

**Online Public Sphere or Communicative Capital?  
Blogs and News Sites in Ireland 2010-13**

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work.

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*Paul Candon*

## *Abstract*

This thesis examines online discourse on news and opinion websites based in the Irish Republic over the period 2010-2013. It arose from an absence of literature on both online communications practices here and the rapid reconfiguration of the Irish mediascape at this time. I seek to understand how users of these sites present themselves, express their viewpoints and engage in the discursive production of the society in which they live. There are nine sites, divided into three categories for analysis: individual blogs, group blogs and online news sites; three sites in each category. All of these spaces are concerned with political and social matters within Irish public culture. I position this enquiry with reference to a much earlier work examining public discourse, ideology and identity in the Irish print media (Peillon, 1982).

The primary research question asks how we understand the production of these texts by individuals, and what this tells us about the social imaginary in a society undergoing shock, disruption and revelation. The discussions all occurred after the bailout provided to Ireland by the Troika in 2010, following near-total economic collapse. It was thus a time of frenzied and intense public conversation. Three themes emerge which are used as an organising structure for the thesis. These are, firstly, the positioning and evident self-perception of the commentators within the spaces examined; secondly, the depiction and reproduction of social groups, particularly class, in Ireland, and finally, the overarching question of national identity. At this time Ireland was, I argue, 're-branded' at an official level to become widely promoted as the 'digital island.' The veracity of such a contention, its underlying assumptions and its connection to individual practices were among primary concerns that motivated this thesis.

I work with a two-pronged theoretical framework in this research. The first of these is the reactivation of Habermas's (1991) public sphere in analysis of digital media; the second is an adaptation of communicative capital, following Dean (2003; 2005; 2010). I disrupt and develop both of these theoretical stances. I argue for a reconfiguration of public sphere that takes a broad view of 'the political,' moving away from a preoccupation with solely democratic and civic concerns into the wider realm of ideology as it manifests in the practices of everyday life. I reinterpret Dean's rendering of communicative capital, taking it away from a Marxist definition of capital to a Bourdieusian (1986) conception that considers its relationship to his suite of major capitals: cultural, social and economic. I do so in order to use it at three levels of analysis: micro, concerning the individual, meso, relating to groups and class, and macro, addressing the corporate and national discourses. Whereas Dean has foregrounded the numerical aspect of this form of communicative production, suggesting we discount the identity of speakers and interpretations of content, these are precisely the matters I concentrate on in this thesis. The work is grounded in sociology, positioning itself also within the critical media studies field. The methods used are cultural studies and qualitative discourse analysis.

The thesis argues that communicative capital is generated, displayed and exchanged in the sites I examine by the adoption of strategies available to those with high levels of both cultural capital and digital literacy. People who enjoy voice in other aspects of public life are most adept at transferring this into spaces of online discourse. This finding diminishes – but crucially does not totally obliterate – the potential for such sites to operate effectively as public spheres.

## *Acknowledgments*

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### ***List of Abbreviations***

DMW	<a href="http://www.davidmcwilliams.com">www.davidmcwilliams.com</a>
MNP	<a href="http://www.mamanpoulet.com">www.mamanpoulet.com</a>
BTR	<a href="http://www.bocktherobber.com">www.bocktherobber.com</a>
STR	<a href="http://www.thestory.ie">www.thestory.ie</a>
DBO	<a href="http://www.dublinopinion.com">www.dublinopinion.com</a>
NWL	<a href="http://namawinelake.wordpress.com">namawinelake.wordpress.com</a>
ITB	<a href="http://www.irishtimes.com/our-bloggers">www.irishtimes.com/our-bloggers</a>
BRD	<a href="http://www.broadsheet.ie">www.broadsheet.ie</a>
JIE	<a href="http://www.thejournal.ie">www.thejournal.ie</a>



*“The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.”*

Guy DeBord (1967) *The Society of the Spectacle*

## ***Chapter 1: Introduction***

*“Digital culture represents a unique instance for the intellectual historian to interact with and observe momentous changes that have produced large-scale practices that are rapidly putting into place new cultural norms. [These] challenge well-established conventions and traditions deeply embedded in the literacy and economy of print culture and its socio-political framework.”*

Douehi, M., *Digital Cultures* (2011: x)

*“In this newly affluent nation of software and low taxes, bent bankers and microchip exporters, house prices in Dublin shot up by 519% between 1994 and 2006, probably the biggest such boom on the planet. It was a land of massive tax breaks and of financial regulation so light as to be invisible to the naked eye. As Ireland grew more dependent on foreign investment for its manufacturing than almost anywhere else in the world, the New York Times dubbed the country ‘the Wild West of European finance.’”*

Eagleton, T. *The Guardian* (November 28, 2009)

### ***1.0 Overview***

This opening chapter briefly sets out the ‘experiential’ origins of this thesis, pointing to the specific research questions that will be addressed throughout, as well as associated hypotheses and the central argument. I give a preliminary account of the ‘two-pronged’ theoretical framework that underscores my empirical investigation in the body of the thesis. I describe in outline the context of ‘crisis’ in Ireland that permeated the research period. Towards the end, I set out my methods and provide an outline to the remaining chapters.

For many people in Ireland as elsewhere, our lives have become media saturated to an extent unimaginable even a generation ago. Posting and commenting on blogs and news sites,<sup>1</sup> for instance, is now a taken for granted practice of everyday life. This thesis aims to understand how emerging communication practices and spaces operate in a particular time and place. It also considers how they may reflect and contribute to the construction of the society in which they occur. I present a detailed qualitative analysis of nine such sites based in the Republic of Ireland and active between 2010 and 2013. These websites are primarily concerned with current affairs in a broad sense – issues at the intersection of the ‘political’ and social within the ‘public culture’<sup>2</sup> – and all presenting a mixture of news and opinion.

The sites are organised into three categories for analysis: the first is the work of individual bloggers, the second category is group blogs, and the final category is news sites (comprised of off-shoots of pre-existing media or online media ‘start-ups’).<sup>3</sup> All of these sites are ‘open’ in that they elicit commentary and participation from anyone who visits them. Such sites represent a radical shift from a passive news consumption pattern, typical of the twentieth century, to one of ‘prosumption,’ or the social production of information, characteristic of Web 2.0 in the new millennium.<sup>4</sup> Such emerging patterns of proliferation have invariably led to *prima facie* suppositions about their levelling and inclusive potentials, not only among the general populous but also among certain communications scholars (Benkler, 2006; Shirky, 2003, 2008).

Thus the primary aim of the research is to examine this expanding field of online discourse and to question the popular assumption that ‘greater voice’ for the citizen in an ever-growing vortex

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<sup>1</sup> The OED defines a blog as: ‘A regularly updated website or web page, typically one run by an individual or small group that is written in an informal or conversational style.’ For the purpose of this research, commercial news sites are included under this banner, as their functional features are almost identical.

<sup>2</sup>“Public Culture delineates a fundamental feature of modern civil society: the network of media and social practices organized around political participation. Three basic assumptions guide scholarly study of public culture: First, publics emerge through the interplay of a wide range of arts, media, and other modes of performance. Second, public identity involves specific habits of audience response and social interaction that have contingent relationships to other forms of power. Third, public agency operates through both political institutions and other communicative practices that are more vernacular, nomadic, or transitory. Because they are at once distinctively modern, inherently pluralistic, and inevitably contested, public cultures have become vital political forms in an increasingly interconnected world.” (Northwestern University online at: [https://www.communication.northwestern.edu/programs/phd\\_communication\\_studies/rhetoric.php](https://www.communication.northwestern.edu/programs/phd_communication_studies/rhetoric.php)). For more, see Horne (1984, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> The sites are: 1. [www.davidmcwilliams.com](http://www.davidmcwilliams.com) (DMW); [www.mamanpoulet.com](http://www.mamanpoulet.com) (MNP); [bocktherobber.com](http://bocktherobber.com) (BTR) 2. [thestory.ie](http://thestory.ie) (STR); [dublinopinion.com](http://dublinopinion.com) (DBO); [namawinelake.wordpress.com](http://namawinelake.wordpress.com) (NWL) 3. [www.thejournal.ie](http://www.thejournal.ie) (JIE); [www.irishtimes.com](http://www.irishtimes.com) (ITB); [www.broadsheet.ie](http://www.broadsheet.ie) (BRD). The sites are described in detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘prosumer’ has its origin in Toffler (1980).

of public conversation can only benefit the society while empowering the individual – what we might call the ‘democratising’ vision. In tandem with this, I offer an analysis of versions of ‘Ireland and Irishness’ at a time characterised by intensity, uncertainty and flux – the maelstrom of a Habermasian (1975) ‘legitimation crisis’ within which this work was undertaken.<sup>5</sup> I counter-intuitively take a localised ‘snap-shot’ of a medium that is deterritorialised and global, attending to questions of form, content and meaning from a sociological perspective, and present findings that are new in the Irish context and fill an obvious void in the literature here.

### *1.1 Origins of the Thesis*

The project emanated from a concern with what appeared to be a celebratory and technologically deterministic public consensus generally. In common with much research, the enquiry developed out of a ‘hunch’ that there was something important and unchronicled going on in online discussion in particular, the greater comprehension of which might illuminate our wider understanding of a society at a turning point and now perpetually ‘in crisis’ during the timeframe examined. It also grew from a desire to gain more insight into the dynamics of the spaces themselves and the stances and worldviews of the users. It is therefore a starting hypothesis that these elements are interconnected.

There is a large and relatively recent international literature on the various shifts to an ‘online society’ and in particular the questions of online discourse as it relates to the public sphere (Nixon et al., 2013). Little attention has been given to these matters in the specific context of Ireland, however; remarkable considering our claims to be among the most advanced – and potentially commercially attractive – European societies in our embrace of communicative technology and its associated industries. My thesis presents a contained example of a now well-established global scholarly debate, which works with public sphere theory to examine social media-making practice. Whereas many commentators take a sanguine position and point towards greater engagement and voice – often analysing these platforms and technologies almost as

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<sup>5</sup> For a context-setting analysis of the financial crisis and its aftermath of austerity, see Allen & O’Boyle (2013) and Coulter & Nagle (2015)

*worlds in themselves* – the approach adopted in this thesis conforms to a critical media studies perspective:

...to put it bluntly, critical media studies is not interested in media for their own sake, but for society's sake. To note the fascinating changes in media technology and practices without situating them within the broader context of a society working to incorporate them into existing social relations is to lose sight of the ball.

(Andrejevic, 2009: 35-6)

It is my intention to use another theory, Dean's (2003, 2005, 2010) communicative capital, to analyse this activity and its texts with greater precision and to connect them into Andrejevic's (2009) concerns with media and society with specific reference to Ireland and its public culture, during a period of intensity and destructive reformation that I characterise as a legitimisation crisis. I intend to use the communicative capital model in an adapted form (following Bourdieu, 1986) to examine if we can see this operating initially at the level of the individual rather than perceiving it in overarching terms. Thus I conceptually reconfigure communicative capital in this thesis, framing it as a form of minor capital within Bourdieu's (1986) suite of major capitals and moving away from a Marxist definition. Equally, I experiment with and disrupt traditional public sphere theory by defining 'the political' very widely here, in ways that I will justify in Chapter 2.

The timespan of the research coincided with a series of compelling – and at times dramatic – public events and debates, offering rich subject-matter from which to draw data. The country had moved rapidly from the 'Celtic Tiger' era into what can be termed 'Austerity Ireland' and the study begins around the time of the Troika intervention in 2010, amid the wider European and global financial crises.<sup>6</sup> It was undoubtedly a moment of copious and frenzied public communication across established and emerging media platforms. Two key public conversations happening in Ireland at this time involved, firstly, a sudden wide-scale questioning of core questions of sovereignty and national identity – hence my suggestion of a legitimisation crisis,<sup>7</sup> where 'pillar' institutions within the society are seen to tumble – and secondly, the recasting,

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<sup>6</sup> In 1994, UK economist Kevin Gardiner, coined the term *Celtic Tiger*, comparing Ireland's unexpected economic take-off to the Asian *tiger* economies. For an overview of the economic and social components of this period of recent history, see <http://www.finfacts.ie/celtictigereconomyireland.htm>

<sup>7</sup> See further Heath (2006).

through official policy, of Ireland as a heavily-promoted hub for internet corporations – what might be termed the ‘communicative industrial complex.’

The phrases ‘digital nation’ and ‘digital island’ came into currency at this time to describe Ireland’s ‘authorised’ vision of its future – a type of hegemonic technophilia, I suggest. The lure of ‘start-up’ culture and a wide embrace of ‘ideas and innovation’ were key official and popular responses to the disastrous economic conditions that had suddenly been revealed. To my mind, these policies and projections seemed highly aspirational, vague and ill-defined, yet they came to define a strategy that would purportedly ‘put Ireland back on its feet.’ What appeared to be something of an ‘Emperor’s new clothes’ scenario playing out, and remaining largely unchallenged, spurred on this enquiry.

Alongside these particular concerns, there was also evidence of a rich and varied online conversation on all manner of mundane or ‘trivial’ topics, yet which seemed to be indicative of deeper political and ideological positions among commentators. As I moved into the research, I became deeply immersed in an ever-expanding, and by times overwhelming, selection of blogs and news sites, posting boards, micro-blogs and networks of online discussion. There was within these, I observed, a clear sense of individuals vying for their place within a broader and more diffuse media landscape. Frequently, one encountered the naming and blaming of certain groups within the society for their perceived role in the events that precipitated the recent economic collapse, and everywhere there appeared to be questions about the meaning of ‘Irishness’ at a time of profound searching that might well be considered the ‘epoch of incredulity.’

I noticed also that certain online commentators, many of whom I recognised from wider arenas of discourse, were particularly prominent in these discussions. My initial response to this was to write it off as typical of a small pool of voices in a small country. However, this was something that became material to my enquiry and would take on considerable significance as the thesis developed.

As these questions and ideas began to take hold, I came across a study of discourse in the Irish media from the early 1980s. Michel Peillon (1982) had examined questions of ideology and public opinion in the Republic of Ireland at that time by analysing the letters to the editor pages of *The Irish Times*. It is a remarkably succinct and revealing piece of research. I became

intrigued by the possibility of re-opening some of the questions he had addressed, particularly what he described as “*the affirmation of national identity [which] occupies a large place in the universe of ideological debate and appears in various guises.*” (1982: 137) It seemed appropriate to re-examine these questions because of the compelling nature of the public debate at the time monitored – this legitimisation crisis – and equally in light of the proliferation of new spaces for the expression of public opinion.<sup>8</sup>

In these early stages I also encountered an informal association of bloggers who had organised a series of public seminars in Dublin to discuss and reflect on their practice within this altering mediascape. Here was a group of people – mostly academics and blogging amateurs – who were committed to participating in the public sphere, as they perceived it, and were also asking questions about the meaning and potentials of these emergent spaces and practices. These and similar gatherings were frequently addressed by journalists who described an altering media landscape and how this would impact on their professional lives; the buzzwords ‘news curator’ and ‘storyteller’ were often invoked by these speakers. Predictably enough, these forums also attracted others with an evangelising predisposition who spoke on the almost limitless potential of ‘unrestricted’ communications practices and platforms. Threaded through this was the vague perception that even though few could explain business models with any great clarity, someone, somewhere was making money from all of this activity.

The evolution of the thesis was also determined by some early observations from initial close reading of the posts and comments. It became immediately apparent that in the Irish blogosphere, status mattered. This was evident from the propensity of public figures, journalists, academics and pundits to *clearly* identify themselves by name (an often a photograph) when contributing to public conversations online – these names I would observe occurring time and again. In addition, there was a high level of cross-reference among commentators who clearly knew each other and frequently corresponded directly with each other publicly.

An ongoing meta-analysis of the established media emerged as a recurring theme in the blogs and there was also an expressed desire to take content offline, either in the form of printed news publications parallel to the online publication or by the practice of supplying the established

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<sup>8</sup> For a foundational account of the concept of ‘public opinion,’ see Lipmann (1921).

media with stories and content. This was then displayed as a badge of honour by the commentators. Thus an initial observation was that this was a space of competition and display of skill, knowledge and possibly societal position. I became interested in the precise mechanics of this and the implications of such visibility and positioning.

I began to question if this participation and production might be aligned to the notion of ‘e-reputation’ at the level of the individual and within a wider reputational economy.<sup>9</sup> This depends on a new perception of the self which has an online brand and engages in advancement, consciously or otherwise, through ‘soft’ activity such as online visibility and engaging in commentary.

In this thesis I examine these activities and scrutinise the relationships between established forms of Bourdieusian (1986) capital and communicative capital, following Dean (2001, 2003, 2010). I raise questions about the meaning and utility of the activities I have monitored for this study and seek to create a theory that may serve to open up understanding of these practices in the particular context observed and beyond.

While the influences underpinning the thesis are many, two clear theoretical frameworks are adopted for this work; the recent wide-scale reactivation of Habermas’s (1991) *public sphere* theory for the online age is considered alongside an adapted model of *communicative capital* (Dean, 2003; 2010) There is agreement that the public sphere is a vast, contested and shifting concept. It is ‘located’ within a section of the lifeworld, set off from the influences of both the state and the market, where individuals come together to engage in rational critical discourse.

Unlike the majority of scholars, who link the public sphere directly to questions of democratic practice and the established political system, this work takes a broader view of ‘the political’ and instead privileges its intersection with the social, cultural and ideological domains. Dean’s (2003; 2005; 2010) framework of communicative capital, as modified and expanded for this work, allows, I believe, for a novel and compelling analysis of discourse in contemporary Ireland by initially applying the theory at a micro level with a focus on individuals and their communicative acts.

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<sup>9</sup> See Blocher (2009) for an overview of this concept.



At its basis, Dean's (2010) theory ascribes a value to the multiple acts and spaces of communication which proliferate and circulate, feeding into the pre-existing economic system. I deviate from Dean's conception in this study in two important respects: whereas Dean (2010) suggests that the content of the communication is of little importance, I propose to foreground content in order to deepen the perspective. Secondly, while Dean (2010) presents a grand overarching theory of the contemporary global order, my interest is located at individual, societal and national levels. I evaluate these two theoretical positions, public sphere and communicative capital, for this work asking how well each serves the current purpose, or if a revised version of either or both is preferable.

## ***1.2 The Research Question(s)***

The primary research question is double edged: firstly, how are we to understand this emergent field of activity at the level of the individual? And secondly, what is revealed through the discourse itself about the 'social imaginary' (following Taylor, 2002; Anderson, 1983 and Mansell, 2012) within which these practices operate? To achieve this, I examine participation, interaction and content, retaining a focus on what is displayed on the screen as the primary object of enquiry.

The study arises from the void in both the social sciences and communication studies in Ireland concerning how new forms of public communication are meaningful and how they might feed into a set of 'public values' integral to the view that the society holds of itself and projects outward. It is a hypothesis that these values, and the language in which they are framed, are powerful drivers. Aligned to this, identifying the category of person who contributes to this discussion, their beliefs and preoccupations as expressed through textual practices, is also illuminating because these websites are now among the visible spaces where ideology is performed and revealed.

Because of the concern as to who is most active and visible in these forums, the sociological perspective of the thesis is concerned by extension with social groups as a live category. The work also coincides with the current move to re-activate class analysis in the discipline of sociology (*see* Savage, 2013). Thus I question the relationship between the public sphere,

communicative capital and digital inequality in contemporary Ireland. I look to the linguistic and cultural aspects of class formation and seek to position communicative capital within this.

My concerns resonate with a question, again from Andrejevic: *“What are we to make of the fact that the advent of ‘bottom-up’ media production amidst celebratory claims about the democratizing power of interactivity have coincided, arguably, with increasing economic and political inequality?”* (2009: 35-6)

More broadly, Mansell observes: *“The prevailing vision of the information society encourages technological innovation with the promise of benefits for all while, simultaneously, it is facilitating persistence of a social order that is complicit in perpetuating social and economic inequality.”* (2012: 29)

These quandaries were central to the motivations that spurred this thesis onward.

While earlier internet scholarship spoke to the question of ‘digital divide’ (Compaine, 2001; Murdock and Golding, 2004), I suggest that it has become neglected in recent years, mainly because of the assumption that ‘everyone’s online now.’ Even if this were the case, it does not account for the differences in *practice* that occur among different users from different backgrounds. Certain current literature on the matter (*see* Eastin et al., 2015; Halford and Savage, 2010) acknowledges the nuanced nature of this; I also extend such an analysis here, using the adapted theoretical frameworks to examine this disparity and to prise open the rhetoric of ‘equal voice,’ sensing that much more complex and pervasive factors call for attention in unlocking this.

As advanced capitalism moves further into a ‘communicative mode,’ it is apt to address these questions with particular reference to Ireland during the ‘bailout years.’ I intend to interrogate why this society at this time might turn out to be a shining exemplar of the inter-relationship between mundane communications practices and larger societal forces. As more of people’s interaction happens in mediated electronic environments, it is compelling for the sociologist to attend to these spaces and ask questions about their meaning and function.

A number of secondary questions also underpin the thesis: is the blogosphere disproportionately representative of members of the higher social classes? If so, doesn’t this run contrary to the

democratising rhetoric ('liberation communication') which often surrounds new media spaces? How might this work? Does much of this activity serve personal rather than public interests? Can it be argued that this field of discourse is an extension of the pre-existing public sphere and favours those who enjoy voice within that sphere? How can we identify the formation of a *discursive elite* within the society? It is axiomatic that membership of this group conveys advantage to the members? How might *this* work?

### ***1.3 Communicative Capital v. Public Sphere***

Among the early commentators who disputed the characterisation of internet discourse as 'online public sphere' was Jodi Dean (1997, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2010). Beginning in the 1990s, she proposed a theory that ran contrary to the tendency to use the public sphere nexus and envisaged these spaces instead as networks within which communicative capital – a term she had coined – flowed. At its basis, acts of communication become commodified and exist merely in service to the economic system. Their meaning and origin are rendered irrelevant.

While I align somewhat with Dean's (2010) fundamental definition of communicative capital, her contentions that the subject-matter and the identity of the individual responsible for the utterance do not count seem problematic; my deviation from these tenets of her framework is vital to the argument I advance in this thesis. In my adaptation of communicative capital, the frequent utilisation of recurring language and phrases and the implicit and explicit promotion of worldviews and beliefs must be scrutinised and become, I contend, integral to the concept. I suggest therefore that if we are to grasp the potency of this form of capital, these aspects require *more* attention and evaluation. As will become apparent, I place considerable emphasis on *who* is making a particular statement and whether that person is identifiable. This also keeps the work within the public sphere tradition, as considerable scholarly attention has always been devoted to the questions of inclusion and exclusion and, in particular, social class (Calhoun 1997, 2002; Negt and Klune, 1993).

The wider concept of communicative capital has recently been much expanded by Dean (*see* Kubitschko, 2012) and this thesis deals primarily with one aspect of the theory as it relates to

discourse. It is nonetheless taken up in its wider application in relation to what I see as the fetishisation of communicative technology more broadly within the public culture in Ireland, with an emphasis on economic policy.

I develop communicative capital in this thesis, drawing on Bourdieu (1986). I argue, however, that it is not sufficient to work within existing Bourdieusian concepts of cultural, social and economic capital when examining online communication, as there is something discrete about the performance of discourse that requires its own category: communicative capital. Similarly, *linguistic capital* (Bourdieu, 1991) is outmoded for these purposes as it does not account for the massification of electronic communications practices that we are living through.

#### ***1.4 Altering Mediascapes***

While there has been a body of recent work on the Irish print media (Mercille, 2015; Silke, 2015) and an examination of the changing shape of public broadcasting in Ireland (Cullinane, 2010; 2016), as well as some consideration of the question of online public sphere, specifically on Facebook in a localised analysis (English, 2013), the questions addressed by this thesis are not as yet considered by any other Irish scholars and the approach of a research project that conjoins sociology and critical online media studies is also new in Ireland.

As elsewhere, blogs and related applications (‘social media’ generally<sup>10</sup>) now form part of the changing communications vista in contemporary Ireland and their content emerges from practices of everyday life by largely ‘non-professional’ unpaid contributors. This points to a number of matters which are important and interesting but remain outside the scope of this thesis. Specifically, the political economy of new media, and the key long-established question of ‘audience labour’ are regaining attention (Murdock 1978, Fuchs, 2008, 2014, 2015; Scholz, 2012; Dean, 2010) and insofar as communicative capital relates to labour, this will be touched on but the wider questions are the work of another project.

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<sup>10</sup> I steer clear of this term in this thesis because of its ubiquitous and ‘catch all’ quality.

The structural alteration of a 'national media' is another significant matter but again detailed analysis of this is beyond the scope of this work. The question of the radical alteration in what is considered 'private' and 'public' in individual acts of communication was tangential to the research but was merely considered here in relation to commentators choosing to name themselves or not. Each of these themes points towards the multiplicity of research opportunities in the area.

The direction of the research and the structure of this thesis were organised by a trio of interrelated themes that emerged very clearly during the early stages of the project. Firstly, the individual positioning and apparent self-perception of those contributing to the websites as media makers, media critics and agenda setters. Secondly, and because the question of social groups, explicitly and implicitly, was a major theme threaded throughout the material examined, considerations of interest groups and class positioning, including the evolution of what is considered a potential 'discursive elite' within this field, is undertaken. And finally, the perception of a crisis-ridden and 'techno-utopian' national identity as revealed in these discourses became a third significant theme. These themes, taken as an organising structure, allow the topic to be viewed from micro, meso and macro levels of analysis and facilitate a corresponding deliberation on relationships with cultural, social and economic capital.

### ***1.5 A National Identity Crisis?***

In an article guiding the interpretation of the relationships between digital cultures and national cultures, Pauwels (2012: 349-250) suggests:

The internet is, apart from an impressive technological achievement, also a vast cultural accomplishment, a set of practices and options that reflect the culture and its production and that continues to exert an impact on subsequent uses by and within different cultures. The internet is not ... a data repository that merely reflects distinct offline cultures or a venue that embodies a confined world of experiences and expressions. It is a highly hybrid multi-authored cultural meeting place, connecting off line and online practices of different cultures in transition.

In the midst of the financial (and legitimisation) crisis were certain views of Ireland widely promoted as axiomatic truths within the wider discourse? That the nation was somehow a

corporate entity, ‘Ireland Inc.’, a branded nation, and was it merely comprised of ‘taxpayers’ and above all ‘consumers’ rather than citizens. One particular debate, which ran in *The Irish Times* in 2010 bucked this trend. A series entitled ‘Renewing the Republic’ considered the aspirations and values of a contemporary republic and sought to mobilise this moment of ‘crisis’ to re-evaluate national identity and societal priorities in the run up to the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the State’s formation (in 2016).<sup>11</sup> In addition, no consideration of Irish culture can ignore the rapid alteration in demographics brought about by inward migration in the ten years preceding the research period, nor the extended population of Irish citizens and descendants internationally who comprise the diaspora.

The timespan examined featured a significant discourse on class and interest groups within Irish society. We heard much in the wider media of the ‘squeezed middle’, the ‘coping classes’ and a frequent comparison of the public and private sector worker against the background of economic austerity and supposedly shrinking resources. There was, many commentators observed, a reluctance to unify and reformulate the society and very little by way of public protest or resistance emanated against a shocking set of events and decisions – there was nonetheless *much talk* of these matters.

These were the conditions and pre-occupations that were in evidence and which prompted the precise direction the study would eventually take. O’Nuallain (2012) makes the case that Ireland, in the aftermath of these events and shocks, can be considered ‘a colony once again.’ He sees stealthy supra-national organisations and the forces of international capital as the invaders this time around; while this is an extreme position, it is one that can be considered here in assessing Ireland’s position within the matrix of communicative capital.

## ***1.6 Methods***

In conducting the research, a multi-disciplinary approach grounded in methods from cultural studies and qualitative discourse analysis was adopted. Because the sphere of Internet discourse

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<sup>11</sup> This series shares a title with a publication by the President of Ireland (Higgins, 2012), which deals with similar concerns.

is not understood as being detached from the society in which it exists, nor, of course, from the subjectivities of the researcher, ethnographic insights and a measure of reflexivity are offered. The ethos running through the dissertation conforms to Bauman's (1997) insights on hermeneutics for the social sciences with its reliance on an interpretive stance and its crossover into the humanities.

### ***1.7 Thesis Organisation***

Having set out this three-fold thematic division of the data, the questions, the arguments and my working methods in brief, I move to briefly describe the substance and organisation of this thesis:

***Chapter 2*** is concerned with clarifying the research question and establishing the points in the literatures where this work makes its impact. It begins by considering an earlier piece of research on the Irish media (Peillon, 1982). It then makes a threefold classification of literature: 1. Theory of public sphere and digital public sphere. Although this model is disputed and eventually modified by me in consideration of other theory, it has been such a dominant theory applied to online discourse that it warrants considerable attention. 2. Critical (online) media scholarship, including a deeper discussion of communicative capital (Dean, 2010), with regard to the proposed Bourieusian interpretation of this concept, and the particular adjustments applied to the theory for this thesis. 3. Studies particular to the Irish media and public culture.

***Chapter 3*** sets out the methods and methodology utilised for the study. It positions itself within a *critical internet studies* perspective (Dean, 1997, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2010; Fuchs, 2008, 2014, 2015; Moscow 2004, etc.) and justifies the selection of qualitative tools for analysis in this case. The primary methods, cultural studies and qualitative discourse analysis, are outlined and justified, and the literature on these is reviewed. The question of multi-disciplinarity is broken down here too. This chapter contains a description of the websites that formed the research field.

I explain the practical steps I took for the collection, analysis and organisation of the data.<sup>12</sup> I also chronicle some of the trial and error nature of the research journey and present insights achieved through this process. I offer a reflexive account of the research pathway I undertook for this work and finally consider the matter of ethics.

*Chapter 4* is concerned with the first thematic strand of the research: the reflexivity and self-perception of the commentators/contributors as media makers and the stance adopted, as well as the interrelationships between established and new media-making practices. Here the question of both reputational economy and the visibility of individual acts of profile-raising is detailed. This is done with reference to the particular relationship observed between cultural capital and communicative capital at this level. The chapter comes to grips with the dynamics of the spaces examined and points to the strategies adopted by commentators in establishing their presence on the sites.

*Chapter 5* deals with the second thematic strand: the preoccupation with social groups in Ireland and discussions that speak either directly to the matter of class or have an inherent class position. This chapter progresses the language-based analysis of the data. It links to the previous chapter by building an argument on class preoccupation, moving this from the individual to the societal level. Links between this level of discourse, interpreted at miso level, and social capital are set out. The data concerning ‘inward-looking’ perceptions of Irish society examined for this chapter makes way for a widening of perspective in the following chapter.

*Chapter 6* addresses the third thematic strand: the wider perception of the nation of Ireland and the meaning of an Irish identity with reference to both the internal and external gazes. This is the macro level analysis and follows logically from the previous chapter to take a more theoretical perspective concerning the question of the relevance of national identity in an arguably deterritorialised, open and globalised world. It examines the tensions between the localised Irish population and the diaspora, interrogating some of the techno-euphoric rhetoric that was apparent in the discourse depicting a ‘future vision’ of Ireland in the midst of crisis.

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<sup>12</sup> Regarding the blog texts quoted, the material presented is taken directly from the sites monitored and reproduced verbatim. The convention of indicating errors in the original text by using [sic] is not used, as it would render the quoted data unreadable.



*Chapter 7* presents an account of the brief re-visiting of the sites and themes at the time of writing up, eighteen months after the research period. This is undertaken to check how the passage of time has influenced the matters considered for the main study and to assess the activity on particular sites, in short to examine the blogosphere once more and question if there was anything exceptional about the initial research period. The consolidation of the research begins in this chapter and I offer reflections on both the process and the findings.

*Chapter 8* presents the overall findings of the thesis and gives a final stance on the process. It seeks to resolve the pair of theoretical frameworks deployed for the research and elaborates on the contribution that this dissertation makes at the level of both empirical discovery and theory. It concludes with ideas for further research, emanating from both the findings and questions that were raised by the thesis.

## ***Chapter 2: The Literature***

*“Modern democratic societies are characterised by ... the delimitation of a sphere of institutions, relations and activities which appears to be political, as distinct from other spheres ... political sociologists and scientists find the preconditions that define their object and their approach to knowledge in this mode of appearance of the political without ever examining the form of society within which the division of reality into various sectors appears and is legitimised.”*

Lefort, C. *The Question of Democracy* (1988: 11)

*“The deluge of images and announcements, enjoining us to react, to feel, to forward them to our friends, erodes critical-theoretical capacities – aren’t they really just opinions anyway? Feelings dressed up in jargon? Drowning in plurality, we lose the capacity to grasp anything like a system. React and forward, but don’t by any means think.”*

Dean, J., *Blog Theory* (2010: 2)

### ***2.0 Introduction***

This chapter engages with the bodies of literature, drawn from a variety of relevant areas, into which the research fits and makes its contribution. I expand on the specific research question introduced in the previous chapter, and initially establish a point of comparison with an earlier study of Irish public discourse pre-internet. I then make a threefold classification of the literature: firstly, theory of public sphere and digital public sphere; secondly, critical (online) media studies, where I raise the question of communicative capital; and thirdly, studies particular to Irish public culture. By reflecting on these bodies of disparate literature, a foundation for the enquiry and the central argument of this thesis is set out.

Working from the basis that there is a lack of scholarship on the question of Ireland and public discourse generally and online discourse in particular, I begin this survey of the literature by looking back at one particular account of the inter-relationship between the print media and matters of ideology in Ireland (Peillon, 1982), which I believe sets the question up well in a context. It establishes both a precedent and a point of comparison with pre-internet public culture. This link I re-visit throughout the thesis.

Because public sphere – and the online reactivation of this concept – is arguably the dominant theoretical lens that has been used by scholars internationally to view questions about the relationship between society, its institutions and individual speakers online – going back to the early 1990s – I give detailed consideration to this debate and apply it to my own particular concerns here.

I then attend to the area of critical media studies, which I have introduced by citing Andrejivc (2009) and Dean (2003, 2005, 2010) in the previous chapter. As theorists seek to interrogate many of the assertions and assumptions born of an increasingly mediatised society, I consider the work of Dean (2010) and her concept of communicative capital and ask if this theory, adapted and leveraged alongside (or against) the digital public sphere framework, is helpful in gaining a clearer understanding of the meaning and function of online discourse in contemporary Ireland. I propose an adaptation of communicative capital in line with the Bourdieusian (1986) ‘suite’ of capitals.

I end this chapter by examining how discourse and media have been theorised in a specifically Irish context, asking what picture of Irish public culture is available and how this relates to an examination of the blogosphere. I thus conclude by drawing these strands together and establishing a precise position for the work within sociological and communications literature specific to contemporary Ireland.

## 2.1 Looking Back

I considered it instructive to examine an earlier piece of research from Ireland with similar intentions and themes in setting up a point of departure for an examination of the current Irish discursive arena. In 1982, Michel Peillon examined what he then termed “*the Irish ideological universe,*” (138) by probing the concerns of the letter-writers to the editor of *The Irish Times*.<sup>13</sup> This correspondence was, as he suggests, a practice limited to a select proportion of the population at the time, remarking that it was most likely that his subjects were in possession of “*...a certain confidence and competence, which is usually the result of a good education.*” (135) Thus Peillon points to both an assumption regarding the identities of his subject – that they are drawn from the middle and upper-middle classes, which is more than likely accurate – and the idea of an elite set of commentators who made up a prominent and visible constituent of the public sphere in Ireland at that time.

I am interested in the possibilities for examining such a contention now in the light of a very different set of spaces and the multiplicity of communications practices that have come to prevail in the meantime. In particular, the massification of discourse is interpreted by many as democratising (Shirley 2003, 2008; Benkler, 2006), as will be discussed below. Such a clear set of privileged voices is no longer a prime feature of discursive spaces, and it is often assumed that speakers now hold equal claim among a meritocratic commentariat, where the quality of one’s contribution is often perceived to trump notions of status.<sup>14</sup> Such contentions are interrogated in this thesis.

It is now remarkable that for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this letters page was the most visible locus of public opinion circulating in the country. It was also one invariably infused with status and

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<sup>13</sup> When providing a brief profile of the Irish media landscape for the European Journalism Centre, Michael Foley characterises *The Irish Times* as follows:

The Irish Times is the oldest national newspaper, founded in 1859 as a ‘unionist’ newspaper, that is one that supported the union of Britain and Ireland. However, since the middle of the last century it has developed into a liberal newspaper, which would see itself as in the same newspaper tradition as *The Guardian* of London, *Le Monde* or *Liberation* of Paris, or *El Pais* of Madrid. It has strong European and world coverage. It is owned by a non-profit making trust since the early 1970s.[sic]

*The Irish Times* is still considered the paper of record in Ireland (see [http://ejc.net/media\\_landscapes/ireland](http://ejc.net/media_landscapes/ireland) for more background on the Irish media).

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of this matter in the U.K. context, see Burkman (2005).

authority, in a space which he considers to be “*the most complete, the most revealing*” (134).<sup>15</sup> His work isolates certain recurring themes but addresses itself in a very specific manner to the question of *national identity* at that time, remarking: “*The affirmation of national identity occupies a large place in the universe of ideological debate and appears in various guises.*” (137)

One of the key components of the discourse Peillon (1982) examines is the dichotomy of national/cosmopolitan worldviews, which he suggests, “...*underlies most discussions in this category since its concern is to define what it is that makes for collective identity.*” (137, my emphasis) As a starting point to my own research this question is equally, if not even more, apt when revisiting this topic thirty years later.

Looking at this research raises a pair of immediate questions for the current study. Firstly, does such “*a complete and revealing space of articulation and discourse*” (134) still exist in Ireland now and where might it be found? Secondly, in light of the prevailing contentions about the democratising nature of new media, are the participants similarly defined as a privileged category of opinion brokers? Clearly Peillon’s (1982) study would be extremely limited if replicated in present-day Ireland due to the proliferation of spaces of publication and the practice of commentary as an aspect of everyday life. As I will detail in Chapter 3, my quest for such spaces was considerably more widespread and initially speculative. However, the answer to the second question, concerning status, is not clear-cut and in my view benefits from analysis using an expanded version of public sphere theory alongside Dean’s (2010) communicative capital, which I will discuss below.

What is not, however, explicit in Peillon’s (1982) survey is that this is a forum of strong disagreement or conflict.<sup>16</sup> The viewpoints are presented as polite dichotomies and the well-worn

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<sup>15</sup> Peillon contends that “*public opinion constitutes [an] expression of society’s ideology*” and declares the letters page he examined “*a unique field of ideological expression in Ireland.*” (134) His work sought to probe “*the system of ideas, beliefs and preferences [which] defines the atmosphere and cultural climate of a society.*” (134)

<sup>16</sup> Peillon’s observation of the characteristics of this field is also noteworthy:

One might have thought that certain themes would dominate the others; one might have hoped to discern a hierarchy of importance among the different categories [of discourse]...this however did not happen, and from week to week the relative importance of each category fluctuates. (135)

Looking back on the research period, I would suggest that there were unusually dominant themes in evidence between 2010-13 which fed into my selection of three thematic strands around which the current project was organised, corresponding to the research questions. A revisiting of the research sites in Summer 2015 shows a field operating much more in accord with what Peillon describes. Thus I would suggest that there was something

theme of the traditional versus modern in Irish public discourse is foregrounded by the author; there is a distinct lack of a sense of ‘cut and thrust.’ When describing the arena of public discourse broadly, Mouffe recasts it as “*a battleground on which different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation.*” (2007: 3) Her analysis seeks to engage with “*the difficulty we currently have in our post-political age for envisioning the problems facing our society in a political way.*” (2, original emphasis) Mouffe (1992; 2007; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001) has developed a body of theory that stands opposed to the Habermasian focus on ‘deliberative democracy,’ towards a more radical form of political interaction termed ‘agonistic pluralism’ which looks to positive and potentially transformative aspects of certain forms of political conflict. Conversely, Dean (2010) contends that communicative capital, discussed below, serves to castrate the political drive among the populace, creating the paradox of increased communication and decreased influence on events.

Mouffe (1992; 2007) is referenced here as she is concerned with definitions of ‘the political’ (following Schmitt, 1996). An underlying argument of this thesis is that almost *anything* can be regarded as political. Whether this is explicitly acknowledged or cast in specifically political language and terminology in its discussion by commentators is not important. There has often been a tendency by researchers working in the conceptual area of public sphere, discussed below, to sift material to extract subject-matter that falls within our conventional understanding of the political and to consider the public sphere restrictively within such constraints. In the later chapters of this thesis I intend to illustrate a clear case for this considerably wider definition.

Ostensibly it may now seem problematic to speak in terms of a ‘national culture’ in a globalised world and with reference to a deterritorialised medium of communicative production. However, while many studies are orientated towards understanding communications practices in a universalised and globalised setting, this thesis suggests that national boundaries of discourse *are* still applicable. The first of many surprises yielded by the initial stages of the research was how localised and bounded many of the themes and discussions were and how lines of nationality were frequently reinforced rather than eroded (this is discussed in detail in Chapters 5 and 6).

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exceptional and perhaps concentrated about the topics I encountered for this research, points that I will expand upon in Chapters 5 and 6 specifically.

These concerns regarding ideology, status and ‘nationalism’ taken from reading Peillon’s (1982) work raise questions that remain relevant within an altered mediascape in contemporary Ireland.

## ***2.2 Developing a Theoretical Framework: Public Sphere and Habermas Re-activated***

In Chapter 1 I stated that the dissertation hinged on the consideration of two theoretical perspectives, drawn from Habermas (1991) and Dean (2003, 2010). Public sphere theory has almost become a default position for a researcher examining mediated communications generally and now online discourse in particular.

The current work seeks to engage with the debate on the validity of this concept in the localised context it examines. Does public sphere theory help to explain massified communications practices as components of the public culture in this particular field of discourse? Because the concept is taken up so widely there is, I argue, scope to include material within the public sphere that is objectively ideological rather than simply matters pertaining to conventional notions of politics, institutions and civic engagement.

A Habermasian stance tends, nonetheless, to add weight to democratising claims made by those who take a cursory reading of internet discourse, seeing *apparent* ease of participation as an open invitation to all comers to join the debate and exercise influence, at its most optimistic; the reality is, however, much more complex. The work of this thesis is to unpick some of this complexity in a specific field of enquiry, asking questions about inclusion and exclusion alongside the formation and display of ideology, questions prompted by Peillon’s (1982) earlier analysis.

The phrase ‘joining the conversation’ – a popularised invocation of the public sphere – has become a catch cry of our age; infused as it is with notions of inclusivity and the possibility for action and change to emerge from these dialogues. I hypothesise that this in turn adds to an essentialist logic of the potency of technology itself, leading to a techno-determinist ethos. This then proliferates in wider discussions on the nature and function of shifting communication

practices. Technology and communication are conjoined and fetishized, then ascribed revolutionary and transformative potentials.

The worrying next stage of such an uncontested series of assumptions is that they make their way into official policy and have consequences for the wider society and economic reality, as will be explored in Chapter 6. I consider whether this aligns to the avowedly *apolitical* ethos of the tech industry globally and resonates with an innovation-orientated drive. I hypothesise that this is especially evident in Irish public culture, where I suggest there has been a failure to acknowledge the structures and impediments that render this discourse aspirational and insubstantial. One task of the main body of this thesis is to examine whether this contention is true and indeed particularly apparent in the Irish context.<sup>17</sup>

As I began to gather the data and consider the possible theories in more depth, I initially examined these questions from an undifferentiated public sphere perspective. When this consideration offered an incomplete or unsatisfactory descriptor for what I was encountering, I considered it worthwhile to examine the data using Dean's (2010) theory of communicative capital, which I adapted, as discussed in the following section. In sum, the consideration of these two theoretical positions seeks to answer underlying preliminary questions: Who is engaging in this space of discussion? What is meaningful about their participation and utterances?

### *2.2.1 Why still Habermas?*

The inclusion of discussion of Habermas (1991) is important because of his two-fold influence: firstly, on studies of mass media in the latter part of the twentieth century, and secondly because of the uptake of Habermasian theory in defining and conceptualising digital practices and spaces since the 1990s. Optimistic internet theorists were quick to point to the possibilities of a commons-based forum for discussion which could bypass the constraints of what print media

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<sup>17</sup> This aligns somewhat to the position taken by Berry (2014) where he points to the seepage of both terminology and ideology from the technological sector into wider societal constructs and institutions.



and broadcasting had transformed into during the twentieth century; ‘public sphere’ adhered to conceptions of discursive internet forums almost from their inception.<sup>18</sup>

### 2.2.2 History of the Concept

Now largely understood in its normative conception, Habermas’s (1991) central idea of *public sphere* emerged from his description of the European coffee houses and salons of the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment. The public sphere was identified by Habermas (1991) as that section of the lifeworld where rational critical discourse led to a wider inclusion of the citizen in public life and decision-making, within what he termed an ‘ideal speech situation.’<sup>19</sup> In sum, contribution to discussion does not rely on power or standing for its validity but on the quality of the contribution to a debate.

If the public sphere ever existed, it was located within the literary and political milieux and facilitated members of the bourgeoisie to participate in public life, thereby ultimately contributing to the development of liberal democratic institutions as we might recognise them today.<sup>20</sup> In this light it begins to become clear why some of these theories were co-opted with the advent of the internet.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The term itself is now widely used as a descriptor, rather than with meticulous regard to the precise definitions set out by Habermas and the numerous scholars who have taken up the concept, it should be noted. For a comprehensive treatment of the public sphere concept in relation to the cultural domain, see Gripsrud et al. (2011), which provides a canonical account of the scholarship on the topic.

<sup>19</sup> A definition of lifeworld is important in conceptualising the primary theory of public sphere: “*the social system dimension within which cultural norms and values are discursively formulated by the participants*” Dillard & Yuthas (2006: 202). This provides the link back to the theorisation undertaken by Pellion (1982), who focused instead on ideology.

<sup>20</sup> Another relevant component of the theory is the notion of a ‘republic of letters,’ whereby discourse could be conducted and shared between speakers at a geographic distance. The contemporary academic journal has its origins in such practices.

<sup>21</sup> A number of comprehensive contributions to the area of public sphere studies include Wodak and Koller (2008) as well as Rheingold (1993) and his corpus of work on related topics (<http://rheingold.com/2013/public-sphere-in-the-internet-age/>). A centralised resource for public sphere studies in the social sciences, which initially sought to “map” public sphere studies, remains available in archive form and is run by Andreas Koller: <http://publicsphere.ssrc.org/about/>

### 2.2.3 Communicative action

A key component of this sphere was what Habermas (1984) termed ‘communicative action,’ whereby citizens sought to reach common understanding and to co-ordinate actions by reasoned argument, consensus, and co-operation rather than strategic actions simply in pursuit of their own goals. Habermas (1991) traced the degradation and colonisation of the lifeworld and the public sphere in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Previously accessible zones of discourse, civic participation and even sociability became co-opted into capitalism and were commodified. Largely, he suggests, this was brought about by the growth of commercial mass media. He thus bemoaned a move from a culture-debating society to a culture-consuming society (1991). The process of transformation to this form of society is well summarised by Valtysson:

The public sphere has been conceptualized as a communicative space that resides between and mediates the different interests of the system (market and state) and the lifeworld . . . the system is seen as colonizing the lifeworld. Seen from this perspective the financial prowess of the market and the administrative power of the state act instrumentally and smother the communicative actions taking place in the lifeworld. Hence the **public sphere has ceased to be an inclusive communicative space for rational critical debate, and is now a venue for the instrumental rationale of the system.** (2012: 78)

In approaching the data I collected, these questions were immediately very live. How much dissent from official consensus was apparent in the commentary? What values and ideological positions were being expressed? How did the commentators perceive and position themselves in relation to key institutions such as the market and the State? If a legitimisation crisis was afoot, how did this manifest in discourse?

The effect of the colonisation of the public sphere for Habermas is that discussion becomes ‘formalised’ and that pre-arranged rules of the game take over from a more organic set of discursive practices. “*What can be posed as a problem can be defined as a question of etiquette; conflicts once fought out in public polemics now fulfil important psychological functions, especially that of a tranquilising substitute for action*” (1991: 164, my emphasis). It is noteworthy that one of the key popular criticisms of online discourse generally, discussed in relation to such theory below is that they are atomised replacements for both real world contact and political action. Similarly, the accusation is levelled that such spaces act as echo chambers,

useful only in reinforcing entrenched personal positions (*see* Keen, 2008). These criticisms do not, however, detract entirely from the usefulness of the commentary for my purposes: the discursive expression and production of the society from which they emanate. In my analysis I will therefore focus less on potential outcome or action and more on how worldviews are expressed, disputed or reinforced.

The questions raised by Habermas have been revisited by many commentators who have disputed or elaborated (*see* Calhoun, 1997; Dewes, 1999; Flyjberg, 1998; Crossley and Roberts, 2004; Edgar, 2006; Fraser, 1990, McGuigan, 1996; Sanli, 2011) on the public sphere concept.<sup>22</sup> The main concerns of this debate have included, *inter alia*, the fundamental validity of the core concept, as well as issues of class, gender and lack of universality. The debate continues at a time where a radical alteration in our understanding of the public and the private is underway. This redefinition applies to the positions taken by commentators within a particular field of discourse and is addressed in its connection to both status and identity in Chapter 4.

#### 2.2.4 Publicness and politics

A seminal reading of the nature of public life in late capitalism is advanced by Sennett in *The Fall of Public Man* (1977: 390) where he proposes the view that:

[B]ecause of the change in public life, private life becomes more and more distorted as we focus more and more on ourselves, on increasingly narcissistic forms of intimacy and self-absorption. Because of this, our personalities cannot fully develop: we lack much of the ease, the spirit of play, the kind of discretion that would allow us **real and pleasurable relationships with those whom we may never know intimately**. (my emphasis)

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<sup>22</sup> Gary Wickham (2010) offers a re-evaluation of what he describes as the Kantian-Habermasian framing of the public sphere and makes a call for the placing of a “politico-legal or civil peace” emphasis which moves away from ideas of rational, critical debate. This contribution is useful as it seeks to locate the public sphere debate within the discipline of sociology, in particular that concerned with critical social theory, where he suggests a limited interpretation of the concept has now become solidified. He also contends that many governments have relegated questions of ideology to the private sphere. This relegation, if we are to subscribe to its veracity, aligns somewhat with the notions of post-politics and third way politics which hold sway among many branches of contemporary thought. It also adds to the validity of my attempts to redefine and broaden ‘the political’ while remaining within the public sphere tradition.

Although this assertion obviously pre-dates the internet, it is a forerunner to a view taken up and appropriated for the critique of online practices by many commentators, including Keen (2008), discussed below. It cuts to something very fundamental in an analysis such as the current one: the study is not merely about posts and comments in online space but these bonds and the imagined communities that form and exist at a given time and what they contribute both to the field of discourse itself and our deeper understanding of the society from which they emanate. While these bonds and associations are not the focus of the current enquiry, they remain nonetheless an important underlying consideration of the context within which discourse is produced.

Arendt is acknowledged as a key contributor to the public sphere concept and speaks directly to my concern with the nature of 'the political.' For her, Passerin d'Entreves and Vogel (2000) suggest, political participation was important because it permitted the establishment of relations of civility and solidarity among citizens. She claimed that ties of intimacy and warmth are distinct and can never become political since they represent psychological substitutes for the loss of the common world.

The only truly political ties are those of civic friendship and solidarity, since they make political demands and preserve reference to the world. For Arendt, therefore, the danger of trying to recapture the sense of intimacy and warmth, of authenticity and communal feelings is that one loses the public values of **impartiality, civic friendship, and solidarity**. (Passerin d'Entreves and Vogel 2000: 73, my emphasis)

These three characteristics are relevant in carrying out an analysis here that questions how much interaction and discourse conforms to the public sphere model, I suggest. Thus I have taken an approach to my data that is vigilant in locating public sphere entry points. In order to comply with Habermas's (1991) original criteria, the field must be open and inclusive, it must facilitate a domain of common concern and perhaps most pertinently, it must disregard the citizen's status and judge a contribution solely on its own merits.

Papacharissi's (2010) position acknowledges associated concerns. Late modern democracies are characterised, she suggests, by civic apathy, public scepticism, disillusionment with politics, and general disinterest in the conventional political process. And yet, she continues, public interest in blogging, online news, net-based activism, collaborative news filtering, and online networking reveal an electorate that is not disinterested, but rather, fatigued with political conventions of the mainstream.

What I suggest here is that if we decouple the conventional political process and its apparatuses from our notion of what the public sphere can encompass, this statement no longer fully holds true and we come to analyse ‘the political’ in much more effective ways. If, in fact, we work with the primacy of ideology, as Peillon (1982) did, then a much wider vista of exploration is opened up.

I suggest that almost any shared concern or dispute on matters that affect *publics* can be construed as political. We can see this either in the terms of solidarity Arendt pointed towards (Passerin d’Entreves and Vogel 2000) or indeed as the battlegrounds described by Mouffe (2007). To frame public sphere merely with restrictive reference to the democratic apparatus, formal institutions and the State is, I suggest, to limit the concept. Rather than simplifying the theory, I argue that such a re-set complicates and deepens it. It also allows scope to factor in a consideration of identity politics, which since the 1970s has eclipsed many aspects of system-based political culture.<sup>23</sup>

Aside altogether from what I consider the valid contention that the so-called democracies we inhabit are merely nominally democratic (following Chomsky, 2004), recognition must be given to other societal stakeholders, for instance from the corporate sphere, as significant power brokers within our social order. The same can be applied to voluntary organisations, think tanks, and, significantly for the current work, particular individuals within public discourse. All of these exist as political actors and their contributions to debate are available for analysis in the forums I examine.

### 2.2.5 Habermas goes online

In the early days of Internet scholarship, there emerged a debate on the potential of this evolving medium to revitalise, or structurally transform in the opposite direction, the public sphere and to

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<sup>23</sup> “The laden phrase “identity politics” has come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. Rather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party affiliation, identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination.” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

open up a hitherto inaccessible space for discourse on matters of public concern. Many believed that this would invariably lead to the facilitation of ‘communicative action’ (Habermas, 1984) and greater democratisation. The open architecture and ethos of online forums, and the pathways of communication to multiple audiences that the Internet facilitates seemed, for some, to resonate with the historically earlier Habermasian (1991) concept of the public sphere.

The polarisation of opinion in the debate on an online public sphere was encapsulated by Papacharissi (2002: 10) in her seminal article on the question:

Proponents . . . promise that online discourse will increase political participation and pave the way for democratic utopia. According to them, the alleged decline of the public sphere lamented by academics, politicians, and several members of the public will be halted by the democratizing effects of the Internet and its surrounding technologies. On the other hand, sceptics caution that technologies not universally accessible and ones that frequently induce fragmented, nonsensical, and enraged discussion . . . far from guarantee a revived public sphere.

A patently optimistic view, which sums up one side of this debate, is espoused by Benkler (2006: 214):

The cost of being a speaker in a regional, national, or even international political conversation is several orders of magnitude lower than the cost of speaking in the mass-mediated environment. This, in turn, leads to several orders of magnitude more speakers and participants in conversation and, ultimately, in the public sphere.

Theorists like Benkler (2006) seem to be satisfied with the mere production of speech acts, without considering questions of identity, influence or motivation. Highly optimistic conceptions of online discourse take a one-dimensional view and tend to see discourse operating in a void where the distinctions between speakers, their power positions and often their class, are obliterated by their mere existence and availability in online space. Yet they frequently go on to contend that these communicative acts can have real impact in effecting social and political change. On the other side of the debate, the often pessimistic Dean (2003; 2010) disregards all of these aspects of the discourse too, by suggesting that speakers’ identities and the content of their contributions do not matter. By doing this she shuts off the possibility of analysis that could in fact re-enforce her own theory. This thesis seeks to extend an analysis that takes account of these factors and thus seeks to develop the theory in a new direction.

Papacharissi latterly proposes a characterisation of the field of Internet discourse as a ‘private sphere’ (2010: 19):

The emerging model of the digitally enabled citizen is liquid and reflexive of contemporary civic realities, but also removed from civic habits of the past. Most civic behaviours originate in private environments, and may be broadcast publicly to multiple and select audiences of the citizens choosing and at the citizen’s whim. The emerging political consciousness is not collective, but privatized – both by virtue of its connection to consumer culture and in terms of the private spaces it occupies. **The contemporary citizen adopts a personally devised definition of the political and becomes politically emancipated in private, rather than public, spaces, thus developing a new civic vernacular.**<sup>24</sup> (my emphasis)

The tendency to group and categorise public opinion, therefore, she suggests, limits the opportunity for, and scope of, discussion on public affairs, as citizens are not called on to deliberate but merely to report agreement or disagreement with certain questions. This phenomenon compromises the depth of the public discourse in ways unknown in past democracies, and restricts civic involvement with public affairs (Papacharissi, 2010).

This rationale guides the preferred theoretical stance taken in this thesis and begins a move away from *received* public sphere thinking to seek a more nuanced explanation for the ideological meaning and function of the sites. In more recent work Papacharissi (2013) suggests that exercises focused on measuring the public sphere potential of net-related platforms further undermine and misrepresent the civic potential of the internet by retrofitting it into models for civic engagement that speak to the political economies of prior eras, overemphasising the theoretical model of the public sphere as the primary vehicle for interpreting the political relevance of a multi-faceted medium like the internet.

Reason and rationally-driven discourses are accentuated, she suggests, as canonical elements of political conversation, thus prompting researchers to associate the absence of these elements with the lack of democratising effect. She contends that such an approach assumes that democracies are rationally based, “*when in fact they are messy affairs, caught up in the daily mise-en-scene of*

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<sup>24</sup> The observation of the similarity between consumer behaviour and the production and consumption of discourse is salient and fits well with the concept of communicative capital discussed. I suggest here that both consumption and communication make up a large measure of contemporary identity performance and that these are underestimated by many theorists of identity. I thus link these to the class component of identity performance, which will become a substantial theme taken up in Chapters 4 and 5.

*ethos, pathos, and logos.*” (2013: 26) All of this serves as both a warning as this research unfolds, and as a ‘green light’ to engage in a redefinition of what comes within the ambit of the public sphere.

Part of my argument is that the public sphere nexus – as inevitably simplified by commentators – is too neat a short cut to explain away a complex set of communication practices, relationships and perceptions and relies upon the blogosphere being (mis)understood as a zone of activity separate from but annexed to the society, where power relations are of little consequence.

The snap judgement of those on the other side of the debate, that the commercial forces which took possession of the flow of information, news and opinion, could be reversed by the provision of reasonably accessible platforms of publication, *viz.* online publication, downplays a number of important considerations; not least of these the assertion that we live in the era of the greatest inequality for decades (Picketty, 2013) and that the system relies upon a highly financialised version of neo-liberal economic practice for its mere existence. For anyone to suggest that this inequality will not be replicated in communicative structures such as blogs and news sites is misguided; to vaguely perceive these spaces, as they are currently constituted, as public goods is also highly inaccurate as things stand.

The conception of public sphere I take in the thesis is thus a very broad one. Because of the numerous interpretations, definitions and redefinitions of the term in Habermas’s (1991) aftermath, this is clearly a justifiable position. I am more concerned here with a public sphere broadly constituted that deals with the political as it connects to the social and cultural; my own concern is with the ideological tenor of the society and how political viewpoints manifest widely in discourse, how politics is part of a worldview, an aspect of everyday life and how discussions on all manner of topics feed into this. At a basic level, such a position also includes the interests and opinions of many more people. While the public sphere as a concept is fragmented and ripe for misinterpretation, it remains a key theoretical stance that is revisited throughout this thesis.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Bennet (2012) provides a consideration of the wider public sphere in our own time from a Europe-wide perspective. The question of transnationalism is addressed by Cammaertes and Van Audenhove (2005), where the concept of ‘unbounded citizenship’ spoke to some early concerns about the location of the study within a nation state and the discursive production of Ireland chronicled in Chapter 6. Dean (2009) also touches on this by discussion of ‘networked individualism’ as she lays out communicative capital as a concept.



The theory has been nuanced, pluralised and this multiplicity is acknowledged by the concept of ‘oppositional’ publics or counterpublics.

### 2.2.6 Counterpublics and citizens

There is by now a wide definitional literature on questions of ‘publics’ generally. Warner (2002) re-examined the entire question of publicness and considered the notion of *counterpublics*:

Counterpublics are, by definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment, and this context of domination inevitably entails distortion. Mass publics and counterpublics, in other words, are both damaged forms of publicness, just as gender and sexuality are, in this culture, damaged forms of privacy. (2002: 63)

The concept offered here is useful in identifying speakers who hold counter-hegemonic standpoints and the material examined is read with vigilance towards the possibility of such divergent opinions emerging in the data gathered.<sup>26</sup>

Negt and Kluge (1993) previously employed the concept of counterpublics and, in a dense and complex account, probe the proletarian (as opposed to bourgeois) public sphere, with particular reference to the decline of the Left in recent decades. This attention to class is a key feature of the wider public sphere canon and highly relevant to the work at hand. I return to this particularly in Chapter 4 where I examine the tactics used to gain advantage and position within the sphere I examine, and consider a case that class and cultural capital play a significant part in this.

The concept of counterpublics is also taken up later in the thesis with reference to the manner in which social groups in Ireland are framed and categorised, as evidenced in the data; it was also

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<sup>26</sup> Another definition of counterpublics is offered by Asen:

As conceptual models of the public sphere have moved toward multiplicity, ‘counterpublic’ has emerged as a critical term to signify that some publics develop not simply as one among a constellation of discursive entities, but as explicitly articulated alternatives to wider publics that exclude the interests of potential participants. (2000: 424)

considered in seeking to understand whether the sites offered an alternative to pre-existing media and their agendas.<sup>27</sup>

What unites the notions of public sphere and counterpublics is that they are both obviously made up of citizens, in the first instance. Hartley (2012) lays out a cluster of ways of understanding citizenship in a postmodern mediated society (alongside the classic Marshall (1965) categorisations). Under the category of ‘cultural citizenship,’ he draws on Warner’s (2002) notion of ‘discourse publics’ and asserts the notion that this type of citizenship, often, he observes, expressed through consumption, is the expression of relational identity and is mainstreamed via style, media and markets (2012: 142). As an extension of this, he posits the additional category of ‘media citizenship,’ suggesting that the very people who are most keenly excluded from classic citizenship are most likely to engage in ‘citizenship of media’ and that these participants evolve into producers of ‘imagined communities’ following Anderson (1983), which often manifest a form that cuts through on/offline connection between the actors. This resonates with the optimistic school of thought discussed above, and advanced by commentators like Benkler (2006; 2010) and Shirky (2003; 2008).

While there may be a measure of truth in Hartley’s (2012) assertion, I hypothesise that in subtle but important ways, certain commentators, who enjoy class privilege through cultural capital, position themselves with greater strategy than those ‘excluded citizens’ that Hartley (2012) refers to. It can be argued that they then enjoy more ‘influence’ in the discussion, but as I will set out below we can consider this in light of their ability to generate and manage their communicative capital and to adopt a set of strategic practices that rely on digital literacy. Later I suggest strong links between established forms of Bourdieusian (1986) capital and these strategies.

Hartley observes that:

[D]espite the corporate provenance of the platform, ‘media citizenship’ is bottom-up, self-organising, voluntarist, tolerant of diversity, and also a good deal more fun for participants than the modernist minimalism of the Habermasian public sphere.” (2012: 143)

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<sup>27</sup> At this point the review of the literature could have ventured into the area of social movement theory or a deeper analysis of social class, but for the purposes of the argument this is excessive. A discussion of social class in Ireland is offered in Chapter 5 nonetheless, as it is directly relevant.

This point, while perhaps optimistic to a fault, is of use to the current study in terms of the location of political discourse within forums which include copious materials and conversations which may be considered ‘trivial’ or non-political at first glance. Even this value judgement as to what is serious or political, I argue, is founded on class-based perceptions.

Where Hartley’s (2012) argument fails is in not taking up any of the structural aspects of the media spaces about which it postulates (*see* Fuchs, 2014), rather subscribing to the view that the internet is free and accessible to anyone with the requisite basic hardware and software. He continues: “*despite the categorical messiness, people are not fazed by entertainment and comedy formats alongside informative and decision-making ones – and in this they have Athenian antecedents.*” (143)<sup>28</sup>

Hartley (2012) also makes a case for the democratising effect of the market and sees the ‘airport bestseller’ as the most laudable form of public discourse within this conceptualisation. He draws heavily on Shirkey (2003; 2008), whose work is optimistic and celebratory, and also lacking in recognition of, for instance, questions of class and cultural capital as factors in the sphere. This also points towards a measure of anti-intellectualism which is often evident in some of the democratising discourses.

Commentators like Shirkey (2003, 2008) and Benkler (2006, 2010) follow a pattern of rhetoric and, I suggest, ideology that is abundant in the technology sector more generally.<sup>29</sup> It is celebratory, aspirational and takes no account of questions of societal position or exclusion. It generally emanates from an Anglo-American libertarian and meritocratic mind-set that has become the default stance underpinning advanced capitalism, frequently reaching its zenith in discourses on communicative technology emanating from the mainstream. I next consider theorists who stand in opposition to this worldview.

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<sup>28</sup> Hartley (2012) offers the view that the concept of public sphere is now outmoded and that ‘public thought’ is a more satisfactory categorisation for the concept. (This multiplicity of terms, which cover broadly similar ground is one of the difficulties encountered in this area generally.) He charts what he calls the distribution of public thought through a series of collapses (journalistic, academic) and counters the ‘dumbed down’ argument with the rather simplistic view that more of something never automatically reduced its quality.

<sup>29</sup> *See* also Berry (2014).

## 2.3 Critical Internet Studies

### 2.3.1 The material base of the (online) public sphere

Recent studies of Internet discourse production have focused on the political economy of the sphere and worked with theories of audience labour emanating from Dallas Smyth in the 1960s which isolated the ‘blind spot’ in Marxist analysis which audience labour falls into (Murdock 1978, Fuchs 2013). Scholz, (2013) coins the term ‘playbor’ to account for the activities of ‘prosumers’ within the field of production. Here it is argued that the division between work and leisure has become so eroded that now every aspect of life drives the digital economy. It is an important set of ideas when considered alongside Dean’s (2003; 2010) communicative capital.<sup>30</sup> Other elaborations of Marxist theory include that offered by Robins (1999: 51, my emphasis), which is useful in consideration of the techno-utopian nature of Irish society probed by in this thesis:

just as Marx theorised commodity fetishism in capitalist society, so too we can refer to a **‘technological’ fetish to understand the ways in which capitalist technology assumes the forms of a discreet and reified entity**, with its own autonomy and momentum, entirely separate from the rest of society and to which society must react.

Fuchs (2008) reads the internet and its effects on society from a classic Marxist perspective. He considers the notion of precarity as it relates to our contemporary living and working conditions as an essential but overlooked aspect of the manifestation of its potential. For Fuchs (2008), digital (audience) labour is the core component of online practice and the key Marxist considerations of exploitation and alienation are central to his stance. He isolates the difficulties of antagonistic competition (which, he argues, replaces co-operation towards social cohesion) as features of advanced capitalism which sully the online potential and the myth of online media democracy.<sup>31</sup> Fuchs (n.d.) suggests: “*Capitalism consists of antagonistic structures and*

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<sup>30</sup> It falls into the recent tendency in the scholarship more broadly to consider ‘the dark side of the Internet’ (see McChesney 2004; 2013).

<sup>31</sup> He draws our attention to the fact that internet advertising in the US alone was a \$20 billion industry in 2009 and points to the content that surrounds all of this is largely produced free of charge and serves to benefit these commercial interests.

*relationships within the economy, politics and culture. Hence the capitalist economy is antagonistic economy, capitalist politics is antagonistic politics and capitalist culture is antagonistic culture.*"<sup>32</sup> He is a successor to the Frankfurt School tradition (see Berry, 2014) and draws from Habermas's (1991) work extensively, extending his views of the public sphere to the online paradigm once more.

Fuchs (2015) begins an analysis of *Social Media and the Public Sphere* by critiquing the transformative power that is often ascribed to it and pointing out that proponents of this ignore the materiality of the sphere in favour of the cultural and political content, as well as what he later calls "*philosophically idealistic revisions or interpretations of Habermas.*" (316) This type of disconnected analysis that Fuchs critiques is, I suggest, widespread in positive accounts of 'tech culture' more broadly and echoes in the rhetoric surrounding innovation and entrepreneurship – topics that are considered later in the dissertation, prompted by concerns with the language used to promote ICTs in Ireland, particularly in the aftermath of the crisis (see Chapter 6).

In considering the question of the social, Fuchs (2015) prompts us to examine how capitalism – and internet capitalism in particular – co-opts sociability to perpetuate itself. He has spoken often about audience labour and now adds the element of sociability to this.<sup>33</sup> These factors of ownership and the generation of content through collective sociability, while extremely important, fail to capture the full picture; this thesis aims to account for other components by observing how communicative capital may explain other aspects of individual practice and the theoretical mechanisms of online discursive spaces.

The audience labour argument is summed up elsewhere by Nixon et al. (2013). They point towards a noted convergence of media formats (Jenkins, 2003) together with the profit-making drive which underpins commercial social media (Goldberg, 2011; Halavais, 2008) that has resulted in their users being objectified as labourers in a capitalist informational mode of production. "*Instead of a potential to be realized, participation is a precondition to entering a*

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<sup>32</sup> Also see Berry (2014)

<sup>33</sup> These ideas can now be said to have gone mainstream: there is a campaign to pay Facebook users for the content they generate by using their account. See Jung (2014).

*market-based public sphere which operates in favour of those **already endowed with economic, social or cultural capital***” (Webster, 2011: 743, my emphasis).

Webster continues: *“far from liberating the passive consumer from control, participation may simply install control on a ‘deeper level’ under the guise of self-expression.”* (2011: 743) Put differently, the changing relationship between production and consumption of online content can be re-viewed as a shift in labour to consumers of online content who are also burdened with the task of content creation as well engagement in civil deliberation. (Nixon et al., 2013)

To my mind the key question here is: can a subject perform both roles, those of citizen and ‘prosumer’? Is it possible for the more altruistic and socially aware aspects of such interaction to co-exist within this mode of production?

They continue:

The young and resource-rich appear to be the most avid producers of user-generated content (Leung, 2009:1341), though these individuals may not be the highly educated and consequently politically most active of the online demographic (c.f. Christensen and Bengtsson, 2011). Those content producers also hold the view that they can have an influence on political institutions (Leung, 2009:1342) exhibiting a sense of external efficacy which was not apparent in previous explorations into the purchase of networked communication on political engagement (Coleman et al., 2008). (11)

Ultimately, they conclude these politically efficacious individuals seem to be no less than another emergent elite joining the ranks of the established and most competent of democratic citizens (11).

These authors share the dim view of those who oppose the democratising, inclusive public sphere model, or the badly drawn connections between social media and the various political movements which have been linked to these practices. This view was reinforced by Papacharissi (2014: 27) *“net-based communication frequently privileges the net-savvy, fragments conversation, and occurs in commercially driven spaces, thus compromising the public sphere potential of the internet.”*

While these aspects, the materiality and the associated sociability alluded to by Fuchs (2015), are undoubtedly important and worthy of significant sociological enquiry, the former is

acknowledged but not deeply probed by this thesis and while certain networks of association and online communities are identified here, their deep scrutiny is also beyond my scope.<sup>34</sup>

Fuchs's (n.d.) main premise is that Habermas (1991) described a sphere that was free from the rules of the state and the market.<sup>35</sup> The market is clearly implicated in the online public sphere as things stand, and with moves from politicians nationally and internationally to regulate online speech this is a growing area of development and concern. Already the evidence begins to stack up indicating that such a normative public sphere, conforming to the received definition, is ideational rather than operational.

The normativity of the sphere is overlaid with the reality of life under capitalism and Fuchs (2014: 63) observes the following:

Habermas' theory of the public sphere ... confronts the ideals of the public sphere with its capitalist reality and thereby uncovers its ideological character. **The implication is that a true public sphere can only exist in a participatory society. Liberal ideology postulates individual freedoms (of speech, opinion, association, assembly) as universal rights, but the particularistic and stratified character of unequal societies undermines these universal rights and creates inequality and therefore unequal access to the public sphere.** There are specifically two immanent limits of the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas discusses:

- The limitation of freedom of speech and public opinion: if individuals do not have same formal education and material resources available, then this can pose limits for participation in the public sphere (Habermas 1991, 227).
- The limitation of freedom of association and assembly: big political and economic organisations “enjoy an oligopoly of the publicistically effective and politically relevant formation of assemblies and associations” (Habermas 1991, 228).

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<sup>34</sup> The focus of the thesis is on the positions adopted by speakers and it works with an analysis of their utterances rather than by taking a detailed structural snapshot or a network analysis of the field of discourse examined. This choice is made because of a perceived over-concern elsewhere with large scale macro analysis of the spaces, their composition and function and a relative neglect of the nitty gritty matter of everyday practice by users and the central role of content within these domains.

<sup>35</sup> Fuchs (n.d.) also contends that it is a mistake to think of these primarily as ‘new’ media in that they merely blend cognition, communication and cooperation, things that human have always done, although not necessarily at the same time or in the same space. I interpret Fuchs as suggesting that we remove the fetishisation associated with newness and possibility in order to neutralise techno-determinism; the fundamental actions that combine to form most of our internet activities are in fact old and established. It is perhaps the blinding effect of novelty that most distorts the perception of certain commentators and feeds both policy and discourse associated with internet platforms, I will suggest. Equally, when I come to set out my rendering of communicative capital, I will argue that it is not the novel phenomenon it is perceived to be.

It is therefore the intention of this thesis to investigate a subtle set of advantages that an individual collects, performs and displays in order to maintain or advance position within the sphere. Most closely resembling cultural capital, what is understood elsewhere as digital literacy – operating at a high level – is analysed more specifically here as communicative capital, a term defined and developed below. This analysis is undertaken in Chapter 4.

In optimising this form of activity, the user may demonstrate a high level of awareness not only of the workings of communicative networks, but also the strategies, etiquettes and linguistic register required to elicit greatest advantage from presence and participation. How this is operationalised within the communications examined is a question this thesis will address using textual evidence. I intend therefore to seek out a connection to capital, class position and specific literacies, all of which conjoin to make up a *field*, echoing Peillon (1982). Whether this advantage is leveraged for reasons of self-promotion or in the interests of an in-group, or in fact for the larger society becomes another concern. Locating this and understanding how it manifests in the data examined is thus a fundamental step in addressing the research question.

### 2.3.2 *Other dissenting voices*

This dissertation seeks to critique a techno-utopian view of contemporary online practices, which I argue has spread into a wider discourse as to the type of society we now live in (Chapter 6). The supremely positive theory of ‘information revolution’ which breaks down old barriers to participation and opens up civil society and the media to the many has been countered by commentators such as Keen (2007). This he decries as the ‘cult of the amateur,’ with everyone a publisher or expert or journalist.

Keen is a controversial figure and has many detractors, however his contrarian viewpoint is an important counter-balance to some of the celebratory rhetoric, discussed above. This ‘wisdom of the crowds’ paradigm (Surowiecki 2004) is taken to task by him as nonsensical and he characterises a society in thrall to its own ‘digital narcissism’ (Keen, 2007). Keen critiques the online discursive platform as an echo chamber where having ones say is the end in itself and



serves only to add to the noise, a shorthand for meaningless and ‘unserious’ digital chatter. Keen (2007) cautions us not to replace expertise, authority and established cultural practices with what he sees as an illusory rhetoric of open participation. In this sense, he is making something of an implicit claim for the reactivation of the original features of the public sphere. Once more, how much of this is encountered in the data is of great importance in advancing the core argument of this thesis.

Keen’s (2007) work is largely polemical but serves as a counter-balance to an often highly optimistic discourse which seems to overlook issues of class, race, gender and geographic position. It is highly relevant to the questions I raise in Chapter 4, where I will examine how ‘expertise’ is performed and how commentators attempt to import their ‘authority’ from other fields of discourse into the online sphere. It also resonates with the transformation of the journalist’s role in society, which is a recurring motif throughout the research.

Keen (2007) points us towards the fragmentation of mass society, the breaking down of nation-state predominance and the celebration of what he sees as an emerging and almost dangerous *faux* community. Such contrarianism has its forebears in theorists such as Postman (1994), that notable critic of technology on social life, culture and community.

Morrisett (in Jenkins and Thorburg 2004: 26) further promotes such a stance:

And so we have adapted to the benevolent tyranny of our communications technology [...] the decline of study, analysis, reflection, contemplation, and deliberation - the mental habits of reason and rationality – have all gone largely unnoticed. We have adapted to the conditions that we and our technologies have created.

While this level of criticism may be apt, if not somewhat polemical, there is scope to take a more nuanced approach in analysing online activity in ways that seek to afford more recognition of agency to users and to foreground their social drives.

### *2.3.3 Literacy, status and identity*

From his perspective as a cultural and intellectual historian, Doueih (2011) provides a useful elaboration of concepts such as *digital culture*, *digital identity* and *digital literacy* that assist in

problematising the sphere of localised Internet activity. These work well alongside concerns within this thesis such as national identity and the identification of a possible discursive elite in the contemporary Irish context. They assist also in the provision of labels and pointers to understanding how participants perform and adopt stances in a digitised environment.

Such concepts point not only to wider questions of sociability and group dynamics but also displays of power and status which I consider in addressing the research questions. In sum, I ask if scrutinising a specifically Irish digital culture gives insight into the broader culture. All of these link back to the passing observations made by Peillon (1982) about who his subjects were and which, I suggest, take on even more resonance in the current set of communicative practices examined for this work. The first empirical chapter (Chapter 4) of the thesis will probe the identification strategies used by commentators and examine how they place themselves to advantage within a myriad of voices.<sup>36</sup>

Regarding the potential composition of discourse publics generally, Nixon et al. (2013: 7) provide a useful summative analysis:

Empirical evidence tellingly points to persisting imbalances in online civic engagement which is skewed towards the more affluent, better educated and socially distinguished of citizens (Bimber, 2003; Dalton, 2006; Loader & Mercea, 2012; Leung, 2009). Socio-economic obstacles to civic participation often seem insurmountable whilst being concurrently compounded by the replication online of chiefly uni-directional models of unresponsive communication. The result is a sobering qualification of assertions that a citizen-producer is superseding the information consumer (Bentivegna, 2006:336). Whilst the predominant image is that of a faltering commitment to political deliberation (Muhlberger, 2005: 164), it still appears that the resource-rich and politically savvy are riding the wave of empowering technological change (Christensen & Bengtsson, 2011) leaving the rest of society trailing behind. **The resource-rich have been furnished with further means of expression whilst the disenchanteds who lack a sense of political efficacy continue to be by-and large confined to the margins of online civic deliberations (Dahlberg, 2007; Geniets, 2010).** Moreover, whilst the resource-poor seem to have had little to gain from the social turn in ICT design, the quality of the online political deliberation that largely excludes them has failed to live up to earlier expectations.” (my emphasis)

The analysis produced here relies upon certain ‘markers’ available through textual interpretation and outlined in Chapter 3 (methodology), which give vivid indications of class positioning and

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<sup>36</sup> These concerns also connect somewhat to the literature on authenticity, *see* Androutsopoulos (2015).

ideological orientation. I suggest that these markers are abundant in the texts encountered and the concerns addressed in the extract above resonate with core preoccupations of this thesis. This clearly opens the way for such issues to be further interrogated by profiling users directly but again this is beyond the scope here.

#### *2.3.4 Where and what is 'the political'?*

Whereas public sphere is most frequently discussed with reference to conventional political institutions and systems, I steer away somewhat from literature coming from the discipline of political science (*see* Norris 2000, 2009, 2011; Parmlee and Bichard, 2012) mainly because it tends to view actors and institutions as sealed off from other social forces and very often takes an insider and frequently uncritical approach to its subjects. As will be outlined in Chapter 3, there was a trial and error aspect to this realisation during the pilot phase of the research process. In forwarding a broader definition of the political here, literature from political science frequently proved unsatisfactory and restrictive.

One of the clearest exceptions to this is the work of Brants and Voltmer (2011). This study takes a nuanced approach to the mediatisation of politics, allowing space to shift consideration of the apparatuses in tandem with altering platforms of discourse. They aim to understand changes as a two-dimensional process: the horizontal dimension encompassing the shifting power balance between politicians and the media; the vertical dimension concerning how new forms of citizenship and the pervasiveness of popular culture, alongside new communication technologies, are challenging the authority of both established journalism and institutionalized politics. This type of consideration resonates with the stance I have taken in my analysis.

Banaji and Buckingham (2013) present a thorough online public sphere investigation across Europe, eventually taking a similarly broad understanding of political and civic participation. They work from the premise that the 'digital native' generation see very little distinction between online/offline activity – that it has essentially merged for them. They ask about the potential for internet based spaces to facilitate and reinvigorate engagement. This feeds into the literature on the democratic deficit (*see* Norris, 2000; 2009). What they suggest is that this type of activity is

not happening on bespoke political sites (often run at great expense by institutions and organisations) but is rather dispersed through social media engagement (Facebook and Youtube, for instance) also including blogs. They argue that “*civic participation is principally about collaboration, solidarity, dialogue, and shared endeavour*” (165) what we might interpret as the ‘new sociability.’ Whereas commentators like Fuchs (2008, 2014) and Dean (2010) would point to this activity as being ‘in service’ to the economic system, this does not erase other possibilities for its efficacy and potential.

Taking this a stage further, Beyer (2014) suggests that young people are more politically involved than much of the civic engagement literature suggests. She argues that political mobilisation increases when a particular site provides high levels of anonymity, low levels of formal regulation, and minimal access to small-group interaction (i.e. when it is more ‘public’) While the popular and media-driven ascription of success to ‘Twitter revolutions’ is widely disputed in the academic literature, there is evidence from a number of ‘civic’ movements including Occupy internationally, as well as from country-specific manifestations (Podemos, Syriza etc.) that a depoliticised youth is far from the truth in recent years (*see Papacharissi, 2014*).

I am just touching on these aspects of the debate because my concern is less with how communication translates into action and association and more about the generating of values, opinions and beliefs – they are nonetheless noteworthy. The point is worth considering in light of the assertions that the events of the bailout and subsequent austerity regime in Ireland were not met with much protest by a depoliticised Irish public and the moment of crisis saw numerous calls for a technocratic response, or indeed the appointment of someone from the business world – bypassing democratic procedures – to sort out the situation.

Muhlberger (2005: 170) has contended that “*researchers of the public sphere need to consider the possibility that the public sphere has not grown dramatically because most people simply are not interested in political and social affairs.*” (Nixon et al, 2013: 3) However, if political affairs are defined more broadly, then such a stance is reductive and overly pessimistic. Where commentators take a critical position on how things are and point to a normative conception of how things ought to be, the political is invoked. It is possible to dispute and make cases for the inclusion or exclusion of many matters from this definition.

### 2.3.5 *Communicative capital*

Among the early commentators who disputed the designation of an ‘online public sphere’ was Jodi Dean. In 2003, she began to advance a concept that ran contrary to the public sphere nexus. She envisaged these spaces instead as *networks* within which ‘communicative capital’ flowed (drawing to some extent on Castells 1996; 2005) and where because of this the Habermasian (1984) notion of ‘communicative action’ was an impossibility. The political will among the populace was now, Dean (2003) argued, rendered impotent by a super-abundance of communication. She perceived this as occurring within an ever-accelerating marketplace primarily characterised by novelty and disposability.

We can chart the evolution of her theory from 2003 where she states:

Instead of leading to more equitable distributions of wealth and influence or enabling the emergence of a richer variety in modes of living and practices of freedom, the deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most of the world’s people. (Dean, 2003: 103)

By 2010 her vision of communicative capital was consolidated:

I take the position that contemporary communications media capture their users in intensive and extensive networks of enjoyment, production and surveillance...just as industrial capitalism relied on the exploitation of labor, so does communicative capitalism rely on the exploitation of communication [...]

(Dean, 2010: 3-4)

One of the most basic formulations of the idea of communication, she points out, is a message and the response to the message. Under communicative capitalism, the fundamentals of this changes. Messages are contributions to circulating content – not actions to elicit responses. The exchange value of messages overtakes their use value. So a message is no longer primarily a message from a sender to a reader or an audience, but part of a circulating data stream (Dean, 2010) The individual is spurred on in terms of production by a series of psychological drives that

are ‘automatic’ and characterised by their irrationality – in direct opposition to Habermas’s (1991) requirement for rationality.

Nowhere does she allow for the possibility that the individual may either gain by their communicative activity or have an awareness of this potential; she does not consider the detail of communicative capital at the micro level of the producer but rather as an overarching theory of our age. Throughout her work she draws heavily on the psychoanalytic work of Lacan, which I suggest overshadows a consideration of the individual in societal context. The social field of communicative capitalism, she suggests, is characterised by competition, division and inequality among these ‘networked individuals.’ (Dean, 2003) This is not an arena we can view in terms of a public sphere of rational deliberation and democratic decision-making. She paints a dystopian picture where communication and content become both the fuel for and the product of a machine within which we are all trapped.

Dean suggests:

**Its particular content is irrelevant. Who sent it is irrelevant. That it needs to be responded to is irrelevant. The only thing that is relevant is circulation, the addition to the pool.** Any particular contribution remains secondary to the fact of circulation. The value of any particular contribution is likewise inversely proportional to the openness, inclusiveness or extent of a circulating data stream; the more opinions or comments that are out there, the less of an impact any given one might make (and the more shocking, spectacular, and new a contribution must be in order to register or have an impact). In sum, communication functions symptomatically to produce its own negation.

(Dean, 2010: 4; my emphasis)

This elaboration resonates with other wider theories of our age: Baudrillard argues that the ‘death of the sign’ has occurred in media-saturated society with the circulation of more and more information that has less and less meaning. (Poster, 2001)

It is, I suggest, possible to challenge and interrogate all of the factors that make up Dean’s theory and still adhere to the core concept, albeit in a radically altered form. I therefore approach communicative capital with more regard to Bourdieu (1986) than to Dean’s (2003; 2010) strict adherence to Marx.

The application of such theory to a selected and localised field of public conversation in an empirical manner is undertaken for the first time in this thesis and Dean's (2010) assertions are questioned by examining the data gathered during the time-frame examined. In terms of its relation to the political, Dean has set this theory out as being the proliferation, distribution, acceleration, and intensification of communicative access and opportunity resulting in a deadlocked democracy incapable of serving as a forum for political change (Dean, 2010). She refers to this as a democracy that talks without responding. It is a position that is as damning as it is universalising and presents us with a contradiction: opposition is not obliterated entirely within the vortex of communicative capital; that fact that her own scholarship is widely cited is testament to this in itself! Again, by offering a radically altered understanding of what constitutes the political, as outlined earlier, I believe we may challenge this assertion by allowing more diverse material to be considered under the lens and offering more nuanced analysis of this aspect also.

### *2.3.6 Holding on to meaning*

Communicative capital, under Dean's (2003; 2010) rendering, is counter intuitive to a discourse analyst who almost by definition looks out for meaning and the promotion of world views as important components of the field of enquiry. My earlier consideration of Peillon's (1982) work points to such a stance. This was the point of contention that motivated me to take this research in a direction that would interrogate such assertions. While Dean's (2003; 2010) theory manages to capture the rapid and sometimes fleeting nature of the type of discourse, I argue, that it is rigid and self-limiting. The work of this thesis will be to redefine and reapply communicative capital, interpreting it from a Bourdieusian perspective and making a case that it may be positioned firmly within a field and a suite of capitals to which it bears relationship, but must be acknowledged and viewed on its own terms. It is not sufficient to suggest that it is simply an offshoot of other forms of capital.

Bourdieu's (1986) three-fold division of the forms of capital that he saw as the predominant constituents of society is now well known. He identified economic capital, immediately and

directly convertible into money and institutionalised as property rights; cultural capital – perhaps the most subtle and mercurial of the three forms – convertible under certain conditions into economic capital and institutionalised as educational qualifications, and social capital, the number and strength of ties or connections a person has and institutionalised as ascriptions of status (Bourdieu, 1986).<sup>37</sup> The important consideration is that these forms of capital are imbued in the individual, that they are fungible and thus often interchangeable, and that they relate to wider institutions within the society, many of which have a gatekeeping function.

The first theme taken up on this research, concerning the positioning and self-perception of the bloggers, bears close relationship to the question of status, education and class position. This is treated in Chapter 4. Here I set up an analysis that questions whether communicative capital can be found to exist at the level of the individual and ask if this connects to Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital in particular. I look to the manner in which people position themselves within the sites of discourse and how they perform in a way that may be seen to give them advantage. The relationship to cultural capital is proposed on the grounds that commentators need to invoke the kind of *distinction* that Bourdieu suggested in his early renderings of cultural capital. It also bears relationship to the observations that Peillon (1982) set out regarding the status of the subjects he examined. Thus I set this analysis at the micro level of the individual commentator.

I next move the analysis to the meso level of social groups and social class as reproduced in the discourse. If we can observe high levels of individual communicative capital at play in the sphere, then how these individuals *classify* themselves and others is the next concern. The argument is that this becomes something of an elite discourse and there are implications for the connection between social and communicative capital. Once again I go against Dean's (2003; 2010) tenets and scrutinise the content and the identity of the speakers in order to identify strategies and signifying practices that serve to name and fix particular groups within the society. I also question what connection this might have to matters of social capital. Does one need to be extensively networked in order to maintain high levels of communicative capital, for instance?

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<sup>37</sup> Bourdieu also identified symbolic capital, which intersects with cultural and social capital and linguistic capital, which I discuss briefly. For the sake of consistency, I work with his original three-way division and refer to them as the 'major capitals' in this thesis.



The final theme, concerning contemporary Irish identity, again deals with the relationships between communicative capital and the other orders; in this instance primarily economic capital. I argue here that national identity is developing in a way that best serves the interests of the Irish economy and aligns to both a techno-determinist worldview and to the creation of what I refer to as an ideal-type Irish citizen/subject. This citizen/subject displays high levels of communicative capital themselves as a personal attribute within an individuated, branded and competitive marketplace of the self. The broader national ethos embraces industrial scale communicative capital in the form of internet corporations and this then becomes a symbiotic relationship.

I finalise my assessments of these intersections and the matter of fungibility of different forms of capital in the concluding chapter, Chapter 8. I thus suggest that there is much to be gained in evaluating ‘units’ of communicative capital as they emanate from individuals by considering precisely the matters that Dean (2010) suggests are irrelevant. I argue, moreover, that communicative capital, constituted at the individual level is potentially a key personal asset in our time.

Therefore, my position here follows in the tradition of Bourdieu (1986) and his adherents in assessing what is available on an individual and group level in terms of gaining advantage within the immaterial and often intangible marketplace into which society is increasingly transforming.<sup>38</sup> With mediated communication and the ‘digital literacy’ required to engage in this becoming predominant aspects of our everyday lives, I suggest that such theory building takes on an urgency.

Thus the current work departs from Dean’s (2003; 2010) theory is in its observation and analysis of content and language as *vitally important components* of communicative capital. To me the value assigned to a piece of communicative capital can only be understood by inclusion of the meanings and also the ascription of the utterance. To define it as only being a matter of number and bulk without attending to questions of authorship, purpose, readership and language is to render it underdeveloped as a theory. As currently iterated, the theory relates only to the

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<sup>38</sup> Two examples are given here to point to the practice of identifying what may be considered minor forms of capital, which I suggest communicative capital is. Wacquant (2006) examined the milieu of professional boxers whose physicality was the primary asset and identified this as ‘bodily capital’ clearly convertible into economic capital. In 2011 Hakim proposed a controversial theory suggestion that physical attractiveness and sexual appeal constituted a form of capital she dubbed ‘erotic.’ Again Hakim (2011) pointed to the fungibility of erotic capital, within for instance, the employment market.

mechanical elements of communication which fails to take consideration of the totality that becomes available once content is examined. In this respect, I suggest that Dean (2010) adheres too readily to the Marxist distinction between use and exchange value and limits her own concept.

My expansion of Dean's (2010) concept takes account of the notion of the branded self as set out by Senft (Hartley et al., 2013).<sup>39</sup> How this connects to wider understandings of the place of the communicative individual specifically within contemporary Ireland may then be theorised. Relationships between social, cultural and indeed economic capital may be interrogated and implications for inequality emerge as key concerns. Precise lines of transferability are beyond the scope of the work here but I intend to point to instances of where communicative capital may have the effect of 'hierarchy disruption' within the forums examined.

In my redefinition of communicative capital there are many subtleties that I wish to explore through the data later in the thesis. As a starting point, I suggest it is the set of skills and the possession of language, as well as strategies of identification (*i.e.* using one's own identity in a discursive forum) crucially combined with the ability to contribute in a way that not only displays expertise or status but also resonates with the tone and texture of the environment in which one contributes. So, for instance, if the forum is an establishment newspaper online, I would regard a comment that comes from a named source, written in fluent and expressive language, that displays a level of knowledge on the matter under discussion and that engages with other contributions as ranking highly in communicative capital. The rules would, however, be different in another forum. In Chapter 3 I give detail as to the criteria I used in my approach to reading and analysing text to specifically monitor these aspects.

I suggest also that a person lacking in cultural capital, be it in terms of education, social class or other symbolic assets may have the ability to perform and generate communicative capital. The same is true for social capital: a person with relatively few social ties can excel within fields of discourse and yet lack 'real world' connections. Therefore, it is not enough to say that

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<sup>39</sup> "...the discourse of 'brand me' has exploded into the public sphere: check the business section of any bookstore, and you will see at least half a dozen titles exhorting the importance of self-branding. In a similar vein, the practice of microcelebrity (which I define as the commitment to deploying and maintaining one's online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same) has moved from the Internet's margins to its mainstream." (Hartley et al., 2013: 346)

communicative capital at the individual level is merely a branch of major forms of Bourdieusian capital.

Another significant distinction is that whereas Dean (2003; 2010) foregrounds the novelty of communicative capital, I suggest that it has existed historically (the press, the law, academia). These three institutions have for hundreds of years held custodianship over language, knowledge and communication and thus we can consider a concentration of communicative capital as having resided in these spheres. However, due to the ‘liberation of information’ and the massification of communication this form of capital has arguably gone into wider generation, exchange and circulation.

#### ***2.4 Studies of Irish Public Culture and Media***

This section of the chapter takes a survey of recent conceptions of Irish identity across relevant disciplines in order to establish points of connection and locate relevant gaps. The thesis aims to provide new analysis of the emerging practices and discourses examined and to develop theory that may be useful in expanding existing perceptions of Irish public culture, particularly with regard to Ireland as an oft-proclaimed ‘digital nation.’ This area is decidedly under-examined to date and while there exists extensive sloganising within popular discourse about the role and value of new media in public life, to date we lack both theoretical and empirical scholarship on these questions.

This selection of the literature is drawn from the social sciences, the humanities, including Irish studies, and communications studies. In addressing questions of Irish identity in the data, I will look for evidence of a self-defining Irish public, the possibility of counterpublics, and also consider how and where communicative capital might take form in these localised settings.

### 2.4.1 The 'National' question

This enquiry examines its subject-matter within a conception of the Irish nation state and with attention to questions of collective identity, doing so at a time of (legitimation) crisis and revelation. These questions are broken down to consider altering mediascapes – the area where the literature is particularly sparse; social groups within the country; and ultimately much broader perceptions of the Irish and Irishness.

It was clear from initial observation of the sites that localised national concerns predominated and to this extent the parallels with Peillon (1982) remained intact. In other words, the direction of the research was informed by primary characteristics of the field of enquiry (this is discussed in Chapter 3).

Connolly (2003: 173), also writing about Ireland, suggests:

**Postulating a particular society as a sphere of sociological analysis is unfashionable in the current theoretical climate of global interdependency, the decline of nation-states and multicultural identities.** The sociology of nationalism has been profoundly transformed in contemporary social theory, for example, and the extent to which the continued focus on any nation-state is plausible, is open to question.

She continues by making a case that while these normative theoretical stances are in vogue within the discipline, curiously the ongoing empirical work of sociological research more commonly remains rooted at the level of the individual country (Connolly, 2003).

The other driver in determining my direction was the perception of an emerging logic of techno-enthusiasm that had come to prevail in Ireland at the time of the research. In the aftermath of housing and banking scandals, the communications technology sector was not only lauded as Ireland's greatest hope for recovery but the language and ethos of 'tech culture' was manifesting in public discourse more broadly and being applied to unrelated areas of everyday life (e.g. *smart farming!*).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See Berry (2014)

The initial hesitation to examine only Irish sites was heightened by the perception of the internet as being removed from the idea of the nation state – as the ultimate deterritorialised space. This predicament will be revisited later, but I suggest that a significant amount of the literature emerging from internet studies generally fails to ground itself clearly enough in the spaces from which discourses emanate, with the result that findings have a tendency towards universalising and sometimes essentialising claims. A clear example of this is the highly positive literature emanating from American scholars like Shirky (2003; 2008) and Benkler (2006), discussed above, which never explicitly references its location and frequently assumes that what is true for the US applies everywhere.

This is not a narrowly-focused study. I was highly aware of two significant groups that constitute the Irish, namely recent inward migrants and the Irish diaspora, throughout the research. I kept a particular lookout for these groups and their concerns in discussions examined. In seeking to locate versions of Irishness in the online sphere, I point to two general assertions offered by Graham. Firstly:

Societies are constituted of multiple, overlapping and intersecting socio-spatial networks of places and axes of identity [...] Clearly a hybrid, diverse, pluralistic and open-ended conception of Irishness contains the potential to transform Ireland into many Irelands. (Graham, 1997: 213)

This type of statement has become a staple of postmodern tracts on identity construction and it is worth re-examining such proclamations in light of altered networks and practices of discourse production, not to mention events that could not have been foreseen – events which would come to bring into focus questions of sovereignty and relationships with supranational bodies at the time the current enquiry began.<sup>41</sup>

Secondly, Graham went on to suggest that “*Ireland is moving away from ethnic conceptualisations of identity towards a civic participatory democracy within the European Union in which identity is defined by a complex of non-national interests and practices.*” (1997: 213) How true such a prediction is after the passage of almost twenty years and events that were unimaginable at the time is worth interrogating and I will do so in Chapter 6, where the question of national identity is examined in detail. These enquiries add to literature that examines Ireland

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<sup>41</sup> See O’Nuallain (2012).

and its relationship to globalisation, cosmopolitanism and postmodernity (Kearney, 1997; Khuling & Keoghane, 2007; Inglis, 2008; Byrne, 2006) with reference to the under-explored arena of communicative practices – practices *integral* to these three concepts, almost by definition.

#### 2.4.2 *The missing pieces*

Reflecting on the tendency among both scholars and journalists in the twentieth century to ‘theorise the nation’ rather expansively, Garvin (1988) suggests:

... Ireland and the Irish microcosm came under increased scrutiny, a scrutiny perhaps disproportionate to the real importance of the country itself. This attention [...] aggravated Irish self-consciousness and self-importance. [...] A result was that few countries spend so much time and intellectual effort on self-definition as does Ireland. Endless and occasionally entertaining debates on what it means to be Irish go on in Ireland and among some sections of the diaspora in Britain and the United States. A minor publishing industry exists built around the subject.

(Garvin, 1988:1)

While there is veracity in Garvan’s assertion – and it serves as an apt warning – it is equally true to suggest that significant aspects of contemporary Irish ‘identity performance’ have remained almost entirely unexamined. I contend that online media practice and the altering shape of the public sphere – or the flows of communicative capital – are clear instances of this neglect. Considering the shape of contemporary society more broadly and the primacy of communications within our everyday lives, this is a cause for concern. Add to this an official promotion of Ireland as a key destination for information technology enterprise and this becomes an area that now demands scrutiny.

#### 2.4.3 *Visions of Ireland*

Contemporary Ireland is well mapped out in the social science literature (*see* Tovey & Share, 2003; Clancy et al., 1995; Coulter and Coleman, 2003; Keoghane and Kuhling, 2004; Kuhling and

Keohane, 2007; Ó Riain, 2004; Bartley & Kitchen, 2007). Connolly (2003: 174) observes: “*the development of a sociology of Irish society has been influenced by just two issues: the importance of historiography in the construction of a collective Irish identity and the enduring effect of the meta-narrative of classic Western modernization in Irish social science.*” Such an interdisciplinary analysis has proved important in examining sociological accounts of Ireland, in line with concepts such as post-colonial theory emanating from the humanities.

Accounts of Ireland from the second half of the twentieth century tended to observe a recently modernised country where traditional elements had been banished to make way for a trajectory of progress, or sometimes a less simplistic rendering of these ideas. Connolly (2003: 174) points to a role adopted by ‘nationalist scholars’ who were charged with “*producing insularity and parochialism in Irish intellectual life*” as well as over-emphasising the exceptionalism that was attributed to Ireland.

A clear view of this is offered:

In Western social science Ireland was not the archetype of economic development and prosperity, and modern Irish society did not develop typically. As a result, Ireland has often tended to provide a good example of a ‘problem society’ in social theory – with ‘the Irish’ conceptualized as anomic. In comparative terms, the slow development of ‘modern’ Irish society was attributed largely to the survival of an exceptional form of traditionalism, considered as both embedded in Irish cultural norms and promulgated by conservative (catholic) clerics and an inward-looking nation-state. (175)

The diminution of these traditional forms is a mainstay of the work of Inglis (2002; 2008), which is presented without an explicit questioning of how such ‘tradition’ came into being in the first instance. During the latter half of the twentieth century, he suggests, “*...Ireland was moving away from being a traditional Catholic, closed, insular, conservative and protected society, to becoming more secular, democratic, liberal, egalitarian, pluralist and cosmopolitan.*” (2002: 5) Unprecedented economic growth and rapid social change, including an unparalleled influx of economic migrants, characterised the era and indeed much of the discourse of the early 2000s.

Coulter and Coleman (2003: 16) suggest:

Over the last decade, popular debate within the twenty-six counties has been dominated by the contention that the path that the Irish Republic has followed has been essentially benign. While it has enjoyed substantial currency [...]this orthodox reading exhibits shortcomings that are the hallmark of the particular ideological tradition upon which it

draws. This particular opposition has a great appeal for commentators. It is therefore entirely predictable that the advent of the Celtic Tiger should have moved a range of commentators to declare and delineate the demise of traditional Ireland.

Kuhling and Keohane (2007) draw on Kirby's work to point towards a cultural discourse which aligned to the Celtic Tiger ideology. It prioritised individualism, entrepreneurship, mobility, flexibility, innovation and competitiveness both as personal attributes and dominant cultural values which displaced earlier values (discourses prioritising national development, national identity, family, self-sacrifice, self-sufficiency and nationalism). A pertinent question for this work is how much these values have been abandoned, redefined or remain intact, as evidenced by the data encountered.

An initial concern is that the embrace of online technology at public and official levels could point to a reactivation of a strong modernisation drive to counteract the sense of national shame and perceived backwardness brought about by the financial collapse and perceptions of Ireland as a 'Banana Republic' (a phrase frequently encountered in the data).

In defining the era of the Celtic Tiger, Kuhling and Keohane (2004) offer a more nuanced account of a *collision culture*, an in-between place, or a society caught between two moments: the modern and the traditional. These commentators and others characterise this as liminal, *i.e.*, a society undergoing a suspension of the normal order of things, a moment of disruption and transition.<sup>42</sup> Szokolczai (2014), who has recently taken up this theory of liminality, has pointed towards the two seismic periods of disruption and transition in very recent Ireland: firstly, the Celtic Tiger period itself, and secondly the crisis/austerity aftermath, during which this current research took place. He considers these as double shocks which do not serve to cancel each other out. In pinpointing a moment of recognition of the end of the first and the onset of the second, a collection entitled *Ireland of the Illusions* (Share and Corcoran, 2010) brings together a selection

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<sup>42</sup> The term and its meaning are semantically deconstructed by Kuhling and Keoghane (2007) as a collective representation. The Celtic Tiger had local, national and global currency and its use was ubiquitous throughout popular culture. A collective representation, they explain, is a name for [and a] way of signifying the values we share and the ideas we aspire towards...they are the elementary forms of social life and fundamental to each and every social practice; they collect and represents the desires, conceits, fears and anxieties not just of the marketplace, but also of the social body as a whole.

They suggest that this phrase had morphed into what Durkheim calls a social fact, an idea with objective existence that exerts moral force with material consequences. Giddens argues that tradition is a substantive reality integral to modernity, an inheritance of pre-modern ideas, institutions and practices that are deeply sedimented and actively reproduced. The retrospective reinterpretation and discursive reconstruction of tradition has been the experience of living in Ireland today. This, they suggest, entails living in an in-between world, in between cultures and identities.



of commentators from a wide variety of subject areas from geography to cultural studies who engage in what might be viewed as a collective *'told-you-so.'* As in so many collections of reflection on these concerns in Ireland, both media and online discourse are excluded as topics from this collection.

The liminality that Keoghane and Kuhling (2004) use to define Irish public culture during the so-called Celtic Tiger era, as well as their conception of a collision culture, undoubtedly remain effective descriptors for the revelations that accompanied 'the crash' and its aftermath. A useful insight into those groups excluded from the supposedly ubiquitous prosperity of the Celtic Tiger – groups that might be considered here as potential counterpublics: prisoners, travellers, migrants and refugees – is set out by Crowley and MacLaughlin (1997) in their collection *Under the Belly of the Tiger: Class, Race, Identity and Culture in the Global Ireland*. Similarly, Pierse (2011) deals with the oft-neglected area of trade union activism in Ireland. Once again, in seeking to address questions of membership of the public sphere, these and similar groups and their concerns are sought out in the sites and data examined here.

At various times (2002, 2004, 2006, 2012) Corcoran has addressed herself to specific matters connected to the public sphere in Ireland. Her work analyses both the political and value orientations of journalists working in Irish media and provides a more recent discussion of 'public realm' in the Irish context. She explores what she calls the 'individualisation and economisation' of public life in Ireland. There is direct relevance between these concepts and the notion of communicative capital take up here.

Murphy (2011) provides a detailed dissection of the response to the crisis current during the research period by Irish civil society, characterised as moderate, muted and passive. Murphy looks to well-rehearsed aspects of the institutional structure to seek to explain the lack of protest in Ireland, an issue which also came to prominence in ITB of that year and is taken up in Chapter 4. Murphy concludes: "*Society needs to develop a greater public sphere where cross-sectorial progressive alliances can demonstrate popular support for alternatives.*" (2011: 170) The current research is necessitated by the absence of a substantial analysis of online media making practices which have become an integral aspect of our everyday lives and our society over the past decade in particular. If these practices form part of the sphere which Murphy describes, then a greater understanding of their function is now called for.

A number of books, particularly by journalists and financial pundits, sought to contribute to the analysis of the origins and causes of the financial crash in Ireland. Among the most comprehensive in this genre is McCabe's (2011) *Sins of the Father*, which offers a historical journey through Irish economic history, pinpointing decisions which, he contends, lay the foundations for the economic boom and crash which occurred in Ireland. In this regard he points to a generational set of factors which form a genealogy of the events post-2008.

What is significant about McCabe's (2011) contribution is that it gives an account of elite formation in Ireland, a topic which is little discussed. There is a point of crossover here as McCabe is the host of one of the sites examined later in the thesis (DBO). David McWilliams is a popular economist who has engaged in a form of social analysis and co-incidentally his site also forms part of the data set for this thesis (DMW). This point of intersection between roles on and off line is interrogated further in Chapters 4 and 5. McCabe re-emerged as a commentator on the 2013 as a 'tax haven' for multinational computer companies and provided a lucid explanation of how this particular loophole operated within the Irish taxation system.

A clear if somewhat polemical analysis of the corporate sphere (encompassing technology industries) as well as events precipitating the financial collapse is offered by O'Nuallain (2013), who poses the intriguing question as to whether Ireland has become a colony once again, this time in the grips of supranational organisations and international corporations. As a computer scientist, he offers one of the few critical accounts of what he proposes as official Ireland's superficial and myopic relationship to the technology sector, proposing as an exemplar the failed Medialab project from the 1990s.<sup>43</sup>

The analysis will turn now to examine matters integral to the field of discourse in Ireland, seeking to locate where powerful voices emerge from and how the spaces examined in this thesis relate to a localised public sphere in Ireland.

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<sup>43</sup> Media Lab Europe was the European partner of the MIT Media Lab. It was based in Dublin, Ireland and operated from July 2000 to January 2005. On 14 January 2005, the Board of Directors of Media Lab Europe announced that the company would go into voluntary solvent liquidation. The decision was taken because its principal stakeholders, the Irish Government and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), had not reached agreement on a new funding model for the organization. (*See* [www.medialabeurope.org](http://www.medialabeurope.org))

#### 2.4.4 *Public intellectuals and private citizens*

The question of public intellectuals and indeed the possibility of an anti-intellectual public culture within Ireland is of relevance to this body of literature on Ireland. This resonates with the question of public intellectuals as arguably the holders of high levels of communicative capital within the wider society. Fintan O'Toole (2003; 2009; 2010) is a prolific commentator on Irish public affairs and has produced a great deal of commentary in the aftermath of the recent crisis. He questions the nature of the Irish republic with particular emphasis on two matters: the domination of the educational system by the Catholic Church and the corruption scandals endemic in the political system. His concerns merge with the debate facilitated by *The Irish Times* in 2010 entitled "Renewing the Republic," where over a two-week period, 'experts' and commentators gave their views on what might be required to 're-establish' classic republican values as the nation approaches the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its foundation in 2016.

Reactivating a debate instigated by O'Dowd (1996), a conference at the Royal Irish Academy and a subsequent publication (Corcoran and Lalor, 2012) examined the role and possibilities for public intellectuals within the sphere of Irish public discourse.

The reason that public intellectuals are considered here is that Habermas, in one of his few pronouncements on the Internet as a possibility for public sphere pointed to the *requirement* for public intellectuals to guide debate online (Heynders, 2015). This of course gives rise to questions as to status and once again cultural and communicative capital. It runs contrary to what has been proposed elsewhere as the ethos of the online environment: non-hierarchical, grassroots and postmodern. In any event, one of the constant difficulties about the discussion of public intellectuals in the Irish context is that there is no agreement about the identity of a particular individual who might fulfil that role. It is raised as a consideration as the first strand of enquiry here concerns the practice of individuals whose cultural capital and reputational standing is high, possibly transferring this into the online sphere. It points also to the question of hierarchies and how these may be maintained or disrupted by a massification of communicative practices.

#### 2.4.5 Irish media and Ireland online

Ireland's media has been subject to a certain degree of scrutiny (Horgan, 2001, Horgan et al., 2007; Kiberd, 1999; Fahy et al., 2010), but a wide and detailed analysis of the online component of contemporary Irish media has not been produced to date. Equally, the points of intersection between established media and new media are almost entirely unexplored in this country. In addition, very little literature exists probing the recent re-invention of Ireland as a hub for communications technology.<sup>44</sup>

The print media's response to the financial crisis is the subject of work by Silke (2015), which examines both the ownership structure and content of the main national newspapers and suggests definitively that they serve to consolidate hegemonic positions within the society, acting as a bulwark for state policy. Mercille (2014) examines data on the print media's coverage of the austerity regime in Ireland and accuses the newspapers of acting as 'cheerleaders for austerity.' Clearly there is scope to ponder the political economy aspects of newspaper ownership and editorial positioning and apply it in a comparative manner to online media, but this is beyond my remit here.

Concerning the public broadcast media, Cullinane (2016: 116) points to "*the diminished critical capacities implied in the normative orientation of Irish public service broadcasting render[ing] it an impediment to the crucial task of thematising counter-hegemonic understandings of and responses to crisis.*" All of this suggests that established media in Ireland is incapable of providing a plausible public sphere. Cullinane (2010) also frames this state of affairs as a legitimisation crisis as I do here; key institutions within the society cannot be relied upon to perform their role. We may then ask if the online sphere can provide an alternative or hold out a possibility for an effective podium on which a greater range of voices can be heard. The first step in this is to examine the 'who' of online participation and to discover how people position themselves within new sites of discourse; this will be done in Chapter 4.

In 1999, Kiberd made the observation that the print media set the agenda in Ireland and that this was the function of the media in an advanced society. This was proffered as a taken for granted

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<sup>44</sup> See Newenham (2015)

and an almost indisputable position. The essays in his collection are remarkable now because of the self-assurance of the contributors concerning the role and power of the journalist within the society. In my initial attendance of forums addressed by journalists for this research, it is fair to say that the tune had changed and news professionals were actively either guarding their fiefdoms or redefining their relationship to the public in the light of the shifting nature of online news and opinion.

The current study examines spaces of discourse as aspects of media making and within a media landscape primarily. Concerning the allied questions of e-participation and social capital, Komito (1999, 2005, 2007) is one of the few to examine the issue here in Ireland, opening up the question of the repercussions of an 'information revolution' in the Irish context and the effect of increased internet immersion on structures and experiences of community, questions of e-democracy and e-government and the regulation of information in what he characterises as a knowledge intensive society. Komito (1999) makes a strong case for citizen participation in determining how the internet might evolve, encouraging us to perceive ourselves as integral its direction and sharing some of the concerns discussed earlier in relation to theorists like Fuchs (2008) and Andrejevik (2009) that the technology and society coexist effectively for the benefit of the citizen.

Some work is being done to examine specific new media practices in Ireland. For instance, a study of Facebook as public sphere among 18-30 year olds (English, 2013) and representations of women in Irish politics (Pieta, forthcoming). There has been some recent scholarship on the internet in Ireland but it has tended to focus on the role of online humanities and is a fragmented body of literature. A very recent collection (Fowley et al., 2013), includes one contribution that examines internet as public sphere, adopting a more user-focused approach and a different set of both concerns and methodologies to those presented in the current work. The authors point to the clear absence of specifically Irish work in this area. I argue in this thesis that the sphere of online communication is a rich field for the researcher wishing to gain insight into individual practice and the societal preoccupations of our times.

## ***2.5 Conclusion***

This chapter has set up the primary research question and its secondary concerns in detail. I began by casting an eye back to an earlier study that in many ways prompted the precise direction of this thesis (Peillon, 1982) allowing me to attend to questions of individual practice as well as broader national concerns. I took stock of the established debates on the Habermasian public sphere, moving my focus to the uptake of this corpus of theory in the online domain. In looking to the debate on the potential of online spaces to be construed as public sphere, I moved the discussion to encompass counterpublics and the work of critical media scholars, who I have argued are more attentive to the intersections between online practices and societal concerns. Dean's (2003; 2010) theory of communicative capital was outlined and redefined with reference to the Bourdieusian (1986) suite and his concept of field was invoked. The analysis then moved to consider the lack of specific literature on both discourse and new media practice in contemporary Ireland; the matter of public intellectuals and broader theorisations of Irish public culture and the Irish media, as they relate to the current enquiry were considered. The following chapter outlines the methodological aspects of this thesis and gives a detailed account of the sites from which the data was drawn.

## ***Chapter 3: Method and Discipline***

*“If we think in terms of academic fields, the often made distinctions are artificial, because it makes no sense, for example, to talk of political science without sociology, but yet they are still separate fields. And it makes no sense to have sociology without anthropology as well. So all these disciplinary boundaries blur if we think of academic fields as starting points for questions rather than as forms of expert knowledge with some kind of complete and all encompassing jurisdiction over particular questions. A lot of media studies unfortunately ends up being either pointless content analysis, training for people to become media manipulators, or generic counting and measuring. Critical media studies, in contrast, is explicitly political, and is explicitly concerned with how communications are used in ways that change people’s subjectivity... So the future of media studies is in the critical and this critical direction will and must reject arbitrary disciplinary distinctions. In fact, to say anything important at all, media studies has to make explicit the role of media in maintaining capitalism.”*

*Jodi Dean interview (Kubitschko, 2012)*

### ***3.0 Introduction***

Building on the chapters setting out the research question and the literature, the focus of this chapter is on describing the methodological choices made to complete the study. I begin by reflecting on the nature of internet research generally. Next I set out the selection process applied to the websites and the particular texts that comprise the data set. I then describe how this data was managed and drawn on for analysis. Consideration is given to the chosen methodology – a combination of qualitative discourse analysis and cultural studies. An account of the piloting phase of the research – the ‘road not taken’ – is offered. I conclude with a reflexive section,

which examines my own position and the insights gained as a researcher, in addition to some remarks on ethics.

This thesis is based on a three-year immersion in and monitoring of nine websites from the Republic of Ireland, all of which were concerned with matters within the public culture, as defined in Chapter 1. They were read as sites of ‘the political,’ as discussed and defined in Chapter 2. Ultimately, most of the research process entailed reading and following posts and threads, isolating and evaluating topics, and revisiting the websites over time. These tasks also entailed considerable methodological discovery. The project is – as I have set out in the preceding chapter – pioneering in the local context, and so there were few points of reference from local literature. This combined with the evolving and sometimes contested nature of internet research itself required a measure of innovation as well as considerable trial and error, necessitating a rejection of certain methods found to be unsuitable for the specific preoccupations of the project. This was, in a sense, a circular process and ended with me employing methods not all that dissimilar from those used by Peillion (1982) for his own analysis.<sup>45</sup> This chapter offers a candid and evaluative account of this experience of methodological discovery.

### ***3.1 Clarification of Terms***

*Method* I understand to be the set of tools of discovery and the ‘replicable’ manner in which the process of knowledge acquisition has been achieved. *Methodology* I understand to mean the underpinning rationale and epistemological orientation of the methods. And by *orientation* I include those theoretical aspects woven into the research process which I as researcher have privileged and selected in the undertaking. This last of these terms us into territories of subjectivity and reflexivity, as well as the theoretical frameworks that were selected and utilised on the research pathway, as set out in Chapter 2; in short, the choices that were made by this researcher for the specific purposes of this project. These three considerations, method,

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<sup>45</sup> Peillion (1982) used a classic qualitative discourse analysis on the letters he examined, also dividing them by theme.



methodology and orientation, are of necessity interlinked and I reflect on this in the current chapter.

### ***3.2 Where to Begin...?***

An initial note of comfort for any online researcher comes from a declaration made by Costigan (in Jones, 1998: xvii, my emphasis), which I believe remains true today:

I am not sure I know what the Internet is; I am not sure that anyone does. **The popular embrace of the concept of the Internet, and the market's enthusiasm to be a part of it, has certainly muddied the waters.** I understand the Internet from its physical properties...I know about the Internet from the application point of view...I also know how it is used and how I use it. I know about it from the market and social perspectives – the next 'cool' thing. None of these perspectives seems to suffice in grasping the Internet.

For the present endeavour we can add that the internet is a space of news circulation, opinion expression and exchange. But clearly, based on the research questions and the complexity of the literature, there is much more to discover and the immediate question becomes: how? The section of the quote highlighted above points to the popular and market positivity for increased spaces of communication and consumption, and the task of a critical scholar is orientated towards uncovering structures and ideologies, a process that may temper some of this zeal.

Costigan's (1998) piece of reflection also sums up the rather daunting initial nature of a project of this type and provides a measure of reassurance, opening the way to a Socratic approach aligned to a flexible set of queries and an acknowledgment that we all continue – many years after this statement was made – to try to make meaning of the internet and its compelling place in our heavily mediated lives.

Castells (2001: 3) posits the theory that engagement in this area of research locates us "*in the midst of informed bewilderment.*" Relationships, connections and flows of information now move across the boundaries between on- and off-line environments and platforms and also from place to place, often in unpredictable and little understood ways and we encounter what are accurately described as "*unstable and transient systems of action*" (Coleman, 1990: 899). It is worth remembering that internet research is a nascent field of enquiry – of less than three

decades – and that contingency and openness characterise enquiry in this area. The challenge becomes the production of valid and meaningful research, the methods employed for which are transparent and robust in an attempt to counter – or perhaps even embrace – some of the acknowledged disorder and flux.

The guiding methodological concern was to find the most appropriate tool to answer the specific research question: how do we understand the practice of online blog and news site authorship and commentary and what insights into the current social imaginary does this facilitate? As this question became clearer, in line with exploration of the research field, it focused on three particular themes: individual positioning within the forums examined, discussion of social groups in contemporary Ireland, and an overarching concern with national identity; these would all be examined as they were performed through the discourse as it appeared, without regard to secondary concerns.

After a time, and a process of trial and error set out below, it became apparent then that the only suitable methods – especially in addressing complex questions of public sphere and communicative capital – were those that placed an analysis of language at their centre and focused primarily on the content itself as having the requisite answers. Thus a consideration of the theoretical frameworks selected also had undoubted bearing on the eventual methodology taken up.

### *3.2.1 The right and wrong ways to do online research?*

The processes and mechanics of internet research remain the subject of intense deliberation (*see* Fielding et al., 2008). This has unsurprisingly led to considerable prescription, with many commentators keen to confidently establish ‘best practice’ methods for research in this field. There have also emerged many binaries in the discussions to date: for instance, between those who seek to theorise the Internet primarily as ‘text’ or data (McMillan, 2000) and those who understand it as ‘social encounter’ (Miller and Slater, 2000; Kozinets, 2002; 2010; Hine, 2000). This also manifests as a division between scholars taking a more humanities-based approach and those with a social scientific orientation.

In the previous chapter, I have pointed to the attention given to the internet in an Irish context by scholars from the area of the digital humanities (Fowler et al. 2013) using methods drawn from their respective disciplines. I maintain that such interpretive methods, originating from the humanities but now taken up widely in the social sciences are keys not only to drawing out meanings but also to grasping elements of ‘the social’ within the texts and the spaces examined. *“In internet research more than anywhere else, humanities and social sciences meet and meld to help investigate areas related to art, writing, and society.”* (Fowler et al., 2013: 27)

The pre-existing methodological cleavages in sociology between qualitative and quantitative methods and orientations are amplified in this research field. While many of the debates, insights and propositions this yields are of undeniable value and utility, much of the discussion can appear as an attempt to impose an ultimate order on a field that is by definition characterised by disorder and non-linearity. A social scientific perspective, drawing on an interpretive orientation, such as is taken up here, privileges the aspect of human agency and counters a technologically determinist approach focusing heavily on the applications and platforms. Similarly, an acknowledgement of human agency in generating and circulating texts prevents the analysis becoming overly clinical, and maintains a connection to the social and cultural worlds that are prioritised here.

The question of mutability was a key challenge of the research. This instability is acknowledged as perhaps the primary obstacle in this area of enquiry (*see* Beer and Burrows, 2007). In short, everything changes very quickly and this undoubtedly creates set-backs for the researcher, particularly in a project that monitors a field of activity over a period of years. Equally, the process of ‘containing’ the research field and not allowing it to become sprawling was an initial concern. These are matters that I will return to in the concluding chapter (Chapter 8) of the thesis, where I question both how well the methods described here have served the project and how valid my findings remain.

### *3.3 Selection of Sites and Refining of Methods*

The first decision to be made for the project was its scale. It was necessary for me to make a selection of sites that would provide sufficient and robust data for analysis but also to remain realistic within the confines of a piece of solo research. At the inception, I proposed to examine the content and composition of *four* websites. This quite simply proved too small a range of material to address the type of questions I was proposing; this became clear quickly. It would have also entailed a different set of methods, possibly engaging in a participative ‘netnography’ (Kozinets, 2010) or conducting interviews. It became apparent that a larger number of websites would be required to make up a sample capable of yielding sufficient substantive and varied material for analysis to resolve the enquiry.

A number of questions arose concerning which sites these would be and how the selection was to be made. In looking at the ‘blogrolls’<sup>46</sup> that were part of the homepage of many of the sites originally monitored, an average of twelve was fixed on. This replicated the apparent ‘fields of discourse’ that some of the bloggers were cross-referencing, promoting, and aligning themselves with – an approximately similar number in each case. The number was finally reduced to nine when a tripartite division was applied to form a typology, so that each category contained three sites. I would additionally suggest that this number is a comfortable average which a person who reads blogs regularly would visit and revisit. In short, it replicates a form of everyday experience and online media consumption of an ‘average user.’

It is also worth pointing out that the research field remained of necessity somewhat fluid over the duration of the study and that themes took on more importance than the strict location of the material, in line with the tenets of the cultural studies and qualitative discourse analysis methodology eventually chosen. This was the case for two reasons: firstly, much of the content of the blogs was promoted via Facebook/Twitter, and secondly there was quite a measure of cross-reference between the sites. Additionally, as Brymen (2012) also highlights, some sites which had been very active at the beginning of the research period were less so at a later point; inactivity is a very common feature after the initial enthusiasm of a new blog begins to dissipate.

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<sup>46</sup> A blogroll is a list of recommended sites on the homepage of a blog.

This in itself was considered to be important to the selection, and sites were not immediately discarded merely because they became dormant or were only infrequently updated. Thus the field is characterised as being both fluid and ‘messy.’ The latter quality will be referred to again in consideration of Law’s (2004) directions on contemporary social science research amid messy fields of enquiry; assertions that are, I believe, especially pertinent to the study of communication.

### *3.3.1 Process of categorisation*

Although there are few clear guidelines to site selection in the literature, and substantial studies have been undertaken of sites chosen at random (Tremayne, 2007), it was decided that the selection should comprise sites that each represented a particular type of blog existing more widely in the sphere. Thus the three categories were formed: the individual blog, the group blog, and the news production site. While these sites varied in format and in many other respects – their traffic, commercial orientation, popularity – what they shared was a preoccupation with broadly similar material and topics, and of course a format which consisted of a main post and the function to comment beneath the line with minimal gatekeeping or restriction.

In the selection phase of the research, certain colleagues, acquaintances or interviewees recommended inclusion of particular websites, judged to be ‘influential,’ ‘reputable’ or merely ‘serious.’ Often this meant that these were the provenance of A-listers (Trammel and Keshelashvili, 2005; Benkler and Shaw, 2010) and frequently contained hard economic or political analysis of Ireland’s current predicament; in short, their recommendation indicated veracity, legitimacy and reliability. Attention was also paid to the community that exists around the Irish Blog Awards, and an early temptation was to draw from this pool in particular for site selection, as this could be argued to be a zone of influence and recognised ‘excellence’ within the blogosphere locally.<sup>47</sup> I restrained myself from making choices on this basis as neither

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<sup>47</sup> [www.blogawardsireland.com](http://www.blogawardsireland.com)

‘influence’ strictly speaking, nor ‘excellence’ were part of my enquiry in line with the research questions I was addressing.

As the variety of sites available to choose from grew over the timeframe of the research, this aspect of selection was subject to alteration in order to give a representative sample in the ultimate selection. A measure of subjectivity thus characterised the sites selection. A basic criterion was that sites conveyed rapid activity and fresh content, or were often referred to and cross-referenced by other commentators within the field. In short, the sites needed to be active and ‘live.’ As a broad guiding principle, all addressed Irish concerns as to the type of society that we inhabit.

Another preliminary attraction was that some of the sites considered gave attention to topics ignored in the established media. For instance, one blog (MNP) managed to create an ongoing news flow on disability rights in Ireland; a subject seldom highlighted by the press. The same site covered the civil partnership/same sex marriage issue years before this became topical in the public discourse. Therefore, the sites were selected in what might be considered an avowedly intuitive manner, an issue I will address in the section on subjectivity and reflexivity below.

### ***3.4 The Ethnographic Phase***

The early stages of the project were guided by the advice of peers and mentors in social science who directed me towards or advocated particular methodologies, including ethnography. In addition, I conducted some preliminary interviews of those hosting the sites under consideration and also gave my attention to certain numerical aspects such as hit rates, popularity of individual posts, or numbers of comments on a particular post. These were highlighted by interviewees as significant from their viewpoint.

At this time also, the process entailed an immersion in what I perceived to be the wider public sphere and in particular the blogosphere on and offline. I began to attend gatherings and discussions, happening around Dublin, about the practice of blogging and where practitioners reflected on their practice. A number of these people would reappear at various events over the

course of the study and there was a clear interest in the question of the meaning and influence of this activity on the ‘public sphere’ – a term that was in currency in these meetings – as well as tie-ins with the pre-existing media. For instance, one person, largely responsible for the ‘academic site’ included among the eventual sample, appeared and spoke at a number of these gatherings and pointed out in some detail the link between the blog he was involved in and what would eventually become news stories in the established media.

It could be observed that these people were speaking in a ‘quasi-professional’ capacity. The is to say that they acknowledged some link between their careers and expertise and the practice of running a blog, but also played up the ‘hobbyist’ side of these activities. What was important about these observations was that it directed my attention to what would become the first thematic strand of the research: how people located themselves within and contributed to discussion, which is set out in Chapter 4.

It was tempting at this time to form focus group or set up further individual interviews with those active in the sphere but on some level this seemed contrived and not suited to purpose once the research questions had become crystallised. My reluctance grew from the apprehension of a level of performativity or meta discourse which would detract from the primary object of enquiry – the sites themselves.

From these initial scoping exercises, I learned about the field of enquiry in broad terms and certain matters became clearer: that there exists an ‘A-list’ of blogs and bloggers, as found in most societies where the practice is established (*see* Trammel and Keshelashvili, 2005; Benkler and Shaw, 2010) and that these actors within this network knew each other. Two additional matters emerged from this phase that would influence the direction of the study: the tendency of many involved in the area to evangelise and celebrate in a manner referred to in the previous chapter, as well as the clear links, and sometimes tensions between professionals’ working lives and their online blogging activities, as mentioned above.

This phase of the research is considered to be ethnographic in the manner described and it is understood that although this study is not an ethnography in the conventional sense, this element added to the mix that would make up a mixed methods approach to the research (*see* Brannen, 2005). Here mixed methods includes the trial and error nature of the early phase, the piloting,

interviews, meetings and seminars and informal conversations with people knowledgeable or merely interested in the field; even though methods were considered and rejected, engaging with these methods had some influence on the outcome of the project in its totality and my own development as a researcher.

Hartley (2012) makes a point that had occurred to me at the early site-selection stage, and which I have referred to in the previous chapter; namely, that it is now commonplace to find hard and soft content – high and low culture, politics and gossip – coexisting in contemporary blogs. In fact, this became an important recurring theme in itself: the post-modern tendency to treat different types of subject-matter with the same level of attention and to blend topics towards variety. This would later become an important aspect of my proposition to move the notion of public sphere away from what is typically considered political and my argument that cultural and social topics are invariably infused with ‘the political’ if we extend this term to embrace ideology.

A broad view of ‘the political’ was thus adopted for the research and the contention remains that the political can often be located in unexpected topics and spaces. This is particularly true of the blogosphere. Thus pre-existing notions of what is to be regarded as ‘serious’ or worthy of analysis could be revised. One of the preliminary discoveries therefore was that profound insight into a prevailing ideology can be apparent in the discussion of seemingly trivial or mundane topics.<sup>48</sup> I will admit however, that the enquiry steered away from sites that would be unlikely to address the thematic concerns that were emerging, so, for instance, my contention that almost anything can be political did not extend to my monitoring fashion, sport or music sites. Thus I took the path of the mean where possible and steered towards sites with a variety of topics and subject-matter.

In finalising the selection, the criteria mentioned above are of lesser importance than other factors. It was considered important to include blogs that were representative of types of production, from hobbyists to amateur journalists, often producing content for no financial reward. This was undertaken in order to read a mixture of professionalised and amateur content

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<sup>48</sup> The *Broadsheet.ie* site (BRD) yielded many examples of this tendency.



and to see the pseudo-journalistic activity alongside offshoots of established media brands.<sup>49</sup> Attention was paid to the perceived political and ideological orientation of the sites in question in order to represent differing political orientations and concerns.

From the foregoing it is clear that the selection process was intuitive and iterative and the subjectivity of the researcher is acknowledged in this. This exercising of taste and selectivity on my own part may have brought the entire project, the selection, analysis and interpretation phases in a direction that I determined it ought to take. (I discuss this further in the section on reflexivity below.)

### ***3.5 The Blogs***

There follows a description of the blogs which were examined for the research. The criteria used for selection should become clearer from these details. Here I try to give a sense of their main features and to indicate the reason for inclusion in the current study:

#### *3.5.1 The individual blogs*

##### **David McWilliams Blog**

[www.davidmcwilliams.ie](http://www.davidmcwilliams.ie) (DMW)

David McWilliams is an economist, social commentator and journalist based in Ireland. This is in many ways a shopfront for McWilliam's professional activities including his writing, economics online learning courses and media appearances; all of his newspaper articles are published here as well as videos of interviews in the international media. It has an extensive and popular comments section alongside the articles and tends to draw in dedicated followers of McWilliams. It was initially included in this selection because of the site host's tendency to

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<sup>49</sup> This also points to the variety of forms of labour, collaboration and funding available to different sites within the sample and this doubtlessly has implications for the activity on sites: the frequency of updating, for instance.

engage in ‘pop sociology’ regarding the current state of Ireland. McWilliams (2005, 2007, 2012) has notably engaged in class analysis of Irish society and has offered characterisation of the commentariat, a class of person who engages in public sphere activity. The site has a search function and archives and relies on its Twitter link than FB presence. There is clearly a large community of regular commentators associated with this site.

### **Maman Poulet**

[www.mamanpoulet.com](http://www.mamanpoulet.com) (MNP)

Perhaps one of the most successful and high-profile examples of a solo blogger engaged in making her own news and commentary agenda, this site has won numerous awards at the Irish Blog awards over a ten-year period. It is the work of activist Suzi Byrne, who is also very active on Twitter and has been a radio commentator in the past. Byrne’s news agenda emanates from her own interests and preoccupations (LGBT, civil partnerships, disability activism, social justice issues) and has a campaigning ethos. It also covers elections, and the political system more generally in Ireland. It is highly critical and ‘reasoned’ in tone and frequently engages in meta commentary of the media; it elicits tips from readers and engages in back and forth discussion with commentators. Although primarily the work of one blogger it does occasionally include guest posts. The site is free of advertising and takes an anti-corporate position as well as challenging official institutions. A good example of the type of ongoing critique concerns the analysis of the JobsBridge<sup>50</sup> programme which received little critical discussion elsewhere in the mainstream media until recent times. The site does not support advertising.

### **Bock the Robber**

[www.bocktherobber.com](http://www.bocktherobber.com) (BTR)

In contrast to the two preceding blogs, this is an anonymous blog that often expresses very strong viewpoints on topical matters, with particular reference to media critique. It engages in contrarianism and provocative commentary, with the host presenting a persona reminiscent of an old-style ‘hack’ (amateur) journalist. It also blends a wide variety of topics: politics, technology, cooking, religion and entertainment, for instance. The site host presents himself as a dedicated

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<sup>50</sup> A government internship/workfare programme, widely regarded as a failure.

polemicist and although there is no ‘About’ section, the tone and texture of the site give a very strong first impression. BTR maintains ongoing correspondence relationships with a number of regular commentators. There is no blogroll, a small number of adverts and a request to donate to the costs of the site (which was not present at the beginning of this survey).

### 3.5.2 *The group blogs*

#### **TheStory.ie**

www.the story.ie (STR)

This is a local iteration of a type of site now operational in most European countries; the site hosts present themselves as “freedom of information nerds.” STR falls into the category of data-driven news production, and provides visualisations of large quantities of material, presented in raw unedited form which are deemed to be in the ‘public interest.’ The subject matter of the site encompasses NAMA,<sup>51</sup> politicians’ expenses, various tribunals of enquiry, the movements of ministers (their diaries are displayed), political donations, government agencies etc., making available extensive document and video resources on these topics. It has been run voluntarily by a pair of journalists (Gavin Sheridan/Mark Coughlan) and is obviously designed to generate news stories and as a reference point for the media and public. The ethos and activities of the site are summed up in their blurb:

... dedicated to sharing documents, combing and combining data and promoting transparency in public life: An experiment in journalism and crowdsourcing hoping to shed light on the government. If you’re spending the Irish taxpayers’ money, you’re on the radar. (**About section, STR**)

The site relies heavily on freedom of information requests. It aligns itself to the ‘political reform’ agenda which has emerged in recent years in Ireland.<sup>52</sup> While the site is billed as being independent of the journalists’ separate careers, it nonetheless serves to showcase their work and reputation. Sheridan has for many years run the popular Gavin’s Blog and is employed by

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<sup>51</sup> NAMA is the National Assets Management Agency, established during the Troika intervention. Its function is to hold, manage and dispose of ‘distressed’ property assets.

<sup>52</sup> See [politicalreform.ie](http://politicalreform.ie) for more.

Storyful, a news curation site. Coughlan is employed by RTE's *Prime Time*. The site allows for commentary and reaction; it showcases instances of uptake of stories based on its findings by the conventional media (especially *The Irish Times/Irish Independent*). It is selected for this study because of the important yet niche activities it presents.

### **Dublin Opinion**

[www.dublinopinion.com](http://www.dublinopinion.com) (DBO)

This site is a long-established group blog, run by people “who don't normally blog” but has very many posts by Conor McCabe, a Dublin-based academic and activist.<sup>53</sup> It is called after a satirical publication which was published here between the 1920s and the 1960s (this is something which occurs elsewhere in the blogosphere, e.g. *Pue's Occurances* is called after an 18<sup>th</sup> century pamphlet). The site is not satirical in tone, but rather substantial, journalistic and leftist in its editorial selection, topics and links (it is heavily linked to the *Irish Left Review*, for instance, and refers to local literary publications like *The Stinging Fly*) and combines feature postings on current events and discourses with numerous links to Irish history resources online and includes a long blogroll. Its core topics include the crisis and austerity debate and a consideration of Irish banking within the international debate on financialisation and the fractures of the international banking model. Clearly the site is not commercial and does not seem to rely on Twitter/FB feeds to attract users' attention.

### **Namawinelake**

[www.namawinelake.wordpress.com](http://www.namawinelake.wordpress.com) (NWL)

This site is a group blog run by academic geographers and social scientists. It publishes accessible and scholarly articles that chronicle recent events in Ireland with a focus on property boom and bust, banking scandals and recession. In its About section it declares its neutrality on the question of NAMA (the National Assets Management Agency, set up in 2008 to consolidate 'bad loans' to the property sector) and describes its editorial stance as 'apolitical.'

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<sup>53</sup> McCabe (2011) is the author of *Sins of the Fathers*, which provides a theoretical historical background to the economic crisis in Ireland.

It plays up its anonymous nature and makes claims about its function that at first sight conform to a public sphere ethos. The main blogger is Prof Rob Kitchen from NUIM and he is credited as the person who, using this forum, opened up the data he had collected on ‘ghost estates’ to journalists and brought this to wider public attention. It falls into the category of a data repository and functions to supply information that may be taken up by other media for investigation and wider dissemination. It locates the establishment of NAMA as a watershed moment in recent Irish events. The site arguably belongs to a group of A-list blogs, which is immediately obvious from its own blogroll: Irish Economy (Philip Lane/ESRI economists), Political-Economy (TASK) and Ronan Lyons, economist, for example. Kitchen was involved in a community of bloggers who met in Dublin to discuss the cultural practice aspects of blogging (*i.e.* Blogging the Humanities 1 & 2 symposia). The site had an active Twitter feed but no FB page and it does not support advertising. It showed only a small number of comments and activity was from regular commentators for the most part.

### 3.5.3 *The news sites*

#### **Broadsheet.ie**

www.broadsheet.ie (BRD)

This site takes a light, arch and ‘quippy’ view of news stories, memes, user submitted street shots and has a very distinctive tone and a stylised manner of presentation and language usage, which frequently borders on the cynical. The title ‘Broadsheet’ probably refers to the fact that the format and tone of the site is essentially tabloid, although with an urban, liberal and somewhat ‘superior and knowing’ editorial stance. It aims to be live and immediate in the manner of presentation and it is clear that a community of regular commentators seek to outdo each other in the commentary sections. It does, nonetheless, allow a forum for some level of substantive debate on particular news stories.<sup>54</sup> More often though, the subject matter focuses on themes

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<sup>54</sup> For instance, in the 2013 Sean Quinn family imprisonment affair, it was obvious that its commentators’ views were anti-Quinn, whereas the radio media in particular seemed to highlight the opinions of those who felt the Quinns were being persecuted and victimized.

such as the discussion of sub-cultures, Dublin street characters etc. It tends to encompass a very wide range of themes and tropes.

The site is run by a group of dedicated amateurs/aspirant journalists and it clearly has commercial motivation. It has advertising and is updated every fifteen minutes, relying on frequent Twitter/FB feeds to draw users in. It engages in considerable media monitoring, adopting a meta-stance observed in other sites also. The majority of its content emanates from Ireland, and more particularly Dublin. It is selected because it straddles the amateur/commercial divide and is clearly a popular site.

### **Thejournal.ie**

[www.thejournal.ie](http://www.thejournal.ie) (JIE)

This is the most high-profile of the emergent news sites operating in Ireland with a team of professional journalists engaged in news and feature production, opinion pieces and aggregation. It is highly interactive and relies heavily on Twitter/FB feed-ins. It also runs frequent opinion polls and has a live job section as well as links to sport and business news sources. It is highly visual and offers image galleries and videos. In format it resembles a traditional newspaper layout with all the features of international news sites like the Huffington Post. It is clearly commercially orientated with considerable advertising on the site. JIE encompasses both Irish and international stories and topics. This site is selected due to its scope and commercial direction as well as its reliance on reader input.

### **Irish Times Blogs**

[www.irishtimes.com/blogs](http://www.irishtimes.com/blogs) (ITB)

The Irish Times online edition hosts a suite of blogs (21 in total at the time of my enquiry), most of which focus on particular topics (consumer matters, music, film, finance, innovation etc.). The 'lead' blog spot is Hugh Linehan's Mechanical Turk page. Linehan has spoken recently about

the newspapers attempts to incorporate online challenges and very recently there has been a change of policy regarding posting comments. Linehan spells this out:

The Irish Times's view is that social media now forms a central part of our engagement with our audience. In effect, we're aiming to move on from the rather antiquated concept of linear comments on articles towards facilitating a more dynamic set of real-time conversations around the many subjects covered every day on our website. (ITB: 12 May 2012)

It is very clear that because of the status afforded by the brand of the ITB, there is a very active community of commentary for these blogs and also a willingness for posters to use their real identities when posting here. Because the online version of the Irish Times newspaper took the same format as the blog section, material from this was included in the study.

### ***3.6 Piloting Phase: Trial and Error***

As previously mentioned, the research process entailed a consideration and 'test driving' of a number of methods which were later abandoned in favour of the final methodological approach set out below. Often the methods available veered in three directions towards firstly, an ethnographic approach privileging human interaction and group dynamics, secondly a 'humanities' approach based on 'readings of texts,' or thirdly a more quantitative approach preoccupied with statistical data and trends. Had the research project been centred on merely discovering which sites bore most influence, the latter methods would undoubtedly have come into play. However, this question, interesting as it is, did not form part of the eventual focus of the enquiry. The array and diversity of methods used by scholars internationally became very apparent when I started to attend conferences of peers and observed just how many ways of researching online material and interaction were presented.

Two methods that were considered or piloted are worth mention here. These were netnography and Pauwels's (2012) 'Six Steps' method. There is considerable attention paid to online ethnography, in recognition that online spaces have strong social characteristics and ought to be

treated as any other social domain might be. In particular, the works of Hine (2000) and Kozinets (2002; 2010) were influential in early forays into ‘netnography’ as a possible method for the current project.

A strong case is made for this method, in terms of the level of immersion a researcher can attain in the field and the richness of human interaction that can be observed. However, two matters prevented this becoming the final method employed in the study. Firstly, although the practice of ‘lurking,’ namely undertaking a passive and observational stance, within fields of online interaction is generally frowned upon, I suggest that the marginal distance this practice affords is useful, particularly when the research is highly interpretive, *i.e.* focused on the textual meanings rather than the perceived personalities and interaction. This method is also most suited to live interaction rather than the more time-lagged post-and-comment activity on blogs I believe (*i.e.* it works best in a live chatroom situation). Secondly, and very importantly as it is not widely discussed in the literature on these methods, I was reluctant to express agency within the field of discourse as this would inevitably distort the material under examination. I am conscious of my own tendency to express opinion and to take on the role of contrarian on occasion!

Part of the piloting involved an immersion and participant observation on one of the sites, adhering to the dictates of Kozinets’s (2010) ‘netnography.’ Adopting the ethically motivated practice of declaring a research interest when setting up my profile on this site made me feel like a censorial presence amid the other commentators and added, to my mind, an air of artificiality; the method was abandoned. I suggest that a declared academic researcher in any discursive field alters the character of that field by their presence. This is something I have witnessed from both sides in an online setting.

Another highly prescriptive method is set out by Pauwels (2012). He prescribes a detailed set of six steps for undertaking the analysis of websites. The advantage of this method is that it provides a thorough starting point and set of indicators to examine a website from a variety of stances; it is a holistic approach and offers much of value.



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## A MULTIMODAL FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYZING WEBSITES

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### 1. Preservation of First Impressions and Reactions

- Categorization of 'look and feel' at a glance
- Recording of affective reactions

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### 2. Inventory of Salient Features and Topics

- Inventory of present website features and attributes
- Inventory of main content categories and topics
- Categorize and quantify features and topics
- Perform 'negative' analysis: significantly absent topics and features

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### 3. In-depth Analysis of Content and Formal Choices

#### 3.1 Intra-Modal Analysis (fixed/static and moving/dynamic elements)

- Verbal/written signifiers
- Typographic signifiers
- Visual representational signifiers
- Sonic signifiers
- Lay out & design signifiers

#### 3.2 Analysis of Cross-Modal Interplay

- Image / written text relations and typography-written text relations
- Sound / image-relations
- Overall design / linguistic, visual and auditory interplay

#### 3.3 In-depth 'negative' analysis

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### 4. Embedded Point(s) of View or 'Voice' and Implied Audience(s) and Purposes

- Analysis of POV's and constructed personae
- Analysis of intended/implied primary and secondary audience(s)
- Analysis of embedded goals and purposes

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### 5. Analysis of Information Organization and Spatial Priming Strategies

- Structural and navigational options and constraints (dynamic organization)
- Analysis of priming strategies and gate keeping tools
- Analysis of outer directed and/or interactive features
- Analysis of external hyperlinks

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### 6. Contextual Analysis, Provenance and Inference

- Identification of sender(s) and sources
- Technological platforms and their constraints/implications
- Attribution of cultural hybridity

While once again I did not fully subscribe to Pauwels's (2012) schema to the letter, it proved *influential* in both the selection and interpretative aspects of the research and I would draw on his directions frequently over the course of the project. The method is prescriptive and thus somewhat limiting for my specific purposes. I incorporated aspects of it into my methodology, employing it as an orientating device particularly in the initial phase of selection of material.

### 3.6.1 *The pilot study*

Another aspect of the exploratory phase involved a pilot study. This entailed monitoring and discourse analysis of two websites (and their wider media coverage) directed towards deeper public engagement in the electoral process in the run up to general election of 2011. This study would eventually become a conference paper and a published article (Candon, 2012). It highlights an earlier preoccupation with questions more directly focused on the democratic process, political engagement and the use of new media tools more specifically within this field.

The experience was instructive for a number of reasons. It entailed a series of twelve interviews with online media practitioners who had been involved both in online campaigning and analysed their responses to a series of questions about the experience. While it proved, to some extent, a useful technique for the issue at hand there were also some rather unsatisfactory elements which made it clear that interviewing would be unsuited to the larger project. With a few exceptions, the interviewees tended to express somewhat recycled views about the utility or otherwise of the forums they had participated in and yet again often fell into a technophobic/utopian binary.

The piloting phase coincided with a redefining of the research question along the lines committed to later in the project and set out in Chapters 1 and 2. Clearly now the focus would need to be on the representation and signification available on the sites themselves, rather than an interrogation of a set of *perceptions* from the producers. This allowed a commitment to both pillars of the primary methodology: cultural studies and qualitative discourse analysis.

### *3.7 Analysing Content*

The more established types of content analysis often deployed by social scientists and frequently privileging either quantitative analysis and/or semiotics, were again considered and reflected on but eventually rejected for reasons summed up in this statement:

The quantitative nature of content analysis at times impedes its usefulness as a cultural methodology. The problem is not ‘counting’ or quantification itself, but that quantification is often substituted for analysis of fundamental issues of context and meaning,

The problem is that both orthodox semiotics and conversation analysis are ‘dehumanising’ and ‘deterministic’ in their drift and implications. In elevating social elements to sign systems, ‘cultural structures are not only said to inform social patterns but are held to determine them (Alexander 1990, p.13). As Alexander (1998, p.31) states: ‘Even at its most socially embedded, semiotics can never be enough. By definition, it abstracts from the social world, taking organized symbolic sets as psychologically unmotivated and as socially uncaused. By contrast, for the purposes of cultural sociology, semiotic codes must be tied into both social and psychological environments and into action itself.’

(Desfor Edles 2002: 191)

Having given consideration to a variety of methods and rejected these for the project, I was drawn towards cultural studies for reasons that can be summarised as follows:

...cultural production is investigated indirectly. Wider deductions about the production (and also consumption) process are inferred from assessments of what is produced. In analysing texts researchers seek to highlight the common codes, terms, ideologies, discourses and individuals that come to dominate cultural outputs. **What can be said about the individuals featured in the texts? Who are the contributors to the text? How are texts framed and presented? What are the terms and phrases used and what is their symbolic meaning? What are the assumptions embedded in the texts?** The answers to such questions, gathered from analysis, are then used to build arguments about those who construct cultural products and wider social, cultural and linguistic conditions. (Pickering, 2008: 59, my emphasis)

In consideration of the core preoccupations, particularly on questions of capital, class and language, that emerged as the research progressed, this seemed to address many of my concerns and provided the most appropriate methodology with which to proceed. This is now discussed in greater detail.

### ***3.8 Selection and Analysis of Themes***

It is argued that those generating texts in these sites are involved in multiple acts of production and reproduction. They are producing stories and opinion, but also reproducing class positionality through their utterances, language choices and acts of editorship. They are additionally reproducing *themselves* within a public forum. The three themes which became the pillars of this research emanated from the research question but also presented themselves starkly after time spent immersed in the blogosphere. To set these out again, they were: 1. The self-perception of those contributing as either media makers or media monitors, with the cultural capital implication inherent in this (see Chapter 4) 2. An interest in discussing or pointing out topics related to social groups in general and social class in particular in Ireland, particularly in light of the economic crisis (see Chapter 5), and 3. The wider concept of Irish identity as viewed from both an internal and external gaze (see Chapter 6).

#### ***3.8.1 Cultural studies and qualitative discourse analysis***

To my mind, the ethos of conducting social scientific research laid down here by Law (2004) resonates with an adoption of a cultural studies perspective. There is an inevitable conjoining of a theoretical perspective with a chosen method, as well as a consideration of its utility for the research question undertaken. Aside from the arguments made for discarding some of the methods discussed above, there was, in many cases a sense of both prescription and restriction which hindered the capture of what I considered indispensable aspects of the object of enquiry. As the study progressed it became clear that in terms both of organisation and achieving answers

to the research question, the thematic focus of a cultural studies approach would take over from questions of how many or what type of websites were to be examined for the research.

I underwent the required training in all aspects of social science research methods and methodology, noting what I was encountering but more often ‘filing’ the insights provided for future reference and only later, following a piloting phase, outlined above, returning to the more textual based methods drawn from cultural studies, methods which were not included in the suite of social science methodology training, which referred to documentary analysis, CDA and using online tools for research rather than online as *object of research*.

It was rather late in the process, having piloted and temporarily adopted other methods, that I discovered a number of guides to method which were to prove most useful in adopting the eventual methodology. In particular, Baker and Galasinski’s (2001) *Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis*, read alongside McKee’s (2003) *Textual Analysis* allowed a blending of methods to be undertaken. This grew into an amalgamation of tools which served well as the most appropriate to undertake the research project. Additionally, this addressed some of the questions that had set in regarding how to order the research project.

Cultural studies points the researcher towards following themes as the organising principle. This assisted in solving an earlier issue regarding the scope of the project, the number of websites to be included and also the parameters of the enquiry from online to offline fora and from old to new media platforms. Therefore, the discipline of cultural studies provided not only methodological tools but guided towards an ordering structure for the thesis.

Some of the criticisms directed at cultural studies are taken up by Pickering (2008: 1):

There has long been a reluctance to bring any explicit discussion of methods and methodology into cultural studies. This can be explained in various ways. We can see it first of all as connected with the field’s renegade character, and its conscious dissociation from established academic disciplines. Developing and adhering to a particular set of methods was considered to be characteristic of those disciplines and somehow compromised by an unexamined notion of empirical enquiry.

Cultural studies, Pickering (2008) suggests has preferred to borrow techniques and methods from established disciplines without subscribing to any disciplinary credentials itself. Empirical enquiry has been treated with suspicion or regarded as woefully insufficient in itself, primarily

because of the emphasis in cultural studies on fully conceptualising a topic of enquiry and locating it within a more general theoretical problematic.

Surber (1998: 233) makes a case that counters the criticism of *vagueness* and *lack of rigour* that often is directed at cultural studies:

...from its very beginning, cultural studies was decisively orientated toward the analysis and critique of **concrete cultural productions and institutions** and their political ramifications. The construction of some general philosophical position or overarching theoretical standpoint was never among its primary aims. This is not to say that cultural studies was purely activist or interventionist and entirely lacking in any theoretical dimension, but only that theory construction remained more a means to various ends rather than an end in itself.

Baker and Galasinski (2001) point towards a distinct characteristic of cultural studies as a component of method, when they assert that language does not mirror an independent object world but is implicated in its constitution and construction. On this basis the language component of the sites under survey in the current research is privileged, moving away from some of Pauwels' (2012) directions on visual concerns, for instance. Their elaboration of cultural studies as established by two of its foundational figures, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, picks up certain central premises. For Williams:

...culture is constituted by the meanings and practices of ordinary men and women...lived experience; the texts, practices and meanings of all people as they conduct their lives within the totality of 'a whole way of life' Williams insisted that culture be understood through 'the analysis of all forms of signification ...within the actual means and conditions of their production....In so far as contemporary cultural studies has a distinguishing 'take' on 'culture' it is one which stresses the intersection of language, meaning and power. (3)

They proceed to cite Hall (1997) who points out that "*culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and making sense of the world in broadly similar ways.*" The logic of this statement resonated very clearly with the orientation I had begun to adopt for this enquiry and consolidated my resolve to work from a cultural studies perspective. Baker and Galasinski (2001) continue to point out that shared meanings of culture are not 'out there' waiting for us to grasp them, but rather a product of signifying practices, most notably those of language. Language constitutes material objects and social practices as meaningful and intelligible, it structures which meanings can and cannot be deployed under

determinate circumstances by speaking subjects. This is an avowedly Foucauldian perspective and comes close to what Butler (1997: 34) defines as ‘the limits of acceptable speech.’

Baker and Galasinski (2001) continue:

To understand culture is to explore how meaning is produced symbolically through the signifying practices of language within material and institutional contexts. Indeed the currently ascendant strand of cultural studies holds the field to be centrally concerned with culture as the signifying practices of representation. (4)

As a preliminary guide to a methodological vista, Baker and Galasinski’s (2001) work was augmented and modified by reference to a number of other sources. McKey’s (2002) lucid guide to textual analysis served to ground some of the more nebulous aspects of analytic practice in clarity.

A more elaborate and complex rendering of discourse analysis from a post-structuralist viewpoint is available in the work of Laclau and Mouffe (2001), who point to the void at the centre of contemporary reality:

Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse analysis is an example of postmodern theorising that insists on what Derrida terms as the structural undecidability of the social. Laclau and Mouffe do not deny that there is meaning and grounds in ‘social life.’ Instead, their point is the social lacks a foundational centre, or transcendental signifier. This lack within the social allows for an infinite play of meaning and different forms of articulation to co-exist and compete with one another. This is what Laclau and Mouffe, in Derridean terminology, refer to as the structural undecidability of the social. (Anon., 2008)

There are divergences between Fairclough’s (1992a) CDA and the type of discourse analysis proposed by Laclau and Mouffe (2001) referenced above. The former adopts a politicised and critical stance against hegemonic reproduction through discourse whereas the latter foregrounds those aspects of postmodernity that often make analysis subjective and contingent. A comprehensive theoretical comparative is offered by Jorgenson and Philips (2002), who also foregrounds national identity as a key sphere of activity whereby discourse analysis can yield discoveries and insights.

### ***3.9 Disciplines and Methods***

Of necessity, both the review of the literature and the consideration of appropriate methods brought me into varied disciplines from sociology and its sub-fields: of culture, information and the media to cultural history, cultural studies, information studies, philosophy and critical theory. This range of exposure is justified in light of the current academic practice of positioning oneself clearly in one discipline and yet moving freely and confidently into associated disciplines to augment and expand conceptual and methodological understanding. Considering the nascent nature of internet research, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, this seems both appropriate and justifiable. I return clearly to sociology itself, guided by Dewey's mantra that society is made in and through communication (Boydstone, 1988). Therefore, I locate my work within both the communicative, linguistic and cultural turns in contemporary sociological theory.

As Friedland and Mohr (2008: 1) point out:

...problems of meaning, discourse, aesthetics, value, textuality and narratives, topics traditionally within the humanities purview, are now coming to the fore as sociologists increasingly emphasize the role of meanings, symbols, cultural frames, and cognitive schema in their theorization of social processes and institutions. This is happening across the intellectual landscape.

Wessels (2010:126) takes this up and makes a supposition: *"if one follows the idea of a communicative turn (Silverstone 2005) within late modernity, then new forms of communication are embedded within the social relations of everyday life, and they are both implicitly and explicitly part of changes in everyday life."* This view is further reinforced by Nash in her discussion of the 'cultural turn' in social theory, when she points towards *"[t]heorists ...[who] see social life as radically unstable; increasingly, stability is only precariously maintained through the manipulation of symbols and meanings which secure collective identities."* (2001: 79). The research process brought me into personal contact with numerous scholars from a wide variety of disciplines (from computer science to cultural studies, history to artistic practice). As the process developed, it was the field of critical internet studies, aligned to a processing of



Dean's (2003; 2010) concept of communicative capital that evolved as a likely harbour for my own work.

As Dean (2010) notes, in recent decades, scholars, artists, and activists working at the interface of communications, media, and cultural studies have developed critical approaches to digital media and their networked environments. Rather than restricted to positivist methods of description and measurement or linear, developmentalist, histories of technical change, this emerging critical media theory anchors its analyses of technologies, users, and practices in an avowedly political assessment of the present, she contends.

In terms of the links between sociology and cultural studies, Woolf (1999: 6) makes the following observation:

In my opinion, cultural studies at its best is sociological. And yet, in the continuing cross-disciplinary dialogue that has characterized the field of cultural studies in the decade or so of its progress ... the discipline of sociology has been notably absent. At the same time, within the field of sociology, the study of culture has expanded enormously in the last twenty years among sociologists of culture, and among those who have more recently been calling themselves 'cultural sociologists,' which is not the same thing. Some of these sociologists have themselves adopted the term 'cultural studies' to describe their work, thereby both claiming (mistakenly, as I shall suggest) to have pre-empted the newer field, and ignoring the possibility of a productive encounter with cultural studies in general and with related developments in the study of culture in the humanities.

Thus, some of the acknowledge uncertainty sparked by the issues of working in a developing field of study, as outlined earlier, are compensated for by the freedom to move between relevant disciplines and their methods and this proved one of the most valuable discoveries of the entire process.

### ***3.10 Practicalities and Organisational Matters***

In compiling a corpus of text that is admittedly and justifiably diffuse and messy, attention was of necessity paid to organisational matters. The social bookmarking site *delicious.com* proved useful on many fronts. It provided an accessible location to store materials for consultation and kept the data set intact and easily available for further reference beyond this project. It

additionally gave the option to allow other researchers to access my collection of sites, articles, links etc. gathered over the duration of the project towards possible collaboration. It further facilitates tagging and annotation, which would prove invaluable as the project grew in complexity.

The collection of specific texts for analysis was a simple matter of copying and pasting from the websites into Word documents. The corpus of text was taken from live debates happening within the timeframe of 2010-13 and from the nine websites outlined above. I then applied interpretive techniques and borrowed some of the directions of grounded theory (Dey, 1999) in creating memos which were interspersed inside the documents. Significant language and ‘meaning’ components of the texts themselves were highlighted. Eventually, the themes which would predominate in the final thesis were selected and analysed from the entire corpus of materials.

This practice aligned with the guidelines set out for a discourse analysis of this kind, in conjunction with the cultural studies orientation set out above. It does, however, create a particular set of texts and finding based on a great number of influences which have already been alluded to. Again I subscribe to the orientation set out by Law (2004) that goes against the notion that research is a set of steps that can be set out and followed with exactitude by another researcher. Thus I justify the lack of replicability alluded to at the beginning of this chapter. I also concur with his assertion that we make the social world by our action of researching it:

The argument is no longer that methods discover and depict realities. Instead, it is that they participate in the enactment of those realities. It is also that method is not just a more or less complicated set of procedures or rules, but rather a bundled hinterland. This stretches through skills, instruments and statements (in-here enactments of previous methods) through the out-there realities so described, into a ramifying and indefinite set of relations, places and assumptions...

(Law, 2004: 45)

In setting forward an account of method it is necessary to describe some of the rather mundane activities which were central to the process undertaken. Previously, I have mentioned casual and more formal conversations that influenced the direction and methods employed here. However, the primary activity for the project was a process of reading, the material isolated as data, the material considered and rejected, as well as the everyday practice of consuming mediated news and revisiting the sites selected for inclusion. How this process may have differed for me as a

researcher rather than a visitor to the sites monitored is a matter that will be discussed in the section on reflexivity below.

### ***3.11 Reflectivity and Positionality***

As mentioned above, there is an admission of subjectivity in the selection and orientation of this body of material. It is therefore crucial to self-disclose to some extent and give background as to where these choices and orientations might emanate from. The practice of giving consideration to matters of reflexivity is now well established in qualitative research of this type (*see* Ryan, 2005; Saukko, 2002; Denzin, 2001; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003).

My original undergraduate background was in the humanities and law. Later work, following a substantial gap during which I was employed, brought me into the area of public culture studies, which deepened my commitment to an interdisciplinary orientation and opened up the area of cultural studies and the associated pathways that were available within this. The research I conducted at this (Master's) level was a 'traditional' media analysis of print and broadcast media with reference to a particular event and set of discourses within what I term Irish public culture (Candon, 2009). The seeds of the current project lie within that experience. Although it did not become a substantial aspect of that research, it was becoming clear to me as I moved through the corpus of discursive text, that in a general sense, very interesting discussions were taking place in an online setting. The proposal and inception of the current project stemmed from that intuition.

I therefore come from a particular orientation of combining humanities and social science with an emphasis on media. My working life has also contributed to the orientation I am disclosing. I was trained as both a journalist and editor, working for many years as a legal editor and more widely within the publishing industry in Ireland and the UK. I was employed on an early online humanities project in another university in the late 1990s. This again was a 'text heavy' environment: I was primarily tasked with securing copyright release to publish private correspondence from literary figures online. The site was a biographical chronology and an early intervention in this country in this field of production, the digital humanities. I then moved to

projects which involved language instruction for particular professional purposes as well as legal linguistic research projects and the authoring and editing of educational materials.

This is also disclosed and reflected upon here for two reasons: firstly, it is intrinsic to both the epistemological and methodological choices made for the study, and secondly I have been involved in textually orientated industries which have a connection to the chosen theme of communicative capital. Much of my working life has been spent in the commodification of language and text and the process of digitisation, particularly within the publishing industry. It also gives insight into the particularity of my approach to reading, my attention to both register and the linguistic choices made by authors. This is submitted not to display my own symbolic or cultural capital within the research site but to give a more fulsome picture of where my preoccupations have their origins and what I may unknowingly privilege within the process.

### ***3.12 A Note on Ethics***

In the early stages of this work, where the methodology had not been settled, there was a concern with ethical questions regarding the materials used. I understand ‘ethics’ as being related to an ‘ethos’ of working, a sense of regard and respect for the human subjects who have generated, in this case, the content that forms the subject matter being examined. Not only have I complied with the institutional requirements set out by my university, I have been guided in particular by the detailed reflections on these matters authored by Charles Ess (2002; 2012) on behalf of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), an organisation of which I have been a member throughout the research period.<sup>55</sup> My observation of these particular guidelines is that very often they relate more towards instantly interactive means of online interaction, for instance instant messaging, chatrooms etc. Because of the relative stability of the blog form I make a number of distinctions and while bearing in mind the requirement to act in accordance with ethical principles would make the following observations on this matter. To quote the general principle outlined: *“One broad consideration: the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the*

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<sup>55</sup> [www.aoir.org](http://www.aoir.org)

*less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent, etc.” (Ess, 2012: 5)*

The data I encountered I understood as public text, whether in written, spoken or visual form. I took note of copyright assertions or claims to ownership but in the absence of this I proceeded to use material available on internet platforms as data for my research. There is more generally the reasonable expectation on the part of the producer that this text may be analysed, cited, deconstructed and republished in a variety of forms. Central to the argument of this thesis is the contention that many contributors use these forums as a profile-raising activity and chose to forgo anonymity, thus actively courting the publicity that this sphere affords. This has a clear connection to a career dependent on currency, visibility and reputation, particularly in the casualised sphere of media production.

It is a reasonable expectation of an author in this respect that the utterances may come under the scrutiny of a researcher. Therefore, I decided against applying pseudonyms for named persons. Where there existed ambiguity as to the copyright status of a site or comment, *e.g.* where text was quoted at length from other sources, I applied the principle of fair dealing and limited my quotations accordingly. Where text was potentially defamatory or contained matters of disputed fact, I avoided any accusation of republication and possible legal consequences and erred on the side of caution.

These questions of ethics arose many times during the course of the research and I refer to Les Back (Sinha and Back, 2014) who coined the term ‘ethical hypochondria’ to describe the heightened level of awareness and fear of backlash undoubtedly to make up for the misdeeds of previous generations of social science researchers.

### ***3.13 Conclusion***

This chapter set out the evolving nature of internet research generally. I considered both the practical steps taken to make selections of sites of enquiry and specific data and some of the methodological explorations that the research entailed. I gave account of the organisational steps required to manage the data set and treated questions of reflectivity and ethics. I justified my

selection of qualitative discourse analysis and cultural studies as the most apt tools with which to examine the field of discourse selected for this project, in light of the specific research questions foregrounded. Additionally, I gave consideration to some of the frequent detractions and criticisms of the methodology settled upon and looked to the question of academic disciplines as they relate to the particular field of enquiry. The following chapter begins to present the first thematic of the thesis which concerns the positioning and performance of authors and commentators within the sites. I continue to link to this current chapter by explaining more about the process by which the themes were settled upon.

## ***Chapter 4: Positioning and Performing Communicative Capital***

*“Today, in a golden age of storytelling, the options are endless. I’m more passionate than ever about social journalism, media innovation and the challenges and opportunities that emerge from a revolutionary age...*

*I’m exhilarated by what might come next.”*

*Mark Little, announcing his resignation from Storyful, the news gathering agency he founded and sold to News Corp for an amount described as ‘large’.<sup>56</sup>*

Broadsheet.ie (June 25, 2015)

### ***4.0 Introduction***

This chapter presents the first empirical evidence supporting the core argument and considers how the contributors position themselves within the shifting mediascape examined – the first of three themes. A symbiotic relationship between the press and the blogosphere emerges as a key point of enquiry. Having previously set up a three-way typology of the sites, the individual blogs, the group blogs and the news sites, I now use this to address a series of questions that aims to deepen our understanding of the participation within the field, focusing on individual acts of production. I remain mindful of both established public sphere thinking and how communicative

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<sup>56</sup> Storyful (<https://storyful.com/>) is an Irish start-up. It provides a clear exemplar of communicative capital at the corporate level in Ireland. It was originally included among a preliminary sample until it became a paid membership site and focused more on international affairs. It explains on its homepage: “*Storyful combines proprietary technology and expert journalism into a human algorithm. This game-changing combination gives us the ability to discover, verify, acquire and deliver the most valuable real-time content the social web has to offer.*” This ‘added value’ aspect combined with the concept of ‘news curation’ formed the basis of presentations by its founder, former journalist Mark Little, which were encountered repeatedly during the research. Other news based start-ups emanating from Ireland with a similar international orientation include [www.newswhip.com](http://www.newswhip.com)

capital may become a workable theory with which to examine these spaces and their content, as set out in Chapter 2.<sup>57</sup> I begin here to analyse the material in line with Dean's concept of communicative capital, reconstituted at the individual level, identifying the possible strategies used to generate, display and exchange this.

The concerns of the chapter are the positioning and performance of the hosts, authors and commentators within the sites; attention is paid to the presentation and apparent self-perception of these people through the texts that they generate. These concerns are important to the empirical enquiry in order to establish simple starting points: who they are and what they may be seeking to achieve. Do their actions conform to a democratised and inclusive mode of discourse that might constitute a public sphere, or are concerns of personality, reputation and power foregrounded, pointing to a re-evaluation of communicative capital operating at the level of the individual, as I have proposed earlier? This would, as outlined in Chapter 2, mark a significant departure from Dean's (2003; 2010) theory.

The analysis opens the possibility of examining the fungibility of individuated communicative capital in relation to the others in Bourdieu's (1986) suite of major capitals. A concern of this chapter is to assess the mechanics of capital generation in the first instance. In examining the sites in the manner set out in the previous chapter, three starting questions have helped to address my central concerns: What is proclaimed by the sites about themselves and their workings? How do they situate themselves in relation to fellow blog sites and the wider media? And: What does the positioning and interaction among commentators reveal about questions of status and reputation? Addressing these questions gives insight into the possibility of public sphere activity and also the apparent mode of communicative capital. My argument is that the building and exchange of communicative capital at the individual level is facilitated by these spaces but that this does not preclude the possibility of a public sphere existing in tandem.

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<sup>57</sup> Self-evidently these categories are unrefined and there will be a degree of crossover, but they are integral to the purposes of this analysis nonetheless.



#### ***4.1 What's Really Going on Here?***

There are of course many possibilities in accounting for the activities of the contributors. The hosts may consider their sites altruistic or public-spirited interventions. They and their commentators may see themselves as hobbyists, aspirant media makers, or possibly even agenda setters. In the alternative these may be merely exercises in self-expression – habitual practices of everyday life. The case can inevitably be made that there is ‘nothing special going on here.’ All of this was considered in analysing the texts.

We can then pose more structural questions: Does the blogosphere really challenge the established media in a significant way? Is the discursive agenda now established anywhere other than on traditional media platforms? Kiberd (1999) suggested that agenda setting was the key function of the media in complex societies. This preoccupation with established media is driven by the preliminary observations raised by the research.

It was initially observed that there exists a symbiotic relationship between established and emerging media, with many participants in the online sphere either pitting themselves against journalists or seeking to perform a quasi-journalistic role – often for no clear immediate monetary reward. Clear evidence of this is presented later in this chapter. Critique of pre-existing media and other public institutions begins to emerge as a significant sub-theme in the field examined. Whether this is used to deepen interventions into the public sphere or in the interests of challenging a pre-established hierarchy or is merely a self-advancing activity become prominent concerns throughout this chapter.

Irish journalists have responded to these shifts in the mediascape in a number of ways that will be outlined. An overarching concern for this discussion is whether the activity monitored poses a serious challenge to the established media as a key institution within the society or remains a relatively unnoticed sideshow – in other words, how much ‘hierarchy disruption’ is evident?

My adaptation of communicative capital has been set out in Chapters 1 and 2. All capital operates in a complex and sometimes unquantifiable set of trajectories and flows; as mentioned

in Chapter 2 communicative capital shares much with Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital in its character and intangibility.<sup>58</sup> The process of identifying and naming it does not provide all the answers but rather raises further questions, particularly concerning motivation among individuals, anonymity and reputation as well as the transferability of this type of activity and the fungibility of communicative capital. It may, however, prove a much more illuminating paradigm in which to place contemporary communicative activity, which is inextricably nestled in a wider set of platforms and practices integral to advanced capitalism. I reiterate that Dean (2003; 2010) has never considered communicative capital as operating at the individual or micro level and the 'theory building' of this thesis expands this concept.

When viewed from such a stance, there are many significant intersections with matters of identity and the argument develops by an examination of class identity and national identity in the following two chapters of this thesis. Again this resonates with Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital in the requirement of familiarity with the dominant culture in the society.

#### ***4.2 The Individual Blogs***

The three individual blogs chosen for the study are DMW, MNP and BTR. The first is a high-profile professional journalist, 'celebrity economist' and author, the second is a social justice activist whose blog has won several awards, and the third is an anonymous host of contrarian disposition who raises provocative questions about Irish public culture.

The content used by DMW is almost without exception material he has previously published in print form prior to posting; he can 'import' this content without generating extra labour in the process and it is automatically validated by its provenance from news publications. In this sense he is using the site as a bridge from traditional media into the blogosphere and his 'validity claim' is very clearly established. MNP creates her own news and opinion pieces and as previously indicated operates as a self-directed online journalist without obvious financial reward; BTR is primarily a polemicist, presenting himself as a hobbyist for the most part. MNP

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<sup>58</sup> This will also be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, as well as its relationship to social capital.

and BTR's sites heavily reference the print and broadcast media in creating content for their posts. Each of the three manages the commentary on their sites in different ways and demonstrates varied approaches to their commentators, as discussed further below. On a textural level they are all strong personalities and this serves as an anchor for each site. All are to a great extent personality driven as much as issue driven.

The term 'A-list blogger' (Benkler and Shaw, 2010; Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2010) is now widely in currency and I understand the first two to fall within this category. I ascribe this status to DMW because of his obvious profile beyond the blogosphere and also the number of commentators he attracts, and to MNP because of the multi award-winning nature of her site; BTR is more of an unknown quantity, mainly because of the question of anonymity.<sup>59</sup> There is no suggestion that a site cannot be considered effective because of an unknown host, rather judgements are made here on the quantity and quality of the posts and to some extent on the identities of commentators where these are apparent. As stated in the previous chapter, there was no requirement for a site to be considered 'influential' per se, more attention was given to the content and the particular texture and dynamics of the sites.

All three sites deal with topics under the current affairs banner; DMW on the intersection of the economy and society, MNP by establishing a news agenda foregrounding social justice issues, and BTR by expressing anger towards and sometimes ridiculing what he perceives as a corrupt state and society.

The similarity of the sites is that the agenda is clearly set by the main post of their hosts and also that they are all 'text heavy.' DMW's site is the most 'professional' in feel and appearance; it was redesigned towards the end of the research period and now presents a more minimalist and sleek navigation for the visitor – it feels expensive. The only information given is a short biographical note on him. It is almost assumed that the visitor will know who he is and if not, the 'shop window' quality of the site leaves one in no doubt that he is both prolific and a public commentator of influence. He is available for speaking engagements; his best-selling titles are all displayed. Beyond this, nothing about the intentions or the nature of interaction or moderatorship is offered.

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<sup>59</sup> See Beyer (2014) for an account of the importance and potency of anonymous activity in online settings generally.

On examination of the comments, it is evident that there is a high level of *deference* towards him. This is visible in the manner in which commentators address and praise him:

**(DMW: December 27, 2010 *paulmcd*)**

David, Excellent article which serves as a timely reminder of the gross inequalities in our society

**(December 27, 2010 *will*)**

David.

Couldn't agree more with this article.

What the article explains is we are all living under a private banking criminal syndicate used by hidden forces to run and control society.

**(December 27, 2010 *ladygee2*)**

Once again you've 'hit the nail on the head', David.

This level of adulation is typical of the content of the site and the nature of the relationship between host and commentators. This focus on the personality and perceived expertise of the host runs throughout the commentary and is something of a one-way street in that DMW does not as a rule respond to any of the comments. The site relies on a kind of adulatory consensus formation. In contrast with this, BTR engages extensively with his commentators and sets out a lengthy comments policy. It is also clear that a degree of antagonism and enmity characterise that site, as evidenced by a full page on another blog taking BTR to task over his political orientation and some of his allegedly censorial practices.<sup>60</sup>

The 'About' section of MNP differs in that the site host, Suzi Byrne, explains who she is, giving her credentials and interests. She is challenged about this by commentators, and engages with the

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<sup>60</sup> See <http://markhumphrys.com/bock.html>

question in the comments section underneath. In this we see that there is a level of ‘cut and thrust’ that DMW does not have to contend with. MNP is often called to account for herself:

**(MNP January 1, 2011 *Andy*)**

Dont you write anything about the left MP? Its interesting how much of the writing focuses on FF and FG. Labour are there, but they are a very centre party which attracts a swing vote. With all due respect, is there no mention of Sinn Fein, the United Left Alliance or other left parties such as the SWP and the workers party? ... Please tell me the country’s ‘best’ blog on current affairs is not as one sided as the times, the independent and so on.<sup>61</sup>

**Reply:**

Andy I am confused. Do you actually read my blog and are you critical of me for not criticising the Left or bigging them up enough? And since when (If I don’t write about the left or progressive politics in Ireland enough which I would argue is not true) did my blog – which is my space can I remind you – have to be fair and balanced?

This exchange is informative in that MNP is clear that she is not in the business of fair representation or balancing discourse. She has set her own agenda in the choice of topics and in this space she is in charge.

This ‘misunderstanding’ gives insight into the gulf between what is expected and what is delivered in some of these spaces. It points to the relative newness of the sites and the question of digital literacy, which I suggest is also important to the unlocking of the communicative capital question.<sup>62</sup> At its simplest, I suggest, those with higher levels of digital literacy are more adept at gaining and exchanging communicative capital. People’s attempts to make sense of the spaces they are encountering are revealing, and this was an observation that occurred frequently in the research, particularly in the news sites.

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<sup>61</sup> FF and FG refer to Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, the two main centre-right political parties in the Irish Republic.

<sup>62</sup> “Digital literacy...is at the centre of the changes occurring in the digital environment, inviting new forms of authorship and publication towards the convergence of technologies and digital social practices. But digital literacy is also a framework for understanding the historical evolution tied to the emergence of this new literacy that complexifies the concept of a digital divide and invites a critical if not a radical modification of a set of key concepts and abstractions operative in the articulation of social, cultural, and political norms: presence, location, community, identity and so on. The evolution is perhaps best observed in blogs, if only because their rapid growth and success makes them emblematic.” (Doueih, 2010: 53)

Whereas it is easy to see the display of communicative capital in DMW's site – his celebrity status, the showcase aspects, the distant host, bearing similarities with displays of cultural capital I suggest – it is more difficult to pinpoint where communicative capital might exist in MNP. She is performing a role that has become increasingly commonplace in recent years: a lone blogger, acting in a quasi-journalistic capacity, performing the *work* of a journalist, having a following and a measure of influence – all without payment or apparent material reward. MNP states: “*I am happy to receive tipoffs, invites, press releases, background briefings, and other documents ....*” I suggest too that bloggers and commentators are engaged in a form of hierarchy disruption, which is evident in exchanges analysed later in this chapter and in Chapter 5. At its height it is obvious that the blog was extremely time consuming for one author to maintain. Similar to DMW's blog it is stand alone in that it does not include a ‘blogroll,’ a list of fellow blogs that the author subscribes to and recommends. Neither is operating within a clearly defined community of voices. BTR differs from this somewhat in that he facilitates an identifiable community of regular commentators and engages in a familiar manner with them. In this way it is a more intimate environment and bears similarity with a discussion forum. When I came to revisit the sites in 2015 (see Chapter 7), the BTR site had incorporated a facility to donate to the costs of the site (which are unspecified) and he was proposing consolidating his posts and publishing them in book form.<sup>63</sup>

#### 4.2.1 Whither communicative capital?

If we accept the working premise that communicative capital is in play in these sites, then the question becomes *why?* Is it ever enough to say that one is taking part in ‘the conversation’ and that this provides its own reward? Following Dean's (2003) definition, it is apparent that communicative capital is more frequently generated in an ‘unconscious’ manner by content providers and participants. In the case of DMW, it is almost axiomatic as to why he performs the role he does, it is an extension of a journalistic career and a platform to promote associated products, and this is displayed in an unconcealed manner. The fungibility is clear too: the visitor

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<sup>63</sup> This practice of turning blogs into books was more widely noted at the time of writing up in 2015 and appeared to be a trend. It is facilitated by a number of commercial outlets, for example [www.blog2book.com](http://www.blog2book.com)

can spend money on products and publications, thus ensuring the conversion of his communicative (and certainly cultural) capital into an economic form for his own direct benefit.

In MNP's case the question of communicative capital becomes problematic, and in the case of BTR even more so because the site is entirely written under a pseudonym and the capital cannot be ascribed to him. Whether or not a person chooses to 'cash in' their communicative capital is not however material to its existence. It is therefore possible to generate copious amounts of communicative capital and to allow it to remain dormant or indeed allow others to appropriate it. This proviso is an important component of my argument, that these are sites that facilitate the generation and display of this form of minor capital.

Can we, however, state that their engagement with this form of capital, through its conversion, has the potential to yield position in the society and potentially facilitates membership of a discursive elite? I suggest that it undoubtedly does. If nothing else MNP has been recognised time and again by her peers as creating "Ireland's prime current affairs blog." It is membership of this discursive group that I will suggest is an initial clear pay off as this argument develops.

Precise accounts of how this form of capital is taken up or circulated are beyond my immediate purpose here, but I do argue that it is capable of being leveraged and transferred into other forms of capital: economic, social and cultural.<sup>64</sup> I would suggest, for instance, that a clear conversion into social capital is operational in the sites as they play out over time. Many of the sites in all three categories show the presence of offshoots into other forums of association, social groups and networks. Portes (1998) provides a useful definition that speaks to these interrelationships:

Whereas economic capital is in people's bank, accounts and human capital is inside their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships. To possess social capital, a person must be related to others, and it is those others, not himself, who are the actual source of his or her advantage. (1998:7)

It matters little whether the orientation of a site is commercial or communitarian, or whether the ideology is of the left or the right, the activities and positioning performed in these spaces equate to perceived status and reputation and are therefore implicated in the generation of this form of capital. By extension, the existence of this type of activity appropriates capital from others in the

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<sup>64</sup> A nuanced account of the relationship between Bourdieusian and Marxist versions of capital is set out in Hikaru Desan (2013).

sphere, notably journalists and professional pundits whose earnings depend on the ongoing commodification of such communication. This has unsurprisingly given rise to the vocalisation of concerns – encountered in this research – for the future of newspapers and the re-branding of journalists as ‘news curators.’ It also illustrates the case of a broadening and massification of communicative capital beyond the domains in which it previously existed: the press, the legal profession and the academic sphere, for instance. This broadening is not, however, to be confused with a levelling or democratising effect.

#### *4.2.2 Tricks of the media trade*

At the beginning of this chapter I used the phrase ‘media makers and agenda setters’ as a catch all to try to come to grips with the activities of bloggers. I suggest now that bloggers like MNP and BTR do something additional and that this is a core aspect of their positioning within this space of discourse. We may regard this as a contest for communicative capital. Challenging media makers is not merely as case of *prima fascia* critique but also a form of hierarchy disruption. I suggest that one may generate communicative capital from a blank slate or by appropriating it from others in the manner set out in the encounter below.

A meta commentary on the media (and associated industries and institutions) by both site hosts and commentators is a devise frequently seen throughout the data gathered.<sup>65</sup> This exchange exemplifies this:

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<sup>65</sup> Critical Media Review is an example of a site dedicated to this in Ireland. “*Critical Media Review is a platform for media scholars, bloggers and activists to critique media content, practice and structure. We welcome submissions on any aspect of mass (or not so mass) media.*” About section: <https://criticalmediareview.wordpress.com/about/>



**(MNP: August 10, 2010)**

*From the Department of Dodgy Research Arís<sup>66</sup>*

If it's the summer it must be time for Peninsula Ireland to publish research and get unquestioning news coverage. [...]

For those of you unaware – the way this works is – Peninsula do research on employment related topic, get a headline put it on a press release and papers publish it verbatim. Peninsula get press coverage of their company and everyone thinks that the majority of employees take sick leave, surf too much at work and are otherwise terrible.

Today's dramatic research finding (no info on their website about it) is regarding staff stealing from employers and Business World and other publications have reproduced the press release. Therefore director Alan Price will appear unchallenged throughout broadcast media without any examination of the methods involved in research, sample size and error margins. He's just been on the News at One on RTE Radio 1 in a classic example of this. 68% of employees have admitted to stealing from employers ergo two thirds of all employees steal.

Trade Unions and others please take note and use some of your resources to kick this rubbish where it should remain.

This post is a clear example of the exposure tactic of the solo blogger at work. MNP highlights the absence of fact-checking and investigation, which it is claimed elsewhere (Davis, 2008) is a dead art in traditional news gathering practice. She engages in this activity extensively. Here she targets two industries that she tacitly suggests are in cahoots: public relations and the press.

This type of post also brings us into the growing practice of scrutiny, as seen by the comments, of commentators given a forum to show their acumen and go beyond what is delivered as *prima facia* news. It highlights how there exists the possibility in these forums to challenge a number of elements of the previous forms of media consensus making. In this example, the ploy of disputing the methodology and refusing to take the survey on face value within the rapid-fire, time-poor traditional media paradigm, allows MNP to bring rigour to the topic. In these types of

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<sup>66</sup> 'Arís' is the Irish language word for 'again.'

intervention, we also begin to see some element of public sphere activity at play, at least on one side of the encounter.

We can in the alternative go so far as to argue that MNP displays *strong* communicative capital and engages in hierarchy disruption by her intervention below. I make such an argument here. She is positioned ‘above’ both the PR industry and the media outlets they supply in calling out the story in the manner she does. Equally, we can argue that as a piece of interaction it veers away from a public sphere model due to the disingenuity of her commentator, Joanne. The public sphere requires veracity and honesty as an entry point and the ‘sleight of hand’ behaviour exposed here precludes this exchange being considered a public sphere encounter by definition.

From the comments below the piece:

**(August 11, 2010 Joanne F.)**

Suzy, why rubbish? ... Obviously they look for free press (which your giving them). However, I encourage debate and free speech. I see ‘dodgy research’ every day. ...

**(August 11, 2010 Maman Poulet)**

hey Joanne – you are writing this from your office in Peninsula – so am sure you listened to them alright! In case anyone is wondering your message came from [i.p. address]

ooops

**(August 11, 2010 Joanne F.)**

Hi Suzy, I work there and read your blog? Is that a problem? I don’t work in press or the research department. I don’t make the calls or emails they send out.

**(August 11, 2010 Maman Poulet)**

They pay your wages Joanne, that’s an important fact to consider for my readers when reading your comment. One of your colleagues tried the same thing last year forgetting that I can see where comments are coming from. I don’t usually publish the IP addresses but I think it is important in this case. I’ve no problem with people disagreeing with my opinions or posts, just that people would be transparent in doing so is all I ask.

**(August 11, 2010 Joanne)**

I didn’t put my work email as it was my own views. Sorry.

At this point a journalist joins the discussion, using his real identity:

**(August 11, 2010 Gerard Cunningham<sup>67</sup>)**

Pick a day, any day. Then pick a paper, any paper. Go through it, and you will find a surprising amount of “news” is regurgitated press releases, often disguised as research.

[...]

Churnalism is nothing new. And newspapers encourage it by misrepresenting their own polls. When was the last time you saw an MRBI or Red C poll accompanied by an explanation of why the results weren't all that significant because the changes were within margins of error and confidence levels in the subsamples were unacceptably high? Instead, we get banner headlines trumpeting a 2% “plummet” in support.

**(August 11, 2010 Eoin)**

Sorry Joanne but your IP address remains the same even if you send the comments from your personal email.

Wait a minute...?!

**(August 11, 2010 Maman Poulet)**

So Joanne now that you are here tell us all about Peninsula, and the sample sizes of the surveys, margin of error and how participants are recruited? Do you employ social scientists, use data packages for analysis? ...

**(August 12, 2010 Eoin)**

Hmm, a curious silence MP. Curious.

MNP's use of the IP discovery strategy is a crucial element of this exchange and is indicative of the level of awareness and interest among certain bloggers concerning exactly who is contributing. It also reveals how easy it is to identify the participants in particular contexts. In other words, she displays a digital literacy – and thus, I argue, levels of communicative capital – that her foe lacks.

I see this as an important three-way encounter between ‘media insiders,’ the blogger, the print journalist (who identifies himself by name) and the PR professional. This also highlights different levels of technical awareness among speakers and raises questions of identity and

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<sup>67</sup> Gerard Cunningham is a freelance journalist. The tendency for journalists and academics to name themselves in posts was noted in the scoping phase of the research and will be pointed to in other sections of the thesis.

privacy. The encounter additionally points to the sometimes grey area of commentators negotiating their personal/professional identities.<sup>68</sup> Digital literacy is highly connected to the ability to generate communicative capital under my definition. I suggest that communicative capital relies not just on being articulate and literate (using ‘correct’ form, language and tone) but on subtler indicators, such as tailoring a contribution to fit into the particular discursive environment, performing ‘authority’ on a topic and certainly revealing and leveraging one’s identity and expertise.

The editorship and sense of ownership of the one-person blog form is a thread that runs throughout other posts on this site: MNP is a one-woman show backed up by a loyal chorus (the contributions from Eoin and Gerard Cunningham above illustrate this and this is not an isolated incident). This dynamic is evident also on the BTR site, particularly where he engages in over and back discussion on topics with his commentators, which is a notable feature of his site. From exchanges such as this I believe that named solo bloggers are claiming and displaying a large measure of communicative capital. Positioning oneself above established institutions to expose their workings is a powerful action. The performance of a ‘watching brief’ serves to disrupt existing hierarchies and holds ‘professionals’ to account, laying claim to *their* store of communicative capital.

In the ethnographic phase of this research I witnessed many members of these industries publicly considering the challenge and reward aspects of new media practice for their sector. I perceive the exchange above as an important exemplar of the ‘contest’ element of communicative capital; the ‘one-upwomanship’ evidence in the above exchange is a struggle not only over the issue but rather about knowledge of the workings of the formalised communications industry itself and indeed the workings of the internet. Similarly, BTR points to the lack of skill demonstrated by political parties in managing their websites: ‘Fools in Charge of Fine Gael Web Presence Embarrass Themselves Again’ pointing to the use of an image of an international celebrity without permission which was legally challenged<sup>69</sup>:

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<sup>68</sup> Whereas it is very common practice on Twitter for people to include disclaimers on their profile to the effect that opinions are their own and not representative of their employers or professional activities, it becomes considerably murkier in a post and comment environment, such as we have here.

<sup>69</sup> Fine Gael was the party of government at this time.

**(BTR: September 21, 2013)**

This is what the party of government in Ireland considers cutting-edge interaction with its public.

Fools. We're doomed.

It is a common tactic from what I observed for bloggers and commentators to highlight digital illiteracy in their critique of institutions and particularly politicians. Related issues emerged in a paper (Parnell Summer School, 2010) detailing the work of a particular media professional from the PR industry, with a background as a media advisor to a right-wing political party. This person now offers training to corporations and their employees in using 'new media' effectively. Such activities are, I submit, an example of the attempt to reconfigure the stale elements of the pre-existing communications industries in light of the potential exposures available within new media practice, as evidenced in the above exchange, and are very direct interventions into the arena of communicative capital.

The recent proliferation of educational and training courses, particularly from private institutions promising direct vocational courses, in new media and digital marketing speak to these trends of placing media and corporate actors in an environment, sometimes where their identity is not foregrounded and equipping them with the 'soft skills' required to navigate an altered media landscapes in a manner that will generate higher levels of communicative capital for not only themselves but the organisations they represent or are employed by.

Interventions such as these also serve to blur boundaries between the social world and commercial activities, where the drive towards a type of paradoxical corporate invisibility co-exists with audience labour and subtler forms of corporate positioning.<sup>70</sup> In this case the PR industry is being reconfigured and rising to these exposure challenges and hierarchy disruption. This activity also highlights the blurring of the boundaries between formal and informal instances of communicative capital, as well as its transferability into other forms of capital.<sup>71</sup> In sum, industries like public relations and media advisory are implicated in both a recognition and corralling of communicative capital to yield direct transferability. In a sense these would have

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<sup>70</sup> See Fuchs (2008) on the digital economy generally from a Marxist perspective.

<sup>71</sup> I am referring here also to situations where predominantly young people who are perceived as 'social influencers' are employed to promote goods, services and corporate reputations among their peers on social media and also blunter interventions, such as the market for Facebook likes and Twitter followers.

been the ‘easy targets’ for an analysis as it is clear that their activities are located within the marketplace.

This section has suggested that communicative capital operates with considerable subtlety but also stealth within the sites examined. It relies upon certain strategic acts of positioning, display and practice. Individuals may transfer this form of capital from elsewhere into the spaces, as we saw with DMW, or generate it within the forums, as BTR and MNP do.

### ***4.3 The Group Blogs***

Three group or multi-authored blogs were examined, and during the initial scoping phase this was a category that yielded many choices as it is a popular format. The three sites selected were DBO, STR and NWL. DBO follows a trend observed elsewhere during the research: it is named after a well-regarded satirical publication, long out of print but with sentimental associations for some visitors (*see* comments section on DBO About).<sup>72</sup> Elsewhere during the ethnographic phase I encountered the authors of *Pue’s Occurrences*,<sup>73</sup> a blog that named itself after a popular eighteenth century pamphlet. I remark in passing on this trend to identify with pre-existing hard copy publications, as this gives an insight into the identification strategies of the site hosts in creating a brand for their sites. I raise this as another potential legitimisation strategy. (This association with pre-existing media formats will also be discussed in relation to the news site category below.) Group blogs have been found to be broadly more ‘influential’ than solo blogs (Hearst and Dumaes, 2009). The overall observation from my own survey is that many appear more vibrant than single author blogs and are more frequently updated, presumably due to the division of labour.

DBO presents itself as a group blog, but in reality the majority of posts emanate from one source. Unlike the individual blogs discussed above, however, it presents us with a blogroll which casts it within an imagined community of sorts and thus gives additional signposts as to its editorial

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<sup>72</sup> “*The Dublin Opinion considered itself to be the Humorous Journal of Ireland and ran continuously from 1923 to 1968. It was highly successful in its day and its political cartoons are peppered through Irish history books dealing with the 20th Century.*” (About section)

<sup>73</sup> See <https://puesoccurrences.wordpress.com/> (The site is no longer being updated)

stance. In this case it is clear that the author(s), although not individually named initially, are coming from the political left. In addition, many of the posts are esoteric and of limited general interest. The blog frequently links to (Sept 2012) the *Irish Left Review* and advertises Conor McCabe's (2011) book *The Sins of the Father*. The generally anonymous quality of the site again raises the recurring concern regarding the matter of communicative capital, namely, where a contributor is anonymous or pseudonymous, how can we resolve this with the ascription of this form of capital?

In two of the three solo blogs, it is obvious that the two named authors are engaged in a level of reputation display, consciously or otherwise and by extension have options to convert capital from one form to another. Where few author details are given, how does this manifest? What is visible in the comments, however, is that again certain commentators do use their own name, notably, Conor McCabe who is an author, activist and academic. This decision to reveal identity was among the early findings of the research and frequently the identities revealed belonged to people who were well known or known within a specific milieu.

A scathing post launches an attack on 'right-wing' economist Constantin Gurdgiev who is labelled "*Not only an extremist but a hypocrite as well.*" (DBO, September, 27 2012) Once more we see a measure of antagonism and contestation previously seen in the feud between BTR and his critic. The timeframe examined was an apex of punditry; attempts to explain and critique the origins of the economic crisis saw such rivalry reaching a peak.<sup>74</sup> The stance of DBO is consolidated by the inclusion of the occasional music YouTube video, often on a political or social justice related theme. These slightly incongruous elements, idiosyncrasies perhaps, were present in blogs throughout all three categories. All of this combines to present a 'texture' that is evident in sites, which relates back to the manner of interpreting the spaces as discussed in Chapter 3 (*see* Pauwels, 2012). Thus this work to create atmosphere and texture in a blog is another tactic used to establish a particularly distinct brand. This becomes something additional to the generation of communicative capital by the production of text alone. It resonates with matters of taste and distinction, set out in the original definitions of cultural capital by Bourdieu (1986). This sometimes elusive quality is problematized by Jansson:

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<sup>74</sup> This also emerges in Chapter 5, when I examine how this manifested in relation to social groups in Ireland at this time.

...the media ethnographic approach should engage with, and critically reflect upon, the totalizing cultural-material textures that characterize particular spaces and movements, and how practical sense among certain groups or class frictions...pertains to the production and negotiation of these textures, especially in terms of symbolic power relations. [...] texture is the 'communicative fabric of space'... Texture is even a dialectical concept; something through which culture and communication materialize into something deeply felt, a fabric, bypassing the realm of semiotics, while simultaneously something through which the material becomes communicative. (Jansson 2013: 8)

There is some attention paid to international affairs by the site as well as more local issues and a tendency to reference the international 'quality press' (*The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic* magazine). Elsewhere there are scholarly posts relating to Irish history, labour history and copies of slides given for talks and seminars. Because the site is used to publicise events and activities in which the authors have an interest, it is apparent that some of the 'shop window' quality visible in McWilliam's (DMW) site is also evident here, albeit aimed at a much smaller audience and having a communitarian rather than commercial orientation.

It is important to point out that under my redefinition, the size of the audience is often of less importance than who that audience might consist of – a point which is elaborated on below. This represents another significant deviation from Dean's (2003; 2010) original rendering of communicative capital, where rapid, voluminous communication is seen as key. It also raises the possibility of transfer of communicative capital into social capital, and the potential to observe a relationship between these two forms of capital. This becomes more of a possibility in these group blogs and the news sites, because the discursive communities upon which they are founded become more visible.

As with MNP there is clear evidence of the adoption of a media critical meta-stance. A primary feature of the site is its sometimes lengthy exploration of personalities and institutions which hold significant financial prowess in the Irish economic and commercial landscape, the Irish Financial Services Centre being a key example, as well as named business moguls (Michael O'Leary, Denis O'Brien) and 'philanthropic' rock stars (Bob Geldof, Bono). This targeting is I contend significant and may even be interpreted as another tactic to acquire and display communicative capital simply by the choice of 'high status' targets. While at first sight the blog may appear close to a public sphere model of discursive interaction, it soon becomes evident that this is a small-scale conversation held between people of similar political stances and the level of



disagreement is minimal. This is a well-established concern – understood as the ‘echo chamber’ or ‘bias confirmation’ critique – among many commentators, including recently Bauman (Wallsten, 2005; *see* De Querol, 2016).

Lovink (2008: 2) remarks that, “*blogs are always both private and public and are characterised by a culture of desired affiliation.*” It was a frequent finding in the group blogs in particular that comments were confined to a few regular participants and the sites tended to have the quality of a panel discussion rather than an open public sphere model of inclusive discourse. I raise the question as to whether this textural element of sites discourages strangers to the blogs from leaving comments, particularly if a high level of inside knowledge or expertise is being displayed, *i.e.* that the display of *cultural* capital has an exclusionary or gatekeeping function, setting up the conditions within which communicative capital may be generated or exchanged most effectively.

STR is a blog premised on making available documents which can be sourced under the freedom of information legislation in Ireland. These include ministerial letters and diaries, expense claims, planning documents etc. It operates as a form of open-source depository and facilitates discussion on these topics, also encouraging others to use the data as raw material for further reporting. Its authors are self-styled ‘freedom of information nerds’ and the site is run by a group of journalists, lawyers and researchers. Its goals and aspirations are not, however, without their detractors. From the ‘Goals’ section of the site:

**(STR: September 1, 2010 Joe)**

Just another busybody with little to do. More time will be spent combing through old records just to satisfy curiosity of outfits like this, rather than delivering services. In a time of limited resources, you cannot have it both ways, delivery of services or spend your time navel gazing -Which is it to be.

Another question -what is this guy’s agenda, all these people prattling on about accountability, they often have hidden and self-serving agenda’s when all the dust is wiped away.

Once again we see a level of confusion as to the function of these sites and how they within existing institutions and perhaps again a degree of digital illiteracy. There is also, I would suggest, a call to preserve the status quo and a blocking of potential hierarchy disruption. We can easily dismiss the cynicism of a comment like this, but the second question posed (“*What is this*

*guy's agenda?*") is a fair one and when re-framed in more moderate terms, points towards the intangible nature of this type of online activity, particularly when viewed with questions of public sphere, communicative capital and motivation to the fore. What initially appears to be an action infused with a public service, or even public sphere, ethos is recast if we consider the professional placement of its authors.

As professional working life grows more precarious and the boundaries between working and hobbyist activities become less clear, can we simply view this type of blogging as a strategy to gain reputational advantage? Again, under Dean's (2003; 2010) very broad terms, it is not necessary to establish motivation in order for an actor – whose identity, according to Dean is immaterial – to be implicated in the circulation of communicative capital. If we contrast this type of challenge with the deferential tone of DMW's commentators, we see once more a clear hierarchy where some bloggers are challenged to account for themselves and prove their 'worth' within the field and others are at liberty to engage in commercial self-promotion without comment or objection.

STR seeks to establish its credentials by citing its feedback:

**(STR: About)**

*"Excellent." Broadcaster and columnist Matt Cooper. Irish Examiner.*

*"...ferrets relentlessly through information obtained through Freedom of Information requests and publishes the results." Hugh Linehan, The Irish Times, August 3, 2010*

*"...fantastic." John Burns, The Sunday Times*

*"indispensible" Gene Kerrigan, The Sunday Independent*

*“...does for Irish political life what the Sunlight Centre for Open Politics does for the UK, except they do it better.” Peter Stafford, research analyst.*

The hosts of the blog are clearly seeking to position themselves within a hierarchy of discourse by selecting recognisable names from the media and academic milieu who have provided these endorsements.

This drive towards transparency using online dissemination techniques is now established international practice; note the mention of an equivalent U.K. site above, reference to which both establishes the site in an international context and widens the imagined community. Because of the niche quality of this blog, it is understandable that the comments under the posts are not numerous and to return to an earlier matter, it would be of little benefit to seek to establish how ‘influential’ a site like this by focusing on numerical reach alone. This point was made early in the research by an interviewee at the Irish Economy blog,<sup>75</sup> who disclosed that the people running the site were conscious of *where* the visitors were coming from (particularly which company/institution), and not just how many visitors/commenters there were.<sup>76</sup>

In addressing to the question of who is visiting the site, the authors say the following:

**(STR: October 27, 2010 Mark Coughlan)**

Myself and Gav have a policy of not revealing much detail about the servers from which we get visits to this website. The info we receive isn’t really useful – or usually interesting – anyway. The logs will only identify very broadly the company or location of someone viewing the site. Stuff like “Department of Environment” and “Ireland” to give a top-of-the-head example, it never really refines by individual or even building, though that depends on how the server is named.

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<sup>75</sup> [www.irisheconomy.ie](http://www.irisheconomy.ie)

<sup>76</sup> To return briefly to questions of methodology, I would argue that for this reason looking at this question quantitatively is a poor way of addressing matters of social function and reach and why an opening up of the identification of capital is more suitable here.

This is given by way of introduction to an anecdote presented on the site about one of their recent visitors, as follows:

**(October 27, 2010 *Mark Coughlan*)**

The DoD Network Information Center in Columbus, Ohio is a combat support agency responsible for planning, developing, fielding, operating, and supporting command, control, communications, and information systems that serve the needs of [various government agents] under all conditions of peace and war.

... and they were googling “thestory.ie Ivor Callely”<sup>77</sup> which brought them to this page. They then spent several hours on the site before exiting. They arrived again soon after, this time googling “site:thestory.ie Ivor Callely” which directs Google to provide results for only mentions of Ivor Callely, only on this website. A while later they left again...

Well, chums, there you have it; Ivor Callely’s story, an issue of US national security.

In the same manner as MNP was able to use the stats available to a site host to discover and expose her duplicitous commentator, the writer here is, I would argue, highly aware of who is visiting and it can only enhance claims for validity, standing and reputation to make readers aware of this.

This type of activity positions the site and enhances communicative capital, I argue, by indicating its reach. It speaks to the question of ‘quality’ over quantity regarding the site’s audience. Whether we view this overall activity as an exercise in public spiritedness or as an adjunct to the site hosts legal, journalistic or research careers, it can be seen that there is a potential payoff in terms of reputation, status and visibility; a payoff that is available to be taken up in another form and converted or left dormant, as I have argued earlier.

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<sup>77</sup> Ivor Callely is a former Irish politician who was imprisoned following an expenses scandal.

NWL in its self-description sets up a forum which resembles a public sphere, perhaps much more so than the sites considered thus far:<sup>78</sup>

**(NWL: About)**

This is a deliberately anonymous blog to allow postings which are untainted by any established interest in Irish banking, property or government administration. The blog is apolitical – the job of government is to govern, the job of opposition is to hold the government to account. The blog is neutral on the concept of NAMA and is more concerned with implementation. In addition to keeping abreast of developments in NAMA, there is reporting and analysis on the associated subjects of property, banking and the economy. Posts are meant to be provocative and engaging and contain quantitative information.

This piece of text I suggest establishes a tone of gravitas and requests visitors to conduct themselves in a prescribed manner by ring fencing its subject matter. The people behind this site are mostly academics, with a particular interest in financial geography, planning and political economy. I informally interviewed the main author of this site, an academic, and pushed him as to why he was making his data available – particularly that concerning ghost housing estates – in such a manner; essentially creating ready-made stories for journalists to print.<sup>79</sup> He framed his response in terms of dissemination, paying little heed to proprietary matters and, of course, I took this at face value. Moreover, he showed a high level of awareness that the practice of blogging and online media participation more generally was being ‘pushed’ by university management as a tool to enhance the visibility of individual academics and thus their institutional brands. His implication was that he was acting in non-conformity to this trend, presumably by the anonymous nature of his efforts.

This matter of anonymity was a sticking point throughout the early part of the research. It becomes redundant, however, when we realise that it is relatively easy to find out who is behind a certain blog in a relatively small community of discourse; in other words, it is often an open secret. Indeed, the question of the ‘status’ of online publication (in comparison with peer-

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<sup>78</sup> NAMA is the National Assets Management Agency, established in December 2009 to administer the ‘distressed assets’ of large Irish property developers.

<sup>79</sup> This after he pointed out that his data had formed the basis of a number of high-profile news stories on the topic.

reviewed academic publication in journals) was a topic that several of the academic interviewees had reflected upon and formed opinions about. I have argued that the academic sphere has historically been a key hub of communicative capital. I further argue now that blogs and forums such as these are another area within which academics can extend and ring fence their communicative capital, display their digital literacy and ward off attempts at hierarchy disruption by others.

The practice of media critique, highlighted above and elsewhere, is epitomised in an extract from a lengthy piece on NWL:

**(January 15, 2011 by NWL)**

**“Shabby news article an example of the pus-filled (not “puss-filled” as used in the article) carbuncle that is much of our media”**

Much of the research on here is undertaken via the internet and you get used to a degree of inaccuracy in details and grammar and you tend to accept that, with a medium that is rapidly updated, the age-old practice of proof-reading is sacrificed at the altar of the new God of internet journalism. Perhaps it is a personal gripe but I still expect higher standards from traditional media organizations and in the Irish context these are principally RTE, the Irish Times and Independent. Most of the time it amuses the pedant within me when I see terms like “baited breath” rather than “bated” (derived from (a)bated) or the venerable Vincent Browne mixing up “apprised” and “appraised”. [...] But a feature article in today’s Independent must take the biscuit for both poor writing and just shabby journalism. The article’s writer is not revealed but for poor and confused writing on an important subject, it is difficult to find a better example. The article is reproduced in full, though with comments interspersed, for the purposes of analysis and criticism.

Shabby journalism is one thing, a piece as confused as what follows is damaging to the national debate. [...]

**“Shabby episode an example of all that’s wrong in sorry State**

Brian Cowen’s troubles are deepening by the hour. The consultation process is little more than theatre. His survival is on a thread [**“hangs by a thread” or “is on a knife-edge”**] as more and more of the facts emerge. The greatest step forward in this process of slow revelation of the truth I will shortly examine [**we never find out “the greatest step forward” in the article**]. First, however, there is [**are?**] Mr Cowen’s statements about himself.

He concealed more than he conceded in his lengthy statements to the Dail on Thursday [**you mean Wednesday 12th, 2011 during Leaders Questions, no?**]. He failed to answer crucial questions [**any hints about what “crucial question”**]. He concealed

details of significant conversations about Anglo Irish Bank held with senior bank staff, board members and other politicians [what “**details of significant conversations**”?]. He denied exchanges that have been clearly claimed by others [what **exchanges**?]. He has since continued to prevaricate. This is what mr [Mr] Cowen has been doing, with little respect for the truth, over the last three years in respect of the banks, and notably, Anglo Irish Bank. [...] (emphasis in original)

It is now well-established internationally that as the traditional press grapples with the challenges of the digital age and neo-liberal financial constraints, journalism in the early twenty first century is almost unrecognisable from its twentieth-century forbearer (Davis, 2008). Accuracy, fact-checking, originality and style have all suffered and there is consensus on this among commentators. By positioning oneself *above* the press, and engaging in detailed criticism and dissection techniques such as this, I argue that one co-opts a great measure of communicative capital and again disrupts the hierarchy of discourse within the wider sphere.

The opening line of the above extract suggests that this is done in the interest of maintaining the *standard* of the national debate, in tones that might almost be regarded as pompous. Dean (2010) directs our understanding of communicative capital towards the volume and rapidity of communicative exchange but I argue here that its potency can best be understood by an examination of antagonistic interventions such as those set out in this chapter, with emphasis on both subject-matter and authorship, neither of which Dean (2010) attends to. In a similar manner, the journalists who now have to deal with ‘live commentary’ on their work, in the form of comments, are challenged, held to account and importantly, disagreed with in a manner to which they have never been accustomed before. Under my analysis I view this as a contest within the field of communicative capitalism. More of this will be evident when I present material gathered from the larger news sites below.

#### ***4.4 The News Sites***

This was by far the most voluminous and sometimes unwieldy category of data collected. It was drawn from a number of large public sites, most notably ITB. It was important to include this not only because of the perceived position of the site and its associated print newspaper but also in reflecting on the Peillon (1982) research, discussed in Chapter 2. Peillon (1982) was able to

conduct his full survey into *Ideology in the Republic of Ireland* solely from the letters pages of *The Irish Times*, a location he considered the most complete and revealing. The sites in this category (BRD and JIE) all differ from the previous two categories in that they have commercial elements, *i.e.* they are supported by advertising and have a core staff. Clearly they are much busier sites with larger numbers of commentators.

As I began to examine these more active forums of public discussion, the most remarkable aspect of the interaction in the comments sections was the tendency for certain commentators to use their real identities. Very often these people were members of a group already identified in the previous section: journalists, political representatives and academics. My initial response to this was to think in terms of *cultural* capital again and the willingness of those with high levels of this to display and augment it by participation in online discussion.

What was equally noteworthy was the difference in tone of the commentary, based on the perceived tone and *texture* of the forum within which comments were being made. I would identify a tendency for the online news sites examined to replicate some of the characteristics of traditional media, which is reflected in the manner in which commentary is performed, depending on the forum. This is in evidence when a site is considered ‘serious’/broadsheet or alternatively ‘trivial’/tabloid, for instance. As I have indicated, communicative capital is not a simple matter of writing or posting in the most prestigious location or displaying one’s vocabulary or rationalising one’s argument but rather communicating in a manner that is most effective in the particular context and space.

#### *4.4.1 The ‘national’ conversation*

As the Irish crisis took hold in 2010, the ITB facilitated considerable discussion on what might be termed the ‘state of the nation’ (this theme will be discussed more fully in Chapter 6). This was a theme that played out in the other news sites examined and a measure of crossover emerged, with articles from one site being referenced and discussed in others. Early observations of the response to the financial constraints placed on the populous by the political establishment pointed to a lack of protest culture in Ireland, a topic addressed in the following article, in a



standard format opinion piece from the newspaper's economics editor, Dan O'Brien, published in both the print and online (ITB) editions:

**(ITB: February 19, 2011 *Dan O'Brien*)**

ANALYSIS: We are mad as hell (as Fianna Fáil is about to find out<sup>80</sup>) but why we are we not doing anything about it? History may hold the answers

IRELAND'S EXTRAORDINARILY moderate and passive society perplexes foreigners. They wonder at the very limited political and societal reaction to the country's economic crisis. A weak infrastructure of dissent explains this moderation/passivity. But why is Ireland's infrastructure of dissent so underdeveloped?

By most measures, Ireland has suffered one of the worst economic crises ever experienced by a developed country. Many lives have been ruined and more are threatened with ruination. Thus far, those at the top – be they bankers, bureaucrats or politicians – have paid little if any price for whatever role they played in the disaster.

The author goes on to reference Ireland's 'brief and unbloody civil war' (in the 1920s) and the lack of uptake of new ideas about government and society during the 1930s. These factors he submits, renders Ireland the country in Europe least influenced by new ideas.

(...)

In the evolution of European society some of the most significant divisions have been between aristocratic and merchant classes; between church and anti-clerics; between a politicised labour movement and merchant classes; and between right and left. For different reasons these divisions either did not exist within Irish society or were less deep than other European societies. Among the most important reasons in explaining the absence of such divisions was the long struggle for statehood, which unified many forces in society that would otherwise have been at loggerheads.<sup>81</sup>

He goes on to suggest that the Irish State started with a blank slate and has always enjoyed a high degree of legitimacy. An anecdotal example of this legitimacy and the limited suspicion of how the State exercises power is that political conspiracy theories are far less frequently heard in Ireland than in other European countries, he suggests, as an overarching point not backed up by examples or evidence.

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<sup>80</sup> Irish political party of government at this time.

<sup>81</sup> This passage is of additional importance because it is exemplary of the manner in which social class is discussed in Ireland, a theme that is taken up in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

Other factors worked to inhibit the development of an infrastructure of dissent, he claims. One was the unusually close attachment of an overwhelming majority of the population to a religion that has not historically encouraged debate or free thinking. Another was the tendency for decades after independence to attribute failure to others. “Britain as the source of all our ills” directed anger at failings – that could have contributed to greater domestic dissent – away from the new State.

In his conclusion he suggests that there may well be other reasons for Ireland’s underdeveloped infrastructure of dissent. *“Or, indeed, the answer may be simpler. It may even be that the question (and answer) don’t matter much – perhaps most people are sufficiently content with their lot not to want things to change.”* (ITB: 19 February 2011)

I suggest that what the author is doing here is setting himself up in a ‘public intellectual’ performance, which is a feature of this site more broadly. This would typically in the past (including pre-internet) have invited a level of debate and disagreement and the most usual site of this would have been the letters page, as examined all those years ago by Peillon (1982). Now however, commentary is immediate and rapid-fire.

From the comments below:

**(February 19, 2011 *Canuck*)**

Your ideas about a historically weak and underdeveloped 'infrastructure of dissent' in Irish society provide a lot more food for thought than some of the more regrettable psychobabble occasionally written in the Irish Times, and elsewhere too, that typically explains this passivity, or inertia, in terms of an individualizing pathology inherent in the 'Irish mentality'. We need more socio, not psycho analysis, although perhaps Franz Fanon might disagree with me on that point. Nonetheless, in your explanation I was surprised at the paltry significance given to the historical role of the Catholic Church in Ireland in helping to create and perpetuate a civic, intellectual and moral culture in Ireland where dissent was a dirty word. Although you speak of the development of the Irish state it should not be forgotten that the Irish State was, and still is to a certain extent, simultaneously a Catholic State and thus the influence of such a powerful political, social and moral institution in undermining the development of an infrastructure of dissent

warrants more attention in your explanation of why we, politically speaking, still tend to behave like the proverbial flock of sheep.

A clear tone of challenge begins this discussion. O'Brien's (the original poster/author) journalistic conceit is to present a series of unsupported hypotheses and to make sweeping observations without example or evidence. I have highlighted a passage on the class system, as potentially an ill-considered piece of historical reduction. The commentary which follows continues to take him to task on this approach. Here again I argue that the commentators are demonstrating strong communicative capital and do so largely by reflecting the tone of the original piece. I reproduce this piece at such length as I consider it indicative of many of the 'journalist versus commentator' exchanges that were observed to take place on the news sites and in the ITB in particular. It demonstrates also the considerable scope available to a series of commentators to express dissent in a consistent and protracted way, which is not available in a Letters to the Editor section.

**(February 19, 2011 *Patrick Hennessy*)**

[T]he emigration factor should not be dismissed so lightly. what distinguishes the psyche of the "enforced" irish emigrant from those who stay at home in such situations. Perhaps one characteristic is that the emigrant is more inclined to take the problem on board and act to resolve it. So he/she emigrates. Those who remain in Ireland are more passive/fatalistic in the face of such trouble. As a consequence those most likely to agitate leave, while those least likely to agitate stay.

Just a thought, but it seems to me as valid a possible explanation as those in your article. Worth a bit of research.

**(February 19, 2011 *Declan J Foley*)**

Well, I think the answer lies in the ever ready Irish put down to any whom dare to think differently, "Who do you think you are?"

**(February 19, 2011 *Malleus Malleficarum*)**

A very limited explanation, I would have thought.

Siphoning off of radical elements and an infrastructure of chain emigration have a lot to answer for here. When you see your future outside Ireland as inevitable and the whole of

civic society conspires in the inevitability of your imminent departure, very little energy is invested in revolt.

This lengthy exchange is revealing in the manner in which the journalist's argument is deciphered and countered. The elements of hierarchy disruption, integral to the appropriation of communicative capital, and also arguably a component of public sphere, are in play again in this exchange. The instant critique in evidence here shows the vulnerability of those who could previously perform expertise and see that challenged perhaps by delayed letters to the editor, which are more easily controlled and moderated than an instant exchange of this type. It is noteworthy too that the deference mentioned above in relation to DMW is not in evidence here. Contrast this to a thread on a related topic on BRD.

**(BRD: September 18, 2012)**

*New Bailout Latest*

The European Commission has cleared the release of another €1 billion to Ireland under the EU/IMF bailout.

Yay

On October 1, a €1bn unsecured unguaranteed AIB bond will be paid, almost a third of all the combined extra taxes/cuts proposed for Budget 2013.

Oh.

From the Comments:

**(September 18, 2012 Joxer)**

Broadsheet – whats the point in running this sort of update? No one in this country gives a shite....if they did there'd be Action.... 'The Fighting Irish' me bollix

The title of BRD is undoubtedly ironic. Stories tend to have a tabloid quality and the commentary here is one of the stronger examples of an imagined community of discourse that I encountered during the research. Although less tabloid in its tone, a similar dynamic is played out in the commentary sections of JIE. There are more instances of 'trolling' activity on these

sites, and status within the community is accorded to those whose comments pass the test of wit or contrarianism rather than the type of seemingly reasoned, informed debate often evident in the ITB. It was abundantly clear having observed the sites over time that commentators tended to ‘cut their cloth according to their measure,’ that is they adopted the predominant tone of the site to which they were contributing. All three news sites display a very distinct texture and this invites or facilitates differing discursive ‘behaviours’ in accord with what are perceived as the morays of the spaces. I argue that it is these acts of alignment with tone and texture that is most advantageous for authors and commentators to generate advantage and communicative capital within the spaces.

#### *4.4.2 Media and markets*

As outlined, the clearest finding is both a regard for and critique of the pre-established media, from where much of the content, again across the three types of site, has its origins. The symbiotic relationship I identify is crucial to the existence of the blogosphere *and* to the altering mediascape more widely. By extension this all operates within a marketplace, thus potentially eradicating the public sphere potential, if we use the firm criteria set down by Habermas (1991). This marketplace is what Fuchs (2013) points to as the material base of the sphere, comprising commercial space, transactions, site valuation, advertising potential and labour. We are also able to identify the effects of a massification of communication on this market which sees a fragmentation and reconfiguration that may be interpreted as being in line with the precarity that exists more widely. The key finding of this chapter is that rather than building their major form of Bourdieusian capital, participants are generating a very specific form of capital that is characterised as communicative.

As I have argued, it is too much of an absurd reduction to suggest that commentary or contribution which might objectively be perceived as more articulate, educated or ‘rational’ automatically scores higher on a scale of communicative capital. There are subtler factors at play. It is much more plausible to propose that an individual can generate high levels of communicative capital by conforming to the tone and morays of the particular space in which they participate. I contend that this type of mirroring is integral to the generation of

communicative capital, with or without the element of hierarchy disruption. That said, there is some scope to consider a hierarchy of discourse and the contention that certain sites carry more perceived status in the blogosphere than do others. For instance, debating questions of national identity with an *Irish Times* journalist – particularly where the commentator is identifiable – is likely to be more immediately generative of communicative capital compared with adding a one-line comment to a little-known blog. This suggestion once again puts my definition of the concept at variance with Dean's. Dean (2003; 2010) would argue that such concerns relate only to use value and should be disregarded. My perspective, in line with Bourdieu (1986), is that we disregard them at our peril, as they may amount to significant 'personal capital holdings' for the individual. (This was laid out in Chapter 2)

These observations bolster the case for a connection between Bourdieu's (1986) conception of cultural capital and my adaptation of communicative capital, but I argue that it is played out in a distinct way in the communicative arena, *i.e.* it is insufficient to say that this is just cultural capital in online form firstly because it is performed within the larger distinct superstructure that Dean (2003; 2010) sets out in her definition and secondly, I suggest that it is possible to hold strong reserves of cultural capital without being particularly communicative. Thus communicative capital entails a measure of performance of cultural capital in particular arenas.

#### ***4.5 Conclusion***

This chapter has examined the data to interpret the positions and strategies displayed by hosts and their commentators within the spaces across the three categories. It has done this to address questions concerning not only status and motivation but also relationships to wider societal institutions, primarily the media. I have identified the practice of hierarchy disruption in evidence and the correlation between this and matters of digital literacy and individuated communicative capital. What I have suggested is that this sphere is replete with individuals positioning and benchmarking themselves and their contributions against others, particularly those considered to possess expertise, status or authority. The changing nature of the journalist's profession is a clear indication of the effects of this form of hierarchy disruption.

If we examine the findings to date, it was observed in this chapter that potential members of this discursive group have a number of tendencies: they are often happy to identify themselves in online commentary; they frequently act in a quasi-journalistic capacity; they engage in meta-analysis of traditional media; their contributions indicate a level of expertise of 'insider knowledge' or are formulated in such a way as to imply this; they are prolific commentators; their comments are in synch with the ethos of the sites on which they post, and finally their contribution may draw on expertise gained in their professional life. I believe that the final factor is heavily borne out by the data described over all three categories in this chapter.

It may be argued that links between social capital and communicative capital are another way of assessing the sphere examined. As discussed, the early phase of the research veered towards a study of relationships (and 'influence') within networks and it is certainly possible to trace communicative capital by reference to connections and flows, but again this presented only a partial picture. Equally it may be argued that those displaying strong communicative capital might be seen to enjoy numerous 'high quality' online connections. The reason the focus favours a comparison with cultural capital is that there are links between this and the proliferation of ideas and beliefs within the social imaginary, *i.e.* it is implicated in the formation of societal values. This should become more apparent in the discussion of social groups in the following chapter.

## ***Chapter 5: Social Groups and Class***

Joejay on December 3, 2012 at 10:08 am said:

*I love when people use the term ‘the elites’ – in my eyes your arguments are instantly rendered laughable.*

Andrew on December 3, 2012 at 10:11 am said:

*Oh God no, not the ELITES!!*

*(Extract from Boadsheet.ie)*

*“Blogs fix the social in a specific manner. These techno-fixes are not neutral; they reflect the broader cultural atmosphere of our time ...”*

Lovink, G. *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture* (2013: 2)

### ***5.0 Introduction***

In my identification of individualised communicative capital, I previously pointed to the formation of a distinct ‘discursive elite’ of online commentators in Ireland. I now look to the representation of social divisions and distinctions more widely within the forums. I examine the relationships between commentators and the groups they identify with and against in contemporary Ireland. This chapter examines the representation of particular social groups in Ireland; a prominent and recurring theme in the blogosphere over the timespan examined. A foregrounding of these discussions helps in comprehending not only the particular field under



scrutiny but also – arguably – the values and ideologies that are integral to the wider social imaginary in Ireland during this time period.

In the previous chapter I gave an account of how communicative capital, understood at the level of the individual, is generated and appropriated under *particular conditions* by individuals. I argued that the mere existence of this form of capital axiomatically depletes the public sphere function of these spaces. The case was made that this form of ‘minor capital,’ previously institutionalised and concentrated primarily in the hands of journalists, experts and professional commentators, has now become diffuse — undoubtedly the result of the massification of communications.

I have suggested that communicative capital remains, nonetheless, more abundant among members of a *distinct group* in the society, in spite of what I identified as practices of ‘hierarchy disruption.’ I have proposed that people who display digital literacy, arguably combined with strong *cultural capital*, are most adept at the transfer of this into the field of online discourse, thereby potentially attaining strong *communicative capital*. Using this as a foundation, I now extend and complicate the analysis to examine the ways in which attitudes about social groups within Ireland are expressed and reproduced in the sites examined; how, in effect, groups are ‘written up’ in the blogosphere.

To revert again to Peillon’s (1982) consideration of the broader topic, he remarks:

Every group of individuals or every society produces ideas, beliefs and values which enable it to judge or situate itself in relation to other groups or societies. These preferences or beliefs are often deeply embedded in people’s consciousness, and represent what the members of the group consider to be self-evident; **what they accept without too much thought; as well as what they are prepared to fight for when threatened.** (Peillon, 1982: 134; my emphasis)

Here he seems to echo Foucault’s (Rabinow, 1991) ‘regimes of truth’ proposition<sup>82</sup>; this chapter considers the inward gaze of these groups in their process of ‘truth making’ and self-definition at

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<sup>82</sup> “Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth, the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.” (Foucault, in Rabinow, 1991: 131)

a time when a metaphorical mirror was abruptly raised in Ireland and many questions were being presented as urgent.

This chapter analyses instances where people make assertions and observations they hold to be true, often speaking up for a group they feel affinity to and also frequently setting themselves apart from other groups. I will also examine connections between communicative capital and social capital in this chapter. Thus I look again to the possibility of transfer and fungibility between different types of capital, major and minor. This also opens up the crucial question of social class and its relationship to communicative capital. Axiomatically, the possession of larger amounts of capital, in any of its forms, implies higher status within the class system. This again raises additional questions about communicative inequality, highlighted previously.

### ***5.1 A Process of Classification?***

In line with the sudden and severe nature of the Irish economic crisis, there was, over the timespan examined, a high level of attention paid in the mediascape generally to the distinct groups that make up Irish society. The media framed certain groups as culprits (the ‘developers and bankers’<sup>83</sup> for instance), while others were identified as the primary victims of the crisis (the ‘squeezed middle’ for example).<sup>84</sup> Established media displayed a tendency to cluster based on one over-riding characteristic and I was interested to see if online discourse differentiated within particular cohorts and also how social groups were represented, bearing in mind the intertwining of news agendas from established into online media.

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<sup>83</sup> It is widely agreed that the Irish economic crisis resulted from imprudent lending by banks for property and unregulated speculation and borrowing by property developers. *See* for instance Kearns (2014) and Donovan & Murphy (2013).

<sup>84</sup> One of the early instances of this was the large-scale public protest by pensioners in 2008, in response to an attempt by the Government to withdraw medical cards from the over-70 age group, and the media representation of this group as ‘united’ in protest. It could be argued that this was a media sanctioned piece of consensus building; that this group – in its entirety – had been unfairly treated, was not responsible for what had happened to the economy and had contributed much to the conditions that had facilitated ‘prosperity’ in Ireland in recent decades. I had observed this process primarily in established media and it piqued my interest in how such discourses might be constructed in the online sphere. *See* ‘Pensioners jeer Minister at 15,000-strong protest rally’ *Irish Independent*, 23 October, 2008.

Mercille (2014) maintains that the established Irish media took a clear position of support for the austerity programme of the Government in response to the financial crisis and backed the official rhetoric of ‘shared burden.’ Silke (2014) points to the growing symbiotic relationship between business, communication networks and mass media in Ireland. With this in consideration I also approached the sites with an openness to find if there was a counterweight to those positions among commentators, particularly among people using the public comments section of the news sites. Such a finding would add weight to a ‘public sphere’ function and point toward the presence of counterpublics in the forums.

There was, in general terms, a plethora of buzz words in general circulation at this time: the ‘coping classes,’ the ‘new poor,’ the ‘golden circle’ etc. I interrogated those and similar phrases where they occurred – asking if anything substantial lay behind them – and seeking to discover the discourses that were implicated in their currency, querying also how these might then relate to the questions of public sphere and communicative capital.

The next chapter focuses on the consideration of a wider gaze, the external and comparative sides of this process at the level of ‘nation.’

## ***5.2 Finding Fault***

I have previously pointed to a tendency on a number of the sites to engage in ‘naming and shaming’ practices – providing information about individuals and institutions that were seen to be involved in decisions or actions that led to the crisis. Attempts to expose or identify ‘the elites,’ members of a somewhat mythical but much-referenced ‘golden circle,’ are an obvious example of this tactic. More widely, some of the online discussion entailed revelation, some involved identifying those most affected by the crisis and more addressed the interplay and tensions between different interest groups within contemporary Ireland. These themes were played out in a particularly detailed way in online discourse, I would discover. I paid attention to the times and precise forums where particular aspects of these conversations were most prominent or indeed absent. Once more, I observed who was most willing to identify themselves

and ‘sign off’ on their remarks, and once again it was people who were well known in broader media circles or who proclaimed a level of expertise on these matters of classification.

In examining and interrogating the data, I gave attention to many conventional categories such as age, gender, rural/urban and social class; I remained mindful in my close reading that other groups may have come to the fore and have pointed towards this where it applied. Two of the sites: DMW and DBO were found to give considerable space to materials and discussions on social class in Ireland. The more data focused sites, NWL and STR, concentrated on the identification of elite or establishment groups seen to be implicated in recent events. For instance, NWL published a list of all of the developers who were taken into NAMA. Such actions are noted and while it is argued that they were powerful interventions in the sphere, they tended not to generate much discussion. The fact that they cannot be analysed here does not, however, detract from their potency in the longer term.

The point of most interest was the framing of specific groups by commentators. I argue these commentators themselves enjoy a privileged position and therefore may be seen to utilise a combination of cultural, social and communicative capital that advances a vision of Ireland, much as Peillon’s (1982) ‘privileged’ commentators had all those years ago. In general terms, I observed a clear tendency for commentators to resonate with the tone, and frequently the point of view, of the site within which they were participating, a theme which also emerged in the previous chapter.<sup>85</sup>

### ***5.3 Social Groups, Class and Communication***

As mentioned previously, the topic of social class was prominent in the data, and particularly so in the immediate aftermath of the bailout, 2010-11. The urgency of reactivating a class-based analysis generally is articulated by Tyler (2015: 493) who cautions that “*the sociology of class*

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<sup>85</sup> This may, however, point towards a limitation of the survey. In almost all cases the editorial policy regarding moderatorship or approval of comments was not apparent, and so it is fair to suggest that what appears on the screen is ultimately what the site host wants us to see. It is unlikely, however, that exhaustive or highly censorial moderation occurred on any of the sites, given the volume of activity and the labour required in maintaining a site to this level.

*should [not] be grounded in the assumption and valorisation of class identities ...*” but must be mobilised to interrogate the inequality that has come to predominate in our shift from industrial to financialised capitalism. I contend that consideration of communications practices and spaces are increasingly important frontiers in a deconstruction of social groups from a perspective that includes language and culture.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, it is no longer sufficient to speak of a ‘digital divide,’ a considerably more nuanced perspective is necessary and this resonates with the reconceptualization of communicative capital that I present in this thesis (*see* Murdock and Golding, 2004). I propose that a complex and advanced society such as Ireland, undergoing considerable societal upheaval, cannot be understood using outdated matrices of both capital and class and that a re-evaluation is required. This reframing of matters of class needs to attend to the cultural and communicative components of social class formation and reproduction.

In this discussion I initially privilege the wider term *group* over *class* to take account of the many variables and points of intersection that must be considered in such analysis. Echoing the earlier-cited sentiments of Andrejevic (2009) on the question of communicative inequality, Hanley (2013) makes the case that the type of class analysis advanced by Hoggart in the 1950s is as pertinent as ever in the online age: Hanley (2014: 2) points toward: “*a deceptively flattened media and cultural landscape ...*” Social media, he suggests “*give the impression of everyone having an equal voice, from the out-of-work plasterer to the millionaire art dealer.*” (2)

Hanley (2014) calls for a renewal of an awareness that access to culture widens and narrows according to who has the keys – and that is always the people with education, contacts and confidence. This connects to my earlier argument regarding both cultural capital and ‘digital literacy’ as core aspects of my version of communicative capital, set out in Chapter 4. The salient point here is that the discussions of social groups, elites and class that I examined are themselves happening in a forum that I characterise as replete with communicative capital, regardless of the political or ideological stance of the commentators. This must be factored into a reading of these

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<sup>86</sup> In sum, the type and proliferation of ‘social media’ interaction, the composition of a person’s virtual networks, the skills available to interact. These must all be given consideration in determining questions of class, social mobility and the intersection of social, cultural and communicative capital. I make this observation regarding the wider implications of changing perceptions of social groups generally and to provide direction towards future work beyond this thesis.

texts and the possibility of transferability between major forms of capital (cultural, social and economic) and the minor (communicative capital) needs to be considered.

In discussing the links between culture and class, Savage (2013: 2/4) suggests that:

Recent developments in what is sometimes called ‘cultural class analysis’ ... have shown how classes are articulated with processes of gender, as well as race and ethnicity, age, and such like, and that **the cultural dimensions of class inequality are profound**. Given these interventions, to try to artefactually differentiate and hold apart the relative importance of class, gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality and so forth is to miss the fundamental weaving together of these different processes into composite entities which we seek to reveal. [C]lasses [are] not ‘employment aggregates’, but ... distinctive assemblages which crystallise particular combinations of economic, social and cultural capital. (my emphasis.)

To the final sentence of this I would add ‘communicative capital,’ as I understand this to be a key yet neglected emerging factor in the construction of position, reputation and identity in postmodern societies. Where a society is characterised as highly individualistic, the trope of the ‘branded self,’ discussed earlier, takes on greater significance. There then emerges a suspicion that social capital is eroded under such conditions, a point that I will revert to.<sup>87</sup>

#### ***5.4 ‘Social Class’ in Ireland***

Tovey and Share (2003) point to the quandary of social class in Ireland by examining the commonly promoted view of Ireland as a ‘classless society’ alongside findings of weak social mobility, including during the Celtic Tiger period of boom, and inequality levels that are similar to other advanced European societies. They highlight the tendency to think of Ireland as a country of two classes: the middle class and the underclass, without going further in seeking distinctions or sub-classes. Meanwhile, Savage et al. (2013) make a division of seven classes for the Great British Class Survey.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Again, I acknowledge that the interpretive methods used for the current work rely on isolating what people ‘betray’ through language and expressed beliefs about their own class position, their group membership and the other groups they define themselves against or in alignment to.

<sup>88</sup> These revised class grouping are: elite, established middle class, traditional working class, technical middle class, emergent service workers, new affluent workers and the precariat.

The highly neoliberalist character of Ireland more broadly is given attention by Keohane and Kuling (2007), particularly as it manifests in what they consider a deeply individualistic ethos. This I remained mindful of in my consideration of groups. The misapprehension of social class in Ireland is often propagated by mistaking the informality that characterises social relations for an egalitarian playing field, which is both meritocratic and open. It is further compounded by the absence of a visible (or indeed titled) elite class and the under-representation of the working class in public discourse.<sup>89</sup> Two of the sites I examined provide clear exemplars of this split in thinking on the question of social class in Ireland.

The DBO site features considerable material from Conor McCabe, who is a social historian and activist. The site functioned as something of a rehearsal ground for his later publications on the background to the Irish economic crisis and matters of class and division in contemporary Ireland. In analysing the origins of the economic downfall that beset Ireland during the period examined, McCabe's (2011) thesis is that an elite class came to power here in 1922 which had little interest in fostering a type of economic development that would benefit the mass of society. Essentially, this class, drawn from the landed bourgeoisie and their professional descendants, favoured the economic interests of the 'rancher class' and ultimately their descendants in the law, construction, politics and high finance. The DBO site devotes considerable space to matters of class in Ireland, containing the tags 'Irish Middle Class' and 'Irish Working Class' pointing to extensive achieved material. His observations on these historical factors that he would argue led to the economic crisis in this country are important contributions to a re-framing of social class in Ireland.

To most Irish political and media commentators, the Republic is a capitalist economy without a capitalist class structure. They argue that its citizens are mostly middle class, with a working class rump that exists on the margins. The past fifteen years, in their eyes, has seen an expansion of that middle class, as well as the birth of a 'new' middle class. We have more money to buy more stuff. We go on more foreign holidays. Life is better than before. The good times, even with the caveats, are now. (McCabe, 2008)

Ask anyone in people in Ireland to define working class, and more than likely an image of poverty will pop into their head, he suggests. Irish political and popular culture sees working class in terms of unemployment, depression, alcoholism, addiction, and despair. He describes

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<sup>89</sup> See Pierse (2011)

what he considers a bizarre situation that in the Irish Republic, where working class usually refers to anyone who does not work. The ability to buy consumer goods remains the benchmark, in McCabe's view, for one's position in Irish society, at least in the eyes of political and media commentators. (McCabe, 2008)

McCabe defines classes in large part based on the power and authority people have at work. The workplace engages people in more than their immediate work, by which they create goods and services. It also engages them in relationships with each other, relationships that are controlled by power. A relative handful of people have great power to organize and direct production, while a much larger number have almost no authority, he suggests. *"We can understand the economic, political, and cultural role of each class if we see it in terms of its relationships to the others, in the textures of social power. This way – with power laid bare – the abstractions of class come to life."* (McCabe, 2008)

I argue that while there is much of merit in McCabe's proclamation, it evades the subtlety of social groups, which blend together a greater range of differing factors than he elucidates in this extract. For instance, the question of the urban/rural divide and in particular the different social groups in Dublin and the rest of the country. In addition, the foregrounding of relationships of power neglects to consider the vital component of communication which I argue here is integral to our understanding of both class affinity and class differentiation in a profoundly mediated society.

Later in this chapter, I isolate and give evidence of what I term the 'narcissism of minor difference'<sup>90</sup> in Irish public culture, as apparent in online discourse, whereby social groups distinguish themselves not merely from separate classes but more frequently from sub-groups, often within their own class. Following Savage's (2013) survey of class in the UK, I note a move away from an analysis of class that is based primarily on employment and income (*see* Crompton, 2010) to one that includes consideration of cultural and communicative practices and distinctions. Thus I strengthen my case for the recognition of communicative capital as an increasingly relevant component of social position and status, and as something fundamental to

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<sup>90</sup> See Blok (2013) for an extensive treatment of this concept as it relates to social theory.



class. I point once more to the links between the nature of communicative capital in the subtlety of its generation and performance and similar traits of Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital.

David McWilliams (2005, 2007, 2012) has long engaged in a form of social group analysis of Irish society, which is largely observational and descriptive. His site (DMW) contains many examples of this and based on the popularity of these posts, it is clearly a topic that exercises his commentators. Once again, as with McCabe and DBO, we can observe this site as a rehearsal space for material that will eventually find itself published in book form – these recycling practices were commonly seen in this blog. The same level of interest and uptake was also noted when similar topics were raised in the three news sites; there was a substantial appetite for engagement in such discussions and categorisations. However, the overall question of class was frequently reduced to the belief that it was not relevant in the Irish context, class popularly being understood as 'more of a British thing' – in short there was discomfort and confusion around the topic.

A point of intersection between the news sites, the mainstream media and its critics highlights the layered nature of the discourse and the high level of cross reference. BRD published a critique from Critical Media Review of the *Irish Independent's* marketing campaign for its newspaper, focusing on the 'subliminal' messages regarding class in Ireland. The strapline for the advertisement was: "*We are defined by the choices we make...*"

Critical Media Review (on BDS) points to what it considers the underlying ideology of the pieces, where pairs of photographs are juxtaposed:

**(May 24, 2013 *Bodger*)**

The first shows two pregnant women, both headless and faceless. **Yet even faceless we can tell immediately the polyester-clad woman on the right is clearly working class, most likely single, living on benefit and smoking and bereft of pregnant glow surrounding her linen-clad counterpart.**

And as the tagline tells us 'her choices' made her this way.

The second image is another one of class: here, we see juxtaposed those who 'choose' to be unemployed compared to those who 'choose' to emigrate. The migrants we can see (even in the rough cartoon image) are young, strong and struggling to make the best of things and making the obviously correct decision to leave the country.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> This discourse on emigration is raised again in data examined for Chapter 6.

On the other hand the mainly fat (and yes they are mainly fat) people who ‘choose’ to remain in Ireland as feckless doleys are seen literally dancing out of the dole office throwing their money in the air. It doesn’t take a genius to pull out the underlying message there.

Some of the confusion about the present subject of social class in Ireland is apparent in the replies:

**(May 24, 2013 *Anne*)**

There’s a class system in Ireland? Pull the other one.

There are those with different amounts of money but social class structure has nothing to do with that.

**(May 24, 2013 *Funman*)**

You would be very naive indeed to believe this. Class is not defined by money (or at least the outward display of it) – its far more subtle than that. I’m sure you have been a victim of class discrimination several times in your life – you just didn’t know it was happening.

**(May 24, 2013 *Anne*)**

Ok, so if there is this formal recognised (but subtle) social class structure in Ireland, who are the aristocrats at the top of it?

**(May 24, 2013 *sinabhuil*)**

The merchants, the politicians, the quangist bosses.

**(May 24, 2013 *VictorRomeo*)**

It’s a Kleptocracy. But then you know that.

Aside from the ‘quippery’ contained in this exchange, it speaks nonetheless to a wide-scale shutting off of discussions of social class in Ireland. It points to a belief in a meritocratic society and a possible alignment with American notions of how class, wealth and privilege operate. This is taken up in data examined in the next section. Some of this reluctance to be explicit on matters of class emerges, I suggest from our desire to contrast Irish culture from that of Britain. It is underscored by a hegemonic belief that we, as Irish citizens, are fundamentally responsible for

the ‘choices we make’ and that these are what ultimately determine our position within the social order.

#### ***5.4 Gendering the Great Recession***

There was generally a lack of material across the sites monitored that directly addressed nuanced questions of gender amid the financial crisis, other than to point to increasing male unemployment as a significant feature. In a post from 2011, entitled ‘Mansession: the enduring legacy of the recession,’ DMW opens up a discussion on the issue of young male unemployment in the aftermath of the construction industry collapse in Ireland<sup>92</sup>:

**(DMW: September 5, 2011)**

At the height of the boom, in 2004, the character Breakfast Roll Man came to me as I was having a coffee, looking out the window and watching the world going by the Spar in Inchicore.<sup>93</sup> He was a loveable lad, working on the sites, making good money and spending it. He wasn’t the most academic [...] He was an Irish male, in a job, with a future and he was having fun. But most crucially, he was looking forward to a future which could be planned.

These prospects, DMW suggests, afforded him self-respect and a long-term horizon. Now he and hundreds of thousands of Irish “lads” like him are among the major victims of the recession. And, he continues, if trends in other countries are anything to go by, the long-term legacy of the recession will be felt permanently in this class – young men without educational qualifications.

(...)

The gradual erosion of the economic strength of this less-educated group of young men has been going on in the western world for some time now. The building boom in Ireland masked this because the Breakfast Roll Men were gainfully employed on the sites.

In fact, just as the housing boom made the broad middle class in Ireland feel richer than they were, the construction bonanza made Breakfast Roll Man feel more secure than he actually was. By giving relatively well-paid work to so many young lads, the construction

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<sup>92</sup> For a more thorough, and amusing, analysis of this phenomenon, *see* Share (2011)

<sup>93</sup> McWilliams has become known for his characterisation of ‘social types’ in Ireland. These are generally light-hearted and overblown descriptions.

boom masked the longer-term transformational changes that are going on in Ireland, and all western economies.

He points to the effect of the housing boom in temporarily minimising the penalty of not going on to further education among these men and widens the discussion to the underperformance of boys in education more generally. His concluding remarks are rather rhetorical, if not doom-laden:

(...)

As male unemployment rises and rises, how long do you think these young lads will loaf around aimlessly before they realise that there is more to life than daytime TV, a few cans and Call of Duty? How long will it be until they get really pissed off? And what then?

DMW retains a primary focus on gender throughout this piece, but the topic could equally be interrogated from a class viewpoint. It is also fair to point to the manner in which these men are treated as ‘lumpen’ *i.e.* distinctions beyond their age, employment and education level are not introduced; crucially *their own take on their situation* is not considered or invited. Moreover, they are never referred to by DMW, and rarely by the sampled commentators, as ‘working class.’

The piece is followed by 229 comments. Generally, the discussion is measured, picking up on different aspects of the question (education, emigration, the injustice of unpunished bankers and developers etc.) but mostly avoiding an explicitly class-based analysis, with certain notable exceptions:

**(September 5, 2011 *Citizen Why*)**

It is often said that the cultures of England and Ireland teach people to think of themselves as losers. The Celtic Tiger was just an interruption in this way of thinking. The habit of begrudgery is related to the self-image of loser.

Thinking of oneself as a loser also happens in the USA, where we live by **the half reality/half myth of meritocracy.**

**If you fail, or become unemployed, you can easily see yourself as a loser and dwell on all the bad decisions you made or all the “breaks” you never got. You withdraw. You do not organize.**

You see only your story, not the big story. [This] is now true of Europe, since US finance capitalism has been determined to turn all the social democratic countries into narrow republics ruled by a business oligarchy that guarantees prosperity for the business elite, professional classes, some of the artistic class, and some skilled workers. But the idea of a large expanding, ever more prosperous middle class is abandoned and those left behind, whom everyone sees as losers, are left to fend for themselves.

This is one of the few comments that addresses the question in a wider level of structures and is an unusual intervention on a site where commentators tend to consolidate the host's opinion and form consensus. Another commentator takes up the gender aspect and airs views that reflect more universalised facets of the debate on gender that is often framed as 'the decline of men' (see Venker, 2013).

**(September 5, 2011 Nicklaus)**

Young men in Ireland have a struggle finding suitable role models to look up to. Many have no fathers, or else their fathers are unemployed for many years. This problem has been going on for at least three generations now. **I work in education and it is essentially a female occupation, as it has child-friendly working arrangements. One can't state this publicly, as you would be deemed sexist. At present, our young men are floundering – the uneducated ones are a 'time-bomb' waiting to explode.** The ones educated to Leaving Cert standard are doing College courses that are totally unsuited to them and will eventually drop out and emigrate (if they're lucky). Our leaders still believe the nonsense that we are a 'nation of saints and scholars'.

By highlighting the above, I am also pointing to the perception that by posting anonymously in a forum like this, it becomes possible to speak 'truths' that would be unwelcome elsewhere, *i.e.* they provide a break from the 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959) that people feel they must perform in everyday life. This reflection on silence created by a fear of causing offence to particular groups is a theme that emerges elsewhere in the discourse examined and may be characterised as an anxiety of our age. It points to another function of spaces such as this where commentators feel at liberty to 'say the unsayable.'

What is highly noteworthy about this thread, however, is that it is assumed that the young men in question are not participating in the current discussion and it becomes an avowedly 'them and us' conversation – they become the 'Other.' We might ask if this is an inherent class perception, *i.e.* people like that are not on this site and we must problematise and find solutions for this 'social problem' that exists at something of a remove; in short, they become absent subjects of

discourse. There is also some confusion as to why only the ‘uneducated ones’ are a ‘timebomb’ waiting to explode.

In other threads the question of ‘over-educated’ graduates and lack of employment opportunity is discussed, but this almost menacing tone is reserved by both the author and his commentators for those who lack formal education. I propose that this space is emblematic of a consolidation of class position and allows no scope for the inclusion of members of a perceived counterpublic to join this particular conversation. I have previously pointed to this site as a source and repository of strong communicative capital; I illustrated the tacit gatekeeping function of a highly deferential and appeasing consensus throughout the material examined from here. Now I suggest that lines of class distinction are reinforced in such spaces and that the presence of strong communicative capital has effects on social capital, which I outline below.

As elsewhere, in this thread there is considerable uptake of comparative views of Ireland: how much like the UK or US we might be, acknowledgement of the difference in the German systems of education and employment and the lack of foreign language proficiency among Irish people generally, which tends to keep them within the Anglosphere. There is not, however, a sense of Ireland experiencing trends in a way similar to Greece and Spain, for instance, where large numbers of the young unemployed are highly educated. These questions of affinity and exceptionalism feed into themes that are analysed in Chapter 6, concerning national identity discourses within the blogosphere.

The input of the commentators falls within a spectrum and complies to a great extent with DMW’s stance, which I perceive as dominant within this space. *Stance* is defined by Thurlow and Mroczek (2011: xxxiv) as ideological position taking and social categorisation. No identity work happens outside of or without a view to relationships, they argue; acts of identity are also acts of comparison, social distinction, and othering.

For sociolinguists, a key linguistic manifestation (or indeed, discursive accomplishment) of this process lies in stance taking, the ways communicators position and align themselves vis-à-vis their speech/writing and those they are speaking/writing to/about (cf. DuBois, 2007; Jaffe, 2006).

It is striking that the above discussion is a response to the perception of an official evasion of the question of disenfranchised young man; it seeks to interrogate an issue that politicians are ignoring in the view of the majority of the commentators and the author.

It is necessary also to point to the emerging official ‘recovery rhetoric’ that is beginning to form parallel to the discussion at hand in 2011. The fetishisation of property, development and construction is now replaced with a fetishisation of technology and particularly communicative technology (Facebook, eBay and Twitter all located headquarters in Dublin at about this time). Ireland is in the process of rebranding itself as a ‘digital nation’ and these emerging industries, examples of foreign direct investment in the long-standing tradition of the Irish state, become the default solution to the collapse of the construction industry.<sup>94</sup> This taking no regard of the question of skill or education required for careers in communicative technology. (This is examined in greater depth in Chapter 6.)

What I suggest is happening in discourses like these is a ‘dance of the capitals’; in tandem with the digital literacy required as an entry point to participate in the discussion, commentators deploy cultural capital by their participation in a meta-analysis of the society, thereby generating communicative capital in the process. Such discussions can also be considered sites of *bonding* social capital (Putnam, 1995), by their work to align, reinforce and form consensus among ‘likeminded’ commentators. What is lacking in the discussions is social capital of the *bridging* variety, a diversity of viewpoints (beyond the highlighted exceptions) or a real sense of an open public sphere in operation – counterpublics are notable by their absence.

Meanwhile, a policy of neoliberal austerity was perused with great vigour by the Irish government, supported by the mainstream media (Mercille, 2014) and this was a recurrent topic elsewhere within the forums. In a post entitled: ‘7 year olds and Austerity Politics’ from 2012 MNP highlights forthcoming statutory changes that would compel lone parents to become activated within the workforce once their child reached the age of seven, *i.e.* their welfare allowance would be ceased. It was a move countered by a number of child welfare organisations and criticised from a social justice viewpoint. The site host points to the under reporting of these

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<sup>94</sup> For background on this policy, *see* Buckley and Ruane (2006).

changes in the media, again pointing to the function of her own site in taking up excluded topics. MNP remarks in the post:

**(MNP: April 18, 2012)**

Austerity politics with no reflection on equality or the impacts and outcomes on people's lives does not serve anyone well. One day we might actually continue reform on the flawed system for reform's sake rather than looking at lifestyle opportunities which do not exist. The proposals feed into myths and discrimination against lone parents because they don't reflect on the increasingly diverse reasons for and responses to lone parenthood.

The lack of attention to what is perceived as the reality of peoples and particularly women's lived situation is reinforced by the only comment on this post:

**(April 18, 2012 *Barbara*)**

Again a poorly thought out measure by our Troika puppet government which will beat the poorest and most disenfranchised of our fair country with a large cudgel. I'm all for lone parents being given incentives to start fending for themselves and come out of the welfare poverty trap, but this will leave the most vulnerable horribly exposed. Mothers who are being forced to work without a support network – some are fortunate to have relatives to fall back on, yet many are utterly alone – will have to leave unsupervised latchkey kids which are open to predation, accidents, truancy, falling in with the wrong crowd, the list goes on. The chattering classes can afford to have a traditional homemaker, be it one of the parents or perhaps a nanny or supervised creche facility. No such thing is available to poorer parents. And we wonder why our literacy/academic performance rate is dropping. All children need to be cherished, as it says in the constitution, but the reality is much uglier.

While this comment can be read merely as an act of 'stance confirmation' and alignment with the original post, it explores both gender and class as aspects of the issue. It can further be noted that the tendency towards moral panic, seen in the earlier DMW piece, also manifests here. Whether this is a reflection of the depth of feeling in the midst of societal (legitimation) crisis or a



rhetorical device used to drive a point home effectively can remain an open question. As elsewhere, however, the tendency to characterise the ‘harshness’ of the current atmosphere in Ireland is foregrounded alongside a sense that people’s concerns, particularly those from the lower social classes, remain unheard. The next section turns to the question of how education in Ireland frequently manifests as another field of contention which draws questions of class to the fore once again. It also consolidates my ascription of the narcissism of minor difference to these particular discourses on class in Ireland.

### ***5.5 Mythologising the Middle Class***

The issue of education, particularly as it related to questions of advantage and disadvantage was one that recurred with great regularity across many of the sites. A piece entitled “Online revolution threatens to destroy our failing universities,” extracted from DMW, concerns the perceived threat to domestic universities alongside a perceived breakdown in a clear career trajectory for children of the Irish middle classes. The author expresses a version of social class in Ireland with very broad statements:

**(DMW: January 23, 2013)**

This traditional middle-class deal was simple. Students did the Leaving Cert,<sup>95</sup> struggled with the points race and went to college. The subsequent degree propelled these students up the job escalator, giving them a much better chance of a much better job.

Social mobility, which in Ireland since the 1960s has been impressive according to DMW, was gauged by, among other things, the access to and participation in, third-level education. And this in turn “*fuelled the dynamo of upward social mobility.*” This understanding is primarily why parents are now prepared to pay for education, he suggests.

He continues:

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<sup>95</sup> School leaving examination taken by most 18 year-olds in Ireland.

Importantly, mobility forms the basis for the Great Irish Dream which, like the American Dream, is a story of self-improvement, upward momentum, based on the notion that tomorrow will be better than today and your children's future will be better than your present.

However, this conveyor belt has stopped and we are now looking at the first generation of Irish university graduates who are likely to be poorer than their parents.

[...]

**Poor economic prospects early in one's career can be very damaging. We know from US research that periods of unemployment in a person's 20s have a permanently negative impact on their total lifetime earnings.** Put simply, the unemployed graduate doesn't recover from the period of post-college unemployment. (my emphasis)

It is worth noting the difference in tone expressed in this piece compared with the extract from the previous section. The unemployed graduate is problematised not as a menacing force or 'a social problem waiting to happen' but rather a member of an in-group that evokes the commentators' concern and careful deliberation towards consensus in alignment with the site host. Absent from the discussion is a consideration of the issue as a Europe-wide phenomenon; the rate of youth unemployment in countries like Spain and Greece is disproportionately comprised of *educated* young people.

Here again the author's proclamations on social class composition and mobility are taken at face value by commentators, even though, if we refer back to McCabe's (2008) take on class in Ireland, these are highly subjective views at best.

There are very many replies to this post and they fall into a number of categories: some probe the nature of a university education generally with the aspects of sociability and networking potential highlighted, particularly with reference to the employment market and the perceived failings of the system; Ireland's place in a globalised world is considered. It is proposed by a number of commentators that the value of online education lies in a supplementary capacity rather than a direct replacement for universities. The following comment is exemplary of what I term a 'splatter gun' response, which I encountered in some of the other sites, where multiple groups or factors are all cited as potential threats to the in-group.

**(January 24, 2013 SLICKMICK)**

During the 5 yrs I spent in a Dublin secondary school, not a single employer came to the school to offer career advice or work experience. The smartest people emigrated, the dummies found cushy work via their families. Grads can't compete with experienced workers who in later life can work for 1/2 pay and don't need any training. With Bulgarians and Romanians getting access to the job market on top of half a billion europeans who already enjoy this, the prospects are dismal for the 90,000 who leave the education system per annum. The Uk private sector has generated an impressive 1 million new jobs in the past 3 yrs, **dumb irish employers just moan endlessly, their Bill Cullen attitude is "live with your parents, work for free"**<sup>96</sup> LOL. In the 1950's a net wage of £7 per week, would pay a monthly mortgage on a smart 3/4 bed house, 3 miles from Dublin city! (emphasis added)

The highlighted phrase targets something that would become more pronounced in the discourse in its latter stages. This is the reduction of wages and the growth of internship culture in Ireland, which commentators argued put the children of wealthier families at an advantage in entering the workforce with a parental subsidy to supplement such employment situations. There was also a clear support from many commentators that introducing fees for third level attendance was necessary; that increasing marketisation would make these institutions more 'competitive' and education was framed in these terms and seen in direct relationship to the world of employment and social advancement. Read in its entirety this thread is clearly a strong move by an established middle class cohort to maintain their standard and their position within the society. I argue that this is a combined deployment of communicative, cultural and bonding-variety social capital to propagate a particular viewpoint in a popular discussion forum.

**(January 27, 2013 Pauldiv)**

Education should never be job oriented

[...]

The league table brigade are despicable in my opinion and I would not let any child of mine anywhere near that nonsense. I'd ask them what they like and want to know why. Encourage them a bit and tell them to play the game but keep their eye on the ball

Now the neocon rhetoric has bitten the dust and we have nations full of unemployed graduates whose education is worth hee haw. Some of them could not cook an omlette

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<sup>96</sup> Bill Cullen is an Irish entrepreneur and sometime pundit.

Work is bs. **That is why it is better to self educate and then offer services that you are great at because in this climate with all this technology there is room for everyone to carve a niche and do well. As long as they are clear about what they can do and name a price such people will never be short of work**

Work is miserable full stop unless you are working at what you enjoy.

(emphasis added)

This comment reflects something that is evident in many of the discourses examined. Particularly in the wake of the crisis and often with reference to technology, commentators express a view that somehow the old rules no longer apply; that they are living through large scale transformations that they process sometimes by forming a strong viewpoint, sometimes by expressing anger and frustration or merely by setting down their concerns in these forums.

#### *5.5.1 'Good schools' and 'bad areas'*

At about the same time, there was a wider public discussion on the question of fee-paying schools, whose teachers are paid by the Department of Education, and the ethical questions raised by this practice, which many considered a subsidy to a privileged section of society at a time when cutbacks were affecting the disadvantaged. BRD raised this topic under the headline 'Who pays for fee-paying schools?' as follows:

**(BRD: December 3, 2012)**

Gemma writes:

I'm sure you'll be doing lots of coverage of the Budget this week but I felt that one area of government spending really needs to be highlighted.

... I have been struggling to understand how the government can justify having any involvement with so called "private" schools, and how they continue to pay teachers' salaries at these schools, which is basically subsidising exclusive education sites for the elite.

Earlier this year it was stated that government spending on salaries in private schools is €89 million annually.

For anyone that's interested to find out more, I'll be covering these and other education issues on my twitter site @EducatingEire

This is without doubt a divisive topic, and opinion is often polarised by those who make ideological arguments against the practice and those whose view is pragmatic, thereby taking a marketised view of education and thus seeing no conflict in the subsidy. It is included here as these responses highlight a recurring fundamental conflict that emerges within numerous pieces of data examined: that between the economy and the society.

**(December 3, 2012 *Ahjayzis*)**

There we have it ladies and gentlemen. It's about jealousy and social control.

My parents scrimped and saved to send me to private school, while paying taxes, which in the end cost the state less and them more.

But because the muppets across the road spent those savings on holidays and sent the kid to the local school it's unfair for my parents to do so.

You don't get to tell parents they can't invest in their childrens future because you don't want to do so with yours.

**(December 3, 2012 *AmeliaBedelia*)**

That's really stretching the concept of 'fairness' far and wide. Cost is one issue, but the principle of free and equitable education for all citizens of the state is central. The silly comments below, i.e. "right to spend money on own children's education", "piano lessons for all", evil "socialism" forcing everyone to settle for the lowest common denominator" are just emotive claptrap. The state should not be in the business of ring-fencing of elite areas in education by subsidisation (capital grants and teachers' pay). Currently parents' pay an uneconomic price for this private education (unlike in the UK where the "public" schools get no subsidisation from the state) which enables their kids to get : better facilities, better teacher-pupil ratios, extra tuition, better SEN services, and ergo, better CAO results. Private schools can also select pupils based on religion and family connection to the school, which effectively ensures the school environment is an homogeneous one.

So the only argument pro-subsidisation of fee-paying schools is the cost one?  
Ideologically bankrupt indeed.

Elsewhere commentators widen the discussion to try to examine the composition, as they perceive it, of privileged sectors of Irish society:

**(December 3, 2012 *Tom*)**

The reason there won't be change on this is because the inept governments of past and present have been comprised of an old boys network that went to private schools to begin with. Just look at where that pool of talent got us.

... why should we support the [...] private school system so that we can have the same privileged chinless wonders take public office just so they can engage in decades of clientelism.

The response to this suggestion echoes a set of distinctions that might be expected in such a discussion of Ireland. That our class system is different from that of the UK and that, for instance, urban/rural divisions are important. This tendency to try to account for social distinctions as they are played out in a particularly Irish way in the view of the commentators led me to theorise this within the 'narcissism of minor difference.' A flavour of this tendency can be observed in the follow up comment:

**(December 4, 2012 *Tannoy*)**

Hang on a sec... Are there any private school people serving as Ministers? I would have thought the problem with talent in the Irish executive was related to the preponderance of family dynasties (which are primarily non-Dublin), not over-educated well-to-do types. This ain't England.

A satirical and emotive piece of commentary from the BTR site entitled '*Growing up in a bad area – the facts*' takes a much more targeted and hard-hitting approach to the question of educational privilege in Ireland:

**(BTR: September 3, 2012)**

For a long time now, I've been talking about scumbags and lowlifes. I've been pointing out that people living in bad areas are going to learn from the people they hang around with and eventually they're all going to end up causing trouble.

Children aren't blind. When they see the sort of things their elders get up to, they're going to do the same, because the parents don't care. While they go out thieving, the children are left to fend for themselves, looked after by people who think the very same way as the lowlife families the children grew up in. With a sense of entitlement as if the State exists to look after them.

The government doesn't seem to care. Every day, these spongers collect millions shovelled out to them, money paid in tax by the rest of us.

I'm tired of hearing that it's society's fault. I'm tired of being told that these people are a product of their environment.

I didn't force them to go to school in Blackrock College or Gonzaga, Castleknock or Clongowes.<sup>97</sup> ...

I didn't force any of them to them to take over a bank and crash it into the ground.

Did you?

The effectiveness of the piece is of course its framing of criticism in language normally used in rhetoric against the 'underclass' and the perceived social problems they are seen to create. There follows a measure of dissection of the argument, commentators drawing distinctions between fee paying secondary schools, which are seen as training grounds for the elites and with one

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<sup>97</sup> Fee-paying schools in Dublin.

commentator suggesting that no ‘Jesuit educated man’ was implicated in the downfall of the Irish economy. This points to the narcissism of minor difference whereby commentators seek to draw minute distinctions or to shield particular groups from criticism.

The following comment from the same piece is revelatory in a different manner, however:

**(September 5, 2012 *Munsterman*)**

**This class-based blame-game gets us nowhere so let’s stop it – we as a country got ourselves into the present fix.**

We need to take another leaf out of the Finns book and do away with all fee-paying schools – the whole idea of segregating our children into fee-paying and non fee-paying schools is completely artificial and destructive.

The Finnish Prime Minister’s children go to exactly the same State schools as the ordinary working people’s children – and Finland’s educational system is ranked numero uno in the OECD countries, so they are doing something right (quite a lot in fact) .

Perhaps more importantly, Finland is more egalitarian than Ireland and this is due in no small measure to the fact that the State provides excellent – and equal – services .... Nobody cares what school you went to – or where you live – or what car you drive, if any.

Certainly, there are rich people and rich families in Finland – and “Golden Circles” – pretty much unavoidable whenever people, power and money mix – but the class divisions are less prominent in Finland than Ireland.

In general we need to stop copying the failed Anglo-American economic/social model – and take a much closer look at the Nordics, particularly Finland.

This response, whatever its shortcomings, points to a tendency to reevaluate Irish society in the midst of crisis, to examine other societies and the way things are done. It is not representative of commentary on this topic or indeed in the wider blogosphere; as I have noted elsewhere there was a tendency not to frame matters within a comparative European perspective. What it does align to is the logic of redefinition that was at its peak at this time and was aired in particular in the ITB *Renewing the Republic* series. I argue here that those participating in such discussions, do so once more through a combination of their capitals, cultural, social and communicative.



There are I propose strong links between social and communicative capital. While considerable scholarly attention has been directed towards social networks (particularly Facebook) as sites of potential social capital formation (*see* Katz and Rice, 2002; Ellison et al, 2011; Ellison et al, 2007; Valenzuela et al, 2009; English, 2013; Quan-Hasse and Wellman, 2004), I argue that the forums of public discourse similar to those monitored for the current study are ripe for deeper research into this particular question, without the customary preoccupation with political activation and civic engagement but rather with regard for the circulation of ideology, as I have privileged in this work.

### ***5.6 Things Coming Full Circle***

In an opinion piece in JIE<sup>98</sup> Conor McCabe (August 8, 2011) makes a direct attack on David McWilliams's vision of contemporary Ireland. The piece leads with the statement: "Middle-class people were insufferably smug during the boom – and they have only themselves to blame for the consequences..."

**(JIE: August 8, 2011)**

McWilliams ended *The Pope's Children* with a chapter on The New Elite, whom he called 'the most educated Irish tribe ever'. 'They have done very well in the past ten years,' he said. 'They have driven the economy and, more importantly, the image of this island. They are like nothing which has gone before. The HiCos [a mixture of Hibernian and Cosmopolitan] are the aristocracy of the Pope's Children.' This New Elite drank macchiatos and talked about 'the simple beauty of the Cape Clear people'. They sipped smoothies before climbing Croagh Patrick, and insisted on local cheeses and real sausages, and watched the Lions in New Zealand. 'Old certainties have been challenged,' said McWilliams. 'We can pick and choose what suits us. The overwhelmingly suffocating inferiority complex – the handmaiden of economic under-achievement – has lifted.' He ended by telling us that the HiCo nomads – the emigrants, the top of the elite of the Pope's Children – have returned to Ireland 'with their own ideas of how things should be done and how the country should be run.'

How different it appeared in October 2008 when the actual power elites in Ireland pulled up and dumped €85billion of shit over the head of every single Hico, Breakfast Roll,

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<sup>98</sup> The article originally appeared on the [www.politico.ie](http://www.politico.ie) site.

RobboPaddy and New Venetian in the State, before driving away into the distance, laughing their asses off.

It's hard not to think that the macchiatos most certainly came home to roost that day.

What McCabe takes most issue with is firstly McWilliams's alleged distortion of the percentage of people who fall into middle and working class brackets but more acutely the assertion that it all amounts to a matter of choice – once again – on the part of the individual. He points to a feature of McWilliam's DMW website (no longer available) that allowed visitors to play a game to determine which group they fitted into by agreeing with a series of statements. He concludes: *“Class is not about choice. It is about power. And the power of the middle classes is just that: middling.”*

In the comments section below McWilliams is defended in strong terms by fellow economist, Ronan Lyons, another prolific commentator on such topics. He begins by quoting from the article:

**(JIE: August 8, 2011 Ronan Lyons)**

It's hard to know what the future may bring, but in all probability in 2029 we will still be paying for the bank guarantee in one form or another.”

While not everyone has the time to crunch the numbers, this sort of economic illiteracy really is inexcusable from someone who, as a commenter earlier pointed out, smugly writes about the smugness of others. If you want to pass yourself off as being at a higher level of understanding than everyone else, you really should check the facts before you write.

[...]

It is easy (and in large part justifiable) to be angry about the extra debt we have, due to the banks. However, to get distracted by that is to miss the bigger problem. The Government is living beyond its means and that is unsustainable.

Once more the two sides speaking up in this exchange are highly representative of wider discourses occurring in Ireland at this time. I highlight this exchange because it features a blogger challenging another blogger on a third party site and another online commentator rising to the challenge in order to defend a colleague. All of these persons are named. They are, in my view exercising their communicative capital and within this making a case not merely for their

own opinion but the version of events and the ‘truth’ they wish to promote. Furthermore, they are speaking not just for themselves but on behalf of large swathes of the people they classify.

## ***5.7 Conclusion***

This chapter has examined and analysed the manner in which authors and commentators approach social groups. These include groups that they perceive themselves as belonging to as well as competing against and also ‘othered’ groups within the society. Advancing the argument that these commentators are themselves privileged by their presence and visibility within the forums, I suggest that these sites become a crucible for the formation of abiding perceptions of groups and class within contemporary Ireland. In sum, they are sites of ideology formation and reinforcement.

The chapter has foregrounded class analysis because this was a predominating theme in the data encountered. I have aligned my position on the question of class with that of Savage et al. (2013) who direct us to attend to matters of culture (and by clear extension communication) in our analysis of contemporary social groups. I argue for a redefinition of social class that accounts for the presence of communicative capital as a key component. The chapter gave accounts of how divisions and distinctions are often bolstered within the blogosphere and I consider this tendency deleterious to the formation of social capital that may serve to create bridges between diverse groups within the society. Notably, named and familiar names from the wider public culture were found to address these questions in the most vociferous manner, using their store of communicative capital to do so. Following Rojas et al (2011) I argue that we should adopt a communicative approach to social capital that views communication as the fundamental source of societal reproduction and integration.

I now move to consider broader perceptions of national identity in these forums and turn my attention to ‘Ireland of the Techno-culture,’ exploring links between the tech industry, an official rhetoric of what Ireland imagines itself to be and examine this with continuing consideration of public sphere and communicative capital.

## ***Chapter 6: ‘International Ireland’***

*“We are a two-bit emerging market economy, dominated by political and business elites. I think it’s an open and shut case. .... We are almost the definition of a banana republic.”*

Extract from *thestory.ie* 17 November 2012

*“Arthur’s Day is so vile because it was dreamed up by PR folk at Diageo in 2009, but is presented as a longstanding tribute to the Guinness founder. It is “celebrated” by a blitz of media and free gigs where Irish music fans have pints of the black stuff foisted on them while they listen to average indie bilge. This is Ireland as brand: Guinness is good for you and your nation, and you’d better not disagree.”*

Wright, M. *The Telegraph*, 26 September 2013

### ***6.0 Introduction***

This chapter surveys the perception and projection of contemporary Irish identity as overarching themes in the blogosphere, moving the analysis to the macro level of the nation. I consider a paradox whereby ‘the nation’ exists within highly globalised communications platforms, in an era when we are told that the concept of nationhood is purportedly outmoded. I examine how

differing versions of Ireland are privileged and communicated to wider publics, frequently within the purview of an economic imperative.

The previous two chapters have in turn examined online representations of individuals (micro level) and groups (miso level) in Ireland. I have built a case that thus far these spaces show considerable evidence of the circulation of communicative capital and function less as public spheres, within my definitions of these theories. This chapter takes a considerably broader view, addressing definitional questions about national identity in online space during the timeframe examined. This widening reconnects the theory with Dean's (2003;2010) original rendering of communicative capital and examines the type of overarching concerns that she foregrounds. Thus I hold my redefined version of communicative capital up against the original to see how they fit together. Here I also consider how the different orders of communicative capital that I have delineated (micro, miso and macro) relate to and depend upon each other.

This ideation of national identity occurs at a point of both undisputable revelation and expectant transformation within the legitimation crisis over the timeframe I examined. It is by now clear that intense discourses on the current 'state of the nation,' the revelation of past mistakes and fears for the future were live and almost constant features of the public culture examined. I also approach this question with a perception of an 'authorised' or 'common sense' version of Irish identity – hegemonic Irishness – which underpins, I suggest, the wider discourse. This aligns to the earlier-cited observations from Peillon (1982), where he pointed to the conditions that people seem to assume are just naturally the way they are. I read the material I encountered, bearing this tendency in mind, to examine if it was in compliance or at variance with this.

Crucial to this hegemonic vision of contemporary Ireland is an unquestioning embrace of the *macro* version of communicative capital, at a corporate and State-sponsored level, that conforms more closely to the version that Dean (2003; 2010) sets out. I perceive this as 'industrial strength' communicative capital that intersects with the sphere of the State and the market. To what extent a vision of Ireland as a base for such capital through its economic policy is supported or critiqued in the data examined is a key concern of this chapter. I propose connections between individualised communicative capital, abundant in the hands of ideal type citizen/subjects, group level communicative capital, bearing a relationship to social capital and this larger-scale version.

The current chapter starts by examining perceptions of the crisis as an event, and the associated austerity regime – the dominant theme of a ‘bankrupt nation’ which proliferated in the blogs examined. This has been the overarching point of reference throughout the discourse and this thesis. I then consider the manner in which attention within the examined discourses shifted outward from consideration of internal social groups to the far-flung Irish diaspora, matters of Irish heritage and initiatives such as the Gathering of 2013.<sup>99</sup> Next I examine the ‘salvational’ consolidation of Ireland as a hub for communicative technology industries – the digital island; this manifesting most clearly in attempts to manage perceptions of the country by international onlookers and to both rebrand the nation and relaunch the economy. How much this infiltrates the wider social imaginary is also considered. Finally, I examine the connections between these national brand-building practices, the public sphere and my rendering of communicative capital.

### **6.1 ‘Banal Nationalism’**

Building on the somewhat surprising finding of a remarkably *homogenous* set of voices on general topics within the sites examined in previous chapters, *i.e.* few contributions from migrants or the Irish abroad identifying themselves clearly as such, I examine the effect of this on discussions which contribute to shared visions of a distinctly embedded and often *uncontested* social imaginary, resonating with what Billig (1995) frames as ‘banal nationalism.’ Very frequently there was a strong sense of an assumption among participants that discursive forums were comprised of native Irish in residence here and exchanging views that were in accord, more often than not. This was also evident in the material described in Chapter 5, concerning social groups and class. This does not sit easily within contemporary theory on this topic, either from the sociological or technological perspective, as we shall see.

As before, a series of buzzwords prompted the direction of my enquiry. The manner in which the short-hand phrase ‘Ireland Inc.’ had become a byword for a society that was unambiguously represented as a corporate entity; the ‘re-branding’ of Ireland as an ‘innovation island’ or ‘digital

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<sup>99</sup> This was a government driven initiative to attract tourists of Irish descent to come and visit Ireland over the year and to reconnect with their Irish heritage.

nation’; the unquestioning fetishisation of communicative technology – all of this prompted me to examine these particular strands of the public conversation and the assumptions behind them.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, while established media referenced the ‘New Irish’ and ‘non-nationals,’ I sought out contributions about and input from these groups in the online sphere in a quest to establish who was implicated in discussions on ‘being Irish’ in its current iteration. This corresponds to the matter of cosmopolitanism versus nationalism in Ireland, as raised earlier by both Peillon (1982) and many commentators thereafter (*see* Ingles, 2008; Bartley and Kitchen, 2007; Corcoran, 2006; Keohane and Kuhling, 2004, 2007).

### 6.1.1 *Plus ça change... ?*

During the timeframe prior to that examined, a number of grand narratives predominated in discussions of Irish identity. Prominent among them was the view of Ireland as a ‘land of peace and reconciliation’ following the peace process in Northern Ireland in the 1990s, closely followed by a period of illusory prosperity and the piece of mythology (following Barthes, 1972) that the Celtic Tiger Ireland had now been revealed to be.

Graham (2001) problematised the paradox of ‘post-nationalism’ typical of the intellectual consideration of Ireland in the latter part of the twentieth century, pointing to one important consideration for the current work. He noted that “*rethinking, revising and repositioning Irish nationalism have become the central preoccupations of intellectual movements in Irish culture. The ‘nation’ remains the dominant discursive formation.*” (111) I argue below that this remains true into the present, with only certain modifications and that theories of disruption or transformation by deterritorialised media presence and practice are unfounded and largely hyperbolic.

More recent years have seen a society coming to grips with rapid demographic change brought about by substantial inward migration (*see* Barrett et al., 2006; Davis, 2003; Krings, 2010; Lentin

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<sup>100</sup> The genesis of this vision of Ireland can be traced back to the 1990s, *see* for instance Wickham (1997). It was reactivated in policy in a framework document by the then Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Brian Cowen in 2008 entitled: ‘Building Ireland’s Smart Economy – A Framework for Sustainable Economic Renewal’.

and McVeigh, 2006; Wickham et al., 2008) a country experiencing sudden affluence and accelerated consumption (Ryan, 2003), and latterly, a place where ‘old reliable’ institutions, such as the church and the entire political system, were either exposed as flawed or no longer provided immediate reassurance on questions of identity, as they once had (*see* Candon, 2009). This I have framed in this thesis as a legitimisation crisis which has been used to contextualise this work.

### *6.1.2 Diversity or fragmentation?*

It is also noteworthy that the more recent discussions were performed in a discursive landscape that was increasingly frenzied and diffuse. The expectation would follow that now a greater diversity of versions and visions of Irishness would be generated and then become available for analysis. It might also be expected that these representations would now lack the kind of clear-cut ideological binaries that Peillon (1982) was able to identify so neatly for his study.

I had embarked on this project concerned that I would be unable to locate a discernible ‘nation’ amid the placelessness of the online sphere, and yet it transpired that the opposite was true. The remarkable initial finding was a set of assumptions and values that were often performed in a taken for granted manner. The findings of this research concur with those of Moffatt (2011: 1) who remarks: *“there can be no avoiding the position that people in Ireland remain firmly socialised through a discourse of nationalised identity.”* In many ways this is an extraordinary proposition, in a highly mobile, globalised and communicative world, saturated in new media technology and yet it resonates with emerging nationalism evident across the developed world (*see* Friedman, 2015). Frequently in the sites, discussions on Irishness were performed in a manner that implied that everyone participating was ‘native born’ Irish and even more remarkably that these discussions were somehow invisible to outsiders.

It needs to be disclosed that on this question of national identity a number of the sites provided little or no material for analysis as these matters were not part of their remit and thus the sample



was automatically scaled down.<sup>101</sup> I felt that by continuing to probe sites where nothing was apparent I might stray into territories of over interpretation. The ‘grand narrative’ of national identity was much more frequently played out in the news sites, which represents the commercial end of the spectrum of the sample. This was a significant finding that I shall return in my conclusions.

### 6.1.3 Local and global

In their analysis of globalisation as a form of ‘identity crisis,’ Morley and Robins (1995: 26) propose that “*[i]n a world of false and frenetic nationalities and of reckless and uncontrollable global nationalism, the struggle for meaningful communities and actual social identity is more and more difficult.*”

The ‘fashionable view’ of how we consider postmodern identity formations, with attention to their mobile and deterritorialised composition, their fragmentation, their negotiated, hybrid characteristics is addressed here by Mills (2002: 69; my emphasis):

It seems obvious that something is happening to the way we communicate, organise ourselves, and identify ourselves. But what? Are identities undergoing fundamental change? Are they being deterritorialised? The answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, the Internet is making non-territorially based identities more viable or ‘‘virtually’’ more real. On the other, **the same bundle of technologies is reifying old-fashioned ethnic/national/communal territorially based identifications.** A contradiction? Of course, but in the Age of Ambiguity that should not bother us, for we can recognise the local and the global forces simultaneously tearing us apart and binding us together, and handle this seeming cognitive dissonance with aplomb.

In taking account of these theoretical considerations, I would observe that I experienced a much less disjointed view of Irishness in the forums examined than I had anticipated, and a strong sense of ‘ownership’ of the question by commentators and site hosts from Ireland.

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<sup>101</sup> NWL, MNP and STR did not yield material for analysis on the question of national identity; it is observed though that one pseudonym adopted by a commentator on NWL used the handle ‘BananaRepublic,’ a recurring term generally at this time.

Across the sites and categories commentators appeared ‘at home’ with and constantly enthused by the topic. It was almost invariably what appeared to be a monocultural assembly of commentators writing in Ireland about what they perceived this place to represent to them, with only infrequent nods to outside perception and the external gaze.

In considering Irish identity in recent years, Conway (2006: 78) suggests that:

...national identity has to do with boundary creation and maintenance. It has to do with creating a national ‘we’ and the criteria that underlie this construction. But this concept of the nation as territorially bound implies that ethno-national distinctions are co-terminous with politically drawn boundaries (Triandafyllidou 1999; Triandafyllidou 1998). In the context of international flows of capital and labour we know now that this is increasingly not the case.

The final line of this quote is problematic and we await evidence for such claims. The question I want to add to this is how international flows of *communication* might impact on the reframing of national identity and the possibilities of boundary creation or reinforcement by discursive means. My initial observation is that neither Mills’s (2002) assertion above, not that of Conway (2006), resolve this question in an entirely satisfactory way.

In *Blog Theory*, Dean (2010: 69) states that: “[b]y now an extensive literature exists documenting the production of national identities through media and communication technologies. [...] twentieth-century technological projects were also identity projects.” It has been suggested that public broadcasting played a substantial part in the creation of homogenous and authorised visions of national identity in the twentieth century (*see* Kiberd, 1999). This corresponds to the experience internationally too:

Historically ... broadcasting has assumed a dual role, serving as the political public sphere of the nation state, and as the focus for national cultural identification [...] The political and social concerns of the public service era – with democracy and public life, with national culture and identity have come to be regarded as factors inhibiting the development of new media markets....Audio-visual geographies are thus becoming detached from the symbolic spaces of national culture, and realigned on the basis of the more ‘universal’ principles of international consumer culture.

Morley and Robins (1995: 10-11)

These observations resonate with the enquiry undertaken by Keohane and Khuling (2007) in their attempt to reconcile questions of globalisation and cosmopolitanism in Ireland at the time of

the boom. Their other work (2004) positions Ireland as a ‘collision culture’ suspended within a space of liminality, where traditionalism and modernism coalesce with and confront each other. I have approached the data with questions prompted by such theory. Later in this chapter I suggest that modernisation theory remains as a key model accounting for the embrace of a techno-determinist ethos within the public culture in contemporary Ireland.

#### *6.1.4 Outward and inward gazes*

One surprising finding of the research was, as mentioned, how easy it was to identify a space as being specific to this country and its concerns, and how other countries and cultures were often considered merely in reference to us and our view of ourselves, if at all. Where imaginary lines of association did present they were more often connected to other Anglosphere nations (the U.K., the U.S.) and hardly ever in relation to other European ‘peripheral’ nations (Greece, Portugal). The more common finding was a subtle reinforcement of a sense of ‘Irish exceptionalism,’ which has typically intrigued and bothered cultural commentators on Ireland in equal measure (*see* Thompson, 2001). This reluctance to perceive the nation in reference to, or even in solidarity with, other European peripheral countries, even from the left-leaning sites, again came as a surprise.

Pauwels (2012: 66) points out that, “*it took some time before social scientists looked at cyberspace as an integral part of contemporary society and not as a strange refuge for some of its members or a sort of ‘parallel’ virtual universe...*” Here I approach the final concern of the thesis – that of national identity – with an acknowledgment of this but also with a clear reluctance to concede that the online sphere is now a primary site of identity construction on the level of nationhood; I argue instead that it is often a site of identity *consolidation* and that rather than negating national boundaries it frequently serves to reinforce them. This tends to add substance to Pauwels’s (2012) claims and to counter the overblown claims by theorists and general commentators who favour a techno-determinist stance.

## ***6.2 Strong Language, Tough Times***

As I have pointed out, in Chapters 4 and 5, there was an acceleration in the genre of ‘state of the nation’ discussion at the time of my survey, across all three types of site examined. The tendency was observed for larger ‘high status’ sites, such as the ITB to give the lead in such discussions.

I suggest that in gauging the ‘emotional temperature’ of the texts in the immediate aftermath of the crisis, tones of accusation and anger were greatly in evidence; very often topics became heated with discussants adopting extreme, or at least hyperbolic and emotionally expressive, views in their stance on particular issues. This spoke to a particular tenor of fervour or what might be interpreted as passion, manifesting as a type of ‘patriotic’ discourse that it has become fashionable to regard as outmoded and redundant within postmodern conceptions of fluid and negotiated national identity formation.

Comments like the following indicate the flavour of the conversation:

**(STR: May 8, 2011 *Luke McFadden*)**

We should not have separated from the UK in the first instance as it brought us only mass immigration, mass ignorance, mass clerical child abuse, going to mass a lot, pretending we were a republic when we were not, we were ruled by an elite of backward catholic ignoramuses and we still had to get the boat the England anyhow to try and find a job but the only difference was that they despised us for all the dirty work done in our name. Great well done to the glorious republic of Saturday night alcoholics and screwed up catholics, the only people who benefited were an elite like the president and all the other professionals with their noses in the trough.

The commentator then suggests that Ireland enjoyed its best years under British rule, with Dublin as the second city of the empire, until it was ruined by those ‘gobshites of 1916.’<sup>102</sup>

**(May 8, 2011 *Luke McFadden*)**

We spent from 1922 to the 1990s as one of the most dysfunctional and laughable countries in Europe, poor and bitter towards the British even though we really wanted to

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<sup>102</sup> The process by which Ireland gained its independence from the British Empire originated in the 1916 Rising.

be British. Europe gave us some money and we thought that was the answer but maybe not ... yes back on bended knee, beg the British to have us ... but i doubt that they would.

While this is clearly a provocative and not entirely serious comment, it does express the sense of profound frustration as well as the wider discourse of this being a time of absolute breakdown of beliefs, structures and institutions that had obtained prior to the crisis. Thus my suggestion of legitimisation crisis resonates with commentary such as this.

### *6.2.1 Taking a position*

As previous chapters have shown, individual commentators not only expressed their ire but in doing so crucially sought to position themselves and display their own knowledge and sense of legitimacy as commentators on important questions of the day. I have linked this to capital demonstration or appropriation, encompassing both cultural and communicative varieties. Equally, certain groups were once more identified as culprits, beneficiaries or victims. An overarching divide emerged between those who isolated wrongdoers, either as individuals or groups, and those who conceded to the view that all citizens had collectively brought about the events leading up to the crisis – the discourse of shared responsibility favoured by many politicians at this time also. These tendencies were rehearsed in Chapter 5.

### *6.2.2 States of failure and fatigue*

As was explored towards the end of Chapter 4, the onset of the crisis was characterised by a distinct lack of the discursive rage identified here translating itself into public protest. In a reprint of an article on STR, and quoted at the opening of this chapter, journalist Gavin Sheridan positions Ireland as “*an emerging economy ruled by oligarchs.*” The piece is titled ‘Ireland, the state that failed’ and at the end of it the author informs us that he has – rather cleverly – taken an article written about Russia and simply substituted ‘Ireland’ each time the country’s name

occurs. He then sets down a check list of indicators to prove his point. This post is cited because it gives an indication of the level of comparison and deconstruction that was apparent in the redefinition of Ireland in the wake of economic collapse. There was also considerable discussion of how Ireland had been perceived by international media in the immediate aftermath of the crisis.<sup>103</sup>

In response to an article in the JIE by Colm O’Gorman entitled ‘It’s time to give the citizens of Ireland the republic they deserve,’ an example of the charged views surrounding Ireland as a bankrupt state follows in the comments:

**(August 1, 2013 *MarkAnthonyBannon*)**

What’s happening to our country is not the fault of greedy politicians and the political class.

It is our fault. We let them have free reign. We accept whatever they feed us. We talk and talk about change but no one acts or certainly no one is prepared to support those that act. [...]

We cannot blame others anymore we can only blame ourselves for letting it happen again and again and again. Stand up and be prepared to get onto the streets and protest.

**Be prepared to ignite the Irish in you. We are a nation of revolutionaries** and it’s time we start believing in ourselves again. (my emphasis)

This level of rhetorical posturing was not isolated; it was rather much in evidence. We might view it as raiding the dressing-up box of stereotypical nationalistic garb, but these were desperate times and they were written up as such. The topic of Ireland’s sovereignty, and the re-empowerment of its people, was one of the first clear responses to the Troika intervention in 2010. The ITB in its series ‘Renewing the Republic’ sought to position events in the context of a

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<sup>103</sup> An article in *Vanity Fair* by Michael Lewis entitled ‘When Irish eyes are crying’ from March 2011, and another from *Süddeutsche Zeitung* simply entitled ‘Abgezocht’ (Conned) from July 2013 (Zaschke) are prime examples of this. Both were subsequently analysed and discussed in the Irish mainstream media. The author of the latter article is quoted in *The Irish Times*: “I realised that the Irish rebel instinct isn’t as pronounced and that it is matched with a kind of lethargy, a certain fatalism as well as melancholy.”

wider history and in particular the upcoming centenary of the state's foundation.<sup>104</sup> Once again, a flavour of some of the sentiment generated by this 'national conversation' on the direction for Ireland is evident:

**(ITB: March 10, 2010 *VincentS*)**

I appeal to all Irish people to urgently form a national summit, and look at all of the possibilities and opportunities that we still have, not just the limited ones we are being offered by political parties. [...]

The Irish people have all the talent and resources we need to remake this great nation, and it is simply insane for us to sit back and allow ourselves be herded into the hands of the IMF, or onto ships to America and Australia. Let all the failed political leaders take the ships this time.

We must become "a nation once again", and reclaim our power and birthright, if we are truly to honour the heroic men and women of 1916, 1798, 1641, 1169, and of every year in between.<sup>105</sup> If they were here today, that's exactly what they would do, but not with guns; with the hearts and minds and voices that they gave us.

The above piece is taken from the letters to the editor (reproduced online) on the topic; the piece below is an extract from one of the articles in the series, both from 2010. The *Renewing the Republic* series also coincided with a number of live forums that had emerged in the wider public sphere at this time. The *Claiming Our Future* group, *We the People*, *Spectacle Defiance*, *Dublin Intellectual*, the *Direct Democracy*<sup>106</sup> group and the *Political Reform* movement are examples of discussion platforms that were established and which sought to address the types of questions examined by the ITB in this series.

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<sup>104</sup> It may be noted that politicised groups such as *Eirigi* and the *New Land League* began to emerge at this time, drawing on historical versions of Irish nationalism and colonial discourses and sought to frame current events in Ireland in parallel to earlier struggles for autonomy.

<sup>105</sup> Significant dates in Irish history of rebellion and the quest for national independence.

<sup>106</sup> These groups were monitored during what I have described as the 'ethnographic phase' of the research, in Chapter 3.

**(March 20, 2010 Gary Joyce)**

In times of great insecurity, disappointment and anger such as we are experiencing today, the appetite for strong leadership is palpable everywhere. In the absence of anything resembling authority, competence or courage coming from the institutions of the State, government or the church, there is a void waiting to be filled. History tells us that this is both a threat and an opportunity.

The sense of all-out legitimization crisis is evoked once more by this commentator. He goes on to suggest that Irish people are at a turning point. They can leave it to others (the institutions, systems and individuals they no longer trust), or they can accept their responsibilities (along with their rights) as citizens of the Republic.

(...)

This means **being willing to engage as citizens, not just as consumers**. [...]The most important thing is that the conversation happens – that people are invited to take part and contribute constructively to reshaping Ireland. It is not about how, when, why or who makes it happen. An online version of a national citizenship forum as called for by Fiach Mac Conghail (Irish Times, March 15th) would be a good start.

The author continues in this vein, pointing towards the necessity for individual and collective responsibility to be embraced. We may also note an invocation to ‘communicative action’ (Habermas, 1984) in the above remarks; a sense that this ‘conversation’ is not just a component of change and revitalisation but rather integral to it.

(...)

What encourages me, however, is that I believe we want to accept this challenge. There’s been a lot of talk about how materialistic we’ve become – how the old values have disappeared, along with the authority of the church. I wonder about that. **I believe that, for all the societal changes we’ve seen in the past generation, there remains buried deep in the Irish psyche a profound commitment to community, and a profound suspicion of an ethos that is entirely individualistic.**

I believe that this new confident generation of Irish people has retained its values of generosity and fairness, and it would rise to the challenge if given the lead. The real issue, surely, is whether our political system is capable of providing us with that lead.



The forgoing text manages to capture the tone of some of the discourse in circulation at this time. A call to essentialised and purportedly inherent ‘values of the Irish’ combined with an assumption of individual agency, and often unspecified duties of citizenship all combine to form noble and laudable ‘call to arms,’ yet these aspirational and rhetorical texts frequently managed to trap discussants in predictable and frustrating patterns of blame and often exasperation. There are, in the highlighted sections above, almost echoes of a decidedly twentieth century construction of Irish identity, even blending in traces of deValera’s conception of a ‘pure and simple’ people at their core, sullied by outside influences of materialism and corruption.<sup>107</sup>

None of this sits comfortably within conceptions of postmodern identity formation on the level of the nation, yet it was widely in evidence in Ireland of 2010. Crucially, it was most frequently delivered by the type of person identified in Chapter 4 as manifesting strong levels of ‘expertise’, credibility and displaying varieties of capital that we can interpret as an amalgam of the social, cultural and communicative varieties.

### *6.2.3 Renewing the Republic all over again...*

As time progressed, the Renewing-the-Republic sub-theme had become exceedingly widespread in the blogs. Some of the fatigue in response to this wave, in this case from JIE, is expressed here:

**(JIE: August 1, 2013 *Jim Walsh*)**

Save us from the weekly pointless “new republic” articles that Journal delights in printing. Not one clear policy in how we achieve the utopia that apparently is before our eyes if only we looked for it. **I could have written this article despite not having any sort of financial or economic background.**

In fact, if Journal are willing to pay me a few quid, I’ll supply next week’s “new republic” article for them. I mean how hard can it be. A bit of “how terrible the economic decisions are”, a dash of “we all deserve better”, a touch of “we should all be equal in

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<sup>107</sup> Eamon de Valera was a leader of the 1916 Rising and later served as Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and later President. He was noted for his normative pronouncements on the type of Ireland he envisioned, heavily influenced by the Catholic hierarchy and their moral ideology. For more, *see* Ferriter (2005).

society” and top it off with an obligatory reference to the founding fathers of the state. Possibly put in a mention of “jailing people” as well just to get the blood boiling.

There you go Journal. All done for you. You can pop the cheque in the post!

(my emphasis)

It is noteworthy that whereas the mainstay of the main article concerns “*economic, social and cultural rights*” and refers at length to the question of political accountability, the highlighted section of the quote adopts the default position at this time of referencing everything to questions of finance and economics. A frequent trope of such discussions was to pit the political milieu against the world of business and suggest a technocratic solution whereby the country was managed with greater efficiency by a recognised business leader. This again ties into a vision of Ireland that has been propagated in such forums and is often referred to as Ireland Inc. Thus the conceptual proposition of nation as corporation is strengthened by such discourse and becomes matter of fact, due to the absence of challenge or indeed the presence of voices from the counterpublics. There was generally very little critique of such discourses of society as economy in much of the material encountered.

### ***6.3 Going Away to Look Back***

It is significant that the next major series of articles that the ITB produced was the ongoing ‘Generation Emigration’ series which had its beginnings in 2011:

**(ITB: January 5, 2012)**

OVER THE past year, The Irish Times – in print and through its website [irishtimes.com](http://irishtimes.com) – has struck up an ongoing conversation with individuals and families who have moved to different parts of the world, many to traditional landing spots, Britain (especially London), the US, Australia and Canada. It has been a remarkable engagement, most notable for the frankness and honesty about the circumstances which prompted departure.

There is the wrench from home, family and friends, and the terrible sadness of leaving  
....

Above all they have conveyed feelings of resoluteness, determination and willingness to confront upheaval and getting on with forging a new beginning. Often, especially for new

migrants, they are living in difficult circumstances although the local economy may be performing significantly better than our own.

Threaded through all, however, is a sense of opportunity, particularly among younger emigrants. For so many it is a positive part of their lives, while texting, phoning, Skyping, and Facebooking become the mode of communicating with home. The ability to support one another, to network, and to use the benefits of third-level education is the hallmark of Generation Emigration 2012. **Our collective history, our diasporic gene, has meant leavetaking is almost the norm – even if it also acts as a valve in a social and economic pressure cooker.**

Statements like the one highlighted feed into what I previously referred to as an ‘authorised version’ of Irish identity. In sum, among other characteristics (innovative, independent, digitally literate etc.) the ideal type citizen conforms to the needs of his/her country before personal drives, even if this entails leaving this country to settle elsewhere; the ideal type citizen/subject puts the nation’s needs before their own.

Although it is debatable whether the ITB, across its print and online platforms, retains its status as the newspaper of record in a much-changed Ireland, it is no great leap to suggest that it thinks so itself and this text contains a tone of gravitas, setting out what is worded as the ‘agreed position’ on recent Irish emigration. Echoes of the meta-stance suggestive of communicative capital, and identified in Chapter 4 where I profiled members of the discursive elite, are apparent in texts such as this. In accord with the theory of communicative capital I present in this thesis, here we see it in its highest order, operationalised and funnelled into the crucible of national identity making.

The above text works by suggesting that this is ‘the natural way’ of things and that leave-taking is an act of self-sacrifice for a greater good; thus the official narrative stands undisputed. Very often the contributors, who are persons of standing and reputation, assume a moderate tone and set up highly *reasoned* positions which are frequently followed by comments which tend to be in accord with the original poster. Again, I identified this as a characteristic of sites where strong communicative capital is generated and where boat rocking is absent, as in the discussion on DMW site in Chapter 5. Whether this remains an example of public sphere engagement, a consolidation of hegemony or yet further manoeuvres in the acquisition and display of communicative capital may remain an open question. Under the definition of communicative

capital elaborated earlier in the thesis however, these comments are examples of high level communicative capital generation, in my terms.

It is important to note that both the ‘Renewing the Republic’ and ‘Generation Emigration’ series are key examples of predominating discourses; they straddle both print and online versions of the ITB and, as mentioned above, have their offshoots and imitators elsewhere in the online sphere. Therefore, a case is made that on overarching and substantial questions of the day, commentary continues to take its cue from established forums such as *The Irish Times* (ITB).

#### ***6.4 The (Sometimes Disagreeable) Diaspora***

As the economic and social crisis deepened during the research period, I observed increasing attention given to the matter of the Irish diaspora. It is frequently pointed out, as by the ITB piece above, that the definition of the diaspora has altered dramatically due of course to electronic modes of rapid communication, and increased mobilities, and thus this imagined community (Anderson, 1983) is not in any sense as far away as it once might have seemed. While conceptions of diaspora may be nuanced and mutable (*see* Hall, 1990), it is fair to suggest that by definition they hinge at their simplest on an extension and elaboration of the idea of Self, rather than something with the quality of an alien Other.<sup>108</sup> The discourse examined concerning the Irish diaspora pointed to the complex and emotive nature of these interrelationships and their perceptions on both sides.

This redefinition of the diaspora culminated, at official level, in a more recent policy document, entitled “*Global Irish: Ireland’s Diaspora Policy*” (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2015) which has sought to consolidate Ireland’s official policy towards its relatively large diasporic populations. Drawing on the aspirations of the Irish Constitution of 1937 it states: “*The Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its*

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<sup>108</sup> For more, *see* Chow (1993)

*cultural identity and heritage. Our vision is a vibrant, diverse global Irish community, connected to Ireland and to each other.*"<sup>109</sup>

The origins of this new-found consideration of the diaspora are traceable through the period I examined. In tandem with a renewal of interest in the Irish cultural sector as a potential export, the matter of heritage as commodity emerged as part of the mission to 'put Ireland back on its feet.'

In July 2011 the first iteration of this was mooted. JIE sought the views of its readers on the matter:

**(JIE: July 14, 2011)**

Earlier this week, writing for *TheJournal.ie*, US-based publisher Niall O'Dowd commented on the 70 million people who make up the Irish diaspora worldwide, and the "incredible footprint" Irish descendants and emigrants have left around the world. He also lamented the lack of a "concrete acknowledgement" of that diaspora.

Now the government has confirmed that it's to introduce a 'Certificate of Irish Heritage' from October, which will enable members of the diaspora who are not citizens to have their Irish roots officially recognised.

Applicants are likely to have to pay a charge, and will not have any legal rights or official citizenship. They will have to prove their ancestry and links to Ireland.

What do you make of this 'proof of Irishness' certificate? Is it worthwhile?<sup>110</sup>

This rather predictably divided opinion between those who perceived it as a sound, pragmatic and logical response and those who took a considerably more cynical view.

**(July 14, 2011, Alan Mulvey)**

think a lot more people from other country's are more proud these days to be Irish than our own people and leaders

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<sup>109</sup> See <https://www.dfa.ie/media/globalirish/global-irish-irelands-diaspora-policy.pdf>

<sup>110</sup> See 'Only 3,000 people pay €40 fee to prove they are Irish' *The Irish Times* 10 August 2015.

**(July 14, 2011, *Rupert J. Cahill*)**

Now that is something to think about. Well said Alvin. People are all too quick to run down our Country.

**(July 14, 2011, *Séamus Johnston*)**

You can almost hear the money spinning

**(July 14, 2011, *Seamus*)**

Bolstering the notion that we are nation of charlatans and crooks. Paddywhackery!

**(July 14, 2011, *Michael Fanning*)**

if people want to pay for it why not? it's better that it should be the government doing it and helping bridge the budget deficit than some Del Boy looking for easy money.

The discursive consensus that emerges on these interventions concerning the call to the diaspora might well be summed up in the phrase “*je sais bien, mais quand meme*” (“*I know very well, but even so...*”). It is applied by Zizek’s to his concept of *fetishistic disavowal* defined as “*a situation where people recognise the truth but proceed as if they haven’t.*” (Flisfeder and Wills, 2014: 16). It is framed as a tactic that people are forced to employ in order to survive the contradictions inherent in postmodernity and life within late capitalism. To paraphrase: the commentators know very well that ‘tapping’ the diaspora for financial contributions entails a loss of face, a certain amount of performativity and an unspoken acknowledgement of this being a rather cynical exercise at best. But of course the inevitable punchline to all this is simple: needs must!

This call to the diaspora had, however, opened up much more profound and hidden aspects of tension in the question of Irish identity in the global sphere. An opinion piece entitled: “The Irish Diaspora: We want something important in return if we are to help Ireland.” on DMW expresses

the view of a second-generation Irish emigrant from the U.K. taking DMW and his contemporaries to task on a little-discussed aspect of the relationship between the two Irelands – home and abroad:

**(DMW [guest post]: September 8, 2010 T. Keogh)**

...when I read about your ideas about energising the Irish Diaspora for the economic benefit of Ireland, I couldn't help but think that while it is an exciting idea, it is one that is doomed to failure simply because of some very important obstacles I have noticed during my time in the Republic.

The idea of extending Irish citizenship to the 50 million members of the Irish Diaspora on the premise that many will return to Ireland and contribute to the economy is, he suggests, flawed. He points to the fact that there are over two million Irish citizens in Britain who have always had the right to return. Most of these, he continues, are only second generation Irish, as opposed to fourth or fifth generation, as commonly the case in the US. He asks and answers a question that brings him to the crux of the matter:

**(September 8, 2010 T. Keogh)**

Why did they not all return *en masse* to the land of their parents during the days of the Celtic Tiger?

It is simple – despite having a strong connection to Ireland, most prefer to stay in England or Scotland because **the attitude towards the Irish Diaspora in Ireland is very hostile. It is fair to say this hostility is endemic. Only the very determined could live in a country where you are persistently remonstrated in your everyday life for having the arrogance to claim an Irish identity just because you have Irish parents.**

He cautions the site host not to underestimate the seriousness of the effects of the hostility towards the Diaspora because “*it is the cultural cancer of Ireland.*” Once Irish-Americans realise how scorned they are as ‘plastic paddies’ in Ireland, he suggests, and it is not “*some light-hearted ribbing but real, irate anger,*” they too will lose interest in reconnecting with their roots. He concludes by pointing out that he has met many Americans who have experienced this treatment in Ireland.

Remarkably, this piece drew only 11 comments, which on this site constitutes a small response. It is also noteworthy that discussing the diaspora as a mass and not making distinctions within it, to take account of the complexity of the relationships, is a point that is often neglected and was highlighted in these discussions. The views of the original poster were vociferously reinforced in the following comment:

**(September 23, 2010 Michael)**

The Irish pre-occupation with themselves and their own national identity over the centuries is what begets Diaspora communities two, three or four generations later. It has little to do with the host nation where the Irish settle.

So scoffing at Irish-Americans or British-Irish for their so-called plastic paddy Irishness is a form of self-loathing ... . Or, more likely, it's simply the height of hypocrisy and begrudgery many Irish have fine-tuned to an art.

**The disdain of the Celtic Tiger generation toward the Diaspora is on permanent record, since so much of it is posted on the Internet in the forms of offensive blogs, chatroom blather and media stories. It must make it difficult for the Irish tourism industry to sell Ireland as a friendly destination.** Irish people love to slag the Americans and British for buying Irish sweaters or piles of bog dirt, while they themselves build leprechaun parks and heritage centers for American presidents with scant Irish connections.

He continues by suggesting that the source of this 'hostility and hubris' is Ireland's lack of ability to maintain financial self-reliance. Pointing to the hundreds of years of emigrant remittances that have sustained Ireland through previous economic and political hardships, he concludes:

Today's Ireland — cosmopolitan as it reckons itself to be — resents its own welfare status, even while depending upon Diaspora largesse.

Ireland is killing the gold and green goose, as it were, by its greed and nastiness toward the Diaspora.

Another commentator quotes at length from a piece in the *Irish Independent* on March 17, 2011 by Martina Devlin addressing the same topic, and deploying some of the language of the marketplace that is frequently seen in discussions of national identity and nation branding:



**(March 27, 2011 P. McCormick)**

**We keep hearing about the damage done to Ireland's global brand and how we must market ourselves as a competitive place to do business.** I have no quibble with that, but if we are to make a success of it, we also need to change our mindsets.

This means we must stop making fun of the semi-detached Irish. Instead, we should leverage their goodwill, targeting them to come here, either for work or pleasure.

March 17 is a time of year when we go global, however. It's a date that brings out the Sean in John — in the US, which becomes the living incarnation of a Lucky Charms cereal box; and in Britain, where one in 10 people is said to have at least one Irish grandparent.

These are our two most substantial trading partners and a brace of ministers apiece has been posted out to each of them in recognition of it.

**It's tempting for us to mock those international parades watched by people in leprechaun hats and shamrock face art. But they generate goodwill and there is a chance it could be translated into something more concrete.**

**While it's too much to hope for crocks of gold, some business opportunities might not be impossible. [...]**

(my emphasis)

Once more, we see this argument firmly framed within the economic imperative and drawing heavily on business terminology. The commentator then adds his own coda as a comment to the piece:

(...)

No regret shown, no apology for offence caused to the Diaspora, no concern about damage done or goodwill lost, just a recognition that they can now be used as a financial resource to bail out the Irish born as did their parents and grandparents – the remittance men and women.

I have reproduced these interventions at length because they expose a strand of discourse that was not frequently expressed in detail in wider discussions of initiatives like the Gathering. They also show a series of voices from outside Ireland which were decidedly absent in other topics encountered.

They are contrasted with a voice from within which is representative of the stance performed by many online commentators on this issue. BTR begins a post by describing an encounter with “*two nice American guys.*” They were in Ireland for a football match between two American colleges, Notre Dame and the Naval Academy, and they had decided, “along with something like thirty thousand other Americans, to use the game as an opportunity to visit the land of their ancestors.”

**(BTR: September 22, 2012)**

What can be bad about this? Nothing, in my opinion. [...] Not only are they used to a hustler button-holing them with a plan for a business or a great investment, but they actually like it.

It tells me that there is serious money involved in these Gathering events, with really influential people buying into the concept. And there’s nothing better than influential Irish-Americans out of their suits, in baseball-cap mode, with a beer in one hand a hot-dog in the other, because that’s when we’re at our best communicating.

Despite the front, we’re not great at formal meetings. Put us in a business suit and we start talking ridiculous Harvard-speak with an added Irish layer of pomposity. We are simply not suit material. [...]

The Gathering won’t solve Ireland’s economic problems, he concedes and asks: where’s the harm in fostering goodwill among people at the top of US business, when those people feel an emotional attachment to our country? Even in business, sentiment has a place, he suggests.

(...)

So let’s continue to welcome these visitors, and let’s go on showing them what’s good about our country. Apart from anything else, we might be able to persuade Notre Dame that the fighting leprechaun logo isn’t such a great image of Ireland.



Let's keep explaining the advantages of investing in Ireland, and every now and then, when the decision is teetering in the balance, let's remind them where they came from. It would be naive to think that any outside agencies can fix what's broken in Irish society or our economy, but it's no harm to have powerful allies in the States.

Let me put it another way: it's a lot better than having enemies there.

The conciliatory, if not somewhat patronising, tone of the site host is further subscribed to by the commentators, one of whom casts it as a contest – “*Nouveau pauvre versus nouveau riche.*” (*EashtGalwayWoman*, September 4, 2012) The discussion, while often maintaining some of the Zizekian disavowal strategies mentioned previously, does reflect views on the meaning of the relationship between Ireland and its diaspora, exchanges of rights and perceptions of belonging. Some commentators on the BTR discussion draw comparisons to US citizens who relocate abroad and continue to maintain taxation and voting connections to their country, and there is a clear sense of people asking questions about the nature of their contribution to and their expectations from contemporary Ireland.

**(November 6, 2012 *fairyqueen*)**

One guy said to me ‘I’m sick to death of being seen as a tourist’.

But if you’re not living there and you’re only going back for visits, what on earth should you be seen as? I’m living in London; probably home more regularly than that guy; but duh, I’m a tourist in Ireland. The attitude of Ireland owing you something just cos you have roots is weird.

**(November 6, 2012 *steve white*)**

you’re not a tourist

**(November 6, 2012 *Kevin*)**

Ireland does owe you something. Ireland should’ve been, had you wanted it to be, a good place to live and work. Once you’re gone, the government whose mismanagement forced you to leave is no longer obliged to consider you; they just silently thank you for reducing the number on the live register. They should be made to consider you; they shouldn’t be able to rely on emigration as a way of dumping excess citizens. This is why I think emigrants should be allowed to vote.

These interventions, particularly those by the members of the diaspora itself, have the effect of causing a measure of unexpected disruption in an accepted but often aspirational self-image of Ireland. In the same manner as I have identified an ‘ideal type’ Irish citizen above, I suggest that an ideal type member of the diaspora exists also: one that makes a financial contribution to the revival of Ireland and voices no complaint about exclusion from definitions of Irishness.

What I observed in these discussions of the diaspora question more broadly in the forums was a remarkable lack of self-consciousness about many of the discussions of these issues, almost as if nobody from outside Ireland was likely to read what is said or take the commentators to task for their views on these matters. There emerges in this discussion a pronounced discomfort about where to position the diaspora beyond a vague but lucrative financial resource in waiting. There is, however, a stronger sense of a public sphere in operation in a discussion like this where people are included and provide counter positions with the effect of disrupting some of the consensus formation that has characterised a great deal of the data examined.

## 6.5 Technologising Identity?

Turning now to ‘macro-level communicative capital’; I frame this as a key factor in the relaunch of the Irish economy and ‘national brand’ during this period examined. I found that a ‘re-visioning’ of the idea of Ireland, alongside an element of techno-euphoria, were highly visible in the language of the official discourse (*e.g.* official policy documents, particularly those on economic recovery) which had both supportive offshoots and damning critiques circulating in the blogosphere. This policy foregrounded often ill-defined ideas of ‘innovation’ and ‘entrepreneurship’ as primary drivers towards not merely economic re-emergence, but also a process of redefinition of the Irish themselves. O’Nullain’s (2012) work makes tangential reference to this and it resonates with wider theory (Berry, 2014) pointing to the ‘computerisation’ of society generally, *i.e.* a seepage of the ideology of the technical sector into the wider society and in this instance the public culture.

The type of communicative capital that this entails corresponds most closely to Dean’s (2003; 2010) original formulation of the theory. It operates at the level of the corporation but relies upon the lower orders of communicative capital funnelled up from the micro and miso level, as defined and examined previously. I believe that macro level communicative capital has the closest relationship to economic capital, in contrast to individualised communicative capital, which I have linked to cultural capital, and miso-level communicative capital, which bears a relationship to social capital. These linkages are, it should be apparent, flexible and interchangeable and it becomes the work of another day to map out the precise trajectory of fungibility.

We see examples of this operating, once more in an international arena, when Ireland emerged as a high tech hub (later recast as a ‘tax haven’). Ireland had during the timeframe examined become a preferred European HQ for a number of high tech multinationals, arguably due to low corporation tax and targeted incentives to attract corporations, a longstanding economic policy of the Irish state more broadly (Buckley and Ruane (2006), A celebratory and uncritical account of the transformation of Dublin’s Silicon Docks is offered by Newenham (2015) and a counter-

position on the fetishisation of ‘ideas and innovation’ as policy is offered by Power (2010), which details the flaws in this logic from the economic perspective which my cultural studies approach has avoided here.

On one level of interpretation, this trend and the language deployed to advance it could be seen in terms of a fervent desire to once more embrace modernity, in a manner characteristic of the late twentieth century in Ireland, and thus takes us back to well-rehearsed identity debates from that time (*see* Gibbon and Higgins, 1974) This view is expanded upon by O’Nuallain (2012), in his analysis of Ireland at the same time, where he posits the nation as “a colony once again” – beholden now to the forces of multinational corporate capital. It is also fair to suggest that the embrace of this sector requires a certain cosmopolitan and outward looking perspective with high levels of flexibility in the sphere of legislation, taxation and public policy. This evokes comparison with some of the discourse generated in DBO on the establishment of the IFSC.<sup>111</sup> Thus we can envisage a situation in which communicative capital begins to have a totalising effect on the society in question. This manifests also in shaping its ideal type subject/citizens who will take their place in the broader structure, arguably depending on their own level of micro level communicative capital and digital literacy.

### *6.5.1 ‘Tech-nation’ or technocracy?*

It is also worth recounting that another ‘tech’ was much in evidence in Irish public culture at this time – that of technocracy, briefly mentioned above. Amid the calls to slim down the apparatus of government under the banner of political reform, it was frequently suggested that something exceptional needed to be done in terms of management of the State; various business leaders were cited as suitable candidates for such a task.<sup>112</sup> This all fed into the logic of steering and managing ‘Ireland Inc’ towards profitability once more. The most visible example of this was the Global Irish Economic Forum, which had taken place at Dublin Castle, in 2009.

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<sup>111</sup> The Irish Financial Services Centre is heavily discussed and critiqued on the DBO site.

<sup>112</sup> A discussion of this under the headline ‘Time for a technocratic government in Ireland’ was published by NWL on 15 November 2011.

The connections made and ideas generated have demonstrated that in this modern globalised world, the reach, power and influence of so many members of the Irish Diaspora can provide Ireland with an important competitive edge. Harnessing this potential provides the State with a significant asset in engaging new and emerging markets.

(Global Irish Network, 2012)

Official Ireland's fetishisation of high technology, the rhetoric of start-ups and innovation can all be viewed in counteraction to its shaming and the suggestions of 'backwardness' that accompanied the preceding crisis – particularly in consideration of negative international attention. There is by now also evidence of a resetting of the relationship between native Ireland and the diaspora where they are perceived more as potential business partners within an international marketplace of entrepreneurship as opposed to the donor/tourist model within which they had previously been framed.

A report in [siliconrepublic.com](http://siliconrepublic.com) (July 25, 2011) captures the official position of the time:<sup>113</sup>

Developing Ireland as a 'Digital Island' as a key policy objective, with specific commitments in relation to cloud computing, e-government and the upgrading of ICT across education, healthcare and other sectors, has been confirmed by Minister John Perry, TD.

Perry, who is Minister of State at the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, with special responsibility for Small Business, today highlighted the importance for Ireland Inc of sustaining momentum in relation to the digital agenda.

Embedded in this ethos is the celebration of 'new ideas' as the key mechanism for economic success and consequent societal harmony – innovation as salvation. In a piece entitled 'Your country, your call, you're doomed', blogger BTR prides open this discourse:

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<sup>113</sup> A more recent headline on the same site demonstrates how ubiquitous this language has become; it reports on moves to making Ireland "a smart, sustainable farming hub..."

**(BTR: September 5, 2010)**

Have you seen the ideas that made it to the last five in the Your Country Your Call competition?

Let me remind you what that was. Martin McAleese, the presidential spouse, had a notion to invite innovative proposals that might create jobs and get Ireland back on track.

As the YCYC website puts it, The competition is designed to find two major proposals that, when implemented, will transform our economy – or significant elements of it – by creating jobs and opportunity.

The article goes on to list the categories for the competition: communications and technology; design, engineering and manufacturing; education and the arts; energy and environment; food and agriculture; health, sport and nutrition “*and of course Other*”

(...)

So. What bright ideas made it through from the thousands of entrants worldwide?

You might remember Brody Sweeney, the sandwich sultan. [...] Brody’s idea is to create an all-Ireland superbrand, to market food and tourism, North and South, but he seems to be overlooking something fundamental. The Irish brand is screwed. We’re perceived the world over as grasping, corrupt crooks, [...] Brody needs to get back to basics and forget about slick marketing campaigns. The world doesn’t believe our bullshit any more. If he was serious about marketing an Irish brand, Brody would do well to start at the beginning, by tackling **the greed at the heart of Irish business culture, and in particular the food and tourist industries that see visitors as marks to be fleeced.**

(my emphasis)

This remark relates back to the earlier discussion of the grievances expressed by the diaspora and the acknowledgement of these tactics by commentators in the previous section of this chapter.

BTR then highlights the case of another entrepreneur, a screen writer and digital media consultant, who had been promoting his idea of an international content services centre, and even persuaded a government minister to lend his support:

**(BTR: September 5, 2010)**

...which admittedly isn’t hard if you include the sort of phrases that make Eamon break into a sweat of excitement. Smart economy. Global Media Hub. Essentially, Leyden wants to set up a clearing-house for digital rights — a sort of bank, if you’ll excuse the expression, and he seems to have snared the YCYC judges by saying that his Irish



Content Industry Association would drive the development of a cultural and creative quarter. Translated into English, this means a snappy new office area for Dublin, with more wine bars and a few jobs for Leyden's friends.

It isn't immediately clear why Ireland would be better able to provide such a service than, for example, anywhere else in the world.

The blogger here does something which was notably absent from many other business reports at this time: he casts doubt by asking questions about long-term viability of projects.

**(BTR: September 5, 2010)**

I'd give a prize to the last pair of geniuses, Cianán Clancy and Colm Mac Fhlannachadha, for the most impenetrable waffle in the competition. In fact, I'm tempted to send this to the Campaign for Plain English.

The Data Island Strategy will build a world-beating entrepreneurial and innovation ecosystem around digital services aimed at positioning Ireland at the forefront of its associated spin-off industries.

The sheer pomposity of it ... **Translated into English, it means, we'll do great stuff, and everything will be great and we'll do it by magic, even though the country is broke and everyone knows we Irish are an incompetent crowd of scammers. Look over there!**

It's the sort of meaningless horseshit that landed Ireland in its current predicament and yet somehow, inexplicably, the YCYC committee think it has the potential to get us out of the hole.

(my emphasis)

BTR points to the fact that these were the best ideas out of five thousand and ends this litany of negativity and critique by proposing a positive intervention:

**It isn't based on wishful thinking, it doesn't use the sort of nonsense phrases like world-beating that for years we relied on to delude ourselves.**

It's simple. I suggest investing in ethics.

I suggest re-educating our entire population [...] I suggest teaching our entire population that marketing, promotion, sales, PR and international glad-handing are of no use whatsoever if the thing you're trying to sell has no substance.

[...]

Forget about Eamon Ryan's smart economy.

Let's put all our effort into creating the Honest Economy.

(my emphasis)

**(September 6, 2010 William)**

All the grandiose terminology past and present such as "Tiger Economy" Envy of Europe" to present "Smart Economy" Knowledge Economy" World Beating" Best in World" Centres of Excellence" World financial hub" etc etc.If I was a cartoonist I would explain it by drawing an Irish version of Idi Amin covered from head to toe in medals.

**(September 6, 2010 Builderfromhell)**

Good article.

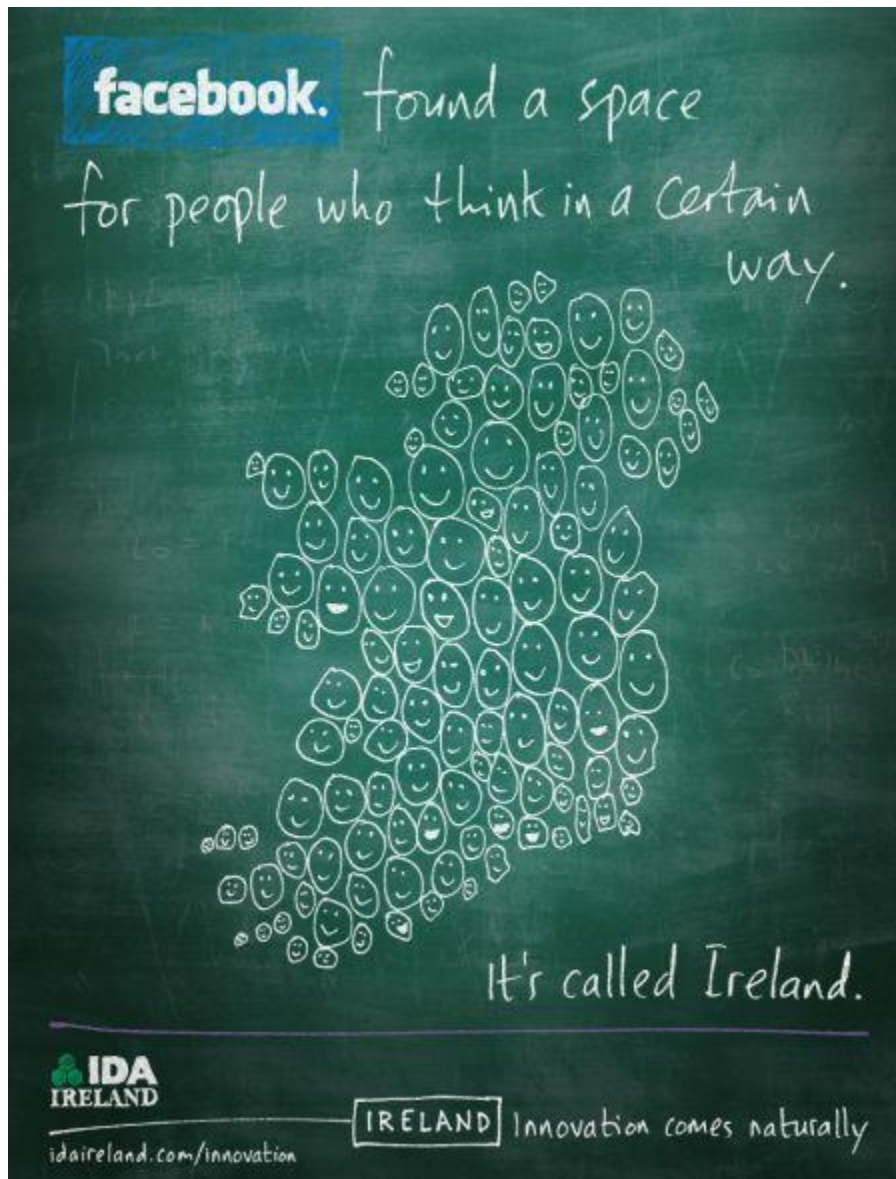
I particularly like the end where you suggest educating people to be honest. I would hate to see the celtic tiger be re-born on the back of soem ingenious ideas and live in a country of fat people in fat cars driving to fat houses and adopting the f\*ck you attitude to all around them. Young people who never knew hardship or toil.

The long term solution is to educate our kids in morals and ethics from an early age. Children have tremendous potential and whether we realise it or not they are our only hope. **If we foster and encourage them now they will create a society (not merely an economy) where communities interact and help each other progress.**

(my emphasis)

This set of comments is among the few to so directly discredit and indeed mock the over inflated language and the 'Emperor's new clothes' quality of the discourse surrounding innovation, entrepreneurship and the fetishisation of the 'new ideas' paradigm. They run contrary to the unquestioning acceptance of a born-again modernisation theory and a corporatist perception of a country that can be managed much like a commercial entity. Sitting uneasily beside images of

Ireland as a hive of technological innovation are the consequences of such policy which emerged in 2013, the generous taxation measures that made Ireland the attractive destination for communicative technology after the crisis; exposing Ireland once more to the international gaze and bringing back the accusations of ‘Banana Republic’ once more.<sup>114</sup> The following piece from the Guardian was quoted on BRD under the strapline: “They’re on to us, aren’t they?” The irony of the visual used with the piece needs no analysis.



<sup>114</sup> To appreciate how intense this issue became, see ‘Obama forced to retract allegation that Ireland is a tax haven’ *Irish Independent*, 27 July 2012

**(BRD: October 9, 2013)**

Facebook paid no corporation tax in Britain last year, according to its latest accounts, despite taking an estimated £223m share of the digital advertising market.

The social network's tax bill fell from £238,000 in 2011 to zero, while its reported UK income rose by 70%.

**...In common with fellow American technology leaders Google and Apple, Facebook funnels the vast majority of its income from advertisers targeting its 33 million British users through Ireland.**

France is pushing for Europe to adopt a new corporation tax regime which would see multinationals such as Google and Facebook regulated and taxed in the countries where customers use their websites.

Fleur Pellerin, the French digital economy minister, is expected to push for the reforms at a summit of European leaders scheduled for the end of October.

(my emphasis)

The dialogue which follows this is well reasoned, measured and somewhat technical but there is a clear isolation of a moral element of the situation:

**(October 9, 2013 *milk teeth*)**

Oh yes the moral argument isn't really about corporation tax. It's about big companies paying their way instead of routing their profits out of countries. This isn't just by basing your European operations in Ireland or the Netherlands. But that's a different fish to fry.

The foregoing highlights the unwieldy nature of Ireland's perhaps hasty engagement with global communications capital and the attempts by commentators within the blogosphere to deconstruct the superficial discourses of re-modernisation that accompany the embrace of this sector towards a rapid re-imaging of Ireland. I suggest that the clearest way to understand such a discourse is within the nexus of a reactivated definition of communicative capital, which relies upon an analysis of the tripartite level of its operation at micro, miso and macro levels and the interdependencies inherent therein. The extracts above were reproduced because of their atypical quality; these criticisms were not to be found on the news sites and neither on DMW. Instead this critique was played out on a relatively obscure blog where the host is anonymous

and his commentators tend not to name themselves. I have pointed to the news sites and other high-status sites as loci for the generation of communicative capital at the individual level. I have additionally suggested that discursive elites are formed within those sites and that groups and social class is reproduced and represented in those spaces. Thus I conclude that a critique of macro level communicative capital, which I have characterised as existing in the corporate and State sectors is contrary to the interest of those using discursive spaces to generate their own communicative capital. In this sense they conform to the idealised citizen/subject I have previously characterised.

## ***6.6 Conclusion***

This chapter has opened up three aspects of contemporary Irish identity as viewed through the lens of online discourse. I began by considering broad postmodernist theorisations of contemporary national identity. My expectation was that immersion in the field of online opinion exchange would confirm the disparate and contested performances of national identity within a field characterised by flux and impermanence. I additionally expected that claims of voice and membership within such a conversation would be deterritorialised and varied. This was not the case. I suggest that with few exceptions, such spaces conform to wider media agendas on these overarching questions and may serve to reinforce the identity work performed by conventional institutions that enforce hegemonic self-perception at the level of nation. I pointed to the manner in which communicative capital sets up a space for an ideal type subject citizen to emerge, whose identity and ideology resonates with official discourses of ‘ideas and innovation’ within the public culture.

With regard to the immediate aftermath of the crisis, once emotionally charged expressions of shock and exasperation had been vented, well-rehearsed and largely rhetorical conceptions of an essentialised Irishness manifested as almost default positions within the discussions. The engagement on questions related to the Irish diaspora were particularly revealing and indeed unexpected, opening up an important aspect of the relationship between native and global Irish people that is not often expressed or analysed. This matter came perhaps closest to the nub of the

issue: who and where are the Irish now? My third concern was the re-imaging of Ireland as a thoroughly modern base for global communications capital (particularly as a European headquarters for internet multinationals); I suggest that the reactivation of policy and discourse in this quarter was particularly swift and performed not just towards financial gain but in direct reaction to the sense of 'national shame' that had accompanied the crisis and as an attempt to offset international images of a backward and corrupt nation. Thus I see in this a revival of the type of modernisation theory that was frequently applied to Ireland in the later twentieth century.

Overall, I discount the public sphere function of the spaces and discussions encountered for this section of the thesis, linking this back to the lack of contestation and the sometimes monocultural stances encountered. Communicative capital related most directly to the final section of the chapter. I pointed again to the interplay between the different levels I observed to be operating, where I discussed corporate internet culture and the welcoming discourses advanced by the Irish State. It is this large-scale manifestation of this form of capital that I now seek to reconcile with the questions that I began this thesis with. The following chapter (Chapter 7) examines a revisiting of the sites and themes after a period of eighteen months and begins the process of consolidation of the thesis.

## ***Chapter 7: Re-visiting the Research Site***

*“...we need to rethink some of our received models so embedded within print and its powerful heritage (both cultural and legal), in order to better appreciate the new dimensions of digital culture. In the same manner that digital tools disrupt our received ideas about authorship and recording, digital literacy invites a new look and an evaluation of what it means to be literate. In the digital environment, more so than at any other moment in the past, literacy is the agency not only for communication and the production and exchange of knowledge; it is also the site of development of a new iteration of individual and collective identities.”*

Doueihi, M. *Digital Cultures* (2011: x)

### ***7.0 Introduction***

This chapter begins to draw together the strands of the thesis towards consolidation. It re-examines the theoretical starting points and presents a process of revisiting the sites and themes encountered during the study; this revisiting occurred eighteen months after the initial research period. This exercise was undertaken to assess how time and events may have impacted on the sphere and to understand the relative stability of the field of discourse, both structurally and thematically.

At its inception, this thesis sought to comprehend how specific new communication practices both reflect and contribute to the construction of the society in which they occur. I posed a question: How do we understand and describe emerging spaces of public discourse online? I set

this question in a particular place and at a specific time. To this I added a number of supplementary questions, most prominently: which theoretical perspectives are helpful in gaining clarity within this complex and ever-shifting terrain? And, what does the interplay of communication, commentators and themes tell us about people, their identities and ultimately the society in which they live?

At the onset I acknowledged the paradox of thinking in terms of a nation and conducting a single country examination within axiomatically deterritorialised fields of communication. As I move to finalise the process, I am satisfied that this was the right course to have taken. I positioned the work against Peillon's (1982) enquiry into discourse in Ireland and the ideology that he observed in the print media more than thirty years ago. At a fundamental level, it is apparent that even with the multiplying effect of new communications practices, such a snapshot of identity and ideology remains available for analysis today.

This chapter consolidates the argument that communicative capital has been seen to operate across all three levels – micro, meso and macro – within the discourse examined in this thesis. This has a by-product in the form of a set of ideologies that infiltrates the individual, group and national levels of identity formation. Thus it permeates the social imaginary. It takes its place in what I have termed the *dance of the capitals* alongside cultural, social and economic capital. Its generation and circulation inhibits, but does not eradicate, the public sphere function of the sphere of discourse examined.

The three empirical chapters of this thesis have shown the manner in which individuals position themselves and perform discourse in a way that generates communicative capital for themselves. Because the groups they belong to and comment on, particularly on the level of social class, were widely discussed and fixed in discourse, communicative capital inheres in these groups. This all occurs within a society and nation that embraces communicative capital at both corporate and official level. Thus, I argue, it becomes totalising within both the public culture and the social imaginary.

In this chapter I briefly re-examine the websites and the themes that made up the core of my enquiry; I present the key observations and findings of the research. The concluding chapter (Chapter 8) evaluates the theoretical perspectives I have used in consolidating my argument and advances the specific contributions of the work.



## ***7.1 Ideology and Identity within Communicative Capital***

The study gave considerable attention to re-examining questions of ideology in contemporary Ireland. As set out in Chapter 2, Peillon (1982) took ideology to represent the system of ideas, beliefs and preferences that defines the atmosphere and cultural climate of a society. He described this as “*a type of knowledge which is not necessarily aware of itself as such, and cannot easily be questioned.*” (134) This thesis has uncovered these types of knowledge that circulated during the legitimisation crisis in Ireland between 2010-13.

There are immediate observations with regard to this re-opened question of ideology. The content examined and analysed for Chapters 4, 5 and 6 is all deeply ideological, revealing what people hold to be true and valuable across the themes I examined. Establishing oneself as a public commentator and critiquing the pre-established media is an action that brings one immediately into the realm of both ideology and the political. Defining oneself as belonging to a social group or indeed characterising and writing up other groups in your society is ideological, and buying into or critiquing an official discourse that embraces communicative technology as salvational and deterministic is ideological. I have argued that *what is ideological is also political* and thus the raw material of a public sphere, which I consider again below.

Bringing all of this into a unity now, I suggest that in each case the social imaginary is reinforced rather than challenged in these emergent spaces. Ideology is not, however, *centralised* in the manner Peillon (1982) was able to describe in his review of the letters page as a clear locus of public opinion in his time; it is now more fragmented, transitory and profuse. This signals that much is to be gained by continued analysis of the sphere beyond this current enquiry, which I will elaborate on in Chapter 8.

As I consolidate the work, I propose that these spaces and practices do not constitute an emergent online public sphere, rather when viewed through the complex interplay of what I have termed major and minor capitals, they replicate aspects of an unequitable set of discursive practices. The mechanisms of such practices have come to privilege certain members of the society who display the requisite skills and strategies to best position themselves within the field

of discourse, leveraging their digital literacy and generating communicative capital at the individual level.

I adopted and developed communicative capital as one of two theoretical lenses at the beginning of the thesis. I point to the presence of communicative capital, across the three levels I have used, as a key hindrance to an inclusive space of online deliberation. While the public sphere potential of these spaces is not eradicated by this, it is severely depleted. I see this as both emanating from and leading to communicative inequality. This finding takes on increased importance in the light of the central role played by digital literacy and the all-pervasive communicative technology industries which have arguably come to dominate both late capitalism and everyday life. Although I have highlighted evidence of ‘hierarchy disruption,’ communicative inequality is implicated by the generation, accumulation and exchange of communicative capital and I later suggest why this is problematic.

## ***7.2 Revisiting the Sites***

The exercise of re-examining both the sites and themes used for this research, following the analysis of the core data, was undertaken to assess trends and activity within the sphere – to briefly press a ‘refresh’ button.<sup>115</sup> I was interested in whether preoccupations remained the same or whether there was perhaps something exceptional about the timeframe I had examined. Because very obvious and consistent themes and preoccupations were observed during the original research period, this ‘checking in’ seemed mandatory. It was thus undertaken out of interest in the stability and consistency of the blogs and not to add substantial data; the primary findings of the thesis are drawn from the research period 2010-13.

I intend to briefly note the status of the blogs in each of the three categories but I make a key overall observation that ‘amateur’ sites, whether group or individual, stood less of a chance of continuous activity than sites that are staffed or have a commercial orientation. The news sites show consistent and ongoing activity – they flourish – whereas the smaller blogs have more often become sporadic in their activity or are dormant. This raises very obvious implications

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<sup>115</sup> The revisiting set out occurred in Summer 2015, at the time of writing up.

regarding the labour and political economy aspects of the field, which drives a further nail in the coffin of the public sphere and points to the primacy of communicative capital within the blogosphere.

### 7.2.1 *The individual blogs*

DMW is still active and has expanded. It continues to draw a similar number of comments as during the timespan initially examined. The site's lead item (as of 17 August 2015) was a news piece entitled 'Google splitting in two is proof we are on the cusp of fourth industrial revolution' DMW points out: "*A big issue for Dublin and Ireland is whether much of the New Google or Alphabet's R&D will be based in Dublin or whether Dublin will remain a sales and marketing hub.*" McWilliams goes on to disclose his own positive experience of the Google corporation in general and speculates about the future shape of the 'Digital Docks' in Dublin.<sup>116</sup>

#### **(DMW: August 17, 2015)**

Despite their ruthless 'winner takes all' attitude to business, **the ethos of companies of the fourth industrial revolution is cosmopolitan, liberal and driven by a lifestyle that is suited to urban living.**<sup>117</sup> These businesses will not locate in the middle of nowhere. They will locate in the middle of everything.

The cities that provide this kind of lifestyle will have the edge in 50/50 investment decisions over those that don't. [...]

One part of the lifestyle, not just for foreigners but for us too, is to have a liveable, preferably walkable city that sees itself as public amenity for the people who live there. This means, whether we like it or not, dramatically reducing the number of cars in the city centre.

(my emphasis)

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<sup>116</sup> In the interests of full disclosure, the author tells us he has delivered talks at Google HQ in the US.

<sup>117</sup> The highlighting of the word 'liberal' in this piece points towards questions raised in the marriage equality referendum of May 2015. Two groups were cited as key to the success of the 'Yes' campaign, namely American philanthropic organisations and the multinational corporations, located in the 'digital docks', many of whom indicated support for the 'Yes' side of the debate. See 'Is it right for philanthropists to fund social change?' *The Irish Times*, 20 July 2015.

It can be observed that what I described as the fetishisation of communicative technology, as critiqued by a small number of commentators, in Chapter 6 continues apace in posts such as this. While DMW's call for a more humane urban environment is laudable, it is important to note the manner in which he leverages this for the benefit of the Google corporation rather than primarily for that of the city's inhabitants. The tone of this piece is reminiscent of Florida's (2005) depiction of the creative class and the requirement for flexible, mobile populations in the service of global capital (*see* Urry, 2000). Similarly, the spectre of European cities competing against one another is not new, this aspect of 'financial geographies' is long established; it was highlighted in the attention given to the history of the IFSC on the DBO site, for instance, during the course of my examinations.

All of this indicates a direction of events and priorities and begs a question: who is likely to determine the future shape of a city such as Dublin? Is it the perceived requirements of global communicative technology or the needs of its citizens? I suggest that O'Nullain's (2011) characterisation of Ireland as a colony once again is worthy of consideration and that my findings based on an analysis of communicative capital tie into such claims.

Again the type of language that was selected from other data in earlier chapters is evident in the above post. In defining his vision, DMW (August 25, 2015) sets out: "*This fourth industrial revolution is about a **ground-breaking** series of **innovations** in genetics, artificial intelligence, robotics, nanotechnology, 3D printing and biotechnology – all connected by billions of **smart devices**.*" I linked discourse of this type to what I presented as communicative capital operating at the macro level in Chapter 6, and it is my observation that this type of discourse remains prominent in both the news sites and in blogs like DMW, sites that are themselves, as I suggested in Chapter 4, key locations of 'strong' communicative capital.

Alongside the advertisements for DMW's publications, a new feature of the site is a course in economics delivered by online learning techniques and billing details for this. The commercial aspect of this site is growing. Here, crucially, we observe the expansion of both the host's personal communicative capital at the micro level and his advocacy of structural and policy deference directed to 'industrial strength communicative capital,' in this case the Google corporation.

The MNP site showed no activity for the first six months of 2015, and then a piece on the topic of healthcare was posted in late July of this year. This perhaps highlights the difficulty that solo bloggers have in maintaining their place in the blogosphere; it becomes clear from the post that the site host was indisposed for personal reasons, explaining the inactivity on the site. Few other highly visible solo sites, which aim to promote ‘neglected’ news topics with a social justice focus like MNP have emerged in the interim.

The BTR site continues to be regularly updated and attracts a substantial number of comments, mostly from regular and recognisable (by their pseudonyms) commentators. It also continues to perform the type of meta-analysis of media identified in Chapter 4. Its August 2015 posts include a number connected to what might be termed the Denis O’Brien affair.<sup>118</sup> The site now supports advertisements and also has added a feature asking for donations to defray the running costs. It does not break down these costs. The subject-matter on the site remains diverse, ranging from the whimsical to the serious, including topics from Ireland and abroad, and the anonymous main poster continues to express views that are contrarian and, at times emotive. It continues to display the type of ‘postmodern’ features that I pointed to earlier, giving its readers everything from recipes to heavyweight political analysis.

### *7.2.2 The group sites*

I observed that STR (the ‘freedom of information requests’ site) had considerably fewer posts during 2014-15, but one new tendency was observed in July 2015: the site duplicated its post (entitled ‘Nama’s Land Strategy’ by Gavin Sheridan) to BRD, where it attained more comments than would be expected on the original site. This was not observed during the time period of the research proper. I suggest that there is an acknowledgement that stories like this need the larger platform of a news site like BRD in order to reach a wide audience. I do, however, reiterate the point made in Chapter 4 regarding ‘quality over quantity’ concerning readership. A handful of journalists reading a site may have considerably more impact on the content’s destination than a

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<sup>118</sup> For ethical and possibly legal reasons, I will not reference this episode in any detail. Suffice it to say that the online discussion of the issues, which is searchable and in the public domain, raises important questions regarding press freedom and the interrelationship between the online discursive sphere, the press and critique of public figures.

hundred ‘average’ readers who do nothing further with the material. This, I contend, is integral to the character of communicative capital as I have reformulated it here, again running contrary to Dean’s (2003; 2010) original definition.

Quite a clear example of what happens with ‘issues based’ sites is evident in the final post from NWL, which became dormant in 2013:

**(NWL: May 19, 2013)**

*Farewell from NWL*

Well that day has finally arrived. After 3.5 years and 2,700 blogposts, this is the final NAMA wine lake blogpost. **I truly regret that I can’t continue something that has become more than full-time and has stopped me leading anything like a normal life.**

There was going to be a much longer farewell blogpost but that is not to be, though I will include the already-drafted section on NAMA itself below\*

The 2,700 blogposts will remain online – from emigration to bank-controlled hotels to political pay/perks and centrally of course, NAMA, there are thousands of hours of original research on these pages, some not available elsewhere. Commenting has now been closed, but the body of nearly 20,000 comments will remain.

(my emphasis)

The highlighted text indicates the laborious nature of blog updating, moderatorship and promotion. These remarks are equally revealing:

It is flattering to hear NWL being sometimes referred to as to most authoritative source for what is going on at NAMA. It’s also depressing because I know how little is reported on these pages. The most common question asked by the public about NAMA is “how is NAMA doing” and the most authoritative reply I can give you on here is “I don’t know”

The author touches here on something of a central function of many of the smaller sites examined. This site, and also STR were not in the business of providing stories with a clear ‘answer’ to what might be going on with a particular issue, but rather placing bodies of information at the disposal of their readers in order for them to take matters further or draw their

own inferences. In this regard their function as public sphere is minimal as they tend not to facilitate substantive opinion exchange or deliberation. Their function of ‘making things public’ is admirable but neither the site hosts nor a researcher examining such sites can easily monitor what becomes of the information once it is placed here.

Finally in this category, DBO ceased posting material in January of 2015. Its most recent post is an extract from the parliamentary banking inquiry, entitled ‘The wrath of Kane: Banking crisis and political power’. One of two comments from this piece seems to encourage the named site host to persist in updating the site:

**(DBO: January 30, 2015 *Coilin MacLochlainn*)**

Conor,

It would be really great if you commented on economic developments in Ireland as they happened...

There are few people who have the perspective and understanding that you do, of Ireland’s economic history in the last 200 years, of banking in those years, and how we have given over so much of value to corporate ownership, the so-called family silver, and how this is proceeding even today but it is never shown to the people, who live in ignorance. Could you please do a little examination of this and tell us here on your website. Your work is being lost on the general populace, and if it’s lost on them (us), then it’s not having any impact and is going down the tubes.

Best wishes,

Coilin

The meaning of the final line of this comment is ambiguous. Does the commentator mean that the site is an important outlet for dissemination? If it is the case, then it is perhaps revealing; do people assume that because a site exists and is regularly updated, then it follows it will be visited by the ‘general populace’ and have influence and impact? Of all the sites examined, this one had the strongest sense of a panel discussion, where the site, although described as a group blog, was clearly the work of the named person and tended to attract few comments from beyond an immediate circle of like-minded people. This takes us back to the echo chamber argument discussed in Chapters 2 and 4.

### 7.2.3 *The news sites*

Of all of the sites examined, the news sites may be regarded as the success stories. In terms of growth and visibility, these three sites show none of the dormancy that was evident in sites from the other two categories – instead they have flourished. It should be reiterated that all three news sites are commercial operations, supported by advertising and updated or commented upon with great regularity. As before, a number of new sites emerged in this category, either during the period of the survey or more recently (*theliberale.ie*, *rabble.ie*). I also point out that ITB introduced its paywall in 2015, which alters the level of commenting activity available to a reader who is not a subscriber.<sup>119</sup> This begins to point us towards understanding these ‘success stories’ by reference to Bourdieu’s (1993) concept of *field*. Primacy within the overall sphere inheres in those spaces that emerge from specific and established fields of cultural production and their interaction among each other. This renders the task of the individual or small group operating in a manner detached from such fields all the more difficult.

I have argued in Chapter 6 that *The Irish Times* (ITB) continues to maintain an agenda setting role in Irish public culture, often leading to copycat activity by newcomers to the field. To use the market parlance, it is a ‘trusted brand’ which has invested considerable resources into developing its online presence and maintaining its readership in the face of newcomers.<sup>120</sup> It has, as demonstrated, spawned imitators, as instanced in the *Renewing the Republic* series. While the whole site operates as one large blog, it has recently streamlined the number of sub-blogs into four categories: music, cinema, ‘pop life: society, life and culture on the edge’ and the *Generation Emigration* section, referenced in Chapter 6.

JIE maintains a strong position as one of the foremost online news sites (by August 2015 it had accumulated 285,000 Facebook likes). It continues to attract a numerical level of commentary similar to ITB, albeit different in tone. On 18 August 2015, its lead story concerned Donald Trump’s immigration reform policies and how they may impact on Irish people. ‘Donald Trump wants to scrap the J-1 programme.’ This piece attracted comments which show that the debate

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<sup>119</sup> Ten articles per week are available to non-subscribers.

<sup>120</sup> See papers given at Parnell Summer School 2012 by Irish Times online editorial staff.



about Irish identity and particularly the reputation of the Irish abroad is still to some extent live. On the 28 August, the business section ran an article headlined: ‘Why this tech CEO says low tax deals were the ‘best thing in the history of the Irish economy’. The commentator in question is quoted as saying:

**(JIE: August 29, 2015)**

WHEN ASKED HIS opinion on Ireland’s grab-bag of low taxes and other sweeteners for tech companies, the founder of fast-growing outfit Nitro doesn’t hold back.

“The reason that the big guys came here was tax and incentives and subsidies and all that stuff, there’s no f\*cking doubt about it,” company CEO Sam Chandler told TheJournal.ie.

“But I firmly believe that the government’s decision to peg the tax rate where they did and offer the incentives that they did will turn out, in hindsight, over the next 50 years, to have been the best thing that has happened to the Irish economy in the history of the Irish economy.”<sup>121</sup>

Echoing some of the concerns raised in the DMW piece cited above, JIE ran a story with the headline: “Dublin is ‘completely unprepared’ for another boom, apparently...” pointing to shortfalls in investment into essential infrastructure and services in the city.

On the matter of media commentary, there was a piece on the same site by a television presenter whose talk show had been recently dropped by RTE: ‘Brendan O’Connor thinks that “cranks have too much power” over the Irish media.’ (JIE: August 12, 2015) It explains that he thinks that Ireland’s media is being led by people with “a particular mindset” on Twitter, that these people were ‘unrepresentative of the population’ and that presenters and commentators had to have a ‘correct set of opinions’ or face the wrath of ‘the twitterati’.<sup>122</sup> This is further evidence of the hierarchy disruption that I have referred to in Chapter 4; the spectre of journalists and established media personalities defending their territory – their field – from newcomers. It also

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<sup>121</sup> Mr Chandler was on a fleeting visit to Ireland when he made these observations. He is originally from Melbourne, Australia and his background knowledge of the Irish economy and its history is not divulged elsewhere in the article.

<sup>122</sup> The theme of the piece points to what I interpret as a localised version of the ‘culture wars’ whereby a binary is created between a traditional Catholic worldview versus a radically progressive and liberal stance which the interviewee is uncomfortable with.

points to the existence or the perception at any rate, of a discursive elite within Ireland, a point that I considered when discussing communicative capital at the individual level in Chapter 4.

One among many commentators who agrees with his stance remarks:

**(August 12, 2015 Anne Marie Devlin)**

...Social media, whilst in some ways allows debate, in many other ways is used as a tool to stifle debate. You see it here all the time. [thejournal.ie] It can act as a conduit for very extreme views where you end up with people with polarised opinions simply name calling or the dominance of one group over another. [...] Not only does this give the impression that there is a significant number of people who hold these extreme views, but also stymies debate of serious issues.

Another important intervention in this category that merits mention is the rise of ‘Waterford Whispers News’ (*waterfordwhispersnews.com*). Once again, satire was a category that I would have included in the survey had practicalities and the direction of the analysis allowed, as I feel a particularly rich aspect of the public culture is apparent in such interventions.<sup>123</sup>

Part of the phenomena of WWN is a common situation where readers are unaware that its content is satirical and post comments accordingly. Very often these commenters are ‘forgiven’ if they are from foreigners because it is pointed out the local knowledge is key to ‘getting the joke’. Although not part of the original data set, it might be observed that such exchanges echo some of the findings in Chapter 6 regarding how national identity is accounted for in the discourses and on the sites.

BRD continues to post light, often pictorially based pieces and has 18,000 likes on its Facebook page.<sup>124</sup> BRD straddles the group blog/news site categories because it is comprised of approx. 25 regular contributors, who unlike JIE are not described as journalists. It is updated every 15

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<sup>123</sup> This site is described in a profile piece in *The Irish Times* as follows:

Drawing from the expression “Chinese whispers” but giving it a local flavour, Waterford Whispers has been slowly conquering social network feeds over the past few years. It has about 240,000 followers on Facebook and has become a national phenomenon among people in their 20s and upwards, as a megaphone for the public’s “generally felt” opinions, and for purely ludicrous ones that are neither here nor there.

<sup>124</sup> The site is something of an anomaly: at first glance it appears commercial, but there is only one ad for a high-profile news site ‘NewsWhip.ie’. NewsWhip is, like Storyful an Irish ‘start up’ which operates at an international level. It has developed tracking software, which gauges the popularity of ‘viral’ news stories and makes this available on a public platform. “NewsWhip tracks the sharing of all content on social networks. Our platform instantly identifies trending stories, engaging writers and key influencers in thousands of niches and locations.”

minutes, which is its key selling point. BRD was the most ‘postmodern’ of all the sites encountered for this study in its tendency to mix serious news and trivia without a clear news site identity. This was a trend observed among a small number of other sites that emerged during the period of the survey, for instance *rabble.ie*. BRD continues to publish everything from ‘lost and found’ alerts, to photographs of the following day’s newspaper headlines.

Both BRD and JIE were found to be home to a recognisable cohort of regular commentators, who can be perceived as a community of discourse. This is somewhat different to the ‘panel discussion’ characteristic I attributed to the group sites, mainly because the discussion is frequently off point and heavy on what might be described as ‘banter.’ This community aspect of such spaces is an important component of their success, even when the commentary veers off topic. This I identify as a core asset of such sites and points to the relationships between communicative and social capital, outlined in Chapter 5.

To make an overall assessment, it is probable that sites where there is no prospect of commercial activity are less likely to survive; sites with a commercial orientation, a staff or a large number of regular contributors tend to be more sustainable in the long term. This in itself opens up another research route in determining why this might be the case, if only perhaps to confirm suspicions. On face value, however, this has clear implications for any public sphere function of these spaces. It points to a repeat in what happened during the first ‘colonisation’ of Habermas’s (1991) public sphere with the advent of commercialised news production. It also complicates calls from commentators like Fuchs (2014) to push for the promotion of commons based ownership and management models for these spaces. Once more I link this to both the dominance of communicative capital in circulation and the importance of pre-established fields, for instance the media and academia within the overall sphere of discourse.

### ***7.3 Revisiting the Themes***

In this process of formulating conclusions, I felt it was important to look again at the three primary themes I drew on for the thesis, in order to examine if they remain prominent within the blogosphere beyond the initial timeframe.

### 7.3.1 Positioning within the blogosphere

Chapter 4 pointed to the strategies used by bloggers and commentators to ‘place’ themselves within the blogosphere. It was something that I observed both in the initial phases of the research, the time span examined and in the recent revisiting of all of the sites. This I framed clearly in terms of the generation or display of communicative capital at the individual level. I linked this to both cultural capital and the alteration in career paths in consideration of e-reputation (Blocker, 2009), which requires the type of soft visibility that online communication affords. I observed that many of the tactics that I pointed to are ongoing and were not dependant on the time-period under examination – they are underlying patterns of participation in the sphere. My argument was that communicative capital can and does operate at a micro level and should be considered as an adjunct to the ‘suite’ of capitals, following Bourdieu (1986). I cited the tendency to use real identities, display apparent expertise and to conform to the tone and texture of the site as important aspects of an effective intervention and the subsequent building of communicative capital. The sites where the *hosts* bring their professional expertise to bear on the material are the clearest iteration of this. This was the mainstay of Chapter 4 of this thesis.

### 7.3.2 Social groups and social class

The second thematic strand of the enquiry looked at the way in which group and class distinctions manifested and were discussed and described on the sites examined. This followed the theory I set up in Chapter 4 whereby individuals who have generated or accumulated strong communicative capital have the greatest say in establishing depictions of ‘in’ and ‘out’ groups within the society and of setting out *their* analysis of class.

Because of the extreme and sudden nature of the financial crash, I observed that the level of attention to these questions was particular to the time examined. I charted a clear link between the perceived backgrounds and class sympathies of commentators and the manner in which

groups were considered or frequently set against one another; this was much less in evidence in 2015.

By Summer 2015 a discourse of recovery had taken hold and discussions focused more on the disparity between Dublin and the rest of the country rather than between class or age groups. We might regard this as something of a ‘Pyrrhic recovery’ which, to paraphrase, was written up thus: you may not feel it but Ireland is in recovery. Much of the recent commentary on this has been tentative. Many online commentators expressed this scepticism and observed that this was being promoted not only by official sources but also by the Irish media.

Ireland was being written up as ‘Europe’s fastest growing economy’ with a growth rate of 6.5 per cent and ITB were dedicating a series of articles to the topic. A 2015 commentary on the trend, by economist Conor McCarthy questioned: “*Recovery: But is it down to good luck, rather than good management?*”<sup>125</sup> a view endorsed by the *Financial Times*. A largely positive analysis of the situation in ITB is followed by series of comments which point to matters such as a housing crisis and the lack of recovery in rural areas. Thus it is possible to conclude that discussions of class in particular were at their height during the initial time frame I examined.

### 7.3.3 National identity

The theme of national identity comes and goes from both the established media and the blogosphere. I submit that this is because such discussions are often reactive or event driven. Therefore, it fits that it was a predominant theme during the immediate aftermath of the crisis and the Troika intervention in Ireland. In a manner similar to the theme of social groups, it was most keenly discussed during the timeframe I examined and is less of a burning issue in 2015, with some reservations. To take up a specific instance discussed in Chapter 6, the ‘Certificate of Irish Identity’ came back into focus. This scheme was officially terminated in Summer 2015, according to JIE due to ‘lack of interest’ from the diaspora, who had been the target of the initiative.

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<sup>125</sup> *Sunday Independent*, 2 August 2015.

**(JIE: August 17, 2015)**

Sales have slowed to snail's pace this year in particular, with just 179 certificates being handed over.

“It was never anticipated that the Certificate of Irish Heritage would provide significant revenue to the Government,” a statement from the Department insisted today.

Further analysis on how “members of the Irish diaspora can seek to assert their Irish identity” are now being explored, the Department says.

In direct response to the establishment of a new anti-immigration political party, Identity Ireland, in August 2015, JIE ran an opinion piece by Bashir Otukoya, where he opened up questions which I have pointed out had been relatively absent from these forums during the 2010-13 period.

**(August 18, 2015 *Bashir Otukoya*)**

I AM IRISH. Not “through blood, sacrifice and beauty”, not even by law. Neither my race, religion, nor my language depicts me as Irish, but nevertheless my identity is Irish; I am Irish by heart. It is baffling still that there are those who remain stagnant in their perception of identity, those who perceive identity as unexchangeable...I suggest Identity Ireland go back to the drawing board to think of a new name more suited to their objectives, because Ireland's identity is not theirs to determine, my identity belongs to me and your identity belongs to you, no-one can determine it for us.

The piece drew a considerable number of comments, 432.

While some of the commentary is nuanced, hard-line positions are adopted by many:

**(August 18, 2015 *Tom Rooney*)**

If I emigrate to Nigeria now, get a Nigerian passport and take a liking to the Nigerian culture that doesn't make me Nigerian. I would be still Irish, ethnically and culturally. At the most I could claim to be Irish Nigerian, but I would never be ethnically Nigerian. To pretend otherwise is just overly PC nonsense!

Merely wishing to be a pink unicorn wouldn't make it so, let's not lose grasp of all rationality.

Once again, as was highlighted in Chapter 6, there seems to be a lack of uptake of what we would describe as postmodern identity formations, where an individual expresses agency and makes choices in determining their own sense of how they wish to be described. We can observe here a continuation of the boundary setting strategies evident in some of the discourse analysed in Chapter 6.

The voices of the Irish diaspora re-emerge in this piece too, taking issue as before with their own lack of acceptance among the ‘native Irish.’ Some of the rhetoric is, once again, revealing:

**(August 19, 2015 Tom Rooney)**

***I haven't defined Irishness, it has defined itself over millennia.***

Only a moron would try to claim race, ethnicity and culture is transnational and interchangeable at will of the individual. Neo – Liberalism and cultural Marxism = proven failure, it is an ideology of the bourgeois elite. Give me non chauvinistic Nationalism over that nonsense any day.

As a general observation, it has been apparent in recent online coverage that a re-emergence of nationalism has occurred in association with some of the anti-austerity campaigns, in particular the resistance to Irish Water. Similarly, the ‘Irish Land League’ became prominent and were embroiled in a high-profile property repossession case earlier in 2015. These movements may be indicative of a reaction to the perceived diminution of Irish sovereignty in the aftermath of the bailout years, and we may watch this in light of some of the anti-EU political movements happening elsewhere in Europe. It is observed that 44 per cent of Irish people view their identity as solely Irish and never position themselves within a joint Irish/European identity spectrum (Eurobarometer 2010).

It is a firm conclusion of the research that the discursive production of national identity is consolidated rather than forged anew in the spaces I examined. There was little evidence of opinions or worldviews that offered anything novel or radical on what it might mean to be Irish; instead they tended to draw on long-established conceptions and in some instances re-ignited the type of emotive and rhetorical nationalism which many would regard as both distasteful and

redundant. These rhetorical re-awakenings of ‘old-style’ patriotism, infused with essentialism and self-enforced stereotyping, were presented in Chapter 6.

I have, in Chapter 6, pointed to a revival of ‘modernisation theory’ as a way to account for some of the stances observed, indicating a desire to be perceived as progressive, innovative and ‘tech savvy.’ The idealised contemporary Irish citizen-subject embodies these traits and is abundant in their generation and display of communicative capital, ultimately in service to the greater good of the corporate sphere and the state. This consolidation of national identity is, however, also worth examining over a more extended period, in the light of emerging topics and changing priorities in Ireland. Overall, the online sphere I examined is revealing of the social imaginary that I alluded to at the beginning of the enquiry, it is also revealing of who holds discursive power and how this power is displayed and maintained within fields, following Bourdieu (1993).

#### ***7.4 Observations from the Data***

There are two central concerns expressed about the practice of blogging and online commentary in general (Lovink 2007; Dean 2003; 2010; Keen 2007) that were raised at the start of the thesis and that I revert to now. Firstly, that these sites are merely echo chambers, where people of similar viewpoints tend to congregate to have their position mirrored and endorsed. Again if this is the case, it erodes the public sphere potential of the sites. As I mentioned earlier, this trend seemed much in evidence in my survey, drawing me away from an analysis that privileged public sphere theory. Gilbert et al. (2009) in an extensive empirical analysis of blog comments discovered that agreement outnumbers disagreement by a factor of three to one.<sup>126</sup> Other factors may of course serve to mitigate this including the airing of topics and agendas that are excluded from established media – MNP was a clear example of this.

This tendency to agree and form consensus was particularly obvious however in the discussion of social groups in Chapter 5 – for instance, the potentially menacing unemployed construction

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<sup>126</sup> They examined 1000 comments from 33 of the world’s ‘top blogs’.



workers – and the surprising rigidity with which national identity was often maintained, as observed in Chapter 6.

The second contention is that blogging is an outmoded practice and is being replaced by a multitude of other social media platforms (twitter, Facebook etc.). This has been mooted since the early days of the blog form (Lovink, 2008). While it is evident that a multitude of new apps, spaces and platforms continue to compete with the format I have examined here, there was no evidence of a decline in the appearance of new blog sites to replace or compete with those that became dormant. On the contrary, one of the central difficulties of this study, as set out in Chapter 3, was fixing on a set of blogs to observe, as it seemed that every few weeks new platforms of discourse were emerging.

It is very apparent that people who have experience in wider established media demonstrate an understanding of how to position themselves to best advantage in the emerging spaces of online discourse. The same is true of those with higher levels of education. There was, in both Chapters 4 and 5 a clear trend identified whereby those with considerable voice and status were seen to be most adept at importing this into the blogosphere. The most important factor is the display and utilisation of what was referred to as digital literacy, which I understand as being in close alignment with communicative capital. The research points to the importance of an individual gaining competence in this form of literacy in order to embrace communicative capital for their own ends. It also clearly points to the dominance of certain fields, most notably the media and academia, as having particular advantage within the sphere.

As a piece of observation, which does I believe connect to these issues and the reputational economy, I have recently noticed that the LinkedIn professional networking site allows its members to be endorsed by their peers for ‘core skills.’ Among these skills are categories such as Social Media, Blogging and Facebook. This can be understood as a formalisation and recognition of the harvesting and generation of communicative capital that I have pointed to throughout this thesis. It appears logical that there is a direct link between digital literacy (Doueihi, 2011) communicative capital and potential economic advantage in the career area, where the knowledge economy is now well established and individuals vie for position within it. The casualisation of journalism and the emergence of the informal content industry are clearly implicated here. Additionally, there is scope for considerable further research on this aspect of

the topic at the level of the individual's lived experience. These opportunities will be further explored in Chapter 8

I have raised the prospect of fungibility between the minor form of capital outlined in this thesis and Bourdieu's (1985) trio of capitals, connecting individualised communicative capital to cultural capital, group formation and differentiation to social capital and framing connections between economic capital and macro structures and institutions. I have argued that there is a high degree of interplay between all of these.

### ***7.5 Conclusion***

This chapter has presented an encapsulation of the empirical aspects of thesis, with reference to a process of revisiting of the research sites. It has examined the matter of a perceived exceptionalism within the original research, with regard to themes and particular discourses. It has presented an evaluation of the stability of the individual sites and re-examined the core themes. The chapter concludes that the news site category shows the most strength and sustainability, and that the theme of national identity remains live within discourse. The links established between communicative capital operating at micro and macro level, earlier in the thesis, are seen to be strengthening. Drawing on these findings, the following chapter presents overall conclusions, with particular reference to theory and points to opportunities for other research emanating from this thesis.

## ***Chapter 8***

### ***8.1 Introduction***

The final chapter of the thesis presents the conclusions and of this research project and seeks to situate it within the gap identified at the onset of the work. I make claims regarding the particular contribution to the disciplines within which I have situated the work. I reflect on my re-framing of communicative capital and point to another Bourdieusian (1993) concept, that of *field*, which enhances the conceptual framework offered here. The chapter also points out direct links between communicative capital and the political economy aspects of the sphere examined and the analysis offered throughout the thesis. I conclude by identifying further research opportunities generated either by the findings or observed as possibilities along the way.

### ***8.2 A New Theory of Communicative Capital and Field***

In my appropriation of Dean's (2003; 2010) theory of communicative capital, I redefined the concept to suit my own ends in this project, factoring in considerations of content and user profile, which I consider crucial and Dean dismisses as 'irrelevant.' I moved this analysis away from a Marxist rendering of capital to a Bourdieusian analysis. I submit that because of the connections between the multi-faceted aspects of the subject within the activity of communication, Bourdieu (1986) affords us both a more rounded understanding of human beings within his sub-categorisations, moving away from the rigidity that is sometimes characteristic of Marx. Taking account of the notion of *field* allows us now to observe with greater accuracy the manner in which the fungability identified in this work *may* play out where individuals compete for resources, position and voice within the social world. I therefore identify the development of my theory of communicative capital as depending on a consideration of its operation with reference to particular fields. The identified dominance of the *media* and *academic* fields in this

work provides clear direction in this regard. The inscription of processes and social relations provided by field theory provides the missing link for the reconceptualisation of communicative capital and the discovery of interrelationships between other forms within the suite of major capitals.

By Dean's (2003; 2010) definition of communicative capital, every contributor who writes even a short comment in a blog is implicated in the generation and exchange of this form of capital. This makes perfect sense. These contributions make up the numerical flux that is required to keep this capital in circulation; however, it disregards the qualitative aspect of the interventions entirely and renders matters of tone and texture, which have been crucial to the construction of the present thesis, to the scrap heap. Were communication something that could be generated or reproduced in a predictable mechanised manner then this would be justifiable. On the contrary, communication relies on human agency, performativity and subjectivity, thus an analysis that refuses to factor in all of the contours these entails is self-limiting. Additionally, communication does not occur in isolation. I have explored the significance of social class and social groups in this thesis as important factors and now add the explicit and unifying concept of field to this. Thus an analysis of field emerges as the most logical point of development of a more nuanced understanding of communicative capital operating across the three levels I have worked with here and taking account of the redefinition I have offered.

Whereas Dean's (2003; 2010) grand narrative as it stands is a compelling and powerful description of one of the core components of late capitalism, she excludes the possibility of subtlety and deeper analysis by such a rigid definition. My development of her theory injects a measure of nuance and opens up pathways to more multi-layered analysis. I continue to argue that communication of the type encountered must be explored in a manner that attends to the social.

One of my key propositions is that communicative capital can be 'taken into ownership' at an individual level, *i.e.* it does not, or need not, exist *merely* to serve a larger system, but can be deployed by individuals and groups who enhance their own standing by the quality of their contribution. 'Quality' here is a loaded term; it is context dependent. For instance, phrasing a comment to 'fit in' with the tone of a particular site will be tactically effective, as I suggested in Chapter 4. The relationship to cultural capital is highly apparent here; having the required digital

literacy to perform within these forums is dependent, to echo Peillon (1982), on the possession of not only a good education but also of that often indefinable hallmark of both cultural capital and higher social class: knowing the right thing to say and do in a particular set of circumstances – a form of social ease that is transferrable into discursive arenas and is likely to have its origins within pre-established fields. This comes close to what Bourdieu (1974) characterises as ‘distinction’ in his preliminary elaboration of cultural capital. Therefore, an explicit acknowledgement of communicative capital and its relationship to field further counters the ‘democratising vision’ that was set out and critiqued, particularly in Chapter 2.

Turning this around, I also argued that as we continue to reconfigure our understanding of social class generally, we need to foreground matters of communication. While Savage (2013) directs us to address the cultural aspects of class, I further suggest we foreground the communicative aspects in such an analysis.

The logical extension of this argument on the micro level is that communicative capital, as I have developed it, interacts with other forms of capital to enhance a person’s position within the society or can be converted into other advantages, as I outlined in Chapter 4. What is problematic about this is that the vast majority of comment one encounters is either anonymous or pseudonymous. We might suggest that as with cultural capital, certain members of society have an awareness of the value of visible communication in online space and are aware of its transferability, others perhaps do so unknowingly and a third have unconscious and unknown (or rather, undiscovered) motives for their activity. In the same manner that Dean (2003; 2010) points to certain aspects of her theory – identity and content – that do not matter, I suggest that this consciousness is as yet unimportant to the fact of generation, possession or exchange of communicative capital at the individual level.

In her elaboration of the communicative capital theory, Dean’s (2003; 2010) fundamental rejection of the importance of content and meaning is undertaken, I suggest, to bolster it as a form of ‘pure’ capital, *i.e.* one where its ‘use value’ is irrelevant, yet I maintain that extending the definition to take account of these factors enriches the concept rather than adulterating it. In considerations of the limits of the present study, I am mindful that there are a great number of other considerations that were not included in my survey of this area:

the rise of metadata analysis shows us that who sends a message, who receives that message, who both sender and recipient also talk to, when, where, and for how long, all these things matter. ... the metadata [matters] – the qualitative features of that circulating datum. So when we think about having real, tangible effects on the organization of our social, political, and economic relations, we ought to think about the means, methods, and qualities of circulation.

(James, 2014)

This statement points to the rationale that I have developed throughout the course of this research and highlights other matters to consider and other specific direction in the future. While commentators like Fuchs (2008, 2014) direct us towards questions of ownership of the spaces and digital labour, my interest remains in the micro level of circulation and display of this form of capital. What the research journey has confirmed is that the refutation of positive and idealistic proponents of internet discourse as a democratising arena (Benkler 2006, Shirky, 2003; 2008) is justified. The findings of Chapter 4 in particular consolidate this point.

I concede that my examination of these themes were limited to a slice of the action, but an important one I submit, and one which gives insights that are new and revelatory. I continue to hold that as discourse and sociability move online this is a vital area for sociologists to examine in an ongoing way. This would acknowledge both the way in which identities are produced through discursive means and how the ability to display one's digital literacy (or one's communicative capital) can impact on one's life chances. I reiterate a belief that 'soft' practices of online presence and visibility are increasingly important attributes within a model of capitalism that is beholden to communication within an all-consuming process of financialisation.

The framework of communicative capital does not, however, provide a complete answer to my primary concerns, *i.e.* it is not sufficient to say that 'what is going on here' is merely the circulation of this form of capital, but rather it casts light on some important possibilities and aspects of the activity. My final argument is that the presence of communicative capital is the key factor which impedes the space examined being considered a public sphere in the full sense of that term.

The question of public sphere was a theoretical issue that had deeply preoccupied me in the early to mid-stages of this thesis. Instinctively I became more and more attuned to the idea that the

level of discourse I was encountering was failing to conform to this ideal and this clarified for me when I began to examine the themes and material that went into Chapter 4 in particular. In a small community of participants, it was apparent that those who were most visible and vociferous in the online space, those who named themselves or were otherwise identifiable, were often people who held a form of communicative power more widely in the society. I found that by redefining this as communicative capital provided greater illumination on this conceptual level.

This power emanated either from their professional position, their display of knowledge or their ability to ‘work within the rules’ of a particular website to ensure that their opinion was expressed to its best advantage. As I pointed out, this might entail an act as simple as using a ‘superior’ level of language, correct grammar or perhaps mirroring the stance of an original poster. (These strategies were particularly apparent in sites like ITB and DMW) I took a theoretical leap with this and suggested that these commentators were, consciously or not, generating, displaying and circulating a micro level of communicative capital themselves. I pointed to the scramble for online space among those professionals who had previously considered the communicative sphere their fiefdom, for instance, academics, public relations practitioners and journalists. This observation, which was widespread in the material I examined, reduced the possibility of the space I was surveying being a ‘space apart’ from other sites of public discourse where a more open, inclusive and disparate arena of participation became available. Once more, situating these actors within their now identifiable *fields* brings clearer understanding of the additional entry-point advantage and forms of contestation that are in operation, under the surface.

These observations continued through my analysis of the data that made up Chapter 5. I argued that the strongest voices who engaged in group definition and delineation within Ireland were, more often than not, those who displayed high levels of communicative capital, within my previous definition of this term. This was, I felt most clearly visible in the three-way discussion on social class in Ireland between a left-wing activist/historian on one side and two economists on the other, all of whom are vocal participants within the sphere examined and beyond. Chapter 6, where I pointed to the disruption injected into the conversations regarding Irish identity by the unexpected appearance of the diaspora gives a counter position. There were elements of public

sphere in operation here. Equally, the critique of ‘ideas and innovation’ responses, also discussed in Chapter 6, showed the presence of a counterpublic response in highlighting what I termed the Emperor’s new clothes scenario. However, both of these were reproduced in this thesis because they were anomalies, *i.e.* they were exceptional and not the rule.

## ***8.2 Contributions of this Thesis***

My assessment of aspects of current Irish identity is that there is now a solidified discourse that is in thrall to communications technologies as both revolutionary and salvational. I have argued that this is particularly strong in Ireland, and taken with the theorisation of how communicative capital operates at the other levels (micro and meso) that it has implications for digital inequality. Where individuals are in a position to generate high levels of communicative capital for themselves through utilising their cultural capital, they are then able to reinforce their views of the groups and classes that make up their society. Such activity supports the macro structures which this all feeds into (at corporate and state level), and such citizens stand a much better chance of prospering within the society. This thesis has identified the operation of communicative capital at this individual level. It has done so within a bounded arena of enquiry – blogs and news sites in Ireland – and thus makes a clear and novel contribution to the study of media within Ireland. More than this, it points to the availability of such an analysis to scholars who wish to examine other online discourse through such a lens. Therefore, the thesis makes an applicable contribution to critical online media studies and communications studies more widely at international level.

The thesis also makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the role of online discursive spaces in the representation of Irish identity and their place within contemporary Ireland. As was well rehearsed in Chapter 6, a highly surprising set of encounters and discourses highlighted the homogeneity of voices and worldviews that I have suggested are consolidated in the forums examined. Thus, a clear contribution to a post-modern theorisation of Irish identity



within sociology is offered by the findings of the thesis. This has wider implications for scholars with more direct interest in immigration and diaspora studies, for instance. Additional to this, the tactic of taking a single country study remains relevant in spite of theory directing research away from such preoccupations. This makes a contribution on the level of methodology.

The key discovery, in Chapter 7, of the prospering of the commercially orientated sites at the time of re-visiting unifies many of the findings and contributions of this work. Although not a core preoccupation of the present study, the political economy aspect of media ownership and commercial drive, aligned to the concept of individualised communicative capital and to the presence of particular fields, is highly significant and puts paid to the notion of an extant public sphere, nonetheless allowing for the dormancy of this in normative form.

### ***8.3 Further Research***

The findings of this thesis indicate other areas that are unexamined and point towards important questions, some of which were encountered here and had to be left for another day. An overarching interest is to develop the conceptual framework of communicative capital and assess its inter-relationships with the other forms of capital, in consideration of its relationship to specific fields. For instance, its deeper connection to social capital, pre-existing networks and commercial operations. This type of study would manifest more in the examination of individual subjects, their practices and economic positions. I see social class and field as key features of such an analysis. A study that combines some of the findings on communicative capital in the current thesis and links these into the reputational economy in more depth would be a logical next step for research, assessing the level of awareness contributors have regarding their expenditure of time in forums of online discussion and its possible pay-offs, whether direct or indirect. A survey such as this would be less focused on discourse and its meanings and more on the motivations, beliefs and practices of individuals; the methodology would of necessity be entirely different.

I am additionally interested in the relationship between individual practices and wider corporate structures. I contend that because of the structural shape the Irish economic and employment

landscape is taking, there is much to be gained from examining the beliefs and practices that support and resonate with this. This would also serve to map out some of the interrelationships between the different forms of major and minor capital that I have suggested in this thesis. The role of the journalist, operating in the midst of greater precarity and competition would mark an obvious starting point for this.

Finally, turning to the question of Irish identity: my findings here produced a number of surprises: that it was so easily locatable in the first instance and that it fails to conform to a postmodern and fluid set of theories and expectations. As people continue to generate discourse and text on this topic, I feel that these shows considerable potential as ongoing sources of insights into the social imaginary and the self-perception of people who identify themselves as Irish. Already new topics and themes point the next stage of my research in these directions.



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