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Irish Travellers and the Transformative Nature of Media Representation

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
Honors in the Department of Anthropology

UNION COLLEGE

March, 2013

ABSTRACT

Aisling Kearns. Irish Travellers and the Transformative Nature of Media Representation. Department of Anthropology, March, 2013.

The Travellers, a nomadic group of people indigenous to Ireland, have long been marginalized in Irish society as a result of discrimination. The Travellers themselves have had a history of working to keep themselves separate from the settled Irish, essentially maintaining their own ethnic identity. Traveller culture has undergone a number of changes since the 1960s, a period of increasing urbanization and economic transformation in Ireland. With the changes in both Traveller culture and Irish society as a whole, there has been a corresponding shift to a more positive relationship between the media (newspapers, documentaries, and commercial films and television) and this marginalized group of people. This shift is largely due to a transformation in the Travellers' self-perception along with their discovery of the importance of self-promotion and the recognition of the media as a tool through which to channel this self-presentation to the larger Irish society.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Travellers and the Media

The premise of this study comes from research conducted during six weeks in Ireland in 2011 participating in a Union College research fellowship. The main purpose of the fellowship was to assist two Union College Professors in collecting contemporary data on the Irish Travellers, a nomadic, minority group in Ireland that maintains its own traditions and cultural values separate from that of the settled Irish. During the fellowship research, much of the data collection had to do with marking the changes that occurred in Traveller culture since the 1970s when Professors George and Sharon Gmelch conducted their original fieldwork; conducting participant observation amongst a group of Travellers on the outskirts of Dublin. There are a number of changes that have occurred in Traveller culture since the 1970s, many of which have altered how the Travellers identify themselves and how they relate to the settled Irish. This study, in particular, focuses on representations of the Travellers in the media and how these representations have changed over time. My belief is that the changes are largely due to a transformation in the Travellers' self-perception along with a discovery of self-promotion and recognition of the media as a tool. Additionally, the media's biases towards the Travellers have undergone drastic changes that contribute to the evolving representations of Travellers.

Before George and Sharon Gmelch conducted their original fieldwork in the 1970s, the Travellers largely performed the work of tradesmen and were once an integral part of Irish rural society. Travellers would provide rural settled communities with news from other counties along with performing the handiwork of farmers in exchange for money, food and clothes. In the 1950s, however, there was an economic transformation

in Ireland. Technological advances threatened to destroy Travelling culture as their original trades quickly became obsolete. Travellers in search of new economic opportunity began moving to more urban areas (G. Gmelch 1985: 42). When George and Sharon lived amongst Travellers on the outskirts of Dublin in the 1970s, urbanization of the Travellers had already been occurring for some time. Because the presence of the Travellers in cities was increasing, the settled community began looking for ways to solve the Traveller “problem.” One obvious solution was the settlement of Travellers. New laws were implemented throughout Ireland that prevented Travellers from being able to roam throughout Ireland, and housing sites were erected to encourage Travellers to give up their nomadic life-style. Today, Travellers are, for the most part, no longer nomadic but still work to maintain their Traveller culture in the face of adversity and increasing irrelevance.

The Travellers have long been marginalized in Irish society. Although indigenous to Ireland, the Travellers have had a long history of working to separate themselves from the settled Irish, essentially maintaining their own ethnic identity. Thus, we must first understand ethnicity in general in order to understand how ethnicity and a shared ethnic identity apply to the Travellers’ situation. The difficulty which arises in defining a group by labeling them as “ethnic” derives from the variety of definitions for ethnicity itself. Ethnic groups are defined by cultural elements such as “social construction involving insiders and outsiders mutually acknowledging group differences in cultural beliefs and practices. Insiders and outsiders do not necessarily agree over the details of the acknowledged division” (Sanders 2002: 327). Travellers and the settled population adhere to this kind of social construction. Although they both recognize that there are

fundamental cultural differences between the two groups, they will often cite various reasons for why these differences exist and why the groups cannot live harmoniously. The Travellers claim they are being discriminated against; while the settled population claims that the Travellers take advantage of them and lack respect for other cultures. The differences in these beliefs are a way of shifting blame for the creation of the boundaries, although the boundaries themselves are probably more a result of misunderstanding. However, by citing specific reasons that put the other group at fault for causing the underlying tension, the two groups alleviate some of the blame placed on their own group. Yet, these beliefs only reinforce the boundary by creating further misunderstanding. The boundary then becomes more defined due to stereotypes that developed as justification for creating the boundary in the first place. Travellers and Settlers, alike, have stereotypes about each other that prevent them from converging. These stereotypes shape the identity of each group and remain one cause of the separation between the Travellers and the settled Irish.

The key components in defining ethnicity are identified as shared or common origin, a group understanding of being distinct, and various groups involved in one social system interacting with each other (Hicks 1977: 3). Essentially, ethnic identities develop when a majority group, defining itself as separate from a specific minority, attempts to label those they identify as being different from themselves: "Using ethnic labels to classify people and to explain their behavior implies a belief that people behave similarly because they share a similar nature" (Hicks 1977: 12). People appear to desire to categorize others as an attempt to enforce order in a chaotic world. Having been labeled, people are no longer indefinable and are, therefore, more predictable; being part of a

group means a person should behave similarly to the rest of the individuals of that group. Desire to label others reinforces the idea that people of the same ethnic group must have a shared origin, which then causes them to behave similarly. Although the Travellers lack a specific shared origin, or at least an origin that separates them from the settled Irish, they do share culturally reinforced behaviors that are common amongst the group. Therefore Travellers are labeled as such by an outside group that does not share in their common behaviors. It is not necessarily true that people with similar origins also necessarily exhibit similar behavior—rather it is more likely that people of the same ethnic group reinforce the cultural values that dictate their behavior—the importance lies in the fact that people generally believe this to be true. Thus, the actions of one person in a group can determine the identity of the entire group. The settled Irish may truly be blaming only one or two Travellers for their “misdeeds,” but then by assumption, applying that same thought to the rest of the Travellers who become blanketed by their ethnic status.

But what separates two distinct groups? Boundaries are essential in maintaining these divisions. Consequently, with ethnicity there also must be boundaries, which are used to both include and exclude. According to Barth, one of the earliest anthropologists to devote his attention to ethnicity in social contexts, the persistence of ethnicity is highly dependent upon boundaries:

When defined as an ascriptive and exclusive group, the nature of continuity of ethnic units is clear: it depends on the maintenance of a boundary. The cultural features that signal the boundary may change, and the cultural characteristics of the members may likewise be transformed, indeed, even the organizational form of the group may change—yet the fact of continuing dichotomization between members and outsiders allows us to specify the nature of

continuity, and investigate the changing cultural form and content.
(Barth 1969: 14)

Boundaries, even imagined ones, must exist for ethnicity to exist. Without the continuance of boundaries, a group would have no need for a separate ethnic identity, as it would be assimilated into one group. And yet, the boundaries are transformative; they can become sharpened or relaxed. Although always marginalized and sharing a common identity, the Travellers have changed their own self-identities overtime. And, as such, the ethnic boundaries that defined the Travellers have transformed as the Travellers' position in Irish society has evolved. However, the Travellers still maintain a separate identity from that of the settled Irish. But the transformation in the identity of the Travellers, along with the changing boundaries, is probably due to the changes that occurred in Irish society even more than any purported inherent changes in the Travellers themselves. Increasing urbanization and advancements in technology forced the Travellers to adapt rather than become obsolete. Early Travellers made a living by begging, peddling, chimney sweeping, and doing handiwork for rural farm owners, but later had to resort to begging in cities and scrap-metal collecting as their rural trades became increasingly irrelevant (G. Gmelch 1985: 42). When the place of the Traveller changed in relation to the settled Irish, the boundaries also changed.

Although it is not completely clear where, or even exactly when, the Travellers originated as there is no record of when or where the group appeared, they were originally itinerant tradesmen doing the handiwork of farmers. According to Gmelch, it was in the late 1950's that the Travellers began seeking new economic opportunities in larger towns and cities (G. Gmelch 1985: 42). Their original trades were quickly becoming obsolete, and Travellers were consequently forced to adapt and search for a

new means of subsistence. Gmelch focuses on the economic changes occurring throughout rural Ireland that essentially diminished the usefulness of the Travellers in society: “In the decade following World War II, rural Ireland underwent a period of rapid economic change; inevitably, this affected the Travellers, who were economically dependent on the farming population” (G. Gmelch 1985: 42). With advanced technology, the farmers no longer needed the Travellers to perform tasks that a machine could finish for them. Additionally, the advanced technology allowed for increased production. Then the improvement of roads and transportation systems undermined the need of Travellers as news bearers since there was increasingly less isolation of rural areas. Technological advances also diminished the need for Traveller handiwork. For example, when tinware became mass-produced, there was no longer a need for tinsmiths, and gas and electric heating made chimney sweep work outdated.

In her ethnography, *Nan: The Life of an Irish Travelling Woman*, Sharon Gmelch documented the life of a Traveller woman, Nan, who lived through many of the changes in Traveller culture. Sharon Gmelch ethnographically documents some of the hardships and difficulties that Irish Travellers face. It is apparent, through Nan’s description of her childhood and her later descriptions of Travelling life as an adult, that much had changed within the Travelling population in her lifetime. As a child, Nan describes how her father would be able to find small jobs, working for farmers who needed a hand in their field, or doing handiwork for the settled Irish. They were semi-respected and trusted by various members of the communities they visited the most. In the ethnography, Nan recalled the Traveller’s role as the news bearer, explaining that the settled Irish would look to Travellers as a source of news from other communities. In exchange for this source of

news and services, many of the settled Irish, particularly in rural communities, would provide the Travellers with food. Sharon Gmelch describes how Nan would follow her mother as she went from door to door, hoping to trade different goods for food grown by the farmers: “Sometimes she was given cast-off clothing and shoes as well, but she never viewed these handouts as charity. Travellers were an integral thread in the intricate fabric of rural life. It was their due. Besides, Nan’s mother also brought stories and news to the women she visited, providing welcome relief from the routine and isolation on the farm” (S. Gmelch 1986: 34). When Nan discusses early Travellers life, she seems nostalgic for the “good old days,” but the trouble with working with memories is that it is unclear whether her memories are romanticized through childhood eyes, or if the “old days” were actually better. It is clear, however, that Nan’s later life was full of hardships including abusive relationships, raising children on the road, and dealing with the prejudices of the larger Irish population.

Boundaries are the product of societies that hold a variety of groups in one social context. The boundary that separates the Travellers from the rest of the settled Irish allows Travellers to be defined as a separate ethnic entity. Ethnic boundaries are brought about through interactions between two distinct groups: “Ethnic boundaries are patterns of social interaction that give rise to, and subsequently reinforce, in-group members’ self-identification and outsiders’ confirmation of group distinctions. Ethnic boundaries are therefore better understood as social mediums through which association transpires rather than as territorial demarcations” (Sanders 2002: 327). The ethnic boundaries are social constructions that reinforce the stereotypes one group has of the other, and, at the same, time reinforces self-identification through recognition of group distinctions. Yet,

the boundary can only arise if more than one group is present in a social context, and often one group is considered the host society which dominates the social scene, marginalizing the other. Such is the case with the settled Irish and the Travellers, who have long been discriminated against by the dominant group, the settled Irish. In this sense, the relationship between the settled Irish and Travellers should dictate the extent of the boundary.

The ethnic boundary is also maintained through the physical separation of the Travellers from the settled Irish. Originally the Travellers banded together and travelled with their own clans, and did not associate with the settled Irish unless they needed to do so. Today, the Travellers, although no longer itinerant and technically settled themselves, remain separated from the settled Irish. Community housing has been established in different parts of the country to house the Travellers and encourage assimilation. However, because these areas are concentrated with only Travellers, rather than being communities with Travellers mixed amongst the settled Irish, the communities only reinforce an ethnic identity. The Travellers are still united, although they no longer travel together, and this fortifies their connection with each other and promotes strong cultural ties. In “Ethnic Boundaries and Identity in Plural Societies,” Sanders explains how “regional and neighborhood concentrations of ethnic groups presumably facilitate the maintenance of social boundaries and ethnic identity” (Sanders 2002: 345). The separated communities would also reinforce the social boundaries in place between the two groups. Again, Sharon Gmelch’s ethnography *Nan: The Life of an Irish Travelling Woman*, provides a good example of the realities that some Travellers faced in dealing with their identity as a separate entity from the settled Irish. The discrimination that Nan

faced throughout her lifetime is a common complaint amongst the Travelling population. The prejudice of the Irish settled population actually gave Nan some anxiety about moving into a house amongst the settled Irish: “Like other Travellers housed in the midst of settled people, Nan kept to herself and had very little to do with her neighbors. They were friendly enough, but she knew no one wanted a “tinker” or “knacker” living next door” (S. Gmelch 1986: 203). Therefore, Travellers and the settled population alike are far more comfortable living amongst people who are of the same group. Yet, living separately affords little opportunity for social interaction which might actually correct some of the misconceptions each group holds about itself and the other.

Another scholar, Kevin Kearns, discussed in his article, “Irish Tinkers: An Itinerant Population in Transition,” some of the prejudices between the settled Irish and the Travelling population. In particular, he highlights how stereotypes become social barriers to the acculturation of Travellers. Although the Irish have been placing the Travellers in standardized housing in an attempt to assimilate them, they remain an object of discrimination. Often communities of houses must be made specifically for Travellers, creating an uproar amongst the settled Irish when they try to move Travellers into their settled communities. Kevin Kearns further claims that Travellers are stigmatized by the settled Irish, who view them as a menace due to their history of vagrancy, trespassing, and deviant behavior (Kearns 1997: 543).

Because the settled Irish and the Travellers live separately, there is less chance of interaction between the two groups: “Constraints on cross-group interaction contribute to the respective groups’ ignorance of one another. This, in turn, encourages stereotyping” (Sanders 2002; 328). In the study, *Tinkers and Travellers*, Sharon Gmelch emphasizes

the hostile relationship between the Travelling population and the “buffers” or settled Irish. Sharon points out that prejudices could arise due to settlers’ few interactions with Travellers: “The attitudes of settled Irish are also influenced by the type of contact they have with Travellers. Begging is an annoyance, and occasional behavior such as public brawling may be viewed as threatening and thus evoke hostility” (S. Gmelch 1975: 98). Sharon Gmelch further asserts that because the non-itinerant population rarely interacts with Travellers, there is little chance to correct the misconceptions through personal contact.

There are marked differences between the Travellers and the settled Irish and these differences become the boundary between the two groups which drives the animosity: “Widely acknowledged racial differences can sharpen in-group members’ self-identification and out-group acknowledgement of intergroup distinctions” (Sanders 2002: 328). Although the Travellers are not a distinct racial group, they do share widely acknowledged distinctions from the settled Irish. The Travellers have their own style of dress, cultural beliefs, their own dialect, and, at one point, even their own language. The distinctions both reinforce the Travellers’ self-identification and sharpen the boundary that separates them from the settled population. The settled population is clearly able to separate the Travellers from themselves by honing in on distinctions such as the difference in dialect, which is generally universal amongst the Travellers even if they reside in different counties. Thus, instead of having a county accent, the Travellers have their own accent. In this way, they can recognize other Travellers and share a connection. But in this way, they are also recognized as outsiders by the settled community.

Many of the more recent changes in Traveller culture have been moving towards assimilation with the settled population. The push towards integration was originally initiated by the settled Irish through attempts to outlaw the act of travelling along with requiring Traveller children to attend school. In order to get Travellers to cease their nomadic lifestyle, the Irish government (controlled by the settled Irish) has more recently been providing the Travellers with housing, resurrecting specific plots of land to be designated to the Travelling clans and communities. These changes have led to inevitable changes in the Traveller identity and an unavoidable shifting of ethnic boundaries. With increasing assimilation, the boundaries have become blurred, though the Travellers still work to maintain a separate identity from that of the settled population. The Travellers believe in the importance of upholding their traditions and distinct culture, which has become increasingly obsolete due to their need to adapt to a changing society.

The changes that have occurred in Traveller culture have influenced the media representations of their group. The media provides the general public with news about the realities of life, but the extent to which they represent the truth is debatable. Yet, people turn to the media to learn about the world: “Increasingly the media have found themselves positioned at the heart of cultural, social, political and economic contexts; and these contexts both influence media performance and are influenced by it” (Watson 1996: 1). This study attempts to convey how the media has been influenced by and, in turn, has influenced the Travellers. The representations of the Travellers within the media have changed over time. These changes in representations have occurred because of the changing purpose of the media in society and because of a desire on the Travellers behalf to recreate their image: “The news is important to us because it purports to represent ‘the

world out there'; its realities. We need only pause for a moment to assess just how much of our knowledge of the world is *mediated* by newspapers, radio and TV" (Watson 1996: 4). The Travellers may not necessarily want to become completely assimilated into Irish culture, as they want to retain their own traditions, but many have come to realize how the negative perceptions of their group can be harmful. The stereotypes that circulated about Travellers affect their attempts to function as normal members of society. Travellers are often unable to find jobs because of discrimination: "In a discriminatory labour market few male Travellers were offered jobs, and when they were the wages were too low to provide adequate support for the household or to compensate for the loss of dole and/or earnings of self-employment" (Helleiner 2000: 140). Because people learn about other cultures via the media, the media could be essential in either combating the stereotypes that negatives affect Travellers or in extending them.

The media typically picks up on trends in culture and extorts them: "The media are part of trends, responsive to them and often instrumental in publicising, and therefore influencing the direction of such trends" (Watson 1996: 1). Because the Travellers have been more active recently in asserting Traveller rights, the media is vital in directing the perceptions of these movements. The media can either make or break the Traveller image depending on what they choose to convey. And it is not just print media and news anchors that are responsible for affecting these perceptions. Films have often been responsible for representing different cultures through stereotypes and often, therefore, uphold the stereotypes and allow them to continue:

Using film and television to relax or escape, Americans discover widely-held attitudes and easy stereotypes, and while this is true for most programming, it is especially noticeable in depictions of

ethnic-Americans. For generations of American movie viewers, for example, Italian families were loud and large, Irish fathers drank, Orientals were either houseboys or evil villains plotting to take over the world, and Blacks sang or danced. (Holte 1984: 101)

Films represent different groups using stereotypes and often are the only way people gain exposure to a separate group of individuals. Films often perpetuate stereotypes as they become mixed with popular culture and affect peoples' perceptions. Television shows act in a similar way, affecting how people view others and the world around them: "When we watch TV soaps we may get a strong feeling that we are being preached at: we may be cynical about this, or we may be grateful for the message which is being conveyed. What we can be certain about is that the message is there" (Watson 1996: 5). Understanding the message that the media is trying to convey is essential in how people view the world. Therefore it is of the utmost importance in discovering what the purpose is behind any story that the media tells. What the media is trying to accomplish by telling their story, affects the beliefs and understanding of their audience.

The media want to sell the story, whether it is a newspaper seeking more readers or a film that needs audiences to buy a ticket. Increasingly today, the purpose of all kinds of media is not just to provide us with an understanding of the world around us, but it is also about providing entertainment and a particular political or social point of view. As James Watson points out in his book, *Media Communication: An Introduction to Theory and Process*, "The media love controversy and are perpetually involved in it" (Watson 1996: 6). Controversy draws attention and therefore the media thrives on it. The media wants to convey a story that audiences will buy. Therefore, the story the media presents may not always be an accurate one, but one that will gain more attention. The media

follows trends, and the media has the freedom to choose the way in which they represent these trends: “Media workers create messages in specific circumstances (e.g. within the limits of a newspaper organization or the laws of a country), and supply these messages to a target group – the readers whom a specific newspaper aims to reach” (Fourie 2006: 342). The media have conveyed different messages about the Travellers throughout history. The way in which the media represent Travellers changes depending on the story about the Travellers that they want to sell to their audience. Previously, the Travellers were highly discriminated against, and, as such, the media chose to represent the Travellers in a negative light. Of late, however, some media have changed their view. Perhaps this is due to a more accepting society, or the desire to sell the story of the underdog that has survived and continues to survive in Irish society. In any case, the ways in which the media have represented the Travellers has changed, and what this study will uncover is the reasons for this transformation.

Methodology

My research relies upon both qualitative and quantitative methods. During my six weeks of research in Ireland, I focused on conducting participant observation combined with archival research. Most of my archival research was either conducted in the Union College library of Schenectady, New York, or in the Cork University library of Cork City, Ireland. The archival research consisted of gathering background information on Traveller culture and information about governmental policies concerning Traveller rights. During my six weeks in Ireland, I was fortunate enough to spend time living amongst the Travellers conducting participant observation.

For a portion of my time in Ireland, I was able to live with relatives who are part of the settled Irish population. My time spent amongst both the settled population and the Travelling population provided further insight into the tensions between the two groups and provided me with an understanding of the biases from each community. This allowed me to gain a more holistic view of the Travellers in the context of the larger Irish population, and perhaps also gain a better understanding of the boundaries that exist between the groups.

The vast majority of my field work took place in Cork City, a large city in County Cork, Ireland. Although this is not the same site where my professors, George and Sharon Gmelch, conducted their original fieldwork, it is home to a large Travelling population. Additionally, I had the opportunity to conduct some fieldwork in Dublin, where Sharon and George Gmelch lived amongst Travellers in the 1970s. However, the halting site where they had once lived has changed drastically since the 1970s. It is no longer the open space crowded with Traveller caravans, but has now been transformed into housing, which was designated to the Travelling community by the Irish government.

For conducting interviews, I relied upon a snowballing technique, which is the most effective method for studying a hidden population that is difficult to access. A snowball sample refers to a sampling technique in which existing informants provide future informants from amongst their acquaintances; this is also sometimes referred to as chain sampling. Because it is the existing informants that provide the researcher with new informants, the sample is not exactly random, but it is often the best way to gain access to people who would otherwise be difficult to find. The Travellers, not always having a specific place of residence, therefore offer limited ways of getting in contact with them,

making it particularly difficult for outsiders to gain access. Although the snowballing technique limited my ability to collect a completely random sample of informants, it was the best method in dealing with a more inaccessible population such as the Travellers.

By using the snowball sampling technique, I was able to gain a number of informants, Travellers and non-Travellers alike. With these informants, I conducted both formal and informal interviews. On a number of occasions, I was able to work with Professors George and Sharon Gmelch to conduct interviews, and had the opportunity to sit in on many interviews being conducted with their own informants. Often we would use old photographs, taken during the Gmelchs' original fieldwork, to elicit memories and stories from informants. The use of photographs in conducting research was particularly useful to Sharon Gmelch during her previous work with the Tlingit Indians in North America. This was generally a successful tool, as photographs would often work as a conversation piece that would lead to any number of discussions. The Travellers enjoyed looking at the photographs which often evoked a feeling of nostalgia for the "good old days."

Much of my research also relied upon participant observation. I was fortunate enough to stay with the Travelling families in Cork City. One extensive Travelling family, the McCarthy's, invited me, along with George and Sharon Gmelch, to stay within their home. I interviewed members of the immediate McCarthy family along with their extended relatives. The McCarthy's live alongside their relatives on a halting site in Cork City, which includes an estimated twenty to thirty families all together. The Keenan family, another Travelling family, in a housing settlement in Cork City were also kind enough to interview with both me and George and Sharon Gmelch. Their family was

smaller than the McCarthy's, and I interviewed three Travellers at this site. I had the opportunity to interview a few other Travellers intermittently during my time in Dublin and Bantry, Cork.

I kept extensive field notes on anything to do with the Travellers, noting what I saw in their communities, remarkable things that were said, or any mentions of the Travellers outside of the Travelling community. Often when individuals of the non-itinerant population were informed of the research I was conducting they would feel compelled to share their opinions of the Travelling community with me, positive or negative. This was advantageous in gaining perspective on how the Travellers were represented to the wider community.

In order to analyze the representations of the Travellers in the media, I used quantitative coding methods to evaluate how the Travellers are conveyed in different types of media over time. I came up with a set of codes that could be used to evaluate different aspects of Traveller culture as it has been presented in newspaper, documentaries, television shows, and films. I then used these codes to draw connections between the different types of media and whether the overall representations of the Travellers appeared to be mostly positive or negative. For example, I used specific codes for determining whether there was use of distancing language or derogatory words, which would imply that it is a negative representation of the Travellers.

I divided my analysis of the media into three separate sections: entertainment media (namely films and television shows), documentaries, and print media, in particular newspapers. For entertainment media I picked a box office film from the 1990s which

depicted Travelling culture and compared it to a popular television series released in 2010. I selected this particular film because I believed it to provide the largest amount of material to work with in its depiction of the Travelling community. My analysis of documentaries included four documentaries from various years, three of which were created by one filmmaker. Print media spanned the longest period of time for analysis. I specifically looked at newspapers from each decade from 1960 up to contemporary articles published as recently as 2012. I chose this range of years for my analysis of the newspaper specifically because I felt it provided the best range of transformation in the representations of Travellers in the media. I was not fortunate enough to find documentaries, films, or television shows that spanned the same amount of time as the print media however. Consequently my sample size for those sections remains smaller than that of the newspaper.

Outline of the Following Chapters

Chapter 2 discusses the representations of Travellers as presented by entertainment media, specifically examining the images suggested in films and television series. The chapter provides analysis of particular films and television shows using coding techniques discussed in the methodology. The analysis aims to convey how certain images of the Irish Travellers develop dependent on the intent of the filmmaker, and how often the stereotypes that are presented by certain films or television shows are actually a reflection of the underlying tensions between the larger society and a specific sub-group. Furthermore, this chapter considers the effects of the “box office” on the representations of Travellers, and how something produced for entertainment value might deviate from representations of reality.

Chapter 3 examines the portrayal of Irish Travellers in documentaries, and further discusses how the narratives of documentaries are subject to the motivations and beliefs of the filmmaker. This chapter also suggests that “truth” in documentary is more or less subject to bias, as the presentation of this supposed “truth” can change thereby altering the narrative that is being marketed. Chapter 3 also delves into the notion that the presence of camera crew might have an effect on how the Travellers present themselves.

Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the representations of Travellers in newspapers spanning the period of 1960 through 2012. This chapter examines how the representations of Travellers in the news are influenced by tensions between the settled community and the Travelling community, societal shifts within Ireland, along with the self-presentation of the Travellers. The images of the Travellers have transformed from rather negative representations in the 1960s to more positive representations in contemporary Irish society. Arguably the representations that are presented are reflections of tensions present within society at that time.

Chapter 5 draws conclusions about how Travellers are represented in the media overall, and why the images of Travellers might have transformed and evolved over time.

Chapter 2: Travellers in the Eyes Entertainment Media

Media (print, film, television shows, and documentaries), though not always factual, has long been the lens through which cultures learn about their place in the world relative to other cultures. Thus media can be both beneficial and/or detrimental in promoting a specific image of a group. Perhaps the most sensationalized form of this is entertainment media, defined by its ability to sell to its audiences through entertainment value and relies upon its ability to provide entertainment to make money. For this reason, entertainment media is not reliable when it comes to facts or representations of different cultures and societies. In this chapter, I discuss how entertainment media represents Travellers within contemporary box office films and television shows, and suggest some reasons for why the Travellers are represented the way they are. Additionally, I explain how some of the representations presented within entertainment media have changed over time.

In addition to being a source of entertainment, film, in particular, has been a medium through which people have learned about other cultures and often depict how one culture relates to another. With more secretive or inaccessible communities, the representations of the community that we see in film or television shows are often the only form of access that outsiders have to these communities. For example, the 1985 American film *Witness*, depicting an Amish boy who becomes the witness to a murder, is one of the few ways in which outsiders might ever learn about the Amish, a more inaccessible group in American society. Not only is film one of the few ways people learn about other cultures they don't normally have access to, but it is also a reflection of

the larger society's point of view. The representations of specific communities that arise in entertainment media are from the perspective of the larger society that creates them.

The representations of Travellers in films, such as the British film *Snatch* made in 2000 with Brad Pitt cast as one of the Travellers, are a reflection of the stereotypes and opinions that the settled population has of Travellers in general and is a good example of “romanitized” version of the culture that might attract the outside world. *Snatch* is a comedic film directed by the British filmmaker Guy Ritchie set in the criminal underworld of London. The film involves two coinciding plots about men in search of stolen diamond and boxing promoter, Turkish, who ends up in debt to a gangster called Brick Top. The film starts out when Turkish convinces Brick Top to add one of his fighters, Gorgeous George to his bookies for betting. However, when Turkish sends his assistant, Tommy, with Gorgeous George to retrieve a caravan from a group of Travellers the deal ends up turning sour. A Traveller named Mickey (Brad Pitt)--who also turns out to be a bare-knuckle boxing champion—seriously injures Gorgeous George, who will now no longer be able to fight for Turkish. Turkish is then forced to convince the Traveller Mickey to replace Gorgeous George as his boxer, or he will find himself seriously indebted to the gangster Brick Top.

The overall image of Travellers that is presented in *Snatch* is largely negative. As case in point, throughout the film Travellers are referred to as pikies, which is considered a derogatory term to most Travellers, along with the terms tinker and knacker. The term pike is mainly a slang word used in the United Kingdoms to refer to gypsies, it has developed some negative connotations, however, along with the terms knacker and tinker. The term tinker was originally coined to describe Travellers who work as tinsmiths,

because of the sound the metal made when it was hammered (G. Gmelch 1977: 8). Although these words were once used frequently to describe Travellers, they have adopted negative connotations and are now considered pejoratives to most Travellers. They never use the word Traveller in the film to refer to this group, though on rare occasions refer to them as gypsies. Furthermore, it is apparent in the film that there is a great deal of animosity towards this group coming from the settled population. Although this film is set in England, the settled English share the same tensions with this group that many of the settled Irish do. There are multiple occasions within *Snatch* that characters will outright state their hatred for the “pikies,” each in turn saying the same phrase, “I fucking hate pikies.” This exact phrase comes up four times within the movie, and is said by a different character every time, and always by a member of the larger society. Furthermore the phrase, “I fucking hate pikies,” was stated by both major characters and minor characters in addition to being stated by a new character every time, conveying that the sentiment was felt universally by all members of the larger society. If there are so many people that have a problem with the Travellers then the Travellers must be creating the problem. At least, this seems to be what the film is suggesting, especially considering the wide variety of stereotypes the film brings to the surface.

The overall negative portrayal that the film presents is synonymous with the prejudice that the settled population has towards the Travellers as a group. The apparent stereotypes in the film are also a reflection of the culture that created it. It is a declaration of their feelings towards the Travellers made eminent through the exaggerated stereotypes used in the film. Although many of the stereotypes in the film are used for pure entertainment, they also expose some of the underlying tensions between the two

groups, at least from the perspective of the culture that created the film. The tensions that are propagated throughout the film are stereotypes that the settled population is wary of when it comes to interacting with Travellers. For example, the film highlights the fact that the Travellers speak differently, making them difficult to understand. When the audience is first introduced to the Travellers, Brad Pitt—who plays a Traveller named Mickey—begins talking to an English man named Tommy in an almost incoherent manner. The narrator of the film, Turkish, interjects Mickey’s speech, saying: “Now there is a problem with pikies or gypsies. You can’t really understand much of what is being said. It’s not Irish, it’s not English, it’s just pikey.” The film uses this inability to understand what the character is actually saying for a comedic effect on numerous occasions. In the same introductory scene, Mickey has invited Tommy into the house for tea, and as they are walking, he asks Tommy if he likes dogs, but Tommy doesn’t have any idea what Mickey is saying to him because Mickey pronounces the word dog as dag. After struggling to understand for a minute, Tommy finally comprehends and they move on.

Beyond just using the Traveller’s incoherent speech for comedic effect, the film also highlights this form of speech as a reason for why the Travellers can’t be trusted, and distrust lies at the heart of the underlying tensions between the settled population and Travellers. The narrator of the film points out that Travellers are known for scamming people and therefore can’t be trusted. He asserts that the Travellers use confusing speech to con people into making deals with them: “Now, pikies are well known for their skills of negotiation and business. It’s part of the reason they talk like they do so you can’t follow what’s being said.” Being unable to understand the Travellers gives the settled people a reason to distrust them as they would be unable to level with them. This might

lead a settled person to believe that they are being cheated in some way. Furthermore, it sets the Travellers apart from the settled population.

It is true, that the Travellers have an accent separate from the settled Irish. Each of Ireland's counties has its own distinct accent, but for some reason, perhaps because they are a more introverted community, Travellers have developed and maintained their own separate accent rather than adopting a county accent of some sort. Although this accent may distinguish the Travellers and allow them to recognize each other, it also marks them as a Traveller to outsiders. One young Traveller I met in Cork city cited his accent as a reason for discrimination. He claimed that the settled Irish are able to distinguish the accent as that of a Traveller and therefore might watch them more closely if they were to enter into one of their shops or refuse to hire them for a job. In an interview with Sharon Gmelch, one Travelling woman, Kathleen Keenan, pointed out that some Travellers who are ashamed of being a Traveller will "put on a settled person's accent, and they think they really are settled people." Rather than be stigmatized by the larger society because of their Traveller identity, Travellers such as Kathleen's sister choose to hide their identity. Kathleen explained that she thinks this is a shame because Travellers should be proud of their culture and who they are and they should not have to hide their identity.

The movie also emphasizes the stereotype that Travellers are always looking to con people. In the introductory scene where Tommy first meets Mickey, Tommy is almost scammed by a young Traveller boy who claims that he will go find Mickey for him. The Traveller boy asks Tommy if he would like him to fetch Mickey for him, but then proceeds to stand there. When Tommy asks the boy why he is still standing there, the

boy explains that he is waiting for the five quid he expects Tommy to pay him. Tommy then is forced to negotiate with the boy and offers him a quid to do what he asked, to which the boy exclaims, “You’re a tight fucker aren’t you?” The scene is meant to be comedic, as this outsider is trying to negotiate his way through Traveller territory with a child. The success of comedy often relies on its ability to epitomize situations that cause discomfort. *Snatch* is successful at this because it capitalizes on some of the true anxieties the settled community has about interacting with Travellers. Interestingly, although comedy often reminds an audience of its apprehensions, it can also effectively relieve them by making light of the situation. They continue to use the stereotype that Travellers scam people throughout the film by having the Mickey constantly bargain with the main characters Tommy and Turkish.

Snatch also tends to represent Travellers as violent, as the movie revolves around the story of an underground boxing business in which Mickey, the Traveller, is a boxer. The main character, Turkish, explains during one of his narrations that Mickey is a champion bare-knuckler boxer: “It turned out that the sweet-talking, tattoo-sporting pikey was a gypsy bare-knuckle boxing champion, which makes him harder than a coffin nail.” Bare-knuckle boxing is a violent sport which is revered by the Travelling culture, and the champions of this sport would be held in high-esteem. Representing Mickey as a tough, bare-knuckle boxing champion only promotes the idea that Travellers are violent and crazy. Furthermore, the narrator refers again to the Traveller ability to scam people by calling Mickey a “sweet-talking” Traveller. The film also asserts that the Travellers would not think twice about killing someone, if they didn’t believe they would be caught. Early on in the movie, when Tommy first visits the Traveller campsite, he brings along a

champion boxer named Gorgeous George. Mickey ends up challenging Gorgeous George to a fight when George becomes angry about being conned by Mickey. Mickey knocks George out in one punch and Tommy is left fearing George won't wake up. The narrator, Turkish then explains that Tommy is afraid that the Travellers will think it better to dispose of him as well if it turns out that George has died: "If Gorgeous doesn't wake up in the next few minutes, Tommy knows he'll be buried with him. Why would the gypsies go through the trouble of explaining why a man died in their campsite when they can bury the pair of them and just move camp? It's not like they got social security numbers, is it? Tommy - the tit - is praying. And if he isn't, he fucking should be."

Clearly, in this scene the Travellers are negatively represented as violent and wild. They are not confined by the law in the same way as settled people because, as Turkish points out, they are nomadic and they don't have social security numbers. The Travellers' unconfined way of living is suggested to offer them the freedom to act according to how they choose. This notion plays into the settled population's image of Travellers being the root cause of any trouble. One of the grievances I heard from many Travellers during my time in Ireland was that they were often blamed for acts of vandalism and petty theft. In some cases, these accusations might have been true, but the entire Travelling population often takes the blame for the acts of one or two members, a typical response of a larger population to a marginalized minority. The image that these few brought forth has come to represent the rest of the community. The misconception of all Travellers being thieves was also brought to light in the film when Gorgeous George refused to leave the car alone to follow Tommy and Mickey into the house for tea. Mickey's mother, also a Traveller,

remarks that he must think they are a pack of thieves since Gorgeous George is afraid to leave the car.

The film *Snatch* and its negative representation of Travellers, is not necessarily true to Traveller culture, but rather, it is a reflection of the boundaries that exist between Travellers and non-Travellers. The film emphasizes the fears that settled Irish have about interacting with Travellers, such as incomprehension of language and being taken advantage of. Additionally, the film reflects the more general stereotype that Travellers create trouble and are willing to do almost anything to get ahead. But films are not only a reflection of long-held beliefs, but they can also be responsible for creating and promoting these ideas through repetition. Sometimes, the only way people can learn about another culture is through the representations they see in films. Therefore, when taking films such as *Snatch* into consideration, audiences should be wary that the film is attempting to capitalize on the comedic entertainment by using Traveller stereotypes. This, of course, is not to say there is no truth behind stereotypes. All stereotypes have to develop somewhere, and many of the representations presented in films are reflections of people's thoughts about the Travellers in general, real or imagined.

Another form of entertainment media that focuses exclusively on the Traveller population is a television series that first aired in 2010 called *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*, which seems to be presented as a documentary but its factuality is probably closer to that of the "reality" television shows in the United States such as the show *Jersey Shore* or *Desperate Housewives*. *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* follows the story of different Travelling families in Ireland and England. Each episode revolves around gypsy rituals and celebrations such as weddings, communions, funerals, and christenings. Despite

accusations from the Travelling community that it does not accurately portray their culture, *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* aired for a second season in 2012 because of its popularity. For my analysis, I examine two episodes from the beginning of the first season and two episodes from the end of the last season so as to increase the increment of time that I am dealing with and understand more fully the changes that have occurred over this increment of time.

The aim of *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*, unlike the film *Snatch*, does not appear to be to cast a negative image on the Travellers by promoting and reiterating stereotypes about them; rather the television series appears to both sensationalize and exoticize the Travellers. The show aims to separate the Travellers from the settled population to make them more unusual and interesting to audiences who follow the show. The show starts out being narrated in a tone that is similar to that of a documentary, for example, *Animal Planet*, in which the narrator might be talking in a factual tone of voice about the behavior of a totally separate species to humans. In fact, in one of the later episodes of the second season, called “Out of Site, Out of Mind,” the narrator begins talking about a group of Travellers that are still nomadic in the same way that someone might discuss a group of migratory birds that return home for their mating season. In the episode, the narrator states: “For ten months of the year, the residents of Rathkeale in Ireland, spend their lives on the road Travelling throughout the world. In December they return home to marry each other during wedding season.” Although this pattern might be true for many of the Travellers in Rathkeale, it seems doubtful that they would all return together in order to mate the way a migratory species would, but this is the image that is put forth by the narrator. Perhaps if the narration had been in a less of an authoritarian tone, which

sounds like it is educating its audiences about a new and wonderful species that has been discovered, the writing might not have appeared so ridiculous. However, if even the tone of the show works to exoticize the Travellers, the rest of the show is produced in a way that tries to completely distance the Travellers from the settled Irish.

My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding, of course, centers around Traveller Weddings. The show dramatizes the wedding events that occur in Traveller culture, and although some of what the show documents is true, a large portion of the Travelling population is unrepresented. To increase its popularity the show attempts to create a spectacle out of what it calls the “lavish” celebrations of the Travelling culture. Essentially, *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* boils Traveller culture down to nothing more than girls who wear skimpy clothing and compete for the biggest dress in their weddings. Katherine Quarmby, a journalist and television producer, asserted in an article criticizing the series, that most of the Travelling women that she has met during her work on Dale Farm “dress extremely modestly, in below the knee skirts, or plain trousers. They don’t have the money for spray tans – they are more concerned with cobbling together enough cash to take their kids to the leisure centre so they can give them a hot shower” (Quarmby: 2012). Although she admits that there is some truth to the show, she also affirms that it certainly does not apply to all Travellers.

The show simplifies Traveller culture in such a way that it does not even begin to introduce audiences to the complexities of Traveller life. *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* particularly represents Travelling women in a poor light. The show declares that women live for their wedding day, claiming that it is the biggest moment in a Travelling girl’s life because all they are good for is cooking, cleaning and caring for their husbands. In this

respect, the first episode of the series, “Born to be Wed,” was aptly named. The entirety of the first episode revolves around the idea that Travelling girls wait for their wedding day from the moment they are born. The dressmaker in the show, Thelma Madine, asserts:

“From the minute these young girls can walk and talk, they only thing they are thinking about is their wedding day, and getting married, and getting the dress of their dreams. She’ll say to you, ‘I want mine to be the biggest. What’s the biggest dress you’ve ever done, well I want mine bigger than that one.’”

Although Thelma Madine does have a great deal of interaction with the Travelling community, she might be dealing with only one portion of the Travelling community. Certainly there are members of the Travelling community who don’t follow this trend, as Katherine Quarmby previously expressed. And yet, *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* continues to convey the idea that Travellers, or Travelling girls in particular, only look forward to their wedding days and sporting the biggest dress they possibly can. The first episode alone mentions the Traveller affinity for outlandish and large dresses a minimum of six times within a forty minute episode.

Beyond that, the television show promotes the notion that Traveller women only have their wedding day to look forward to and then the rest of their life is spent in subservience to their husbands. Although it is true that the Travelling culture is more traditional and patriarchal in the sense that often the man is expected to work outside of the home while the woman cooks, cleans and takes care of the children, this is hardly the steadfast rule that is presented in *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*. There are many Travelling women who take active roles in society, have jobs and control the decision making within Traveller households. I met many such women during my time spent in Ireland, such as

Bridget Carmody, a Travelling woman who actively promotes Traveller culture in mainstream society and is a leader in the Cork Traveller Women's Network, an organization dedicated to the betterment of Travellers and promoting cultural awareness. In a meeting with some of the active members of this group, their disappointment with the *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* television series was expressed when they stated that they were "fed up with it" in reference to what they see as inaccurate, stereotypical portrayals of Travelling culture. It is clear that the television series dramatizes different, apparently exotic, aspects of Travelling culture because it makes for better entertainment. However, the show is not true to all aspects of Travelling culture, nor are they representing the community as a whole.

Many of the interviews that take place during the show do seem unscripted and include the thoughts of Travellers and settled people alike, but the interviewers sometimes ask leading questions. This is a tactic that allows the interviewers to either draw the audience's attention to a particular point or to catch their interviewee saying something unusual. For example, throughout the series, the interviewer might ask questions about how big the Traveller bride's dress is in order to bring the audience's attention to the ridiculous size of the Traveller dresses that might weigh as much as 20 stone, the equivalent of about 280 pounds. On other occasions, the interviewer might choose to highlight a certain aspect of Travelling culture that he or she might deem controversial by asking leading questions. In the episode, "No Place Like Home," the show highlights the dancing of young girls at a communion party. These girls are about eight years old and are both dressed and dancing semi-provocatively. Because the producers obviously felt that just showing this in the episode wasn't enough, they decided

to also show an interview with the young girls during which the interviewer asks them questions such as, “Where did you learn to dance like that?” In the four episodes that I analyzed, this tactic was used to highlight negative aspects of Traveller culture a total of thirteen times. However, the vast majority of these instances were in the first two episodes during the first year—eleven in total. Perhaps the reason for this is that the producers realized from reviews that the show needed a more legitimate form of interviewing if they were going to claim to be a documentary. Or perhaps they were able to glean drama from other controversial topics such as the debate over land or the eviction of Dale farm, a Traveller halting site, which is a large part of the last episode.

My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding also has a tendency to use distancing language when talking about the Travelling culture, and this is perhaps a way of further exoticizing the culture for entertainment purposes. For example the television series uses words such as “unique” or “unconventional” to describe Travellers or aspects of their culture, and therefore it sets them apart from the mainstream society as something different and unusual. Within the four episodes I analyzed I found thirty-six instances of distancing language. The amount of distancing language however, seemed to vary from episode to episode depending on the subject matter. More serious episodes that revolved around discrimination against Travellers (such as the eviction of Dale Farm) used less distancing language, opposed to the episodes that were attempting to exoticize the Traveller culture and show it as unique. In addition to distancing language, the television series would also use negative words or phrases when discussing Traveller culture, such as “strict” or “imposing.” Generally the negative words were used to describe their treatment of women as subservient members of society. If the episode seemed to lack in negative

words or phrases, it certainly highlighted different behaviors of Travellers as negative. For example, to point out that the restrictions on girls in the Travelling culture are overall negative, the narrator might comment that different rules apply to both boys and girls. It seems that the purpose of pointing out the obvious differences between boys and girls is to highlight how girls are treated unfairly in Travelling culture, at least by the settled community's standards.

There didn't seem to be a huge change between the earlier and later episodes in the *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* series, but there was a difference in the way the series, made in 2010, portrayed Travellers and the way they were portrayed in the film *Snatch*, made in 2000. The ten year difference had a large impact on the representations of Travellers in entertainment media. *Snatch* relied heavily on negative stereotypes of Travellers for comedic effect, while *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* didn't necessarily rely on comedy, but on the interest of distinguishing the Travelling culture from the settled culture in such a way that the Travellers would become more exotic. This difference may be a result of change in the settled population's attitudes towards Travellers. If the settled community were to become less focused on the negative stereotypes they have of the Travelling community this might be reflected in the way the media represents the Travellers. However, it is equally as likely that the media simply desired to represent the Travellers in a new light for the sake of entertainment. In the case of *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*, the media appeared to want to portray the culture as something unique and different in order to gain more viewers and uphold its image as a factual, reality show. In *Snatch*, the producers were more concerned with ridiculing Traveller culture in order to create a comedy that would resonate with a settled population. The film highlights some

of the underlying tensions between the Travelling and non-Travelling population and exploits them for the use of comedy. *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*, however, takes a more documentary-style approach and although the show is not completely true to all of Traveller culture, they attempt not to show Travellers in a completely negative fashion. Instead, the series aims to emphasize the Travellers as a separate, and perhaps secret, community in order to interest their viewers. The flaw with this approach is that audiences might be more apt to take what is presented in the television series as fact, because that is how the series is set up. It is more likely that the film, however, will not be taken as a completely accurate representation of the culture. In any case, it is clear that audiences learn a fair amount about cultures from the depictions that appear through the entertainment media. Although these depictions are often untruthful, they do reflect the perspectives of the society that creates them, and are often a reflection of the barriers between the two cultures.

Chapter 3: Documentary Representing the “Truth” about Travellers

Documentaries have always presented themselves as portraying truth.

Documentaries are meant to teach their audiences about the world, representing its realities and its truths. Whether any given documentary in fact conveys the “truth,” the styles of documentaries have been subject to change:

“It is worth insisting that the strategies and styles deployed in documentary, like those of narrative film, change; they have a history. And they have changed much for the same reasons; the dominant modes of expository discourse change; the arena of ideological contestation shifts. The comfortably accepted realism of one generation seems like artifice to the next.” (Rosenthal 2005: 17)

Thus, what might be deemed as realistic and appropriate of documentary-style at one point in time might later be disavowed as misleading and fabricated. For example, an expansion of knowledge could discredit previous assumptions or dramatized narratives. Consider the documentaries made during Hitler's reign in Germany for the purposes of propaganda. These documentaries are obviously not entirely truthful, part of their power derives from leading people to believe in their supposed “truth.”

Documentaries about people are generally created to represent the “other,” often claiming to reveal truths about hidden societies to the general public. Therefore documentaries are typically made to educate the larger society on some sub-group that is usually represented as inferior, intentionally or otherwise. Documentary has rarely been used in a reflexive context in which people study themselves:

“The documentary film was founded on the Western middle-class need to explore, document, explain, understand, and hence symbolically control the world. It has been what ‘we’ do to ‘them.’ ‘They’ in this case are usually the poor, the powerless, the disadvantaged, and the politically suppressed and oppressed.” (Rosenthal 2005: 41)

Rosenthal argues that the larger, viewing society uses documentary as a means of exploring the world around them in an attempt to not only understand it, but also to control it. Arguably, documentaries could lead to forms of control through the representations of the subgroups about which they are speaking. A documentary, being largely a work of interpretation as the producers may pick and choose what will be in their film, can portray a group of people as it chooses. This portrayal may be positive, negative, or neutral. Obviously, the most accurate representation would be impartial, however, this is often difficult to achieve when we take into account that documentaries also rely on entertainment value. Without an audience that selects to view a documentary, there is no point in creating it. But where should the line between fabrication and truth be drawn in this field? This is a difficult question to answer. An audience desires truth because the members don't want to feel that they are being deceived, but what if the truth is boring? It is clear that interpretation plays a role in the narrative of the documentary: "Coincident with the hunger for documentary truth is the clear sense that this truth is subject to manipulation and construction by docu-auteurs who, whether on camera or behind, are forcefully calling the shots" (Rosenthal 2005: 62). And yet, if the people creating the documentary have so much input into how a group or a situation is represented, how truthful can that documentary be? In fact, can it even still be defined as a documentary? Paul Ward asserts in his study on documentaries, entitled *Documentary: The Margins of Reality*, that premises about what constitutes a documentary are rather ambiguous: "In all of these attempts to adequately capture the meaning of documentary, there is the same dilemma: how to deal with and understand something that quite clearly is attempting to represent *reality* (or some part of reality), but

as it does so, uses specific aesthetic devices” (Ward 2005: 6). The underlying question is really whether using aesthetics to create a documentary, which many would consider a work of art, is in any way compromising its truthfulness.

Understanding the extent to which a documentary is truthful means being made aware of and understanding the intent of the documentary. The filmmakers may have different motives which influence the representations they provide. As case in point, the Travellers have been shown in very different lights through documentaries over the years. As is the case in all documentaries, the portrayals of Travellers depend on the aim of the documentary and the (then present) underlying tensions between the Travellers and the larger society. Dependant on the whim or intent of the filmmaker, the documentaries concerning Travellers range from negative stories about a backwards group of people to stories of the underdog overcoming obstacles of discrimination and injustice. These narratives often are simply a reflection of either animosity towards Travellers by larger society or an inclination towards acceptance, and also perhaps the inclination or disinclination of the filmmaker. But the documentaries are simply that, a narrative or a story. Documentaries do not always expose the true nature of a situation because they strive to dramatize and entertain or to present a politically-biased representation of how the larger society should respond.

The 2012 documentary “Gypsy Blood,” directed by Leo Maguire, a first-time filmmaker and photographer by trade, conveys the story of a Travelling community enveloped in the violence of “fighting culture” and bare-knuckle boxing. This documentary provides an overall negative image of Travelling culture by presenting it as one that promotes violence. The documentary focuses on the alleged need to fight among

the Travellers, and the fact that fighting is supposedly in the Travellers' blood. There were six examples in this hour and eleven minute documentary of the characters discussing how the children were reared to become fighters. One of the Travellers in the film exclaims: "It's the way they are bred. You are bred to fight. You're going to fight. You don't think of the consequences, you just want to do it." This quote does come directly from a Traveller, but it is from one who takes pride in his bare-knuckle boxing skills. The documentary only ever interviews the Travellers involved in bare-knuckle boxing because that is the part of their world that the documentary is trying to expose. The problem with this is that the documentary is also only showing one small aspect of Traveller culture, rather than the culture as a whole. There may only be a few Travelling families who are actually involved in bare-knuckle fighting, but the documentary reveals it as something central to Traveller culture and genetic make-up. Though the documentary does not bother to provide its audience with any statistics regarding the percentage of Irish boxers who are in fact Travellers. If the documentary had presented us with some sort of disclaimer that stated that not all Travellers participate in or support bare-knuckle boxing, it might have been more truthful. However, there would be less entertainment value in presenting their audiences with a culture that is generally peaceful rather than the violence that comes with the story of its bare-knuckle boxing champions. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 2, one of the common stereotypes regarding Travellers is that they are purportedly violent, and so this documentary reiterates the stereotype of Travellers to its audiences.

As it happens, regular boxing is actually very important in Traveller culture. There is the famous Traveller Francis Barrett who became a professional boxer and

represented Ireland in the 1996 Summer Olympics. I noted during my time in Ireland interviewing Travellers that boxing was a large part of their lives, particularly for males. The young boys would often take part in boxing as a hobby or a way to overcome boredom. Many were very serious about the sport including two brothers, Paddy and Oliver McCarthy, whom I met during my stay in Cork City. Both brothers are very passionate and talented boxers. Paddy went to Chicago the year before we met for a boxing tournament, and his younger brother Oliver was about to make a trip to Russia to compete as an all-Ireland Champion. They both stated that they had been trained by their father starting at a young age and have been dedicated to the sport ever since.

Although boxing remains an important part of Travelling culture, the culture is not completely encompassed in violence as the documentary “Gypsy Blood” would seem to suggest. The documentary consistently promotes the idea that the children are bred into this culture of violence. The filmmakers may be attempting to display the Traveller culture as violent in order to dramatize their story or to play to the underlying fears and stereotypes of the larger society. The documentary highlights the importance of winning fights multiple times. The filmmakers picked interviews with Travellers who discussed how important it is to win fights. There were at least four instances in which interviewees discussed how they could not lose a fight or it would cause complete humiliation and degradation. Furthermore, to exaggerate the violence that occurs in Traveller culture, the documentary displays multiple acts of rage and animal cruelty. There were five instances within the documentary in which the Travellers were exhibited in fits of rage. Often times this footage was not entirely relevant to the documentary. Therefore it can be assumed that the aim was to show how violence is interlaced within

Traveller culture. For example, one scene depicts one of their hunting dogs, with a camera attached to its neck, chasing down a rabbit and killing it. The purpose of exposing this violence was most likely to embellish the storyline of the documentary to make it more interesting or appealing to its audience; the settled society. It also probably reflects some of the tensions between the settled population and the Travelling population, echoing the stereotype that Travellers are violent and trouble makers. These beliefs may be grounded in some truth, as bare-knuckle boxing does exist as part of the Travelling culture, but it is unfounded to believe that every Traveller supports this. Furthermore, it is misleading to believe that all of Travelling culture celebrates violence as shown in the documentary.

The documentary also tends to show cases in which the Travellers support violence towards animals by showing hunting traditions and cock-fights. These aspects of the Travellers culture do not exactly relate to the tradition of bare-knuckle boxing that some Travellers uphold. Yet, the documentary showed at least three separate instances of what might be deemed as animal cruelty by having roosters fight each other for sport, or trained hunting dogs chase down and kill animals such as rabbits and deer. The violence that arises during these scenes was likely an attempt by the filmmakers to have viewers draw the conclusion that the violence is found within Travelling culture as a whole.

While the documentary shows scenes that teeter on the edge of animal cruelty, it hardly exhibits any part of Traveller culture that is peaceful or kind. The reason for this is that the filmmakers obviously want to sell one type of narrative, and these scenes would hardly fit with the story they want to present. The one case in which they show an important aspect of Traveller culture that does not revolve around violence is when the

documentary reveals the Traveller love of horses. They do not spend much time on this, and it is isn't even discussed in more than a sentence, but the documentary does have a couple of scenes where Travellers are caring for their horses. Horses are actually an essential part of Traveller culture because they represent their livelihood. Horses were once the means by which Travellers were able to travel from place to place, and therefore horses were treated with great care, as a valuable commodity, and also loved dearly. Today, men still have horses and care for them as more of a hobby than a utilitarian means of existence. Although it is such an important part of the culture, the filmmakers of "Gypsy Blood" spend little to no time discussing this aspect of the culture because it does not fit in with their overarching theme of violence.

The one saving grace from all of the fighting and aggression that the film encompasses is the assurance that Travellers fight fair. The notion of a "fair fight" was stressed by Travellers in interviews throughout the documentary. This at least separates the Travellers from complete savagery as they take pride in winning a fight in a fair way. Furthermore, there were a couple of times that Travellers asserted that they do not look for trouble. They only fight when they have to. In one scene, one Traveller is documented providing his son with some general advice as he says to his son, "stay out of trouble, but don't ever let anybody push you around." The message of this advice is clear. The father desires that his son tries to remain out of trouble, but he should not allow himself to be taken advantage of and should always defend himself.

In fact, when viewed fairly, much of the fighting that is presented in the film is actually a matter of honor or respect. Respect is very important amongst Travellers. Because of all the obstacles and discrimination they have had to face in their lives,

respect is something that has to be earned and kept. The Travellers who are so adamant about bare-knuckle boxing might feel some sort of emasculation at the thought of losing in a fight. It is crucial for them to maintain their manhood and win because it earns them the respect from their own and larger, settled society that they feel they might otherwise be deprived of. Although the documentary does not discuss how the masculine nature of fighting doubtless contributes to the need for bare-knuckle boxing, it is something that seems to underlie the narrative. This attitude also might contribute to the violence found in the cock-fights and the hunting games. Although not about Travelling culture, anthropologist Clifford Geertz asserts in his essay “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” that the roosters involved in the cock-fight are a representation of the men that own them. Thus, he argues the cock-fighting persists as a sort of metaphor for masculinity, in this way it may be a similar symbol in Traveller culture.

There are many reasons for which violence such as bare-knuckle boxing and cock-fights endure in Traveller culture, but the documentary fails to delve into any of them. The documentary simply presents the Travellers as a violent breed reared to fight from a young age, thereby only skimming the surface of the true nature of Travelling culture. This negative portrayal represents the stereotypical images that the larger society have of this subgroup. Although the filmmakers are not necessarily telling a completely dishonest story, they do not provide a comprehensive view. The filmmakers aim for presenting the Travellers in this way affects the representations that the audience receives of Travellers. A documentary about Traveller boxing made by another filmmaker with a different aim might have had a totally narrative and therefore a different representation of

the culture. In this sense, documentaries are entirely subject to the motives of their creator, and tell the truth from that creator's perspective.

Another director, Liam McGrath, who has worked with Travellers and other Irish subcultures in numerous documentaries, presents a very different story about their lives and culture. His documentary, "Southpaw: The Francis Barrett Story," released in 1999 follows the story of the Traveller Francis Barrett who participated in the 1996 Summer Olympics as a professional boxer on the Irish Olympic team. The story is one of an underdog and an unlikely hero who overcomes adversity to make it to the Olympics and represent Ireland. This documentary presents a clear deviation from the documentary "Gypsy Blood," because the aim of the filmmaker is different. Liam McGrath uses a different narrative and style from "Gypsy Blood" to captivate the audience and present a certain aspect of the Travelling culture, and yet it cannot be said that this documentary brings a more holistic view of Traveller culture than "Gypsy Blood" does. The documentaries are equally biased, but the representations are different because the narratives that they are trying to sell to their audiences are different.

The aforementioned documentary, "Southpaw," created by Liam McGrath shows Francis Barrett representing Ireland in the Olympics of 1996, and makes it clear that there were a number of obstacles the Francis had to face in order to achieve so much in boxing. As a Traveller, Francis Barrett and his community face adversity every day. Treated as second-class citizens, Francis and other Travellers were forced to train for boxing in substandard facilities. The story that the "Southpaw" documentary conveys is that the passion Francis felt for boxing was enough to drive him to face down these odds and become a successful boxer.

The narrative makes clear use of the underdog story, claiming that Travellers are mistreated and victims of prejudice. Because the documentary is attempting to convey a fairytale-like story to its audience, the producers want the audience to pity the Travellers and see them as victims of discrimination and narrow-mindedness. The documentary weaves a background story into Francis Barrett's boxing career about Francis' success being an opportunity to gain the respect from both the Travelling community and the larger society. The opening lines of the film introduce the audience to this theme, as Francis Barrett exclaims: "I've been dreaming since I was fourteen about going to the Olympic Games. For people to show respect for who I am and what I am, and to show respect to other Travellers as well." By introducing this story-line, the documentary has to follow through by portraying the Travellers as victims, as opposed to other portrayals, such as in "Gypsy Blood," which show them as violent, devious, or trouble-making. Liam McGrath's intent seems to be to show the Travellers as misrepresented and misunderstood. He does so by highlighting incidences of prejudice against Travellers and attempting to convey that they are misrepresented by stereotypes. McGrath achieves this through most of his interviews with non-Travellers who are somehow connected with the group. In their interviews, informants would often point out that Travellers are slandered by the larger society, but maintain that these are simply stereotypes that have nothing to do with the true nature of Travelling people.

During my time in Ireland, I was fortunate enough to participate in the creation of a documentary about Travellers by Liam McGrath, the director of "Southpaw" and another Traveller documentary entitled "Blood of the Travellers." This experience gave me the unique opportunity to see how documentaries are made and the impact the

presence of a camera has on the way people present themselves. Although I found working with a film crew to be an interesting and fun experience and I realized that the documentary could be important in both the field of anthropology and as a depiction of Traveller culture, I could not help but think that the presence of a film crew was a hindrance to the anthropological research. Often, Liam McGrath would want Professors George and Sharon Gmelch and me to discuss certain aspects of Traveller life in our interviews, which prevented us from delving into different topics that we might have felt were more important to an accurate representation of our work or of the Travellers themselves. Furthermore, there were many times that the film crew wanted certain scenes filmed with George and Sharon Gmelch that were irrelevant to their research, but that the filmmakers felt might be beneficial in creating an interesting story-line. For example, at one point, the filmmakers decided to have George Gmelch coach some of the settled children in baseball, because of his previous career playing baseball. Although this scene might have made an endearing part of the film, it had nothing to do with the Travelling community or the research and that George and Sharon Gmelch were conducting. However, I should play the devil's advocate and say that with the film crew being present it was easier to build rapport with people, as people noticeably became more interested in the work we were doing when there was a camera around. But I also have to wonder if the film crews presence actually helped build true rapport or if this "rapport" was just interest in being on film on behalf of the Travellers. Also, the film crew did have some contacts through the previous work that was done during the making of *Blood of the Travellers*, and these were contacts that George and Sharon might not have ever gained otherwise.

Because of my own experience working with the film crew on the documentary, “Unsettled: From Tinker to Traveller” which was released the following year, I was able to witness the effects that a camera has on the participants in addition to how the producers create their own narrative. Although the Travellers became much more interested in the work we were doing because of the documentary that was being created, they also might have been more reserved at times, knowing that there was a camera filming them. Additionally, there were many occasions that Travellers would refuse to talk to us because they did not want to be filmed, as they felt it was an invasion of their privacy or they were worried about who would see it. Arguably, the film crew was looking for an underlying theme or a story for their audience. Therefore they would often create situations that they thought would be beneficial to them. Although they never provided anyone with a script, they were often very clear about how they wanted the conversation or interview to go and what topics they felt should be discussed. Obviously in editing, they were able to pick and choose what they thought would best contribute to the story that they were trying to present. Therefore it is untruthful in the sense that they are not entirely representing reality and may be taking some things out of context to contribute to their narrative.

The documentary, “Unsettled: From Tinker to Traveller,” ended up being a story about how Professors George and Sharon Gmelch were returning to Ireland to reunite with some their old Traveller contacts and discover the changes that have occurred in the lives of those that they knew. The documentary remains mostly unbiased and does not have a tendency to take a position on any of the controversies surrounding Traveller culture at the moment. The documentary presents a background story to the Gmelchs’

previous fieldwork in the 1970s while providing a quick history of the circumstances of Travellers during that time. The documentary is mostly a narrative of memories, but it tends to veer away from difficult topics that encompass the changes that have occurred, many of which were of great interest to the Gmelchs. The documentary glosses over topics such as the housing debate and some of the more drastic changes that have occurred in the culture, although it claims to be a documentary that discusses the changes in the culture. Perhaps the reason the documentary overlooks such topics is because it was meant to be a sort of feel-good film about the memories the Gmelchs' have of their own fieldwork experience and revisiting some of the relationships that they established. The documentary does introduce a rather sad topic of suicide in Travelling communities, discussing the loss many of the families that the Gmelchs once knew had experienced. The documentary would draw most of its viewers through the heartwarming, and at times sad, story of memory, nostalgia, and loss. In this way, Liam McGrath was able to allow the story to simply be told through memories and avoid presenting a biased representation of the Travellers. Thus the representations that are promoted within documentaries are largely subject to the discretion of the filmmaker and influenced by the story that is being shown.

It is clear that the narrative of documentaries are very much subject to the intent of the filmmaker and the story that he or she is trying to present to the audience. The documentary claims to reveal "truths" about a culture, but it is impossible to present a holistic truth when trying to focus on one certain aspect. Furthermore, the presence of a camera has an impact on a way that a culture might represent itself. The Travellers don't want to provide a negative image of themselves to be viewed by the larger society, so

given the opportunity, they might change how they act in front of the cameras. The representations that are produced are, therefore, the result of a combination of the intent of the filmmakers and the actions of the Travellers themselves in the presence of the cameras. The negative or positive images of the Travellers are also the result of carefully selected footage that supports the filmmakers intent. Because documentaries are so subject to the will of the filmmaker, it is difficult to ascertain an entire truth about a culture since we may only be presented with a piece of the culture.

Chapter 4: Transformation of Traveller Representations in Print Media

Perhaps the most noticeable change in Traveller portrayals took place in the newspaper realm of the media. The most obvious explanation for this is simply that the newspaper as a media source, has spanned a longer period of time, and therefore the changes between the most recent articles and older articles are easily perceptible. For the purposes of this study, I chose to analyze articles dating back to the 1960's and continuing through contemporary articles. In order to gain a better understanding of how the articles were changing throughout this time period in regards to Travellers, I attempted to find articles written about Travellers from each decade. For articles from the 1960s through the 1990s, I used an online database that includes thirteen different Irish Newspapers: local and national. I decided to look at both local and national newspapers in order to gain an understanding of the biases on both a local and national scale. For more recent articles, I searched in common contemporary newspapers such as the *Irish Examiner* and the *Irish Times*.

The articles have a range of representations due to the changes in the perspective of the media, the biases of the journalist, and the potential biases of informants. Although often depicted as the most trustworthy source of information, newspaper journalism is subject to biases as much as entertainment media or documentaries:

“News is not neutral, objective reality exists in a vacuum ready-made and separate from those in the media who report it. News simply would not exist without the media: it is an ideological term which suggests that some events in society require our attention because they are more important than other events” (Kirby 2000: 152).

Newspapers and their editorial policies will highlight certain stories over others and represent the story from the perspective that writer or owner wants to sell. By looking at the titles of articles and the kinds of words chosen by the authors of news articles, we can determine whether or not the article is biased in a certain way. Although all news is biased, its biases can change in relation to changes in the larger society and what will attract both readers and advertisers to the newspaper. The biases in the media have changed overtime as a result of the Travellers' discovery of self-presentation. In general, older newspaper articles had an inclination to represent Travellers negatively, while more recent newspaper articles take a different perspective, attempting to show the Travellers as underprivileged and misrepresented group of people.

People involved in the production of news articles make conscious decisions regarding the stories that will be placed in a newspaper, determining what is “newsworthy” so to speak. The fact that these decisions are being made automatically establishes a bias within the news source because these decisions involve selection. In determining what is newsworthy, a newspaper editor must decide not only what stories will sell over others, but also what perspective on the story will resonate with the audience: “Through manipulating the values (worth) of some stories to be included as news and others to be excluded, the media personnel control, regulate and oversee what information or biases are given to the buying public—and what are not” (Kirby 2000: 154). So not only are the authors determining what stories will be provided to their readers, but they are also regulating the kinds of information that is being given. For example, editors can select the information that corroborates best with the story they want to sell and they often decide which reporters will be sent to cover certain stories, further

ensuring the kind of report that will be written. Thus, rather than being provided with a full picture of an event, audiences are often getting a skewed version that only highlights what that particular writer deems to be important. Furthermore, people elect to read certain newspapers based upon the angle the newspaper presents. Therefore, often the stance of the newspaper company is important in understanding the types of representations included in the media.

These biases are particularly apparent in newspaper articles concerning Travellers. Early newspapers convey the Travellers in a negative light, reflecting the biases of the larger society at the time in addition to the lack of Traveller self-promotion. The newspaper articles from the 1960's were the most markedly negative of the articles that I analyzed. Of the articles I analyzed, all of them described the Travellers as a menace to society and involved in both causing trouble and acts of violence. One of the articles from the 1960's, entitled "Tinker Jailed at Westport: Assault with Iron Bar," was a rather lengthy article that detailed the events of fight that occurred between two Travellers. The title of the article on its own conveys the violence that the article is trying to portray. Although the term "tinker" was used with great occurrence during the 1960s through the 1980s, today the term carries a negative connotation and is considered derogatory. Additionally, the article points out quite clearly that the fight occurred between "tinkers" not anyone who is a part of the settled community. By classifying the men as "tinkers," they are immediately set apart, depicted as some sort of misbehaved sub-group that is acting out, unable to even cooperate with each other. The article outlines the court proceedings that followed the incident quoting the witnesses testimonies. The article highlights that the "tinkers" had been drinking earlier in the day, even mentioning the

number of drinks each of the men had consumed, although the incident occurs later. The article then seems to claim the defendant hit the victim over the head with an iron bar for no apparent reason: “Later when he was sitting at the camp fire Collins hit the witness with an iron bar for no cause at all” (*Connaught Telegraph* 1960). However, later in the article, the defendant’s father claims that they had asked the witness to leave their campsite multiple times before the defendant hit the victim, conveying the reason behind the act. By portraying the defendant as violent enough to strike a member of his own community for no reason, the article effectively suggests that the Travellers are a violent and rowdy group of people. The stereotype of the Travellers as violent cannot be entirely true, though it is reiterated by the media through newspaper articles that highlight their violence. It is also questionable whether a fight between two settled men would acquire the same amount of media coverage. In fact, I went back through the archive, looking for any articles written in the 1960s in the *Connaught Telegraph* that were about fights between men of the settled community, but were no suggestions of this in the article headlines.

Another article from 1960 is perhaps negative to a greater extent than “Tinker Jailed at Westport: Assault with Iron Bar.” Published in the *Sentinel*, “Solution to Itinerant Problem? Special Tinker Camping Sites” described the frustrations the local settled population had with the “tinkers” living on a camping site in Galway. This article is largely established from the perspective of the settled Irish, reflecting their beliefs about the Travelling lifestyle and their contempt for it. The article uses negative language to describe the Travellers such as “problem,” “menace,” “intolerable,” and “disgrace.” All of these words have strong negative connotations which are being applied

to the Travellers. Within the article, the word “menace” is used on exactly three occasions, and they are described as a “problem” in four other instances including within the article title. Additionally, the article uses negative imagery to depict the “tinkers” as a problem for the local community: “Householders on the outskirts of the city were plagued by tinkers who begged, let their animals break into gardens, trample lawns, eat vegetables, etc” (*Sentinel* 1960). These images portray all of the Travellers negatively and only convey how the Travellers negatively impact the local community rather than how the local community might discriminate against the Travellers. The article expresses that the only way to solve the “problem” of the “tinkers” is to drive them out of the community. This clearly shows that the Travellers are being expelled from communities simply because of their status as a Traveller and without any reservations. From the settled community's perspective, they shouldn't have any reservations or second thoughts about getting rid of the Travellers considering how much of a “nuisance” they are to the community. The Travellers are comparable to vermin who need to be exterminated and expelled from a household, viewed as the problem and certainly not the victim. In truth, the Travellers can also be perceived as the victim, as they are being evicted from their campsites and forced to move suddenly no matter how long they have resided there. Furthermore, they are being dehumanized by being referred to as a sub-group of people that need to be controlled or driven out. This is obvious in the text as it establishes the incentive of the article in the first few lines: “At Monday’s meeting Mr. E. Casburn criticized the efforts at present being made to control the ‘tinker menace’ and put forward the above plan which he said would end the problem within a few years” (*Sentinel* 1960).

The quotation presents a clear dehumanization of the Travellers only representing them as a problem that needs to be fixed and controlled.

The negative representation of the Travellers in the article from the *Sentinel* is a manifestation of the tensions between the settled population and the Travellers. The settled population has increasingly become upset with the Travellers who beg and steal, their inability to control wandering animals perhaps due to their lack of owned land, and their “unsanitary” way of living. The locals see the garbage that is left around by the Travellers and view it as disgraceful. The settled community is unable to relate to the Traveller way of life so they fear it and perceive it as a problem when it interferes with their own lives. The negative articles are simply an indication of how the tensions between the two groups are becoming increasingly hostile. The growing tensions between the settled community and the Travelling population during the 1960s were most likely due to the introduction of the national settlement policy. George Gmelch claimed in *The Irish Tinkers: The Urbanization of Itinerant People* that there was a rising concern with the Traveller “problem” throughout the mid 1950s to 1960s. Furthermore, the increasing urbanization occurring in the 1960s led to more conflict between the settled population and the Travelling community (George Gmelch 1985: 45). As discussed in the Chapter 1, the Travellers had once been a source of news and hired help in the rural areas, and therefore were an integral part of rural society. However, as technology developed tools were created that helped the farmers making the handiwork of Travellers unnecessary, better roads made communication between counties easier, and the Travellers now had to find new sources of income. As a result, the Travellers began moving into cities in search of work and other sources of income. Urbanization brought

Travellers into contact with the settled community more often, creating tensions between them, especially considering Travellers were no longer a necessary and integral part of the community. Because of all of the rising tensions between the communities, it is only natural that the settled community would maintain a negative perspective on the Travellers. Therefore, since the newspapers are owned by the settled population, the representations in the articles reflect the outlook of the settled community, leading to largely negative portrayals of the Travellers that outline them as the problem rather than the victim.

The negative image of the Travellers in the news continued into the 1970s. One article from 1974 in the *Connacht Tribune* was entitled “Wealthy Tinkers who Rob the Poor Farmers.” The title alone conveys an extremely negative image of the Travellers. It is essentially not only proclaiming that the Travellers steal from people, but it is also claiming they don’t need to steal because they are already rich. It mocks the whole Robin Hood myth that excuses the people who steal from the rich and give to the poor by turning the idea upside down, claiming that the Travellers will steal from the poor and give to themselves. The title of the article, however, has little to do with its actual content. In fact, the only mention of Travellers’ wealth in the article is when it reveals that large amounts of money were witnessed in the hands of horse-dealing Travellers and there was nothing to suggest that this money was acquired through thievery. The overall content of the article describes the problems the settled community had with the Travelling community encamped in their town and their fear that the Travellers would only return the following year even though the settled population had finally managed to get them to leave. The article describes how the Travellers caused the locals

“considerable hardship,” hassled the tourists and begged them for money, and ruined the farmers’ fields by allowing their horses to graze on the property. All of these acts were designated as “intolerable.” The article also claims that the Travellers were forced to leave the town. Yet, since the article is from the settled population’s position, it conveniently claims that “the travelling people were helped by the local community to make up their minds to move off.” In other words, the local community told the Travellers they had to depart and drove them out forcibly, but the article glosses over this fact, not using the extensive detail used to describe the “intolerable” acts of the Travellers. The article avoids placing any blame on the settled population whatsoever.

The overall point of the article was to reveal that the local community could not tolerate the Traveller “nuisance” and therefore did not intend to allow the Travellers to move back into the community. The article suggests a number of strategies for keeping the Travellers out such as fencing off the area where they generally encamp and growing shrubbery there so they can no longer park their caravans on it. It is clear the tensions that began increasing during the 1960s due to the urbanization of the Travellers remain an issue in the 1970s. Thus the Travellers are discriminated against and are as much the victims as the settled community, and perhaps more so. The article reflects the ever-present hostility between the two communities, but only presents one side of the argument. Therefore it represents the Travellers poorly, depicting them as a community that repays the kindness of the locals by stealing, begging, and disregarding private property. Being biased, the article then attempts to suggest that the locals were right to remove the “problem” from their community by whatever means necessary. Because of the underlying tensions between the communities at this time, an audience would be far

more receptive to a story that portrayed Travellers negatively as a reflection of their own perceptions. The media, being highly influenced by its audiences who are their buyers, would naturally comply. Also, the *Connacht Tribune* is a county-wide newspaper, which makes it more localized than a nation-wide newspaper. The scope of the newspaper might also affect the types of stories it publishes. Because it is not a nation-wide paper, the *Connacht Tribune* can publish articles that convey the frustrations of the local community, perhaps making it better for gaining more detailed information about a local community's qualms with the Travellers.

Uncovering substantial articles regarding the Travellers in the 1980s and 1990s was more difficult. In the aforementioned database I used to find articles about Travellers, there were only a total of thirty-five articles that mentioned the word “Tinker” in the headline during the 1980s. Of those thirty-five articles, I was only unable to find articles that actually described some issue with the Travelling community. Perhaps the tensions between the Travellers and the settled community were not eradicated during this time, but slightly subsided which resulted in less stories about the Travelling community being deemed newsworthy. That being said, the settled population’s perception of the Travellers did not seem become any more positive, exemplified by the headlines of two articles I was able to unearth. One article from 1996 in *Southern Star*, entitled “Looks like a Tinker!,” was meant to be a comedic anecdote about a man who mistook an undercover guard as a Traveller. Although the story does not directly relate to Travellers, nor does it contain any actual Travellers, it is still considered insulting to the community as it degrades the way the Travellers dress and look. There were a number of articles such as this, using Travellers dress or behavior as a comparison to something that

is bad or dirty such as another article entitled “They Would Have Paraded a Tinker's Trousers,” which actually described a sporting event that had a lot of “holes” in it, hence the comparison to the “tinker's trousers.” The intention of these remarks is to entertain the settled community at the expense of the Travellers.

Interestingly the contemporary newspaper articles regarding Travellers reflect Travelling culture in a much more positive light. They highlight cases of discrimination against the Travellers by the settled community, which older articles specifically avoided and the articles discuss issues from the Traveller perspective. This change in the representations of Travellers is due to a variety of reasons including a shift in the tensions between the settled and Traveller communities because of transformations within Ireland and the self-promotion efforts begun by the Travellers. Travellers’ rights organizations began appearing in the 1990s and slowly began gaining momentum in the 2000s. For example, the Irish Traveller Movement, a network of organizations and individuals, established in 1990 works to gain equal rights for all Irish Travellers. With the foundation of organizations that promoted Travellers rights through implementation of social policies and encouragement of education, there arose an increased sense of pride in the Travelling community for their life-style and culture. One of the women that I met in Cork City was a leader in the Cork Traveller Women’s Network, which is linked to the Irish Traveller movement. This organization promotes Traveller culture and cultural awareness. The leaders were responsible for coordinating what they called the “Barrel-top Wagon Project” in the museum, which is essentially an exhibit within the Cork City Museum that is dedicated to Traveller culture. The leader of this group, Bridget Carmody, claims that the promotion of Traveller pride and Traveller culture came

from the Travelling organizations that have been fighting for Traveller recognition. She asserted:

“It’s organizations. It’s doing workshops, like the Cork Traveller Women’s Network do leadership programs, you know, where we bring the women in and talk about being leaders. It’s seeing other Travellers out there working, they actually do see there is something out there.”

She believes that getting Travellers involved in their culture is of the utmost importance. There is worry that the Traveller culture is disappearing due to it being subsumed by the larger society with increasing assimilation and also due to the fact that Travellers no longer travel, which brings into question their entire identity. Furthermore Bridget claims that there are some Travellers who damage the Travelling community's reputation through their behavior, but that it is the same with all society. There are good and bad people everywhere, including within the settled community. However, she states, “when something bad happens within the Traveller community it’s spread all over the newspapers. It sells stories. It sells papers, you know, it gets people’s attention.” Bridget’s assertion is clearly accurate as newspapers are reliant on their ability to sell stories, so the representation of Travellers that sells the best will be repeated throughout the news.

Yet, with the newfound pride in Traveller culture, and Traveller self-promotion along with organizations heralding rights of Irish Travellers throughout Ireland, there has been and increase in the number of articles depicting a positive view of Travellers. Recent articles focus on issues such as discrimination against Travellers. For example, an article from the *Irish Examiner* in 2011, entitled “Hotel Discriminated Against Group Including Travellers,” discussed how a hotel refused service to a group of people because

some of them were Travellers. Previously, articles about Travellers would blatantly disregard any of the discrimination towards Travellers including how locals would force them out of their own homes. Articles would highlight the Travellers as the problems rather than the management who discriminated against them. Additionally, this article even managed to interview the Travellers involved in the incident about their point of view; something that older articles failed to do. Another simple change in the style was the lack of derogatory references to Travellers through the use of the word tinker or knacker, and articles now appropriately refer to the group as Travellers. Though it is important to note that the use of the word “tinker” was once acceptable, although the Travellers preferred to refer to themselves as such. The article also mentions the word “discrimination” numerous times, outlining the story as a human-interest piece about the struggles of the Travelling community in the face of adversity. Thus, the new angle of the newspaper might be to sell the “truth” through a version of the story that highlights the underdog struggling against the obstacles of discriminatory society. This new representation of Travellers, unlike the representation of the 1960s through the early 1990s, is largely positive. The reason for this change in the representation must be largely due to the Traveller rights organizations that began to appear at around the same time as this shift. The ability of the Travellers to self-promote and manipulate their own image in the public’s eye should certainly influence how the media portrays the group. The Travellers attempts to make their community heard forces the newspapers to recognize both the Travellers in a new light and the prejudices within Irish society. Also, the newspaper may have found that stories of struggles also sell and resonate with

audiences, rather than just extorting the negative tensions between the groups, which have been done repeatedly already.

Other contemporary articles market the idea of Traveller culture and ethnicity, claiming that Travellers deserve recognition from Irish society and capitalize on the hardships of the Travelling community. Ten of the fifteen contemporary articles I analyzed discuss the discrimination Travellers are forced to confront, conveying it as inexcusable. Other contemporary articles discuss how the fault lies with the settled community in their inability to accept the Travellers and their way of life. For example, one 2012 article from the *Irish Times* entitled “Ireland Hasn’t Travelled Far Enough Yet For Nevin,” describes how Ireland needs to become more accepting of the Travelling community and should avoid the bigotry that was once evident in Irish society. It describes how John Nevin, a Traveller, qualified for the Olympics in boxing following the success of Traveller Francis Barrett. The article is written in the style of an underdog story, discussing how Nevin has had to overcome many obstacles as a Traveller, while following in the footsteps of Francis Barrett who opened the world of professional boxing to the Travelling community. Like the other article describing discrimination, “Hotel Discriminated Against Group Including Travellers,” this article places most of the blame for the tensions between the Travelling and settled communities on the bigotry of some settled Irish. This places the Travelling community in a more positive light, while casting a negative image of the narrow-minded Irish. With events such as Francis Barrett representing Ireland in the Olympics and Travellers taking a more active role in organizations and politics, the media has been forced to recognize the group in way they hadn’t previously. The Travellers could no longer simply be ignored and pushed to the

margins, and with the current events, the news was forced to accommodate with new representations of the Travellers. It is also possible that the economic boom that occurred in Ireland from 1995 to 2008, known as the Celtic Tiger, affected the tensions between the settled and Travelling communities favorably. Because the Celtic Tiger brought with it a time of wealth and economic growth, the settled community possibly felt less threatened by a community that appeared to seldom work or contribute to society. If the settled community perceived of themselves as better off, it is likely that they were less concerned with those that they might otherwise perceive as taking advantage of the system. I found during my time in Ireland that the settled population often harbored complaints about the Travellers taking advantage of “the system” by not having to pay for housing due to the settlement policies, collecting welfare in various counties under different names, and not working as hard as the settled community but reaping all the benefits. It seems that these issues with the Travelling community would be more present in times of economic depression or stagnation, as is the case in contemporary Ireland. However, the changes in representations of Travellers in the late 1990s and forward do coincide with the economic growth of the Celtic Tiger, and it is therefore entirely plausible that the positive changes were also a reflection of the economic stability of the time.

Due to the changing perspective of Travellers by the larger society along with the more recent self-promotion by the Travellers, the Irish media has come to present the Travellers in a new light. Travellers must now be acknowledged and heard by a media that once largely ignored the community altogether. The representations of Travellers in the news is simply a reflection of the tensions between the settled Irish and the Travelling

community. At times when the underlying tensions between the two groups were more intense, the representations of Travellers in the news were chiefly negative. These negative images were a manifestation of the growing hostility between two groups that were coming into more contact due to the increasing urbanization of the Travellers as a result of the economic shift in the mid 1950s. As the tensions between the two groups have lessened more recently, perhaps due to transformations in society such as the Celtic Tiger, the representations of the Travellers have become more positive. The new ability of the Travellers to manipulate their own image through promotions of Traveller culture and Traveller rights has also contributed to this shift amongst Traveller representations in the media. The emergence of this group into the public arena demands that they no longer be ignored or misrepresented by larger society. Therefore the media has been forced to adjust the way in which they represent this community and discover new ways to market their stories.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This analysis of the image of the Irish Travellers in various types of media over almost six decades indicates that the general representation of Travellers has become more positive in recent years. Two major reasons have emerged to explain this change: the Travellers' newfound ability to manipulate their image and self-promote, and a general change in the media's outlook on the Traveller community. Perhaps the media source that best tracks the change in the Traveller image is the newspaper because it spans a longer period of time than the other media sources in addition to being circulated both more broadly and more regularly to the settled community. As explained in Chapter 4, the 1960s through the 1980s was wrought with negative images of Travellers in newspaper articles, and it wasn't until the 1990's that more positive representations began appearing. The transformations that occurred in the Traveller image are most likely reflections of the changes occurring in Ireland as a whole, with respect to both Travellers and non-Travellers. During the late 1950s and early 1960s there was an economic shift within Ireland and Travellers began to urbanize in order to survive:

“By the 1960s the Travellers had become economically and socially displaced from rural society. The general movement of Travellers to urban centers was part of broader demographic changes in Irish society. However, the urbanization of Travellers rendered them extremely vulnerable to hostility from the dominant community and to ongoing processes of spatial exclusion as spaces within Irish society for non-sedentary ways of life diminished. In this context, Travellers were constructed as a social problem experienced by sedentary people.” (Fanning 2002, 51)

Because of urbanization, the settled and Traveller communities were now coming into more contact, and, as a result of this increased contact, there was increasing hostility between the two groups. With the introduction of the Irish government's settlement

movement in the 1960s, the tensions between the two groups intensified and therefore the representations of Travellers in the media, namely newspaper articles, were a reflection of these aggravated tensions.

All this time, the settled community viewed the Travellers as a group of social deviants who were an increasingly present and growing problem within Irish society. The newspaper articles, owned and written by and for the settled community, capitalized on the negative sentiments by creating negative images of Travellers and promulgating common stereotypes about the group. Without a voice in Irish society, the Travellers had no real way of combating these negative stereotypes. That isn't to say that the settled Irish were deliberately looking for opportunities to cast the Travellers in a poor light, but it was simply a way of relieving some of the tensions along with reporting events that had occurred to the rest of the community. With little understanding of Traveller culture, journalists were presenting the Travellers the way they, and the larger society, viewed them, reporting only on what dangers or problems the Travellers might present to the settled community. That being said, there also was never an attempt during this period to reconcile the two groups, which meant that there were no opportunities to correct misconceptions.

As tensions became less intense (in the 1980s and 1990s), however, there was a slight shift from the image of the Travellers as a social deviant that only causes trouble toward an image of the Travellers as an outsider to be ridiculed. Although the resulting representation was still negative, I believe that this shift marked a subsiding in the tensions between the two communities and perhaps even a slight acceptance of the Travellers on behalf of the settled community. Perhaps it was not exactly acceptance of

the Travellers on equal footing with the settled community, but rather recognition of the Travellers as a separate community living for the foreseeable future within Ireland that had to be tolerated to some degree. There were a number of media representations of Travellers being mocked, particularly in the commercial/entertainment media, as exemplified by Brad Pitt's character in *Snatch*. These representations reiterate and expose underlying tensions, but in a way that is comedic. Comedy is often used to relieve tensions, and this may be the purpose of these types of Traveller representations. By depicting the Travellers as a community that is ridiculous and something to be laughed at (as opposed to threatening and dangerous), the media may actually be assuaging fear of the Travelling community and offering acceptance of them as an odd part of Irish society. For example, as discussed in Chapter 2, Mickey, Brad Pitt's character in *Snatch*, is a fast-talking Traveller who cons members of the settled community by speaking so they can't understand him. Although this image is meant to be the archetypal Traveller, the character's qualities are completely exaggerated for comedic effect. However, it is these very exaggerated qualities that resonate with the audience and cause them to laugh about how true, or not true, an image is. This specific transformation of the Traveller image also is seen in the newspaper articles of the 1980s, which did not discuss the deviant behavior of the Travellers but mocked aspects of their character in relation to other topics.

Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, the Traveller image was reformed in various media, evolving into a more positive image. The transformation was associated with changes in Irish society that allowed Travellers to have a voice in politics and organizations and perhaps brought them closer to the settled community, or at least made

them appear more like the settled community. It was in the 1983 that the organization Pavee Point was founded and began working towards gaining equal rights for Travellers, and The Irish Traveller Movement founded in 1990 also began making strides towards gaining rights. Following the development of the Irish Traveller Movement, other organizations appeared dedicated to the betterment of Travellers and the preservation of Traveller culture including the Cork Travelling Women's Network discussed in Chapter 4. Gaining a voice in politics was an important step in changing the Traveller image within the media. Additionally, the Travellers began to understand how to manipulate their image in such a way that it would become positive in the eyes of the larger society. Through their organizations, Travellers began to market themselves and reveal themselves as a unique culture that had a long history but had been marginalized and discriminated against by the whole of Irish society. Armed with the tools of self-promotion, the Travellers began transforming their own image and using it to their advantage in dealing with the media. At the same time, the media was developing a new story of the Travellers that cast them as the underdog and highlight their suffering in the face of adversity. The change in representation allowed for the development of a new story that was perhaps not heard before, such as the Cinderella-like story of Francis Barrett representing Ireland in boxing during the Olympics of 1996. And such stories of discrimination and racism are dramatic enough to sell the media carrying them on their own. Therefore, at this time, there are a wide array of representations of Travellers appearing across various types of media including documentary, commercial film and newspaper.

Perhaps also because of the increasing presence of Travellers in both politics and the media, there has been a newfound interest in their lifestyle and culture. Earlier, during periods like the 1960s, the Travellers had been labeled as a social problem that needed to be fixed, but this perception did not provide incentive to understand the Traveller life. There was no need to understand a group that was to be removed as quickly and as quietly as possible. However, because the Travellers are now very present within society, and perhaps even more accessible, there is an interest in the people and their culture, an interest in how they came to be, and why they choose to live the way they do. Furthermore, because issues surrounding the tensions between Travellers and the settled population, such as settlement, are subject to debate throughout Ireland, the Travellers are receiving much more media attention. The increased media attention has come in the form of newspaper articles describing the blatant discrimination against the Travellers, documentaries that explore the lives of Travellers and how they came to be, television shows that exhort the uniqueness of Traveller customs and weddings for entertainment. Although the representations presented more recently in the media are not always positive, they still contrast the overly negative images of the Travellers in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, the television series, *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*, discussed in Chapter 2, profits by separating the Travellers from Irish society and exoticizing the culture to pique the audience's interest. Although the exoticized image of the Travellers is not entirely positive because it marks the culture as entirely different and sometimes odd, it is still marketing the Travellers as a unique and interesting group of people. The series also attempts to encourage an understanding of the Traveller lifestyle,

which is something the media has attempted only more recently in dealing with the Travellers.

In truth, *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding's* attempts to market the Travellers as completely separate and different from the settled in Irish are not too far from reality. While the Travellers are indigenous to Ireland, they themselves have historically worked to distinguish themselves from the settled Irish, maintaining their own culture and traditions and essentially creating their own ethnic identity. The Travellers own newfound interest in preserving their culture and marking it as a separate culture from the Irish only reiterates the idea that the Travellers might actually be a separate ethnicity. Traveller ethnicity is actually a topic of great debate throughout contemporary Ireland. Internally, the Travellers are even in disagreement over whether or not they should be recognized by the Irish government as their own ethnic group. Travellers who desire acceptance by the settled community and equal rights with them believe that ethnicity would forever mark them as different from the settled Irish and would actually lead more to prejudice and discrimination than to acceptance of their way of life. Many of the Travellers I met explained that they do not want to be treated differently than any other settled person, but, at the same time, they want recognition and respect for their culture. It seems that the Travellers are treading a very fine line; one that marks them as both separate from the settled Irish but also the same. Other Travellers insist that because they are so different from the settled Irish in their culture, they should be recognized as a separate ethnicity, perhaps viewing this as a way to win assistance from the government.

It is my belief that the Travellers already act as an ethnic minority within Ireland by maintaining the boundaries between themselves and the larger society. As stated in

the introduction, for ethnicity to exist, boundaries must also exist. Although the boundaries have shifted and transformed throughout Traveller history, they have always been maintained, allowing the Travellers to redefine and manipulate their identity. The Travellers' belief in preserving their culture and upholding their traditions has now become more important than ever, and they are once again faced with the need to adapt rather than become obsolete. Despite pushes towards integration by the settled Irish, the Travellers have resisted such assimilation and now take pride in their own culture and independence. I believe it is pride in a separate identity and the commitment to protecting it against becoming irrelevant that give the Travellers their own ethnic identity. The evolutions in their own ethnic identity and their ability to manipulate and promote this identity have led to the changes in the representations within the media. The more recent push towards pride in the Traveller culture and identity has led to many of the changes of the Traveller image within the media. The positive representations of Travellers that have made their way into the media lately are the result of the Travellers ability to self-promote and manipulate their image and identity in such a way that it has transformed and is reflected in the media's perception.

What is unclear, however, is whether the Traveller identity will continue to adapt and evolve, or if it will slowly become obsolete as their way of life is threatened by the demands of the larger society. Travellers no longer travel, so what makes a Traveller? It seems that now the Travellers are turning to their separate identity and their culture to define the Travelling community rather than their previous identity as nomads. Today, as a sedentary group of people, the Travellers will have to continue to preserve their own culture to keep it from disappearing, along with further transforming their identity so that

it can define their new way of life. What is clear is that the Travellers have had a history of adapting to the changes within society and have continued to endure in the face of adversity and growing irrelevance. It may not be overly optimistic to predict that they will continue to do so as they adapt to newer challenges posed by the larger society.

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