

# **‘I’d be proud to spend the sacred foreign aid budget on our poor pensioners’: Representations of macro aid resourcing in the Irish, UK and US print-media during the economic crisis, 2008-2011**

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## **Abstract**

The news-media has been identified as an influence on donor nations' overseas aid allocations, acting as a site where decisions are justified to 'domestic constituencies' and through which resistance is mobilised (Van Belle, 2003). Mediated pressures on aid allocations amplified between 2008 and 2011 in three donor countries experiencing domestic economic difficulties: Ireland, the UK and the US. This study suggests that each country's print-media positioned the macro resourcing of aid primarily as an inward concern, neglected recipient country needs, and made weak connections to international policy frameworks to benchmark, contextualise and rationalise aid allocations. The research suggests that the explanatory limitations of the countries' news-models in communicating the processes and rationales underpinning macro aid resourcing may be a factor in sustaining a knowledge and legitimacy deficit among domestic publics for international aid agreements.

**Keywords:** Overseas aid; economic crisis; news-models; news-discourse

## Introduction

In the United Nation's 2012 report on the Millennium Development Goals, Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon said: 'The current economic crises besetting much of the developed world must not be allowed to decelerate or reverse the progress that has been made' (UN, 2012: 3). The context for his remark was that, since the late-2000s, overseas aid (OA) budgets in many countries had come under pressure as areas where governments could implement cuts to ease domestic budgetary stresses. The report noted that, in 2011, 'Core development aid falls in real-terms for the first time in more than a decade, as donor countries face fiscal constraints' (2012: 58). Advocacy group ONE (2012) measured the decline in contributions from European Union countries at 1.5%.

The squeeze on OA budgets was happening in the shadow of the 2015 deadline to reach the Millennium Goals of, among other commitments, halving the proportion of people who experience extreme poverty and hunger. A fundamental pre-requisite to achieving the Goals was that donor countries would commit 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) to resource their OA budgets annually. However, the UN report stated that among the 24 members of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC), which comprises the developed countries with the largest aid programmes, contributions had fallen in 16.

The news-media has been identified as a non-state influence on donor countries' OA allocations, and as a site where governments and aid stakeholders seek to justify decisions to 'domestic constituencies' in contexts where the public resources available to even the richest nations are finite (Van Belle, 2003). Institutional and ideological resistance to aid allocations may also be mobilised through and by the news-media. Such mediated pressures may rise at times of national economic difficulty, when donations overseas hold greater potential to be framed as coming at the expense of domestic citizens.

As the global economic crisis persisted from 2008 to 2011, macro aid resourcing (as a budgetary commitment at GNI level, as distinct from donor country responses to specific humanitarian events or routine contributions to individual recipient countries) flared in print-media news-discourse in Ireland, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) as an

element of addressing national budgetary difficulties. While buffering economic, ideological and mediated pressures on their OA budgets, the countries continued to play important roles in global aid delivery. The UN identified the UK and US as being among the world's largest donors of aid by volume, with Ireland being among the largest donors per capita. But common DAC membership and international policy links did not translate into common responses by the states to their aid commitments amid domestic economic strains.

Positioning national news-models and state commitments to international aid policies as being common, if not exact, contextual factors, the study draws on a content analysis to trace variances and consistencies across and within the countries in how, when and why the print-media directed attention to macro aid resourcing. Building on the content analysis, the study considers the orientation of news-discourse either inward to the donor country or outward to the recipient country under the following thematically coherent clusters:

- Donor country internal interests/influences
- Donor country external/strategic goals/interests
- Recipient country considerations: humanitarianism/development

The study examines the explanatory robustness of the countries' news-models in communicating the processes, rationales and international policy contexts underpinning macro aid resourcing amid domestic economic difficulties.

### **Irish Aid, USAid and UK Aid**

The 2006 White Paper on Ireland's OA programme, Irish Aid, set out the Government's ambition to reach the Millennium Goal target of 0.7% of GNI by 2012. The enlarged OA programme, against the backdrop of the booming Celtic Tiger economy, was framed by Government sources and the news-media primarily as an inward reflection on Ireland's newly gained wealth and enhanced economic, social and international status. A signal of the weak attention directed to overseas objectives was the tendency of news-discourse to cluster recipient countries under the label of Africa, even though two of Irish Aid's nine priority countries were in Asia (Barnes and Cawley, 2009).

Within two years, Ireland's open and highly globalised economy was in crisis. Acerbating the impact of global factors were specific national vulnerabilities around a property bubble, a banking sector emergency and a boom-time growth in public sector spending. As the national budgetary deficit deepened, the Government implemented a series of austerity cuts, including to OA – first in real-terms but by 2009 as a % of GNI.

Also buffeted by economic difficulties was the UK, which, similarly, had committed to reaching the 0.7% target early. From 2010, the newly-elected Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition followed the previous Labour Government's policy of protecting OA, but did so within the harsher context of implementing austerity cuts domestically. In late-2011, the Coalition reduced UK Aid's funding in real-terms to reflect the struggling economy's lower GNI.

In 2010, macro OA resourcing became an increasing point of tension between the Obama Administration and Congressional Republicans pressing for cuts as the US economy weakened. GOP candidates, seeking the party's presidential election nomination, also emerged as critics of OA funding. In April 2011, a deal on federal deficit reduction included State Department and OA cuts of \$8bn. That year, USAid accounted for less than 0.5% of the federal budget.

Outside domestic political-economic pressures, donor countries may attach geo-political considerations to aid allocations, especially when OA is tightly bound to foreign policy (Cottle and Nolan, 2007; Van Belle and Hook, 2000). Such strategic self-interest and ideological underpinnings are embedded in the policy-discourse of USAid, which has 'the twofold purpose of furthering America's foreign policy interests in expanding democracy and free markets while improving the lives of citizens of the developing world' (2012). UK Aid identifies itself as 'working to stimulate open societies and open economies' (2012: 3). Such strategic objectives are tempered in the policy-discourse of Irish Aid (2012), which foregrounds broader values of 'peace and justice' but also positions OA as an element of 'foreign policy'.

That strategic self-interest motivates donor countries is consistent with two of the three international relations paradigms which traditionally have grounded understandings of OA: realism, which views aid as a means of enhancing the prestige, economic status and military security of the donor country; and globalism, which views aid as a means of exploiting

developing countries and perpetuating rich nations' structural and economic advantages (Van Belle, 2003). The third paradigm, pluralism, draws on the values of humanitarianism and promotes a balance between donor country wealth and recipient country needs, often employing GNI to benchmark aid allocations (Van Belle and Hook, 2000). The resilience of the realist and globalist paradigms suggest that humanitarian motives alone are insufficient to explain a donor nation's allocation decisions.

However, Van Belle argues that such elevated international or 'system-level' paradigms are generally blind to 'where aid competes with finite resources in [domestic] areas' (2003: 267). At this point of domestic-political pressure, the 'real costs' of aid have to be justified to 'domestic constituencies' (Van Belle, 2003). This need may arise not least because a country's spending on OA might outstrip or equal its funding of important domestic public services, or be perceived as reducing the resources available to them. As with any policy area determining the use of public resources, discourse surrounding OA has the potential to create 'winners and losers' among domestic political actors seeking to promote an ideological position, gain favour with the electorate, or achieve career advancement (Milner and Tingley, 2010). The assumption here is that politicians will frame their messages on OA in mainstream news, speeches and policy debates with the wishes and sentiments of domestic stakeholders in mind. Moreover, OA tends to lack a 'stable' core of legislative (and mediated) political support because it involves the shifting of public resources away from voters to peoples who have no say in donor country elections (Milner and Tingley, 2010). OA, in this conception, becomes more vulnerable to opportunistic political sponsorship or criticism to serve domestic agendas.

### **News-models, OA and the developing country 'Other'**

Ireland, the US and UK can be viewed as hosting media systems which conform closest to what Hallin and Mancini (2004) suggest is a Liberal model, characterised by strong commercial orientation, distance from political parties, and journalistic autonomy. At the level of editorial production, Curran *et al.* (2009) have identified the US news-model as being based on 'social responsibility', while O'Regan suggests that the Irish news-media in its

professional practice tracks 'the Anglo-American model of journalism' (2010: 447). Such arguments suggest that journalists in the three countries work within a broadly shared framework of news values, which act as filters of what is and is not considered to be news, and which frame the presentation of newsworthy material to audiences.

Journalists rarely acknowledge the 'ground rules' of news production (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001: 261), but academic research has a rich tradition of trying to codify the values, routines and practices that underpin national news-models. A common starting point is Galtung and Ruge's (1965) identification in the mid-1960s of twelve news factors embedded in foreign news, including unambiguity of the story and references to elite nations or persons. Ethnographic newsroom research in the 1970s and 1980s accumulated sophisticated insights to the information-gathering routines, narrative forms, and journalistic values through which print and broadcast news were funnelled on a daily basis (Gans, 1978; Tuchman, 1978; Schlesinger, 1987). More recently, attempts have been made to reconsider Galtung and Ruge's original study in light of the contemporary news landscape, with Harcup and O'Neill proposing a refined set of news factors including Power Elite, Magnitude, Relevance and a 'news organisation's own agenda' (2001: 279).

The news-media's capacity to frame OA's 'real costs' as coming at the expense of domestic citizens may escalate when the donor country's economy is in difficulty. A key assumption here is that governments will be 'responsive to the content of the domestic news-media' if they believe it is reflective of public opinion (Van Belle and Hook, 2000: 321). Further, through distilling the competing agendas of political actors and aid stakeholders, news-media discourse may point to the institutional and ideological motivations underpinning a nation's OA decisions. Therefore, argue Van Belle and Hook, domestic 'societal pressures in general' and news-media coverage 'should be part of any comprehensive model of foreign aid' (2000: 323).

Fresh challenges arise once the news-media has been placed within such a model, as OA tends to sit uneasily within traditional categorisations of news: straddling domestic news (allocation of public resources) and foreign news (directing public resources overseas). The dominant orientation of news in developed nations tends to be inward to domestic matters, with even foreign news being viewed through a 'national prism' (Preston, 2008).

News from developing nations, in particular, struggles to gain traction, being increasingly crowded 'out of the "news hole"' (Paterson, 1998: 94). Even when a donor nation's aid programme flickers within news-coverage the attention may be directed home, as when the Irish Prime Minister visited a recipient country and in subsequent reportage 'the most common topic was domestic Irish politics' (Barry, 2012: 133). An inward discursive orientation, which neglects international policy frameworks and backgrounds recipient country benefits, is especially problematic if justifications for OA allocations are being based not on the easy availability of resources from the donor's economy but on values of humanitarianism.

Fair (1993) echoes concerns on the frequency and orientation of aid reporting when highlighting a broad assumption among US journalists that domestic audiences lack interest in foreign news, which in turn underpins a resource-based decision that the cost of reporting from developing countries 'outweighs the need and benefit' (1993: 8). Such cost containment measures tend to reinforce a pattern whereby news about developing nations comes from a small number of news agencies, and countries without a news agency presence are even less likely to receive attention (Wu, 2003). The lack of diversity in news producers on the ground means that coverage of developing nations is prone to homogenisation (Paterson, 1998). Smoothing out political, socio-economic and cultural differences may facilitate a discursive construction of developing nations as 'undifferentiated other' which are positioned for domestic audiences in oppositional terms as 'a place over "there" and not "here", while its peoples ("they") are not "us"' (Fair, 1993: 10). There is a broad resonance here with what Said (2003) argued was the ideological tendency of Western cultures towards 'otherness', establishing a superior self in contrast to the perceived deficiencies of the inferior non-self. This tends to be manifest in news-discourse as binary us/them segregations, with media outlets invariably encouraging audience identification with the in-group (us) over the out-group (them).

Additionally, the 'episodic' coverage of developing nations tends to emphasise the negative (violence, famine, natural disasters, disease) without reference to underlying factors, which ignores the normalcy of 'post-emergency communities' (Cottle and Nonlan, 2007: 863) and reinforces perceptions of 'a lost cause' (Kothari, 2010: 209). One reason for the neglect of complex structural factors is that both journalists and aid agencies tend to aim for a

'straightforward narrative' to engage audiences and donors (Franks, 2010: 81). Such narratives tend to portray developing nations as helpless (lacking 'agency') and Western countries as compassionate (Kothari, 2010). They also signal a limitation of news-models, which are better calibrated to reporting discrete humanitarian events than integrated development processes.

That developing nations struggle not only for positive coverage but also for 'visibility' in donor country news-media is consistent with the findings of prior research on international news-flows, where the tendency of news-coverage is to 'gravitate towards the powerful' (Wu, 2003: 20). Jones *et al.* (2013) suggest that the following factors influence the visibility of a foreign nation in US news-media: the country's proximity and/or economic significance to America, its position within the international hierarchy of nations, and US troop deployment. With the possible exception of military importance, aid recipient countries tend to score low in the key factors enhancing visibility in US news – in a broader context where the overall visibility of foreign nations in US news-media seems to be diminishing (Jones *et al.*, 2013).

The low visibility of recipient countries and the narrow range of news-coverage may have tangible resource implications by amplifying a 'negative context' in which donor country politicians and the public consider aid allocations (Fair, 1993). Non-governmental aid agencies, sensitive to the resource implications of news-media coverage, have been professionalising their media-relations to try to improve political/public perceptions of OA (Franks, 2010). Often, agencies frame media strategies to counter simplistic news-narratives of waste that neglect the challenges of delivering aid (Cottle and Nolan, 2007). Such counter narratives may assume a heightened resource importance when a donor country's own economy is in difficulty, with the news-media acting as a site through which agencies appeal not only to public sympathies for donations but also to institutional (state) actors to fulfil their OA commitments.

## **Method**

Due to the study's four year timescale and the researcher's limited resources, the sample was assembled using word-searches through the Irish, UK and US newspapers accessible on the



Nexis database. Terminology related to OA can vary by country, institution and newspaper. Therefore, a combination of terms were searched to capture relevant articles, including 'aid', 'allocation', 'assistance', 'budget', 'development', 'foreign', 'overseas', 'Irish Aid', 'UK Aid', and 'USAid'. The researcher read through each article and, to establish a solid basis for comparability, removed from each country's sample any material that failed to match the following criterion: that the news-text, in whole or in part, linked macro OA resourcing to the status of the donor nation's economy and the allocation of its finite public resources. The search returned few articles that considered macro OA resourcing without these broader links.

No Irish, UK or US newspaper was excluded from consideration. Therefore, the final sample (Table 1) includes all newspapers that returned matching material. Nexis offered access to a comprehensive range of regional and national newspapers in each country (and major city publications in the US). However, the Wall Street Journal was a notable absence among US publications.

**Table 1: Titles/Articles, 2008-2011**

| <b>[Country articles overall (2008; 2009; 2010; 2011)]</b><br><b>(% of country sample)</b> |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| Ireland: 240 (58; 131; 21; 30)<br><b>(24%; 55%; 9%; 13%)</b>                               | UK: 321 (2; 40; 91; 188)<br><b>(&lt;1%; 12%; 28%; 59%)</b> | US: 233 (25; 20; 53; 135)<br><b>(11%; 9%; 23%; 58%)</b> |
| <b>Total articles per newspaper (2008-2011)</b>  |  |   |
| <b>Ireland</b>   |  |   |
| Irish Times: <b>124</b>  | Sunday Tribune: <b>5</b>                                   |   |
| Irish Examiner: <b>36</b>  | Sunday Times:* <b>4</b>                                    |   |
| Irish Independent: <b>27</b>   | Daily Mail:* <b>3</b>                                      |   |
| Sunday Business Post: <b>16</b>  | Sun:* <b>2</b>   |   |
| Sunday Independent: <b>11</b>  | Sunday Mirror:* <b>2</b>                                   |   |
| Daily Mirror:* <b>10</b>   |  |   |
| <b>UK</b>  |  |   |
| Daily Mail: <b>63</b>  | Sun: <b>12</b>   |   |
| Daily Express: <b>59</b>   | Sunday Express: <b>8</b>                                   |   |
| Daily Telegraph: <b>52</b>   | Mail on Sunday: <b>7</b>                                   |   |
| Independent: <b>34</b>   | Observer: <b>6</b>   |   |
| Guardian: <b>26</b>  | News of the World: <b>4</b>                                |   |
| Times: <b>19</b>   | Independent on Sunday: <b>4</b>                            |   |
| Sunday Telegraph: <b>12</b>  | Daily Mirror: <b>2</b>                                     |   |
| Sunday Times: <b>12</b>  | Sunday Mirror: <b>1</b>                                    |   |
| <b>US</b>  |  |   |
| Washington Post: <b>74</b>   | USA Today: <b>27</b>                                       |   |
| New York Times: <b>56</b>  | San Jose Mercury News: <b>18</b>                           |   |
| Washington Times: <b>48</b>  | Los Angeles Times: <b>10</b>                               |   |

\*Irish' edition of UK newspaper.

The researcher implemented a content analysis to trace each sample's pattern of coverage. Full article-text, including headlines, was set as the unit of analysis, on the basis of news-pieces potentially being encoded with a number of (competing, overlapping) arguments, representations and perspectives. The code-sheet was constructed through a grounded approach, with the researcher anticipating that pre-determined coding-measures would provide a less accurate outline of print-media engagement than those that emerged organically through article analysis. Having detected a particular coding-measure (the categories that emerged as coding measures can be viewed in Tables 4-6), the researcher interpreted whether it was encoded in subsequent articles. The following limitation should be acknowledged: at this juncture there was scope for the researcher to introduce subjective interpretation of what counted as an important coding measure/category, especially as the study involved a deep sample of often lengthy and discursively complex news-texts. This is a

problematic dimension to content analyses generally. As McQuail (1977) has argued, 'There is no objective or neutral way of deciding which categories should be used' (cited in Harcup and O'Neill, 2001: 266). To maintain consistency, the researcher alone coded the samples. Articles coded early in the research were double-checked for coding-measures that had been established on the final version of the code-sheet. A coding measure being detected in an article (the unit of analysis) counted as an incidence of one (e.g., that OA could be reduced in real-terms but still maintained as a % of GNI). The total number of incidents (number of articles in which a coding category was found) was then calculated as a percentage of all articles in a country sample. Figures were rounded to the nearest whole percentage. For instance, the argument that OA could be adjusted as a % of GNI was present in 19% of all articles in the Irish sample. Finally, the results were arranged into three thematically coherent clusters for analysis: Internal interests/issues; External interests/influences; Recipient country considerations (Tables 4-6).

Augmenting the content analysis is a textual examination of specific discursive constructions to illustrate broader patterns. The discursive strategies underpinning news-media representations of macro OA resourcing included nominalisations, construction of in-groups/out-groups, positive self-representation and negative other-representation, and the emphasising of good/bad consequences while neglecting the reverse.

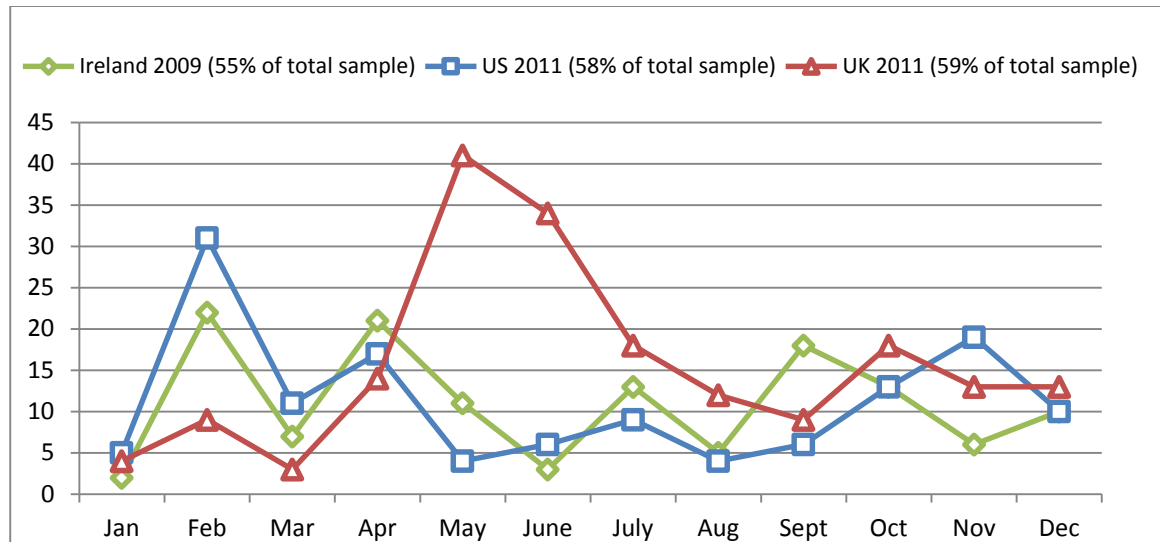
## Findings

Each sample produced a peak year of coverage: Ireland, 2009; UK and US, 2011. However, even peak years returned an uneven engagement, with specific political-economic contextual factors triggering spikes in coverage:

- **Ireland 2009:** *February:* Government implemented a 10% OA reduction; *April:* emergency national budget, €100m OA reduction; *September/October:* national budget, further OA reduction
- **US 2011:** *February:* Congressional negotiations on deficit reduction; *April:* deal on deficit reduction, \$8bn cuts to State Department and OA; *November:* GOP presidential election nomination debates

- **UK 2011:** *May/June:* Defence Secretary questioned Government's OA policy; Prime Minister publicly defended OA; *November/December:* OA reduced in real-terms to reflect struggling economy

**Table 2: Peak year coverage**



While coding, the researcher logged the number of times identifiable categories of sources were quoted in each sample. For example, the Prime Minister as a unique identifiable person being quoted in an article (the unit of analysis) counted as an incidence of one; two separate Opposition politicians quoted in a single article counted as an incidence of two. At the end of the coding phase, the total number of incidents of sources being quoted in a country sample was added together. Then the number of incidents of a category of source being quoted was calculated as a percentage of this total figure (Table 3). The purpose of this was to give a broad indicative measure of who were the institutional sources featuring most prominently in news-discourse in each country on macro aid resourcing.

Table 3: Institutional sources

| Source category  | % of sources quoted in IRL print-media* | % of sources quoted in US print-media* | % of sources quoted in UK print-media* |
|--|---|--|--|
| Irish Aid/USAid/UK Aid/Foreign Affairs (on aid issues)                             | <1%                                     | 2%                                     | <1%                                    |
| Aid Minister/Secretary   | 9%                                      | 1%                                     | 8%                                     |
| Prime Minister/President   | 6%                                      | 4%                                     | 8%                                     |
| Government politician sub-Ministerial/non-Cabinet                                  | 8%                                      | 9%                                     | 21%                                    |
| Opposition   | 8%                                      | 34%                                    | 14%                                    |
| Department/State institution other than Foreign Affairs or country's aid programme | 5%                                      | 10%                                    | 6%                                     |
| Defence Minister/Secretary   | 0%                                      | 2%                                     | 2%                                     |
| Other Minister/Secretary   | 5%                                      | 2%                                     | 8%                                     |
| Military   | 0%                                      | 2%                                     | 1%                                     |
| Non-governmental aid agency  | 32%                                     | 6%                                     | 9%                                     |
| Political leader aid recipient country   | <1%                                     | 4%                                     | <1%                                    |
| Citizen aid recipient country  | 1%                                      | 2%                                     | 2%                                     |
| Business sector/Economist  | 8%                                      | 2%                                     | 3%                                     |
| Advocacy group/think tank  | 0%                                      | 7%                                     | 7%                                     |
| Other (church, academic, WHO, UN, OECD, World Bank, Trade Union)                   | 15%                                     | 12%                                    | 7%                                     |

\*Figures rounded to nearest whole percentage

Sourcing patterns will be analysed in more detail in later sections, but at a headline level the following findings are noteworthy.

First, in each country, domestic (Government/Opposition) politicians emerged as frequently encoded sources, while political leaders from recipient countries registered weakly.

Second, the Irish sample had by far the strongest encoding of non-governmental aid agencies criticising Government decisions on macro OA resourcing, particularly in 2009.

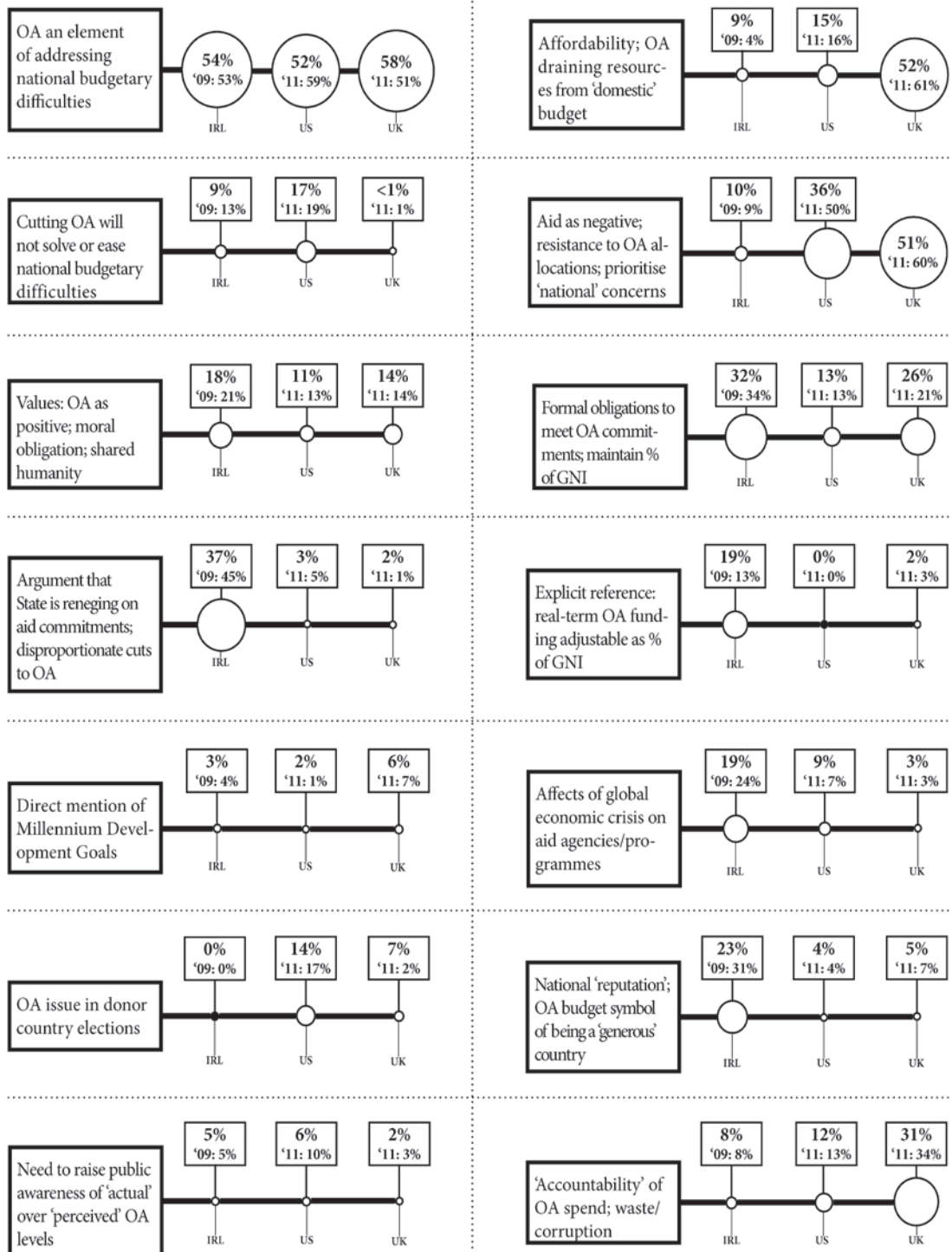
Third, formal aid programmes (Irish Aid, USAid, UK Aid) rarely featured as sources.

Fourth, military sources were weakly encoded in the sample, even though there was a relatively strong securitisation and militarisation of OA discourse in the US and UK print-media.

**Cluster one: Internal issues/influences**

**Table 4: Internal issues/influences**

IRL first circle; US second circle; UK third circle. The top figure is the overall percentage of articles in each country sample in which the argument/representation was detected, 2008-2011. The second figure (IRL '09; US, UK '11) is the percentage during the peak year of media coverage in each country



***Ireland: Internal issues/influences***

From mid-2008, the Irish print-media had a tendency to position OA among the competing claims on diminishing public resources when reporting the Government's emergency budgetary adjustments, as illustrated in an Irish Examiner article: 'The overseas aid budget is to be cut by €45m this year and the health department will make "savings" of €144m' (10/07/2008).

Much of the institutional discourse filtered through newspapers, therefore, was justifications by Government and criticisms from non-governmental aid agencies of OA reductions. The encoding of the latter as sources was reflected in the discursive prominence of claims that the Government was reneging on aid commitments (37%; 2009-45%). In seeking to apply mediated pressure to Government decisions, non-governmental aid agencies often contrasted the severe consequences of OA cuts in recipient countries to the modest impact the savings would have in Ireland, as when an agency director argued: 'No matter how bad things are here, the cuts we make should not be at the expense of the very poorest people in the world' (Sunday Business Post, 9/8/2009).

Non-governmental aid agencies were a key means through which 'formal obligations' (32%; 2009-34%) and 'values' (18%; 2009-21%) were embedded as arguments to protect macro OA resourcing. Contextualisation of 'formal obligations' tended to be weak, however. Usually, connections to international policy agreements were made through broad references to 'UN targets' or the 'UN target of 0.7%' without clarifying explanation of the processes and objectives underpinning the 'target' or the rationale for the figure of 0.7%. An exception was when a non-governmental aid agency director explained that the figure 'was agreed by the UN in 1970 as a mechanism to encourage wealthy countries to increase their aid budgets' (Irish Times, 11/09/2009). Values arguments, meanwhile, tended to draw on a discourse of 'universal humanitarianism' (Cottle and Nolan, 2007), with one agency condemning OA cuts as 'morally indefensible' (Irish Independent, 9/07/2008).

Such discursive constructions challenged the Government's % of GNI argument: that, as the economy shrank, the real-term OA budget could be reduced but still remain on track to reach 0.7% by 2012 (19%; 2009-13%). The Overseas Development Minister followed this line



when stating: 'Our budget is tied to GNP so it depends on the prevailing economic factors' (Irish Independent, 28/08/2008). That Government sources drew on a GNI argument implicitly nodded to international aid agreements, yet explicit references to them were infrequent (8%; 2009-4%). This reflected a detachment of Irish print-news discourse from the wider international context for aid: only 3% (2009-4%) of articles benchmarked Ireland's OA budget against that of another country.

In 2009, with the economy worsening, Government sources switched from the GNI argument to a broader defence of generosity. The Development Minister illustrated the discursive shift when seeking to justify OA cuts as a necessary part of stabilising the public finances, claiming 'Ireland was still the sixth most generous aid donor in the world per capita' (Irish Times, 1/05/2009).

Belying Ireland's small state status, a strong argument emerged linking the maintenance of macro OA resourcing to national 'reputation' (23%; 2009-31%). The discursive construction, sponsored primarily by non-governmental aid agencies, was not of deploying OA to enhance national prestige but to protect reputation already achieved. 'We must work to keep that reputation even in these straitened times,' argued an agency director (Irish Times, 6/02/2009). Another director spoke of Ireland imperilling its 'unrivalled reputation' in development (Irish Independent, 9/07/2008). The mediated appeal here was to an institutional donor (the state) to protect resources allocated not as a result of specific humanitarian events but through the mechanisms of budgetary and international policy processes.

### ***UK: Internal issues/influences***

UK newspapers had the highest amplification of arguments on the affordability of OA while cutting spending at home (51%; 2009-61%). Embedding affordability arguments most strongly were three mid-market tabloids: the Mail (67%), Express (73%), and Telegraph (46%). When isolated to these newspapers, the overall percentage occurrence rose to 63%. The argument often was constructed through discursive strategies of nominalisation and 'othering' (privileging a domestic in-group while neglecting consequences for a foreign out-group), as

exemplified by a Telegraph columnist: 'I'd be proud to spend the sacred foreign aid budget on our poor pensioners' (1/12/2011).

Conservative backbenchers, dissenting from Government policy, were most frequently encoded as institutional sources demanding OA cuts. Mid-market tabloid source selection provided the strongest amplification of their arguments. In-group/out-group (here/there) divisions and nominalisation of complex OA budgetary and policy processes were key discursive strategies, as in a Conservative MP's claim: 'If we cannot afford to spend money at home, we cannot afford to spend it overseas' (Express, 10/06/2011).

Such source selection underpinned strong returns for negative arguments: resistance to OA allocations to prioritise 'national concerns' (51%; 2011-60%). The percentage occurrence increased to 65% when the sample was confined to the Mail (68%), Express (59%) and Telegraph (67%). An example of this was how the Express framed a 'row' on EU aid allocations amid 'growing fury about the way Britain's multi-billion pound overseas aid budget is soaring while public services are being cut on home soil' (24/02/2011). The 'fury' was abstract and unattributed, aid was 'othered' from 'home soil', while the 'soaring' OA budget was decontextualised from agreed GNI targets (and, by extension, the policies and rationales underpinning them). Some newspapers, such as The Independent, did contextualise OA as a % of GNI. However, the stronger discursive strain was to present the decontextualised headline figure (the flat 'multi-billion' pound sum sounding larger than a proportional contribution of less than 1% of GNI). Weaker was the argument that cutting OA would not solve/ease national budgetary difficulties (<1%; 2011-1%), as were calls to raise public awareness of 'actual' OA levels to counter inflated perceptions (2%; 2011-3%).

Arguments to maintain macro OA resourcing tended to be positioned in terms of 'values' such as shared humanity (14%; 2011-14%) and/or 'obligations' to formal commitments (26%; 2011-21%). The institutional sources most commonly sponsoring these arguments were Ministers defending the Government's policy of protecting aid from austerity cuts, among them Prime Minister Cameron: "Britain has stuck to its [aid] promise and will stick to its promises under my premiership" (Independent, 26/06/2010). But the rationale underpinning such promises was weakly contextualised in terms of international policy

frameworks. Direct references to the Millennium Development Goals were encoded in 4% of articles.

A discursive strain linking OA to 'waste' and 'corruption' was strongest among UK newspapers (31%; 2011-34%). The Telegraph, in this vein, positioned the OA budget as 'entirely wasteful and pointless' (19/10/2009). As a discursive strategy, neglecting successful aid delivery reinforced a perception of waste as norm. The frame tended not to argue that OA delivery should be reformed or diverted to another (deserving) recipient but agitated for the resources to be kept at home.

### ***US: Internal issues/influences***

US newspapers displayed a relative neglect of recipient country needs and returned a high amplification of 'negative' arguments: resisting OA allocations to prioritise 'national concerns' (36%; 2011-50%). Negative arguments were sponsored primarily by Republicans, in Congress and among candidates seeking the GOP presidential election nomination. One candidate promised to end 'all foreign aid, nation-building and participation in organizations that threaten our national sovereignty, while honoring our commitment to our veterans, who deserve what they have sacrificed to earn' (Washington Times, 4/11/2011). Embedded within the discursive construction was an implication of causality: 'ending foreign aid' (while neglecting the consequences for recipients) being bound to a renewed ability to 'honour our veterans' as a deserving part of the in-group.

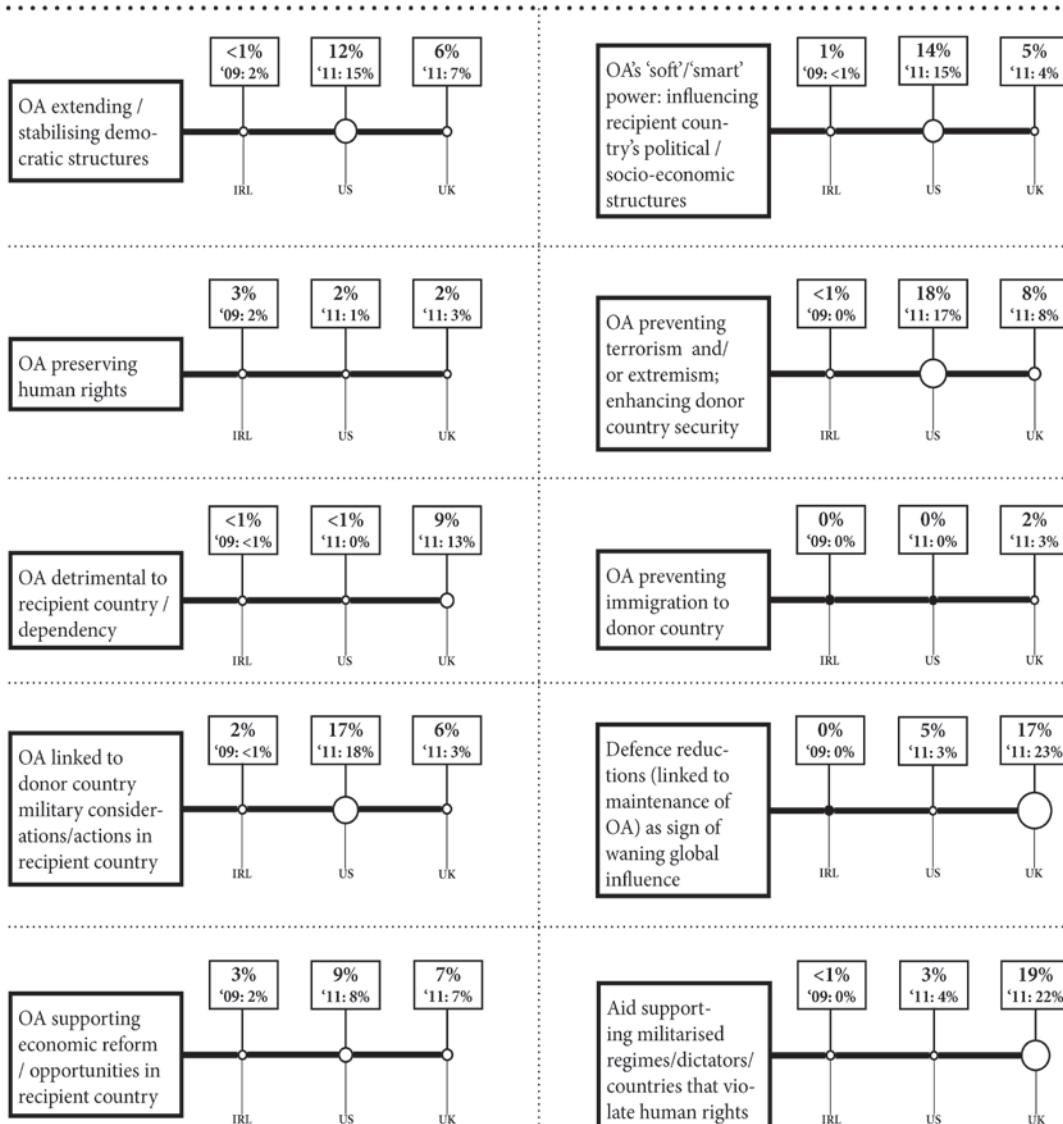
A counter discursive strain, especially during the 2011 negotiations on federal deficit reduction, centred on the argument that cutting OA would not solve/ease national budgetary stresses (17%; 2011-19%). The San Jose Mercury News illustrated the point when commenting on Congressional proposals: 'Foreign aid is the one category that everyone agrees can be cut, but it represents less than 1% of our total budget' (10/02/2011).

Reflecting an inward orientation of news-discourse, few articles benchmarked America's OA contributions internationally (2%; 2011-1%) or linked aid to 'national reputation' (4%; 2011-4%). Direct references to the Millennium Development Goals were fewest in the US sample (2%; 2011-<1%), reflecting weak discursive links to international policy.

## Cluster two: External influences/interests

**Table 5: External influences/interests**

IRL first circle; US second circle; UK third circle. The top figure is the overall percentage, 2008-2011. The second figure (IRL '09; US, UK '11) is the percentage during the peak year of media coverage in each country



### Ireland: External influences/interests

Reflecting Ireland's status as a small, neutral state, news-discourse tended not to link OA to military considerations (2%; 2009-<1%) or donor country security (<1%; 2009-0%), or frame aid negatively as supporting militarised regimes (<1%; 2009-0%). OA rarely was identified as

advancing Ireland's strategic interests through 'smart'/'soft' power (1%; 2009-<1%) or as fostering economic opportunities in recipient countries (3%; 2009-2%). However, also weak were links between OA and the preservation of human rights (3%; 2009-2%).

### ***UK: External influences/interests***

External strategic motives emerged as strong considerations, but not in the sense of extending the UK's international influence through OA's 'smart'/'soft' power (5%; 2011-4%) or through creating economic opportunities in recipient countries (7%; 2011-7%). Instead, news-discourse tended towards a negative positioning of OA as undermining the UK's global influence through linking macro aid resourcing to a perceived underfunding of defence (17%; 2011-23%). The argument gained momentum in 2011 when, in a leaked letter, the Defence Secretary questioned the Government's position on aid. Amplifying the argument through the discursive strategy of othering, the Express suggested that 'one day our own under-equipped and undermanned forces may come into conflict with a Third World army that has been built up on the proceeds of British aid' (18/05/2011).

The in-group/out-group construction of an unspecified 'Third World army' equipped through (our) 'aid' linked to another negative representation that was embedded most deeply in UK newspapers: OA supporting militarised regimes (19%; 2011-22%). Isolated to the Express (27%), Mail (35%) and Telegraph (21%), the overall percentage occurrence rose to 28%. The representation tended to obscure the needs of citizens by nominalising developing nations under the label of 'dictator', as when the Telegraph described aid monies as 'very nice for the wives of [Third World] despots on their shopping trips to Paris' (19/05/2010).

Self-interested security as a justification for maintaining macro aid resourcing was sponsored primarily by Government sources (8%; 2011-8%), with, for instance, the Deputy Prime Minister claiming: 'The fight against terrorism in Britain would be helped by increasing the amount of aid given to poor countries' (Telegraph, 23/09/2010). A related justification sponsored by Government sources was the prevention of immigration ('them') to the donor country ('us'). 'An [OA] increase would also help to reduce the number of people who seek

asylum in Britain, [Clegg] said' (Telegraph, 23/09/2010). This justification to domestic constituencies was rare (2%; 2011-3%), but it did not register in the other samples.

***US: External influences/interests***

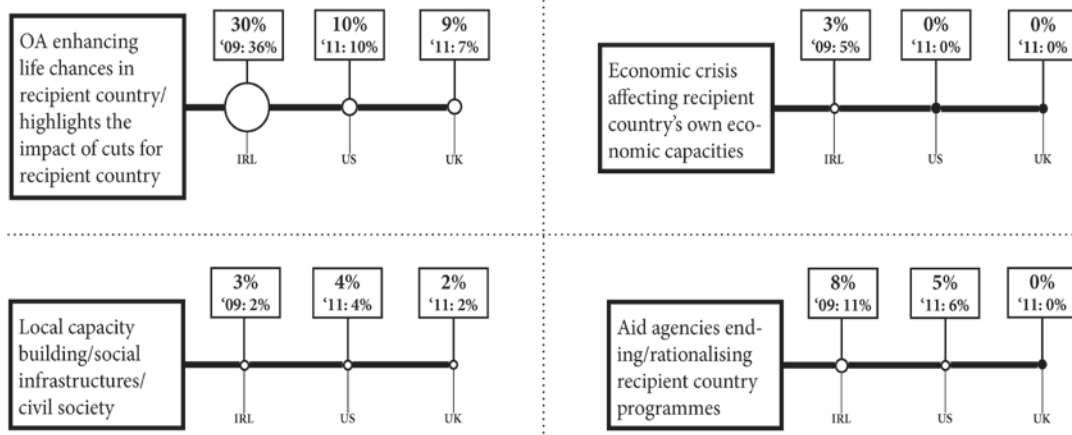
US newspapers had the strongest positioning of OA as a means of exerting influence in recipient countries through 'soft/smart' power (14%; 2011-15%) and extending democratic structures (12%; 2011-15%). However, justifications to domestic constituencies for maintaining OA resourcing still tended to be orientated inward, grounded in direct benefits to the US. A key benefit was framed as the reinforcement of domestic security through aiding counter-terrorism and preventing extremism (18%; 2011-17%). The Washington Post illustrated the political sponsorship of this justification when reporting the President as highlighting OA's role in bringing 'stability to other parts of the globe and greater security for our nation' (27/02/2009). Republicans were encoded as institutional sources most sceptical of OA's benefit to the US, with one congressman seeking 'to shut off federal aid going to countries that "don't like us"' (Washington Times, 17/03/2011).

US newspapers also returned the strongest links between OA and military considerations in recipient countries (17%; 2011-18%) even though military sources were weakly encoded in the sample (Table 3). Links between aid and military interests tended to be established through coverage of political actors, as when The Washington Post reported: '[Republican], head of the House subcommittee handling foreign aid, said that, to preserve funding considered critical to national security, such as military assistance for Israel and Egypt, other aspects of foreign assistance must be reduced' (17/02/2011). Weaker was the identification of OA's role in protecting human rights (2%; 2011-1%).

### Clusters three: Recipient country considerations

**Table 6: Recipient country considerations**

IRL first circle; US second circle; UK third circle. The top figure is the overall percentage, 2008-2011. The second figure (IRL '09; US, UK '11) is the percentage during the peak year of media coverage in each country



#### **Ireland: Recipient country considerations**

Irish newspapers returned the strongest orientation of perspective beyond the 'national prism' through consideration of impacts on recipient countries (30%; 2009-36%). Non-governmental aid agencies, criticising Government decisions, were the primary sponsors of 'impact' arguments, as when: 'GOAL said that the cuts could result in "the deaths of thousands of people"' (Irish Independent, 8/04/2009). The agencies had a strong encoding as sources highlighting to domestic audiences the consequences of diminished OA resources, including the ending/rationalising of programmes in recipient countries (8%; 2009-11%). This frame connected the abstract discursive-event of the Government announcing macro OA cuts to specific consequences: 'Aid agencies have been vocal in outlining the devastating effects of the cuts. Trócaire will have to pull out of Zambia, Nigeria, Peru...' (Irish Times, 10/09/2009).

Despite returning the strongest outward orientation, Irish print-news discourse demonstrated a weak recognition of 'agency' among recipient countries, including local capacity building (3%; 2009-2%) and the impact of the economic crisis on recipient countries' own economic capacities (3%; 2009-5%).

### ***UK: Recipient country considerations***

UK newspapers returned a lower amplification of the impact OA cuts would have on recipient countries (9%; 2011-7%). However, the mid-market tabloid newspapers advocating cuts to reserve resources for 'here' tended to underplay consequences 'there'. The discursive-strategy was reflected in a Mail article criticising the Coalition for ducking 'the easiest cut of all' (18/04/2011).

Such arguments reinforced macro OA resourcing as primarily a domestic concern. Local capacity building by recipient countries registered weakly (2%; 2011-2%), and recipient countries' own economic capacities not at all.

### ***US: Recipient country considerations***

US newspapers had a low amplification of the impact OA reductions could have on recipient countries (10%; 2011-10%), and echoed the discursive pattern of detaching cuts from consequences. The US sample returned no references to the impact of the global crisis on recipient countries' own economic capacities, and registered little interest in local capacity building (4%; 2011-4%).

## **Comparative discussion**

Across the print-media landscapes of the three countries, recipient country politicians and citizens had low visibility as news-sources in discourse on macro OA resourcing (Table 3). An associated finding was that recipient country needs and considerations (such as the impacts of OA cuts) also had low visibility in news-discourse, with the partial exception of the Irish sample where non-governmental aid agencies highlighted the issue (Table 6). Such findings point to the primacy of the national perspective in coverage of what ostensibly was an 'overseas' issue.

Reflecting the poor visibility of recipient country needs was a lack of clarity in the Irish, US and UK print-media on how and where national aid budgets were being spent.



Particularly in the UK print-media, the most common discursive means of moving from the general (headline figure: Britain is spending £Xbn on aid) to the particular (a specific example of aid spend) was to highlight an isolated aid project perceived by the tabloids or politicians to be anomalous, wasteful, or contrary to the donor country's national interests. But in all samples, routine news-coverage tended to present the macro OA budget as a significant national financial commitment but the application of its resources tended to be ill-defined.

Also unclear from print-media reportage was that significant portions of donor countries' contributions circulate not 'overseas' but in the domestic economy, through the purchase of commodity materials and the servicing of contracts (Milner and Tingley, 2010). The Washington Post noted the increased 'buy America provisions' attached to aid budgets (5/8/2009), but this was a rare acknowledgement that OA was not necessarily a pure transfer of public resources abroad. The routine absence from news-texts of data on the precise application of OA resources preserved the national aid budget as a vague and lightly bordered concept, leaving it porous to ideological arguments and vested interests.

It was here that the motivations of political actors were influential in moulding a different shape to news-discourse in each country on macro aid resourcing. In Ireland, a primary motivation for Government actors was expediency: defending against criticism their actions in cutting the OA budget. It would be expected that, as with other areas of policy, a binary discursive conflict would emerge with Opposition politicians. But OA reductions failed to gain strong traction with Opposition sources, perhaps reflecting a perceived low priority for the issue among the electorate at a time of domestic economic collapse. This left open a wider discursive space for non-governmental aid agencies than was evident in the US and UK samples. It also partially accounts for why the Irish sample had the strongest focus on impacts on aid recipient countries.

An unusual aspect to the UK sample was that the discursive binary conflict of defending/attacking aid allocations was contested most strongly within the Government: Cabinet members set against Conservative backbenchers, who between them accounted for almost half of all sources in the UK sample (Table 3). Ministers were the primary sponsors and defenders of aid policy in news-discourse, with their motivation being, *The Express* claimed, 'to change [the Tory] image' (17/5/2011). The backbenchers' motivation conformed

more to ideological self-interest: criticising aid to win favour with domestic publics, but also echoing the stronger tendency of free-market orientated political groupings to be hostile towards aid policies (Milner and Tingley, 2010).

The US President and Government were weakly embedded in news-discourse as defending policies on OA, but Opposition politicians were strongly embedded as critical commentators. Congressional Republicans were (politically, electorally, and ideologically) motivated to include OA in criticisms of the Obama Administration's handling of the federal deficit. GOP candidates seeking the party's nomination for the presidential election were inclined to include reform and reduction of OA in their policy agenda, the appeal, again, being ideologically to domestic party members and the electorate.

The influence of political actors on the contours of media-discourse was apparent in the relative strength and weakness of certain arguments across the three clusters. For instance, in the Irish sample, Cluster One (internal considerations) had a strong embedding of arguments that OA allocations were adjustable as a percentage of GNI (19%, but only 2% in the UK and 0% in the US). This was a narrative sponsored by Irish Government sources in 2008 and 2009 when the deepest cuts were being applied to the country's OA programme.

Similarly, political sources in the UK and US had a strong influence on the securitisation and militarisation of news-discourse on OA, while military sources and Defence Ministers/Secretaries had a low visibility (Table 3). Arguments such as OA preventing terrorism/enhancing donor country security, or critical comments that committing resources to aid was draining funds from the military, all registered more strongly in the UK and US samples than in the Irish sample, where such arguments were, reflecting the country's geopolitical status, less likely to attract political sponsorship. Conservative backbenchers were most likely to push the argument that OA commitments were reducing available resources to the UK military, while US Republicans were likely to suggest that aid allocations could be contrary to the US's interests abroad.

The news-media's own agenda in sponsoring an issue (to appeal to the real or perceived sentiments of its own domestic constituency, the audience) can be a strong news factor (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001). The print-media's internal agenda as a shaper of news-discourse was evident in the UK sample, where mid-market tabloids displayed a stronger

motivation than quality broadsheets to direct editorial attention to macro OA resourcing (Table 1). Mid-market tabloids promoted a negative perspective on OA, which was reflected in the strong encoding in the UK sample of stereotypes of aid supporting militarised regimes/dictators and of aid being linked to waste and/or corruption (Table 4).

Irish mid-market tabloids were far less interested in the issue of macro OA resourcing than their UK counterparts. This may partly explain why the Irish sample was less likely to perpetuate negative stereotypes associated with aid. More interested in the issue was the quality newspaper *The Irish Times*, which has a strong record of reporting on aid issues and at one stage in the 2000s employed a development correspondent. Its reportage accounted for more than half of the Irish sample (Table 1), and was a significant factor in Irish news-discourse reflecting the strongest consideration of Ireland's aid commitments and obligations and of the impacts OA cuts would have on recipient countries.

The US, despite hosting the largest media market of the three countries, returned the narrowest range of newspapers to engage with the issue of macro OA resourcing. This may reflect a wider trend whereby the US news-media seems to attaching a lower priority to news on 'foreign' nations (Jones *et al.*, 2013).

## **Concluding comments**

The global economic crisis, arguably, has reinforced the position of the news-media as a site where institutional actors compete to justify their claims on finite, and perhaps diminishing, public resources. Such a pattern was evident in Irish, UK and US print-media discourse on macro OA resourcing in the context of national economic difficulties between 2008 and 2011. Mediated pressures on and contests over public resources most commonly centre on internal allocations (to health, education, welfare) or on distributions to national institutions operating externally in the interests of the state (military, foreign affairs). In the case of macro OA resourcing, news-discourse centred on the allocation of public resources externally to support overseas recipients (ostensibly, as aid spend may actually occur in the domestic economy). Further, while national governments make choices on aid allocations, the rationale underpinning the decisions may be found in international policies, agreements and

aspirations. In these regards, macro OA resourcing would seem to place strain on news-models that traditionally have tended to draw clear lines between domestic and foreign news. In practice, the strain seemed to dissolve through the tendency of the print-media to prioritise the national over the foreign.

Specifically, each country's print-media registered little interest in macro OA resourcing until a biting point had been reached in domestic political-economic circumstances: 2011 in the UK and US; 2009 in Ireland. Donor capacity and recipient needs tend to be key considerations underpinning aid policies, development processes and allocation levels. However, the two considerations were out of alignment in print-media discourse, with donor capacity prioritised over recipient needs. But capacity-needs had another configuration in news-discourse which was wholly internal to the donor country: the capacity of its (struggling) economy to spare resources for OA and still meet the needs of domestic citizens. Overall, but particularly in UK mid-market tabloids, news-discourse tended to consider macro OA resourcing more in terms of inward *cost* (of resources available to domestic citizens) than outward *utility* (in underpinning processes of development, enhancing life chances in recipient countries, protecting human rights).

Arguments advocating OA reductions tended to detach cuts (costs saved, resources retained) from consequences (utility diminished). This was particularly so in the UK and US samples, in broader national contexts of OA reductions not taking place until 2011. News-discourse tended to have a weak consideration of macro OA resourcing from the recipient's perspective (Table 6), with the partial exception of the Irish sample which had the highest source visibility of non-governmental aid agencies. Few recipient country sources were quoted across all samples, which further signalled the inward orientation of news-discourse. The lack of voices from developing countries reflected the following tendency in news-coverage: little news content on the issue of macro OA resourcing was generated within or linked directly to recipient countries (e.g., reporting on aid delivery). News content, while it may have referenced 'overseas', tended to be constructed wholly from sources within or representing the donor nation. This editorial pattern of low visibility of recipient countries facilitated broad-brush representations of them as 'undifferentiated other' and as lacking 'agency' (Fairs, 1993; Jones *et al.*, 2013).

News-discourse also tended to construct a second frame for OA's utility which privileged the donor and neglected the recipient: as a means of supporting the donor country's external/strategic interests. Identifications of OA's external/strategic utility were strongest in the UK and US samples (Table 5), and with arguments/representations broadly resonating with the international relations paradigms of realism and globalism. Cabinet-level politicians were most likely to link external/strategic considerations to direct donor benefits as justifications for maintaining macro OA resourcing: enhanced domestic security or the consolidation of international influence.

The reverse applied when institutional sources (UK Conservative backbenchers and mid-market tabloids, US Republicans) employed external/strategic considerations to criticise macro OA allocations as creating deficits for the donor, including underfunding of military and waning global influence. Such patterns of mediated resistance to OA tended to echo the findings of earlier research (Fair, 1993; Kothari, 2010): reliance on discursive strategies of othering and the construction of (privileged) in-groups and (lesser value) out-groups. The constructions tended to fall within an explanatory limitation traditionally associated with Irish-US-UK news-models: construction of news through binary opposites (here/there, them/us, cut/maintain, for/against).

News-media coverage of OA can have tangible implications for its resourcing (Van Belle, 2003). Political actors communicating, via the news-media, the rationales and objectives informing international policies and objectives may be a means of justifying, explaining and legitimating aid allocations to domestic constituencies. This study suggests that the print-media, in weakly representing development and macro OA resourcing as processes, tended to background international policy frameworks as contexts to understand government decisions on aid allocations.

Reflecting further the inward orientation of news-discourse and its faint contextualisation in international policy was the print-media's weakness in communicating two additional aspects of macro OA resourcing: first, 'proportionality' to available national resources as a % of GNI, with critical discursive strands tending to rely on a flat (and, within a struggling donor economy, seemingly arbitrary) 'headline' figure; second, 'comparability' to

international community commitments, specifically the macro allocations of other donors (Table 4).

Ireland, the UK and US broadly share news-models that calibrate the newsworthiness of an issue in favour of a national perspective, the magnitude of its implications for domestic constituencies, geographic and cultural proximity, and elite power (e.g., Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001; Galtung and Ruge, 1965). Developing nations tend to carry a low priority when passed through these editorial filters. This might explain why, over the study's four year timeline, macro OA resourcing struggled to gain prominence in the print-news agendas in each country, even in peak years of coverage. It may be more appropriate, therefore, to argue that (print) mediated pressure on macro OA resourcing was periodic rather than sustained. However, the study suggests that there can be considerable variance across and within national contexts in how, when and why the print-media raises or reduces the intensity of coverage on macro OA resourcing. Some of this can be explained by newspapers' own editorial agendas. This study, by surveying broad samples of newspapers in three countries, highlights how the uneven engagement by different segments of the print-media shaped the contours of public discourse. In the UK in particular, mid-market tabloids acted as sites of ideological pressure on macro aid resourcing at times when elite newspapers demonstrated much lower levels of interest in the issue.

The study indicated that the key triggers to increased newsworthiness (particularly in peak years) also varied across countries and newspapers, but, consistently, spikes in coverage were prompted more by immediate domestic (political-economic) imperatives than by international policy targets, objectives and deadlines or by recipient country considerations. Particularly at times of domestic economic difficulties, amid heightened mediated contests over diminishing public resources, the explanatory limitations of national news-models in communicating the processes and rationales underpinning macro aid resourcing may be a factor in sustaining a knowledge and legitimacy deficit among domestic publics for international aid agreements and aspirations, including the Millennium Development Goals. Such deficits may weaken domestic societal resistance to Government decisions to cut OA resourcing (Ireland) or increase the difficulty for donor nation governments in gaining popular support for maintaining OA resourcing amid competing

domestic claims (UK, US). The study suggests that robust frameworks to interrogate a donor nation's adherence to or slippage from international aid targets should be sensitive to the character, timing and range of domestic mediated pressures on macro OA resourcing.

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