Sport and the Media in Ireland: An Introduction

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SPORT AND THE MEDIA IN IRELAND
An introduction

Seán Crosson and Philip Dine

The symbiotic relationship that has existed since the mid-nineteenth century between sport and the media—from the popular press, through newsreels and radio, to television, and beyond—is so well established as hardly to require comment. However, the very familiarity of this long and successful marriage should not blind us to its abiding, and abidingly remarkable, affective power, both for individuals and for communities, real and ‘imagined’, of all kinds. We may thus legitimately pause to reflect on the key role played by the media in establishing the local, national and international significance of what are inherently ephemeral and objectively trivial corporeal practices. Whether it be through the national football cultures of England and Scotland, or the national cycling cultures articulated through Spain’s *Vuelta*, Italy’s *Giro* and, especially, the *Tour de France*, sport annually continues to mobilise millions of spectators, whether physically present or, especially, by means of the mass media. This is even more obviously true of such major international competitions as the World Cup, European Championship and European Champions League competitions in association football. To pursue a little further the example of the *Tour de France*—an event launched in 1903 by the specialist sports newspaper *L’Auto*, as part of a combined commercial and political circulation war with its rival *Le Vélo* in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair—we might even argue that France’s ‘great bike race’ is actually and annually brought into existence by the media. As Jacques Marchand, one of the event’s most seasoned reporters, once remarked: ‘cycle road racing does not really have spectators, it has readers above all’ (Marchand 11). For Marchand, the fleeting vision of the race itself meant little to the crowds massed on the roadside. Indeed, they became conscious of its significance—as lived experience, rendered comprehensible and thus comprehended—only when the event had been variously reconstituted, and thus effectively translated, by its only permanent spectators, that is the accompanying journalists.

This special number of *Media History* is conceived as a contribution to the ongoing scholarly analysis of sport’s social significance, as a set of mass-mediated practices and spectacles giving rise to a complex network of images, symbols and discourses. Its specific aim is to examine the distinctive contribution of various sports—as communicated by a range of mass media—to the creation of modern Irish identities. For sport inhabits a central place in Irish life, more possibly than in any other country in Europe. Indeed, sport provides a defining element in many Irish people’s sense of themselves and their country. One might even suggest that given the loss of an indigenous language to most Irish people and the increasing secularisation of the country, sport is as important as a distinct marker of identity now in Ireland as at any point in the country’s history. And this in a country in which the emergence and consolidation of Irish nationalism and the building of the Irish state were inextricably linked with sport, in particular the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), still the largest sporting organisation on the island. Indeed, uniquely again in international sport, Gaelic games (essentially amateur in ideology and practice) continue to be the most popular...
sports followed and practised in Ireland, despite the significant and growing popularity of non-indigenous sports such as soccer and rugby. Given the recent celebrations in 2009 to mark the 125th anniversary of the GAA’s founding, it is thus particularly appropriate that we should focus on a parish-based institution that is present in all 32 counties of the island of Ireland, and thus north and south of the still-contented international border.

Yet while sport has occupied a central position in Irish life, one cannot underestimate the role of the media in popularising and affirming this position. A recurring subject of the contributions that follow is the impossibility of appreciating the position of sport in Irish life, particularly since the mid-nineteenth century, without considering the role of the media. The movement of sport’s representation, as in other countries, has encompassed the print, radio, cinematic, televisual and virtual (via the internet) media, and this progression is charted here in our contributions, particularly as it relates to the first three of these media. However, in Ireland, the relationship between sport and the media has been complicated by the fact that much of this media emerged, and continues to emanate, from non-indigenous sources, particularly Britain and America, and there is an intriguing encounter apparent here, as Crosson and McAnallen note in their contribution to this special number, with indigenous sport. Indeed, in his 1884 letter of acceptance to Michael Cusack to become the first patron of the GAA, Archbishop Thomas Croke of Cashel indicated his awareness of the popularity of British media in Ireland when he remarked on what he called the ‘vicious literature’ which ‘we are daily importing from England’ and the need for ‘our national journals . . . to give suitable notices of those Irish sports and pastimes which your society means to patronise and promote’ (Croke).

Sport already had a number of publications dedicated to it in Ireland prior to the foundation of the GAA in 1884, namely the sporting papers the Irish Sportsman and Farmer and Sport, though neither gave coverage to Gaelic games but focused rather on sports such as hunting and horse-related activities, rugby, tennis and cricket (Rouse 54). Within a few short years of the foundation of the association, there were two more, Celtic Times, initiated by the GAA’s founder Michael Cusack, and The Gael, both, though short-lived, a testament to the growing popularity of Gaelic games in this period (Duncan 106–7).

In post-partition southern Ireland, the state’s control of the media played a significant role in affirming and promoting a particular, and quite insular, version of Irishness. In this context, Gaelic games played a pivotal role as a marker of Irish culture—particularly as distinct from that of Britain, evident in the frequent broadcasting of Gaelic games from the founding of 2RN, the first radio station in the Irish Free State, in 1926, and the exclusion of perceived non-Irish games such as soccer and rugby. In the north of Ireland, the BBC began transmitting from 1924, though its efforts to advance distinctive local cultural practices, such as sport, were hampered ‘by intense political and public hostility to anything suggestive of an “Irish” identity’ (Connolly 471). Although the contributions to this volume are focused primarily on the relationship between the media and sport in the south of the island, the challenges that partition brought for sport and the media are also aspects of the contributions, including Conor McCabe’s analysis of the tensions surrounding the administration of association football in Ireland post-partition.

While radio in the south of Ireland was quick to exploit sport as a means of attracting audiences, Irish newspapers were slower to realise its importance. However, with the launch of the Irish Press in 1931 and its growing popularity, significantly contributed to by
its extensive coverage of sporting events, particularly Gaelic games, both the Irish Independent and Irish Times increased their coverage of sport in Ireland substantially (Oram 173). The Press, in particular, played an important role not just in affirming the antiquity and centrality of Gaelic games in Irish life, but also the position of sport in general in Ireland as an important marker of identity. As Raymond Boyle has noted: ‘The effects of radio and newspaper coverage of sport were twofold. They elevated awareness of sport while also contributing to the building of the country’s national passion for sport’ (Boyle 631–2).

With the launch of Ireland’s first dedicated national broadcaster, Telefís Éireann—now Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTE)—on 31 December 1961, home-produced television arrived in Ireland, and would play a central role in continuing the popularisation of sport, in particular Gaelic games. The first live television broadcast of an All-Ireland final was in September 1962, and as television became an increasingly important part of people’s lives, so too did its coverage of sport. While soccer and rugby have enjoyed considerable coverage and popularity on Irish television, with horse racing, athletics and boxing also receiving significant exposure, Gaelic games still typically attract the biggest audiences each year for sporting events. This coverage focused primarily on the semi-final and All-Ireland stages for the first 30 years or so of RTE’s existence, but the arrival of Sky television and the increased broadcasting of live soccer games have encouraged the expansion of coverage of Gaelic games in Ireland. This has also been added to by the advent of two more national television channels over the past 15 years, TG4 and TV3, and one Irish-based cable sports channel, Setanta Sports, all of which have given considerable coverage to sport, including Gaelic games. In Northern Ireland, BBC Northern Ireland and Ulster Television (UTV) were slower to broadcast Gaelic games, focusing primarily where local sporting events were concerned on soccer, in particular the domestic Irish league. However, the success of teams from Northern Ireland in the All-Ireland Football championship since the early 1990s, and indeed the development of the peace process, has seen increasing coverage given to Gaelic football, particularly on BBC Northern Ireland.

Despite the popularity of sport on television, radio coverage of sporting events has continued to have a huge following among Irish listeners. While Micheál Ó Muircheartaigh earned a reputation until his retirement in 2010 as one of the finest commentators on live sport in any country for his Gaelic games commentaries on RTÉ Radio 1, the centrality of Gaelic games coverage on local radio, and particularly of soccer on national radio stations Today FM and Newstalk—both established in the past 10 years—all testify to the continuing importance of this medium in Ireland for sporting enthusiasts (Cronin, Duncan, and Rouse 177–207).

The relationship between sport and the media has been an area of increasing international research, with scholars such as Goldlust (Playing for Keeps), Whannel (Fields in Vision, Media Sport Stars), Wenner (MediaSport), Rowe (Sport, Culture and the Media) and Blain and Bernstein (Sport, Media, Culture) all underlining the central role that the media plays in ‘producing, reproducing and amplifying many of the discourses associated with sport in the modern world’ (Boyle and Haynes 8). When we speak of the media’s role in broadcasting or communicating sport, it is a function that goes beyond merely relaying sporting events to an audience; radio and other media have a crucial role in influencing how such sports will be received by the manner in which they mediate the sports they
broadcast. This is a recurring concern of the contributors here. Radio in particular affirmed
the popular communal engagement with Gaelic games as they grew in popularity in
Ireland, with the Kilkenny versus Galway All-Ireland senior hurling semi-final one of the first
live broadcasts of a sporting event in Europe, when transmitted by 2RN on 29 August 1926
(Cronin, Duncan, and Rouse 179–80). The prominent images of families gathered around a
radio in the first indigenous cinematic coverage of an All-Ireland final by the National Film
Institute, in 1948, reflected both an awareness of the importance of radio to people’s
engagement with sport and also the fact that many people in the audience would
probably have listened to the match live on the radio in the first instance. The hiring of
Michael O’Hehir to provide the commentary for this footage—famous across Ireland for his
sporting commentary on radio since 1938—further affirmed this connection. With the
arrival of live television coverage in 1962, O’Hehir would continue to play a crucial role in
the commentary on Gaelic games until his retirement in 1986 (Cronin, Duncan, and Rouse
179–80).

In the Irish context, the relationship between sport and the media remains
significantly under-researched, although the 125th anniversary of the GAA in 2009 has
encouraged much needed and important reflection on this relationship, at least as it
applies to Gaelic games. Where work has been done in this area, including by Marcus De
Bürca (The G.A.A.), Raymond Boyle (From Our Gaelic Fields), W.F. Mandle (The GAA and Irish
Nationalist Politics), Luke Gibbons (‘From Megalith to Megastore’), Mark Duncan (‘The Early
Photography of the GAA’), Mike Cronin (Sport and Nationalism in Ireland; The GAA), and our
contributor Paul Rouse (The GAA; ‘Michael Cusack’), it has emphasised the crucial
relationship between sport and media, particularly in terms of the popularisation of sport
in Irish life. Boyle, in his pioneering study of the relationship between Irish radio and Gaelic
games post-partition, noted how:

sports coverage played a key role in the formative years of Irish broadcasting. The
selective treatment given by radio to specific sporting events not only helped to amplify
their importance, but actually played a central role in creating national events and
organisations. (Boyle 623)

The chief beneficiary here was the GAA, and the sports the association promoted,
particularly Gaelic football and hurling. As Gibbons has also observed: ‘both radio and the
press contributed substantially to creating a nationwide audience for Gaelic games, thus
establishing the Gaelic Athletic Association as a truly national organisation’ (Gibbons 73).
Boyle was also keen in his study to stress the ‘important interrelationship that exists
between radio and newspapers in helping to construct national pastimes. They transform
sport from a simple rule-governed game into a tangible activity which can generate a
degree of collective sensibility that in turn helps to legitimise more abstract political
structures such as “state” and “nation”’ (Boyle 624). Thus, political and economic factors
are crucial to understanding the development of the relationship between sport and the
media in Ireland. This is also a concern of our contributors, who note the important role
that the media played in both popularising and legitimating the GAA as the promoters of
the Irish sports. In contrast, Conor McCabe notes how a publication such as Football Sports
Weekly argued strongly for the recognition of the preferred sport of its publishers,
association football, as equally entitled to be regarded as a hugely important part of Irish people's identity.

These issues indicate how sport in Ireland, as elsewhere, has had an importance beyond that of a mere recreational activity for some time, and the focus of several essays in this issue is sport's political relevance in the formative period of Irish team sports. While the position of Gaelic games as being among the most popular sporting pursuits in Ireland today is undeniable, this was, of course, not always the case. Jeff Dann's study here charts the popularity of British sports in Ireland in the later nineteenth century through an examination of magazines published in elite Irish schools of the period. He finds, as others have noted as regards the emergence of sport in the same period in Britain, that there was a close relationship between sport and theories of personal development, clearly articulated within an imperial context. Playing British sports, particularly rugby and cricket, for those who contributed to these magazines, did not conflict with people's sense of patriotism and Irishness, though this was an Irishness that was clearly imagined, unlike that favoured by those who promoted Gaelic games in the same period and subsequently, within an imperial context. Dann's analysis of the mediation of these sports in these publications indicates the complexities of evolving identities in this period.

The GAA was founded at a point when Gaelic games were in considerable decline, with the distinct possibility that they would not survive beyond the turn of the twentieth century. Indeed, the ban on members or players of the association attending or participating in 'foreign' games was at least partly a response to the growing popularity of sports perceived as 'British', such as cricket, in Ireland throughout the nineteenth century, a matter also remarked upon in Croke's acceptance letter to Cusack quoted above. A crucial ingredient in Gaelic games' development was the role of popular media, particularly newspapers and sporting publications of the 1880s and 1890s, and the fortune that the association had in attracting journalists of the highest calibre to write on its games. Indeed, as Paul Rouse observes in his contribution, at least three of the seven (though as Rouse notes there may have been up to 14) people, including its first secretary Michael Cusack, at the celebrated founding meeting of the association in Hayes Commercial Hotel in Thurles on Saturday 1 November 1884, were journalists. Their contributions, particularly those of Cusack, were crucial in spreading the word regarding, and thus popularising, Gaelic games in Irish life. Rouse's article also highlights the fascinating and tumultuous period in which the association was founded, and the many challenges it faced, including that of a media initially largely hostile towards the association and its aims.

While Rouse provides an insight into the role that the print media played in the emergence and popularisation of Gaelic games, Crosson and McAnallen explore the important information provided by surviving newsreels, in particular those produced by the Pathé company, on these evolving sports and Irish society in the early twentieth century. With a strong focus on the British market in particular, these films offer a fascinating insight into the encounter between colonial representation and indigenous Irish culture. Drawing inspiration from Mike Huggins' work on the role that newsreels played in the promotion of association football, Crosson and McAnallen argue for these fascinating, if short and sometimes misleading (particularly with regard to the heavily accented English commentary), depictions in terms of the explanations that they offer
today of the changing aesthetic of the sports depicted, their role in promoting and maintaining the status quo and the reaction of the GAA to the contemporary media and its representation of its games.

While an analysis of the media offers unparalleled insights into the development of a range of sports in Ireland in this period, the various means of communication themselves played a crucial role in the popularisation of sport in the country, and indeed, in the case of soccer particularly—as Conor McCabe observes—effectively affirmed the division of the island politically. Crowd problems reported at soccer matches in the 1920s suggest that sectarian tensions were also in evidence at sporting occasions, while abuse of referees would appear to be far from a new development in the game of soccer. McCabe’s analysis of the weekly sports newspaper Football Sports Weekly between 1925 and 1928, reveals the tumultuous and challenging circumstances that surrounded the emergence of association football in Ireland. Condemned as ‘imperial’ and ‘un-Irish’ by nationalists, and particularly many leaders and supporters of Gaelic games in Ireland, Football Sports Weekly played a crucial role in defending soccer and asserting its relevance to Irish identity. As McCabe indicates, soccer in this period did grow rapidly across Ireland, though unlike rugby, and Gaelic games, it arguably articulated the political tensions and divisions on the island more than any other sport, as rival associations emerged north and south of the border to administer the sport. In this context, the media played a crucial role in both documenting and affirming the emerging sporting—and to some extent political—identities across the island.

While the popularity of association football in Ireland is aided significantly by the huge following among Irish people for soccer clubs in England and, to a lesser extent, Scotland, rugby football, particularly through the success of Ulster, Munster and Leinster in the Heineken-sponsored European Rugby Cup, would appear to have adopted and incorporated some of the central, and most clearly defining, aspects of Gaelic games, particularly the relationship between place, community and team. Having, since 1995, adapted successfully to a system of professionalised provinces—which itself parallels the time-honoured province-based structures of the GAA and draws affective strength from popular investment in the island’s ‘Four Green Fields’—Irish rugby has attracted both mass spectatorship and media enthusiasm through its skilfully marketed show of locally rooted authenticity. However, as Liam O’Callaghan outlines in his essay, the ‘tradition’ of Munster rugby is very much a media creation of the past 10 years, and one that is not supported by the historical practice of rugby in the province. Indeed, as O’Callaghan argues, for much of the preceding century, the province was characterised by bitter rivalries between the main heartlands of Cork and Limerick, both at club and regional administrative levels, where the club game was of far greater importance, with provincial ties poorly attended and attracting often negative comment in the press. Yet it is the press itself, particularly following the advent of professionalism in 1995, and the successes of Munster in the Heineken cup from 2000 onwards, that played a crucial role in popularising the myth of the proud and ancient tradition of Munster rugby and its attendant qualities, as much moral as material.

The articles that follow together explore the historically symbiotic relationship of sport and the media, elucidating the mechanics of that mutual support against the backdrop of the very specific cultural politics of Ireland. In the Irish context, the central
importance of the GAA in the development of cultural and political nationalism—and in the subsequent establishment and consolidation of a distinctively Irish state—can hardly be overstated. As a particularly clear exemplar, the case of the GAA underlines the broader value of the academic study of the history and sociology of modern sports, and particularly of its specific contribution to the imaginative life, and thus the identity politics, of European (and other) nation-states. The combined associative and affective functions of sport over the past century and a half are unimaginable without the simultaneous emergence of the mass media, in Ireland as elsewhere. The present case studies thus seek to contribute to the ongoing elucidation of that still essential structural and perceptual linkage.

Notes

1. Footage of this game between Cavan and Mayo is held in the Irish Film Institute.
2. The intimate linkage between the media and the very profitable state encouragement of gambling on horse racing—on which O’Hehir also became a regular commentator, as did his son Tony—is also illustrated by the establishment in 1930 of the Irish Free State Hospitals’ Sweepstake, which ran in various guises until 1986.
3. A celebrated folk song by the Irish musician Tommy Makem, *The Four Green Fields* (1967), celebrates the island’s land and people, while lamenting the British colonial presence in the north-eastern province of Ulster (specifically in six of its historic nine counties).

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