

# **Fake News? A Critical Analysis of the ‘Welfare Cheats, Cheat Us All’ Campaign in Ireland**

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# **Fake News? A Critical Analysis of the ‘Welfare Cheats, Cheat Us All’ Campaign in Ireland**

## **Abstract**

Using qualitative content analysis, informed by a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, this article examines the production, content and reception of print and online media discourses concerning the 2017 ‘Welfare Cheats, Cheat Us All’ campaign in the Republic of Ireland. Our article is situated in the context of recent debates concerning the media’s role in articulating ‘disgust’ discourses focused on ‘welfare fraud’, poverty and unemployment. Central to these processes is the social construction of those who are deemed to be the ‘deserving poor’ or the ‘undeserving poor’. Our corpus includes records of in-house debate within the Department of Social Protection; the campaign’s documentation; print media and on-line media coverage of the campaign. The article’s findings demonstrate the ways in which welfare ‘fraud’ is misrepresented by the state and media. It also evidences ways in which such hegemonic discourses can be challenged in traditional and ‘new’ media settings.

**Keywords:** Welfare; Welfare Cheats; Class Disgust ‘Deserving Poor’; Neo-Liberalism, Moral Underclass Discourses.

## **Introduction**

The media’s role in demonising people on welfare and in articulating classed and gendered disgust discourses has been well documented (see for example Tyler, 2008), as has its wider ideological role in supporting the interests of the powerful through the spread of dominant ideological discourses (Devereux, 2014). The widespread use of moral underclass discourses (see Levitas, 2000) – which are presented as being ‘natural’, ‘inevitable’ and full of ‘common sense’ – has resulted in welfare recipients being routinely represented within media and other discourses as being distrustful and in need of surveillance and punishment. This has, arguably, become even more acute in a neo-liberal context as the politically and economically powerful continue to further shrink the state’s welfare role, reduce taxation and increase levels of privatisation.

Following the work of CDA scholars like Fairclough (1995), Van Dijk (1998) and Wodak and Meyer (2008) who have examined the relationship between language, power and social interests, as media sociologists we are interested in the ways in which discourses work ideologically. In this regard, we ask where do dominant discourses actually come from? Is it possible through a systematic analysis of media content to identify recurring patterns of language which facilitate the perpetuation of unequal

power relationships? Are they based upon empirical evidence, well-worn tropes or mythologies? Whose interests are served by their very existence? Do these discourses have a role to play in determining social action (or inaction)? Can these discourses be shown to influence the decisions of politicians and policymakers? To what extent can such hegemonic discourses which are created and disseminated by the politically and economically powerful be resisted through the creation of counter-narratives? And in what circumstances do such discourses become exposed for what they really are, i.e. primarily representing the perspectives and interests of the powerful?

In this article we attempt to answer these questions by reference to a recent contentious case in the Republic of Ireland. In the weeks leading up to the election of a new leader for the governing Centre-Right Fine Gael party (June 2017), one of the two contenders – Leo Varadkar – instigated a highly publicised anti-welfare fraud campaign in his capacity as Minister for Social Protection.<sup>1</sup> The ‘Welfare Cheats, Cheat Us All’ (original emphasis) campaign cost €200,845. Varadkar somewhat controversially claimed, in his wider election bid, to represent ‘the people who get up early in the morning’ (Bardon, 2017). His use of this carefully chosen phrase – with its intimations of ‘deservedness’/‘undeservedness’ – in his leadership campaign was revealing in that it was not only a coded message to his supporters within the Fine Gael party; it was also a way of identifying (and othering) those members of Irish society that he, and thus by extension Fine Gael, do not represent.<sup>2</sup>

As media sociologists we are interested in debates concerning ideology/dominant ideology (in the Neo-Marxist sense) and discourse. Our guiding theoretical lens is broadly Gramscian (for a detailed discussion on Gramsci and language, see Ives, 2004). Gramsci recognises the ways in which hegemony is primarily achieved through consent. Public knowledge (and acceptance of the *status quo*) is shaped through discourses which rely on the selective use of language to explain the social world and, if effective, contribute to the continuation of unequal power relationships.

Using qualitative content analysis, informed by a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, we examine the production, content and reception of media discourses

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1 Mr. Varadkar would eventually succeed in becoming leader of Fine Gael.

2 It is interesting to note that Leo Varadkar has also made other controversial comments concerning Community Employment Schemes for long-term welfare recipients (which were described as not being ‘real work’) and Council Estates. In 2018, in the course of criticising the Socialist perspective on housing, he stated: ‘...They want to divide our society into people who live in different areas, with some people paying for everything but qualifying for nothing. It is the wrong way of doing it’ (Dail Debates, Houses of the Oireachtas, September 26, 2018, emphasis added).

concerning the 2017 'Welfare Cheats, Cheat Us All' campaign<sup>3</sup> in the Republic of Ireland. Our overall corpus includes a series of internal memos which were circulated within the Department of Social Protection in the lead up to the launch of the campaign (Foxye, cited in Sheridan,2017); the campaign's supporting documentation, including its press release and ad campaign; print media coverage of the campaign launch and its aftermath, as well as a series of tweets (using the hashtag #Ratforleo) which evidenced the emergence of a counter-hegemonic narrative to the state sponsored discourse.

Our article is organised as follows:

- (1) Having summarised our methodological approach and the parameters of our data-set, we provide a critical account of the background to the 'Welfare Cheats Cheat Us All' campaign by discussing the social consequences of the post-2008 economic collapse and crisis.
- (2) We outline recent debates concerning the media's role in articulating 'disgust' discourses focused on 'welfare fraud', poverty and unemployment. Central to these processes is the social construction of those who are deemed to be the 'deserving poor or the 'undeserving poor'.
- (3) We present our analysis of the dominant discourses evident in (a) the in-house discussions in the lead up to the campaign; (b) the campaign documentation itself; (c) print media coverage of the campaign.
- (4) Finally, as a counterpoint, we discuss the presence of a counter-hegemonic narrative reference originating in an online campaign on Twitter.

## **Methodological Approach**

A qualitative content analysis was undertaken on a corpus of materials including internal department memos; the campaign's press release and associated advertising materials; one month of print media coverage and a sample of tweets using the hashtag '#Ratforleo'. We subjected the memos sourced from the Department of Social Protection under the Freedom of Information Act to a close critical reading. Our semantic reading of the memos in question revealed an interesting debate concerning the contours of the

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3 The Creed agency was awarded the contract.. The summary of the campaign on their website states: 'People who cheat the Welfare literally cheat us all. But for some reason, it's seen as a victimless crime. Socially acceptable and widely abused. Our campaign aimed to raise the debate and start a conversation about welfare fraud. Reports of welfare cheats doubled in the first week, social media went into meltdown and all main publications and news outlets spread the word. The campaign was a huge success and got people debating the rights and wrongs of cheating the welfare (see [www.thecreed.ie](http://www.thecreed.ie), emphasis added).

imminent campaign in terms of overall strategy and the language to be used.<sup>4</sup> We also scrutinised the campaign's press release and its associated advertising content. We systematically analysed both the language used (descriptors) in all of the texts and the visual imagery employed in the actual campaign. The campaign materials (posters, newspaper adverts, etc.) were analysed both discursively and semiotically.

Newspaper coverage was sourced from Nexis using the search terms 'Welfare', 'Fraud', 'Cheats' and 'Varadkar'. The titles examined<sup>5</sup> were *The Irish Times*; the *Irish Examiner*; the *Sunday Business Post*; the *Irish Daily Mail*; the *Sunday Independent* and the *Irish Independent*.<sup>6</sup> We analysed newspaper coverage for a period of one month (April 18, 2017 to May 18, 2017).<sup>7</sup> A total of 26 newspaper articles were analysed.<sup>8</sup> The texts include both news articles and letters to the editor, since the latter provide further insight into public discourse and individual newspapers' editorial stance. All of the newspaper articles were hand-coded in terms of the language used to describe Mr Varadkar; Social Welfare; Social Welfare Recipients and Social Welfare Fraud. The articles were also classified in terms of their overall stance on the campaign, i.e. did they accept, question or critique the assumptions of the Welfare 'Cheats' campaign. We also examined the articles in terms of likely source bias. Tweets using the hashtag '#Ratforleo' were gathered for the same time period as the newspapers and were categorised in terms of whether the hashtag was used in an ironic or critical way (i.e. to spread a counter-hegemonic interpretation of what the campaign was actually about).

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4 The memos (which amount to 465 pages) were disclosed to the journalist and academic Ken Foxxe for the Right To Know organisation under the Freedom of Information Act (Foxxe, 2017).

5 It is also worth noting that, while print media organisations subscribe to a voluntary code of conduct set out by the Irish Press Council the print media titles in question were also direct beneficiaries of the campaign through the placement of paid advertising.

6 The *Irish Times*, which has a 'liberal pluralist' ideological orientation and is owned by a trust, is widely considered to be the newspaper of record in the Republic of Ireland. The other newspapers are privately owned and occupy centre (*The Irish Examiner*; the *Sunday Business Post*), centre-right (the *Irish Independent*; the *Sunday Independent*) and rightwing populist (the *Irish Daily Mail*) ideological positions.

7 The selected timeframe runs from the day the Welfare Cheats campaign was launched to the announcement of the Fine Gael leadership contest. The then leader Enda Kenny announced his resignation as being effective from midnight on May 17.

8 These breakdown as follows *Irish Daily Mail* (6); *The Irish Examiner* (6) the *Irish Independent* and *Sunday Independent* (9); the *Irish Times* (4) and the *Sunday Business Post* (1).

## The social consequences of economic crisis and collapse in Ireland

Ireland's economy has very recently gone through a spectacular boom and bust cycle. European banks made enormous sums of 'cheap' money available to Irish banks, who increasingly used it to fund property speculation (Allen, 2009, p. 48). While the resulting construction boom created enormous wealth for many (including the Irish State) the illusion of our economic miracle (see Share & Corcoran, 2010) was laid bare by the global economic crash of 2008. Ultimately, it played a major role in the government having to use 'the entire Irish State as collateral for the crushing liabilities of six private banks' (McCabe, 2011, p. 169). In 2010, Ireland entered into a 'programme' and received funding from the Troika of the EU, IMF and European Central Bank as the country faced a sovereign debt crisis. As a consequence, Ireland gained the dubious distinction of becoming the most (bank) debt burdened country in the EU (see Taft, 2013a cited in O'Flynn et al., 2014, p. 924). The total cost of these banking losses has been calculated to be approximately '€35 billion or 22% of Ireland's nominal GDP in 2011'. Without this cost, Ireland's debt-GDP ratio in 2011 could have been more or less the Eurozone average (Whelan, 2012). Both the decision to pay the socialised private banking debt and the programme of austerity which followed are rooted in neo-liberal ideology, which seeks to 'frame and shape individuals' perceptions and preferences so as to preempt challenges to the status quo' (Glasberg, 2011, p. 48).

The payment of 'promissory notes'<sup>9</sup> which began on March 31, 2011, and of the €700 million (unguaranteed and unsecured) Anglo Irish Bank bond on the November 2, 2011 (see Donagh, 2011 for details) in particular, have been hard to stomach for many Irish people.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, between 2007/08 and 2011, €20bn (12% of GDP) was taken out of the economy in successive austerity budgets, which in conjunction with the repayment of banking debt produced massive social consequences for (in particular the most vulnerable) people in this country (see EAPNI, 2018, p. 3). Irish poverty/social exclusion rates (which were already higher than the EU-15 average before the recession) significantly increased in contrast to stable rates in other EU-15 countries (Taft, 2012). Since the onset of the recession, the number of people in poverty has increased by more than 110,000. In 2015 the incomes of 16.9% of the population fell below the 60% poverty line (€12,000 disposable income p/a), rising from 14.1% of the population in 2009 (EAPNI, 2018, pp. 3-4). There were more than three quarters of a million people living in poverty (Social Justice Ireland, 2016, p. 1) in a country with a national population of only 4,757,976 (2016 census).

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9 The promissory notes were to be paid at a rate of €3.1 billion per year every year on March 31 through to 2023, €2.1 billion in 2024, €0.9 billion a year from 2025-2030, and a final payment of €0.1 billion in 2031.

10 For example, for five years (2011 – 2016) on every Sunday morning after Mass, locals in the North Cork towns of Ballyhea/Charleville held a protest against the bailout of unidentified bondholders by the Irish state (see Baker, 2016).

The 2016 data on poverty showed that 18.8% of Ireland's adults living below the poverty line were employed, while 18.6% (230,000) of children resided in a household whose income was below the poverty line. Overall children represented almost one-third (30.6%) of Ireland's poor (Social Justice Ireland, 2016, p.1). Consistent poverty has also increased significantly, with 8% of the population (approximately 370,000 people) experiencing it by 2014 (Social Justice Ireland, 2016, p. 4). Moreover, since 2007 the deprivation rate has more than doubled (Social Justice Ireland, 2016, p. 1), rising from 11.8% in 2007 to 30.5% in 2013, before falling back slightly to 25.5% in 2015. Those experiencing material deprivation more than doubled (from 4.2% to 9.1%) from 2008 to 2013, before reducing slightly to 8.7% (approximately 403,279 people) in 2015 (EAPNI, 2018, p. 4). By 2016 there were over 1.3 million people (29% of the population) experiencing deprivation (Social Justice Ireland, 2016, p. 1). This situation has been compounded by high levels of income inequality in Ireland, which increased during the crisis, and while they have reduced they are still much higher than before the crisis began (EAPNI, 2018, p. 4).

Ireland is a strong performer in using social transfers to reduce inequality, yet this hides the fact that inequality in Ireland before social transfers is among the highest in the EU (EAPNI, 2018, p. 4). Indeed, Social Justice Ireland (2016, p. 7) (in their analysis of budgets between 2011 and 2016) show that in budget after budget, 'government choices, whether cuts or increases, have favoured the better-off in our society'. It is also important to note that in post-Celtic Tiger boom Ireland, given the cost of the social welfare budget annually, the government has been directly and indirectly cutting social welfare for a wide range of recipients. In examining one of the most vulnerable groups in Irish society, single parents, we saw that more than half of these households were at risk of poverty and social exclusion by 2012, with Government policies, through a 'sustained and substantial attack' (Taft, 2012) making their situation worse (see Taft, 2012 for a fuller discussion of these policies and their impact).

Successive governments also made it increasingly difficult for the unemployed to receive ongoing support as some government Ministers began to talk of unemployment as a 'lifestyle choice'. For example, the Labour Leader and Social Protection Minister, Joan Burton commented

What we are getting at the moment is people who come into the (social protection) system straight after school as a lifestyle choice. This is not acceptable, everyone should be expected to contribute and work. (cited in Taft, 2013; see also McConnell et al., 2011)

These kinds of discourses began to appear with increasing regularity, particularly in the run up to the annual Budget and we argue that they served the purpose of 'legitimising' cuts that were subsequently made by government, to the wider public. If the general public is to support high levels of welfare spending, particularly in times of economic crisis, then citizens must be kept informed of the needs of those requiring the assistance of the welfare state, and the costs of addressing those needs (Lens, 2002). In that context, it was worrying to see numerous politicians from Fine Gael, Labour & Fianna Fáil claiming that massive social welfare fraud was / is occurring. For example, in 2011, then Minister of State, Fergus O'Dowd, claimed that there was widespread fraud in the social welfare system, costing the state somewhere in the region of €600m (see Taft, 2011), assertions which were uncritically repeated in the print and broadcast media and by many other commentators. Yet the €600 million figure of welfare fraud was in reality



a 'control saving'. This means that 'if there were no controls or inspections', there would be a guesstimated '€600 million in over-payments over time, but crucially fraud would only account for a minority of these over-payments' (Taft, 2011). Indeed, the Irish State's own auditor, the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), identified a number of issues with these control savings, stating that '... the Department's current practice of including all of these over-payments arising from control activity as (bankable) savings is questionable' (cited in Taft, 2011,) As Taft elaborates, fraud was actually accounted for at a rate of '€21 million in 2007, rising to €26 million by 2010', figures which are approximately 0.1% of the Department of Social Protections' budget. Thus, we concur with Taft's assertion that 'to talk of €600 million in fraud is highly fraudulent' ).

### **Debates concerning media coverage of welfare 'fraud'; class disgust; poverty, unemployment and 'deservedness'**

In further scapegoating 'blameworthy' and 'lazy' welfare recipients and justifying 'savings', politicians and the media repeatedly sensationalise 'social welfare fraud'. The people of Ireland (and elsewhere) are routinely exposed to television investigations by leading state and commercial stations, print media coverage and vocal pronouncements from establishment politicians claiming that massive fraud is occurring. Ireland's commercial TV3<sup>11</sup> station has been quite enthusiastic about this. Between 2011 and 2013, the station repeatedly aired the same documentary on 'dole cheats' from the series *Paul Connolly Investigates*. The TV3 website description of the documentary reads: 'Paul takes a look at the rampant [sic] problem of social welfare fraud occurring in Ireland' (TV3 Player, 2013). Whether consciously intended or not, each time this was aired it helped to further crystallise 'common-sense' responses to the crisis where ever deeper cuts to social welfare appeared reasonable and something any 'right minded' person would expect. Following the work of George Gerbner, we hold the repeated circulation of these anti-welfare discourses serve to cultivate audience/public understandings of issues pertaining to welfare (see Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

And, if claims of fraud and laziness were insufficient, other rationalisations helped to frame the regressive measures contained in the Social Welfare Bill of December 2012 as warranted, such as women's 'immorality' and/or 'imprudence'. Such judgements were offered most enthusiastically by Fine Gael TD Derek Keating who decided to highlight single mothers who were framed as promiscuous, unwise in their choice of partners and abusing the system. With righteous indignation, Keating complained of young women who find themselves caring, not for one child or two, but for three and four children by multiple fathers who are uncaring and failing in their duties of care and support with the consequences picked up by the taxpayer (cited in Browne, 2012). These young women were apparently creating 'a new lifestyle of welfare economy' (Browne, 2012). Keating's sudden concern about single-mothers' claims on welfare could not have been prompted by any increase in occurrence of single-parent claimants, since the number of claimants had dropped from 92,326 in 2010 to 87,735 in 2012 (Browne, 2012). In any case, as Browne elaborates: 60% (of claimants) have only one child, 28% have two children and the remaining circa 12% come in the category of having three or more children — with many of these families comprised of women who

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11 Since August 30, 2018 TV3 was re-branded as Virgin Media One.

are divorced or separated after their marriages broke down. Of course, the strategy employed by Keating has a long history and is similarly witnessed in other countries (see Skeggs, 2006; Tyler, 2013). In fact, it can be traced at least as far back as Thomas Malthus' opposition to the Old Poor Law (abolished in 1834), which depended on claims that the system was facilitating immorality, dependency, irresponsibility and feckless breeding (O'Flynn, 2009, p. 98).

When it comes to efforts to scapegoat vulnerable groups in contemporary Ireland, we argue that the political establishment typically prefers anecdotes over facts. In 2009, for example, Limerick County Councillor, Liam Galvin (Fine Gael) said that he believed that a considerable amount of fraud was being committed through the wrongful claiming of welfare 'benefits' by foreign nationals. He stated that 'taxi drivers are picking up foreigners at the airport and driving them straight to the welfare office and straight back to the airport again' (*Limerick Leader*, May 26, cited in Power et al., 2012, pp. 13–14). Yet, Councillor Galvin's assertions seem to ignore the fact that since 2004, *all* applicants for a wide range of social assistance payments in Ireland had to satisfy the Habitual Residence Condition (HRC) (Department of Social Protection, 2010a, 2010b).

Crucially, the extent to which these discourses have taken hold among the general public – the degree to which they resonate with pre-existing prejudices and dominant ideology – has meant that cuts to welfare tend not to be understood as attacks on the most vulnerable. Rather, they are framed as a means of tackling the putative abuse of the system and the irresponsibility of feckless groups that cannot and should not be tolerated in a time of austerity. As an aside, we recognise that such framing is also evidenced in Britain with intensified political rhetoric about 'the welfare scrounger/skiver' and attendant media 'poverty porn' which constructs 'figures of disgust' (Jensen, 2014; O'Flynn et al., 2014, p. 930).

All of these recent developments in Ireland and elsewhere must also be seen in an historical context. By this we mean the long-standing practice – evidenced in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century English Poor Laws for example – of constituting the poor as being either 'deserving' or 'undeserving'. Devereux (1998) has demonstrated, how, in an Irish context, RTE (the public service television broadcaster) constructed the Irish poor as being either 'God's Poor' or the 'Devil's Poor'. Indeed, researchers like Van Oorschot (2006) evidence how the concept of 'deservingness' is central to understanding public attitudes and beliefs about welfare provision in a wider European setting. Van Oorschot (2006) demonstrates how in Ireland (and elsewhere) a hierarchy operates in the public mind as to 'deservingness'. In the Irish case, the highest levels of solidarity are expressed towards the elderly, sick and disabled in equal measures. The unemployed are placed in the middle with immigrants at the bottom of this schema. Such demarcation has become a routine practice in the developed world and is, arguably, more acute in an age of neo-liberal politics and economics (for an example of research on deservedness, welfare and disability in a Canadian context, see Quintero, 2014). All discourses begin somewhere and as we have already noted many have a long history and contain echoes of earlier discursive formations. The Welfare Cheats Cheat Us All campaign is no exception in this regard.

## **Analysis of the Welfare Cheats Cheat Us All Campaign**

An FOI request to the Department of Social Protection (DSP) by (2017) revealed the high level of detailed planning behind the campaign. The exchange of memos commenced in September 2016 and while many of the internal memos were understandably of an operational matter – focusing for example on the tendering process; its key media components; their production and budgetary constraints – they also reveal that the language and overall message of the campaign were the subject of detailed discussion and debate.<sup>12</sup> It is clear from the memos that the Minister took an active role in shaping the campaign. On December 6, 2016, for example, an internal memo stated ‘Leo’s thoughts on this are that he likes the [redacted] one. However, he feels we need to emphasise more that this is just not money from your pocket; that someone else will lose out directly. We want to reduce fraud so we can preserve resources for those who need them most. Could that be worked in somehow?’ (DSP Memo). Another memo sent on March 23, 2017 summarised the objectives of the campaign as being to increase levels of fraud reporting; to alter public perceptions about social welfare fraud by underscoring the idea that it is not a victimless crime and to stress how seriously welfare fraud is/will be responded to by the Department of Social Protection.

In its nascent phase, the terms ‘fraud hotline campaign’; ‘anti-fraud campaign’ and ‘fraud awareness campaign’ were used to describe the project in-house. Concerns were also expressed in the in-house exchanges about whether the campaign might be confused in the minds of some of the public with another anti-fraud campaign being led by the Irish insurance industry. Equally, sensitivities were in evidence concerning the planned use of the terms ‘fraud’ and ‘crime’ owing to what was perceived as public disquiet with reported scandals involving the Gardai (Irish police force). Perhaps the most revealing exchange amongst the department’s officials was that which focused on whether or not the media campaign might be better served by using the term ‘cheats’

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12 A variety of personnel were involved in these exchanges including the Head of Communications Unit, Department of Social Protection and the Principle, Control Policy, Debt Management and Prosecutions.

instead of 'fraud'.<sup>13</sup> Although the Department of Social Protection's press release issued on April 17 and the copy used in the subsequent advertising campaign foregrounded the word 'cheat' in its headline – 'Welfare Cheats Cheat Us All' (original emphasis) - it is noteworthy that the term 'fraud' occurs ten times in the main body of the press release as opposed to just four uses of the word 'cheat/s/ing' (two of which occur in the launch's press statement headline). The phrase 'hard-hitting' is used three times and the document released to the media claims that the department's antifraud and control measures resulted in savings of over €500 million in 2016. It is also revealing that fraud is placed before control measures in the press release. It states that 20,800 reports alleging fraud were reported in 2016. Of these 300 cases were referred to the State Solicitor's office in order to commence legal proceedings and an additional 160 cases were referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions. It further claims that 'one in three' reports of welfare fraud in 2016 resulted in payments 'being reduced or stopped'. Three categories of welfare recipient are singled out in terms of being the subject of the majority of complaints alleging welfare fraud, those on Jobseeker Schemes, those on Supplementary Welfare Allowance and those in receipt of One Parent Family Allowance Payments.<sup>14</sup> In addition to providing details of where 'whistleblowers' could report their suspicions, the press release concluded by itemising eight typical situations in which welfare fraud occurred. Five posters accompanied the campaign. They mimic the format of a simple tick-box survey. Readers are asked to tick 'Yes' or 'No' in response to questions such as 'Would You Report A Welfare Cheat?' or 'Is It OK To Still Claim Illness Benefit Once You Have Recovered?'. The simple poster design used white text on a vivid red background. Red, of course, is routinely read as signifying danger. It is also noteworthy that the press release puts fraud ahead of control measures which have resulted in savings for the taxpayer ('Anti-fraud and control measures in 2016 saved over €500 million in expenditure') thus implying that the extent of fraud is higher than it actually is. The focus on the imagined 'us' in the campaign ('...cheat us all') depends on

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13 A memo from the advertising agency tasked with running the campaign dated April 11 was circulated within the department's campaign team which stated: 'Fraud means "wrongful or criminal deception intended to result in financial or personal gain". It's mainly associated with businesses, corporates, businessmen and rich people who have committed fraud on a grand scale. It does work as a headline but it's not as powerful as using 'cheat'. Cheat, means "to act dishonestly or unfairly in order to gain an advantage". It's far more colloquial and it's how people really speak to each other. People don't say 'Marie committed Welfare fraud', they say 'she cheated the Welfare'. Cheating is also a far more emotional and hence more powerful word to be used in advertising. No one likes a cheat but some may think fraud is almost acceptable. If we really want to strike a chord with people, using 'cheat' will have greater impact and hence be more effective' (Department of Social Protection, Internal Memo, April 11, 2016).

14 For a detailed account of the workings of each of these schemes see [www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie)

the imagined existence of a population of folk devils (cheats, scroungers) who are defrauding the system and 'our' money.

### **Print Media Coverage**

In examining print media coverage we focused in particular on two pivotal moments in the campaign, namely its initial launch and the subsequent focus some three weeks later on the Minister's stated intention to 'name and shame' welfare fraudsters.

In our analysis we focused on the language employed and were interested in addressing the following questions:

- (1) To what extent was a hegemonic discourse replicated concerning welfare 'fraud'?
- (2) What were the main descriptors used in reference to welfare 'fraud'?
- (3) To what degree was the reported scale and cost of welfare 'fraud' interrogated?

### ***Circulating and Challenging Hegemonic Discourse***

The term 'crackdown', with its connotations of taking more severe and immediate action was used four times in media coverage of the early phase of the campaign. In only one instance did the term appear in an article that was critical of the Minister's actions and which called the reported levels of welfare fraud into account. It featured twice in conjunction with the terms 'hard-hitting' and 'whistle-blowing'.

Two news reports published on the morning of the campaign launch (April 18) replicated the phrase 'hard-hitting' which was originally contained in the Department of Social Protection's press release (as was the term 'whistle-blowers'). The first appeared in *The Irish Independent* (Headline: Public Urged to Blow Whistle on Social Welfare Fraud, April 18, 2017). The second appeared in the populist *Irish Daily Mail* (Headline: Stop The Fraudsters, April 18, 2017) and repeated the Minister's assertion that savings of €500 million were made in 2016 owing to control and anti-fraud measures. The alarmist language used in that newspaper's accompanying editorial lauds the Minister's initiative as being a 'step in the right direction' and describes the actions of those said to be engaged in fraud as 'milking the state'. Neither the reports nor the editorial offer any critique / counter narrative of / to the Minister's assertions. Noteworthy too is the lack of attribution to the claims made in the *Irish Daily Mail* that '...the Department reviews around one million cases every year, and has saved around half a billion euro from these probes'. It is also worth noting that all three articles were published prior to the actual press launch event and depend heavily on the language and contents of the department's press release, in the process evidencing how agendas are set regarding particular discursive frames. One interesting dimension in this campaign was the Minister's assertion that welfare cheats were engaging in identity fraud (Headline: Welfare Cheats Using Make-up and Fake Beards to get Benefits won't beat the ID Software, warns Varadkar, *Irish Independent*, April 19, 2017). Mr Varadkar is reported as stating the 'facial recognition technology [...] was helping the Department of Social Protection find "doppelgangers" who try to double claim payments. "There are quite a few out there," he said. The facial recognition software can identify "double people" out there. "Even people putting on make-up and beards and stuff. None of that works

because it's all based on bone structure.” (*Irish Independent*, April 19). That report is of further interest in that the Minister’s assertions are not challenged in any way.

There were a small number of articles which countered the hegemonic discourse (Headline: Bankers Ruined Our Country, Leo – not Social Welfare Recipients, *Irish Independent*, May 9 and most notably in two letters to editor: ‘Leo’s Cruel Campaign’ (*Irish Daily Mail*, May 17) and ‘Welfare Fraud: A Culture of Hysteria?’ (*Irish Times*, May 17).)

The campaign’s slogan ‘Welfare Cheats, Cheat Us All’ provided a strong cue for media discourse. In spite of the greater use of the terms ‘fraud’/ ‘welfare fraud’ in the department’s press release, the term ‘cheat’ predominated in the media’s coverage of the campaign and its aftermath, with seven instances of either ‘Welfare Cheats’ or ‘Cheats’. There are a smaller number of references to the existence of ‘Benefit Cheats’ (1) and ‘Fraudsters’ (2). The terms ‘Welfare Cheats’ and ‘Social Welfare Cheats’ are inverted in just two instances. In another instance, a reporter refers to ‘so called fraud’ and in two other reports (in the *Irish Independent*) welfare recipients are identified as the poor, vulnerable and marginalised whom readers are told are being vilified by a campaign which treats them as leeches and cheats. One additional article argues that in comparison to the relatively low levels of welfare ‘fraud’ the real fraudsters are those who avoid/evade paying tax. As we will discuss later, the parodying of Varadkar’s campaign by a group of left-wing members of the Dail (Irish Parliament) in the form of bus advertising campaign entitled ‘Vulture Funds, Cheat Us All’ was reported on by the *Irish Times* on May 5 (Headline: Welfare Cheats Advert Inspires Imitation). The media’s construction of deviant outgroups as cheats and fraudsters stands in sharp contrast to the portrayal of the Minister. He is referred to in personal, first-name terms (Headline: We’ll Snoop On Social Media To Catch Welfare Fraud, Says Leo, *Irish Daily Mail*, April 19). The sharp contrast between the familiar and the anonymised masses serves to further underscore the assumed threat of the welfare fraudsters.

As the Fine Gael leadership contest gained momentum, the incumbent Minister for Social Protection announced a possible change to the Social Welfare legislation. It was proposed that the names of those found guilty of social welfare fraud would be published on a quarterly basis (Headline: Social Welfare Cheats to be ‘named and shamed’ and have benefits cut, *Irish Independent*, May 10; Headline: Welfare Cheats Will Be Shamed on Blacklist, *Irish Examiner*, May 10).

### ***The Numbers Game***

Accurate measurement based upon empirical evidence is essential in reaching an understanding of the true extent of welfare fraud. This includes separating out control savings from activities deemed to be fraudulent. Our review of statements made by successive Ministers since the economic collapse evidence repeated (unsubstantiated) assertions that welfare fraud is in excess of €500 million. As noted earlier, the conflation of control savings and activities deemed to be fraudulent is highly problematic (Taft, 2011). In examining the 2016 campaign we were interested in asking to what extent did the reportage convey a clear understanding of what constitutes welfare fraud? Did it manage to disaggregate the reported figures in terms of ‘control measures’ and actual ‘fraud’? Did the coverage include reference to empirical evidence of the actual extent of welfare fraud as opposed to people reporting their suspicions of fraudulent activity? An

appreciation of the numbers is at the core of understanding how this campaign misrepresented welfare fraud.

It is interesting to note that as late as June 12, the *Irish Daily Mail* claimed that 'More than €2.6 Billion was saved in the welfare fraud clampdown in the past five years'. However, the acceptance at face value of claims that welfare fraud was costing over €500 million per year was quickly contested by a number of newspapers, as was the difference between the numbers being reported by members of the public and the numbers of recipients found to be engaged in fraudulent activity. Some two weeks after the campaign launch, articles appeared in *The Sunday Independent*, *The Irish Examiner* and *The Sunday Business Post* that contradicted the numbers being reported by the Minister. Mr Varadkar was accused of circulating 'fake news' (*The Irish Independent*, May 18). Columnist Gene Kerrigan stated: 'If you are inventing a fraud problem, Leo, you ought at least to get the technical bit right' (*The Sunday Independent*, April 30). The minister's inability to count correctly was also commented upon by *The Irish Examiner* (Headline: Making The Numbers Count For Nothing, April 29). A comprehensive opinion piece by Sinn Fein TD Eoin O'Broin in *The Sunday Business* (April 26) set out to debunk the numbers being cited by Varadkar. Using official data, O'Broin was able to demonstrate that social welfare fraud in 2015 was less than €50 million (or one tenth of the figure claimed by Varadkar). Welfare fraud using fake identities was initially presented as being a growing practice. However, by May 30, 2017, in response to a Dail (parliamentary) question, it was eventually conceded that there had only been a single case in the previous twelve months (Headline: 'Single case' of Social-Welfare Identity Fraud Suspected This Year, *Irish Times*, May 30).

### **Who Wants To Be A #Ratforleo**

One of the unintended consequences of media globalisation is that technological developments - particularly in the realm of social media - have allowed for the creation and spread of counter-hegemonic discourses. Twitter, Facebook and other platforms have facilitated the further development of sub-cultures of resistance. The 'culture jamming' referred to by Klein (1999) for example evidences how some audience members can engage in resistive strategies. Klein (1999) specifically refers to the practices of 'ad-busting' and 'ad-bashing' by anti-consumer activists, where, for example Nike's 'Just Do It' became 'Just Screw It' and the Absolut Vodka slogan became 'Absolute Nonsense'.

Agentic practices involving the inversion of dominant discourses were in abundant evidence following the launch of the Welfare Cheats campaign. Activists who were critical of Mr Varadkar's campaign subverted the title of his own Twitter handle @campaignforleo by creating the hashtag #Ratforleo. It was first used on April 20, just two days after the campaign launch. This hashtag was used extensively up to December 2017 in reference to the Welfare Cheats campaign, in response to his election campaign to become leader of Fine Gael and Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and as a means of criticising Mr Varadkar and the neo-liberal policies of Fine Gael, more generally. The use of the word 'rat' implies the act of informing and has a long history in terms of both policing and the prison system. To rat or the practice of 'ratting' is widely frowned upon.

#Ratforleo was repeatedly used to point out the different ways in which the rich and powerful are treated vis-a-vis the poor. For example, one tweeter wrote 'Ireland,

where welfare claimants are cheats, but multinational corporations like Apple who rob us of €13bn are fine?' (see Brennan, 2017 for a discussion of the Apple Tax case). Another stated: 'Check out our social welfare minister's brainwave. He is Irish tory party. Divide and conquer the poor.' The culture jamming extended to other pro-sumption or prosumer activities in which official photographs from the campaign launch were photoshopped to subvert their initial intended meaning. One replaced the original slogan 'Welfare Cheats, Cheat Us All' with the phrase 'Corporate Tax Cheats Cheat Us All', while another stated 'Mass Immigration Cheats Us All, (excluding slumlords, wageslavers and immigration industry)'. A further example of culture jamming was in evidence in the circulation online of a picture parodying the television show 'Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?'. In 'Who Wants To Be The Leader of Fine Gael?' Mr Varadkar has been asked the question who cost the state €64 billion and counting? The possible answers were: A. Lone Parents, B. The Unemployed, C. The Homeless and D. The Banks.

Resisting the dominant narrative concerning welfare fraud was not however restricted to the activities of online activists. We also note the presence of an alternative and more modest media campaign funded by a number of TDs (members of the Irish Parliament) who were part of the Independents4change grouping. The 'Vulture Funds Cheat Us All Campaign' encouraged members of the public to report on any suspicious activities by the state owned 'bad bank' National Management Agency (NAMA) and the numerous speculative vulture funds in operation in the Republic of Ireland. The group paid €7,260 for the advertising campaign which featured on 50 buses in Dublin City for a fortnight. Parodying Varadkar's media campaign, the posters told the public 'If you have information of malpractice in Nama or Vulture Funds contact namaleaks.com' (see O'Halloran, 2017).

It is interesting to note that by the end of 2017 it was finally conceded by the Department of Social Protection that the campaign was problematic. At the Public Accounts Committee, the Department's head admitted: 'Putting the word cheat beside the word welfare ... I think we've learned from that. In retrospect I believe it was a mistake.' He added: 'You take the best advice from professional advisors in advertising and marketing and communications companies. You take their advice and you run with it' (McKeon, 2017). Crucially, he also revealed that in 2016 '...most of the €110 million in overpayments [...] related to errors made by the department's customers rather than deliberate fraud' (McKeon, 2017). Furthermore, it was publicly acknowledged that the level of fraud being reported by the department (2%) was in fact a merging of two sets of figures – 0.6% suspected fraud with a 1.4% of departmental error.

So what were the achievements of the Welfare Cheats Cheat Us All campaign? How did it influence social action and public perceptions of welfare fraud? Again it is interesting to look at one brief snapshot of public opinion in this regard. An opinion poll conducted for the RTE *Claire Byrne Live*<sup>15</sup> current affairs television programme on May

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15 The Claire Byrne Live show is part of RTE's suite of current affairs programming. It combines panel discussions, interviews and high levels of audience participation. The show regularly makes use of polling data to offer viewers a sense of the public mood. It has an average viewership of 250,000.



29, 2017 asked its 1,000 respondents 'Are government campaigns that ask people to report welfare cheats a good idea?'. 64% responded in the affirmative; 22% said no and 14% didn't know. It is clear that the campaign resulted in an increase in the numbers of suspected welfare fraud being reported. In comparison to the same period in 2016 (April 18 to June 24) there was an increase of 1,537 reports by members of the public, rising from 3,322 to 4,859 (see *Dáil Éireann Debates*, Vol. 955 No. 1, June 21). However, we also know that in spite of the campaign, the numbers detected as engaging in welfare fraud by the Department of Social Protection in fact dropped by one third in 2017 (see Gallagher, 2017). In the first nine months of 2017, the department detected 928 cases per month of what was deemed to be welfare fraud. It is essential to put these figures in context. In April 2017, for example, when Varadkar launched this campaign there were 266,600 people on the Live Register (CSO), thus 928 cases represents a figure of 0.35% of fraud. Costing €3.38 million a month, this equates with €40.5 million a year – a far cry from the €500 million being spoken and written about as the extent of fraud during the campaign (see Taft, 2011).

## Conclusions

This article contributes to our understanding of how discourses concerning social welfare fraud are created, disseminated and responded to. By analysing a corpus consisting of pre-planning memos; a press release; campaign materials; press coverage and online discussion, we have been able to focus on the linguistic choices made in creating, reporting on and responding to the Welfare Cheats Cheat Us All campaign. We find that the discussions in the run up to the launch of the Welfare Cheats Cheat Us All campaign (documented in the internal memos) about whether to use the word 'fraud' or 'cheat' were of significance. The chosen word was deliberate, and it was underpinned by a knowledge of the communicative power of the chosen word versus its competitor. We would argue that the information about the scale of 'fraud' was available to the planners at the time they decided to launch the campaign. Yet something happened over the course of the campaign to make them retract their claims by the end of 2017. We argue that the retraction evidences the power of counter hegemonic discourses (circulated via certain journalists and politicians), and counter hegemonic narratives such as the #ratforleo campaign (circulated via social media) to challenge the dominant discourses circulating at any given time. Hegemony, as Gramsci reminded us a long time ago, is never total or complete. Interrogating the language used by public servants, consultants, media agencies, journalists, politicians and ordinary citizens is central to understanding how 'common-sense' assumptions concerning welfare fraud are encoded and circulated. Discourses which, far from being neutral, serve to represent and perpetuate the interests of the dominant political and economic establishment (see Power et al., 2016). In this article we have demonstrated the circumstances by which dominant discourses on welfare (see Garrett, 2017), which are based on well-worn tropes and mythologies<sup>16</sup> rather than on empirical evidence can also be resisted and subverted. We have demonstrated how a counter-hegemonic narrative quickly emerged in a variety of settings to contest the *raison detre* of this campaign. It was accused of engaging in

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16 These discourses act as a cognitive prompt, framing the issues ... and function as linguistic references facilitating the general public in strengthening previously held beliefs about welfare and welfare recipients (see Edelman, 1998; Lens, 2002).

hysteria and of being a hate campaign (see *Irish Times*, May 10). In spite of previous criticisms of how welfare fraud is defined and represented in an Irish context by the Comptroller and Auditor General, the campaign repeated the erroneous conflation of fraud and control savings. Like many others (political commentators, journalists, etc.) we hold that the campaign cannot be separated out from the Minister's wider political ambitions to become leader of Fine Gael. The timing and language of the campaign, and the language<sup>17</sup> used by Varadkar had, we argue, more to do with sending a signal to his prospective electorate in Fine Gael than to the wider public. In this regard, given the subsequent election of Mr Varadkar as leader of Fine Gael, we would argue that the campaign actually achieved its aim. The collateral damage was the further demonisation of welfare recipients and the construction of welfare as fraud.

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