



Article

The 'miracle' of Fatima: Media framing and the regeneration of a Dublin housing estate

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Abstract

This article examines media coverage of one local authority housing estate in Dublin with a difficult past. Fatima Mansions was built between 1949 and 1951 as part of a government policy to re-house the city's poor. The estate enjoyed a relatively unremarkable history up until the 1970s. A heroin problem developed in the estate in the 1980s and contributed to its negative media construction, such that by the end of the 1990s the estate was widely viewed as being in crisis. Beginning in the early 2000s and recently completed, a major regeneration project has seen the estate transformed with the potential finally to dislodge the negative stereotyping embedded in the estate's past. An empirical analysis of two media spaces that represented this change process shows how the media tuned into the change agenda promoted by local residents, in the process widening its frame of reference and allowing for representations with a more positive valence. The article argues that media representations of social problems may not be authoritative and media agenda-setting is more provisional and open ended than is commonly assumed.

Keywords

Media representation, social housing, social problems, stigma, urban regeneration

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Introduction

The present study is concerned with how one social housing estate in Dublin with a long and difficult past successfully mobilised itself and different media spaces as part of a wider redevelopment project to debunk earlier meaning-making in relation to the estate. Like other publicly provisioned housing complexes across major cities in Europe and the United States, factors such as high levels of crime and drug activity blighted the estate for a long time. In spite of these difficulties, Fatima Mansions had certain assets – a critical mass of residents and workers willing to challenge how the estate was perceived within and well beyond its boundaries and to bring others on board in realising this – that provided a propitious context for resident activism about the estate's public image. Fatima Mansions, then, represents a particularly interesting case study of media representations of local authority housing because of the important role its own constituents played in seeking to manage its image and reputation in concert with the media and disrupt its earlier 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1990) as a housing estate replete with anti-social behaviour problems.

As well as illuminating how the media represents public housing in the specifically Irish context, this article – by examining the variable media agenda-setting capacities of Fatima Mansions constituents – also contributes to broader debates about 'institutional manoeuvring' (Ball and Lilly, 1982) and claims-making in terms of media coverage of social problems. We argue that earlier framings of social problems may not be as constraining on later framings as is sometimes assumed. It also casts light on the relationship between institutional centres (Gamson, 2001) (media professionals and state officials) and institutional peripheries (people who live in local authority housing estates) in constituting and making sense of social realities. This case study challenges the assumption that media organisations are necessarily aligned with powerful groups in society and suggests – against the media 'selection bias' and agenda-setting literature – that less powerful but resourced social groups can mobilise successfully to challenge dominant media images. In this context we argue that the Fatima Mansions community exercised a form of counter-power; that is, they demonstrated their capacity as social actors 'to resist and challenge power relations that are [relatively] institutionalised', (Castells, 2007: 239).

Fatima Mansions, social housing and the problem of image

Historically, the model of provision in Ireland was distinguished by three characteristics: it was primarily based on subventions from central government; policy implementation was channelled through local authorities; and a standardisation (or stigmatisation) attached to house and estate design (Fahey, 1999). Given the centrality of the principle of home ownership in Ireland (77% of the population own their homes), social housing has generally been viewed by home owners and tenants alike as an inferior option. Private ownership has been seen as for the upwardly mobile in Irish society, and social housing as the option for those going nowhere. Not surprisingly, then, social housing is generally characterised by residualisation and social housing tenants are at high risk of social exclusion as measured by a range of indices of deprivation. In Ireland, as

elsewhere, local authorities have in recent years been seeking new ways of providing housing in the public or social sector that can overcome some of the problems encountered in the past.¹

Fatima Mansions was built between 1949 and 1951 by Dublin City Council to rehouse people living in tenements. The development originally consisted of 15 four-storey blocks with an average of 27 units per block (Figure 1). The complex was configured inwardly which had the effect of cutting off Fatima Mansions from the neighbouring locale both physically and symbolically. In the 1970s a confluence of factors propelled the estate into a spiral of decline: deindustrialisation in the city centre reduced employment opportunities, fiscal cutbacks in the local state resulted in a decline in maintenance and services to the estate and many of the more stable residents moved out when incentives were made available through a government programme to buy a home elsewhere. This gradually produced a residualisation effect, as less reliable tenants frequently replaced those who had moved on and were unable to exert moral authority on the estate. The estate became vulnerable to problems of social disorder – vandalism, joyriding and, later, drugs. Fatima Mansions earned a reputation as an undesirable place to live. As the literature suggests, reputation issues have a significant effect in consolidating images and stereotypes about large-scale housing estates: ‘a series of problems causes a stigma, and a stigma worsens the existing problems’ (Wassenberg, 2004: 280). This is particularly the case when that stigma is refracted through the media into the wider public domain. It is often impossible for residents to escape being labelled negatively by virtue of being in residence. This labelling effect renders troubled social housing estates ‘unable to escape the image which is reinforced by selective or sensational reporting in the media’ (Page, 1993: 8). Dean and Hastings (2000) noted the deleterious effect of stigma on residents’ quality of life and opportunity structures. Similarly, residents in Fatima Mansions have struggled with the exclusionary impact of address effects as do residents in other problem estates in Ireland, (see Haynes et al., forthcoming). Hastings and Dean (2003) found that dislodging the difficult reputation of local authority estates involves more than bricks and mortar strategies, and even when it does include efforts to disrupt spoiled identities via media impression management this does not necessarily bring about changes in public opinion vis-à-vis estates with problematic pasts.

Since 1998, a local development coalition in Fatima Mansions, Fatima Groups United (FGU), has undertaken a series of innovative and strategic actions to drive forward a programme of regeneration for the community. This has involved a visionary and courageous approach to a set of very real challenges set against the backdrop of deprivation and the failures of previous public policy interventions. The original flat complex was demolished in the early 2000s. A public-private partnership involving a private developer and Dublin City Council working together through the Fatima Regeneration Board has brought to fruition a new development consisting of a mix of social housing units (150), affordable housing units (70) and private apartment units (396), configured around a state of the art neighbourhood centre and an all-weather football pitch. How has the estate been represented to wider publics over that period of time? Has the physical transformation of the estate, which took place over a 10-year period, been sufficient to overcome the stigma and stereotyping that characterised Fatima Mansions since its inception? Have media framing devices proved amenable to (or disinterested in) the

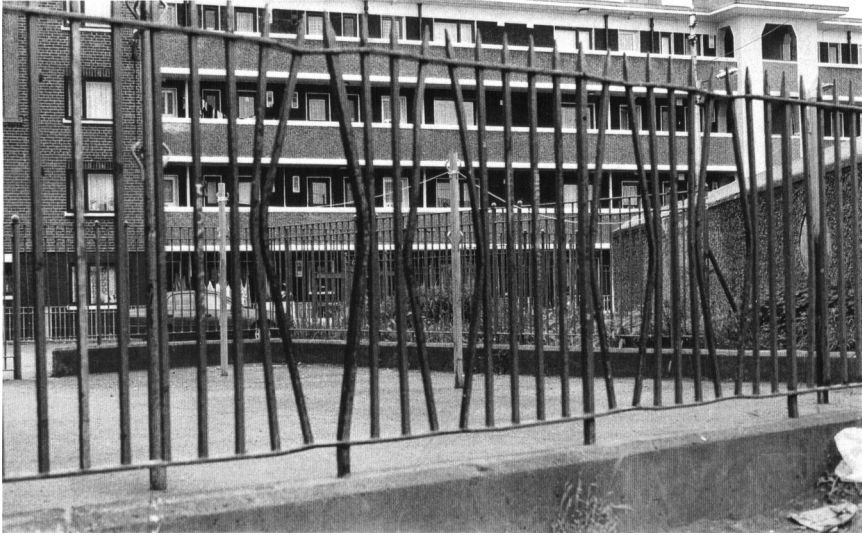


Figure 1. Fatima Mansions 1998

visible changes in the local landscape and the symbolic renewal of the local community? Have the local community leaders succeeded in transforming the way in which the estate is reported in the media? These are the key questions which inform our analysis.

Media channelling of social problems

This section of the article outlines the theoretical scheme guiding the research. We draw here on the literature on the media construction and framing of social problems such as crime, poverty and racism to identify the key forces involved in shaping whether an issue gets defined as a newsworthy or not. The sociological literature on framing is informed by Erving Goffman in his well-known work *Frame Analysis* (1986). In this text, Goffman attempts to provide an answer to the seemingly straightforward ‘what is *it* that’s going on here?’ question about everyday social situations (1986: 9). The concept of frame is introduced to accomplish this and is defined as ‘schemata or frameworks of interpretation’ (1986: 21). Media spaces – including television, radio and print media – provide important discursive and visual interpretative grids, lenses and frameworks through which ordinary people make sense of their everyday lives (Best, 1987; Clark, 2007). This is even more true in the case of happenings or processes such as wars, acts of terrorism, and natural disasters that fall outside the range of people’s routine experiences.

Mediating between this everyday social world and various media outlets are human actors we call journalists or broadcasters. From the vast range of daily routine happenings, journalists choose to highlight a small subset of these to write about as newspaper articles or talk about in radio and television programmes. Typically, already existing tendencies to concentrate on local political and legal elites as sources of news rather than socially distant non-elites (Alimi, 2007; Dreier, 2005; Gamson, 2001; Kollmeyer, 2004;

Oliver and Myers, 1999), to highlight ‘bad’ rather than ‘good’ news (Gamson, 2001; Gans, 2004; Kollmeyer, 2004), to report on happenings with a physical proximity to media outlets (Ortiz et al., 2005), to spotlight issues affecting a large number of people or a number of significant people (Ortiz et al., 2005) and those with existing sponsors or entrepreneurs (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988), and to only cover issues that fall within the ambit of the job brief of journalists (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988; Oliver and Myers, 1999), combine to narrow the pool of potentially noteworthy happenings and vantage points in newspaper reportage and media coverage generally and to elevate certain issues and topics over others.

An international comparative study carried out in the late 1990s demonstrated that Irish journalists self-positioned more left of centre than US, German, Swedish and UK journalists. Only Italian journalists positioned themselves to the left of Irish journalists. Irish journalists express personal views that are in the main sympathetic to the marginalised in society, reflecting their broadly liberal orientation, (Corcoran, 2004). However, Irish journalists believe that the interests of those sectors of Irish society that are well connected and served by public relations machines are better represented in their news organisations’ coverage of politics and public affairs than more marginalised groups. Journalists enter a practice that is characterised by truth telling, but, paradoxically, the journalist is an employee who works for a wage and is expected to produce a story of the kind demanded by his or her newspaper or broadcast station. The nature of such stories is determined by a market with which the journalist may have no sympathy (O’Neill, 1992: 27). Even a journalist with a will to ‘tell it like it is’ must balance that aspiration against the dictates emanating from the news organisation that he or she serves and the wider demands of the market. Not surprisingly, poverty receives only limited media coverage and when it is covered the result is often negative, with little attempt to understand or explain what life is like for those on the bottom rung of the economic ladder (Seymour, 2009).

One would expect, then, that events and processes in local authority housing estates would be unlikely to be considered salient and to make it into ‘the news’ (Gans, 2004). The fact that local authority estates tend to be located at some geographical distance from major media outlets, that influential people tend not to live in them, that coverage of them does not clearly fall within the standard foci of journalists, that estate regeneration projects represent positive ‘good’ news stories running counter to dominant media representations of social housing, and that only a relatively small number of people live in social housing estates, means that they are not ready candidates for media selection or ‘newsworthiness’. That the residents of Fatima Mansions were willing and able to assert their own agenda-setting capabilities in the face of this provides an interesting and counterintuitive case study for students of media framing. The next section of the article describes the data and methods used in this study of media representations of one Dublin social housing estate.

Data and methodology

In this article we draw on two data sources – newspaper data and radio data. Agenda-setting can be ranked as either high or low depending on the ability of actors to exercise

power over what issues gain media attention and how those issues get talked about or represented. We are interested in the extent to which residents may exercise counter-power in the sense of developing a role in the setting of the media's agenda for estate coverage. Our method of content analysis reveals the extent to which Fatima Mansions features in key media spaces over a finite period of time. Our analysis of media framing is based on the population of stories culled from the newspaper analysis and the radio programme inventory. A wider project might include interviews with the journalists and editors who produce the news stories but that was beyond the scope of the current study.

Newspaper data

For this study we collected data on media representations of local authority housing from a single newspaper – the *Irish Times* – over a time span of 10 years (January 1998 to December 2008). Our decision to analyse the *Irish Times* was deliberate – it is a national quality broadsheet newspaper with a daily circulation of 105,742 (Audit Bureau of Circulation, January to June 2010) and has all-island distribution. It has a high readership amongst those in positions of power in Irish society and it is an opinion leader in the media field.² As such, it represents an important repository of national opinion and an outlet for reaching beyond a local-level audience with which Fatima residents sought to connect. The newspaper also publishes an online version which means that its audience is transnational as well as national, widening its reach. The fact that previous research on Irish media discourses in relation to such themes as divorce (Dillon, 1993), political conflict (Mulcahy, 1995), and asylum seekers (Haynes et al., 2005) also had recourse to the *Irish Times* increased our confidence in its value for getting at national perspectives on public issues and in our belief that it constitutes an authoritative newspaper of record. The print media remains a significant player in terms of media agenda-setting. Moreover, it is acknowledged that ‘even nowadays to a large extent, the media constitute an articulated system, in which, usually, the print press produces original information, TV diffuses to a mass audience, and radio customises the interaction’ (Castells, 2007: 240).

We used the search term ‘Fatima Mansions’ to identify articles pertinent to the research in the Lexis-Nexis database and the *Irish Times* online archive. Access to both of these archives allowed us to cross-check one data source with the other. We are reasonably confident that we identified all articles related to Fatima Mansions in the time period under study. The *Irish Times* archive was particularly useful because of the digital availability – via online subscription – of full-text articles in the newspaper going back to 1859. This initial search yielded 188 articles, including opinion articles, letters to the editor and basic news items. We printed hard copies of each article and organised them by year so we could easily refer to them for more detailed information. From a basic preliminary analysis it was clear that ‘hard’ news reports – consisting, for example, of reportage of court cases involving the ‘private troubles’ (Mills, 1959) of residents of the estate – constituted the bulk of our data. Because of the concentration of local authority estates in major urban centres, most of the articles initially identified by these search terms related to either Dublin or Limerick and to the local authority estates of Fatima Mansions (Dublin) and Moyross (Limerick), both of which have a ‘difficult reputation’

(Fine, 2001) and have long suffered from ‘address effects’, (OECD, 1998). Because some of the articles identified related to housing estates other than Fatima Mansions or mentioned Fatima Mansions only in passing, we decided to drop these false positives (Ortiz et al., 2005) from our dataset. As a result, our final dataset consisted of 104 articles. Our coding of the articles was carried out using STATA. We chose January 1998 to December 2008 as the time period for the study because this allowed us to examine media coverage over a relatively long timeframe and represented an important period of change in Fatima Mansions specifically (as it underwent a major regeneration jointly funded by the public sector and private developers) and Irish society generally (this period coincided with a period of unprecedented economic growth which came to an end in 2008).³

The distribution of coverage over this 10-year period was uneven – coverage peaked in 1999–2000 and dropped off thereafter. This temporal pattern was not surprising: from previous research we know issues tend to have an ‘attention cycle’; that is, they achieve attention for a limited time period and after this begin to lose significance (Baylor, 1996; McCarthy et al., 1996).

After reading the articles in our dataset we constructed a coding scheme (Franzosi, 1987) with three categories: (1) content, (2) policy and (3) perspective. Within the first category we identified the following subcategories: (a) articles with a positive valence (articles mentioning neighbourhood assets), articles with a negative valence (articles mentioning private troubles of individuals or anti-social behaviour), and articles with a mixed valence (articles mentioning neighbourhood assets alongside mentioning either the private troubles of individuals or anti-social behaviour problems). The second category had to do with public policy efforts and whether articles mentioned this or not. We coded articles as 1 if they mentioned state-led estate regeneration efforts, or 0 if they did not.

As well as being interested in what kinds of issues the print media wrote about in relation to the estate we were also interested in the vantage point from which they wrote them and whether they called upon ‘street-level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky, 1980) such as city council staff, elected politicians such as councillors, TDs (Member of Parliament), Taoiseach (Prime Minister), and President (Head of State), business elites such as property developers, or Fatima residents. Within the frames of reference category we coded articles as putting forward an official (coded as 1), resident (coded as 2), mixed (coded as 3), or no perspective (coded as 4).

Radio data

In addition to collecting data from the *Irish Times* we also listened to a Radio Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) programme on Fatima Mansions broadcast on 13 December 1999. This show, which regularly features in the top 10 most listened to programmes nationally, is one of RTÉ’s flagship programmes in the current affairs field. We obtained a copy of this radio programme from RTÉ’s archive and library services. The programme consisted of an 80-minute special feature marking the fiftieth year of the estate. It involved commentary by well-known national broadcaster Pat Kenny, interviews with current and former residents about their personal life histories, a doctor treating heroin addicts via a

methadone programme and a community activist involved in combating drugs, and music and singing by residents. Most of the interviewees were women who had been long-term residents of the estate and who remembered a time when the estate was more stable. Resident informants also included young people who belonged to the local youth club and the chair person of FGU.

Today with Pat Kenny was analysed in ways broadly similar to our analysis of *Irish Times* coverage. After listening and relistening to the programme, we constructed a coding scheme identifying private troubles (references to drug-user life histories or experiences of homelessness), neighbourhood deficits (mentions of graffiti, physical design of the estate, housing conditions, educational disadvantage such as early school leaving and low rates of higher education entry, and political apathy), anti-social behaviour (mentions of drug activity and joyriding), public policy efforts (mentions of estate regeneration or refurbishment programmes, housing allocation policies, estate management policies and practices, community policing, relationships between state agencies and residents), and neighbourhood assets (mentions of community centre, women's centre, youth club, community employment scheme, homework club, crèche, community arts, FGU, local employment opportunities, sociability and communal bonds among residents, and resident mobilisation and organisation) as the major frames in the radio programme's account of the estate. In addition, we identified two salient vantage points from which the estate was discursively represented: a resident perspective and an official elite perspective.

Findings

Not surprisingly, just about two-thirds of the 104 articles in our sample for the period 1998–2008 had a negative valence. Thirteen (12.5%) articles were positive in orientation, 67 (64.42%) were negative and 24 (23.08%) were of mixed content. Official voices were preponderant in the perspectives advanced in the articles under consideration, although it is noteworthy that a significant number of articles did not reference officials or residents at all (Table 1). Articles putting forward no perspective were descriptive reports of court proceedings involving the private troubles of particular individuals.

Given the dominance of 'personal troubles' stories covered by court reporters it is not surprising that only a quarter of stories (26) on Fatima Mansions over the 10-year period referenced public policy. Three-quarters of all stories (78) made no such reference. Thus, very little newspaper space was allocated to providing a contextualised framing of the social and public policy issues pertaining to the flat complex and its eventual renewal.

In order to assess change in terms of media reportage over time, one needs to establish some baseline against which variation can be gauged. We chose 1999 as a baseline year for the analysis because most of the efforts to change the way Fatima Mansions saw itself and was seen by others concentrated around the 1999–2000 time period and thus one would expect that this would be registered in changes in media coverage around this time or – owing to an expected lag between the occurrence of the changes and their reportage in the media – soon after it. Prior to this, then, mostly represented 'empty' time (Zerubavel, 2003) in terms of efforts to revitalise the estate;

Table 1. Perspectives of articles: *Irish Times* 1998–2008

	Official	Resident	Mixed	None
Number of articles	26 (25%)	17 (16.35%)	12 (11.54%)	49 (47.12%)

Table 2. Content of articles in 1999 and 2005: *Irish Times*

	Valency of articles					
	Positive		Negative		Mixed	
	1999	2005	1999	2005	1999	2005
Number of articles	1	1	33	9	1	4

although, admittedly, an organisational infrastructure to realise change had begun to develop in the mid 1980s.

Tables 2–4 report the content, perspectives and public policy mentions in *Irish Times* articles for two selected years: 1999 (before the Fatima Mansions regeneration) and 2005 (after the Fatima Mansions regeneration had been undertaken).

Content

Given the difficulty identified in the literature of shifting the entrenched image of distressed housing estates we had expected that over time there would be little significant change in reportage of the estate. Nevertheless, it is possible that given the imaginative regeneration programme in train throughout most of the time period surveyed there might have been at least a small shift from a focus on issues and topics with a negative valence to issues with a positive valence. While in our two comparator years, 1999 and 2005, there was no change in the number of positive stories, there was a significant decline in the number of negative stories (Table 2). In other words, Fatima Mansions appeared less frequently in the news for the wrong reasons. Examining the decade as a whole, in the 1998–2000 period we found a concentration of articles pertaining to the ‘private troubles’ of residents from the estate. The following example is representative of this reportage:

A Dublin Corporation official has been ordered to explain why accommodation was denied to a heroin addict who had just been released from prison. Michael Carolon (23) was refused permission by the corporation to live in his family home in Fatima Mansions. He was told he could face a fine of £1,500 if he stayed there. (*Irish Times*, 13 February 1999)

Although such reportage did not disappear in subsequent years it tended to decline. In the period after 1998–2000, we found an increase in reference to ‘good’ news stories, with more media mentions of neighbourhood assets such as community spirit and

resident resourcefulness and of its civic organisational life and less emphasis on private troubles. The comments of an estate resident in a 2004 article about the estate's regeneration represent this 'positive' framing:

I hope the community spirit stays. You can't get spirit like it anywhere else. It has been a long battle to get here but we are here now, and there are opportunities for the young people. What more could you want? (*Irish Times*, 9 August 2004)

Perspectives

In line with well-established news collection procedures (Baylor, 1996; McCarthy et al., 1996), we sought to explore whether or not media coverage of Fatima would be more likely to rely heavily on the views and opinions of official elites such as government bureaucrats as primary sources of news in 1999 than after (Table 3).

In our two comparator years 1999 and 2005, there was a decline in the proportion of official perspectives relied on in the reporting of media stories, the numbers of stories that drew on resident perspectives remained the same, but the number of stories published which omitted the perspectives of key actors declined significantly. This is suggestive of a shift in the frame of analysis employed to report the estate across time, with less journalistic attention focused on the personal troubles stories of people associated with the estate

Looking at the decade as a whole, we found that early coverage frequently made mention of what government officials felt about the estate but that after 1999 more attention was given to views of the estate from the vantage point of its residents, and those who worked there. For instance, writing in 1998 about the drug problem in the estate, the *Irish Times* first reported the views of a Labour Party politician:

The Labour Party spokesperson, Pat Upton, issued a statement condemning the shootings and asking why most of the media had ignored it. Had it happened in a middle-class housing estate there would have been blanket coverage. (*Irish Times*, 20 June 1998)

The article continued by telling readers of how one community worker felt about the estate:

People working in the complex admire the community. 'They are resilient like you can't imagine,' Mr Whyte said. (*Irish Times*, 20 June 1998)

Table 3. Perspectives of articles in 1999 and 2005: *Irish Times*

	Perspectives							
	Official		Resident		Mixed		None	
	1999	2005	1999	2005	1999	2005	1999	2005
Number of articles	9	3	2	2	2	2	22	7

Table 4. Mention of public policy efforts in articles in 1999 and 2005: *Irish Times*

	Mention of public policy efforts			
	Yes		No	
	1999	2005	1999	2005
Number of articles	2	4	33	10

Significantly, the article does not solely rely on street-level bureaucrats to interpret the estate and goes on to tell the story from different vantage points by mentioning how local residents work together to make the estate a better place to live, prompted by their own positive early memories:

The young members who grew up in the flats remember their own childhoods when they played handball in the pram sheds ... at the same time they are not blind to realities. 'You've seen that Real TV programme. Well, this is Real Fatima', one woman said. At a meeting of the women's education project they talked about the day a school group came across three addicts injecting outside a window. (*Irish Times*, 20 June 1998)

After 2000 more frequent mentions were made of how residents understood the changes occurring in the estate. This article from 2005 typifies this framing:

More than 350 residents of the condemned 1950s flat complex Fatima Mansions will begin moving into new homes from tomorrow, following a regeneration programme started more than four years ago. Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and Lord Mayor of Dublin Catherine Byrne yesterday presented keys to Margaret Brophy (61), who will be the first tenant of the new development, along with her husband John and three sons. 'I moved to Fatima 34 years ago, with my husband who had been born and reared here. I reared all my children here and my grandchildren were reared here. I've never had a house or a garden before in my life.' (*Irish Times*, 4 October 2004)

Public policy efforts

In 1999 we expected to see fewer mentions of public policy efforts to revitalise Fatima Mansions as a place to live compared to later years. In 2005 there were indeed more mentions of public policy initiatives even though the absolute number of Fatima stories being covered had declined (Table 4).

This excerpt from a 1999 article on estate childcare service provision well illustrates this framing:

As the childcare nightmare continues to torment parents, communities across the country are looking at ways of addressing the need for affordable, quality provision for themselves. Last Friday, The Little People's Palace was officially opened at Fatima Mansions in Dublin.

One of 25 pilot day-care projects funded through the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform's equal opportunities childcare programme, the day-care centre evolved out of a crèche set up three years ago by five women living in Fatima Mansions. (*Irish Times*, 11 May 1999)

Articles in the mid 2000s were more likely to make mention of public policy efforts such as estate regeneration plans and developments than those prior to 2000. This excerpt from an article in 2005 is a good example of this:

Disadvantaged communities from across Ireland will be 'beating a path to Fatima Mansions' in Dublin to see how successful regeneration is done, President Mary McAleese told residents there at the weekend ... The social regeneration plan is intended to underpin the physical regeneration which has been underway for four years. (*Irish Times*, 14 November 2005)

Visual imagery

Most of the articles examined in this study consisted of text without an accompanying photograph. Ten articles in our dataset included visual imagery alongside textual accounts. Our expectations led us to think that visual imagery in 1998 would reinforce the estate's spoiled identity, linking it to crime and drug dealing, and that imagery after that would portray the estate more positively through images of newly created community institutions and celebratory events associated with the regeneration.

In line with our expectations, imagery in 1998 tended to reinforce the negative valency of the estate. Consider, for example, an article under the title 'Fatima Mansions, a place known to residents as the heroin supermarket', which included a photograph of one resident looking at the open courtyard space of the flats complex that provided a ready physical environment for drug use and abuse. The caption read:

Fatima Mansions: the planners could not have designed a better layout for drug dealing, with at least eight exits from every open area between blocks and hundreds of stairwells and balconies. Heroin has turned parts of the complex into a junkie paradise and a nightmare for the residents. (*Irish Times*, 20 June 1998: 10)

Echoing this, an article about the launch of *Making Fatima a Better Place to Live* (Corcoran, 1998) included a photograph of a teenage boy swinging a hurley stick (Gaelic games) with the flat complex in the background. The caption, 'a young resident takes aim before belting a sliotair (hard ball) at Fatima Mansions yesterday, but if many residents had their way a wrecking ball would be aimed at the walls of the Dublin estate' (*Irish Times*, 24 September 1998: 3), registered residents' long-standing grievances about their living place.

Photographic images after 1998 were different. An article under the title 'Secrets of Fatima' about estate regeneration, carried in the newspaper's Media Scope section in 2000, juxtaposed two photographic images of the estate: one of a three-member

music band, with the caption 'In Your Face (two out of view) – Andrew Cahill, Sean Finley, John O'Brien, Keith O'Brien, and Eoin O'Connor – perform The Drugs Don't Work for the radio show'; another of the physical design of the flats complex depicting a large open courtyard space dividing each block of flats from one another, captioned by 'a view of the blocks'. Another article in the same section depicted one of the residents speaking on the *Today with Pat Kenny* radio show with the caption 'Issy O'Rourke, a resident of Fatima Mansions tells Pat Kenny about "H Block"' (*Irish Times*, 19 January 2000: 8).

In 2003 the Planning and Development section of the newspaper carried an article under the title 'Fatima Mansions to be demolished' and the accompanying photograph of a view of the large open courtyard space of the flat complex was captioned by 'The Fatima Mansions Complex: to be demolished and redeveloped'. A few months later a photograph of this demolition process was carried and titled by 'Fall of Fatima: demolition of 1950s social housing complex begins in Rialto' and captioned by:

Gareth Brophy (9), from Fatima Mansions, watches as the demolition of Block P started yesterday. The 1950s-built social housing complex in Rialto, Dublin, is to undergo a phase demolition and redevelopment. Complete redevelopment is now considered the most practical solution due to the mass concrete nature of the 14 blocks in the scheme and the public perception of the area as a walled-in ghetto. (*Irish Times*, 20 August 2003: 7)

The photograph showed a bulldozer razing the blocks to the ground.

When the estate regeneration plan was launched in 2000 the estate received more media attention. Photographic imagery around this time tended to portray people living in the estate rather than its deteriorating physical environment. One article, for example, under the title 'Tenants plan regeneration of Fatima Mansions' (*Irish Times*, 24 November 2000: 4) included a photograph of young children from the estate against the background of one of the blocks in the flat complex.

Coverage around the time of the end of the regeneration was in concert with this. In 2003, reports about the Fatima Mansions regeneration festival included photographs of joyous children (*Irish Times*, 11 August 2003: 11) and a colour photograph of new residents receiving the keys to their homes with the caption 'Miracle of Fatima: first tenant of rebuilt 1950s flat complex receives keys' depicted celebratory residents congratulating one another on their new housing environment and used the religious idiom of 'miracle' to characterise the event (*Irish Times*, 4 October 2005: 6). Another article in the newspaper's weekend section around the time of the rehousing of tenants in the newly developed complex consisted of a montage of photographs, including tenants sitting in the sitting room of their new living place and young children from the estate with new housing units in the background (*Irish Times*, 8 October 2005: 108). In terms of visual imagery, then, the negative optics of a heroin-haunted estate gave way over time to a positive story of renewal for the ordinary, decent residents. A virtual no man's land was transformed into a model of urban excellence (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Fatima Mansions 2010

Analysis of the special radio show (13 December 1999)

The radio programme on the estate highlighted the challenge facing media spaces in promoting a positive representation of local authority estates without dwelling on their negative histories.

The programme opened with a reminder of the difficult everyday realities confronting residents of the estate by telling listeners of syringes on the ground, iron-railings and stone boulders erected to prevent joyriding, graffitied walls, boarded-up flats, spiked railings enclosing the flat complex, and blood-stained stairwells. At the same time, it sought to contextualise these problems by making reference to early school leaving and unemployment among residents of the estate, and pointing to their resolution via neighbourhood assets such as a community centre, women's centre, local shops, homework clubs, and an institutional environment involving closer cooperation with state agencies including Dublin Corporation and gardaí (police).

Although the *Today with Pat Kenny* special programme on Fatima Mansions tended to remind listeners of the estate's 'spoiled identity' via mentions of drug activity, joyriding, and so forth, it also made reference to neighbourhood assets such as strong social ties among residents and resident resourcefulness in dealing with overcrowded housing conditions, and the institutional environment impinging upon the estate such as changing relations between the estate and state services such as Dublin Corporation that helped create a new political context for revitalising the estate in the 1990s.

Table 5. Content and public policy mentions in *Today with Pat Kenny*

Issues	N
Private troubles	1
Neighbourhood deficits	25
Anti-social behaviour	50
Neighbourhood assets	21
Public policy	22

It is noteworthy that the radio programme did not displace talk about anti-social behaviour problems or neighbourhood deficits associated with Fatima Mansions with a more benign discourse. Frequent references were made throughout the programme to the estate's difficult history, involving, in particular, drug use and to the deterioration of its physical condition (see Table 5). Interestingly, in terms of perspective, resident views were referenced 22 times in the programme, whereas official views were referenced only twice. The voice of residents was elevated about official elites and street-level bureaucrats in representing the estate to wider publics. Far more resident perspectives were sought and given a hearing than the perspectives of official elites such as doctors treating drug users, voluntary sector representatives, or local politicians. In their stories and life histories, residents regularly mentioned the assets of the estate – citing the example of the community centre, women's club, youth club and so forth – and related the strong communal bonds among residents over a long period of time. These life histories personalised the experience of living in the estate and made its difficult conditions less abstract to grasp. In their personal biographies, long-term residents tended to draw a contrast between Fatima Mansions in the 1960s and present day conditions of the estate, while at the same time pointing to the strong social ties among residents that set it apart from other estates as a place to live. The affirmation of Fatima's strengths was also a key aspect of the report published in 1998, *Making Fatima a Better Place to Live* (Corcoran, 1998), which had nonetheless concluded that the majority of residents favoured the demolition of the estate. Some contextualised the history of the estate in a wider political and economic background – a history of arms-length relationships with Dublin Corporation and high levels of educational disadvantage and long-term unemployment. As a referent for talking about positive social change in local authority housing, the estate's difficult history was invoked rather than displaced.

Not surprisingly, *Today with Pat Kenny* also made mention of public policy efforts to revitalise the estate via references to planned 'regeneration' and 'change'. Earlier public policy efforts to revitalise the estate were also referred to and residents pointed to their lack of success – citing their lack of meaningful engagement with the community – in bringing about needed change. Special attention was given to how under the planned regeneration a new era of relations with three key state institutions – Dublin City Council, gardaí, and the Department of Education – had been realised. One informant contrasted earlier failed 'refurbishment' efforts with prospective 'regeneration' plans.

The redemptive story of Fatima portrayed in the radio programme was amplified further in the print media. *The Irish Times* reported on the broadcast of the programme

and emphasised how the national broadcaster RTÉ and residents worked together to co-produce the 'story' of the estate with a mutual respect for the constraints impinging on them. On the media side, the constraint was to put across a story in a short period of time and in a way that upheld the personality-driven rather than issue-driven nature of the radio programme. On the resident side, there was an explicit desire to desensationalise media coverage of the estate without sanitising the problems experienced by it. That both sets of actors were able to pull this off is noteworthy given that previous research suggests that it is difficult for feel-good stories like this to attract media attention as compared to events or incidents involving some kind of public contestation (Oliver and Myers, 1999). By most accounts, residents were satisfied that the story they sought to put across was taken up by the media and that they were successful in their framing strategies. *The Irish Times* reported in January 2000 that while the radio programme did not idealise the estate it convincingly conveyed the changes being brought about in the estate in recent times.⁴ The programme also acted as a powerful energiser in propelling FGU forward in their campaign to secure regeneration.

Conclusion

This article has examined the media trajectory of one Dublin social housing estate with a spoiled identity against the backdrop of the regeneration of the estate, first mooted in the late 1990s and that came to fruition in the current decade. So 'successful' has this regeneration become that the estate is now routinely held up as an exemplar of the possibilities of estate regeneration plans and as a referent for talking about recent social policy changes in local authority housing.⁵ Whereas, before, Fatima Mansions was a synonym for heroin use, it is now a poster-child for what have come to be known in planning and urban development discourse as 'sustainable communities'.

From the start, the presence of a cadre of residents and local community workers willing and committed to the project of regenerating the estate was crucial to the changes it experienced. With this cadre in place it worked hard to develop its own leadership, build allies with and links to community power nodes, leverage resources from other community groups, and communicate its efforts to wider publics. In short, residents became more professional and sophisticated in their claims-making. All of this is made clear in Fatima United Groups' canonical document *Dream! Dare! Do!* (Donohue and Dorman, 2006) in which the estate sets out the lessons it learned via its attempts to bring about positive social and economic change from the early 1990s onwards. Early on in this document, FGU makes clear the importance of evidence-based research in underwriting its change efforts and in garnering media attention for it:

11 Acres, 10 Steps would have remained only a dust-collecting curiosity if we hadn't done two key things: firstly we designed and produced it to the highest of standards so that it would have to be taken seriously and secondly, we launched it to huge national and local media fanfare so that it became the central reference for all the partners. (Donohue and Dorman, 2006: 16)

The report goes on to argue that successful regeneration turns on a community's ability to relate in an effective way to internal and external audiences and to exercise strategic control over how it is represented in variable media spaces:

When we embarked on this regeneration journey, Fatima was in the news for all the wrong reasons – drugs, crime, joy riding. And despite the fact that many quality services and initiatives were happening, we couldn't get a positive story on Fatima. We knew we needed allies ... we set out deliberately to portray a very different, more accurate image of Fatima and its residents ... we made sure that the regeneration work was 'sold' to the media at key moments and for key reasons. (Donohue and Dorman, 2006: 21)

The findings of this research indicating the important role of media spaces in challenging the difficult reputation of local authority estates are both in line with and contrary to some previous research. As part of their study of housing revitalisation in Bell Farm in York, England, Cole and Smith (1996) carried out an analysis of local print media reportage over a 20-year period and – consistent with reportage about Fatima Mansions prior to 1999 – found a strong focus on anti-social behaviour and the private troubles of individual residents. Journalists tended to follow the 'if it bleeds it leads' formulation with respect to what they wrote about and consequently paid little attention to news with a positive valence. The word 'notorious' was the most widely used journalistic idiom in relation to Bell Farm, contrasting with the focus on more technical issues such as planning in coverage of other less problematic estates. Not surprisingly, most Bell Farm residents felt that media coverage was less than accurate in its portrayal of the estate. Newly arrived residents who took up residence around the time of the estate's revitalisation, by contrast with long-term settled residents, were less likely to feel that media representations were inaccurate, pointing to the possibilities of revitalisation efforts in overturning long-standing difficult reputations, especially when this also involves building relations with media journalists (Cole and Smith, 1996).

In this study we have argued that media spaces can play an important role in shaping meaning-making around local authority housing estates. Admittedly, the extent to which changes in media framing influence public opinion is difficult to gauge and clearly there is a danger in assuming that one is in concert with the other. Previous research (Hastings and Dean, 2003) urges us to be cautious about treating changes in media reportage as a register of wider public attitudinal shifts and overstating the media's capacity to displace earlier difficult reputations. At the same time, it appears that overcoming the social distance between cultural elites such as journalists via on-site physical interaction with residents and estate revitalisation efforts goes some way in terms of challenging media reportage of problematic pasts. Clearly, the residents of Fatima Mansions succeeded in this by inviting RTÉ to actually come to the estate and to broadcast a flagship programme from it with an angle sympathetic to residents' needs and interests.⁶

With respect to neither of the media spaces examined here, however, can we make claims about an effect exerted upon public opinion. Clearly, there is no simple or straightforward relationship between coverage in media spaces of this or that issue and views of the wider population and we are wary of attributing changes in media representations as the 'cause' of public opinion shifts – it may well be that changed representations are an 'effect' of public opinion changes or, more likely, that there are reciprocal influences between the two. At any rate it is difficult to see the relationship as spurious, given that most people do not have first-hand experience of living in local authority estates like Fatima Mansions and, consequently, tend to rely on media outlets as their key – or maybe only – source of information about them.

One important lesson we take away from this study, though, is that media coverage of local authority estates does not always follow the pattern that our earlier examination of media agenda-setting research leads one to expect. Prior research would lead us to think that media spaces would be much less subject to influence from non-elites, that there would be a strong value incongruence between audiences and media outlets, that they would be unlikely to report positive news stories about disadvantaged social groups, and that they would be more likely to rely on established news sources even if they did. Against this pattern we found that media spaces were surprisingly receptive to non-elite views and opinions and saw them as co-producers of their relatively benign coverage. We conclude that media coverage of social problems such as those associated with local authority housing estates may well be less authoritative than previously understood.

This begs the question of whether the Fatima Mansions case study introduced and elaborated in this article is unique as an illustration of the malleability of framings of social problems. While there are some empirical examples of other housing estates that underwent similar changes in how they were discursively constructed (Cole and Smith, 1996), the relatively few cases of this that we know about in the Irish national context may well point to the significance of 'oneness' (Schwartz, 2009). Given the constraints that media spaces operate under and that we documented earlier, there tends to be little or no room for more than one example of successful housing estate revitalisation to circulate at any one time in the media as a concrete exemplar of innovative social housing policy, resulting in other equally worthy examples of it falling foul to collective oblivion.

As well as showing some evidence of resident agenda-setting in a specific Dublin housing estate, this case study also sheds some light on the conditions under which it is likely to develop. Underwriting estate revitalisation through empirical research, building a strong resident organisation, developing residents' communicative competencies, forging alliances with important community power nodes, and the presence of a favourable political opportunity structure make a residents' voice possible. Given these background conditions, rarely heard and sometimes disengaged social groups like local authority residents can mobilise and exert power and strength in agenda-setting processes and institutional politics that shape what issues people deem salient and how they think about them. Or, put more simply, residents assert counter-power and determine how they engage with the outside world.

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Notes

- 1 The two most notable Irish urban regeneration projects are in Ballymun on the north side of Dublin and in Limerick. Ballymun Regeneration Ltd (BRL) was established by Dublin City Council in 1997 to plan and implement a regeneration programme that has involved creating a range of new and improved services for the residents of Ballymun. Five thousand new homes have been built to replace 26 high and medium rise flat blocks. A range of retail and commercial services animate the new Main Street, and a variety of arts, environmental and leisure facilities have been built in the environs. The Limerick Regeneration Agencies were set up by

- the Irish government in 2007. The objective of these agencies is to improve the quality of life for residents within key Limerick city locations. This is to be achieved through the creation and implementation of a programme of regeneration to include quality designed new housing, improved community facilities and integrated services. About 3,000 households fall within the remit of the Limerick agencies.
- 2 We were particularly interested in how a broadsheet newspaper which has the power to set the news agenda covered the estate. The tabloid newspaper market in Ireland is more fragmented than the broadsheet sector; most of the titles originate in Britain with Irish content added, and in general they do not have the national reach or influence of a paper such as the *Irish Times*. We did not deem it appropriate therefore to include them in the study. Similarly, our radio data focus solely on a single flagship radio programme which has a significant national audience and which devoted a full programme of 80 minutes to the subject of Fatima Mansions. The local commercial and community radio sectors are extremely fragmented, have neither the same resources or remit to cover current affairs stories as RTE, and have much smaller audiences. We therefore did not deem it substantively useful or feasible to include a survey of local radio stations in the study.
 - 3 We also paid attention to whether articles were accompanied by visual imagery or not and viewed these as texts in their own right and constituting a crucial part of the media's interpretative package and meaning-making.
 - 4 *Irish Times*, 'The Secrets of Fatima', 19 January 2000.
 - 5 See, for example, Brendan Kenny's article in the *Irish Times* under the title 'Making golden age of regeneration a reality' (*Irish Times*, 28 November 2007: 18). See also case study of Fatima Mansions in Treadwell Shine and Norris, 2006.
 - 6 The example set by activists centrally involved in the re-imagining of Fatima Mansions has influenced other city communities with regeneration ambitions. Mimi Doran has documented through participatory action research the efforts by the St. Michael's Estate Regeneration Team in Inchicore, Dublin, to engage with the media in the aftermath of the collapse of the regeneration plans. Doran examines the process through which the Regeneration Team gained prominence in the national media and fostered public interest. She outlines the media literacy programme that the community pursued and demonstrates how they came to use mainstream and new media platforms to tell their story, raise awareness and instigate debate (Doran, 2011).

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