University of Limerick
Department of Sociology Working Paper Series

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Reasonable People v The Sinister Fringe:
Interrogating the Framing of Ireland's Water Charge Protestors
through the Media Politics of Dissent

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Interrogating the Framing of Ireland's Water Charge Protestors through the Media

Politics of Dissent

Introduction

In this research article we explore the manner in which a particular discursive device, the "sinister fringe" was deployed in national news media coverage of protests against the introduction of water charges in Ireland. We use this analysis as a lens through which to examine news media treatment of the water protests more generally, and as a means to interrogate divergences in the mainstream media's framing of the movement. We ground our interpretation in the contemporary Irish context of austerity and crisis, which we understand as linked to the overarching discourse of neoliberalism which dominates Irish political and economic life (Dukelow 2012). As such, this analysis of news media frames also references discourses about these protests which are produced and circulated by politicians. Our interest in how such discourses contribute to and reproduce hegemony is influenced by both Neo-Marxist and Foucauldian approaches (see Van Dijk, 1998; Deacon et al. 1999, p.147). Our conclusions speak to the currency of the protest paradigm as a means of understanding news media reporting of protest. We raise concerns regarding the effects of this dominant frame on deliberative democracy. We conclude that the media practices and values which lend this paradigm, (and the neoliberal status quo), its resilience, are in turn a product of the impacts of neoliberalism on the political economy of media organisations.

Unpacking the "sinister fringe"

Frames are ways of understanding an issue or an event. In reporting on social phenomena, news media organisations select from among a range of possible frames or frameworks of understanding. In doing so, they determine how they will explain the issue they cover to media audiences. They "promote a particular problem

definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation …" (Entman 1993, p.52). News reporting necessarily legitimates some frames and delegitimizes or disappears others - even in 'balanced' coverage, only a very limited selection of frames will be presented to the audience (Iyengar 1991). Our approach is both inductive and systematic, attending in particular to the explanations that are provided for the protests themselves and the tactics deployed by protestors; to the linguistic devices that are used to describe the protests and protestors, to the reporting of diversity among the protestors and their objectives, to the interpretation of public and State responses to the protestors, and to the sources employed in researching and supporting the news.

The lynchpin of this analysis is our focus on understanding the role of the "sinister fringe" within these contexts. Consequently, we begin by tracing the origins of the "sinister fringe" as a discursive device, to understand how it entered news media discourse as a necessary precursor to unpicking the ways in which it has been used to explain protests against water charges to the Irish public. Following Lee (2014) we seek to attend to divergences in usage on the part of journalists and media organisations and to explore what such differences might tell us about the factors that impact on reporting of protest.

Our paper is based upon a sample drawn from both print and broadcast media. The sample of print media articles was obtained by searching all national Irish newspapers available through Nexis, a widely subscribed database of news media content. The titles examined were *The Irish Times*; *The Irish Examiner*; *The Sunday Business Post*; *The Irish Daily Mail*; *The Sunday Independent* and *The Irish Independent*. *The Irish Times* is widely accepted as being the newspaper of record in the Republic of Ireland, is owned by a trust and is seen having a liberal pluralist ideological orientation. The other newspapers are privately owned and occupy a centre (*The Irish Examiner*; *The Sunday Business Post*) or centre right (*The Irish Independent*; *The*

Sunday Independent) ideological position. It is worth noting that Independent News and Media's largest shareholder is Denis O'Brien who owns 29.9% of the company. O'Brien's media conglomerate Communicorp owns Newstalk, Today FM and is also responsible for the syndication of news content to local and regional radio stations in Ireland. RTE is the Republic of Ireland's public service broadcaster.

We selected articles including the terms "sinister fringe", "sinister element" and "reasonable people" anywhere within the text of a news article. The search period was defined as 1st February 2014 to 1st February 2015. This time period pre-dates the first water protests and brings us through to the present day. The overall search yielded 33 articles which used the term "reasonable people" and 32 the term(s) "sinister fringe/element." Of these, a total of 26 articles dealt specifically with the water protests and it is this corpus that forms the basis of the analysis in this paper. The newspaper content selected for analysis includes letters to the editor. We have deliberately included these in our sample for analysis as we hold that they give further insight into public discourse they are also a key to understanding more about the mindset of those with editorial power within individual newspapers. While the print media sample comprises the main body of our data, we have also purposively sampled from current affairs television programming namely two episodes of *Prime Time* (RTE Television) (broadcast on the 3rd and 17th of November 2014) and current affairs radio content in the form of an episode of *Breakfast* on Newstalk which featured an interview of significance concerning the water protests and which made reference to existence of both the "sinister fringe" and "reasonable people."

In addition to the sampled newspaper content and purposively sampled broadcast content we also reference in some detail a directly related story which was widely reported and commented upon in November. In this instance it was claimed by one member of the Irish parliament that the state was facing an 'Isis situation' viz the water protests. We have chosen to include this because even though it does not

specifically make use of the terms 'sinister fringe' or 'reasonable people' it dramatically rehearses the moral panic concerning the water protests at this time.

Cottle (2008) critiques methodologies such as ours that employ frame analysis as potentially decontextuallising, resulting in a failure to recognise, or assign significance to, the manner in which alterations in the political terrain impact media reporting on protest. Our analysis of print and broadcast media framings deploying the device of "the sinister fringe" and "reasonable people" is firmly grounded within a broader archaeology of the changing political, social and economic circumstances surrounding the Irish water protests.

Austerity and Resistance.

To contextualise our discussion of the water protests we now briefly examine the Irish experience of austerity and resistance to it. The rise and fall of Ireland's 'Celtic Tiger' economy makes "Icarus look boringly stable" (O'Toole, 2010, p.10), and should be seen as a period of speculative boom within a wider neoliberal "bubble economy" (Monaghan and O'Flynn, 2013). Irish banks progressively availed of cheap money, loaned by European banks, to increasingly fund property speculation (Allen 2009, p.48), with the resulting construction boom creating a huge economic dividend for many. The illusion of Ireland's economic miracle (see Share and Corcoran, 2010) was brutally exposed however, when global finance capitalism crashed in 2008. Many of the big property developers became insolvent (see Murphy and Devlin 2009) and the loan books of Irish banks became hugely problematic. In essence they now owed "tens of billions to European banks", with no way to make good on these debts (O' Flynn et al. 2013, p.165). Ultimately, this would lead to the Irish government being forced to use "the entire Irish State as collateral for the crushing liabilities of six private banks… approximately €400 billion in leveraged loans" (McCabe, 2011, p.169). A programme of austerity would follow which saw cuts to services and a number of new levies and taxes being introduced. The

government of the day (and the subsequent government) "justified its actions in terms of 'tough choices' made in the 'national interest'", but the result was that the living standards of a huge amount of its citizens plummeted (O' Flynn et al. 2013, p.164). In 2010, Ireland, faced with a sovereign debt crisis, entered into a 'programme' and received funding from the Troika of the EU, IMF, and European Central Bank, in the process becoming the most (bank) debt burdened country in the EU. While the cost of bailing out the banks in the EU averaged €192 per capita, in Ireland it stood at a phenomenal €8,981 (Taft, 2013a cited in O'Flynn et al. 2014, p.924).

The dominant commentary was that the Irish population submissively accepted all of the 'mature sacrifices' that our government expected of us. Indeed, the then Minister for Finance Brian Lenihan, declared in April 2009 that "the steps taken had impressed our partners in Europe, who are amazed at our capacity to take pain. In France you would have riots if you tried this" (Irish Times 2009). However, tensions were beginning to surface, and the government's response to the financial crisis gave rise to a number of initiatives which, explicitly intended to expedite the development of a political consciousness and militancy, which were required for the development of mass resistance (see O' Flynn et al. 2013 for an excellent overview of these initiatives). Moreover, widespread discontent amongst the population, found savage expression in the 2011 general election, when the Fianna Fail[1]-led government was annihilated at the ballot box. In that context, the rise in electoral support for Labour and Fine Gael can (at least to some degree) be seen as a response by the electorate to both party's claims / promises to provide a viable alternative (in their words "a democratic revolution") to the austerity measures which had been introduced by the previous government.

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[1] The dominant party of Irish politics since the foundation of the Irish state.

Such electoral optimism was to prove short lived, as the new Government imposed similar policies to the government which had just been ousted. Indeed research (see Callan et. al. 2014) has shown that this new Fine Gael – Labour government introduced more regressive budgets than ones previously led by Fianna Fail.

In 2012 mass opposition developed to one of the newly introduced taxes. Homeowners were required to register for the flat-rate 'household charge', which was to be paid directly to the local authorities throughout the country. The requirement to register for the charge provided an "opportunity to resist government policy, resulting in the emergence of a nationwide campaign, which opposed austerity more generally" (O' Flynn et al. 2013, p.168). Aided by the well organised Campaign Against Household and Water Taxes (CAHWT), half of those liable for the charge did not pay (O' Flynn et al. 2013, p.168). The household charge was replaced by a 'property' tax in 2013, which was collected centrally by the Revenue Commissioners, who had been given additional powers to deduct payment from wages or social welfare payments if a liable person did not pay. These measures ensured almost total compliance with the new tax.

Against this backdrop, the 2014 local elections were a major setback for Fine Gael and the Labour Party. In comparison to the 2009 local election results Fine Gaels' share of first preference votes dropped by 10.7% resulting in the loss of 105 seats, while the Labour Party saw their share of first preference votes decline by 7% with 81 seats being lost. Fianna Fail gained 49 seats from an increase of 0.3% in their first preference votes. In contrast, Parties who had expressed opposition to Austerity did very well. Between them, Sinn Féin, The Anti-Austerity Alliance and People Before Profit saw their share of first preference votes increase by 8.6% gaining them an additional 124 seats (Reilly, 2014). Kavanagh (2014) argues that in some urban areas in particular, the narrowing of turnout differentials between middle class and working class areas may have played a role in the stronger electoral performances of

Sinn Fein, the People Before Profit Alliance, the Anti-Austerity Alliance/Socialist Party and other left wing groupings. The leader of the Labour Party resigned in the wake of these election results.

The Final Straw? The Introduction of Water Charges

Water charges were abolished in Ireland in December 1996. Since that time, users in 'group water schemes' paid directly for their water; while everybody else paid for it through general taxation[2]. In 2010, against the backdrop of the Irish governments' National Recovery Plan proposing to make €15 billion of savings by 2014, the memorandum of understanding which had been drawn up with the Troika was published. This stated that metered water charges would be introduced in 2012 or 2013. Moreover, responsibility for the provision of and charging for water was to be transferred from the local authorities to a new utility which would be established.

In June 2011 the Minister for the Environment and Local Government announced that a procurement process for the installation of water meters was underway[3]. Metered domestic water charges were to be put in place once this process was completed.

The Government announced in April 2012 that households would be liable for covering the cost of establishing the new utility company. This was estimated to be more than €800 million. In 2013 a new semi-state company, Irish Water, was established. The Government announced that charges would be introduced in 2014 and upwards of 90% of the water meters would be installed by the end of that year

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[2] When water charges were abolished in 1996 legislation to increase VAT and Motor tax to cover water costs was introduced.

[3] GMC Sierra is a consortium comprising GMC Utilities Group and Sierra Support Services Group (a subsidiary of Denis O'Brien's company, Siteserv). This consortium was awarded the contract to install water meters for Irish Water.

(Carroll 2014). In May 2014 the government abolished the €50 standing charge which the utility had requested and the Commission for Energy Regulation revealed in July that water charges were being set at €4.88 for 1,000 litres of water for customers requiring both drinking and waste water services. The average cost for a household of two adults and two children was to be €278 (Carroll 2014). In October 2014 the Commission for Energy Regulation announced that the deadline for 'customers' to sign up to Irish Water was being extended until the end of November .

The Minister for the Environment announced in November 2014 that water charges would be capped until the end of 2018. The capped rates are based on usage of a little over 43,000 litres per year for a single-adult household and approximately 70,000 litres per year for a multi-adult household. The maximum rate of domestic water charges for a single-adult household is €160 per year for a household that uses both water supply and wastewater services, and €260 per year for a multi-adult household. Those households whose premises have been metered will be billed for the metered usage if it is lower than the capped charge (Citizens Information 2015). Customers who have registered their primary residence with Irish Water can apply for a water conservation grant of €100 per year. The first bills for water will issue in April 2015 (see Irish Water 2015 for further details).

As of February 16th 2015 869,000 of the 1.9 million households in the State had "registered their details with Irish Water ahead of the commencement of billing in April" (Flynn, 2015)

The Evolution of the Water Protest Movement
Building on the relative success of the earlier Campaign Against Household and Water Taxes a series of protests against the water charges emerged throughout 2014.

It is important to note from the outset however that there is a multiplicity of reasons for people's involvement in these protests[4], and the form that these protest have taken[5].

In January 2014 the CEO of Irish Water confirmed that the utility company would have spent in the region of €85 million on consultants by 2015 (RTE News 2014a). Further controversy occurred in October 2014 when it emerged that staff at the new utility company were to receive bonus payments, even where their performance was deemed to "need improvement" (Gartland 2014). Additionally, what appeared to be exorbitant call-out charges for repair work were announced. On Saturday 11 October, opposition to the water charges intensified with a major march taking place in Dublin. Before the march began, organisers said they expected upwards of 10,000 people, however, the final estimate was that 80,000 to 100,000 people took part (the Journal.ie 2014a). At the end of October the Green Party and Sinn Féin called for a referendum that would ensure water services remain in public ownership.

November 2014 saw a number of interesting developments. On Saturday 1st November over 90 separate protest marches took place around the country (the Journal.ie 2014b). With some estimates putting the combined number of protesters at

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[4] There are for example those who were opposed to the requirement to give Irish water the social insurance numbers of all household residents (including children) as part of the registration process, those who see water as a fundamental human right, those who do not see Irish water and the costs associated with establishing the company as being the best way to tackle the deficits in the water infrastructure, those who do not see the establishment of Irish water as having anything to do with water conservation, those who are opposed to what they see as the inevitable future privatisation of water services, those that are opposed to what they see as a double charge for water services, and those who are against austerity more generally.

[5] Much of the protest throughout the country has been of a local nature. Individuals and groups of residents have for example worked together to disrupt and prevent the installation of water meters, lobbied politicians directly, publically burned registration packs, and returned unopened registration packs with no consent-no contract written on them (see Direct Democracy Ireland 2014 for a fuller explanation). There have also been large local and national public demonstrations / marches. These marches have been organised by a number of different groups/political parties.

over 200,000, it was (possibly) the largest demonstration in the history of the Irish state. On November 5th the Irish prime-minister said there would be no referendum to prevent the new utility company from being privatised and instead proposed strengthening the legislation concerning the company. Twenty-four hours later the Government suffered an embarrassing defeat in the Upper House of the Irish parliament when Labour Party senators backed an Opposition motion for a referendum to allow citizens to decide if Irish Water must remain in public ownership (McEnroe2014). However, no further discussion about such a referendum being held has taken place. Later in the month, anti-water charges protestors gathered in Jobstown, Tallaght, in West Dublin on November 15th as the Labour Party leader, Joan Burton was attending a graduation ceremony. Ms Burton was delayed in her car for more than two hours by the protestors and hit on the head with a water balloon. Finally, it was announced that bonus payments for Irish Water staff were being suspended for 2013 and 2014 on November 18th (O'Connor 2014).

December 10th 2014 saw the third, large-scale anti-water charge protest takes place in Dublin. This was the first major protest in the capital on a weekday and there were questions asked over whether this would see a small turn-out (Griffin, 2014). Right2Water claimed the turnout was over 100,000 while the Gardaí estimated the crowd to be '30,000 plus' (RTE News 2014b). Right2Water campaigner Brendan Ogle said: "We are leading people on to the streets and we will lead them on to the streets again…and we will continue to lead them on to the streets until this Government deals with water, deals with homelessness, deals with austerity and deals with the dreadful way that the citizens of this State have been forced to pay for a private gambling debt" (RTE News 2014b). A national poll conducted in December found overwhelming support for the holding of a referendum, with 74% of respondents stating they would vote to keep Irish Water in public ownership in any referendum on the matter (McConnell, 2014).

Finally, on January 31st 2015, tens of thousands of people again marched throughout the state to mark the February 2nd deadline for registration with Irish Water (see BreakingNews.ie 2015 for photographic and video coverage of the events). Local protests have continued unabated since then and further national protests by the Right2Water campaign and other groups are planned for 2015.

Reporting Dissent

The theoretical framework adopted for this research interprets discourse, in a Foucaldian sense, as practise. Discourse acts upon the world and its inhabitants: it defines problems to be addressed; it delimits the parameters within which that constructed problem can be acted upon; it categorises actors and positions their relative entitlement to a say in the defining of the problem and its solution. Cottle (2008) asserts that protest can be envisaged as a message, in that its purpose is to communicate concerns and the need for change. Certainly we would conceive of protest as a discursive intervention, designed to dramaturgically disrupt dominant discourse, to promote alternative frameworks of understanding and to demand their actualisation. News media coverage of dissent is then understood as the framing of a (subaltern) framework of understanding. This process of mediation between protestors and the wider public, if favourable, can mobilise public and political support (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993). Unfavourable coverage, on the other hand, can drain a movement of its base. In the contemporary hyper-mediated world, media coverage is ever more influential on the path of the social movement:

> *"It is in and through the news media especially that the politics of protest and dissent is now generally conveyed to wider audiences, and it is by this same means that wider support and legitimacy for their actions and aims can be potentially won – or lost. …. These matters of 'representation', then … are consequential for democracy …"* (Cottle 2008, p.854)

As such, the analysis of news media framing of dissent is central to understanding the success or failure of protest movements.

A Paradigmatic Response?

Early analyses of media framings found a common pattern of coverage in which the legitimacy of protest movements and events was undermined through coverage which constituted the actions of dissenters as violent and subversive (Gitlin 1980). Publishing in 1980, Chan and Lee coined the term 'protest paradigm' as shorthand for the delegitimizing effects of mass media coverage of dissent:

> "*The protest paradigm refers to a pattern of coverage that focuses on violent and disruptive aspects of the protest actions, describes protests using the script of crime news, highlights the protestors' (strange) appearance and/or ignorance, portrays protests as ineffective, focuses on the theatrical aspects of the protests and neglects the substantive issues, invokes public opinion against the protestors, and privileges sources from or supporting the government*" (McLeod & Hertog 1998 cited in Lee 2014, p. 2320)

Recourse to the protest paradigm is triggered not by overt or conspiratorial state control of media content (although Boykoff, 2007, explicitly identifies the media among the means by which state repression is achieved[6]) but by journalistic conventions and news values, including conceptions of newsworthiness (Oliver and Maney 2000). Just as we found in previous research with journalists on the factors informing their construction of stigmatised neighbourhoods (Devereux et al., 2012), violence is held to be a particularly saleable narrative and reliance on official sources promotes the reproduction of elite interpretations. The values, practices and political economy of mainstream media (Devereux et al., 2012) disincentivise dissemination of the dissenting discourse, in favour of focusing on the deviance of the dissenters.

The culmination of the protest paradigm is media coverage which focuses on (minority militant) tactics over causes (Giuffo 2001), on conflict over content. "As a

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[6] Boycoff (2007, p.283) labels the four mechanisms of repression as resource depletion; stigmatization; divise disruption and intimidation. She defines repression as ".. a process whereby groups or individuals attempt to diminish dissident action, collective organization, and the mobilization of dissenting opinion by inhibiting collective action through either raising the costs or minimizing the benefits of such action".

result of these mechanisms, a social process that sustains dissident action – mobilization – makes way for a different social process that debilitates dissidence – demobilization" (Boykoff 2007, p.285). The pattern of reporting which the protest paradigm represents cannot be ascribed intent, but the effect, nonetheless, is the repression of dissent.

Images of Dissent

Discourse is, of course, communicated not only through prose but also through music, song, dance, and through visual media for example. Perlmutter and Wagner (2004, p.94) emphasise that "the process by which one of the thousands of images in the global news stream is favoured over the other is … to a large extent, a politically motivated process of manufacture and spin… rhetorical tools wielded by numerous, and often diverse, appropriating parties to support their respective arguments". Perlmutter and Wagner (2004) exemplify the manner in which challenges to dissent may be achieved through the presentation of images via their analysis of the media usage of a photograph of two G8 protestors, one of whom, Carlo Giuliani, was fatally wounded by police gunfire in the moments following the capturing of a now iconic image in which he and another protestor attack a police Land Rover.

Permutter and Wagner's case study of Genoa shooting image underlines the fact that pictures, like data, do not speak for themselves. In this instance, while the image itself might have been read in a manner sympathetic to either the police or the protestors, the authors find that the use of captions directed media audiences to the former interpretation. Published images are presented with and through preferred framings, although that interpretation may be challenged and rejected. Cottle (2008) reminds us that the American civil rights movement, made strategic use of what he refers to as 'dramaturgical framing' in some instances, seeking out police violence for the purpose, evidencing on camera practices which too frequently occurred away from the public eye.

Better news? Challenging the Protest Paradigm

More recently, Cottle (2008) has argued against the primacy of the protest paradigm. He holds that we need to re-examine the media politics of dissent in the light of what he perceives as the ideological fragmentation and perhaps dilution of protest, as well as significant shifts in public attitudes towards protest. He argues that protest has been mainstreamed and demonstration normalised as a means of communicating with the public and the state. As a consequence, he holds that the manner in which the media reports on protest is also more fluid "… and sometimes more progressive" (Cottle 2008, p.858) than might otherwise be assumed. His arguments cohere with, and draw upon those of Rojecki (2002) who identified a departure from a delegitimizing frame in news media reporting of the 1999 Seattle demonstrations, and concluded that this could be attributed to the failure of the elite to present a coherent counter-narrative to that of the protestors or to associate the protestors' belief system with that of an established folk devil, as well as the role of the internet as a resource in mobilising support for the protests.

Lee (2014) usefully mitigates Cottle's optimism. Pointing us to the work of Boyle et al (2012) and Weaver and Scacco (2013), he notes the continuing relevance of the protest paradigm in the present day, while at the same time acknowledging the need to attend to variations in the treatment of dissent across space and media. Likewise Gottleib (2015) supports the continued relevance of the protest paradigm, but advises attending to variations within coverage over the course of a protest. Gottleib contributes a protest news framing cycle[7] to the debate, but just as significantly, the conclusion that protestors remain today caught in a Faustian relationship with the mainstream media whereby militancy begets coverage, but also triggers the delegitimizing protest paradigm.

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[7] Which theorises that mainstream media coverage of protest commences by focusing on conflict, then addresses the content of the dissent, before finally returning to conflict.

Sinister Fringe or Reasonable People?

In an agenda-setting interview with Newstalk Radio on November 7th Minister Leo Varadkar proposed that the water protest movement contained both what he termed a "very sinister fringe" and "a lot people protesting legitimately and reasonably". He described the supposed fringe element as "sinister", "nasty" and "violent".[8] We would argue that the constructs of the "Sinister Fringe" and their opposite, the "Reasonable People", referred to by Varadkar, served the purpose of significantly shaping public and media discourse in the following months.

The 'Sinister Fringe'

The term 'Sinister Fringe' (and to a lesser extent 'Sinister Element') formed a significant part of the state's discursive armoury in the battle for hearts and minds. Following Varadkar's initial use of the term, it was subsequently used routinely by the political elite in their attempts to fragment and undermine the legitimacy of the protests. While specific groups (many of whom are in fact ideologically opposed to one another) were named as constituting the 'Sinister Fringe' (Sinn Fein; the Anti Austerity Alliance; the Socialist Party, amongst others) no actual evidence is cited by government ministers to support their claims of the existence of such a 'group' or its alleged activities.

In our print media sample there are 17 cases of coverage of the "Sinister Fringe". The term is used within news reports, feature articles, opinion pieces and also appears in letters to the editor which we interpret as an indication of its potency. In the mainstream media, practices ranged from using the term unproblematically to ones

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[8] "What strikes me is that there is a very sinister fringe to some of the water protests. They abuse the Gardai. They break the law. They engage in violence. And also they spread all sorts of information. And what I am worried about is that it is only a matter of time before someone gets hurt. While there are a lot of people protesting legitimately and reasonably, this fringe element is very sinister. It is a very nasty fringe to these water protests." (Minister Leo Varadkar , Breakfast, Newstalk November 7th 2014).

where it was contested or subverted. As an Illustration of the former, one broadsheet told its readers that: "Health Minister Leo Varadkar again attacked sinister elements in the anti water charge protest groups, as he told Newstalk that dissident Republicans were using the demonstrations to advance their own political agenda" (Irish Examiner Nov 8th 2015). The report does not question either the veracity of the minister's claims or offer an alternative account.

A counter narrative to the supposed existence of the 'Sinister Fringe' was contained within The Irish Times, The Irish Examiner and The Irish Daily Mail, but none, significantly, were present in The Irish Independent. Both The Irish Independent and to a lesser extent its sister newspaper The Sunday Independent, rehearse unproblematically the idea that a 'Sinister Fringe' was controlling or manipulating the protest movement for its own ends. Thus, one Sunday Independent journalist wrote that:

> "*The sinister fringe which has now attached itself to the anti-austerity movement is not content with drawing cartoons, but it will be drawing blood if those who have influence over their actions don't wise up quickly*" (Sunday Independent Feb 1st 2015).

It is also noteworthy that the elusive 'Sinister Fringe' is associated with the possibility of violence. Source bias or the use of anonymous sources is also an aspect of how the "Sinister Fringe" is constructed in a media setting. Those named as being part of the "Sinister Fringe" included "Loony Leftists"; "Thugs" "Dissident Republicans" and "Eirigi[9]". The descriptors used include "bandwagon"; "disgraceful behaviour"; "sordid show of violence and anarchy"; "precipice" and "dupes".

On November 20th a Fine Gael TD attempted to link the water protest movement to the militant Jihadist group Isis (see Irish Times, November 20th 2014). Noel Coonan's

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[9] Éirígí is revolutionary political party, established in 2006 to "fight for the rights of working people" and "rebuild opposition" to British rule in the North of Ireland (see http://eirigi.org/).

speech, delivered in the Irish Parliament, warned that the state was "facing potentially an Isis situation." Coonan suggested that some of the protestors in Dublin wanted to "act like parasites" and "live off country people." In direct reference to the Jobstown protests on November 17th he branded the protestors' behavior as "disgraceful" and suggested that it was "socialist led." Coonan claimed that ordinary people (referred to as "the People of Ireland" and his constituents) were "horrified" at the way in which protestors were behaving. His comments also included a reference to the seemingly contradictory class status of one of the key members of the water protest movement: "elements of socialists, the so-called wealthy Socialist Party, led by Paul Murphy and aided and abetted by extremists within our colleagues here [in the parliament] from Sinn Fein." While Mr. Coonan's attempt to link the protest movement to Isis was not taken that seriously, it was, nonetheless, widely reported. As a discourse it is of interest in the way it attempts to malign and discredit the protest movement; in the way it tries to set up an opposition between an imagined 'us' and 'them' and in the way it calls into question the credentials of some of the movement's key activists. The statement is of significance in that - notwithstanding its obvious hyperbole - it echoes the larger narrative of how the water protest movement was explained by the political elite and by many media commentators. Within political and media discourse there were repeated references to the existence of the "Sinister Fringe" and "Reasonable People". While we acknowledge that counterhegemonic discourses concerning the water protests were circulated within a social media setting, our focus is on how these discourses were played out within the largely privately owned mainstream media (see also Silke 2014 and Mercille 2014 for an overview of media coverage of the protests).

The meaning of the term 'Sinister Fringe' is also inverted by some commentators to refer to the establishment as being the sinister fringe (see for example Irish Times 11th December 2014). The term is also treated with scepticism by those who question

whether the very large number of protestors (100,000+) were in fact being manipulated by the 'Sinister Fringe' (see for example Irish Times 10th December 2014)[10].

'Reasonable People'

> *"Some people are protesting because they don't want to pay at all. But we govern for the reasonable people, and the reasonable people were upset by the way in which it [the introduction of water charges] was handled"* (Finance Minister, Michael Noonan, November 17th)

> *"Our sole focus now is on ensuring Irish Water and its vitally important national project of improving water services secures public support, and becomes a service of which the country can be proud. We know we need to gain public trust and have made a start on some very necessary measures."* (John Tierney, MD, Irish Water, November 19th).

The second discursive frame in evidence within the mainstream media's coverage of the water protests at this time is that of the "reasonable people". The discursive frame of the "reasonable people" was first used by a government minister on national radio on November 16th[11]. It also appears in a quote from an unnamed government minister in the Sunday Business Post on the same date who stated:

> *"There are people who aren't going to pay. It is about making it manageable for reasonable people and establishing the basic principle of paying for water."* (Sunday Business Post Nov 16th 2015)

Between the 16th and 25th of November the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and four of his key government ministers repeatedly used the phrase "reasonable people" in media

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[10] The inversion of the term "Sinister Fringe" is most pronounced in content emanating from The Irish Times. It is invisible in the Irish Independent, while it appears in a single instance in the Sunday Independent.

[11] The phrase 'reasonable people' was used in reference to the water protests on November 4th 2015. Ivan Yates a presenter with Newstalk and a former Fine Gael Minister stated "A lot of reasonable people have been out protesting and they are just at the end of their tether." Newstalk Breakfast, November 4th 2015.

interviews in national and local media[12]. Neither they, nor the journalists who wrote the reports make any effort to identify who the "reasonable people" actually are. The use of specific descriptors within our sampled newspaper articles (e.g. Sinn Fein; Anti Austerity Alliance; "Loony Left"; "Marxist Leninist Republic"; "Hard Line"; "Unapologetic Defiance"; "Rabble Rousing") function to imply who the "reasonable people' are <u>not</u>. The "reasonable people" are assumed to be in the majority separate from the minority "sinister element" or "fringe" who are understood to have ulterior political motives. We would argue the political elites attempt to appeal to the "reasonable people" was influenced by the scale of water protests, which demonstrably included a significant number of people who would ordinarily be considered to be part of the ideological middle ground.

We identified a total of 9 instances in which the term is used within print media coverage during November and December. Our analysis demonstrates source bias; infrequent reference to alternative explanations, a lack of actual evidence to substantiate both claims and counterclaims; all of which contribute to the reproduction and circulation of hegemonic discourses. It is notable that two newspapers in particular – The Irish Examiner and The Irish Independent – simply rehearse the construct of the "reasonable people" without offering their readers any counter narrative. In one Irish Independent opinion piece, for example, the author[13]

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[12] The repeated and consistent use of this term by elite political figures in the days following the protests in Jobstown on November 15th (see our earlier summary) seems to suggest that the mobilization of this discourse was conscious and deliberate. (A variant 'right thinking people' was also employed, see for example Prime Time RTE 1 Television Nov 17th). We argue that for the political elite, the phrase "reasonable people" promised two things. It was an attempt to further fragment the burgeoning anti-water charges movement into the "reasonable people" and the "sinister fringe"; it was also an attempt to appeal to what they perceived as the 'middle ground' for support for the revised schedule of water charges being announced at this time.

[13] Liz O' Donnell is a former Junior Irish Government Minister and Deputy Leader of the Progressive Democrat party. The PD's were formed in 1985and disbanded in 2009. They were very neoliberal in their outlook and although they never won more than 10 seats in a general election they were in government for 14 years between 1989 and 2002. Since leaving politics O' Donnell has worked in the media and public affairs.

refs to "the emergence of a violent, aggressive element taking to the streets" who are using the water protests as "a vehicle to foment anarchy and intimidation of other citizens, including ministers." The unidentified "hardliners" in this piece are accused of "stoking up all this unrest" and are "beyond reasonable persuasion". While in a small number of instances (3) the term is either criticized or used ironically; in the majority of cases (6) the term "reasonable people" is not problematised in any way.

The term "reasonable people" was also repeatedly used by the political elite at this time in a broadcast media setting. A Prime Time[14] (RTE 1 Television, 3/11/2014) studio discussion encapsulates the ongoing discursive battle taking place over water charges.

> *Junior Minister: "Most reasonable people you talk to accept the system [the existing water system] is wrong."*
>
> *Programme Presenter: "But there were a lot of reasonable people […] people who said they had never gone marching before, they are not convinced by anything your government has said."*
> *Junior Minister: "Correct…part of our job is to actually convince them…the reasonable person…I think there is some people you'll never convince…I mean people like [names a Socialist Party member of parliament] don't want to pay water charges for ever, for anything…that's their choice…most people I that I talk to accept the principle that water charges…"*
>
> *Programme Presenter: "Not on those marches…"*
>
> *Junior Minister: […] Most of the people that I talk to accept the principle done right, done fair, done very clear. The principle of user paying is acceptable to most people if they believe that it is affordable. We have to convince them that it is.*

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[14] Prime Time (November 3rd) lists the following groups as taking part in the protests in north and west Dublin in particular. The Land League; Eirigi; the 32 County Sovereignity Movement; 'Dissident Republicans'. It is also interesting to note that in reporting on one particular march there is reference to the presence of "small but prominent pockets" of more radical political groupings.

Legitimation lies at the heart of the repeated attempts by the political elite to carve protestors into those who are reasonable and those who are not. There are discernible differences between the content and tone of the mainstream print media coverage and what is in evidence in current affairs television coverage. That genre's convention of being 'balanced' (see Kelly 1984; Devereux 1995) and presenting both sides of the story results in coverage that is more nuanced and is more likely to contain content which is counter-hegemonic in orientation. The privately owned print media (in the main) present its readers with an uncritical reproduction of the hegemonic discourses concerning "reasonable people" and "the sinister fringe".

Interpreting the 'Sinister Fringe: Subverting a mass protest?

In this paper we examined discursive constructions of the anti-water charges protest movement in Ireland and offered a brief insight into the contemporary Irish context of austerity and crisis, linking it to the overarching discourse of neoliberalism which dominates Irish political and economic life (Dukelow 2012). We do not only see neoliberalism as an economic policy programme (Larner 2000 cited in Purcell 2011, p.43). It is also understood as a particular type of "governmentality", and as a form of "public pedagogy" (Giroux 2004 cited in Purcell 2011, p.43). In the current era of neoliberalisation, a "coherent, large-scale responsibilisation process" is underway, that is "fundamentally premised on the construction of a moral agency that accepts the consequences of its actions in a self-reflexive manner" (Thompson 2007). In essence neoliberalism remains a global hegemonic ideology because of its ability to adapt to fluctuating circumstances and it "is now engaged in manufacturing a new reality, using an ambitious blame-the-victim bait-and-switch strategy" (Gutstein 2012).

This research article has demonstrated the ongoing currency of the protest paradigm as a means of understanding recent media coverage of dissent. Through demonstrating widespread uncritical reproduction of delegitimizing discourses and

discursive strategies deployed by political elites, our findings have contributed to the body of work which seeks to delineate "the quieter methods of repression" (Boycoff 2007, p. 284). Understanding the relevance of such a paradigm to (some) Irish news media reporting, within the context of a democratic political system and a free (and largely privately owned) press, requires reference to media practices and ownership. Our analysis has evidenced, for example, reliance on representatives of the State as sources. Our previous research with Irish journalists provides us with a framework for interpreting such bias - the political economy of the mainstream media produces cost-reducing pressures on journalists and editors which lend themselves to such patterns (Devereux et al. 2012). Ironically, the neoliberal values of private enterprise and profit-orientation which constrain media professionals in their reporting of dissent, feed coverage which threatens dissent against the extension of neoliberalism into the realm of national natural resources.

In future research, it would be illuminating to examine the discursive strategies employed by the protestors themselves, particularly in a new media setting. Perlmutter and Wagner (2004, p.96) note that "movements seeking mainstream connections and acceptance try to create narrative structures and visual symbols that may connect to (in research terms, they try to activate the schemes of) mainstream audiences". It would be interesting to examine discursive devices and other communications strategies deployed by Irish water protestors, both as a means of understanding the extent of media reflexivity within the 'movement' and as a means of gaining insight into the nature of the movement itself, its constituent elements, diversity and resources.

In conclusion, we underscore the need for sociology to challenge discursive processes which undermine the capacity of dissent to contribute to a healthy, functioning, deliberative democracy, particularly in an era where the neoliberal world-system is in structural crisis (see O' Flynn et al 2014).

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