

# Framing the Tiger's Death: How the Media Shaped the Lost Economic Decade

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Ten years on from the property and banking crash many of the same issues still set the news agenda. Property continues to make the headlines. We are currently in one of the worst housing crises in the history of the state, fuelled by ever growing rental inflation where landlords, despite recent reforms, can seemingly still raise prices and evict, while tenants have little serious recourse. A lost generation, too young during the period of cheap credit pre-crash, and getting older while paying exorbitant rents, have little chance of ever qualifying for a mortgage in the current inflationary climate. In the absence of fixity of tenure, this leaves them without hope for a secure home. Public housing remains, despite numerous promises, something from the history books rather than a serious option for most working people. Cost-rental models remain hypothetical.

We seem destined to be trapped in a constant cycle of housing crises. Pre-crash there was not enough housing. We inflated a bubble and built too much housing, much of it in the “wrong” places. We went from a period where houses cost too much, to a period when housing that cost too little (for developers to turn a profit) and have now cycled back again so that house prices are ramping up to Celtic Tiger levels, with all the inherent dangers therein. All the while, affordable housing is out of reach of ordinary people, and those who can reach are often stretched to the limit. Meanwhile, growing thousands face the trials of homelessness every day.

Are these cycles inevitable? Was it always thus? Why aren't we talking about alternatives to the rollercoaster of the market? And where does the media fit into the conversation?

## TRUST IN THE MEDIA?

There is evidence of a global crisis in trust in the media. This is a problem native to Ireland also. According to the 2017 Eurobarometer poll only 50% of Irish people asked tended to trust the print media, while 45% tended not to trust it. Remarkably, this is an improving

trend, the first time since 2004 that more people have trusted the print media than not trusted it. (Radio, conversely is trusted by 71% of the population.)<sup>1</sup> While there has been a lot of noise around the issue of so called fake news especially on social media, I would argue there are deeper material issues underlying the lack of public trust, not least the perceived media biases in some of the key questions facing Ireland in the last ten years.

The lived reality of many people is not being matched by what they are reading in papers, and unlike previous decades, access to alternative sources of information is easy and free. Another key cause of the lack of trust is the deepening concentration of media companies and their connections to elites. For example, the links between Independent News and Media (INM) and Siteserv were not lost on anti-water charge protesters. For many, INM's hyperbolic coverage of the meter protests was a reflection of this conflict of interest.

At a time when journalism should be trying to win back the trust of its readership it has sometimes dug a deeper hole by blaming social media, fake news and even Russian State interference for the loss of trust, rather than engaging in a thorough reflection on why the Fourth Estate is losing credibility.

## AGENDA SETTING AND FRAMING

While the media is facing a credibility crisis it is still constituted by a powerful complex of institutions. As media scholar Bernard Cohen put it, “The press 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*.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, the media still play a key role in setting agendas, and beyond this the media can act to “frame” an issue.

News is often thought to be objective and value-free. This is rarely, if ever, the case. Most news reporting is value-laden in both production and content. News is not an exact representation of reality, but rather a

1 Stephen Quinlan, “Public Opinion in the European Union: Ireland Autumn 2017,” National Report, Standard Eurobarometer 88 (Brussels: European Commission, 2017), 14, [https://ec.europa.eu/ireland/sites/ireland/files/eb88\\_nat\\_ie\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/ireland/sites/ireland/files/eb88_nat_ie_en.pdf).

2 Bernard Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1963), 13. Emphasis added.

reconstruction from various angles of a small section of reality. This is not to say journalists lie or consciously distort the truth, but that as journalists cover particular stories, using particular sources, from a particular news angle, they are depicting a construction of reality through a necessarily selective process. Journalists are also constrained by work practices, resources and their relationship to managers and/or shareholders.

We see this clearly in war reporting. While British and American media will focus on pro-government bombings in Syria, and sympathetically cover the civilian devastation, they tend not to cover the civilian deaths in Iraq or Afghanistan in the same manner. In a mirrored fashion, Russian TV may play down civilian deaths in Syria, while focusing on Iraq. The coverage of the bombings of Aleppo in Syria alongside Mosul in Iraq were a case in point. In Western media Aleppo “fell,” while Mosul was “liberated.” In Aleppo the anti-government forces were described as rebels in Western media, and sometimes as moderates, while in Russian media they were described as terrorists. In Mosul, similar forces were described as terrorists in Western media and civilian casualties were the “human shields” of the terrorists, rather than the targets of government forces. Issues are invariably framed. By taking a position, media organisations are not lying, but the perspective they are bound to take emphasises certain facts and narratives, while downplaying others. As the philosopher Thomas Nagel has taught us, there is no view from nowhere.<sup>3</sup> This is why Aleppo filled our screens and broke our hearts, while the similar onslaught in Mosul made little or no impact.

When we read about “agenda setting” or “gatekeeping,” what is being discussed is the method by which a newspaper or broadcaster decides what to cover or not cover. Scholars also use the concept of “framing” to describe the overarching angle of how the various stories are treated once they are covered. Framing, like agenda setting, is an inherently

ideological act (whether consciously or not). The frame of a story (or group of stories) will influence how that story is investigated and reported, who the journalist chooses to speak to, what questions he or she asks and how information is interpreted and reported.

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Various issues can influence how frames are created; not least overarching ideologies in societies or what is often considered common sense. Issues such as the race, class and gender of journalists, editors, owners and audiences can influence the framing. Religion, or lack thereof is commonly assumed. The production of news or how news is constructed is also of importance. News-makers often depend on institutional sources such as police, courts and politicians to supply stories. Such sources both influence agenda and how a story is defined. In the case of economics, research has shown that journalists are overly dependent on sources with vested interests (i.e. banking) and economists from a narrow school of thought.<sup>4</sup>

## FRAMING HOUSING

The framing of homelessness is a case in point. Much of the coverage of homelessness has been in the charity frame, where homelessness is presented as something that happens to other people. In that frame, the way to deal with homelessness is to support charities to “save” the homeless people. This often gives echoes with historic ideas of the deserving and undeserving poor.<sup>5</sup>

What is rarely mentioned is that people are homeless because they have been evicted, often illegally, or because rent was raised to an unsustainable level. Voices of landlords and landlord representatives get far more air time than tenants, and the power differences

3 Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

4 Ciarán Michael Casey, “Averting Crisis? Commentary from the International Institutions on the Irish Property Sector in the Years Before the Crash,” *The Economic and Social Review* 45, no. 4 (2014): 537–57.

5 Heather E. Bullock, Karen Fraser Wyche, and Wendy R. Williams, “Media Images of the Poor”, *Journal of Social Issues* 57, no. 2 (2001): 229–46.



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between landlord and tenant are rarely, if ever, discussed.

Thus, the standard narrative is often framed like this:

Across the housing crisis, the overarching frame has been that property is first and foremost a *commodity* that can only be supplied and funded by market forces. Therefore, the only way to supply housing is by clearing the way for developers by cutting *red tape* (regulation). Likewise, private developers should be *incentivised* to build (by lowering taxes). Moreover, only private developers can build housing and only private banks can supply mortgages.

In a similar vein, only private landlords can *supply* rental housing. Landlords don't increase the rent, the *market* does, and therefore landlords don't evict people, tenants are unfortunately *priced out* of the market. Again, landlords should be incentivised via tax cuts and the loosening of regulations to give people the *choice* to live in substandard accommodation. Rent control will *distort the market* and therefore should not be introduced. Such proposals would be an attack on the *rights* of landlords, whose property rights trumps the rights of tenants to security.

The property market crashed in 2007/2008 because people *wanted* to have expensive houses and mortgages that they couldn't afford, nobody

forced anyone to buy a house. People *partied* and became *uncompetitive* because salaries were too high. The banks were led by *bad apples* and the *regulator was asleep*. The system is not under question, because there is only one system and there was only ever one system. The system is reality.

All of the above are assumptions rather than facts. Yet by repetition, they have become common sense and serve as the parameters of policy discussion around the crisis.

Private supply of housing and mortgages is not the only solution. In fact, up to the mid-1980s councils and building societies supplied the majority of mortgages and councils supplied housing to rent, with full fixture of tenure and rent control.<sup>6</sup> The insistence that social housing should only be supplied to the most marginal in society is also an illusion. There is no reason that public housing could not be made available to the "squeezed middle" and also no reason that it cannot be self-funding. If some of the money being used to subsidise private landlords via the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and other programmes was invested into public housing, we would make a tangible step towards finally getting out of the crisis and giving young people some hope for security.

<sup>6</sup> This and related topics were extensively explored in Working Notes 80. Consider: Margaret Burns et al., "Rebuilding Ireland: A Flawed Philosophy - Analysis of the Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness," *Working Notes* 80, no. 1 (2017): 3–20.

The media framing of housing and economics is based upon power structures in Irish society. Property and finance sources are most likely to be quoted, as they have the resources to employ public relations staff and consultancies. The connection between newspapers and advertisers (especially with the property sections) cannot be forgotten. And journalists often have long-standing connections with sources in industry. Most fundamentally, this entire framing fits with current orthodox neoliberal economic thinking, which maintains only self-regulating private markets can offer sustainable solutions

## EVER-PRESENT NEOLIBERALISM

The discussion of much of the political problems around economics stems from a commitment to a certain understanding of economic orthodoxy. Since the 2008 crash, journalism, like politics, remains wedded to an unquestioning belief in markets replicating what can be described as a neoliberal ideology.<sup>7</sup>

Neoliberalism is the political ideology which at its core maintains that markets, if left alone, will be self-regulating and that markets are the best (and for some, the only) method of providing societal needs. The goal is not just the liberalisation of the markets for our telephone lines, but the marketisation of goods that were previously thought essential to human flourishing, such as housing and healthcare. This is a more extreme ideology than other capitalist economic theories, which more directly acknowledge the role of the State. While the ideology may idealistically present the State as the problem, it is in fact one of the more authoritarian economic ideologies when put into practice. The State is displaced in rhetoric, but is prominent in practice, as we saw after the crash in Ireland, where market actors such as the financial institutions were protected from suffering the consequences of their own exuberance. The private risk was borne publicly as the State

stepped in to clean up the mess made by deregulated banks.

Problematic self-interest runs right through this system as the ideology provides a justification for attacking regulations in industry, cutting taxes (if not avoiding them altogether), and privatising State enterprises. It is of no surprise that this is a key elite ideology, and is backed by numerous, very well-funded international think-tanks. Since the early seventies, the ideology has become hegemonic in much of the world. However, the lived reality of the crash and its aftermath negated many of the assumptions of the movement. Markets are not self-regulating. Such a belief is now exposed as utterly utopian. It ignores power differences in economic actors. The question arises: Why, then, does neoliberalism persist?

## CRISIS? WHAT CRISIS?

One of the interesting aspects of orthodox economic theory is that it has almost nothing to say about financial crises. They are imagined as effectively impossible, once markets are left to themselves.<sup>8</sup> This was reflected in the pre-crisis coverage in 2007 where we can recall most newspapers predicted a “soft landing” in the markets. As long as the government refrained from “interfering” (i.e. regulating), everything would be fine. When the evidence of a crash was building we were ordered to don the “green jersey” and not to “talk down the market.”<sup>9</sup>

We are still picking up the pieces of the unregulated banking sector, land sales, and housing. The lack of enforcement of standards around house building has led to misery for the people who have been left with substandard and often dangerous housing, such as at Priory Hall.

There is little evidence that economic journalism since the crash has attempted to consider other ways of looking at how economics works. Marxist scholars have

<sup>7</sup> There have been increasing calls for economic pluralism in university departments. For an introduction to that conversation, consider the International Student Initiative for Pluralism in Economics: <http://www.isipe.net>.

<sup>8</sup> Consider: David Colander et al., ‘The Financial Crisis and the Systemic Failure of Academic Economics’, Kiel Working Paper 1489 (Kiel: Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2009). Or, if a briefer treatment is to be preferred: Paul Krugman, ‘How Did Economists Get It So Wrong?’, *New York Times*, 6 September 2009.

<sup>9</sup> This line of analysis was ubiquitous, but Donovan and Murphy cover it well: Donal Donovan and Antoin E. Murphy, *The Fall of the Celtic Tiger: Ireland and the Euro Debt Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 186.

examined market cycles and developed several crisis theories to try to explain why crashes happen, but they are rarely consulted (my own interest lies in the role of communications and the media in this). Neo-Keynesian scholars study the fallibilities of unfettered markets and consider counter-cyclical policies to combat it, but attention is directed elsewhere. I cannot think of many articles post-crash where any of these ideas were considered in the mainstream Irish press.

In fact, the media's immediate response to the crash was to double down on orthodox economics. Ironically, one of the biggest financial crashes in economic history, which was brought about by the deregulation of banking and housing (alongside the abandonment of public housing) was blamed on what was termed the "public sector." The "solution" to the crash was to cut mid-to-low-ranking public sector salaries and public spending in services such as health care. This great ideological moment paved the way for massive salary cuts, across all sectors, and huge cutbacks. In the moment of neoliberalism's discrediting, a deeper commitment to neoliberal austerity was embraced.

Here the media, by and large, played its classical role of protecting elite interests and reflected a hegemonic power that was quite remarkable. Unions were often on the back foot, and working people were often left arguing about who should bear the cuts (amongst working people), rather than questioning the nature of the crisis itself. What could be termed the ideological campaign or the "private sector/public sector" debate in the early part of the crisis laid the political groundwork for the austerity regime that followed.

## POLITICAL PLURALISM AND IDEOLOGY IN FLUX

Irish journalism has remained quite homogeneous when it comes to politics. Key political correspondents are wedded to what is called "the centre." Terms such as Right, Left and Centre are always historically and geographically dependent. What an *Irish Times*

political correspondent might term Centrism, when seen from the viewpoint of a tenant facing a massive rent hike and/or eviction, may appear far from moderate.

Ralph Miliband, writing in the late nineteen sixties, discussed the idea of political objectivity in the mass media as something that only exists within strict political parameters.<sup>10</sup> If a political actor steps outside such parameters, all bets are off. This, for example, leads to someone like Jeremy Corbyn being depicted as an "extremist" and Tony Blair as a "centrist," even though it was Blair as Prime Minister who supported the Iraq invasions, leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands. In this Orwellian world, up is down, and black is white.

The media often tend to concentrate on the so called "horse race" element of elections – who is winning who is losing – rather than policy, unless of course someone questions economic orthodoxy. Such a figure will be chastised as "economically illiterate."

Ideologies are not fixed and are constantly changing. We are living through a huge period of social change on issues of gender and identity. Identities that were once even illegal, can now be celebrated. The changing social conditions of women has led to a vibrant and strong feminist movement. However, class remains a key blind-spot and especially issues of class-based power. While the journalistic corps can be quite liberal on some social issues, such as some LGBTI and reproductive rights, when it comes to class, and less fashionable causes such as traveller rights, progressive politics are quickly forgotten and much of the old prejudices remain. This is a problem particular encountered on radio, both local and national. The coverage of strikes and sometimes protests are a case in point. If we recall some of the classist reportage during the Luas strikes alongside the hyperbolic anti-working-class coverage of the water charge protests, we can see that the underlying regressive framing persists.

It is critical to remember that advancement on many of these social liberal issues may come at little cost to the State or economic powers, but class issues and questions around ownership

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1969).

entail economic cost. That is not to say that social issues are not important. They are life-changing for large sections of the population, in some cases the majority of society. Rather, it is to be clear that such social issues can be co-opted over time into existing structures. As Angela Nagle has recently reminded us, classes on “allyship” are freely offered to staff at the European headquarters of various Silicon Valley giants in Dublin, but these same corporations are utterly opposed to collective bargaining.<sup>11</sup> In this context, attention is often focused around the gender and race of people in boardrooms rather than questioning the power of the boardroom itself. Agenda-setting and framing influence what is considered important.

For many people, much of the ideology of neoliberal economics was negated by the lived reality of the crash and the ensuing austerity. While there has been some reflection of this in politics, the media is by and large still lagging behind. Some business and political journalists are a little more critical than before 2007, however most media are still seemingly wedded to an outdated economic theory and issues of class and power.

All this holds while the future for those without

access to mortgages looks bleak. We may be reaching another key point in the crisis where lived reality is not matched by media accounts and most likely journalism, unless it changes, will continue to lose its power, credibility, and indeed sales. Reform, with such a concentrated and elite-centred media, seems unlikely.

If we are to be optimistic, as we have seen the growth of social movements, we might also see the growth of housing and other class-based movements. It is not hard to imagine a crossover of activists from social issues moving to housing and class. If you marched for marriage equality and/or reproduction rights, why not march to protect your right to a home? Indeed, in class-based movements there is potential to draw in people from more socially conservative backgrounds, as was the case with the Irish Water Movement.

If this were to emerge, there will likely be much less support from the political centre, nevermind “allyship” from multi-nationals. And there probably won’t be public relations consultants or flash design. The media is likely to take a far more hostile position compared to current social issues. The class revolution, as Gill Scott Heron sang, “will not be televised.”<sup>12</sup> And more akin to the water charges campaign the opposition will be vicious, not just from large landlords, but also small landlords with one or two rentals, who make up sizeable voting block.

Nonetheless, there is an inherent contradiction between a lack of secure and affordable housing and social peace. “Family values” and “personal autonomy” meet in the living room! Regardless of how framing may be polarised, there remain goods we can discover in common. The provision of these basic necessities of human life is central to a just society, regardless of the flank from which you approach your politics. This is a message that media may struggle with: If there is a to be genuine movement towards equality, this cannot be divorced from economics and class.



A viral tweet captures the situation facing many today: <https://twitter.com/27khv/status/992491289596911617?lang=en>.

11 Conall Carlos Monaghan, ‘In Conversation with Angela Nagle’, *Trinity News*, 8 April 2018, <http://trinitynews.ie/in-conversation-with-angela-nagle/>. Angela Nagle has written a provocative book on the connection between internet cultures and political discourse and is one of the most interesting Irish intellectuals to emerge in the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger: Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2017).

12 Gil Scott Heron, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, 7 inch single, Pieces of a Man (New York City: Flying Dutchman Productions, 1971), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnJFhuOWgXg>.