Public Exercises in Othering: Irish Print Media Coverage of Asylum Seekers and Refugees

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Introduction:

Over the last decade, Ireland has witnessed an unprecedented inward migration, in stark contrast to its historical norm of outward migration. This new experience has brought in migrants from across the globe. Many of these have come as asylum seekers, under the terms of the Geneva Convention, and have sought to be defined as refugees. As asylum seekers, they have ostensibly come on the basis of a well founded fear or threat of persecution in their home countries, in line with the terms of the Convention. In 2004, at the time of this research, the top five countries of origin for those seeking asylum in the Republic of Ireland were Nigeria (37.3%), Romania (6%), Somalia (4.2%), China (3.2%) and Sudan (3%) (reference). Of the recommendations issued by the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioners in that year, only 6.2% were an immediate granting of refugee status (reference). In addition to asylum seekers and refugees, a growing number of migrant workers, most notably from Poland, have migrated to the Republic of Ireland seeking work and better employment prospects.

As media sociologists, we have a particular interest in the manner in which the mass media cover this new phenomenon in Ireland. We are engaged in a long-term research project entitled *Construction, Conflation and Content* that is examining how the Irish print and broadcast media have responded to this example of recent social change (see Haynes, Devereux and Breen, 2006, 2005; Breen, Haynes and Devereux, 2006). In this chapter we focus specifically on the construction of refugees and asylum seekers in the mainstream print media, with a particular emphasis on the framing routines used in this context. We draw upon the results of a quantitative content analysis of 611 newspaper articles published in Irish broadsheet and tabloid newspapers between 2000 and 2003. Our investigation into the frames employed in these media discourses suggests that we are witnessing, within media coverage, a public exercise in "othering'. In doing so, we are interested in examining to what extent media discourse manages to create a binary opposition between 'us' the imagined homogenous Irish and 'them'. We focus on the role that the generation of fear plays in this process, as well as the amplification of negativity through the use of specific frames, which serve to construct the presence of asylum seekers and refugees as a threat. We argue that there is a demonstrable link between the negative nature of media discourse and measured public attitudes and beliefs. Immigrants are problematised and racialised as 'other' to the Irish. Irishness in this context is founded upon notions of being white, able-bodied, heterosexual, sedentary and Catholic (reference).

Drawing from both framing and post-colonial theory, our chapter begins with a discussion of the 'othering' process. Moving to examine the particularities of the Irish case, we report public opinion data on the issue of asylum seekers and refugees and suggest that there is an intrinsic link between the negativity of public opinion and the negativity evident within newspaper coverage. Our examination of Irish print media focuses upon the presence of 'othering' discourses evident within media content. We conclude by discussing the significance of these 'othering' discourses for both Irish society generally and for the media industry in particular.

The 'Other'

The concept of the 'Other' has its roots in philosophy and psychology, originating with the notion that the ability to define the self is dependent on reference to an Other who embodies characteristics held to be in opposition to those of the self. In sociology, the Other is similarly viewed as central to the formation and maintenance of group identity. The concept has proved particularly fruitful in theorising the exclusionary nature of gendered, ethnic and national groupings, whereby the boundaries and core characteristics of the group are defined by reference to, and frequently exclusion of, an oppositional Other. Nowhere does the concept of the Other have more relevance than to the study of national responses, or responses of the nation, to non-nationals. The Other is, of course, central to the definition of nation. As Triandafyllidou notes, the nation cannot exist without the non-national.

> The double-edged character of national identity, namely its capacity of defining who is a member of the
> community but also who is a foreigner, compels one to ask to which extent it is a form of inward-looking self-

consciousness of a given community or the extent to which the self-conception of the nation in its unity, autonomy and uniqueness is conditioned from outside, namely through defining who is *not* a national and through differentiating the in-group from others. […] the whole argument of nationalists seems to be reduced to the fundamental question of defining the 'we' and the 'they' (Triandafyllidou, 1998: 593-594).

The Other does not exist independently. Constructed as the binary opposite of 'us', the Other is inherently a product of 'our' imagination. The Other is created as that which we are not, our negative. Where we are normal the Other is abnormal. Where we are healthy the other is pathological. Where we are acceptable, the Other is taboo. 'We' become both "the positive and the neutral" (de Beauvoir, 1989). These devices, used to construct the Other as our opposite, also have the common effect of creating the Other as a threat – to stability, to health, to order, to safety.

Framing

The concept of 'framing' is usually associated in mainstream sociology with the work of Erving Goffman. Within recent media sociology, writers such as Iyengar, Entman, Gamson and Kitzinger have applied versions of framing theory to their work on media representations of the social world (Devereux, 2006). Following in a much longer established tradition of 'agenda-setting' research within media theory, frame analysis of media content is concerned with the interpretative frameworks used by media professionals in telling stories to media audiences. Denying the idea of journalistic neutrality or objectivity, framing theory asks of us to focus on the 'shorthand' or 'cues' that media professionals use in communicating with audiences. It asks of us to critically examine the contexts in which we hear about specific social phenomena. Furthermore, it suggests that we need to carefully consider how certain words and images act as a referent (e.g. Muslim and Terrorist or Homeless and Alcoholic) for audience groups. Framing theory reminds us that media work is an active social process in which media professionals consciously or unconsciously frame stories in a particular way. However, far from re-inventing an interpretative wheel for audiences, media professionals resort to using templates which audiences will (usually) readily understand. A basic assumption of framing theory is that media content plays a central role in shaping public opinion and beliefs. While the potential for agency or creativity amongst audience members is acknowledged, framing theory places considerable weight on the power of media content (and by extension on media professionals such as news journalists, reporters, sub-editors and photographers) to shape public discourse. The obvious challenge for framing theory is to show a link between the media packaging of an issue and the way in which members of the public understand and think (and act) about the issue in question.

Public Beliefs About Refugees and Asylum Seekers

So what do the Irish public think about refugees and asylum seekers? A number of surveys of public opinion detail Irish attitudes to migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers. We have examined these in detail elsewhere (Breen, 2006) and we deal here only with a small sample of attitudinal questions from Eurobarometer 59.2. The Eurobarometer is twice-yearly pan-European survey carried out on behalf of the EU. In the tables that follow, we report only on the Irish data from 59.2 which was carried out in 2003. (For a fuller treatment of the entire dataset, see Coenders, Lubbers and Scheepers, 2005.)

Table 1 reports on the attitude of Irish respondents to the acceptability,of immigrants, refugees and those from Muslim countries. The data reflect an overall willingness to accept such persons into Ireland, with less than 11% of respondents offering a flat refusal for any of these three groups. The most positive attitudes (accept without restriction) are to those who are coming from outside the EU but not as refugees, whereas the most negative are toward those from Muslim countries.

Table 1 EB Willingness to accept immigrants (N=1004) (Source: Eurobarometer)

	MUSLIM COUNTRIES (%)	REFUGEES (%)	NON-EU COUNTRIES (%)
Be accepted, without restrictions	16.2	25.8	35.6
Be accepted, but with restrictions	60.3	59.5	51.2
Not be accepted	10.6	5.6	3.8
Don't Know	12.9	9.1	9.4

Total		100.0	100.0	100.0

These data are puzzling in the light of the data shown in Tables 2. Table 2 shows that only about 2/3 of the Irish respondents accept the proposal that the right of asylum is a fundamental human right. It also indicates that almost 3/4 of Irish respondents 'completely agree' or 'agree' with the proposition that there are too many immigrants in Ireland, and close to 2/3 'completely agree' or 'agree' with the proposition that immigrants should be sent back if safe, which suggests a very significant restriction around the rights of asylum seekers. It also seems to suggest that the only issue of concern is one of safety and appears to ignore the question of belonging.

Table 2 Views on immigrants, various aspects (N=1000) (Source: Eurobarometer)

	Completely agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Completely disagree	Don't Know
The Right of Asylum is a fundamental human right	N/A	65.7%	17.9%	N/A	16.4%
Too many immigrants (%)	38.5%	36.2%	13.8%	2.2%	9.3%
Responsible for crime (%)	18.8%	34.0%	28.0%	5.1%	14.1%
Expel if against values (%)	28.7%	27.6%	20.9%	9.0%	13.8%
Send back if safe (%)	26.6%	35.6%	18.0%	3.6%	16.2%

Table 3 provides evidence of a hard-line core among Irish respondents in terms of attitudes to immigrants. More than 1/4 are willing to send back all immigrants, whether legal or not, including children. Taken in aggregate, these responses suggest a focus among the majority of respondents on issues relating to legality and conformity, without regard to either the natural or human rights of asylum seekers and refugees, nor the reality of danger to them in their native countries.

Table 3 Attitudes to sending back of immigrants under various conditions (N=1000) (Source: Eurobarometer)

	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Don't Know
If convicted of serious offences	76.4%	10.4%	13.2%
If unemployed	36.3%	44.3%	19.4%
All legal	27.4%	52.9%	19.7%
All illegal	45.3%	39%	15.7%
All inc. children born in Ireland	28.3%	53.1%	18.6%

Table 4 provides mixed messages. While almost 3/4 of Irish respondents see that minorities are good for society, 4/5 agree that there is a limit to how many minority members there should be, and 2/3 believe that limit has already been reached, while almost 1/3 agree with the proposition that minorities should give up their own culture.

Table 4 Attitudes to minorities under various headings (N=1000) (Source: Eurobarometer)

	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Don't Know
Good for society	73.5%	17.4%	9.1%
Give up culture	31.2%	54.5%	14.3%

Give up part of culture if legal conflict	61.1%	26.1%	12.8%
There is a limit to how many from minorities	79.1%	14.0%	6.9%
The limit has been reached	65.7%	18.4%	15.9%

Overall the data from the Eurobarometer suggest a broad welcome for immigrants, but one with clearly defined parameters which are restrictive in terms of the numbers coming, the cultures they bring, and a strong sense that inward migration should be a temporary phenomenon, pending resolution of difficulties in the countries of origin, which is effectively a denial of permanent residency.

Media Framing and Othering
As media sociologists, we believe that the mass media play a significant role in informing the public, in setting the agenda for public debate and in framing the terms in which such a debate occurs, albeit a limited event. In the light of the public opinion data above, we wonder how the Irish public have arrived at these specific perspectives, especially in light of the lack of contact or social distance between the 'man in the street' and the 'average refugee/asylum seeker'. We suggest that these opinions are not based on reality, but rather on a construction of refugees and asylum seekers which is created for the mass public by the media. In relation to such content we wish to raise specific questions, namely –

- Who are the sources for stories about refugees and asylum seekers?
- How are stories about refugees and asylum seekers framed in the media?
- How are refugees and asylum seekers represented as an amorphous, homogenous group?
- In what sense, if any, are refugees and asylum seekers represented as the 'other', different from the assumed homogeneity of Irish identity?

Sources
We examined the primary, secondary and tertiary sources for these articles. Refugees, asylum seekers, and NGOs working with them accounted for less than 15% of the sources in any of these categories. We noted that 14 of the 611 stories (2.3%) used refugees, asylum seekers or related NGOs entirely as sources without reference to anyone else. On the other hand, 131 stories (21.4%) did not use any source from refugees, asylum seekers or related NGOs. The other most commonly cited groups as a primary source were elected representatives (23.6%), followed by civil servants (8.6%) and police (4.8%). These stories are all about refugees, asylum seekers and asylum seeking, but those about whom they are written are sources in only a small minority of the total. We are seeing a national newsprint discourse about one process and one associated group of people who are themselves essentially disenfranchised from the reportage on the topic. The net outcome of this effective exclusion is to construct refugees and asylum seekers as a silent minority, to create others as the agents of power and control, and to represent asylum seekers and refugees as a homogenous, amorphous mass. This group is voiceless, not because they have nothing to say, but because their rights to speak and to be heard in the debate about themselves has been severely constrained by journalists' choices of sources and reliance on official agents, such as politicians, civil servants and police. Although voiceless, this group is made highly visible in the media, but that visibility itself is negative. This is quite different from the normalised marginalisation of vulnerable groups in the media, such as the mentally ill, the homeless and the socially excluded, who are both voiceless and invisible (Devereux, 1998). In the case of asylum seekers and refugees, the denial of voice allied with high visibility adds a particular potency to the media construction of the group in question. This is a direct result of combining high visibility with low voice, which renders the frames used in media construction of refugees and asylum seekers particularly effective.

We find strong evidence of a number of distinct frames in use. We identified 5 frames in common usage: legitimacy, integration, economy, criminality and health/morality (Devereux, 2006). These can be used positively or negatively. Articles suggesting the presence or imminence of danger were more abundant in tabloids (36.9%) than broadsheets (11.2%).

Table 6 shows the number of stories utilising these frames, and broken down into broadsheet and tabloids.

Table 5 Frames in use, N of stories, by Newspaper type

Frame	Broadsheet (N=470)	Tabloid (N=141)	Total
Legitimacy	316	70	386
Integration	309	65	374
Economy	128	35	163
Criminality	119	52	171
Health/Morality	26	18	44

While these frames can be positive or negative, for the most part these frames are used primarily in a negative sense.

'Legitimacy' is an interpretative framework that is focused on the genuineness (or otherwise) of asylum seekers and refugees. Within broadsheets, stories utilizing this frame have five principal themes: deportation (16.1%), the asylum system (14.3%), and Entry into Ireland (13%). Conflation of the terms asylum seeker and refugee occurs in 22.3% of all stories which use the legitimacy frame. There is a strong focus on the issue of deportation. 17.9% of articles are concerned with attempts to contest deportation; 12.7% of stories deal with individuals who are awaiting deportation; 10.4% of stories speak of immigrants 'evading' deportation.

'Integration' is an interpretative framework that is employed in stories that have a focus in whole or in part on issues concerning fears about cultural cohesion. This frame is deployed, for example, when immigration is constructed as a threat to the assumed homogeneity of local communities or to the nation as a whole. Of stories categorized under this frame, 23.1% dealt with Racism; 16.9% were concerned with Dispersal; 11.3% focused on the Asylum System. Conflation of the terms asylum seeker and refugee occurs in 21.7% of all stories concerned with integration. The language used in many stories is also noteworthy. Terms like 'tide/wave'; 'flood' 'swamp' and 'influx' are commonly used to create a sense of the country being 'overrun' by asylum seekers and refugees. In addition to this we detected the use of a range of metaphors which serve to demonize those who are seeking asylum. References to the supposed rise in crime rates, increases in racism and racial conflict as well as threats to national security are in evidence.

'Economy' is an interpretative framework deployed in media content concerning the costs and benefits associated with inward migration. These were concerned with Dispersal (18.5%); Racism (16.7%) and Welfare Rights (9.3%). Conflation of the terms asylum seeker and refugee occur in 28.2% of all articles. Under the Economy frame a juxtapositioning occurs between asylum seekers and refugees and specific groups of the indigenous Irish poor such as Travellers, the Homeless, welfare recipients as well as 'We the Irish'. Many of the metaphors used in contrasting the amounts being (allegedly) spent on asylum seekers and refugees and the indigenous Irish poor are further evidence of the othering processes in operation. Terms such as 'Burden'; 'Beggar' 'Freeloader' 'Sponger' are in common usage. Asylum seekers and refugees are constructed as a drain on 'our' economy. We are assumed to be 'doing more than our fair share' and that the Irish pot can 'only feed so many'. Inward migrants are seen as an added cost to the welfare system and as a drain on other resources such as health and housing provision.

'Criminality' is an interpretative framework used in coverage of crimes perpetrated by or against asylum seekers or refugees. Within this category, the most common themes were Crime (23.4%), Racism (23.4%), and Illegal Entry into Ireland (15.2%). Conflation of the terms asylum seeker and refugee occurs in 17.5% of all stories concerned with criminality. From the 2003 Eurobarometer data we know that more than 51% of Irish respondents believe that refugees and asylum seekers are responsible for a great deal of petty crime. Figures also showed that non-nationals were more 6 times more likely than nationals to experience crime generally. Some 6.9% of non-EU nationals were victims of personal crimes in 2003 compared to 5.8% in 1998. This compares to a figure of 5.2% for the general population. These data are not reflected in the media coverage. In the content we studied, crimes against non-nationals by other non-nationals were more likely to be reported than such crimes by Irish citizens. Of 59 stories dealing with

alleged crime by non nationals, 16 (27%) related to violent crime, implying danger to the national population.

'Health/Morality' is an interpretative framework used in stories that have as a focus the physical or moral well-being of the host community. This frame is used in media discourse that imagines the nation as a body, which is under threat of contamination from disease, illness or other pathologies. Within this category, the most common themes were Health (40.9%), Welfare (13.6%), and Racism (13.6%). Conflation of the terms asylum seeker and refugee occurs in 38.6% of all stories concerned with health/morality. Tabloid articles were almost twice as likely as national broadsheet articles to make reference to bodily disorders, bodily disfigurement, disability or mental disorders in relation to asylum seekers and refugees. The compulsory health screening of asylum seekers and refugees in terms of HIV was a focus in 2004 for example.

The use of nationality or national status as an identifier is also interesting. Some 18% of stories refer to Nigerians, 12% to Roma, 8% to 'illegal immigrants' and 6% to 'non-nationals'. Within the newspaper subtypes, tabloid newspapers were more likely to refer to 'Africans' in stories (8.1% v. 4.3%), more likely to refer to 'illegal immigrants' (16.3% v. 10.1%), more likely to refer to 'Roma' (15.1% v. 8.6%) and less likely to refer to 'Nigerians' (17.4% v. 25.6%).There is a greater (negative) focus on those groups who are more visible in terms of skin color or membership of ethnic minority groups such as Roma Gypsies or Nigerians.

Individual stories are small, discrete events. As items they carry little import. A totality of news discourse, on the other hand, is altogether different. The frames which we have identified here have a wider function that providing a simply classification or approach function for journalists. As we discuss above in relation to framing theory, these frames provide the reader with a definitive approach to the text, and set clearly defined parameters for the discourse. In that sense, these frames serve as much more than rhetorical devices. Taken as whole, they create an aura of otherness about refugees and asylum seekers, focusing on specific dimensions and individual stories as though they were representative of the totality. By failing to identify or offer analysis of the background to the situations which asylum seekers are fleeing, this discourse also serves to remove the context from the process of asylum seeking. At one stroke, the framing of the news discourse along these lines decontextualise the very *raison d'etre* of the asylum seekers and replaces it with an invitation to considerations of illegitimacy, difference, cost, disease and threat.

Discussion: "Nothing But The Same Old Story…"

Inward migration will continue to be a feature of contemporary Irish society. While the numbers of those seeking asylum has declined (owing in no small measure to the emergence of Fortress Europe and a more repressive response by the Irish State) all of the indicators point to an on-going growth in the number of migrants who will come to live and work here. In spite of the trend evident within public opinion data that we have reached 'saturation point' in terms of the numbers of asylum seekers and refugees, we continue to have legally binding obligations towards those who seek refuge in the Republic of Ireland.

In order for Irish society to respond positively to the challenges that inward migration brings, societies members need to be properly informed about the realities around the movement of people. The data presented in this chapter suggests that far from witnessing an informed public discourse about inward migration we are seeing a public exercise in othering. In examining this issue in detail, our focus is not on the obviously racist discourse evident in some quarters of the print and broadcast media, but rather on the everyday 'run of the mill' 'normalised' coverage of asylum seekers and refugees. By adopting a framing theory approach we have emphasised the degree to which media content makes use of a number of distinct frames in order to communicate with audiences. Asylum seekers and refugees are 'othered' in a variety of ways. Their very legitimacy is made suspect. 'They' are portrayed as costing 'us' money. 'They' are a deemed threat to both the bodily and moral health of the nation. 'They' are blamed for crime and an increase in racism. Certain groups (Nigerians and Roma) are more likely to be 'othered' than others. It is also interesting to note that a number of indigenous 'out-groups' such as Travellers, the homeless and lone-parents have been appropriated within a discourse that is critical of inward migration. In more recent media discourse, a further interesting contrast has emerged between the ways in which Poles are portrayed

vis-à-vis other immigrant groups. Many newspapers have published full feature length human interest articles on the movement of Poles to Ireland. These stories have been strong on providing the contexts for recent Polish migration and they have stressed the similarities between the Poles and 'us' – like 'us' the Poles are Roman Catholic and they like to drink beer! It is somewhat ironic that one of the key planks of our similarities with the Poles – our shared fondness for alcohol – was a key othering device in demonising the migrant Irish for a significant part of the 19th and 20th centuries in the UK and the USA.

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