

The Frame Game - A Content Analysis of  
Framing Denis O'Brien's Controversies  
in the Irish Press

By

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# Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of the MA in Journalism & Media Communications, is my own; based on my personal study and/or research, and that I have acknowledged all material and sources used in its preparation. I also certify that I have not copied in part or whole or otherwise plagiarised the work of anyone else, including other students.

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# Abstract

This study examined the reporting in selected Irish newspapers of the affairs of Denis O'Brien, the largest shareholder at Independent News & Media (INM), which publishes Ireland's two largest-selling titles, the *Irish Independent* and the *Sunday Independent*. Given the high level of ownership concentration in the Irish media market, questions have arisen regarding the role that newspaper ownership may play in the choice of framing said affairs. Using the concepts of framing and news values in the context of ownership structure this analysis draws on the literature to look at a variety of frames, most notably content bias and news slant in relation to Independent News and Media owned newspapers and other Irish publications.

A content analysis was applied to 86 articles across four Irish broadsheets: the *Irish Independent* and the *Sunday Independent*, both owned by INM, and *The Irish Times* and *Sunday Business Post* (SBP), both owned by other organisations. The analysis was categorised by five different events involving Denis O'Brien that took place between September 2016 and June 2017.

The results of the content analysis show that framing varied between those newspapers owned by INM and those independent of the media organisation. Not only was coverage less critical it was also far more infrequent in INM-owned publications.

Perhaps future research should assess the media's impact on the forming of public opinion by carrying out audience surveys to measure the audience's perception of Denis O'Brien and events surrounding the businessman, within the context of the newspaper they read the most and use this study as a starting point.

# Table of Contents

Declaration	2
Abstract	3
Table of Contents	4
List of Charts	6
Acknowledgements	7
Chapter One: Introduction	8
1.2 Aims and Objectives	12
Chapter Two: Literature Review	16
2.1 Framing and Media Power	16
2.2 Media Ownership	20
2.3 Agenda Setting	23
2.4 News Values	24
2.5 The Commercialisation of the News	26
Chapter Three: Methodology	34
3.1 Overview	34
3.2 Content Analysis	35
3.3 Description	36
3.4 Strengths and Weaknesses	38
3.5 Data Collection	39
3.6 Event Categories	42
3.7 Research Tools	48
Chapter Four: Findings and Results	49

4.1 Introduction	49
4.2 Charts	50
4.3 Thematic Analysis	55
4.4 Discussion	65
Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations	70
Bibliography	73
Appendix: List of Articles	82

## List of Charts

Chart One: Number of Articles by Event per Publication	50
Chart Two: Total Articles by Publication	51
Chart Three: Average Word Count by Event per Publication	53
Chart Four: Average Word Count by Ownership per Event	54
Chart Five: Total Average Word Count by Ownership	55

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# Chapter One: Introduction

Critical scholars frequently argue that ownership structure affects news content, often negatively, as it can limit what events get covered in commercial media outlets and how these events are portrayed. A central criticism to accompany this critique is that commercial ownership encourages profit-producing behaviours at the expense of democratic processes (Baker, 2006; McChesney, 2004). Furthermore, corporate news outlets tend to avoid news that may harm their own interests or marginalize advertisers (Baker, 2006; McChesney, 2004).

The media is often referred to as the 'fourth estate' of democracy, yet critical scholars offer important insights into how ownership structures affect the role of journalists as defenders of the public interests, as corporate owned newspapers are influenced by shareholder pressures which can lead to a reduction in quality of content (Picard and Van Weezel, 2008).

Though the role of mass media in democratic societies is largely contested, democratic theorists generally agree that a key component of democratic discourse is an inclusive media (Baker, 2002). The inclusion of diverse viewpoints across a range of media sources allows the public to look beyond their own subjectivity and become cognisant of perspectives beyond their own, allowing for public debates which in turn enhance the democratic process (Wessler, 2008).

It can be argued that the issue of concentrated media ownership and the increased commercialisation of the news industry has led to the press consciously asserting the importance of issues that are politically and financially beneficial, over those that are not (Tuchman, 1978).

This study will focus on comparing the framing of the affairs of businessman Denis O'Brien in publications owned by Independent News & Media (INM), of which he is the largest shareholder, and publications independent of INM. The following section will outline the media market in Ireland, but more specifically Denis O'Brien's interests and will also summarise his other business assets.

Denis O'Brien is the largest shareholder at INM, which publishes the two newspapers with the highest circulation in Ireland, the *Irish Independent* and the *Sunday Independent*. In addition, INM publishes the *Sunday World* and the *Dublin Herald*. It also owns the *Belfast Telegraph* and 50 percent of the *Irish Daily Star*. The publisher also owns thirteen weekly regional newspapers across the country, which include the *Drogheda Independent*, *Wexford People* and *The Sligo Champion*. The company is the leading newspaper and online publisher in Ireland and according to INM's website it is also the largest wholesale distributor of newspapers and magazines (Independent News & Media PLC, 2017). The company's titles reach a combined average of 2.4 million readers per week across print and online. 'In the Republic of Ireland, INM is the clear leader in newspaper publishing and accounts for over 50% of the quality daily market and over 65% of the quality Sunday market'. (Independent News & Media PLC, 2017).

Denis O'Brien's control of the media in Ireland extends to radio also. He is the chairman and principal shareholder of Communicorp, which owns Ireland's two leading commercial radio talk stations: Newstalk and Today FM. In addition, it owns Dublin's 98FM, SPIN 1038, TXFM and SPIN South West (Greenslade, 2016). In total, Communicorp has a 20 percent share of the Irish radio market, as calculated in the Media Pluralism Monitor 2015 (Flynn, 2015).

The businessman has a plethora of non-media holdings too, including the Beacon private hospital in Dublin and the recently acquired Siteserv, which provides services to the Irish state including the installation of water meters. Denis O'Brien has many other business interests elsewhere in the world, such as Digicel, his Caribbean telecommunications company (Greenslade, 2016). *Forbes Magazine* placed Denis O'Brien's net worth at just over five billion dollars as of July 2017 (Forbes, 2017).

In order to begin this study, it proved necessary to use the main research on the mass media and how news can be socially constructed as a starting point to gauge whether the lack of media plurality in Ireland can lead to a lack of diversity of media narratives and content.

According to Nicholas Garnham (1986) the policies of the then United Kingdom (UK) Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and United States (US) President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s promoted a return to laissez-faire market regulation which favoured privatised media corporations and was a danger to public service media and smaller media outlets. The argument for commercialisation of the cultural sphere on the other hand was that media operating under commercial principles are compelled to deliver the products wanted by audiences or to face bankruptcy and therefore through this principle it is in their economic interest to promote ethical journalistic practices (Louw, 2001). Social Democrats like Nicholas Garnham (1986) and James Curran (1991) argue that this commercialisation of cultural production undercut the spaces available for public debate (Louw 2001). With the growth of commercialisation and globalisation, decision making was removed from public scrutiny and placed within private commercial businesses. Market allocation of cultural resources combined with the destruction of the public service media

threatened 'public communication' which Garnham suggested lay at the heart of the democratic process (Garnham 1986).

Traditional liberal ideology defines the media as a public watchdog that has a primary democratic role to oversee the state and hold the government accountable to the public (Curran 1991). This ideology asserts that only by anchoring the media to the free market is it possible to ensure the media's complete independence from the government. Curran (1991) and other progressive theorists find a fundamental flaw in this liberal theory. The watchdog idea ignores the exercise of power through structures other than the state. Furthermore, it pays no attention to the role of the press as a defence against exploitation from the private sphere. The free market compromises rather than guarantees the editorial integrity of commercial media and impairs in particular its oversight of private corporate power (Curran 1991). A large number of communication conglomerates are still controlled by a single shareholder or family and according to Herman and Chomsky (1988) a significant number of these media controllers are ideologically committed rather than politically neutral businessmen. Disturbingly, critical scrutiny of government can also be blunted by political partisanship.

The press industry as a media institution plays a definitive role in shaping public consciousness and attributing salience to specific issues; news is not only news, but an active selection and creation of social reality (Goffman, 1974).

In 'The Nature and Order of Mass Opinion' John Zaller states that individuals with limited political awareness, which he explains are the majority of people, will accept messages both consistent with and in opposition to their political predispositions. This is known as cognitive dissonance. In his Receive- Accept-

Sample (RAS) model he notes that if elite discourse is disproportionately on one side of the ideological spectrum, even those with modest cognitive engagement or limited factual knowledge on a topic, will have a more consistent set of political considerations (Zaller, 1992).

The Agenda-Setting theory (McCombs and Shaw 1972) refers to how the mass media force attention to certain issues using a series of frames. Due to the limited space and the infinite number of events that occur daily, certain issues are strategically emphasised over others thus giving the impression to the public that these issues are significantly more important than others.

Schiller (1992) highlighted that the news media represents the business interests of either the owners or stockholders, who have vested interests in maintaining the status quo of economic power and wealth.

The theoretical framework will be the focus of the following chapter, the literature review, but these studies have raised interesting questions about the media's role in framing an event. This concept of framing will be analysed in the forthcoming research in the context of ownership structure, using a content analysis of four national newspapers.

## 1.2 Aims and Objectives

The 1997 British Election was my starting point for investigating clear shifts in public opinion correlating with a shift in media narratives. The most notable shift was the Rupert Murdoch owned *The Sun* newspaper which had the widest circulation in the country. It announced its shift from its long-running Tory support with a front-

page endorsement of Tony Blair on the second day of the official campaign. Many publications have stated that the shift was initiated by the owner Rupert Murdoch who was assured of a friendly media regulatory environment under the 'New Labour' leadership. *The Sun* had no recent history of supporting Labour. Indeed, in the early 1990's *The Sun* had claimed itself responsible for John Major's Conservative win over Neil Kinnock's Labour with the telling headline the day after the election 'It's the Sun Wot Won It' (McDonald Ladd and Lenz, 2009). In an interview with political scientist Owen Jones in 2014, Neil Kinnock said that as far as the New Labour elite were concerned, winning over *The Sun* was crucial to their chances of victory (Jones, 2014).

The overarching power of the Murdoch empire has been well documented in recent years with books and studies on the *News of the World* phone-hacking scandal. The Leveson Inquiry was set up and as a result of their findings, a new press regulator, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) was established in the UK, in the Press Complaints Commission's (PCC) stead. I was conscious that I wanted my dissertation to have an Irish focus and although issues have been raised concerning media plurality and concentration of ownership, there have not been many in-depth studies that seek to discover if there is a link between the structure of ownership and diversity of content.

A Report on the Concentration of Media Ownership in Ireland was published in October 2016 and this gave me an opportunity to understand the problems that a lack of plurality can have in a media market as small as that in Ireland. This report stated that the high concentration of media ownership in Ireland and particularly the media owned by business mogul Denis O'Brien is creating a high -risk environment for the protection of freedom of expression and the diversity of voices in the media.

The report notes that ‘democracy would be threatened if any single voice within the media, with the power to propagate a single viewpoint, were to become too dominant’ (Boylan, 2016).

The Report on the Concentration of Media Ownership in Ireland cited research which found that Denis O’Brien ‘received less critical coverage in his own titles when he was embroiled in controversies’ (Boylan, 2016). This claim was the basis for the main research questions included in this study. I knew that I would focus on media ownership in Ireland as an area but this statement gave me the opportunity to build a dissertation around the content analysis of International News and Media’s (INM) articles concerning Mr. O’Brien and articles penned by competitors.

Interestingly, in an opinion piece following the commission of the report, Fintan O’Toole stated that the papers with the largest circulation in the country, the *Independent* and the *Sunday Independent* had omitted any mention of the Report on the days following its publication. Yet the *Irish Times*, *The Sunday Times* and the *Sunday Business Post* gave the report extensive coverage as “the papers were doing the basic work of journalism: telling readers about a significant piece of research in which there is an obvious public interest” (O’Toole 2016).

Ownership, structure and framing are well known concepts that seek to explain the different presentation of similar news events. This research intends to interrogate the definitive role of the press for constructing these representations by

examining the way in which Independent News and Media (INM) newspapers framed controversial events surrounding Denis O'Brien's business affairs.

I will seek to do this by asking the following research questions:

RQ1: Is there a connection between structure of mass media ownership and diversity of content?

RQ2: How did ownership structure influence the framing of O'Brien's affairs in newspapers owned by INM?

RQ3: Does Denis O'Brien receive less critical coverage in his own titles?

My expectation is that the framing of Denis O'Brien's business affairs in the two selected INM newspapers will be much less critical than other newspapers. My other expectation is that negative stories surrounding the business mogul will receive much less attention in INM newspapers and will be framed as less salient than other events through lack of coverage.

# Chapter Two: Literature Review

The following section will outline some of the key theories and concepts that will comprise the building blocks of this piece of research, these will include literature on framing, news values, agenda-setting, media ownership structure and media power.

## 2.1 Framing and Media Power

Framing is one of the most important theories for understanding the presentation of news stories. The concept of framing is defined by key scholar Robert Entman (1993) as follows: 'To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation'. Within this definition, Robert Entman is implying that these frames are consciously selected. Although many scholars talk about how societal values have implications for the choice of frames, on a more basic level profitability is a key driving force behind frame selection as commercial news organisations are businesses first and foremost (O'Neill, 1992).

There has been much research to suggest that newspaper proprietors play a definitive role in determining the content of their publications, whether directly or indirectly. Rupert Murdoch famously was quoted at the Leveson inquiry as saying, "If politicians want my views they should read sun editorials" (Cassidy, 2012). Indeed, the media mogul is well known for his hands-on approach at his media corporation, News International. According to Murdock (1982), this overt display of power is

known as instrumental yet proprietors can also exert their power structurally, meaning that the newsroom politics are politically or economically aligned with that of the owner(s).

Robert Entman (2007) defines content bias as consistent patterns in the framing of mediated communication that promote the influence of one side in conflicts over the use of government power. By this definition, content bias refers to patterns of slant that regularly prime audiences, consciously or unconsciously, to support the interests of holders or seekers of political power. Research shows that content bias tends to slant news favourably towards the side regarded as most powerful, popular, and unified.

The liberal media, it has been contended, tend to favour the conservative elites in their framing, and the findings of a plethora of studies support this. Researchers such as Entman (2005) have looked at coverage of protests or trade union strikes and other anti-establishment activities and have found evidence of this bias.

According to Van Gorp (2005), a frame is meta-communicative, meaning it 'gives the receiver instructions or aids in his [or her] attempt to understand the message included within the frame' (Bateson, 1972: 188). Erving Goffman (1974) notes that the majority of frames are inherently related to culture, yet Van Gorp (2005) contends that though connection between frames and a cultural motive (e.g. myth, stereotype, value, shared belief) forms an important step, it cannot be detected directly through frame analysis. This connection is formed cognitively by the reader through his or her perception of the news text, based on knowledge of prior events (Van Gorp, 2007). News narratives that reflect shared values and underlying

schemas that are dominant in society will take precedent over those that do not (Lule, 2001).

Robert Entman (1989) coined the term 'interdependence model' based on the perspective that public opinion grows out of an interaction between media messages and what audiences make of them. De Vreese (2005) also takes this view by studying framing as a communicative process. He states that frame-setting refers to the 'interaction between media frames and individuals' prior knowledge and predispositions'. Entman (1989) also refers to the 'autonomy model' of framing, a category which includes both the minimal consequences and the agenda-setting positions, as both perspectives assume that audiences form their preferences autonomously. Apart from the usual influence that framing research has shown in terms of media messages altering the viewpoints of individuals, De Vreese's (2005) study alludes to implications on a societal level:

Frames may contribute to shaping social level processes such as political socialization, decision-making, and collective actions (De Vreese, 2005).

According to some framing researchers, the predominant pattern of framing in news selection is one that is compatible with the interests of the dominant class or power group in society, making it easier for the powerful elites to secure their position (McCullagh, 2002). One of the most prominent theorists to be identified with this position is Jurgen Habermas. Habermas argues that there is an area of social life called the public sphere, in which public opinion is formed (McCullagh, 2002). In an ideal society, all members of the public would have the right to speak in this arena. For Habermas, the public sphere is a communicative centre from which the bourgeoisie learned to constitute themselves into a force that could generate

collective power and in turn hold the hegemony to account (Lunt and Livingstone, 2013). Habermas (1989) however argues that this sphere, which emerged in Europe in the late eighteenth century, no longer exists. The world is increasingly dominated by large corporations that make deals with each other and the state to the exclusion of the citizenry.

Nicholas Garnham (1992) argues that the commercialisation of cultural production that began under prime minister Margaret Thatcher has undercut the spaces available for public debate. With the growth of globalisation and capitalism, decision making has been removed from public scrutiny and placed within the boardrooms of private businesses. Garnham, like Habermas before him believes that 'public communication' lays at the heart of the democratic process. One of his worries is the replacement of national cultural spheres with an international media market (Garnham, 1986). For him the destruction of the national public sphere and the promotion of disunity among the citizenry were preconditions for creating the 'international space' needed by those building the new form of capitalism associated with globalisation (Louw, 2001). His position was a call to constructing a global public sphere and creating the mechanics for this global community to make the capitalist elite accountable to public scrutiny.

Bias and news slant, though both important elements of framing or agenda setting, do have distinguishable characteristics. Entman (2007) highlights that news slant characterises individual news reports and editorials in which the framing favours one side over another in a current or potential dispute. Mainstream media organisations contend that they give fair reportage to both sides by treating competing frames equivalently, ensuring their reports do not slant, yet Entman (2007) argues that slanted news is not the rare exception. However, news frames

can be interpreted by an audience in a different way from that which was intended. (Entman, 1993).

## 2.2 Media Ownership

There is a general agreement that in countries where the media is mostly privately owned such as the United States and Ireland, that ownership is rapidly falling into fewer hands. The process of concentrating ownership into a limited number of companies is known as 'conglomeration' (McCullagh, 2002). The political economy perspective on media framing contends that private media ownership on such a concentrated level leads to a media that is limited in scope and diversity (McCullagh, 2002). One example of this viewpoint is the 'propaganda model' proposed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988). Their argument is that the mass media, particularly in capitalist, Western societies, is just a transmission belt for the ideas and ideologies of the governmental and corporate elites (McCullagh, 2002). Herman and Chomsky (1988) elaborate on this model of the mass media that specifies concrete and verifiable mechanisms that account for systematic media bias. This model employs five so-called filters: the concentration of media ownership, the influence of advertising, the over-reliance on information from the powerful, "flak" against transgressors and finally, an ethos of anti-communism. Herman and Chomsky argue that dissent is allowed if it operates and is controlled within a largely internalised consensus. As mentioned above, their first filter is the large scale, concentrated ownership and profit orientation of the mass media. Their argument is that in the free market system public interest is largely irrelevant. The wealthy media owners have an enormous vested interest in the 'free enterprise

economy' and this is a danger to democratic society (Goodwin, 1994). Ben Bagdikian (2004) explains the power the mass media has in society today:

No imperial ruler in history had multiple media channels that included television and satellite channels that can permeate entire societies with controlled sights and sounds.

With the force of the growth of the internet, today's media channels reach more citizens than ever before and they are controlled by the smallest number of owners yet (Bagdikian, 2004).

A central concern is that ownership concentration can restrict the flow of communication and information by limiting the diversity of producers and distributors (Mosco, 2009: 162). As private media owners operate in a capitalist environment, being financially profitable is their primary concern. According to Murdock (1982, quoted in McCullagh, 2002) 'profit maximisation remains the basic structural imperative around which the capitalist economy revolves'.

Curran (2011: 58) argues that the central objective of the commercial media is to turn a profit. In his words: 'the primary goal of commercial media is to make money, while that of public service organisations is to serve society in way that is defined in law and regulation'. A substantial body of critical opinion has developed which argues that commercial media do not provide voters with sufficient information to allow them to fulfil their role as informed citizens (Dahlgren and Sparks, 1991). Thus, critical theorists often perceive the commercial media as failing to create an adequate space for public debate.

Democratic theorists have legitimate concerns about the concentration of ownership in the media sector, a definitive source of information for many media

audiences. A concentration of ownership often means a concentrated amount of information with limited variety (Curtin and Streeter, 2001). To Ben Bagdikian (2004), ownership is critical; he argues:

Many of the corporations claim to permit great freedom to the journalists, producers and writers they employ. Some do grant great freedom. But when their most sensitive economic interests are at stake, the parent corporations seldom refrain from using their power over public information.

If, as indicated by many theorists particularly of the political economy school, turning a profit is the driving factor behind decision making in media corporations, then advertising and its power to influence these decisions must also be studied in this literature review. Curran and Seaton (1988) sum up the power the advertising industry has over the media noting that ‘advertisers thus acquired de facto licensing authority since, without their support, newspapers cease to be economically viable’. As advertising is the main contributor to the revenue and income of newspapers and other media outlets, it must be attracted if profit targets are to be reached (McManus, 1994). The right audiences must be targeted so that advertisers can direct messages at them and this process arguably turns the news into a commodity and a resource used to attract audiences who are in turn sold to advertisers (McCullagh, 2002). In this way, the mainstreaming of news can affect the variety of topics discussed. According to Herman and Chomsky (1988): ‘large corporate advertisers on television will rarely sponsor programs that engage in serious criticisms of corporate activities’.

Media corporations need audiences but as they receive most of their revenue from advertisers who may only be interested in specific segments of the public and

so the media does not fit the stereotypical market model, where unregulated markets respond to and satisfy the needs of the public (Croteau and Hoynes, 2006). Higher income viewers and readers are more attractive than lower income viewers and readers as they are more likely to buy the advertisers' products (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Croteau and Hoynes, 2006). There is a claim by market model advocates, who have adopted the mantra of deregulation, privatisation, and commercialisation, that the media marketplace responds to buyers and therefore the needs of the public come first. However, as buyers are often advertisers there is a significant challenge to this belief (Croteau and Hoynes, 2006).

## 2.3 Agenda Setting

Agenda setting can be defined as an ability of one or more actors to influence the degree of importance accorded to an issue in the minds of the public. It is a process by which the mass media present certain issues prominently and frequently, resulting in large segments of the public perceiving that those issues are more important than others (Coleman and Banning, 2006). In simpler terms, the more coverage or airtime an event is given, the more important the people perceive it to be. Bernard Cohen (1963) was the first to suggest that the mass media performed an agenda-setting function. Cohen states the much-reiterated metaphor that the news media 'may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about'. The seminal quantitative study of agenda setting is credited to McCombs and Shaw (1972) in their piece "The Agenda Setting Function of Mass Media", which reported that those issues given prominent attention by the media were the same topics that people said

were important to them during a presidential campaign (Johnson- Cartee, 2005). Agenda-setting theorists also suggest that the agenda of the mass media seems to have a compelling influence upon the policy agenda of elite decision makers, and sometimes, on policy implementation (Rogers and Dearing, 1988, quoted in Johnson-Cartee, 2005). Worth noting is that the more recent studies of agenda setting contend that it is not a result of any diabolical plan by journalists to control the minds of the public, but ‘an inadvertent by-product of the necessity to focus’ the news (McCombs, 2004, p.19).

## 2.4 News Values

News values dictate what story is reported and how. These values are not universal and can vary. Journalists manufacture news, in the sense of making choices about which events to cover and how to cover them. According to Jackie Harrison (2006, p. 13), news is that which ‘is judged to be newsworthy by journalists, who exercise their news sense within the constraints of the news organisations within which they operate.’ As can be seen from this definition, news selection is not a scientific process and it is subjective based on the company or culture a newsroom is in.

First analysed by Galtung and Ruge (1965) in their article, ‘The Structure of Foreign News’, they discuss the concept of news values and how much coverage a story is given in the media. They argued that the more clearly an event can be understood and interpreted unambiguously, without multiple meanings, the more likely it was to be covered as a news story (Harcup and O’Neill, 2001). The factors making up their news values continue to be cited as preconditions of news selection to this day. The central question at the core of their paper was: “How do ‘events’

become 'news'?" Seeking to answer this question they established a taxonomy of news values that seemed to be of importance in the selection of news.

Events become news to the extent they satisfy the conditions of:

- (1) Frequency: The time-span of an event, an event that unfolds within the publication cycle of the news medium is more likely to be selected than one that unfurls over a long period of time.
- (2) Threshold: What is the size of the event? Is it big enough to make it into the news? The greater the intensity, the greater the impact.
- (3) Unambiguity: How clear is the meaning of an event? The more clearly an event can be understood the more likely it is to be selected.
- (4) Meaningfulness: How meaningful will the event appear to the receivers of the news? Events that are more culturally familiar to the news receivers are more salient.
- (5) Consonance: Does the event match the media's expectations? Due to experience in the field, journalists can predict whether an event will be newsworthy.
- (6) Unexpectedness: If an event is highly unpredictable or rare, then it is likely to make it into the news.
- (7) Continuity: Once an event has already made it into the news it can be covered some more as a running story because it has become familiar to the audience.
- (8) Composition: An event can be selected because it fits into the overall composition or balance of a newspaper or news broadcast.

(9) Reference to elite nations: Those nations that are culturally closer to our own will receive the most coverage.

(10) Reference to elite people: If the event has something to do with a powerful or famous person the public may identify with them. It is assumed that the actions of 'important' people are more consequential than ordinary citizens.

(11) Reference to persons: News that can be presented in terms of individual people rather than abstractions is more likely to be chosen.

(12) Reference to something negative: Bad events are generally newsworthy.

According to Galtung and Ruge the more criteria that an occurrence meets on their list of 12 news values, the more likely it is that this will become news. As all these factors are hypothetical it is important to note that such taxonomies of news values must "remain open to inquiry rather than be seen as a closed set of values for journalism in all times and places" (Zelizer, 2004, p. 55). The exploration of news values has proved useful to my research but it does only offer a partial explanation of the journalistic selection process as news selection cannot solely be based on intrinsic journalistic values; external conditions, such as occupational routines and constraints must also be taken into account.

## 2.5 The Commercialisation of News

John H. McManus (2009, p.219) defines the commercialisation of news as "any action intended to boost profit that interferes with a journalist's or news organization's best effort to maximize public understanding of those issues and

events that shape the community they claim to serve". The argument for commercialisation of the cultural sphere was that media operating according to commercial principles were compelled to deliver the products demanded by audiences or face bankruptcy.

Since the introduction of the Penny Papers in the 1830s, many newspapers sought income from advertisers on a large scale thus eliminating the reliance on political subsidies or individual subscriptions (Krause, 2011). This shows that the conflict between the public service goals most news media claim is their mission, and the demand of their owners for the greatest return on their investment has existed since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (McManus, 2009). With significant stockholder pressures and advertising revenues the US media is more profit-driven than its counterparts in other advanced nations (Benson and Hallin, 2007). In Western Europe, where Ireland is of most concern for this study, Antonio Gramsci and the "Frankfurt School" scholars said that commercialisation was seen as contributing to class domination and hegemony (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch, 2009).

One of Curran's fundamental critiques of traditional liberal thought on the democratic role of the media was the theory that only by anchoring the media to the free market is it possible to ensure the media's independence from the government (Curran, 1991). Once the media is free from subjection to public regulation it can fulfil its vital watchdog function. According to Curran this model of the media is outdated and fails to recognise that power is exercised over the media through other structures and has 'paid no attention to the role of the press as a defence against exploitation in the private sphere' (Curran, 1991).

So often the term 'freedom of the press' is placed in the context of freedom from the shackles of state interference; but for Curran it also means freedom from the constraints of the corporate culture that is engulfing the Western world. In liberal democracies, it is arguable that protection from the power of the market is more necessary than protection from the government. The *News of the World* phone-hacking scandal and the subsequent findings of the Leveson inquiry have shown that the light touch self-regulation favoured by the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) failed to hold the perpetrators of cultural injustices to account. One of the findings of the Leveson inquiry was that self-regulation 'denies the influence and power of a corporate culture that wreaks its own havoc and sets its own agenda often more blatantly than any democratic government would ever dare' (Fenton, 2011). Markets do not have democratic intent at their core. Markets which include private media corporations pursue competitive and financial gain. The PCC has been replaced by the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) and many academic commentators assert that this model still gives large media conglomerates too much freedom to operate purely for commercial gain rather than the public interest (Barnett, 2016; Fenton, 2015).

Curran is critical of the argument that the free market produces a media system which responds to and expresses the views of the people. He finds this misleading as market dominance has reduced media diversity and audience choice as well as restricting entry into the market (Curran, 1991). In recent years there have been many voices of dissent over what is believed to be a worrying lack of plurality in the Irish media market (Greenslade, 2016). A report on the concentration of media ownership in Ireland was issued in October 2016 and it highlighted the uniquely high concentration of ownership in Irish media (Boylan, 2016). The report was funded by

the Council of Europe, commissioned by Sinn Féin MEP Lynn Boylan and drawn up by four independent lawyers in the UK and Northern Ireland. The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) had called for an investigation into media ownership in Ireland earlier on in the year and since their request Denis O'Brien's Independent News and Media (INM) had attempted to acquire the Celtic Media Group in September 2016, which would have added another seven titles to O'Brien's repertoire (Greenslade 2016). In an opinion piece following its publication Fintan O'Toole stated that the papers with the largest circulation in the country, the *Independent* and the *Sunday Independent* had omitted any mention of the report. Yet the *Irish Times*, the *Sunday Times* and the *Sunday Business Post* gave the report extensive coverage as 'the papers were doing the basic work of journalism: telling readers about a significant piece of research in which there is an obvious public interest' (O'Toole, 2016).

There is another very real threat to the media plurality and freedom of expression for Ireland, the Report finds. This is the 'sustained and regular threats of legal action by Mr O'Brien to media organisations and journalists who are engaged in newsgathering or reporting about his activities' (Boylan, 2016). If the Irish media is to be overly monopolised by one mogul, one who does not fear bringing other media outlets to court when they criticise his business decisions then Curran's critique of anchoring the media in the free market is extremely valid.

Curran (1991) also turns his attention to the professional responsibility model of the media. The ideology of professionalism centres on the notion that the journalist's first duty is to serve the public. The belief is that the democratic role of the media can be upheld without structural reform due to journalists' innate commitment to neutrality, justice and truth. Curran argues that evidence points to declining levels of autonomy in large news organisations and public service

broadcasting since the 1970s. In large media organisations journalists only have a certain degree of autonomy over their work as they answer to higher powers. In the words of Lord Justice Leveson, “a few powerful individuals have been able to dominate the system” (Barnett, 2016).

## 2.6 Media Pluralism in Ireland

The importance of diverse media ownership to a healthy democracy appears prima facie common-sense. The more media outlets an individual or institution owns the more de facto political influence it possesses through the ability to intervene in or effectively set the agenda of public discourse. According to C. Edwin Baker (1994), above all ‘democratic concerns should be central in formulating legal Policy relating to the press.’ Baker elaborates on this point by detailing three major reasons why a broad distribution of media ownership is preferential and should be upheld. Baker refers to ‘complex democracy’-

The closer a society move toward an acceptable parity between media ownership and social organisation, and the greater potential a public has of articulating a general will truly representative of its varied interests” (Tracy, 2008).

Baker (2002) also coined the term ‘the Berlusconi effect’ to refer to the possible dangers arising out of a single media owner having too much power in one market which can lead to using their “communicative power” to select or dominate the government. According to the Irish report on concentration of media ownership in Ireland, Ireland has one of the most concentrated media markets of any democracy. This “communicative power” that C. Edwin Baker (1994) referred to within the media

market has reached unprecedented levels and this, combined with the dominance of one private individual media owner in the State, creates what the Media Reform Coalition has described as ‘conditions in which wealthy individuals and organisations can amass huge political and economic power and distort the media landscape to suit their interests and personal views’. (Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, 2016)

The CMPF’s major project is the Media Pluralism Monitor which seeks to systematically analyse the strengths of weakness of the media plurality of different member states. The report analyses the countries under certain categories with a scoring system based between a low of 0.00 and a high of 1.00, with scores of 0.66 and above being labelled as ‘high risk’. The March 2016 Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF) report awarded Ireland a score in excess of 0.70 in the category ‘concentration of media ownership’, which placed it firmly in the highest level of concern. The Media Pluralism Monitor assesses four key areas of media pluralism:

Basic Protections: Dr. Flynn assessed Ireland as at 29% risk in this category. This indicator assesses the regulatory system in place in the Irish media system. The monitor assesses the regulatory safeguards that protect freedom of expression and the right to information; the protection of journalists in Ireland and the independence and abilities of the regulatory bodies in operation. Dr. Flynn noted that under this indicator there was a medium risk for journalistic profession standards and protection stating among numerous reasons that ‘ there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that some media owners have sought to influence editorial content’.

Media Plurality: These indicators examine the existence and effectiveness of implementation of transparency and disclosure provisions with regard to media ownership. Dr. Flynn assessed Ireland as at 54% risk under this heading. The professor notes that Irish company law does not require media companies to make their ownership structures public knowledge. A consequence of this is that there is a lack of transparency of media ownership with the public often unsure as to who owns what within the Irish media. As aforementioned the monitor scored 'concentration of media ownership' at 74% stating the risk is very high here. There are no maximum media ownership thresholds which means that in theory one individual media owner could own 100% of the Irish media market.

Although the BAI's Ownership and Control Policy does not have legislative status, it does specify the quantitative limits on the ownership of sound broadcasting (i.e., radio) services: ownership above 25% of the total number of licenced radio services is considered unacceptable.

Other EU states impose absolute limits on ownership. In Germany, 20 per cent is the ownership limit in any media sector and where that limit is breached, "forcible divesting" is imposed (O'Regan, 2016).

Social Inclusiveness: Ireland is at 41% risk in this area. This area evaluates access to media platforms for different cultural and social groups.

Political Independence: Ireland was assessed to be at 41% risk under this category. The professor evaluates the politicisation of the media, taking commercial media outlets and the public service media into account. According to Dr. Flynn, Mr. O'Brien "enjoys a dominant position within the Irish print sector, due to his ownership of a significant minority stake in Independent News and Media" (Centre for Media

Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF), 2016). Independent News and Media publishes Ireland's two largest selling titles, the Irish Independent and Sunday Independent. It also publishes the Sunday World and the Dublin Herald, and it has a 50% stake in the Irish Daily Star.

Dr. Flynn then concludes the report with recommendations for improvement. As the media concentration is so high particularly in the print and broadcast sectors, the report recommends amending the legislation in the 2014 Competition and Protection Act so that it applies retrospectively. The contention with this suggestion is the strong defence of property rights however yet the report claims that as freedom of expression is also explicitly defended in the constitution, a case could be made for retrospection.

In October 2016 a legal analysis of the concentration of media ownership in Ireland, commissioned by Sinn Féin MEP Lynn Boylan and written by four independent lawyers was released in Dublin. The report interestingly, gives persuasive arguments to fight the common misconception that there are many legal barriers in the Constitution and in European Union law to State action in support of a more diverse media (O'Toole, 2016).

## Chapter Three: Methodology

From the foundation of the literature review I will draw upon the key theories that will assist in the structuring and conducting of this research project. It is my contention that Robert Entman's (2007) theory of framing and content bias is most appropriate for the analysis at hand. Under his theory of content bias I must show patterns of slant that regularly prime audiences, be it consciously or not, to support the interests of particular holders of power; in the case of this particular study, the holder of power is Denis O'Brien.

### 3.1 Overview

To be able to get an accurate representation of how Denis O'Brien's business affairs are framed in the Irish press, it appeared obvious to look at the source of the framing itself, Independent News & Media (INM) publications. It was also important to analyse a large sample of articles from a representative sample of newspapers to get a diversity of frames. The *Irish Independent* has the largest circulation of all the daily newspapers in Ireland with 97,104 as the recorded circulation for July to December 2016 (News Brands Ireland, 2016). *The Irish Times* as the second largest daily newspaper, with a circulation of 66,251 for the same period, seemed like the most obvious choice as a newspaper to be analysed and compared with the INM publication. The *Sunday Independent* is INM's largest Sunday newspaper; with a circulation of 191,594 it is by far the most read newspaper in Ireland. In order to compare and contrast the coverage of Denis O'Brien in a weekly publication it was necessary to choose another Sunday newspaper. The difficulty here with choosing

the second largest publication based on circulation figures (149,652), *Sunday World*, is that this newspaper is a tabloid style with a penchant for sensationalism and this does not fit in with the broadsheet newspapers that have been selected. *The Sunday Times* and the *Irish Mail on Sunday* were automatically omitted from the selection as UK newspapers with Irish print editions. The *Sunday Business Post*, with a circulation of 30,244, was selected as it fit the requirements mentioned.

With these considerations in mind, posing questions to readers of the Irish press in the form of interviews or surveys was immediately discredited as a valuable method for this research, as this study does not attempt to determine how audiences interpreted the presentation of events but rather, the way in which the events were framed or intended to be interpreted.

It had been decided that an analysis of a body of text would be the most appropriate method for this research, a discourse analysis was the first consideration for conducting this research. This analysis is usually used to scrutinize in-depth both the content and form of a text, including the language dimensions, inter-textuality and presentation (Fairclough, 1992). Given the time constraints of this study, this research method was omitted. Content analysis proved to be the most appropriate method and was chosen because it would allow for the discovery of both the presence and possible re-occurrence of frames among the Irish press.

## 3.2 Content Analysis

Content analysis is a research technique that approaches the analysing of documents and texts that seeks to quantify content in terms of predetermined

categories and in a systematic and replicable manner (Bryman, 2012). In order to understand the process of conducting a content analysis, the following paragraphs give a brief explanation of content analysis research and the strengths and weaknesses it brings to the study.

### 3.3 Description

Content analysis research has been given many different definitions over the years, but arguably the best-known definition was provided by Bernard Berelson. In *Content Analysis in Communication Research* (1952), Berelson said as follows: 'content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication'. Another well-known and similar definition is: 'content analysis is any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages (Holsti, 1969: 14). Both of these definitions place emphasis on the qualities of objectivity and being systematic. Objectivity means that rules are set in advance of the analysis and the raw materials (newspaper articles) can be set into pre-determined categories. This quality is a vital part of this analysis as it is important that the researcher's personal biases do not interfere in the procedures. The quality of being systematic refers to the application of the rules being done in a consistent manner, which again is another preventative measure for the intrusion of bias (Bryman, 2012). It is my hope that by applying these two qualities to my content analysis, any other researcher could analyse the data and come up with the same results. Content analysis is also useful for examining trends and patterns in documents. One prominent example of this method is Stemler and Bebell's (1998)

content analysis of school mission statements to make some inferences about what schools ascertain are their primary reasons for existence. One of the main research questions asked was whether the criteria being used to measure programme effectiveness were aligned with the overall program objectives or reason for existence (Stemler, 2014).

According to Krippendorff (1980), six questions must be addressed in every content analysis:

- 1) Which data are analysed?
- 2) How are they defined?
- 3) What is the population from which they are drawn?
- 4) What is the context relative to which the data are analysed?
- 5) What are the boundaries of the analysis?
- 6) What is the target of the inferences?

There is a general distinction in content analysis between the emphasis on the text, counting certain words and an emphasis on themes within the text (Beardsworth, 1980). A concentration on themes is more appropriate for this study. As referred to in my research questions this study is expecting to find certain omissions in coverage in the *Irish Independent* when it comes to the personal affairs and business dealings of Denis O'Brien. Omissions themselves are an interesting and important theme as they may reveal what is and is not important to reporters and their editors (Bryman, 2012). As the coding process in this study is thematic, a more interpretive approach has to be taken. As the analyst, I am searching for not

only manifest content but latent content as well. Manifest content is a term referred to by Berelson (1952) and it means that a content analysis is concerned with uncovering what the item being analysed is clearly about. Latent content is discovered through a deeper interpretation of the texts, as it refers to meanings that lie beneath the superficial indicators of content (Bryman, 2012). The term reliability is an important one in content analyses; Weber (1990) notes:

To make valid inferences from the text, it is important that the classification procedure be reliable in the sense of being consistent: different people should code the same text in the same way.

### 3.4 Strengths and Weaknesses

A content analysis is a highly flexible research method. It can be applied to a variety of unstructured textual information. It is also a vastly transparent research method. Transparency refers to the clarity provided by coding schemes and sampling procedures, making this method systematic and replicable if conducted accurately (Bryman, 2012). Like all research techniques, content analysis does suffer from certain limitations, however. A content analysis can only prove useful if the texts being analysed are sound. Scott (1990) recommends assessing documents based on certain criteria, which are as follows: authenticity; credibility; and representativeness. These considerations are especially important when a researcher is conducting their study on documents such as letters. As this study is only analysing newspaper articles this limitation does not affect the research. A great concern with conducting a qualitative content or thematic analysis, is the generally subjective nature of distinguishing a theme. Without a proper definition of

coded variables and the subsequent categorical choices for those variables, thematic coding can be largely inaccurate. To be able to most accurately code the theme of each article, the variable topics, referred to in this study as events, were considered in conjunction with the variable ownership of publication. Being able to determine the subject matter of each article proved beneficial for then more accurately identifying a corresponding theme and categorizing them into the five most frequently occurring events (topics) within my selected timeframe. Most importantly, however, content analysis aims to interpret the significance of the coded dimensions of a text to the larger social structure (Hansen et al, 1998); this research hopes to interpret the significance of its findings as it relates to the politics of newspaper ownership.

### 3.5 Data Collection

I have selected four Irish broadsheet newspapers for inclusion in the content analysis; *The Irish Independent*, the *Sunday Independent*, *The Irish Times* and the *Sunday Business Post* (SBP). These four publications are included to represent a cross-section of Irish print media, and therefore increase the probability of exploring the research hypothesis conclusively. The Irish Times is considered the quintessential broadsheet in that it is balanced, independent, quality journalism with a liberal ethos. The Irish independent is a traditional broadsheet which, it has been argued, has altered its focus in recent years, to compete with the tabloid media.

To source the sample of articles suited for the content analysis, various factors for the selection of the newspapers were considered. The different content characteristics provided by the newspapers are needed, as these segmentations are

analysed for the diversity of their audience and size as well as the potential impact the newspapers have on their readers. The audience type itself refers to aspects such as age, social class, gender, race and profession, while the audience size based on either mass or minority (Hansen, 1998).

The availability and accessibility also played a role in the selection process of the articles. This is a retrospective analysis, looking at articles from 15th June 2016 to 15<sup>th</sup> June 2017, and so many articles were downloaded from the LexisNexis platform. Using LexisNexis 328 articles matched my keyword search under 'Denis O'Brien'. On analysing the articles, it became evident that many of these articles only briefly referred to Mr O'Brien in their articles and they were actually on different topics. To narrow my search to articles where Denis O'Brien was a main focus I altered the search to 'major mentions'. This search returned 167 articles; 112 for *The Irish Times*, 52 from the *Irish Independent* and three from the *Sunday Business Post*.

As the *Sunday Business Post* returned so few articles I decided to subscribe to its website in order to access the newspaper's archives. The subscription fee is €12.99 per month but it has allowed me to retrieve the necessary articles from its database. When searching for Denis O'Brien on the SBP website my search returned many articles that I automatically omitted based on relevance. As the SBP website does not have a 'major mentions' search button I manually went through the articles and deleted 'what it says in the papers' and 'business diary' which were weekly and daily round-up articles of business news items from the previous week. Once these omissions were made I found 23 articles in which Denis O'Brien was majorly mentioned in the period between June 2016 and June 2017.

From these articles, the five events that received the most coverage over the timeframe were selected and coded for further analysis. Eighty-six articles were coded and categorised by event. *The Irish Times* published 45 articles in total; the *Irish Independent* published 19; the SBP published 18 and the *Sunday Independent* published four.

The *Irish Independent* is Ireland's largest selling daily newspaper and is published by Independent News & Media (INM). It was founded in 1905 and is a privately-owned newspaper. Since 2012, the Irish Independent has been controlled by Denis O'Brien, by virtue of his 29.9% share of its parent company INM. The *Irish Independent* is traditionally a broadsheet paper, but following Denis O'Brien's takeover of the publication in 2012 it became a compact only newspaper.

The *Sunday Independent* is a Sunday newspaper published by INM, of which Denis O'Brien is the single largest shareholder. It was first published in 1905 as the Sunday edition of the *Irish Independent* and maintains a broadsheet outlook, that has arguably become more entertainment and lifestyle focussed of late.

*The Irish Times* was first published in 1859 as a 'new conservative daily paper'. In 1900 The Irish Times became a public company and in 1922 once the Irish Free State was established the newspaper shifted to an independent political line. It is now considered as being a politically liberal and progressive newspaper. Since 1974 *The Irish Times* has been run by a non-charitable trust, The Irish Times Trust CLG, with the objective of securing and maintaining the newspaper as 'an independent newspaper primarily concerned with serious issues for the benefit of the community throughout the whole of Ireland' (The Irish Times, 2017). Any profits

made by *The Irish Times* cannot be distributed to the trust but must be used to strengthen the newspaper in either a direct or indirect way.

The SBP is a Sunday newspaper that is distributed nationally in Ireland. It is a broadsheet paper with a liberal editorial line. The paper is relatively new with the first edition appearing in 1989. The paper describes itself as "Ireland's Political, Economic and Financial Newspaper". It is a general newspaper with a strong emphasis on commerce, politics and financial markets. Circulation was 30,244 for the period July to December 2016 (Sunday Business Post, 2017).

## 3.6 Event Categories

The five events, coded for analysis, will be described in further detail in the following section.

### Event 1

An expert report, published in October 2016, has called for the government to establish a cross-disciplinary Commission of Inquiry into the concentration of media ownership in Ireland. The report states that 'there are extremely grave concerns about the high concentration of media ownership in the Irish market, and in particular regarding the position of Independent News & Media and Mr Denis O'Brien' (Report on the Concentration of Media Ownership in Ireland, 2016). The report commented further that 'Ireland has one of the most concentrated media markets of any

democracy', with most media outlets owned fully or partly by the businessman, or controlled by the public service broadcaster, RTÉ.

This feature- alarming in itself- must be viewed alongside the other gravely concerning aspects of the Irish media landscape which we have highlighted: sustained and regular threats of legal action by Mr O'Brien to media organisations and journalists who are engaged in news gathering or reporting about his activities, and the 'chilling effect', of the current defamation laws. This is a toxic combination for freedom of expression and media plurality (Report on the Concentration of Media Ownership in Ireland, 2016).

The report was 36 pages long and was prepared by four lawyers from London's Doughty Chambers and KRW Law in Belfast. It was commissioned by Lynn Boylan, a Sinn Féin member of the European Parliament (MEP), on the behalf of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left group of the European Parliament. The report refers to calls in the past for greater media plurality by bodies such as the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) as well as the Competition and Consumer Protection Act 2014 which introduced a new media mergers system. These new rules, the report stated, contained 'no mechanism for adjusting the status quo' where Denis O'Brien already controlled large amounts of media. The report also refers to the takeover bid for Celtic Media Group, which has since collapsed, stating that it would extend INM's regional footprint to five more counties. The report went on to call for 'urgent action' to be taken to reassure journalists, media organisations and the public as well as ensuring Ireland complies with Irish and European law. The report suggests that a Commission of Inquiry should examine issues such as 'how precisely to measure plurality; the desirability of any retrospective mechanism

concerning media ownership; and the specific position of RTÉ as a public state broadcaster' (Report on the Concentration of Media Ownership in Ireland, 2016).

## Event Two

On September 28<sup>th</sup> 2016, the then US Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump brought Denis O' Brien into one of his attacks on his Democratic rival Hillary Clinton. In a statement published on his website entitled 'Follow the Money', Donald Trump made several disparaging comments about the Irish businessman, who has close links to the Clinton family. The statement included links to many media reports on controversies that Mr. O'Brien has been embroiled in in the past and claimed that O'Brien and his mobile phone company Digicel have donated between \$10 and \$25 million dollars to the Clinton Foundation (Carswell, 2016). The statement goes into detail about the scandal over the awarding of Ireland's second mobile phone licence to Esat Digifone (Denis O'Brien's then telecommunications company) in 1995 and the subsequent findings of the Moriarty Tribunal, with links to Irish media reports, for those looking to find out more. It also highlights the controversy over O'Brien's company Millington's purchase of Siteserv, a company that provides a wide range of services to public and private companies such as scaffolding for construction projects and installation of satellite boxes (Duffy, 2015) for 45.4 million euro. This led to the setting up of a Commission of Investigation into the State-owned Irish Bank Resolution Corporation (IBRC), the former Anglo-Irish Bank. The statement also refers to various legal actions involving the media baron in Ireland.

## Event Three

Over the course of the past year there have been ongoing media reports surrounding Denis O'Brien's court case against the Dáil after revelations made in the Irish parliament about his personal banking arrangements may have had significant consequences for a case that was pending the court at that time. In May and June 2015, two Irish politicians, Social Democrat Catherine Murphy and Sinn Féin's Pearse Doherty remarked about the allegedly favourable loan terms that Denis O'Brien received from Irish Bank Resolution Corporation (IBRC), formerly Anglo-Irish Bank. At the time of the remarks Mr. O'Brien was in the middle of a High Court action to stop RTÉ (Raidió Teilifís Éireann), Ireland's public service broadcaster, and its business editor David Murphy, from reporting on his dealings with the bank. A temporary injunction had been awarded, which had gagged the public service broadcaster and this was in place when Catherine Murphy made her comments in the house of parliament on May 6, 2015. Days later, Pearse Doherty leaked further information about the IBRC'S dealings with Mr. O'Brien, while speaking in the Dáil.

The businessman claimed that his right to banking privacy was deliberately breached and his ongoing court case against RTÉ was rendered moot due to the utterances by the two politicians. The businessman and his legal team brought the case before the courts looking for the court to censure the Dáil for trespassing on the judicial domain in breach of his constitutional rights. Utterances made by politicians in the house of parliament are protected by Dáil privilege but in this unprecedented case, O'Brien's legal team were arguing that it was a 'gross abuse of Dáil privilege' designed to 'usurp the role of the courts' (Carolan, 2016).

## Event Four

Independent News & Media failed to finalise the takeover of the regional newspaper chain Celtic Media in 2017, a deal which it had been working on since the summer of 2016. Coverage in the SBP was critical of the brief statement to the stock exchange that claimed the deal was ended by mutual consent with Celtic Media. Ian Guider of the SBP asked 'Is it good enough for a publicly -listed company not to give shareholders any more details on why a takeover, which it has spent the best part of a year working on, has fallen apart?' (Guider, 2017) Over 100 jobs are now at risk at the Celtic Media Group after the €4 million takeover bid was pulled. The breakdown of the takeover followed months of work scrutinising the deal to see if it was in breach of media merger legislation.

Another news items surrounding INM in recent months was the public dispute between INM'S chief executive Robert Pitt and INM chairman Leslie Buckley, over the proposal to acquire Newstalk, the radio station owned by Denis O'Brien, who is also INM's largest shareholder. Robert Pitt made a protected disclosure under the state's whistleblowing legislation due to his discomfort with the process around buying the radio station. The Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement (ODCE) is currently investigating the deal and at least one other senior INM executive has also made a protected disclosure.

The company also disclosed in its annual report in April 2017 that the board does not have a majority of independent directors, something which is against best corporate governance practice. The Annual General Meeting (AGM) has been postponed under August 2017 in order to allow the company time to rectify the

matter. Currently only three of the nine INM board members are independent non-executive directors. Two non-executive directors were re-classified as non-independent the week before the annual reports disclosure. According to the INM annual report, Triona Mullane, a non-executive director since 2012, cannot be considered independent as her business, mAdme Technologies, received a €280,000 investment from a company introduced to her by a relation of Denis O'Brien, who as aforementioned, is by far the single largest investor in INM. In addition to that link, Digicel, the telecommunications company owned by Mr. O'Brien, is a client of mAdme Technologies and accounts for 6 percent of its revenues. Another director, Allan Marshall, cannot also be considered independent as he has been providing consultancy services to INM since 2013. He was paid €77,000 in 2016 for these services and €158,052 in 2015 (Hancock, 2017).

## Event Five

The businessman's Caribbean telecommunications firm Digicel frequented the news over its \$6.5 billion debt pile and its exposure to currency fluctuations. The company operates in 31 markets across the Caribbean and Asia- Pacific markets and it has had a very rocky 2017 which saw revenues decline 6 percent in the three months to December due to currency weakness across several of its main markets. Digicel's 6.5 billion debt pile is in US dollars, which have appreciated against the currencies in which it operates. Digicel is currently letting go of one in four workers (1,500) as a part of its massive restructuring programme (Kehoe, 2017)

## 3.7 Research Tools

In order to conduct a valid and reliable content analysis an appropriate coding frame must be selected. As this content analysis is qualitative in nature with a specific emphasis on thematic analysis, thoroughly defining the variables is essential in order to ensure inter-coder reliability. An important variable for consideration was that of tone, which helped to decide whether the articles were generally critical, positive or took a neutral stance on Denis O'Brien and his affairs. Standard variables were issued to help identify each article and included: identifying which newspaper each article appeared in; the date in which the article appeared; the page number that it appeared on; and each article's word count. The variable 'ownership' was added in order to clarify whether or not the newspaper was owned by INM. After having coded 86 articles in this manner, the next section will outline the results.

# Chapter Four: Findings and Results

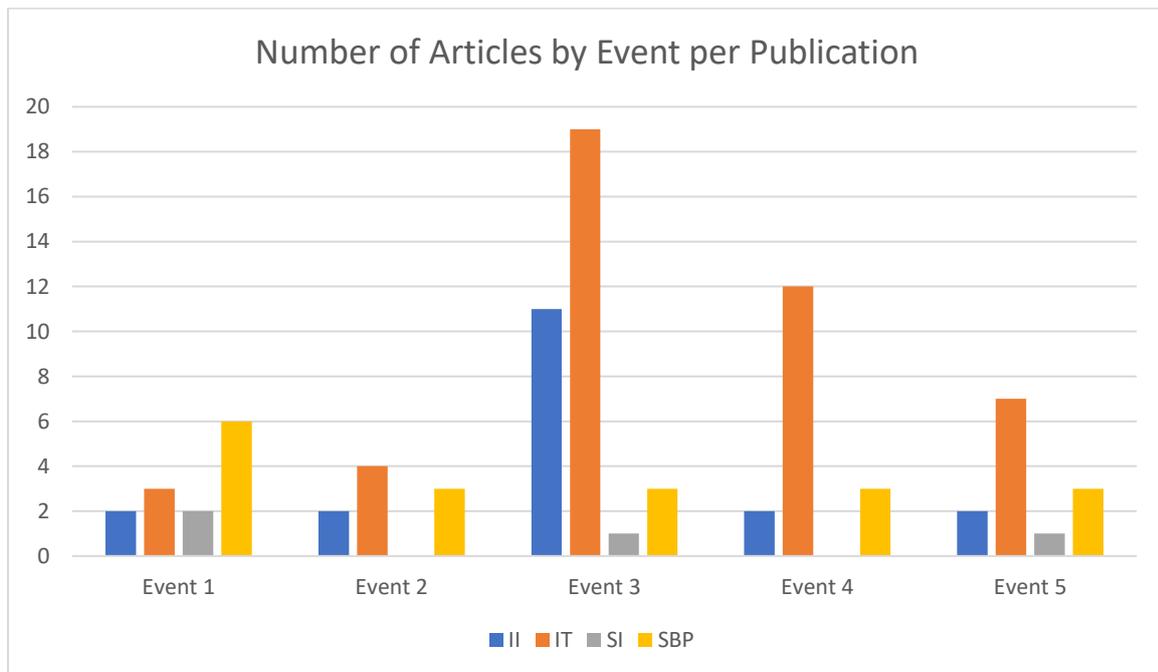
## 4.1 Introduction

The findings and results presented in this chapter are all based on the content analysis, discussed in the methodology chapter. This chapter is structured by introducing findings by combining them with the visual illustration of charts. Following this is an in-depth analysis of the framing of each event by publication, separated by ownership structure and a thematic analysis surrounding the reoccurring theme of omissions and content bias.

The most frequently occurring topic, with 34 articles out of the 86 analysed, was the ongoing court proceedings of Denis O'Brien's case against the Irish parliament. This generally meant that the majority of the articles were written by court reporters giving neutral coverage of courtroom updates.

The second most frequently occurring topic was Event Four with 17 articles. Event One and Event Five both had 13 articles. The least number articles were accorded to Event Two, which only has nine in total across all four publications.

## 4.2 Charts

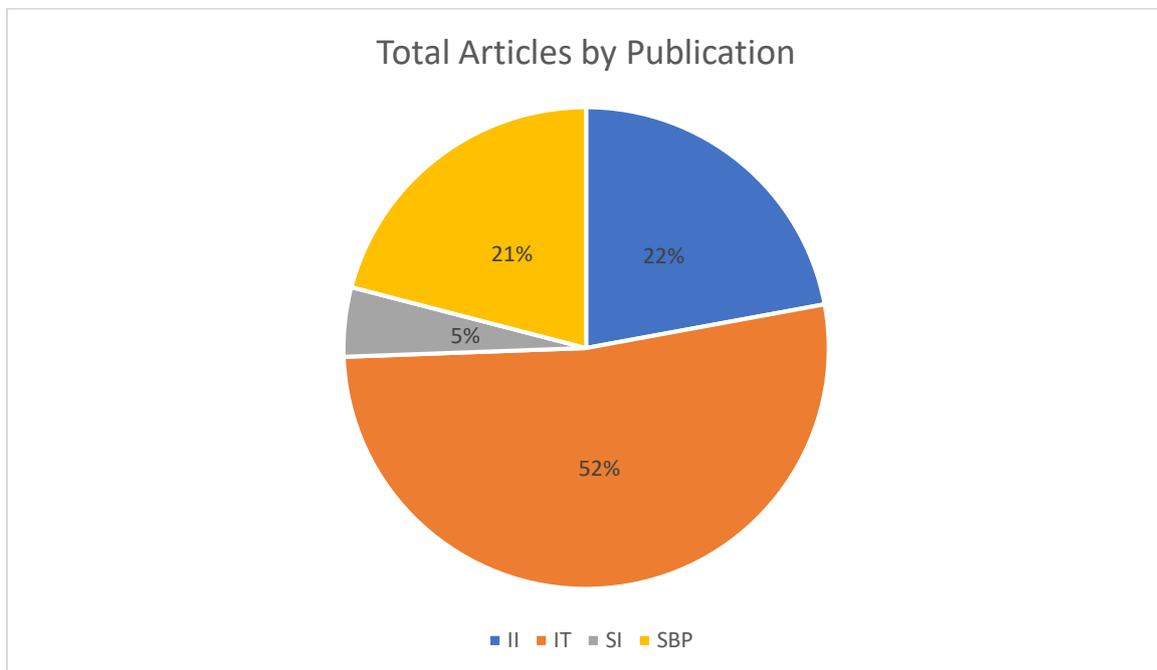


**Chart One**

Chart One shows how many articles each publication published over the course of all five selected events. The most notable feature is that *The Irish Times* (IT) covered all events the most extensively, bar Event One. As can be seen in the chart, the *Sunday Independent* (SI) had the least coverage across all five events, with Event One and Event Two receiving no coverage at all. As Event Two was the Donald Trump dossier that contained many disparaging articles pertaining to Denis O'Brien, his businesses and his numerous court cases, the omissions are entirely in line with my expectations when I formed my research questions at the beginning of this study. RQ3, 'Does Denis O'Brien receive less critical coverage in his own titles?' is

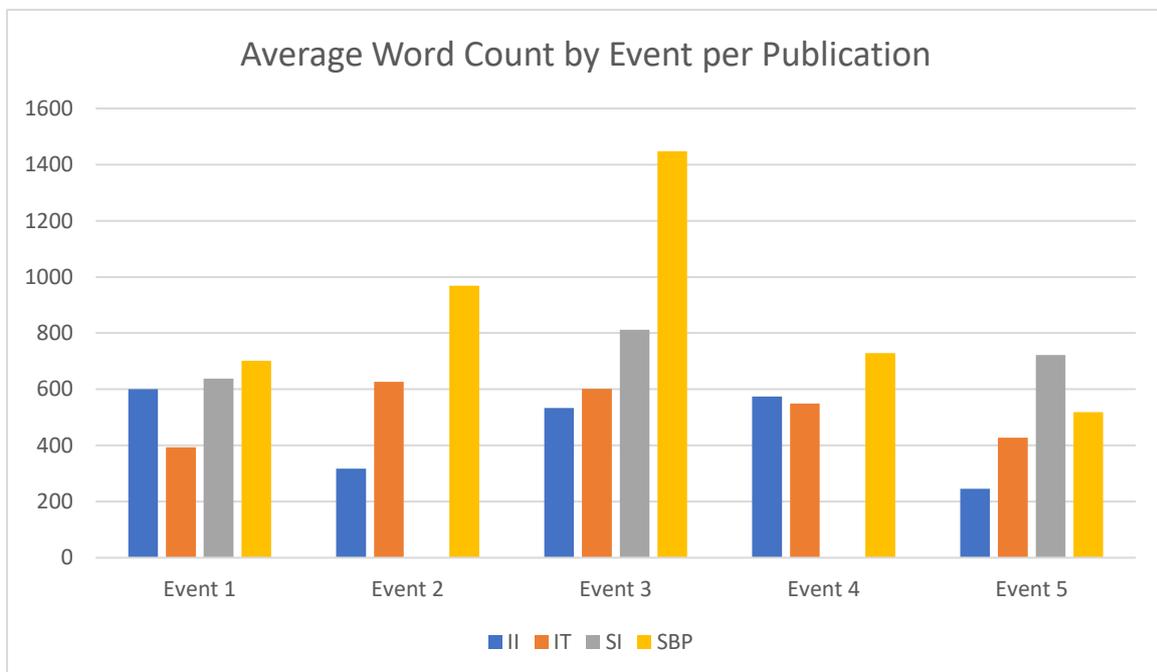
answered in my findings yet as my sample only contained 86 articles it may not be an entirely accurate representation of reality.

Event Four, which also received no coverage from the *Sunday Independent* and very low coverage from the *Irish Independent* (II), was about the numerous issues surrounding INM in recent months. These include the disagreement between high level INM officials over the acquisition of Newstalk, the classifying of two board directors as non-independent and the impending ODCE investigation. The event was clearly of importance to *The Irish Times*, which published twelve articles on the topic. This disparity in coverage gives credence to the belief that journalists exercise their news sense within the constraints of the media organisations that they operate in (Harrison, 2006: 13).



**Chart Two**

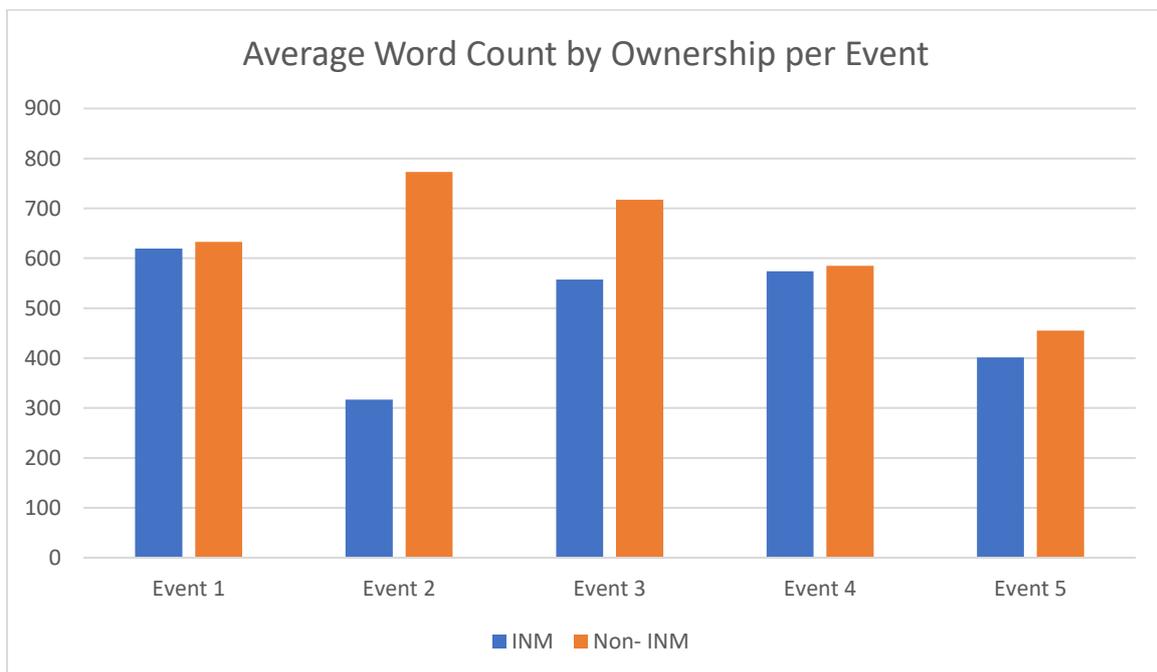
As the data in Chart Two shows, *The Irish Times* featured articles about Mr. O'Brien the most frequently. Interestingly, as the *Irish Independent* is the only other daily newspaper analysed it is substantial that Mr. O'Brien received less than 50% of the coverage in his own publication indicating that readers of the biggest national daily newspaper would be substantially underinformed on issues that featured the businessman.



**Chart Three**

The analysis only included articles with a minimum word count of 200. Chart three illustrates the average word count of all articles categorised by publication and event. The SBP had the highest average word count across the majority of events, with the exception of Event Five. The *Sunday Independent* had the second highest average

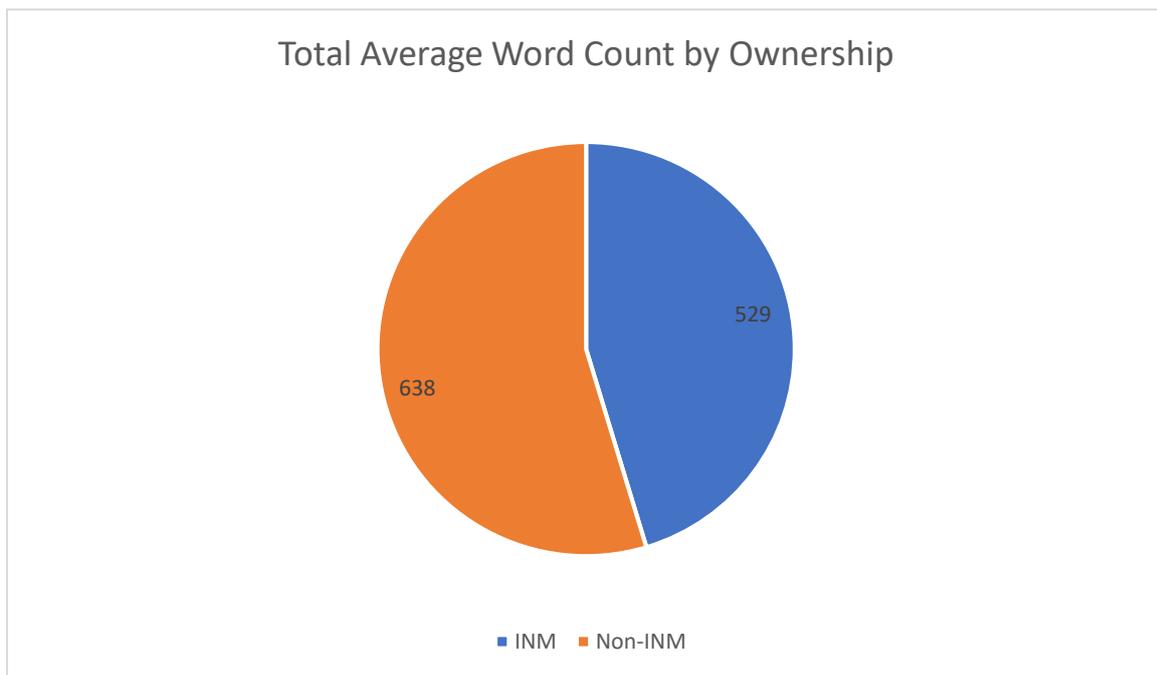
word count in two events and had the highest in Event Five. These findings are in keeping with the style of weekly broadsheet newspapers, which provide extensive coverage of the previous week's events. The word count average in the context of ownership structure is telling as although the *Irish Independent* has the highest readership figures of any daily newspaper in Ireland its word counts were substantially lower than other publications and on analysing the articles my conclusion is that this is due in many cases to omissions of important details, vagueness and a consistent lack of background information on stories that impact negatively on Denis O'Brien and his many business dealings, including those of INM, the newspaper's parent company.



**Chart Four**

This chart clearly shows that across all five events, the non INM owned publications consistently devoted more column space to Denis O'Brien led stories within my

selected timeframe. The obvious difference in coverage of Event Two positively answers my first research question, 'is there a connection between structure of mass media ownership and diversity of content?'



**Chart Five**

This chart clearly summarises the findings from previous charts in a clear visual format. *The Irish Times* and the SBP devoted more articles and a higher average word count than the *Irish Independent* and the *Sunday Independent* to the five most prominent news stories featuring Denis O'Brien during my selected timeframe.

## 4.3 Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis is based on the use of language in terms of words or phrases that appeared in the articles. A thematic analysis is used to identify themes which emerge from and describe a given episode (Daly, Kellehear and Gliksman, 1997). The themes were derived as they emerged from the data after “careful reading and re-reading” of the newspaper articles (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258).

### Event One

There were 13 articles in total, four from INM publications and 9 from *The Irish Times* and SBP. Noticeably, INM had the lowest number of reports on the event with four articles and nine articles were spread out between the two other newspapers, averaging 4.5 articles per publication. The average word count for INM publications was 619 whilst the average word count for non INM owned publications was 633 per article. Six articles were considered positive towards the report and its findings; three were neutral, with a general reporting tone and four articles were considered negative towards the report and its integrity. The four negative articles were from the INM publications accounting for 100% of articles having content bias against the report. The word Sinn Féin was mentioned 23 times in the INM articles, which averaged 5.75 times per article. It was mentioned 16 times in the nine non-INM articles, making it an average of 1.78 per article. In order to discover whether certain articles made omissions about the findings of the report and were vague on certain details as a result of content bias in framing, the question “Does this article quote from the Report at least once?” was asked. This topic was cross-referenced with the

variable of ownership. Ten articles quoted at least once from the report whilst three articles did not mention the report's findings. Two of the three articles, 66.7 per cent, were from INM newspapers. The reaction of Denis O'Brien to the report was a topic that featured in five articles, three of these were INM publications, *The Irish Times* and *The Sunday Business Post* focussed on Mr. O'Brien's rebuttal in one article each. This is only a small sample of articles but the findings are quite in keeping with my research questions.

The *Sunday Independent* mentioned the report by way of comment in Liam Collins' news column 'Zozimus'. The column, on page 12, opened with a reference to "Yet another tiresome blog on the 'worrying lack of plurality' in the Irish media from that paragon of British liberalism, Roy Greenslade". The *Sunday Independent* had no actual reportage of the report only Liam Collins' comment, which made up only 163 out of the 988 words in his column. The *Irish Independent* did not discuss the report until the following Thursday. Contrastingly the *Sunday Business Post* gave the report extensive coverage, with a prominent piece on page five by its business editor Tom Lyons, and an opinion piece by Lynn Boylan on its Media and Marketing page. On the Monday morning, *The Irish Times* had a piece by Pat Leahy on page four which went into detail about the main findings of the report and included quotes from Lynn Boylan's comments to the paper. The first mention of the report and its findings in the *Irish Independent* was an article entitled 'O'Brien rejects claims in SF's report on media'. The article was focussed on Denis O'Brien's rebuttal rather than the report itself and remarkably was the only article to mention the report as a 'SF report' when it was in fact only commissioned by a Sinn Féin MEP on behalf of the European United Left/ Nordic Green Left. Overall *The Irish Times* covered the subject three times, SBP six times, Irish Independent twice and Sunday Independent twice.

In an article in October 2016, esteemed journalist for *The Irish Times*, Fintan O'Toole, remarked on the lack of coverage the Report on the Concentration of Media Ownership in Ireland had received in the *Irish Independent* and the *Sunday Independent* and indeed all publications under the INM umbrella. As Mr. O'Toole highlights it is the basic function of a journalist to inform the public about information which is clearly in the public's interest. The only mention of the report in the days that followed was an opinion piece by Liam Collins that gave no information on the report itself. What is striking, though, is that the only account of the report that readers of the Independent titles received on Sunday and Monday was through an attack on another reporter whose views were discounted in advance because he is, of all despicable things, a paragon of British liberalism. Those readers would have no idea what the report actually says (O'Toole, 2016).

The *Sunday Independent* is by far the most read publication in Ireland with 2015 figures at 191,000, the SBP reaches an audience of 30,244 however. As the SBP is a subscription based website this accounts for the low scoring of 3 major mentions on Lexus Nexus. On conducting further research by subscribing to the publication online, I have found another 23 articles that I would consider to heavily feature Mr. O'Brien. This figure dwarfs the 7 that INM's weekly newspaper produced. Strikingly, the INM publications had a definite theme in continuously pointing out the link between the report of Media Ownership in Ireland and the controversial Republican political party that Lynn Boylan is a member of. One article entitled "O'Brien rejects claims in SF's [Sinn Féin] report on media, referred twice to the party within its article as 'a report that the party paid for' and 'the Sinn Féin backed report' (Doyle and Ryan, 2016). Another article entitled 'O'Brien fights back over perception of his role' published on the same day again referred to the 'Sinn Féin commissioned report'.

Neither article referred to the four independent lawyers who had written the report and only one referenced Lynn Boylan the Sinn Féin MEP who had commissioned it, rather focussing on the alliance between the report and the political party Sinn Féin as a whole. Both articles were written with a focus on Denis O'Brien's response to said report but the *Irish Independent* published no articles on the findings of the report itself, with these first articles appearing on Thursday October 27<sup>th</sup> following Denis O'Brien's rebuttal and no articles on Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday when the report was being discussed by the other newspapers in this study. In addition, it is well worth noting that all newspapers in this study had received advanced copies of the report on Sunday October 23<sup>rd</sup> before its publication on Monday as is customary in the media. The Irish Times, which gave the story prominence with a piece on page 4 on Monday 24<sup>th</sup> October referred to it as 'an independent report' and a 'report commissioned by Sinn Féin MEP Lynn Boylan and written by lawyers in London and Belfast' (Leahy, 2016). In the *Sunday Independent* piece by Liam Collins the term 'this Sinn-Féin sponsored socialist report' is used in a derogative way following a sentence that links the report to the Irish Republican Army (IRA): 'When are they going to have a redress scheme for IRA abuse victims?' (Collins, 2016). No mention of the report's findings is featured in the piece. The SBP writing about the report on the same day (Sunday October 23<sup>rd</sup>) referred to it as 'an expert report' and talked about its main findings before linking it to the independent lawyers and the Sinn Féin MEP later on in the article (Lyons, 2016). Lynn Boylan herself was given an opinion editorial piece on the same day. Both the Irish Times and the SBP published articles on Denis O'Brien's rebuttal later in the week. Interestingly neither of the INM publications included in this study published any articles the following week about KRW law's statement in response to Denis O'Brien's accusations about

the independence of the report. In their statement which was featured in a SBP article on October 30<sup>th</sup>, the law firm stated:

We reject completely the suggestion that the authors were paid for by the IRA and the allegation we were anything less than independent...This report was paid for by the European Parliament via the GUE/NGL group. The GUE/NGL stands for the European United Left/ Nordic Green Left group of parties, of which Sinn Féin is one member (Lyons, 2016).

On reading and re-reading the data it seems clear to this author that the framing of this news item was markedly different in publications in which Denis O'Brien is the majority shareholder than the ones he had no affiliations with. This was one of my main research questions. The funding came from the European Parliament and not Sinn Féin itself and so referring to the report as 'Sinn Féin backed' or a 'Sinn Féin socialist' report is factually inaccurate and reporting the truth is one of the main pillars of journalism in a democratic society.

## Event Two

All articles were published within a two-week timeframe of the release of Donald Trump's dossier on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016. This event was covered in nine articles across the chosen publications; two of these were in the *Irish Independent*, four in *The Irish Times*, three in the SBP and zero in the *Sunday Independent*. The two articles in INM owned publications amounted to 22.22% of the coverage and were to be found on pages 14 and 16. The lowest average word counts of the event were in the INM articles with 316.5; the SBP average was 968.6 for their three articles and

the four articles in *The Irish Times* sat at 625.5. Taking an average of the word count in the two publications not owned by INM gives an average of 772.5 words which is over 100% greater than the average wordcount in the articles from INM owned publications. Three of *The Irish Times* articles were found on page four of the newspaper with the first articles appearing on the day the story broke and a front-page slot was allocated. The SBP website does not provide details of page numbers in their archives and for this reason they were omitted from this topic's analysis. The topic news slant was analysed across all articles with positive indicating slant towards Denis O'Brien. The slant in the two Irish Independent articles was found to be positive in both (100%); three of *The Irish Times* articles were found to be neutral and one was negative towards the businessman; the SBP articles were positive, neutral and negative. The omission of any mention in the *Sunday Independent* can be directly compared to the number of articles (three) in the other weekly publication, the SBP.

*The Irish Times* led with a front-page story on the day the story broke. The article entitled 'Trump attacks Clinton over close ties to Denis O'Brien' was neutral and informative in nature. On September 20<sup>th</sup> the paper had a cynical piece on page 4 by Peter Murtagh (2016) entitled 'Casting doubt on charity motives clearly rankles'. An example of the comments in the piece is 'O'Brien reacts with characteristic fury to any suggestion that his philanthropy is somehow insincere or a smokescreen to mask or draw attention away from his other activities' (Murtagh, 2016). The newspaper had another article by Murtagh on the same page that went into detail about the dossier Donald Trump released and what it accused Mr. O'Brien of. Interestingly the only mention in the *Irish Independent* was on September 30<sup>th</sup>, with a 374 word piece on page 14 of the publication. The differences in the articles became

apparent when studied side by side. The *Irish Independent* did not go into any detail on what was included in the dossier with vague descriptions of the report's details such as 'another report details the outcome of the Moriarty Tribunal, which investigated how Mr O'Brien secured a mobile phone licence for his company Esat Digifone' (Doyle, 2016). This contrasts with *The Irish Times* description of the same event:

And reports relating to the Moriarty tribunal and the finding, By Mr Justice Moriarty, that Mr O'Brien gave the then communications minister Michael Lowry £447,000 sterling and supported an additional loan of £420,000 sterling stating it was 'beyond doubt' that Mr Lowry provided Mr O'Brien information "of significant value and assistance to him in securing the [mobile phone] licence (Murtagh, 2016).

The following week both publications issued follow on stories explaining how Denis O'Brien had used Clinton connections to help with Haiti earthquake relief efforts. The articles came after newly disclosed emails showed that Denis O'Brien contacted Doug Band, Mr Clinton's long-time close aide who ran the Clinton Foundation, 10 days after the January 2010 earthquake asking for help in contacting the state department. Denis O'Brien was looking for assistance to transport relief supplies into the Haitian capital Port-au-Prince and to evacuate his employees. (Carswell, 2016). Again, the difference in word count is notable with *The Irish Times* article at 713 words and the *Irish Independent* article at 259. *The Irish Times* article was on page 4 whilst the *Irish Independent's* was on page 16.

### Event Three

Thirty-four articles were found during the timeframe selected that covered the court case. *The Irish Times* produced the highest number of articles at 19 (56%); the *Irish Independent* were second with 11 (32%); the SBP published three (9%) and the *Sunday Independent* published one (3%). The word count average for INM owned newspapers (12 in total) was 556.5 whilst the non INM publications (22 in total) had an average word count of 717. Looking at news slant, 24 articles were neutral in tone (70.5%), seven were found to be negative towards Denis O'Brien (20.5%) whilst three articles from the sample were positive in stance (9%). The three positive articles came from INM owned publications whilst the seven negative articles were published in non INM newspapers. The 24 neutral articles came from both INM and non INM papers. It is worth noting that the majority of articles referring to Denis O'Brien vs Dáil Eireann were written by court reporters for each publication and thus were neutral reports of proceedings in the High Court. INM publications show 25% of articles published were positive and 75% were neutral court reports. Non INM publications, in contrast were 68% neutral and 32% negative with no articles of a positive slant.

### Event Four

The timeframe selected for this event was from 29<sup>th</sup> November 2016, when *The Irish Times* published an article about a boardroom fall out between Leslie Buckley and Robert Pitt, to June 11<sup>th</sup> 2017. During this period 17 articles were found. Two articles from INM owned newspapers (*Irish Independent*) while the remaining 15 were

published in the two non INM newspapers. 12 of the 17 articles came from *The Irish Times* (70%), three came from the SBP (18%), 2 articles came from the *Irish Independent* (12%) and zero articles came from the *Sunday Independent*. 100% of the INM articles were found to be neutral in tone, whilst the SBP had two negative and one neutral article. *The Irish Times* had five negative articles and seven neutral; therefore 47% of the non INM publications took a negative stance towards INM. The average word count for the INM owned publications was 574 whilst the average word count for non INM newspaper articles was 585.

In the first five months of 2017 several news items featuring the media company came to light with an Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement (ODCE) investigation being identified and two shareholders being announced as non-independent. *The Irish Times* printed 12 articles about INM and its travails whilst the *Sunday Business Post* printed three. Interestingly the INM owned publication *Sunday Independent* published no articles on the issue during the timeframe. The *Irish Independent* published two articles, both considered neutral in tone. Nine out of 12 articles mentioned Denis O'Brien in the title or opening sentences. Eight articles were considered to be neutral in tone whilst four were perceived as negative. An example of a negative statement in *The Irish Times* was:

O'Brien insists these days that he doesn't control the group, of course. But would he not agree that [Tony]O'Reilly controlled it for 40 years with the same-sized 29 per cent stake that O'Brien owns now? Whether or not O'Brien technically "controls" INM is moot. Everyone knows that little of strategic significance happens at INM unless he is on board (Paul, 2017).

An article in the *Sunday Business Post* that was marked as negative said: “Is it good enough for a publicly-listed company not to give shareholders any more details on why a takeover, which it has spent the best part of a year working on, has fallen apart?” A few sentences later the author goes on to ask,

But is all this satisfactory for investors? A company in breach of corporate governance rules, involved in an active dialogue with the corporate enforcement office and with Pitt and Buckley having such a fundamental disagreement. How sustainable a position is it for INM? (Guider, 2017)

### Event Five

This research study found 13 articles about Digicel and its business interests during the timeframe December 2016 to June 11<sup>th</sup> 2017; three of these were in INM owned newspapers (23%) and the remaining ten were in non INM publications (77%). Of the articles studied, 100% were found to be neutral in tone. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2017 Digicel announced that from March 2017 it would be shedding a quarter of its workforce over an 18-month period, as part of a major restructuring programme entitled ‘Digicel 2030’. One hundred percent of the articles about the company after this date mentioned the job losses. The average word count for the ten non INM articles was 455.4 whilst the average for the INM owned publications was 400.67.

The first theme that became clear on initial collection of the data was that the INM publications had written about Digicel much less than the other publications. *The Irish Times* had eight articles about Digicel in 2017 under the timeframe selected whilst the *Irish Independent*, the only other daily national newspaper in this study only had two articles. The *Sunday Independent* had one article on the subject and

the SBP had three, worth noting is that the SBP is particularly business focused. Both *The Irish Times* and the SBP published articles about the mobile phone business' plans to cut global staff by 25% as part of its restructuring plan but INM publications did not report on this as the main focus of any article only making comment about this event briefly in other articles about Digicel.

## 4.4 Discussion

The above findings help to answer the research questions which are:

RQ1: Is there a connection between structure of mass media ownership and diversity of content?

RQ2: How does ownership structure influence the framing of Denis O'Brien's affairs in papers owned by INM?

RQ3: Does Denis O'Brien receive less critical coverage in his own titles?

The definition of agenda setting is the ability of actors (for the purpose of this study the actors in question are newspapers) to define the degree of importance or salience accorded to an event in the minds of the public. By this definition the *Sunday Independent*, by failing to publish any articles about Event two or Event four, was influencing its readership through omissions. Robert Entman (1993:54) contends that omissions may be as critical as inclusions in guiding their readers into according events with degrees of importance. Over the five events analysed in this study, there was a marked contrast in the coverage assigned by each publication to matters concerning Denis O'Brien. As is highlighted in Chart Two, the SBP published 18 articles in total with articles about all five events, whereas the other weekly

newspaper, the *Sunday Independent*, published four articles across a total of three events.

According to Robert Entman (2007) bias comes in different forms within the media platforms. Sometimes it can be used to purposely distort facts and falsify reality, this is known as distortion bias. To test for intentions behind decision-making would require an in-depth analysis not afforded to me within the timeframe I was given. However, content bias which was previously mentioned in the literature review chapter, refers to news slants sometimes favouring one side in a conflict or event. This has been highlighted succinctly within my findings due to the high level of disparity in tone when reporting the very same event. Ownership structure seems to be the variable that accounts for this difference. The third and final type of bias that Entman (2007) describes is decision-making bias. Decision-making bias, by his definition, refers to the motivations and mindsets of journalists who allegedly produce the biased content. Democratic theorists are concerned about the concentration of ownership in the media sector as they contend that it is narrowing the news narratives available to media audiences (Curtin and Streeter, 2001).

As has been discussed in my findings and can be seen in Chart Three, the *Sunday Independent* completely omitted any coverage of events two and four in this study. This omission by the INM owned publication gives credence to these concerns as it shows that the newspaper with the largest circulation in Ireland provided a more concentrated amount of information with a more limited variety than the other newspapers included in this analysis. Readers of only the *Sunday Independent*, for example, would have been substantially underinformed on these matters pertaining to Denis O'Brien. If other Irish national publications find these issues important enough to cover on more

than one occasion and to feature the story on their front page (*The Irish Times*), it seems that in the case of this INM owned publication the journalists were not striving to construct more “fair and balanced news” (Eveland & Shah, 2003).

To understand framing is to acknowledge the fact that there are various ways in which the press covers the same event. This was evident in the case of this analysis when coding Event One. In the 13 articles analysed, covering the same event, tone varied widely based on publication. Six articles were positive towards the Report on the Concentration of Media Ownership in Ireland and its findings, three were neutral and four were negative. The four negative articles all came from INM owned publications and accounted for 100 per cent of their coverage of the event. Crucially, 100 per cent of the INM owned articles focussed on Denis O’Brien’s reaction to the report and included quotes from the media owner yet his response was notably absent from many of the other articles from *The Irish Times* and the SBP. The Irish Independent also did not give any coverage to the report until four days after its release, when Denis O’Brien published a rebuttal. With ownership considerations in mind, Denis O’Brien’s response to the report’s publication was given much more coverage in INM owned newspapers than the findings of the report itself, which is in keeping with certain characteristics of agenda-setting. According to Coleman and Banning (2006), agenda-setting involves the media presenting certain issues more prominently and frequently than others, resulting in large segments of the public finding them more salient.

In Galtung and Ruge’s (1965) taxonomy of news values, an event is more likely to be selected as news if it makes reference to elite persons, to something negative, and is unambiguous. The two events omitted by the *Sunday Independent*,

clearly fit these criteria and arguably other factors on the taxonomy. News selection is not an exact science however, yet Galtung and Ruge's (1965) table serves as a useful guideline for inclusion in mainstream news reporting.

When Dr. Roderick Flynn of Dublin City University, published a report on media plurality in Ireland, the findings raised some concerns, particularly when analysing the High Court filings of the seemingly pugnacious media baron. Denis O'Brien. The businessman has been described as a 'serial litigant'(Lyons, 2016), a characteristic that instils concern in media critics and scholars alike. In an article in the SBP in October 2016 by Tom Lyons, when commenting on the lack of coverage Newstalk and *Irish Independent* gave Donald Trump's 'Follow the Money' exposé that linked Denis O'Brien with the Clinton Foundation, Lyons said "Newstalk is one of the few Irish media outlets not to have been sued by its owner and it would be foolish to risk tarnishing that record". Trump put on public record in the US market, negative issues such as the findings of the Moriarty Tribunal; the Siteserv deal that triggered a commission of investigation into the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation (IBRC) and drew attention to Denis O'Brien's voluminous litigation against the media and Irish parliament.

The EU funded Media Plurality Monitor found Ireland to be in the high-risk category. Dr. Flynn found that the absence of any a priori legal mechanisms in Ireland protecting individual journalists against changes in ownership or editorial is a concern. In Dr. Flynn's professional opinion, "if there is a domain approaching a clear and present danger it is market pluralism". He found media ownership in this country to be "less than transparent". The 2014 Competition and Consumer Protection Act points to the undesirability of allowing any single undertaking to account for more than 20% of a given media market yet those limits have clearly been exceeded in the

case of Independent News and media and Denis O'Brien's broadcasting offshoot, Communicorp. Denis O'Brien controls the single largest stake (29.9%) in INM, which accounts for 48% of all weekly national newspaper sales in Ireland. He also owns Communicorp, the radio stations of which account for more than 20% of the total radio market in Ireland. The report also gave Ireland a 41% risk score in the 'social inclusiveness' domain due to the fact that minority groups are manifestly under-represented in the mainstream media. According to Dr. Flynn, "there is also anecdotal evidence to suggest that some media owners have sought to influence editorial content".

## Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite the publication of two expert reports in 2016 concerning the high levels of concentration of ownership in the Irish media market and the issues this gives rise to, the framing of events to suit certain publications is still prevalent in this country and the entire press industry. As gatekeepers, journalists have the power to select the issues that receive news coverage. The treatment of the same event was markedly different in publications owned by INM and other publications across all five events included in this research. It is difficult to measure how long news slant must persist to merit classification as bias but this study found alternative news slant based on ownership structure in most of the articles analysed.

The findings here are not a unique situation to Ireland, as framing research is one of the most heavily concentrated areas of media study.

Choosing a content analysis proved beneficial for conducting this research as it allows the researcher to analyse large bodies of text with relative ease but, for the purpose of this study, it proved essential for drawing comparisons between INM-owned newspapers and *The Irish Times* and SBP. Content analyses show the facts, but may not reveal the underlying motives for the observed pattern, therefore further intrinsic qualitative analysis, such as discourse analysis, should be utilised in future research.

The analysis is limited by availability of material and in the case of certain events limited material was available. Overall the study was limited in terms of articles in the chosen publications, even though news pertaining to Denis O'Brien is of most consequence to the Irish public. Observed trends in media may not be an

accurate reflection of reality but under the time constraints of my dissertation my study can provide the groundwork for further investigations into the Irish media market. It could be useful for researchers to further expand on this study in the future by conducting a similar content analysis with a larger timeframe to acquire a larger body of analysis.

Many critical studies have ascertained that the media meet the standards of bias on a more fundamental level: framing in favour of capitalism, heterosexism and consumerism (Entman, 2007) but future research that focuses on bias in the context of ownership rather than deeply entrenched societal values would be my recommendation. Perhaps future research should assess the media's impact on the forming of public opinion by carrying out audience surveys to measure the audience's perception of Denis O'Brien and events surrounding the businessman, within the context of the newspaper they read the most. This method would utilise framing research by applying the concept of media bias to illuminate ownership power in Ireland, which would be of great benefit to the public. Greater attention may need to be paid to the Irish radio news market as this has been generally neglected in other studies with the focus thus far largely on television programming.

The objectivity requirement is often criticized in content analysis. Content analysis outlines certain aspects of a text for analysis rather than analysing everything in a text. Through the content analysis the researcher has to make a subjective choice by looking for particular frames.

It became apparent in the early stages of analysis that there was a difference in the framing of events featuring Denis O'Brien and Independent News & Media in INM- owned newspapers. Not only was coverage less critical it was also far more

infrequent in the *Irish Independent* and *Sunday Independent* than in *The Irish Times* and the SBP.

Whatever method of analysis is applied, the fact remains that there is still much to be discovered about the ways the Irish press frame events that involve Ireland's largest media owner.

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# Appendix

## List of Articles:

### Irish Independent and Sunday Independent

'Lynn Boylan commissioned a report to get result SF wanted; The latest analysis of Irish media fails to offer any insight into the big picture of an evolving landscape' (30.10.16), pg. 19, Shane Coleman.

'O'Brien fights back over perception of his role' (27.10.16), pg.12, Kevin Doyle.

'O'Brien rejects claims in SF's report on media' (27.10.16), pg. 12, Kevin Doyle.

'Zozimus by Liam Collins' (23.10.16), pg.12, Liam Collins.

'O'Brien loses case over disclosure of banking details as judge finds courts cannot intervene' (1.4.16), pg. 14,15, Tim Healy and Shane Phelan.

'Oireachtas urged to review rules around use of privilege'(1.4.17), pg. 15, Shane Phelan.

'O'Brien loses case over disclosure of banking details as judge finds courts cannot intervene' (1.4.17), pg.16, Shane Phelan.

'Ruling in O'Brien case after Christmas'(9.12.16), pg.13, Andrew Phelan.

' O'Brien has "no basis" for case against State, defence lawyer claims' (8.12.16), pg. 16, 17, Andrew Phelan.

'Debate in Dáil would be stifled if O'Brien wins the case, court is told' (7.12.16),  
pg.14, Andrew Phelan and Shane Phelan.

' TDs who abuse free speech only get a slap on the wrist; Tycoon's lawsuit puts  
spotlight on how Oireachtas handles alleged abuses of parliamentary privilege'  
(4.12.16), pg.20, Shane Phelan.

'O'Brien has "no right" to have TDs censure by court' (3.12.16), pg. 18, Andrew  
Phelan.

'We must redefine limits of parliamentary privilege- but in Dáil, not court' (3.12.16),  
pg. 34,35, Theresa Reidy.

'Chilling threats made to shoot O'Brien and slit his throat' (2.12.16), pg. 10, 11,  
Shane Phelan and Andrew Phelan.

'O'Brien says lawsuit not just about him but also Irish citizens' (2.12.16), pg. 11,  
Shane Phelan.

'O'Brien to take stand in row over "interference" by TDs in legal action' (1.12.16), pg.  
16, Shane Phelan.

"'Reckless TD used Dáil privilege to frustrate court order", O'Brien claims' (30.11.16),  
pg. 8, Shane Phelan and Andrew Phelan.

'O'Brien wants three-judge High Court to hear privilege case' (7.10.16), pg. 17, Tim  
Healy.

'Tensions run high as objectors weigh in with angry words' (6.12.16), pg. 10, 11,  
Dearbhail McDonald.

'INM financial plan gets the green light despite staff protests on pension cuts' (6.12.16), pg. 10, 11, Michael Cogley and Anne Marie Walsh.

'Digicel increases debt deal to \$1.25bn' (9.5.17), pg. 29, Donal O'Donovan.

'Digicel expands business solutions arm with acquisition' (5.5.17), pg.36, Donal O'Donovan.

'Digicel targets local supplier deals to share currency risk; Telecommunications; Job cuts could hit 2,000 workers as Irish-owned giant goes through transformation' (26.2.17), pg. 4, Samantha McCaughren.

'Trump draws O'Brien into bitter battle with Clintons' (30.9.16), pg.14, Kevin Doyle.

'O'Brien enlisted help of Clinton to get aid into Haiti after earthquake' (12.10.16), pg. 16, Ryan Nugent.

## The Irish Times

'Digicel raises debt sale to \$1.24bn' (9.5.17), pg. 14, Joe Brennan.

'Digicel to buy French overseas territories business' (5.5.17), pg.3, Joe Brennan.

'Digicel partner ZTE faces fine of \$1.2bn' (8.3.17), pg.1, Barry O'Halloran.

'Digicel's bondholders back refinancing' (9.5.17), pg. 15, Mark Paul.

'Digicel to cut more than 1,500 jobs in restructuring; Consultants advising Bermuda-based company on how to cut EUR 6.2 bn debt'(23.2.17), pg.1, Barry O'Halloran.

'INM "was days from closure", says O'Brien; Businessman reacts to media ownership report commissioned by Sinn Féin' (27.10.16), pg. 4, Pat Leahy.

'O'Brien's media ownership highlighted' (24.10.16), pg.4, Pat Leahy.

'O'Brien judgement a strike in favour of free debate; When one thinks of current crises, who dares say we have no need of a space when there can be free discussion?' (4.4.17), pg. 14, David Gwynn Morgan.

'A resounding rejection of case against two TDs; Businessman wanted the court to censure deputies for disclosing aspects of his banking arrangements' (1.4.17), pg. 6, Colm Keena.

'Judge says a successful action would have had a chilling effect' (1.1.17), pg. 6, Colm Keena.

'Ruling on O'Brien case due in new year' (9.12.16), pg.6, Mary Carolan.

'O'Brien case targeting freedom of parliamentary debate, court told' (7.12.16), pg. 6, Mary Carolan.

'Court warned of consequences for Dáil Debate' (3.12.16), pg. 4, Mary Carolan.

'Businessman admits legal victory would greatly restrict Dáil speech' (2.12.16), pg. 2, Peter Murtagh.

'Challenging immunity of TDs a difficult case to make' (2.12.16), pg.2, Colm Keena.

'O'Brien to give evidence in court action; Businessman taking the case over commentary about his banking affairs' (1.12.16), pg.6, Mary Carolan.

'Counsel claims case could benefit everyone' (1.12.16), pg. 6, Colm Keena.

'Separation of powers at heart of High Court case; Case goes to the core of how the three pillars of State safeguard our democracy' (30.11.16), pg. 2, Colm Keena.

'Barrister paints picture of noble defender of Constitution' (30.11.16), pg. 2, Peter Murtagh.

'O'Brien wants clear legal demarcation between powers of Dáil and courts' (30.11.16), pg. 2, Mary Carolan.

'O'Brien set to attack TDs in evidence to High Court; Businessman to testify in challenge to legal privilege for members of Oireachtas' (24.11.16), pg. 3, Peter Murtagh.

'O'Brien cannot call evidence from US report, judge rules' (4.12.16), pg.10, Mary Carolan.

'O'Brien wants US legal expert in Dáil case' (28.10.16), pg. 4, Mary Carolan.

'ODCE's travails and INM investigation' (30.5.17), pg. 15, Mark Paul.

'UBS now a major shareholder in INM' (22.4.17), pg. 16, Mark Paul.

'INM reclassifies two directors as not independent' (29.4.17), pg. 16, Ciaran Hancock.

'Judge to rule today on O'Brien case over Dáil statements' (31.3.17), pg. 4, Mary Carolan.

'O'Brien linked to INM director's start-up' (31.3.17), pg. 2, Mark Paul.

'INM row brings to mind Denis O'Brien's past crusade on corporate governance' (31.3.17), pg. 14, Mark Paul.

'INM chief made protected disclosure about Newstalk bid' (22.3.17), pg. 1, Mark Paul.

'Newstalk row that refuses to go away as Pitt turns whistleblower' (22.3.17), pg. 3, Mark Paul.

'Pitt has dug in following INM row with Buckley, but for how long?' (10.2.17), pg. 12, Mark Paul.

'INM's boardroom spat raises host of questions' (30.11.16), pg.1, Ciaran Hancock.

'INM confirms clash over Newstalk big' (29.11.16), pg. 16, Mark Paul and Ciaran Hancock.

'O'Brien remains silent after Trump uses businessman's record to attack Clinton' (30.9.16), pg. 4, Peter Murtagh.

'O'Brien used Clinton connections to help with Haiti earthquake relief efforts' (12.10.16), pg. 4, Simon Carswell.

'O'Brien remains silent after Trump uses businessman's record to attack Clinton' (30.9.16), pg.6, Simon Carswell.

'Casting doubt on charity motives clearly rankles; Businessman says if you make a profit in a community you pay into social projects' (30.9.17), pg. 4, Peter Murtagh.

'Trump attacks Clinton over close ties to Denis O'Brien' (29.9.16), pg. 1, Simon Carswell.

### Sunday Business Post

'Report warns of "extremely grave concerns" about concentration of power in Irish media; Most outlets are either owned by Denis O'Brien or controlled by RTÉ' (23.10.16), page number not available, Tom Lyons.

'There should be an open and diverse media that holds those in powerful positions to account' (23.10.16), page number not available, Lynn Boylan.

“I do not believe the Irish media is objective in relation to matters relating to itself”, says businessman’ (26.10.16), page number not available, James McNamara.

‘Media plurality is a huge factor in determining the character of our public discourse’ (30.10.16), page number not available, Pat Rabbitte.

‘It is right to question Denis O’Brien’s ownership of media’ (30.10.16), page number not available, Ian Guider.

‘KRW Law to seek apology and retraction from O’Brien’(30.10.16), page number not available, Tom Lyons.

‘Media tycoon Denis O’Brien suffered a knock-back on Friday when a court held that utterances made in the Dáil are still constitutionally protected’ (2.4.17), page number not available, Francesca Comyn.

‘Denis O’Brien argued that in taking his legal case against the Oireachtas, he was acting, not just for his own interests, but for the future good of Ireland’s citizens’ (4.12.16), page number not available, Tom Lyons.

‘In a jam-packed courtroom, Denis O’Brien’s team laid out his case why a precedent of “anarchy” could be set if he failed to get his way on the matter of Dáil privilege’ (4.12.16), page number not available, Francesca Comyn.

‘Corporate governance issues put increasing pressures on the media giant’s share rally’ (30.4.17), page number not available, Ian Guider.

‘The media group reported a near 12 per cent increase in profits for 2016 to €41.8 million’ (21.3.17), page number not available, Ian Guider.

‘Does Independent News & Media need a new chairman to solve its numerous problems?’ (11.6.17), page number not available, Ian Guider.

'Refinancing a boost for O'Brien's Caribbean telecoms firm as it is still "highly leveraged"' (14.5.17), page number not available, Ian Kehoe.

'Digicel is inextricably linked with Denis O'Brien's fortune- but has that tap been turned off now?' (18.12.16), page number not available, Ian Guider.

'Mobile phone business to cut global staff by 25% over next 18 months' (22.2.17), page number not available, Ian Guider.

'O'Brien is virtually unknown in the US, voters are far more exercised by the Donald's fat-shaming of a beauty queen' (2.10.16), page number not available, Marion McKeone.

'Denis O'Brien argued that in taking his legal case against the Oireachtas, he was acting, not just for his own interests, but for the future good of Ireland's citizens (2.10.16), page number not available, Tom Lyons.

'Trump has held up to the light a number of issues that could well affect the prospects of another Digicel flotation bid' (2.10.16), page number not available, Ian Kehoe.