007). We feel particularly confident in making this statement with regard to a socially-distant group such as immigrants. While fully accepting the audiences' capability to negotiate and reject media-disseminated knowledge and understandings, we hold that this process is more difficult where they lack an alternate to sources of information found in the mainstream media (see Philo 1993). Certainly there is evidence that media content which problematises immigrants can contribute to negative attitudes (see Short and Magna 2002 cited in Danso *et al* 2007, p.1121). As such, we expected to find that the significance of the mass media to our respondents' knowledge and beliefs about immigrants is tempered by their access to alternative channels of information and understandings, e.g. by means of direct experience or word of mouth. We also seek to confirm whether the positive relationship between direct experience and attitudes found in the *Know Racism* survey of 2003 holds within our sample (Millward Brown IMS 2004). Our data enables us to examine the relationship between sources of information about and attitudes towards immigrants. "As a general rule it is far more likely that the media contribute to attitude formation by repeated patterns of representation – significant aspects of which may impact in unconscious ways – rather than through spectacular one-off high impact events" (Hargreaves 2001, p.27).

Media Content

Our earlier studies of Irish print media content (both tabloid and broadsheet), focused specifically on representations of asylum seekers and refugees and found extensive negative representations of this diverse group. Such framings were often informed by the in-group's fears and concerns relating to the impacts of immigration on economic prosperity, crime and social integration. Within negative representations, asylum seekers and refugees were variously depicted as a, threat to public services and welfare, safety and cultural dominance of the majority population, constructing the perception of resource competition, identified as a factor in negative attitude formation.

We do not hold that all immigrant groups are equally subject to negative construction in the Irish mass media. Indeed, both in the mass media and in public discourse, some immigrant groups, such as the Polish, are commonly subject to positive evaluations, for example regarding their work ethic and importance to Irish economic prosperity. Nonetheless, existing research warns us against drawing oversimplified conclusions, based on the manifest positivity or negativity of representations, regarding the impact of media content on public attitudes. For example, Esses *et al* (2001, p.391) note that positive representations of immigrants can have a perverse effect on the attitudes of those who hold that access to economic, social and political resources is (and/or should be) inherently unequal (and are therefore classified as high in social dominance orientation). Such individuals hold that gains by one group can only be achieved at the expense of another. As such, positive representations of immigrants, for example of their work ethic, economic or social integration, can heighten a perception of threat on the part of those who believe that the economic and social gains of immigrants must come at the expense of majority's dominance. For immigrants this represents a sort of 'double-bind'. Because of the threats that they are seen as posing, immigrants face a fundamental dilemma. On the one hand, immigrants who do not do well economically may be perceived as detrimental to national well-

being, as a drain on social services such as welfare and unemployment insurance (see for example, Johnson *et al*, 1997; Gallup 1999) Also, immigrants who do not do well socially and thus are not integrated into the “mainstream” may be perceived as threats to collective identity (see for example, Johnson *et al*, 1997). On the other hand and perhaps less obviously, when immigrants succeed economically, they may also be viewed negatively by members of the receiving society” (Esses *et al* 2001, p.391).

The Importance of Knowledge

The above findings may seem to construct an impasse for those seeking to positively influence media content. However, using experimental methods, Danso *et al* (2007) find that media content which focuses exclusively on the immigrant group, rather than on framing the immigrant group in terms of their similarities to or differences from the majority, reduces prejudice even among those who regard competition as ‘zero-sum’. The researchers propose that a positive focus on the immigrant group exclusive of the majority can reduce a perception of inter-group competition. Learning more about our immigrant population and immigration in general was also found to have a positive impact on the attitudes of young people by researchers conducting a pan-European survey on population education (Van Peer 2006). Findings show that “there is a significant relation between knowledge and perception of the migration issue” (Van Peer 2006, p.121). Specifically, a better knowledge of the phenomenon of immigration and (to a lesser extent) of migrants, was shown to positively impact attitudes towards immigrants. Van Peer (2006) concludes that knowledge has an impact on the formation of attitudes and that as such knowledge acquisition is important for the advancement of multiculturalism. While she focuses on schools, we would suggest that the mass media is also an instrument of socialisation, one which we are exposed to throughout our lifetime. As such, while the formal education system is unquestionably a key site for advancing integration among young people and future generations, a focus on the mass media allows us to address the perceptions and misperceptions of the current generation.

Methods:

In our overall research project we have made use of a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods. This article adopts a quantitative approach to examining public attitudes and understandings of inward migration to Ireland. Our dataset consists of 453 interviews carried out in 2007-8 in 26 different locations in the West, Mid-West and South of Ireland using a face-to-face survey administered by a team of research assistants. The survey was pilot-tested and administered to randomly selected households in the provinces of Munster and Connaught. Twenty-five of the respondents identified themselves as being of non-Irish origin and have been excluded from the analysis. The primary demographics of interest are gender, age, education, religiosity and occupation (**See Appendix A**).

Main Findings:

Positivity and Negativity

The countervailing attitudes to immigration previously identified in the *Eurobarometer* (2003) study are strongly confirmed in our findings. Age, education and religiosity were found to be significant variables in relation to whether immigration is seen as a positive or a negative thing. Our respondents were asked to

state whether they ‘tended to agree’, ‘didn't know’ or ‘tended to disagree’ with a series of statements relating to cultural diversity (The data are summarised in Tables 12-18 **See Appendix D**). In respect of the latter two questions regarding limits, older people are more likely to agree than younger people, indicating a more conservative attitude towards limiting migration (‘There is a limit’ ($t=3.95$, $p<.001$) and ‘A limit has been reached’ ($t=4.32$, $p<.001$).

Education is a statistically significant factor in respect of the first (It is a good thing for any society to be made up of people from different cultures and religions) and fourth (Ireland has reached its limits; if there were more people belonging to these minority groups there would be problems) *Eurobarometer* questions. People with higher levels of education are more likely to agree that different cultures and religions represent a social benefit and more likely to disagree that the limit to minorities has been reached. Religiosity emerges as a statistically significant factor in respect of the first (It is a good thing for any society to be made up of people from different cultures and religions) and third (There is a limit to how many people of other races, religions or cultures a society can accept) *Eurobarometer* questions. People who report themselves as more religious are less likely to agree that different cultures and religions represent a social benefit and more likely to agree that there is a limit to the number of people from minorities a society can accept. Our findings are in agreement with previous research which seeks to explain the ways in which immigration is perceived in Irish society. In identifying who was more likely to see immigration in negative terms that research stressed the significance of individual factors such as low levels of education, social conservatism as well as economic vulnerability (see Coenders *et al* 2005 and Semyonov *et al* 2008).

The Importance of Competition

Economic considerations are to the fore in terms of how migrant workers and asylum seekers are perceived by the public (see Coenders *et al* 2005 and Semyonov *et al* 2008). Occupation and education were found to be of significance in terms of attitudes towards the economic impact of immigration. Respondents were asked their opinion as to how immigrant workers have affected the Irish economy. Some 51.9% saw it as a positive, 13.3% as negative, and 33.4% as mixed. Those with higher education tended to be more positive about such effects than those without ($t=5.6$, $p<.001$). There were no discernible significant differences in how respondents who mentioned specific countries as sources of immigration view the economic effects of migration. There is a clear relationship between social class (as evidenced by occupational category) and attitudes to migrant workers. In Chart 1 (**see Appendix E**) we see the mean value of respondents belief about economic effects of migrants (1= positive, 3 = negative) of six occupational categories. As the occupational status decreases, the level of perceived negative effect on the economy rises. Those whose occupational category and level of education provide better economic security are those who are most likely to regard the economic impact of immigration as positive. In general, when asked to identify the reasons (unprompted) behind immigration, the most commonly mentioned reason was employment related (79.2%) followed by better quality of life (58.4%), social welfare (23.4%) and family re-unification (12.6%).

However, the ways in which our respondents report on Polish immigrants is of particular interest. They are the group who are most frequently mentioned when

respondents were asked to identify who had immigrated to Ireland (97.7%) and who had best integrated into Irish society (67.3%). The reasons given as to why the Poles have had greater success in terms of social integration stress factors such as their capacity for hard work (29.2%); their cultural similarity (13.6%); their Catholicism (10.3%) and their ability to speak English (5.8%). Age was found to be of significance with older respondents more likely to cite hard work and Catholicism as the reasons why the Polish have integrated well. Those who are more religious are more likely to cite the capacity for hard work amongst the Polish and their social networks as being the reasons why they integrate best. Respondents who cited TV as their primary information source concerning immigrants were more likely to mention the capacity for hard work, whilst those who stated that newspapers were their primary source of information were more likely to mention cultural similarity. It is important to note that this identification of primary source does not exclude the use of and the reliance on additional sources which may be as important in shaping attitudes. These positive perceptions of the Polish reproduce media discourses that have stressed the extent to which the Poles are like the Irish.

As we have noted elsewhere, it is notable that the human interest story has been utilized by media professionals in seeking to explain Polish migration. However, in response to our open ended questions we also encountered some negative commentary about the Polish which blamed them for dangerous or reckless driving and for driving Polish registered cars which are exempt from Irish motor tax or insurance – a theme which has also received considerable media attention in Ireland.

Furthermore, it is important to consider that these more positive media representations do not necessarily result in positive evaluations. Respondents who consider that Poles' integration into Irish society is based on their work ethic are neither more likely to regard the impact of immigration as positive or to value cultural diversity. The Polish work ethic may in fact be perceived as a source of competition. Earlier we referred to the so-called 'Catch 22' situation experienced by migrant workers. Poles may be regarded as good workers, but this does not readily lead to a positive assessment of immigration on the economy, particularly amongst those further down the socio-economic ladder.

Misinformation

Considerable confusion and misinformation prevails about specific aspects of immigration. At the outset respondents were asked if they had any idea how many people immigrated to Ireland in 2006. The mean estimate was 79,958 with a range from 250 to 1,000,000 immigrants in that time frame. In fact, 203,894 PPS numbers were issued to foreign workers in that year (CSO 2009). Less than 10% of those responding to this question estimated equivalent to or higher than the number of PPS numbers issued in that year.

Particular misunderstanding is in evidence concerning the question of asylum seeking. We asked our respondents to identify which nationalities have sought asylum in Ireland in the last five years. The highest mentions were of Nigerians (71%), Romanians (45.1%), Somalis (25.7%), Lithuanian (16.8%), Latvian (16.4%), and Congolese (15.2%).

Mentions of Lithuanians and Latvians indicate misinformation regarding the constitution of the asylum seeking population over the last five years and reflect respondents' difficulties in defining the difference between an asylum seeker and a refugee, identified in earlier publications, and is, we argue, reflective of the mainstream media's tendency to conflate both terms when reporting on immigration.

In addition to these, Nigerians, Romanians and Congolese were appropriately cited by our interviewees. Our past analyses of print media content found that Nigerian and Romanian were the most common identifiers of nationality referenced in print media stories regarding asylum seekers and refugees. While Nigerians (24.1%) were the most numerous group to seek asylum in Ireland in 2006, applications were also received from people fleeing the Sudan (7.1%); Romania (6.7%); Iraq (5.0%); Iran (4.8%) and Georgia (4.0%).

The numbers of those seeking asylum was significantly over-estimated with numbers ranging from 1 to 500,000 (the mean figure was 19,302). Independent t-tests indicated that statistically significant higher estimates were more likely for younger respondents ($t=2.02$, $df=181$, $p<.01$). Mean estimates were in fact five times higher than the actual numbers of asylum seekers entering Ireland in that year. This suggests significant misinformation on the part of the public. According to the Irish Council for Refugees, applications for asylum have been falling for the last five years and in 2006 Ireland received only 4,314 applications. It is worth noting, in this context, that our previous content analysis of newspaper articles on asylum seekers and refugees, found that reports citing changes in the numbers of applications, were more likely to focus on increasing numbers, than on stable or declining numbers. It is interesting to contrast the over-estimation of those seeking asylum with estimations of the number of immigrants in general. This may indicate that respondents regard these categories as mutually exclusive and moreover may reflect a media generated panic about asylum seekers.

Beliefs about the reasons why people seek asylum in Ireland and the supposed 'benefits' which accrue to asylum seekers are also of interest. At 15.9%, safety is the second last reason cited as to why people seek asylum, with quality of life (61.9%), employmentⁱ (35.3%) and social welfare (18%) being the key reasons cited. The significantly greater number of mentions of financial reasons over reasons related to safety suggests a misunderstanding or rejection of a basis for asylum-seeking in escaping persecution.

We asked our respondents to identify how asylum seekers support themselves whilst in Ireland. The responses were as follows: social welfare (83.4%), begging (31.5%), illegal employment (27.1%) and legal employment (10.5%). Those with less than third level education were more likely to mention illegal employment ($t=2.1$, $p<.05$) and begging ($t=2.28$, $p<.05$) than those with third level education. It is worth stressing that asylum seekers are currently prohibited from paid work in Ireland. Engaging in paid work can result in fines or imprisonment. Those mentioning legal employment were clearly unaware of this serious restriction upon the rights of asylum seekers. The mention of illegal employment is also of interest in that more than one quarter of our respondents associate asylum seekers with illegal or criminal activities, thereby reproducing the criminality frame that is in evidence within mainstream media discourse (see Devereux, 2006).

Respondents' estimates of the asylum seekers' allowance ranged from nil to €1000 with a mean of €112.41 (SD= 88.4). Statistically significant lower estimates were made by those with a lower level of education ($t=-2.17$, $p<.05$). In actual fact, their allowance amounts to only €19.10 per week.ⁱⁱ

Respondents also identified (unprompted) a range of benefits, which they perceived asylum seekers as receiving. These included free communal accommodation (60.5%), child benefit (47.2%), free meals (43%), rent supplement (40.1%), food vouchers (34.3%) free buggies (32.7%), medical benefit (23.1%) free local authority accommodation (21.5%), and free cars (7.5%). Those with most significant forms of contact with immigrants were less likely than those with less significant forms of contact to mention either free buggies ($t=3.29$, $p<.01$) or free cars ($t=5.17$, $p<.001$). Asylum seekers are currently housed in full-board accommodation centres. They receive child benefit and are entitled to free medical care. However, they have no entitlement to rent supplement or free local authority accommodation. They do not receive food vouchers or free cars. Asylum seekers can apply for an exceptional needs payment, which might be used to purchase such things as push-chairs, however there is no entitlement to this payment (RIS 2008).

In further analysing our data we wanted to know if our respondents' level of contact with immigrants had any bearing on their levels of understanding and whether their primary source of information was of significance. Using ANOVA we found no difference in terms of primary source of information. We then compared respondents with more significant contacts to those with less significant contacts (3 vs 1 or 2 on our scale). Contact proves to be positive in terms of only one variable – the belief that asylum seekers are in receipt of free cars. These are important findings. They suggest that the Irish media are under-performing in terms of their information function and contact, where it exists, is not a guarantee of accurate knowledge.

Knowledge Matters

Following Van Peer (2006) we ask does misinformation or lack of information lead to greater negativity towards immigrants? The existing research literature suggests that the higher the *perceived* number of immigrants the more negative the attitudes (see Semyonov, 2008 and Coenders et al 2005). In our analysis we did not find that those who overestimate the size of the immigrant population any more likely to see the economic impact of immigration as negative. Neither did we find that those who overestimate the size of the immigrant population are more likely to agree with the 'limits' question discussed earlier. These tests were replicated for the asylum seeking population. We found that those who overestimate the size of the asylum seeking population are not any more likely to see the economic impact of immigration as negative. However, a significant finding does emerge in terms of the questions concerning limits. Using an independent t-test we compared those who estimated 4,314 or less asylum seekers with those who estimated more than 4,315 asylum seekers. We found that those who overestimate the size of the asylum seeking population are more likely to agree that "There is a limit to how many people of other races, religions or cultures a society can accept" ($t=3.66$, $p<.001$) and are more likely to agree that "Ireland has reached its limits: if there were more people belonging to these minority groups there would be problems" ($t=2.7$, $p<.01$). Equally, we found a relationship between beliefs concerning the alleged benefits accruing to asylum

seekers, specifically the belief that they receive rent supplement and agreement that “Ireland has reached its limits: if there were more people belonging to these minority groups there would be problems” ($t=4.15$, $p<.001$). Furthermore, we found a significant relationship between the belief that asylum seekers receive ‘free cars’ and negative perceptions of the economic impact of immigration. These findings, we suggest, point to a relationship between knowledge of, and attitudes to, immigration.

The Significance of Contact

We have already noted in the section on misinformation that we found no difference in the level of misinformation apparent among respondents on the basis of the source of information they employed. Those who depend on the mass media for their information about immigrants are no better informed than those who depend on direct experience or word of mouth. A total of 62.4% of respondents cited a combination of TV, newspapers and radio as their first choice in terms of where their information about immigrants came from, in contrast to 26.4% who said ‘direct experience’ and 10.3% who said ‘word of mouth’. A larger number again – 84.1% named TV, newspapers and radio as their first choice in terms of the source of their information about asylum seekers. This is in contrast to the 6.1% and the 7.7% who referred to direct experience and word of mouth respectively. But, is one or the other a more positive force in shaping attitudes and perceptions?

Our data indicates that those who cite direct experience and word of mouth as a source of knowledge about immigrants are more likely to resist multiculturalism than those who don’t. The same holds true for mass media, with those who cite the media as a source of knowledge also being more likely to resist multiculturalism. It is important however to note that ‘direct experience’ is a problematic term, open to multiple interpretations. This is highlighted by the responses to another question which asked respondents to specify the *nature* of their contact with immigrants. They cited a wide variety of forms, everything from a family tie to a chance meeting. Thus direct experience, potentially taking so many diverse forms, proved too broad a term to be useful. For example, when correlated with the *Eurobarometer* question on the limits of multiculturalism we find that contact, objectively categorised on the basis of the ties cited by respondents¹, is linked to positivity, as opposed to the negativity associated with direct experience.

When we analysed responses to the *Eurobarometer* questions we found that those who have more significant forms of contact with immigrants are more likely to reject the statement that “Ireland has reached its limits: if there were more people belonging to these minority groups there would be problems”. We also found that those who have more significant forms of contact with immigrants are also more likely to rate the economic impact of immigration as positive than those with less significant forms ($t=2.2$, $p<.03$). The apparent positive relationship between more significant forms of social contact and perceptions about the impact of immigration raises for us a crucial issue about the role of the mass media.

¹ The following provide examples of the recoding of the forms of contact listed by respondents: contact with immigrants who were family, friends, work colleagues or housemates was recoded as the most significant forms of contact, contact with immigrants through one’s local church or local service industries or sporting activities was recoded as forms of medium significance, contact with immigrants as clients, customers or on the street was recoded as forms of least significance.

As noted in the section on misinformation, more significant forms of contact do not guarantee that respondents will be more accurately informed about immigration and immigrant groups. As such, the positive relationship between significant forms of contact and more positive attitudes to immigration may be an emotional rather than a reasoned response i.e. occurring in spite of misinformation. This suggests that contact is not an alternative to the mass media as a source of informed frameworks of understanding.

Moreover, our findings suggest that less significant forms of contact are the most common. Almost three quarters of our sample (72.7%) scored at the lowest level for forms of contact with immigrants; 19.2% were ranked at the intermediate level and just 8.1% reported having the most significant forms of contact. As a result of this apparent social distance, the mass media play the primary role in informing the general public about immigration.

Conclusion:

Our findings point to considerable confusion and misinformation amongst the general public concerning inward migration. Our research raises important questions about how the mainstream media in Ireland have explained the complexities of this phenomenon. The Irish mass media have played a very limited public sphere role in this regard. We find that the mass media have effectively failed to ensure an informed citizenry as evidenced by the misinformation we have identified.

We have found that more significant forms of social contact with immigrants are linked to more positive dispositions towards immigrant groups. However, the generally low levels of contact reported in this and other surveys, combined with our finding that contact does not *necessarily* correlate with significantly more accurate knowledge, supports our thesis that it is, in fact, the mass media that play the pivotal role in informing the general public about immigration.

From the outset we have made clear our conviction that the media are important in the creation of a public sphere and that knowledge and accurate information are the *sine qua non* of successful interculturalism (cf. Van Peer, 2006). In light of the findings of this study, we remain convinced about the power of the media in shaping public beliefs, and more importantly, in how those beliefs and attitudes can be perverted by a knowledge vacuum, in the absence of an informed media debate.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: Tables 1 to 5

Table 1: Gender of respondents (N=427)

		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	149	34.9	34.9
	Female	278²	65.1	100.0
	Total	427	100.0	

Table 2: Age Cohort of Respondents (N=426)

		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-24	36	8.5	8.5
	25-30	65	15.3	23.7
	31-40	116	27.2	50.9
	41-50	84	19.7	70.7
	51-60	42	9.9	80.5
	>60	83	19.5	100.0
	Total	426	100.0	

² As more women work in the home than men, door-to-door surveys are more likely to have a higher number of female respondents.

Table 3: Highest Educational Level of Respondents (N=425)

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Primary	39	9.2	9.2
Lower secondary	76	17.9	27.1
Higher secondary	133	31.3	58.4
PLC	22	5.2	63.5
Third level non degree	65	15.3	78.8
Third level degree or above	90	21.2	100.0
Total	425	100.0	

Table 4: Respondents' Self Assessment of Religiosity (1=lowest, 10 =highest) (N=423)

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Not at all religious	28	6.6	6.6
2	15	3.5	10.2
3	23	5.4	15.6
4	38	9.0	24.6
5	98	23.2	47.8
6	80	18.9	66.7
7	60	14.2	80.9
8	51	12.1	92.9
9	17	4.0	96.9
Very religious	13	3.1	100.0
Total	423	100.0	

Table 5: Respondents' Occupation Category (N=371)*

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Professional;	25	6.7	6.7
Managerial/Technical	42	11.3	18.1
Non-Manual	42	11.3	29.4
Skilled Manual	34	9.2	38.5
Semi-skilled	44	11.9	50.4
Unskilled	3	.8	51.2
Unemployed	7	1.9	53.1
Retired	75	20.2	73.3
Home duties	68	18.3	91.6
Ill/Disabled	2	.5	92.2
Student	29	7.8	100.0
Total	371	100.0	

*For ease of handling these data, we further recoded the groups into six categories: Professional, Managerial and Technical / Non manual / Skilled Manual / Semi-skilled / Unskilled or Unemployed or Disabled / and others. These data were recoded into a new three point variable. Those who mentioned having a family member or a friend who was an immigrant were scored as 3. Those with sustained direct contact with immigrants such as teachers, support workers, or those with immigrant workers or

co-workers and those who socialised with immigrants were scored as 2. Those with minimal contact such as only seeing immigrants on the streets or as service providers in shops were scored as 1. The data for this new variable, level of contact is given in Table 6.

APPENDIX B: Tables 6 to 10

Table 6: Respondents' Contact Level with Immigrants (N=406)

		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Lowest contact	295	72.7	72.7
	Intermediate contact	78	19.2	91.9
	Highest contact	33	8.1	100.0
	Total	406	100.0	

Respondents were also asked to identify the primary sources of information about immigrants and asylum seekers. Tables 7-10 show the summary data for primary identification and total mentions of each information source in respect of immigrants and asylum seekers respectively.

Table 7: Respondents' First Choice in response to "Where does most of your information about immigrants to Ireland come from?"

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	TV	143	33.4	33.4	33.4
	Newspapers	94	22.0	22.0	55.4
	Radio	30	7.0	7.0	62.4
	Direct Experience	113	26.4	26.4	88.8
	Word of mouth	44	10.3	10.3	99.1
	Missing value	4	.9	.9	100.0
	Total	428	100.0	100.0	

Table 8: Respondents' First Choice in response to "Where does most of your information about asylum seekers in Ireland come from?"

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	TV	225	52.6	52.6	52.6
	Newspapers	105	24.5	24.5	77.1
	Radio	30	7.0	7.0	84.1
	Direct Experience	26	6.1	6.1	90.2
	Word of mouth	33	7.7	7.7	97.9
	Academic sources	1	.2	.2	98.1
	Community organisations/ meetings	1	.2	.2	98.4
	Missing value	4	.9	.9	99.3
	No opinion	3	.7	.7	100.0
	Total	428	100.0	100.0	

Table 9: Total mentions of major Information Sources regarding Immigrants

	Frequency	Percent
TV	394	92.1
Newspapers	368	86.0
Radio	345	80.6
Direct Experience	310	72.4
Word of mouth	338	79.0

Table 10: Total mentions of major Information Sources regarding Asylum Seekers

	Frequency	Percent
TV	392	91.6
Newspapers	357	82.7
Radio	338	79.0
Direct Experience	217	50.7
Word of mouth	298	69.6

Appendix C:

Table 11: Cross-tabulation of primary information source by level of education

		Highest level of education						Total
		A	B	C	D	E	F	Primary
Where does most of your information about asylum seekers come from?	TV	21 53.8%	43 56.6%	82 61.7%	13 59.1%	23 35.4%	42 46.7%	224 52.7%
	Newspapers	5 12.8%	15 19.7%	31 23.3%	5 22.7%	17 26.2%	32 35.6%	105 24.7%
	Radio	6 15.4%	4 5.3%	10 7.5%	0 .0%	6 9.2%	3 3.3%	29 6.8%
	Direct Experience	0 .0%	7 9.2%	3 2.3%	0 .0%	10 15.4%	5 5.6%	25 5.9%
	Word of mouth	6 15.4%	7 9.2%	6 4.5%	3 13.6%	5 7.7%	6 6.7%	33 7.8%
	Academic sources	0 .0%	0 .0%	0 .0%	0 .0%	0 .0%	1 1.1%	1 .2%
	Community organisations/ Meetings	0 .0%	0 .0%	0 .0%	0 .0%	1 1.1%	0 0.0%	1 .2%

	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	1.5%	.0%	.2%
Missing value	0	0	0	1	3	0	4
	.0%	.0%	.0%	4.5%	4.6%	.0%	.9%
No opinion	1	0	1	0	0	1	3
	2.6%	.0%	.8%	.0%	.0%	1.1%	.7%
Total	39	76	133	22	65	90	425
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0%
	%	%	%	%	%	%	

A = Primary

B = Lower Secondary

C = Higher Secondary

D = PLC

E = Third Level (No Degree)

F = Third Level Degree or Above.

Appendix D: Tables 12-25.

Table 12: Responses to the Eurobarometer Question: It is a good thing for any society to be made up of people from different cultures and religions.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Tend to disagree	25	5.8	5.8	5.8
Don't know	21	4.9	4.9	10.7
Tend to agree	382	89.3	89.3	100.0
Total	428	100.0	100.0	

Table 13: Responses to the Eurobarometer Question: Ireland's diversity in terms of race religion or culture adds to its strengths.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Tend to disagree	49	11.4	11.4	11.4
Don't know	62	14.5	14.5	25.9
Tend to agree	316	73.8	73.8	99.8
Refused	1	.2	.2	100.0
Total	428	100.0	100.0	

Table 14: Responses to the Eurobarometer Question: There is a limit to how many people of other races, religions or cultures a society can accept.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Tend to disagree	51	11.9	11.9	11.9
Don't know	43	10.0	10.0	22.0
Tend to agree	334	78.0	78.0	100.0
Total	428	100.0	100.0	

Table 15: Responses to the Eurobarometer Question: Ireland has reached its limits; if there were more people belonging to these minority groups there would be problems.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Tend to disagree	91	21.3	21.3	21.3
Don't know	60	14.0	14.0	35.3
Tend to agree	277	64.7	64.7	100.0
Total	428	100.0	100.0	

Table 16: Summary t-test data on Eurobarometer Questions with Age Cohort as grouping variable.

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
There is a limit to how many people of other races, religions or cultures a society can accept	3.946	391.180	.000	.255
Ireland has reached its limits; if there were more people belonging to these minority groups there would be problems	4.319	413.688	.000	.336

Table 17: Summary t-test data on Eurobarometer Questions with Highest Level of Education as grouping variable.

	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
It is a good thing for any society to be made up of people from different cultures and religions	3.770	401.698	.000	.170
Ireland has reached its limits; if there were more people belonging to these minority groups there would be problems	-4.293	335.395	.000	-.349

Table 18: Summary t-test data on Eurobarometer Questions with Religiosity as grouping variable.

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
It is a good thing for any society to be made up of people from different cultures and religions	-2.326	395.959	.021	-.113
There is a limit to how many people of other races, religions or cultures a society can accept	2.027	393.829	.043	.134

Table 19: Summary t-test data on Eurobarometer Questions with Newspaper as Source as grouping variable.

	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
It is a good thing for any society to be made up of people from different cultures and religions	-2.197	66.537	.031	-.214
There is a limit to how many people of other races, religions or cultures a society can accept	3.044	105.304	.003	.220
Ireland has reached its limits; if there were more people belonging to these minority groups there would be problems	3.055	94.135	.003	.289

Table 20: Summary t-test data on Eurobarometer Questions with Radio as Source as grouping variable.

	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
It is a good thing for any society to be made up of people from different cultures and religions	2.014	102.287	.047	.153
There is a limit to how many people of other races, religions or cultures a society can accept	-4.787	217.658	.000	-.286
Ireland has reached its limits; if there were more people belonging to these minority groups there would be problems	-3.466	152.498	.001	-.298

Table 21: Summary t-test data on Eurobarometer Questions with Direct Experience as Source as grouping variable

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
There is a limit to how many people of other races, religions or cultures a society can accept	5.589	372.211	.000	.316
Ireland has reached its limits; if there were more people belonging to these minority groups there would be problems	8.259	374.611	.000	.547

Table 22: Summary t-test data on Eurobarometer Questions with Word of Mouth as Source as grouping variable.

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
It is a good thing for any society to be made up of people from different cultures and religions	-1.978	115.053	.050	-.142
There is a limit to how many people of other races, religions or cultures a society can accept	4.630	245.647	.000	.274
Ireland has reached its limits; if there were more people belonging to these minority groups there would be problems	4.641	195.770	.000	.364

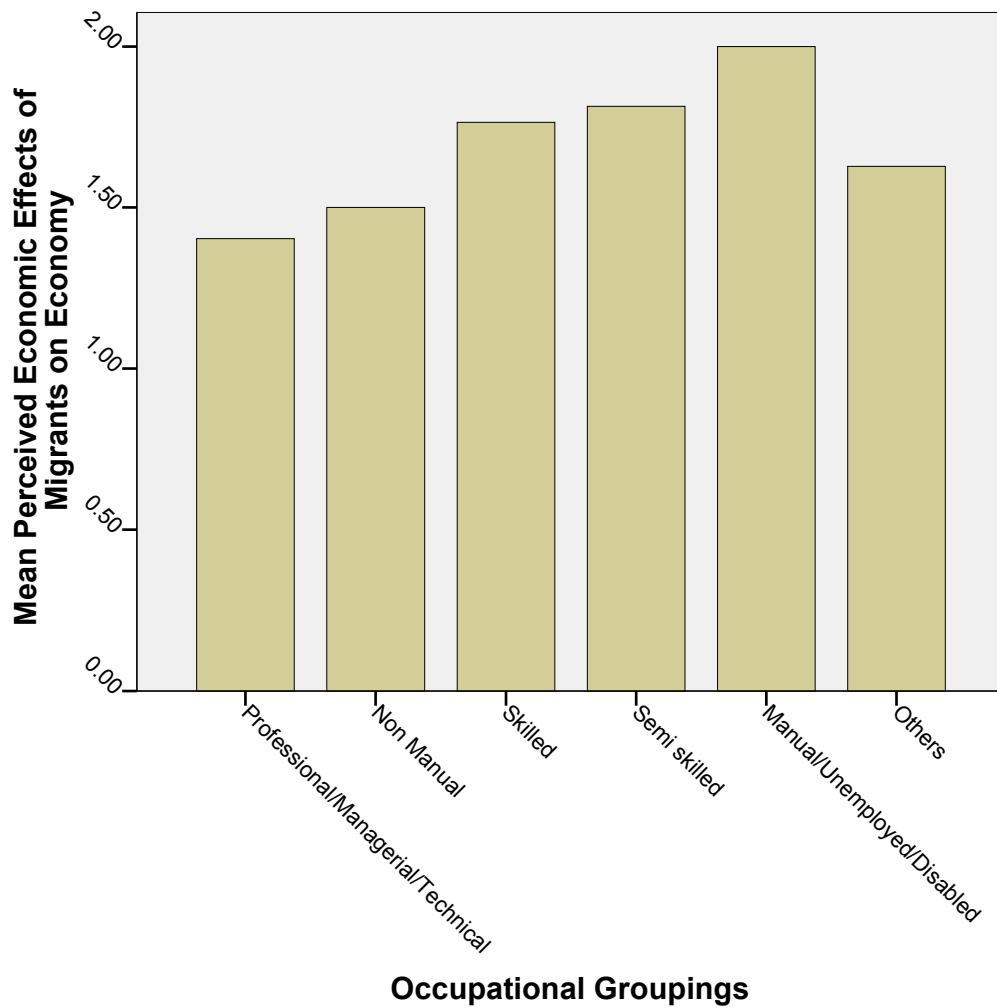
Table 23: Summary t-test data on Eurobarometer Questions with Level of Contact as grouping variable.

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
There is a limit to how many people of other races, religions or cultures a society can accept	-2.425	274.327	.016	-.180
Ireland has reached its limits; if there were more people belonging to these minority groups there would be problems	-5.522	266.437	.000	-.477

Table 24: Perceived Economic Effects of Migrants.

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	7.685	5	1.537	3.130	.009
Within Groups	176.763	360	.491		
Total	184.448	365			

Chart 1: Perceived Economic Effects of Migrants on Economy by Occupational Group.



The corresponding ANOVA data are given in Table 24 (See Appendix D).

ⁱ Under Irish law asylum seekers are not allowed to work.

ⁱⁱ When the estimate was recoded into those who estimate the correct amount of €19.10 or below and those who estimated an amount higher than this, independent t-tests showed that the only identifiable variable which impacted on this was gender. Males were more likely to have higher estimates than women ($t=2.21$, $p<.05$). Asylum seekers in Ireland currently receive communal room and board and an allowance of only €19.10 per adult.