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**Course Title:** BA Film and Media, Year 3

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**Module/Subject Title:** Contemporary Media Analysis

**Assignment Title:** 2. Follow the coverage of an ongoing news story across a variety of media outlets, on and off-line (inc. print, radio, television, public, commercial, independent, social media platforms, blogs, etc). Analyse the coverage using some or all of the following concepts: participatory culture, collective intelligence, power and control.

**No of Words:** 1,650

The world of today is more connected than the world of the past. Through the rise of digital media, particularly the internet, the lines between the various types of traditional media have been blurred. This is a process known as convergence. (Hodkinson, 2011: 33) This coming together of the media, particularly through the internet, has enabled new and different forms of storytelling, both in fiction and factual stories. This essay is concerned with a news story, a factual event, and how it is presented across the various different forms of media that exist in this modern age, from traditional newspapers, to television, to the online world (and the different forms it can take there).

The story being covered is one of the many that occurred after the 2014 budget was announced on Wednesday the 16th of October 2013. On Sunday the 20th of October, at Fianna Fáil's annual Wolfe Tone conference, Micheál Martin called for the resignation of James Reilly, the Minister for Health, stating that he was unfit for his job and "no longer in control of his department". (RTÉ, 2013) The following day, Monday October 21st, James Reilly issued a rebuttal announcing that he had no intention of resigning, and attacked Micheál Martin in turn. (Healy, 2013) Over the next few days, interest in the story died down.

These stories received top billing on RTÉ's *Six One News* on Sunday and Monday evening. They also appeared on the front pages of both *The Irish Times* and *The Irish Independent* on Monday and Tuesday. On the online versions of these news outlets, the story also appeared, as well as on *The Journal*, an Irish news website. However, while the facts never changed between the stories, the way the audience could interact changed dramatically. Not all media channels are created equal and not all allow for a two-way channel of communication between audience and broadcaster. Most of the traditional media is one-way, as opposed to the internet's two-way participation. (Hodkinson, 2009: 34) RTÉ's *Six One News* does not have any

form of audience participation, because the majority of the audience does not have the means to broadcast their message in the same manner. Equally, newspapers are restrictive in their ability for back and forth communication. Granted, *The Irish Independent* on October 21st may have had a paltry letters section on page twenty-six, but that could in no way encompass the breadth of opinions held by the public; *The Irish Independent* must filter those letters it receives and selectively publishes them (more on this later). The internet, however, is seen as a great leveller (Hodkinson, 2009: 35-38) and it does not cost very much to participate in an online two-way discussion. In comments sections on news websites, a participatory culture emerges, where users contribute to the story as much as the journalists. (Meikle and Young, 2012: 108) (Jenkins, 2006: 3)

Articles by *The Journal* on the 20th of October (Bohan, 2013) and the 21st of October (Duffy, 2013) contained between them more than one hundred and seventy comments. Together, their word count dwarfs the length of the two articles. The comments themselves vary wildly in their content. Some address the content of the articles, some attack the character of the politicians named in the articles, and most are bitter and angry in tone. Some comments are replies to other comments, be they relevant to the topic at hand or not. These comments are a far cry from the journalistic pieces read in the newspapers, or even from opinion pieces written in those papers, such as John Downing's piece on page 25 of the October 21st issue of *The Irish Independent*, however the comments do present a clear view that the public (or at least those members of which visit *The Journal's* website) are unhappy with the news, but more important are empowered by the technology to produce their own content and opinions (Lüders, 2008: 693-696). Nowhere can the viewers of RTÉ express themselves so publicly or freely.

On *The Irish Times'* website, there were fewer comments. Their article for the 21st of

October (Healy, 2013) had only three comments, all by the same user by the name of MchlMcPhillips. These comments are noteworthy in their content however. Using links to various Supreme Court judgments as evidence, the user claimed that "all citizens are constitutionally entitled to medical care because of the Christian nature of the constitution". This was an angle unseen in the articles written by the professional journalists and can be seen as a form of collective intelligence. Jenkins (2004: 35) describes collective intelligence as "the large-scale information gathering and processing activities that have emerged in web communities". Jenkins was writing about fiction, but the point is still valid here. This user has gone off and sought information that they were aware existed to form their own analysis of the events.

The social media website Twitter provides similar angry commentary to the comments sections of the news websites (The Journal, 2013), albeit shorter in some cases due to Twitter's small character limit per post. There were, however, two stand-out posts among them that bear particular mention, both of which involve parody. *The Donegal Dollop*, a parody news website, tweeted on October 20th (Donegal Dollop, 2013) a link to an article of theirs from the previous April, titled "James Reilly "Worst Health Minister Since Micheál Martin," says Micheál Martin". (Pterosaur, 2013) An *Irish Times* article on the story was shared on Twitter by an account registered in the name Biffo Cowen (2013), a parody of former-Taoiseach Brian Cowen. The user's profile bears the subtitle "Unemployable Ex-Taoiseach" and their handle is also @biffo, while their background picture is a map of Co. Offaly. While these are somewhat tertiary to the story itself, they are both examples of users being empowered to create new content, in a way similar to what Meikle and Young refer to as "remix culture" (2012: 113-118), where existing material is re-edited to provide commentary, or simply for comedy. In both of these cases, comedy was arguably the primary goal, but they both provide an element of criticism also. That a

Twitter account called @biffo exists and that it is still in 2013 making new tweets every day to its 331 followers is a testament to the dislike that some members of the public still hold against the former Taoiseach. Similarly, the *Donegal Dollop* article is a jab at both James Reilly and Micheál Martin for their poor handling of the health service during their times as Minister for Health. These parodies also represent a shift in the balance of power. It was estimated that by 2010, seventy percent of online content would be created by users. (Napoli, 2010: 509) In 2013, then, it is no surprise that websites exist solely to parody the old media or that Twitter accounts lampoon politicians who have fallen from grace, nor should lengthy comments dwarfing the article they are referring to (as mentioned above) be surprising either.

It can be seen by these examples that the online world is an open space for public expression and many people do feel the need to voice their opinion and are finally able to thanks to the way online media is structured, but not all of the internet is quite so free. While *The Journal's* article on the 21st of October (Duffy, 2013) has seventy comments that can all still be read, *The Irish Independent's* article of the same day (Sheahan, 2013) features no vestige of the forty comments that were once attached to it. The website announces in a lengthy caveat (which includes asserting their ability to remove comments at their discretion) above their comments sections that "The comment facility is removed after 48 hours." *The Irish Times* presents a similar caveat on their pages, but extends that to ten days and simply disables commenting rather than deleting them entirely. Other newspaper websites, such as RTÉ's (rte.ie/news) or the *Irish Mirror's* (irishmirror.ie) don't have any comment functionality at all. This is an attempt by the old media to maintain power and control like that they traditionally possessed. (van Dijck, 2009: 43) Certainly, it can be seen in the small and filtered letters section of a newspaper these old media businesses see some value in audience opinion, but it seems to be with the caveat that they

can remove or filter that opinion as they see fit; an illusion of input rather than any real form of it. Conversely, with the popularity of online websites such as *The Journal*, where no such lengthy caveats exist (although there is certain to be some invisible moderation that occurs), one might hope that the hold that the old media giants want to have on public opinion is eroding fast in the wake of the new technologies that now inhabit the media environment alongside them.

In conclusion, it can be seen that the existence of online media has created new avenues for public participation, allowing a range of different opinions to be heard, which is something that the older forms of media cannot, by their nature, allow. There is chaos to be found trawling through the comments of online articles, often there are arguments, but that arguments can occur on the internet is its biggest advantage over the older forms of media. As much as one person is free to chime in with their opinion on a matter, somebody else is equally free to counter that person's argument with thoughts of their own. That this can result in immature arguments is a small price to pay for the freedom of expression that is ubiquitous with the internet. The online world is far from perfect, and some still seek to control and moderate its content as strictly as a newspaper, but it is at the very least leagues ahead of the offline competition in allowing the audience freedom and agency.

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