

Behind The Headlines: Media Coverage of Social Exclusion in Limerick City – The Case of Moyross

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Introduction¹

In a media setting, and within the public mind, Ireland's 'Third City' has acquired an intensely negative reputation over time. While there are many historical precedents for the maligning of the place's image, it is generally agreed that the 1980s reached a new low within media practice with the ascription, in some media quarters, of the label 'Stab City' to Limerick. The blanket representation of Limerick as a place of crime, social disorder, poverty and social exclusion has continued and it has been amplified in recent years, particularly in the context of the feuds between rival drugs gangs, most of which have been played out in the city's marginalized local authority estates such as Moyross, St. Mary's Park, Southill and Ballinacurra Weston. Understandably, a variety of interest groups have expressed concern over the ways in which Limerick generally and marginalized areas in particular have been misrepresented by the mass media².

Our focus in this chapter is not on the veracity or not of individual stories about Limerick, but rather our task is to get behind the headlines and to examine, in detail, the making of media messages concerning one socially excluded area in Limerick City, namely Moyross. We focus on the role of print and broadcast media professionals in the (mis)representation of this area. Our research takes place in the context of a wider sociological debate about the ways in which mass media can contribute towards the further stigmatising of the socially excluded and the places in which they live³. We critically examine the ways in which media

professionals understand the many complex problems facing Moyross. Media professionals such as journalists, reporters, editors and sub-editors play a crucial role in shaping and determining how the social world is understood. While we privilege the role of the media professional in shaping and determining media coverage, we also take the views and experiences of local community activists vis-à-vis media coverage of their locality into account. This chapter is drawn from a more extensive study on media coverage of Moyross and is largely based upon data gathered through the use of semi-structured interviews with media professionals and from focus groups with community leaders. The main focus of our chapter is to examine how the media's portrayal of Moyross is variously understood by both media professionals and by community leaders. In stressing the pivotal role played by media professionals in framing and shaping public perceptions about Moyross, our research is located within a production research paradigm. We begin by describing the key tenets of this paradigm and summarise the key findings from our content analysis of print and broadcast coverage of Moyross before examining the main themes of the chapter.

Media-Making: Understanding Media Professionals

Although media studies has been dominated in recent years by analyses of content (discourse) and audience reception, there is a long-standing tradition within media sociology of examining the world of the media professional and of the activities of news journalists in particular⁴. Early sociologists such as Weber and Park recognised the pivotal role played by media professionals such as journalists and editors in shaping our understanding and perceptions of the social world⁵. What has come to be known as 'Production Research' places the spotlight on the initial 'making' of media messages or texts. Drawing upon a range of ethnographic research methods including interviews and participant observation, it investigates the culture of media organizations and the activities, experiences and ideologies

of media professionals⁶. It seeks to explain how and why particular discourses, ideologies or frames come to predominate within media coverage. The Production Research approach carries with it the promise of revealing more about the realities of doing media work, the constraints within which media professionals operate and the intended meanings that are encoded into media texts⁷.

The production research approach acknowledges that the creativity or agency of media professionals such as journalists and reporters is constrained by a wide range of factors internal and external to their respective media organisations. Internal constraints might include the routines of production; ownership structure; editorial line; culture or ethos of a particular media organisation. External constraints might include the economic power of advertisers or sponsors; the laws and regulations imposed by the state concerning libel or defamation; the willingness (or not) of the politically and economically powerful to cooperate in the production of certain kinds of media texts and the potential for negative reaction from audience members⁸.

Elements of the production research approach have been used to good effect in attempting to understand why certain kinds of explanations of poverty and social exclusion come to predominate within a media setting. Devereux, for example, has used this approach to understand how the Irish Times reported on the 1998 Sudanese famine crisis and how RTE Television portrayed poverty, exclusion and long-term unemployment⁹. The latter study drew upon extensive interviews and observation of RTE personnel and sought to explain the thinking behind how RTE represented poverty, exclusion and long-term unemployment in 1990s Ireland. In a similar vein, Iyengar¹⁰ attempted to explain how US television networks sought to explain poverty, unemployment and racial inequality. Eschewing any pretence of

journalistic objectivity or neutrality, Iyengar demonstrates how the makers of television news make use of either episodic or thematic frames in explaining the phenomena of poverty and unemployment to their audiences. His study shows how the practice by media professionals of explaining poverty in episodic terms is more likely to result in audiences believing in poverty being caused by individual rather than societal or structural failings. Unemployment, by contrast is reported on more regularly and is framed in thematic terms which in turn affect how audiences perceive of the issue. Iyengar's research underlines for us the importance of understanding the conscious and unconscious practices that shape media work and that ultimately have an impact on how audiences understand particular phenomena.

Mediating The Message About Moyross:

In our analysis of media representations of Moyross we concluded that coverage was highly problematic and in fact could be seen as contributing to the further stigmatisation and pathologising of the people and the place. Our findings add weight to our conviction that media texts are never neutral or objective in representing the social world.

Coverage of the area is overwhelmingly negative. 70% (298) of our sample of print media articles, for example, had crime as their primary theme. Even allowing for the fact that 84 of these articles were concerned with the Millie and Gavin Murray¹¹ story and its aftermath, crime remains the most common context by which the public hear about Moyross. The second most common theme in print media reporting at this time was that of regeneration. This was the primary theme in only 10% of all articles examined. Even in covering a process that might ultimately re-shape Moyross in a positive way, media professionals resort to negative frames. A number of the headlines concerning re-generation use stigmatising language – e.g. Moyross is variously referred to as a “troubled city suburb”; a “feud estate”; a

“crime-ridden housing estate” and a “gangland estate”. A much smaller number of articles were concerned with more positive stories about the efforts of the Moyross community in the face of the challenges posed by social exclusion. In our total sample of 420 articles we identified only 10 that were primarily focused on community spirit in Moyross.

While Moyross is regarded as being newsworthy (mainly in negative terms) it is noticeable that media coverage of the area, as a rule, does not provide much by the way of explanation as to why social exclusion and marginalisation exist in Moyross in the first place. In both print and broadcast media, stories are more likely to be episodic than thematic. With some notable exceptions, we found that media coverage is focused on the factual reporting of episodic events, rather than providing any analysis, context or critique which are reserved in the main for editorials and features. Structural explanations are largely confined to brief excerpts from sources comments which are regularly presented as lists of causal factors. For example, in the articles that are primarily about regeneration only 3 can be regarded as engaging in any meaningful way with the structural causes of Moyross’s problems. A Limerick Leader editorial (29th May 2006), a feature from the same newspaper (26th May 2007) and an editorial from the Irish Independent (30th October 2006) offer readers an analysis of the causes of the area’s difficulties. While the Limerick Leader focuses on political neglect, the Independent focuses on the impact of illegal drugs. The homogenising tendencies of media coverage report on Moyross as if it were a single entity¹².

As further evidence of the pathologising discourses evident within media coverage of Moyross we argue that the language regularly and routinely used by media professionals is problematic. For example, a number of articles employ the metaphor of a war-zone to describe the estate. Moyross is described as ‘troubled’; ‘notorious’; ‘a blackspot’; a site of

endemic problems or a 'time-bomb'. Thirty eight newspaper articles define Moyross as troubled ('troubled estate' and 'troubled Limerick suburb' and 'troubled area' being the most common descriptions) and sometimes in doing this grouping Moyross and Southill together. The term 'troubled' is routinely used by media professionals but not by their sources which leads us to conclude that it is a powerful media construct. It should be noted however that it is not inevitable that the media use the epithets 'troubled' or 'troubled estate' in reference to Moyross. Live 95fms¹³ documentary on Millie and Gavin Murray successfully managed to narrate a tragic story about the arson attack and its aftermath without ever once referring to Moyross in this fashion.

Findings and Analysis

“..that’s how people have access to information on Moyross. They wouldn’t know anything about Moyross if it wasn’t for the media”. (Journalist-participant, hereafter JP)

It is worth acknowledging at the outset that the journalists whom we interviewed feel that Moyross has changed in the last couple of years and with the coming of regeneration. They hold that the level of crime in the estate has declined. Resulting both from this perceived trend and from the advent of the regeneration project, it is to be expected that one might see a change in the coverage of Moyross from the time during which our data was collected and the present day. Indeed, a number of the journalists mentioned what they perceive as the beginnings of shift in the kinds of stories that are told about the area. “... At least every week you’d hear about a shooting, at least, in Moyross. ... That definitely has quietened down dramatically in the past year.” (JP) However, as we will see the imperative to cover crime and the perceived newsworthiness of crime occurring specifically in Moyross remains strong.

Moreover, for the focus group participants to whom we spoke unrepresentative media coverage is very much a current issue.

The residents and community activists to whom we spoke were critical – to varying degrees – of the ways in which the local and national media represented and stigmatised Moyross. While the local print and broadcast media fare somewhat better in terms of local perceptions of how their area is represented, there was still a clear sense of coverage being problematic and unbalanced. The lack of detailed knowledge of Moyross by the national media came in for particular criticism. Residents were critical of the way in which some journalists used a very limited range of sources and repeatedly used archive visuals to portray the area. In contrast to the dominant (negative) themes within media coverage, our interviewees offered alternative accounts of the lived experience in Moyross. However, while the residents expressed resilient pride in their local community – in spite of their area’s negative media image - they were also very conscious of the damaging role that the media play in shaping external perceptions of the area and the self-image of local people.

Representations of Moyross

There was agreement among our interviewees that Moyross has been and continues to be represented in a negative light, despite the aforementioned perceived beginnings of more positive coverage. The image of Moyross, constructed in the public mind, was held to be one of an area overcome by crime and anti-social behaviour. “It means crime to people. It means crime, it means murder. ... Particularly in the two years that you are covering Moyross was a very negative place in Limerick.” (JP)

“Outside Limerick it triggers fear and it triggers a place where people associate it with trouble, with crime, with violence, with feuds, with gangs,

with drugs and it's a place, definitely outside of Limerick, it's the place where people wouldn't want to live and even within Limerick city ... people don't want their new neighbours to be from Moyross. But certainly around the country ... I think it's not a place that's got a great name, it's not a place that people would connect with opportunity or progress.” (JP)

It is noticeable that our community interviewees seemed very conscious of external perceptions of their area: “... people see Moyross, or St. Munchins, or St. Mary's Park as a community, which as long as they are kept where they are, they are not a problem to us, we have no problem with them, they are lovely people. ...”. (Community-participant, hereafter CP). One resident suggested that those living outside Moyross misperceive it as a “Total disgrace” and a “No go area” as a direct result of the media coverage. Others expressed similar opinions about such misperceptions

“The biggest problem that we have is the perception that one bad apple the whole bag is rotten and the bottom line is the bag isn't rotten down here.... there was a lady coming for a job... she made a statement in the interview that she had come out the night before with her child a seven year old child and said this is where you will end up if you don't go to school. Now this was a professional person ... and it just goes to show you the perception that people have out there”. (CP)

The residents highlight the excellent character of the majority of Moyross residents and felt strongly that there are very positive aspects to Moyross, which are seriously neglected in media coverage and which ultimately impact upon external perceptions of the area:

“They haven’t seen what we have ... There’s such beautiful places out here. These are the good things: the schools, our Church, our library, the activity, the adult education classes, our pipe band. I mean, they’re never shown like that ... But if there is a shooting or a mugging or a robbery – Moyross, Moyross, Moyross”. (CP)

Pushing Good News

Interestingly, the journalists we interviewed spoke of a specific sense of obligation, to tell good news stories about the Moyross area. They spoke of feeling a responsibility to give coverage to positive events, which might provide the audience with a more balanced perspective on the area. Often this obligation was framed as a response to efforts on the part of the community to alter their own circumstances or image. Such efforts were seen to be deserving of media attention. “... that has to be shown up as well when a neighbourhood or an estate is trying to turn around and trying to show its good side that has to be reported as well because you can’t show one side of an estate.” (JP)

This is of particular interest in light of the overwhelmingly negative coverage that we found in our sample. While, we acknowledge that the journalists to whom we spoke regard the time period to which our sample relates as peculiar, one would nonetheless expect a greater reflection of their self-professed desire to report on positive events in the coverage of that time than is apparent.

The constrictions and limitations of working for highly commercial news media organisations provide a framework for understanding the negativity of media representations of Moyross. A number of factors limit the capacity of journalists to realise a desire to tell good news stories.

These limitations relate to news values; journalistic practises and to role of the editor and sub-editor. Later we will also argue that a dearth of time may also impact on journalists' opportunities for critical self-reflection.

All but one of our journalist-participants (a broadcast journalist) agree that it is more difficult to gain coverage for positive rather than negative events. The journalists to whom we spoke talk about having to 'push' good news stories: "... and I said [in an e-mail to her editors], 'Look if something bad happened in Moyross we would put it on the front page. This wasn't just positive, this was outstanding'" (JP)

Bad News Sells

Exploring the role of the editor and sub editor is key to understanding the obstacles that journalists face in gaining coverage for such events. Repeatedly we are told that, not only in general, but with specific reference to Moyross, stories about criminality are more likely to be accepted by editors and sub editors than positive news stories.

Our participant-journalists acknowledged the news value of negative stories. There was general agreement that bad news is perceived as more commercially viable and that as such, negative stories are more likely to be published and to receive prominent coverage:

"When it bleeds it leads. If something negative happens in Moyross its on the nationals ... if it's a negative story it is closer to getting to the front page than a happy clappy story in relation to Moyross but I think that's across the board in the local media". (JP)

One of our focus group participants suggested that residents are more likely to be approached as sources where their comments are negative:

“... they don't want to listen to the people like us that's willing to say the positive side of Moyross. If I can say something bad I'll have a reporter down to me and I'm great and I'll be on the television, I'll be on the radio and everything. And if they go to Mary and she has something good to say, well you're not going to put Mary on you're going to put me on, because I am the one that's running the place down.” (CP)

Local versus National

Community participants were considerably more negative regarding the national media:

“...the national media and the national papers will not take up on a good news story because they have no interest”(CP) and with one exception were particularly critical of televisual representations. “The television is the worst of all I think”. (CP)

As we will demonstrate later, our journalist participants also held that national media are less likely to provide positive representations of Moyross than their local counterparts. Both sets of interviewee shared a perception that tabloid coverage is the most problematic. “National tabloids have 95% negative”. (CP) Whether paper or broadcast-based tabloid formats were cited as more likely to sensationalise. One of our journalist-participants explained that tabloid formats may have less space to cover good news stories because of the prioritisation of celebrity news:

“ ... I think you can see from looking at the tabloids as well they have less space because you know they'll go bigger on Jade Goody type stories and you know I suppose sexier stories as well, sexier women but the amount of space they have and also will determine what they use.” (JP)

Indeed, while all the newspaper journalists emphasised the degree to which the final shape of their stories are impacted by the role of the editor and sub-editor, it was the journalist who contributed to tabloids who found this relationship most problematic:

“... I have sources know me and trust me but you know it’s still very hard to explain to people that there’s a sub at work here or you know who’s writing headlines and stuff. ... there are times when I am filing copy I’ll say and I’ll know myself now at this stage what they’re going to change and I’ll say if you’re changing that take my name off it or don’t use my stuff you know. It’s very difficult because it is, it’s what I do and it’s my wages as well but at the same time I want and I have to be able to stand over what I write.”

While assertions of negativity were made with equal reference to both local and national newspapers, most residents believed that local print and broadcast coverage of Moyross also included a greater quantity of positive material than their national counterparts. One interviewee stated “I would say locally, the actual local coverage, I would say by the Limerick Leader and by the radio locally, is probably 60 / 40 good coverage” (CP). Community participants were generally positive regarding Live 95 FM. They perceived the station as willing to promote events that the community bring to their attention.

Nonetheless, some felt disappointed by the local coverage of events, holding that not all local media give sufficient coverage to positive events in Moyross and, across the board, positive events are given less prominence: “It wouldn’t get the front page and the headline” (CP). “We had the ball, the Moyross ball in October, the Post wouldn’t cover it. They wouldn’t put in the photographs that were sent in. Neither would the Independent (the Limerick Independent)... the Leader did” (CP). Across the board, however, commercial considerations are key to undermining the commercial value of positive news.

The Ease of Stereotyping

There was a sense among our journalist participants that there was some truth behind the negative stereotyping of Moyross. Although the journalists to whom we spoke seem more attuned to the negative aspects of life in Moyross than the everyday banality of most residents' lives, most did recognise that the focus of media attention was overwhelmingly on the negative at the expense of a balanced depiction of the area.

The stereotype of Moyross as the 'troubled estate' is a frequently used template¹⁴. The term Moyross acts a cognitive trigger¹⁵ for audience members, providing them with familiar storylines about the area and its residents, which serve to reinforce commonly held beliefs about the people and place. Both community participants and journalists recognised the template: "Moyross is the rock star of deprivation [laughter from others], you know crime and gangs". (CP)

"I think there has been, in the past, some truth to caricatures, there often is, but I think the caricature has suited the media and ... when a particular image is in the public mind and it will sell newspapers or, alternatively, it will bring in viewers or listeners, they have a tendency to feed into that stereotype ...".
(JP)

One of the journalists holds that this stigmatised identity extends to Limerick city in general. He holds that stories about Limerick are framed in terms of an association with a history of criminality. While crime occurring in other provincial cities is commonly depicted as an aberration, crime occurring in Limerick is normalised, he asserts:

"I genuinely believe that every country needs a waste paper bin, in media terms, and I think, unfortunately, Limerick has become the waste paper bin and, because it has a simple image in the minds of people outside of Limerick, it is one that a lot of people, perhaps even subconsciously, like to reinforce in their coverage." (JP)

The participants reject the idea that the behaviour of residents as a group exceeds the limits of expected deviance or differentiates them from residents of other areas. They suggest that there are worse places in Cork and Galway, but these cities are represented less sensationally because they are tourist attractions, a point of view shared with the journalist quoted above.

Impact on Residents

The preponderance of negative media coverage has a powerful impact on the resident's interactions with external actors. "... I know there's a lot of people who won't go into Moyross because they are probably nervous. But it's like us if we read a paper and see something in Dublin ... Do you know what I mean it's all down to the papers like? "

Residents cited real impacts of Moyross's stigmatised identity on their interactions with external actors, resulting in prejudice and differential treatment. Residents cite a number services, in relation to which they perceive that they have been denied equal access, including taxis, insurances cover and costs, mortgages:

"... there was a couple of instances where if somebody was looking for a mortgage and wanted to buy a house here that was coming up for sale here and wanting to stay in the area near their family and wanting to borrow maybe 40 or 50 thousand, and they would not give them a mortgage for 50 but they could give them a mortgage for 250 to buy a house 300 yards away" (CP)

"One lady in particular she was in her seventies and she ordered a taxi from town with her groceries and she said Moyross. That man pulled up outside Watchhouse Cross [on the outskirts]. That lady was living up in the very top of Moyross. She had to walk with six bags."

The community participants to whom we spoke resisted the negative image of their locale:

"I have always maintained, and I have maintained it a thousand times over, that the most important thing as far as I am concerned is not the people outside of Moyross, what their opinion is of us... the most important thing that

we have to hold onto is our opinion of ourselves. Under no circumstances should we have a downgraded opinion of ourselves”.

However, some residents spoke of how people internalise the stigmatised image of their estate, impacting their self-image in turn.

“She gets really upset, she gets really annoyed and I say look do you want to leave the area if you feel that bad about it? ... she hates to think that because where she is living is being run down. It’s kind of a pride. It hurts a person’s pride. Me, its water off a ducks back, I don’t care any more”.

They also cited examples of others who have succumbed to pressure to change or hide signifiers of their identity as Moyross residents:

“I know people who have changed their accents and you probably do too, from Moyross, one girl on a media studies course inside in town ... she is very in tune or rooted to where she comes from, she put her hand up straight away, [she said] that’s how I felt when I was a teenager if I was to get ahead I’m going to have to change my accent”. (CP)

The Troubled Estate

Our analysis of print media coverage, confirmed that Moyross was frequently labelled as ‘a troubled estate’, reinforcing a stigmatised and homogenising identity. A number of the journalists to whom we spoke, themselves used this term in their coverage of the area. When we put this practise to them, they acknowledged it as problematic, but were nonetheless unapologetic about its use. “I suppose I have called it troubled estate depending on the story. It is problematic, of course it is, that it suffers from a label, those type of labels. I suppose troubled estate is what it is at times so that’s why that phrase is used you know” (JP).

Residents are acutely aware of this kind of labelling:

“... no matter what story that comes up you will find the ‘troubled estate’, ‘the ghetto’, it is categorised, it is stigmatised, and no matter what story, if they are giving a story about something that happened, if its from Moyross they will always make sure that it is known that this is a stigmatised area”. (CP)

Notably, only one of the journalists had taken a conscious decision not to use the term in his work. He summarises succinctly the reasons for eschewing the use of this kind of label: “The obvious danger is that you never get away from it. I mean can you ever see a situation where someone replaces constant reference to the trouble with the joyous, the joyous estate of Moyross, that’s never going to happen. So, that very shorthand is dangerous. ...”.

It may be that the ubiquity of this label in both broadcast and print media coverage reflects its unconscious use. However, there is a case for arguing that in addition to pushing stories about positive events, journalists who are concerned about the impact of their reporting on Moyross, might also reflect upon the manner in which they frame the area in general. It will be difficult to change the public perception of the locale if journalists continue to reinforce the areas stigmatised identity through use of such labels, even in relating good news.

Moyross’s News Value

It was clear from speaking to our journalist-participants that Moyross’ association with criminality and deprivation in the public mind (and more recently the resulting regeneration project), is the primary source of its interest for the media. There is a sense here that media organisations tend to view the audience as located outside of Moyross, and the media as providing a window into this place from which the audience themselves are socially distant.

“... people have a kind of a morbid interest in this family feud, the gang feud that goes on in Limerick. I think because it’s almost like something out of the Sopranos. So from that point of view it is interesting, I mean, people are watching CSI, watching programmes like the Wire and so they see a lot of that happening in Moyross. And its true up like, up till very recently that definitely was the case. I think that Moyross does have that appeal. Unfortunately it’s a negative appeal ...”. (JP)

Although one of our participants specifically cited her interest in Moyross as focused on educational developments, this is still framed as resistance to media organisations' primary focus on the area's association with criminality. "I've considered it [Moyross] newsworthy because I have in my time attempted to do other news stories in Moyross, apart from the one's that would oblige me to be there, in terms of crime and anti-social behaviour." (JP)

In our analysis of media content, we found that many good news stories about Moyross, unrelated to criminality or anti-social behaviour, still made reference to these issues diluting the positivity of the overall article. One of our participants makes specific reference to the underlying news values that explain this phenomenon; it is the very juxtaposition between the stigmatised image of the area and the positive event that makes the story newsworthy: "... it has been newsworthy for even the smallest little things that the estate does. Now perhaps it got that attention because the wider picture was one that wasn't a great picture ..." (JP)

One of our journalist-participants notes that it is not good news about Moyross that receives little coverage, but good news in general. The negative media depiction of Moyross, which all our participants agree has had such an influence on its public reputation, is not so much the consequence of inaccurate as unbalanced reporting. As our journalist-participants incisively noted, it may not be that other areas in Limerick receive significantly more positive coverage, but that they manage to stay below the radar of media whose profit motivations orienting them to prioritising bad news.

Market Matters

As aforementioned, local media are likely to give additional space to positive events. The victories of the community, in terms of sports, or educational developments, were often

constructed as local, not national news, and therefore more appropriate to local media: "...I think at a local level people feel ... if something positive is happening we try to put that out there as well and to let people know about the good stories because at the end of the day they are our readers or they are our listeners".

However, while newspaper journalists spoke of their own support for the coverage of positive events in terms of a principled stance, they spoke of their media organisations' coverage of positive events in terms of profit motivation as well as remit. It was their perception that local media give more space to positive events in Moyross in publications that are seen to have a bigger market in the area: "... they are also looking at audience and readers and loyalty ..."

(JP)

Parachuting Journalism

Journalists contributing to local media tended to locate the reasons for more negative national coverage in reduced local knowledge and sensitivity to impact. "... I don't want to be unfair – local media is far from perfect – certainly nationally, particularly in Dublin, it is easy to caricature somewhere that is a little bit away from you." They held that national media organisations are more likely to represent Moyross in a stereotypical, oversimplified or even inaccurate fashion, specifically because they lack the local knowledge of regionally-based journalists:

"... when there are the really big stories like the time of the Millie and Gavin thing or some of the bigger murder type stories when there are people down ... they are down to do a job, they are under pressure with time, they've a different impression of a place and it does, it's definitely different." (JP)

Several participants in the focus groups were conscious of journalists' sometimes limited experience of the area or issue on which they are reporting: "It's only since regeneration has

came to this city that it has been said that there is a Northside and there is a Southside. I know it's always been there" (CP)

Remote Journalism

While bigger stories will attract journalists to the locality, many stories are now researched remotely by phone and e-mail. This applies not only to journalists working for national media organisations, but also those working for local media. "The bigger the story I would be out there. If it was a smaller story I would be doing it over the phone and a photographer would just go out there separately" (JP). While local journalists may cover a smaller geographical area, their remit may be so broad as to confine them too to the office: "Sometimes it takes nearly a big story for us to nearly get out of the office, because of all the bits and pieces that we are covering. It's a real pain"(JP). The dangers of this increasingly ubiquitous news practise is of course a greater reliance on sources rather than first hand observation, on official sources (who are more readily identifiable and contactable) and, according to one of our journalist-interviewees, on a smaller number of sources. In the context of such practises it may be more difficult to develop an alternative to the dominant interpretation of events.

Images

In print journalism, the selection of images to accompany articles is a key area of influence of the sub-editor. Images can have a significant impact on the meanings readers associate with an article. They are part of the text with which the audience engages. "... predominantly because ... the news has been bad news coming out of Moyross it always has been predominantly a bad picture to go alongside it" (JP).

Negative images can play a role in reinforcing the stigmatised identity of Moyross. Residents have complained, in particular, about use of images that are unrepresentative of the estate in its entirety. Although newspaper journalists held that archival images are used only occasionally, there was a recognition that this practise does occur and can be particularly problematic in terms of unrepresentative depictions. Our analysis of television content also identified repeated use of a limited range of depictions of Moyross in this medium, including images of burnt out houses and wandering horses. An interviewee in the area of broadcast journalism held that television journalists do not commonly use archival footage. They stated that periodic issues with access can increase reliance on archival footage. In addition, the stories in our broadcast sample related to the arson attack on Gavin and Millie – participant-journalists noted that archival images will be employed when referring back to a past event.

Despite these explanations, residents participating in our focus groups have criticised more recent use of stereotypical images in contemporary current affairs programming. Some participants hold that media professionals choose not to film better areas and cited an example of a recent episode of RTE's Nationwide regarding a positive story about a successful local FETAC horse project. "And it was very positive I have to say ... But the images they showed with it was just horrendous ... for something that was such a positive story ... all the boarded up houses." (CP) Journalist-participants also recognised this phenomenon:

"... if you go out there you will see horses you know but you don't see them all the time but ... I would imagine some people when they're watching their television news at home at night are expecting to see the horse walking passed in the background you know if the reporter is doing a piece to camera in Moyross ... " (JP)

One participant suggests that it is difficult to visually illustrate more positive developments in the area. He states: “ TV doesn’t cover stories without the pictures and community development largely takes place without the pictures ... it doesn’t make for sexy TV” (CP)

Tarring Everyone with the Same Shorthand

In a study of seven local housing estates, including Moyross, published in 1999, Corcoran notes that “Differentiation does not ... begin and end along the perimeter of the estate. In fact, in all of the estates a complex intra-estate differentiation occurs ... they themselves exhibit considerable internal stratification ”¹⁶. Moyross specifically was found to exhibit physical and symbolic divisions; residents made distinctions between the area as a whole and what they regarded as a minority of Parks which were subject to more intense social problems.

The continuing existence of distinctions among Parks is supported by Humphreys’ chapter in this book. Her analysis draws on two studies, one conducted with the general population of Moyross and a second conducted with older residents, whose residences were concentrated in “... ‘more settled’ areas of Moyross (Cosgrove, Cliona and Dalgaish Parks)”¹⁷ She finds that this latter sub-population of residents are more likely to perceive the area as a good place to live (73%), as a place where people watch out for neighbours (84%), as forming a close community (50%); and report higher levels of trust in their neighbours (44%), than the general population of Moyross.

While other chapters in this volume have documented the critical and very real impacts of living in proximity to serious criminals (see the chapter by McCullough¹⁸ in this volume) and the manner in which their activities can come to dominate the everyday lives of their

neighbours, it is also important to hear about residents other experiences and, indeed about the experiences of residents living in other Parks. Our focus group participants told us some of these other stories of Moyross "... even after all these years, I mean I never had a problem, thank God, out here. Never did now. So, they're not actually targeting the good parts – the good parts of Moyross, the good people of Moyross." (CP) Humphreys' chapter confirms broader experience of these 'good relationships' (indeed finding that Moyross has higher levels of bonding capital than other areas in Limerick, such as the more affluent areas of Castletroy and Monaleen).¹⁹ However, community participants also suggested that the heterogeneity of the area was not reflected in media discourse "All I see emphasised is a horse and big stones and burnt out houses. There isn't a burnt out house in Cliona Park ... There's one burnt out house in Cosgrove Park. They haven't gone down there. ... spotless clean". (CP)

Our content analysis of media coverage uncovered homogenising tendencies whereby, distinctions between the different parts and Parks and events that happen therein are subsumed under the umbrella label Moyross. We argue that in the public's imagination this practise serves to extend the experience of living daily with criminality, which does dominate the lived experience of some Parks, to the whole area. The journalists to whom we spoke recognised this phenomenon and, indeed, many suggested that Moyross's stigmatised reputation is equally extended to Limerick city in the national consciousness:

" I think it certainly, it does tarnish the whole area but it's like the bigger picture then how Moyross then tarnishes what happens to the whole of Limerick like." (JP)

However, they saw little opportunity to resolve this issue. Our journalist-participants explained that Moyross is a geographical identifier to which the audience can relate:

“I suppose well at this stage I suppose it’s because a lot of listeners and readers know where Moyross is but that’s because there’s a reason for that I suppose.” (JP)

Moreover, such level of detail was not seen to be of interest to national audiences:

“... the splitting up of Moyross into its constituent elements or of Southill into its constituent elements isn’t something that.. trying to imagine myself living in Wexford, that I’d be particularly interested in.” (JP)

As a number of our journalist-participants pointed out, there is little value in simply transferring the stigma which Moyross is currently associated to specific Parks. It would not serve the residents of these Parks to stigmatise them any more than it currently does the residents of Moyross. Rather, we highlight this issue in order to emphasise that the story of the Parks plagued by gangland feuds is not the only story that Moyross has to tell. Indeed, for the residents of many Parks it is not their story. Moyross is an area which requires investment and public attention as a result of high levels of unemployment and educational disadvantage as well as organised crime. However, our focus group interviews suggest that there are variations, at the level of individual households, but also across the area in terms of tenure, mobility, and indeed the impacts of serious criminality. While small area statistics are enabling us to clarify some of these distinctions in relation to the former (see McCafferty’s²⁰ chapter in this volume), as McCullough²¹ notes, the lack of spatial details in our crime and victimisation data do not facilitate geographical specificity. In any case, we argue that these

intra-area variations are not given recognition by a media which, we argue, largely constructs Moyross for an audience of outsiders.

The Importance of Opportunities for Self-reflection

Journalists held their relationships with the community in Moyross to be largely positive, despite the highly critical perspectives of the residents to whom we spoke. "...hopefully I'm doing a good job I haven't had too much feedback which is a good sign." Complaints are depicted as rare and usually highly specific. Journalists involved in local media in particular feel that they are highly accessible to local residents and as such interpret the low levels of complaints they have received as approval.

In general, however, the community participants who have interacted with journalists as sources or in seeking coverage for events were distrusting of media professionals and organisations and cited examples of their identity not being properly protected, being misquoted, misinterpreted, or inaccurately portrayed: "... You won't be quoted but you know damn well who said what without even mentioning it". (CP) "It's just how my words were twisted." (CP)

As a result of such practices one resident will not engage with reporters at all. As a group, our community participants did name a small number of journalists whom they trust, all of whom work for local media, both broadcast and print. One resident stated that: "If you want something positive, I find nine times out of ten it's (name of local journalist) that you'd go to, and then if you want something to hit the headlines its (name of local journalist) ... ". (CP).

It is noteworthy that the journalist whose coverage was found to be the most consistently positive and whose media organisation resident-participants specifically cited as presenting them with a more positive self-image than others, is also the journalist-participant who speaks of having had an opportunity for critical self-reflection:

“... We’ve made a conscious decision to do that ... we are conscious of an imbalance over the years and we at some point maybe in the last five years made a decision and said, okay, let’s try where possible to give an overall picture on an ongoing basis so that when crime happens - and we must cover it - it is within the context of saying but there’s another story here and there are lots of people and events taking place that are worth covering ... We sat down and thought about it and said, is there an imbalance? Yes. Have we perhaps contributed to that imbalance in large sweep of things? Perhaps we have. So, let’s try to make sure that we don’t and let’s try at least.” (JP)

Conclusion

In his chapter, McCafferty²² documents the manner in which housing policies have contributed to the creation of segregated and marginalised social spaces. In this chapter, we document the manner in which media constructions also contribute to this process.

Moyross faces challenges which merit significant investment and public attention; among these problems is a stigmatised identity. Indeed, Humphreys research illustrates ‘bad external image’ was the only problem (from an extensive list of possible problems presented to her sample) cited by every respondent from Moyross²³. This image is not merely a (limited) reflection of the challenges that Moyross encounters, it is also one of those challenges²⁴. As we have documented in this chapter, the imagined constructions of a social space have very real consequences for those that live there. The social problems that exist in Moyross (and which will take time and investment to redress) deserve media attention. But there is also another story, many other stories, to be told about the 12 Parks, about the residents that take pride in them and about their achievements as individuals and communities “... based on my

observations, Moyross is in many respects a fine estate served by a good community centre, and by the activities of the Moyross Development Company” (Fitzgerald Report 2007, p.4). Our analysis suggests, however, that ensuring these stories achieve sufficient prominence to challenge the stigmatised identity of Moyross will require proactive commitment from the community members, organisations, institutions and media professionals who choose meet this challenge.

In a media forum on the representation of social exclusion in 2000 (Devereux and Haynes 2000), we found that media professionals operating to tight deadlines and in an increasingly insecure occupational environment lack the opportunity for reflection. In such an environment it is all the more difficult to recognise or alter problematic practises and routines. Research such as this can help to bridge this gap, providing media professionals with an opportunity for critical thinking. However, significant change also requires leadership from within media organisations. While broadcast journalists have greater autonomy, it is clearly difficult for newspaper journalists to implement change without the co-operation of the sub-editor or editor. However, in the context of an increasingly competitive commercial environment, it is questionable whether there is a desire for principled reflection or unprofitable decisions. Communities will continue to depend on their own media literacy and the goodwill of individual media professionals ensconced in a culture in which if it ‘bleeds it leads’ is still the mantra. As audience members we should also be willing to reflect critically on our own media practices and ask whether our purchase decisions are perpetuating or challenging these assumptions about what the audience wants.

Chapter 11 Notes & References

¹ Appendix (A) Methodology Employed

Following the Glasgow University Media Group (Philo 1990), the methodology employed in our study adopts a tripartite approach to media analysis, incorporating content, production and reception. Specifically, we have undertaken a qualitative content analysis of print media and broadcast texts; interviews with media professionals and focus groups with residents and community activists in Moyross itself.

Print Media Content

Print media content was sampled from four newspapers, which were chosen for their diversity of audiences and styles. Specifically, we selected our sample from a national Broadsheet (Irish Independent), two national tabloids (Irish Mirror and the Irish News) and a local imprint (Limerick Leader). The time period within which we selected articles was 1/01/06 – 31/12/07. We selected this timeframe in order to examine in detail the extensive media coverage of a specific case (an arson attack on two young children – Millie and Gavin Murray) and also to investigate media coverage of the Regeneration project which was subsequently announced in late 2006. Our sampling strategy returned a final total of 420 articles. (Irish Independent – 82; Irish News – 21; Limerick Leader – 179; Irish Mirror - 138). Once the articles were download they were entered into Nvivo, where they were subjected to qualitative content analysis. Content analysis can be defined as “... a research technique for making valid and replicable inferences from texts ... to the contexts of their use (Krippendorf 2004, p.18). Content analysis involves identifying themes, concepts, and patterns thereof, within the data. We infer meaning through interpreting these patterns. Themes and concepts may emerge from the data as a result of close reading and constant comparison, a process facilitated by sensitivity to:

The relationship between the research question and the text

The relationship between the texts and the context to which meaning will be inferred

Broadcast Media Content

Television broadcasts were selected from RTE's *Six One News* and *9 O'Clock News* programmes from September 1st 2006 to December 31st 2006 and using RTE's proprietary News Archive. In instances where the same report was broadcast by both programmes, only one was included in our sample. We also included a radio documentary in our analysis made by the local licensed radio station Live 95fm. The documentary, broadcast in November 2006, was based upon a composite of radio broadcasts concerning the Millie and Gavin Murray story.

Local Media Context

Limerick's Live 95fm is owned by the Northern Irish multi-media conglomerate UTV PLC and is the BCI licensed station for Limerick City and County. According to JNLR data, for the period 2007-8 the station had 44.5% of prime-time market share, with 84% of adults tuning in on a weekly basis. Its audience share of younger listeners has come under increasing pressure from the presence of SPIN Southwest owned by the Communicorp Group. The local print media is dominated by the Limerick Leader which is owned by the Johnston Group. Previously owned by the Buckley family and for a short while by the Leinster Leader Group, the Limerick Leader publishes 5 titles – The Limerick Leader City Edition; The Limerick Leader County Edition; The Limerick Chronicle and a smaller tabloid version of the Limerick Leader on Mondays and Wednesdays. The local print media also includes two other free-sheet titles – The Limerick Independent and The Limerick Post. The

national print and broadcast media have a reduced presence in the City. The Irish Examiner and The Irish Independent both have correspondents based in Limerick. The Irish Times and the tabloid media depend upon agency coverage, whilst Limerick City is part of a much larger brief for RTE's Mid West Regional Correspondent.

Reception Analysis

Two focus groups were conducted in Moyross following preliminary analysis of the print and broadcast media content. Each involved six participants, most of whom were residents of Moyross. In each focus group, one non-resident community activist also participated. Participants were sourced through the Moyross Community Forum and as such, many of the residents to whom we spoke were active in their community.

Production Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with five media professionals who work in the print and broadcast media sectors. All but one of the media professionals to whom we spoke have a broad remit with regard to covering events in the Limerick region. One is primarily a crime and court reporter, but also has a secondary broader remit. A number of key themes emerged.

² The frustration experienced by local community representatives with the negative image of Moyross and other local authority estates was noted, for example, by Fitzgerald in his report *Addressing Issues of Social Exclusion in Moyross and Other Disadvantaged Areas of Limerick City: report to the cabinet committee on social inclusion* (Dublin: Stationary Office, 2007). The Fitzgerald Report which was a pre-cursor to the setting up of the Limerick Regeneration Agency notes the 'intense negative publicity' (p. 7) received by Moyross in 2006 as well as the wider implications for Limerick City as a whole resulting from its negative (media) image. This theme is repeatedly discussed in the Limerick Regeneration Agency's report *Limerick Regeneration: A Vision for Moyross, Southill/Ballinacurra Weston and St. Mary's Park* (Limerick, 2008). It recognises the implications of this negative image for the residents of socially excluded areas and also stresses the wider implications in terms of economic investment in the city.

³ C. Greer, and Y. Jewkes, 'Extremes of Otherness: Media Images of Social Exclusion', *Social Justice*, Vol. 32 issue 1, 2005, pp20-31.; A. Hasting, 'Stigma and social housing estates: Beyond pathological explanations,

Journal of Housing and Built Environment, vol. 19, 2004, pp.233-254.; B. Skeggs, 'The making of class and gender through visualizing moral subject formation', *Sociology* vol.39 issue 5, 2005, pp.965-82.

⁴ S. Cottle, 'Ethnography and News Production: New(s) Developments in the field', *Sociology Compass*, Vol. 1, issue 1, 2007, pp.1-16.; D. Hesmondhalgh, 'Inside media organizations: production, autonomy and power', in D. Hesmondhalgh, (ed.), *Media Production*, (Maidenhead and Milton Keynes: The Open University Press/The Open University, 2006), pp.49-90.; L. Grossberg et al., *Media Making: Mass Media in a Popular Culture*, (London: Sage, 2006) ; G. Tuchman, 'Qualitative methods in the study of news', in K. Bruhn Jensen and N.W. Jankowski (eds) *A Handbook of Qualitative Methodologies for Mass Communication Research*, (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁵ E. Devereux, 'Are You Sitting Comfortably? The Codes and Conventions of Irish Current Affairs Television', *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 1995, pp.110-134.

⁶ T. Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, (London: Routledge, 1994).; G. Philo, 'News Content Studies, Media Group Methods and Discourse Analysis: A Comparison of Approaches', in E. Devereux (ed) *Media Studies: Key Issues and Debates*, (London: Sage Publications, 2008), pp.101-133.

⁷ S. Hall, 'The television discourse: encoding and decoding', *Education and Culture*, vol. 25, 1974, pp.8-14.

⁸ E. Devereux, *Understanding The Media*, 2nd edn, (London: Sage Publications, 2008); P.J. Shoemaker, and S.D. Reese, *Mediating The Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content*, 2nd edn, (Boston, MA: Longman, 1996).

⁹ E. Devereux, *Devils and Angels: Television, Ideology and the Coverage of Poverty*, (Luton: University of Luton Press/John Libbey Media, 1998).

¹⁰ S. Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*, (University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹¹ In September 2006, Millie Murray and her five-year-old brother Gavin were severely burned in an arson attack on their mother's car in Moyross. Three teenagers from Moyross were subsequently convicted of the petrol bomb attack on the children. The arson attack on these two young children was the final catalyst for state intervention in Moyross. The cabinet asked a former Dublin City Manager to carry out an immediate assessment of the issues prevailing in the estate. Fitzgerald reported back on the scale of social exclusion in March 2007 and the Cabinet's Committee on Social Inclusion agreed to the creation of two regeneration companies to oversee the redevelopment of 4 estates in Limerick City including Moyross. While there has been a major focus in the plans (and in their reception) on the moves to physically regenerate these estates through a

major demolition and re-building programme, there is also a focus on how social regeneration might take place. The estimated cost of regeneration is in the region of 3.6 Billion Euros. See www.limerickregeneration.ie

¹² There are some notable differences between the local and national media in terms of how Moyross is reported. Stories which had crime as their primary theme account for 52% of the Limerick Leader articles, compared to 77% of the Irish Independents, 88% of the Irish Mirrors, and 90% of Irish News articles.

¹³ Live 95fm is the local licensed commercial radio station in Limerick. It is owned and controlled by the UTV PLC media group.

¹⁴ J. Kitzinger, 'Media templates: patterns of association and the reconstruction of meaning over time', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 22 issue 1, 2000, pp.61-84.

¹⁵ V. Lens, (2002) 'Public voices and public policy: Changing the societal discourse on welfare', *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, vol. 29 issue 1, 2002, pp.137-154; M. Edelman, 'Language, myths and rhetoric', *Society*, vol. 35 issue 2, 1998, pp.131-139.

¹⁶ M. Corcoran, 'Social structure and quality of life' in T.Fahey (ed) *Social Housing in Ireland: A Study of Success, Failure and Lessons Learned*, (Dublin: Oak Tree Press, 1999) pp.125-148.

¹⁷ E. Humphreys, 'Social inequality and social capital: what's the problem in the neighbourhoods?' in N. Hourigan (ed.) *Understanding Limerick: Social Exclusion and Change*, (Cork University Press, 2009).

¹⁸ C. McCullagh, 'Getting a Fix on Crime in Limerick'; N. Hourigan (ed.) *Understanding Limerick: Social Exclusion and Change*, (Cork University Press, 2009).

¹⁹ E. Humphreys, 'Social inequality and social capital: what's the problem in the neighbourhoods?' in N. Hourigan, (ed.) *Understanding Limerick: Social Exclusion and Change*, (Cork University Press, 2009).

²⁰ D. McCafferty. 'City of difference: The social geography of post-Celtic Tiger Limerick' in N. Hourigan (ed.) *Understanding Limerick: Social Exclusion and Change*, (Cork University Press, 2009).

²¹ C. McCullagh. 'Getting a Fix on Crime in Limerick'; N. Hourigan, ed., *Understanding Limerick: Social Exclusion and Change* (Cork University Press, 2009).

²² D. McCafferty. 'City of difference: The social geography of post-Celtic Tiger Limerick' in N. Hourigan, (ed.) *Understanding Limerick: Social Exclusion and Change*, (Cork University Press, 2009).

²³ E. Humphreys, 'Social inequality and social capital: what's the problem in the neighbourhoods?' N. Hourigan, ed., *Understanding Limerick: Social Exclusion and Change*, (Cork University Press, 2009).

²⁴ See F. Wassenberg, 'Renewing stigmatised estates in the Netherlands: a framework for image renewal strategies', *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, vol. 19, 2004, pp. 271-292; G. Gourlay, 'It's got a bad name and it sticks ...' *Approaching stigma as a distinct focus of neighbourhood regeneration initiatives*, Paper presented at the EURA Conference, The Vital City, 12-14 September, 2007; J. Dean, and A. Hastings,

Challenging Images: Housing Estates, Stigma and Regeneration, (Bristol: Polity Press/Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2000).