
Reporting on Vital Agricultural News in Ireland – a Comparison between Mainstream Print Media and the Farming Press

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to compare the reporting of vital agricultural news between the mainstream print media and the farming press in Ireland. To achieve this, this study examined coverage of a recent and significant agricultural news event by mainstream Irish newspapers and the Irish farming press. Taking the 2018–2019 Irish beef sector crisis as the case study for examination, researchers conducted a comparative content analysis of the most widely circulated mainstream national newspapers' ($n = 5$) and farming newspapers' ($n = 2$) coverage of the story over a 14-month period. We analyzed the timing, frequency, and placing of some 294 articles published to communicate issues regarding the beef crisis at three specific stages—before the national farmer protests, during the farmer protests, and after the farmer protests. We found mainstream newspapers to be significantly slower to start reporting on the Irish beef sector crisis of 2018–2019 compared to the country's farming newspapers—although national print media coverage of the event increased as the crisis escalated. This early underreporting of the event by mainstream newspapers is compelling considering the importance of the agri-food sector, and beef farming in particular, to Ireland's economy. Building on existing international, but very limited Irish, research on agricultural journalism, we concluded that farming newspapers are more in touch with the critical issues affecting Irish farmers while mainstream newspapers appeared slower to cover a vital agricultural issue of public importance.

Keywords

mainstream media, agricultural media, content analysis, print media, beef plan movement, specialized journalism

Introduction

Agriculture is one of Ireland's most important indigenous industries, but media coverage of the sector has changed substantially over the years with less coverage of the sector and less agricultural correspondents in mainstream media outlets. However, the extent and impact of this has never been researched. The purpose of this paper is to compare how vital agricultural news stories are reported by the mainstream national press versus the farming press in Ireland. We selected the Irish beef sector crisis of 2018–2019 as the media case study for analysis because this major agricultural event (Javornicky et al., 2021) affected the largest proportion of Irish farmers, threatening not only the income and viability of tens of thousands of family-owned farms (DAFM, 2020), but the crisis also posed an immediate threat to the industry's beef processing sector. Ireland is the fifth largest beef exporter in the world and the largest exporter of beef in Europe (Enterprise Ireland, 2022), hence the term a "vital" news story is justified for this study. This paper examines the reporting of this event by several prominent national newspapers and farming newspapers over a 14-month period to determine when this story became of interest to the national media, to assess the amount of coverage the story received through both mediums over time, and to ultimately draw conclusions about the importance of agricultural news to the mainstream media agenda in modern Ireland. It is necessary to seek this understanding of mainstream media interest in big agricultural issues/stories/events in Ireland because agriculture is a major pillar of the Irish economy with beef production alone worth €2.5 billion annually (Power, 2020). This research is also timely as Irish agriculture faces significant national and international policy changes to meet climate change, environment, and biodiversity targets. (DECC, 2021). Because of these factors it would be expected that mainstream media organizations in Ireland would have the editorial competence and commitment to consistently cover the vast, complex, and important agricultural news beat. However, no research has been done to date to specifically investigate the reporting of agricultural news in Ireland, this paper is a first step in addressing that gap.

Literature Review

Importance of News to Agriculture

Throughout media and communications literature ‘news’ has been defined in several ways, from new information about an event or issue shared with the public in a systematic way (Zelizer et al., 2010), to information people need to make rational decisions about their lives (Mencher, 1977). Schudson (2020) wrote that exposure to news media helps people come to a “cognitive reckoning with a complex and changing world” (p. 5); while Andrews and Caren (2010) wrote that news plays a pivotal role in shaping the public agenda “by influencing public opinion, authorities, and elites” (p. 841). For decades, media coverage of agricultural news has largely been treated as a specialized field of journalism focused on reporting information about the food production system from the farm to the consumer (Allen, 2010; Scruggs & Moseley, 1979). Agricultural news has also been reported by dedicated agricultural correspondents and general-interest reporters assigned to cover the beat for mainstream media organizations (Boone et al., 2000; Turner & Orange, 2013).

How Agricultural News is Reported

Although the fundamental journalistic rules of crafting a news story about agriculture are no different than crafting a general news story on any subject in terms of compliance to accuracy, fairness, neutrality, and objectivity (Schudson, 2020), communication scholars have advocated that journalists reporting on farming and food production should at least possess an above average knowledge of agriculture (Kubitz et al., 2013; Rogers, 2003). Williams and White (1991) and Kubitz et al. (2013) considered this approach particularly important when agriculture is one of a country’s major economic industries. Furthermore, Nisbet et al. (2015) and Summ and Volpers (2016) highlighted that journalists covering science must demonstrate a wider knowledge-based approach in reporting to encompass other complex and relevant aspects including the environment, climate change, energy, technology, economics, and policy.

However, Ruth et al. (2005) highlighted that agricultural scientists held more negative perceptions about national news coverage of agriculture compared to local news coverage of the area. Reasons identified for this included a tendency for national news outlets to report “bad or unfavorable news about any topic” and that “national news reporters did a poor job of reporting the facts on complex scientific topics” (p. 141). Similarly, Reisner and Walter (1994) upheld arguments that general-interest newspapers’ farm writing lacked comprehensive understanding of food production and tended to be “superficial, stereotyped, and crisis-orientated” (p. 533); yet the same study also noted that farm publications tended to be “uncritical of agriculture and unconcerned with social and environmental issues” (p. 533). Nelkin (1995) also noted that mainstream media reports on the agricultural industry often focus on crisis stories that receive a high level of attention for a short period of time. Conversely, McIntosh-White and Rutherford (2003) found “no differences” (p. 10) between science-specialty-beat reporters and other types of reporters in terms of coverage of science-intensive stories.

Nevertheless, Lundy et al. (2007) and Olper and Swinnen (2013) warned that misinformed media coverage of agricultural issues can negatively affect public support for the sector. In light of such concerns, Kubitz et al. (2013) suggested that editors and governing boards of national newspapers should “allocate funds” (p. 15) to educate journalists about global and domestic agricultural issues and that agricultural communicators should “reach out” (p.16) to general-interest reporters instead of only collaborating with agricultural journalists. But regrettably, Allen (2010) and Miller et al. (2020) also warned of a decline in

university-level agricultural journalism programs. For example, Miller et al. (2020) pointed out that although agriculture is a fast-growing discipline in the U.K. “there is no specified academic discipline for aspiring agricultural journalists” (p. 1). There is anecdotal evidence that a similar education gap is happening in Ireland too.

Role of Specialist Correspondent in Disseminating National News

McKinnon et al. (2018) noted that specialist science-based correspondents in mainstream media played a valuable role in adding context and nuance to news reports for non-expert audiences, while Trench (2011) wrote that the specialist journalist is expected to be “a critic and interpreter” (p. 176) on new developments entering the public domain. Whitaker and Dyer (1998) also noted the significant role of newsroom editors in this regard because if news and/or agricultural journalists fail in their duties to accurately and fairly report on agricultural issues “responsible reporting and consumption of agricultural news will not occur” (p. 133) which may impact on society, the agricultural sector, and the environment. However, many investigators also warned that specialist journalism remains underinvested and under resourced in mainstream media organizations due to revenue challenges posed by the digital age and shortened news cycles (Schudson, 2020). Moreover, Turner and Orange (2013) pointed out that general-news reporters are increasingly expected to know the essentials to cover most beats as they do not have sufficient time to acquire more than a basic grasp of subjects.

Impact of Agricultural News on Audiences

Agricultural news is very important to the farming community. Stuhlfaut (2005) wrote that U.S. farm publications have been credited with educating farmers and raising production standards while also serving “to counteract political and other vested interests, improve the marketing system and foster pride in farming as an occupation and way of life” (p. 21). Scruggs and Moseley (1979) highlighted the influential role of the farming press in developing U.S. agriculture and growing public support for the sector, while Rust et al. (2021) noted the farming press’ key role in disseminating news and information to farmers about transitioning to more environmentally sustainable food production practices in line with new policies on climate change, biodiversity, and the environment. Conversely, in terms of impact on mainstream media audiences, Boone et al. (2000) emphasized how farm publication news frequently influenced the coverage and prominence of agricultural stories in the national press; while Reisner and Walter (1994) noted that the nonfarming public depends on mainstream newspapers for much of their understanding of agricultural topics. However, Sweeney and Hollifield (2000) questioned the degree to which modern agricultural publications serve to set the agenda for national news on agricultural industry issues; while Hays (1980) described farm news as more important to mainstream media when a majority of people make a living from agriculture. In reference to the U.S., Hays (1980) said “Today, with only a small percentage of people living on the farm, agricultural news is probably seen to be much less important by most urban editors” (p. 33). There is anecdotal evidence that a similar evolution is happening in Ireland too.

Decline and Shift in Mainstream Media Farm News

Pawlick (2001) found that mainstream media interest in covering the agricultural beat has changed significantly in recent decades, noting the number of Canadian daily newspapers that listed an ‘agriculture editor’ or ‘farm writer’ among full-time staff declined by 65% between 1975 and 1995. Wang et al. (2012) attributed dwindling mainstream media attention

on agriculture with “a bias towards covering issues perceived as more relevant to media outlets’ largely urban circulation” (p. 24). Moreover, Thomson and Kelvin (1996) argued that because urban based mainstream newspapers had become more interested in reporting on agriculture from an environmental or consumer perspective, urban dwellers dependence on sustainable agriculture had become “less vivid” (p. 2). Furthermore, Pawlick (2001) noted that the decline in the importance of farm news meant agricultural issues no longer impacted on national politics or policy as they had before. Again, in the absence of research, there is anecdotal evidence that a similar change is occurring in Ireland.

Debate over Media Coverage of Agriculture

Some recent international studies questioned the journalistic quality and editorial independence of agricultural reporting via the farming press and the mainstream media, particularly in countries with a dominant agricultural industry. In a discourse analysis of mainstream news coverage of drought and agriculture in Australia, Rutledge-Prior and Beggs (2021) identified “persistent crisis narratives” (p. 106) that represented drought primarily through its impact on the agricultural industry. The same study also identified “persistent agrarian narratives” (p. 106) used to emphasize the “exceptional cultural value of the agricultural industry to the country as justification for continued government support” (p. 106). In a media content analysis Liu et al. (2020) found “denialist narratives” (p. 1) more prevalent in mainstream media portrayals of peatland agricultural practices in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore than peer-reviewed science on the environmental impact associated with the development of agricultural palm oil plantations on tropical peatlands. Similarly, Kristiansen et al. (2021) found that from 2006 to 2018, animal agriculture’s contribution to greenhouse gas emissions did not feature strongly in the U.K. and U.S. elite media’s coverage of climate change, which, the study noted, may have impacted low public awareness of the link between climate change and food. Furthermore, in a study on national newspaper reporting on climate change in Ireland between 2007 and 2016, Robbins (2019) found that although the impact of climate change on agricultural production featured strongly in the articles, the impact of agricultural emissions on climate change did not feature strongly in the analyzed content. In addition, Rust et al. (2021) found that specialized agricultural publications used more positive than negative tones when writing stories about new sustainable agricultural practices. The same study also argued that, although the agricultural press raised farmer awareness of wider agricultural issues, many farmers did not fully trust specialized farm publications with arguments that they had become “mouthpieces” (p. 1) for agribusinesses. Furthermore, warnings over the influence of advertisers on farm publication ethics and independence have also been highlighted for several years (Reisner & Hays, 1989). Consequently, LaGrande et al. (2018) noted that consumers have varying levels of trust in agricultural production practices, which could impact on consumer attitudes, opinions, and behaviors toward to sector.

Conceptual Framework

To better understand the frequency of media reporting on the Irish beef sector crisis of 2018–2019, McComb’s and Shaw’s (1972) Agenda-Setting Theory and an elaboration of this theory called Quantity of Coverage Theory (Mazur & Lee, 1993) guided the conceptual framework of this study. Agenda-setting theory (McComb & Shaw, 1972) addresses the concept that readers learn about a given issue, and the importance to attach to that issue, from the amount of information and positioning of news stories on that issue in the media. Using this as a framework, we documented the frequency of coverage of the Irish beef sector crisis in both national and farming newspapers. Moreover, quantity of coverage theory implies that

as the quantity of news stories on an issue increases, public concern about that issue rises, and as the quantity of coverage declines, audience concern about that issue decreases (Mazur & Lee, 1993). Although this theory is usually linked to reporting on environmental and technological risks, this study uses it to provide further understandings of the volume of stories published about the Irish beef sector crisis in both media types. Furthermore, this study uses Sjøvaag's (2010) and Schudson's (2008) Social Contract Theory as a framework because this concept implies that journalism has a democratic role to inform citizens so that they can make informed decisions about their lives. We considered this relevant to the aims of this study in terms of assessing whether the national and farming newspapers fulfilled their democratic duty to society by reporting accurately and fairly on a major agricultural story of national importance.

Research Questions

From the literature review it is clear that international communication scholars have identified several serious issues regarding the coverage of agricultural news in both the mainstream media and the farming media in recent decades, including how shifting levels of media coverage of agriculture can impact on/influence public perception of the farm sector, agricultural policy, agricultural development, and general consumer behavior/sentiment towards farming and food production. With this in mind and given the significance of the agri-food sector to Ireland, its need to transition to more sustainable food production systems, and the lack of Irish research in this specific journalistic field, this study provides a unique opportunity to measure the importance assigned to the agricultural brief in modern Irish newsrooms. As such, this study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) Is there a difference in the speed at which mainstream newspapers and farming newspapers started to cover the Irish beef sector crisis?
- 2) Is there a difference in the extent of the coverage given to the beef crisis by both media types before, during, and after the national farmer protest campaign?

By answering these questions, we believe this study can be used to inform a variety of future media content analyses on the reporting of agriculture and food production in mainstream and farming media outlets; it can be used to inform research on public understanding of agriculture and food production; and it can be used to inform future research on the status and importance of knowledge-based journalism in modern media models, including for other specialized journalistic briefs (e.g. health journalism, science journalism, business journalism).

Method

Early 20th century definitions of quantitative content analysis guided the method for this research as, during that period, social scientists critical of the press, such as Street (1909) attempted to monitor the frequency of column inches dedicated to certain news items in order to reveal “the truth about newspapers” (p. 1). As outlined by Krippendorff (2019), researchers Wilcox (1900) and Street (1909) argued that the coverage of certain cultural, religious, scientific, and literary events had declined in yield to an increase in coverage of gossip and scandal known as “cheap yellow journalism” (p. 12). Diefenbach (2001) summarized this approach as “relatively simple, often using a ruler as a metric to measure column inches devoted to each topic” (p. 13). Moreover, Krippendorff (2019) and Berelson (1952) associated the method to a time when numbers and quantified facts about newspaper analysis had become indisputable. Although we acknowledge that this journalistic approach to content analysis has been heavily criticized as too narrow and insufficient for modern use as it dismisses subjective qualitative tests (Krippendorff, 2019), nevertheless, we found that earlier methods provided the necessary scientific grounding for this paper’s argument which centers on the measurement of articles dedicated to reporting on the Irish beef sector crisis in 2018–2019. We also considered this approach appropriate because this study is not interested in analyzing the subjective latent content, messages, or story frames of the sampled articles, the research questions are solely interested in testing objective and quantitative expectations.

Irish Beef Sector Crisis 2018–2019

This section presents the news event in Ireland that provided the basis for the data analyzed in this paper.

Throughout autumn, 2018, Irish beef farmers became deeply frustrated over historically low beef prices while the cost of production increased. Disillusioned by traditional farm politics, farmers also distrusted Meat Industry Ireland (MII)—the representative body for large meat processors—when its spokespeople described the precarious situation as market driven. Farmers voiced their outrage at supermarkets for selling Irish beef at cheap prices and questioned the relevance of quality assurance schemes backed by state agencies. A major backlash over the impact of dairy expansion on the beef sector emerged too. Due to this complex, highly charged scenario, a new grassroots farmer group surfaced named “Beef Plan Movement” (BPM). In November 2018, BPM organized heavily attended meetings at venues nationwide to unite farmers and build capacity. BPM presented an 86-point plan to rejuvenate the sector. Thousands of farmers joined BPM’s *WhatsApp* group and BPM registered as a company in January 2019. In February, with a claimed membership of 20,000 farmers, BPM held its first protest. BPM moved to set up new purchasing and producer groups and met with several key sector politicians and officials throughout March and April. In May, BPM staged a mock funeral for the beef sector at the *Irish Farmers’ Journal* Beef Summit event attended by several key industry stakeholders. In early July, BPM held its first major rally outside Government Buildings in Dublin in opposition to the EU/Mercosur trade deal and beef price depression.

In late July/August, BPM launched a nationwide protest campaign, thousands of farmers picketed outside meat plants demanding fairer prices. The 24/7 campaign, backed by rural communities, brought the country’s meat processors under immense pressure putting international contracts in jeopardy. Temporary factory job losses ensued; with legal action also threatened against some BPM members due to volatile exchanges at some pickets. On August 10, after 12 days of protest at more than 20 factories, the sides agreed to enter talks on condition that legal threats be lifted by processors and that all protests be suspended. After several days, MII endorsed a draft agreement, however, BPM and other farm organizations

opposed it. Consequently, a second wave of meat factory protests erupted at the end of August led by splinter farmer groups. BPM distanced itself from the second wave but commenced protests outside retail distribution centers in September. As tensions escalated again, the stakeholder talks reconvened. On September 15, 2019, all sides agreed to the Irish Beef Sector Agreement. Although farmers did not secure a price increase, farmers received some new bonuses. The stakeholders considered it a first step towards better prices. But the changes would only commence once all the blockades officially stood down. After several interventions, all farmer pickets eventually withdrew at the end of September. The stakeholders agreed to the establishment of the Beef Taskforce to ensure full implementation of the agreement. The stakeholders scheduled the first meeting of the Taskforce for mid-October at the Government's Department of Agriculture, but officials abandoned the inaugural meeting on the day because individual farmers launched a fractious snap protest outside the building. Similar scenes erupted in late November, when farmers drove tractors into Dublin city center to stage a 48-hour protest causing traffic mayhem. The Taskforce finally met in early December, BPM attended the meeting, but by then, BPM had become entrenched in a bitter internal governance dispute which continued for several months.

Sources of Data

We selected newspapers as the medium for analysis as newspapers are considered the most trustworthy source of news content for Irish consumers (Newman et al., 2018). We selected the titles based on print circulation as the primary criterion. We identified five top-selling mainstream newspapers for sampling these included: *Sunday Independent*; *Irish Independent*; *The Irish Times*; *Irish Daily Mail*; and *Irish Examiner* (ABC, 2018). The two farming newspapers selected included: *Irish Farmers' Journal* and *Farming Independent*. Full newspaper libraries for all these publications are available on Nexis Advance U.K., with the exception of the *Irish Farmers' Journal*. Although the *Farming Independent* library is not individually categorized on Nexis Advance U.K., the articles are easily identified through the *Irish Independent* library as those labelled "Farming Section" and published on Tuesdays (the weekly publication day of the *Farming Independent* supplement). As the *Irish Farmers' Journal* library is not available on Nexis Advance U.K., we subscribed to the digital version of the newspaper online in order to avail of full access to the print archive, which facilitated the data collection process.

Collection and Analysis of Data

Bryman (2012) said the striking qualities of content analysis research are objectivity, transparency, flexibility, being systematic, and applying rules in a consistent manner to suppress bias. We selected the term "Beef Plan Movement"—abbreviated to BPM for the report write-up—as the identifier for articles that reported on the event because BPM has been acknowledged (Javornicky et al., 2021) as "the catalyst" (p. 3) of the farmer unrest and subsequent national meat factory protest campaign. We conducted an initial computerized search using the Nexis Advance U.K. database and the *Irish Farmers' Journal* online newspaper archive to identify all articles published by the selected mainstream and farming newspapers ($N = 7$) that referenced the entity "Beef Plan Movement". We removed duplicate articles, and omitted articles if they did not specifically include reference to the entity "Beef Plan Movement". The print media first referenced BPM in November 2018; BPM's subsequent protest campaign ensued during 2019; the negotiated Irish Beef Sector Agreement consequently emerged, and stakeholders agreed to the establishment of a new Government-led forum known as the 'Beef Taskforce' between September and December 2019 to finally ease the crisis. Therefore, the timeframe identified for this analysis covered from November

1, 2018 to December 31, 2019, a 14-month period. We found that the newspapers ($N = 7$) published a total of 294 articles that referenced BPM within the specified timeframe. Table 1 shows the profile details for each newspaper and the associated number of articles.

Table 1

Summary of Newspaper Profiles and Relevant Articles on Beef Plan Movement (BPM) (N = 294)

Newspaper title	Newspaper profile			Mentions of BPM (Nov 1, 2018–Dec 31, 2019)	
	Medium	Publication	ABC circulation (July–Dec 2018)	No. of articles	% of total ($N = 294$)
Sunday Independent	Quality	Weekly	165,334	3	1
Irish Independent	Quality	Daily	83,900	39	13
Farming Independent	Supplement	Weekly	83,900	76	26
Irish Farmers’ Journal	Quality	Weekly	62,226	113	38
The Irish Times	Quality	Daily	58,131	46	16
Irish Daily Mail	Tabloid	Daily	30,428	12	4
Irish Examiner	Quality	Daily	25,419	5	2
Totals				294	100

Note. Circulation figures sourced from ABC (2018)

We developed a coding frame as the primary instrument for analysis. Taking one article as one unit of analysis, we designed the coding frame to identify and record the following variables in each article: date of publication, section of publication (the identified sections included: news, analysis, opinion, letters to the editor, satire); page number, and article headline. All the aforementioned document-level variables could be accessed for each of the identified newspaper articles via the Nexis Advance U.K. database. Using the same procedure on the *Irish Farmers’ Journal* online newspaper archive, the same document-level variable information could be accessed, identified, and recorded within the timeframe of November 1, 2018 and December 31, 2019. Where news sections were not clearly stated on Nexis Advance U.K., we cross referenced the article’s corresponding page number with a hardcopy of the newspaper to identify the relevant section, we mainly conducted this follow-up exercise for articles published by *The Irish Times*. Where page numbers were not clearly stated on Nexis Advance U.K., we omitted this variable data, this issue mainly emerged with the *Irish Examiner*. We inputted the data into Microsoft Excel for analysis to establish the frequency of articles published per newspaper within the timeframe.

The establishment of intercoder reliability is considered a key part of assessing measurement success in content analysis (Riffe, 2019). We analyzed a subset of the data—the first articles that referenced BPM in all titles ($N = 7$)—to meet this requirement. We considered these articles as the most important because they were the first articles identified that clearly covered the BPM story in each publication. We recruited and trained two coders, an academic member of staff and a PhD researcher, to use the coding frame. The two coders independently applied the coding frame to the same seven-article sample to confirm clarity with the coding scheme. We compared the results between the coders after completion of the analysis. We found consistent and unanimous levels of agreement across all variables analyzed by the coders after assessing the articles independently. Based on this outcome, the data collection proceeded.

Results

This study is concerned with analyzing how newspaper coverage of the Irish beef sector crisis 2018–2019 changed throughout the course of the event to determine whether any difference occurred in the pace and extent of the reporting in farming and mainstream newspapers.

Question 1: Is there a difference in the speed at which mainstream newspapers and farming newspapers started to cover the Irish beef sector crisis?

We found that the farming press (*Irish Farmers' Journal* and *Farming Independent*) published the first articles that mentioned BPM in November 2018, some six months before a story on BPM first appeared in a national newspaper, namely *The Irish Times*. Furthermore, a story on BPM did not feature in the *Sunday Independent*, the best-selling newspaper in the country according to ABC circulation figures for 2018 (165,334 average circulation per issue), until August 2019 more than nine months after the initial reporting on BPM in the farming newspapers. Table 2 outlines the publication details of the first articles that referenced BPM ($N=7$).

Table 2

Summary of the First Articles that Mentioned Beef Plan Movement in Each of the Newspapers ($N = 7$)

Newspaper title	First story on Beef Plan Movement			
	Date of publication	Headline	Section	Page no.
Sunday Independent	August 11, 2019	“Hopes rise for progress in beef dispute; farmers and meat processors agree to talks.”	News	2
Irish Independent	July 8, 2019	“Politicians must reject this beef deal that favours barons; Letters.”	News	23
The Irish Times	May 9, 2019	“Beef industry struggling with worst crisis in 40 years, says farmer.”	News	2
Irish Daily Mail	July 11, 2019	“Farmers give it welly in Dáil protest over Mercosur beef deal.”	News	15
Irish Examiner	August 8, 2019	“Beef protestors want Minister Creed's Tullamore Show cancelled.”	News	–
Irish Farmers' Journal	November 10, 2018	“Beef Plan group to go its own way.”	News	4
Farming Independent	November 6, 2018	“New beef group aiming for 40,000 members to drive ‘united’ agenda.”	News	2

Note. Sign (–) = data not available

Question 2: Is there a difference in the extent of the coverage given to the beef crisis by both media types before, during, and after the national farmer protest campaign?

We found that the farming newspapers published a total of 189 articles that mentioned BPM throughout the duration of the timeframe, which equates to 64% of the total number of articles under analysis ($N = 294$). The mainstream newspapers published 105 articles that mentioned BPM over the same period, equating to 36% of the dataset. The *Sunday Independent* included coverage of BPM in just three articles during the period (1% of $N = 294$). Of all mainstream titles, *The Irish Times* published the largest number of articles that mentioned BPM at 46 articles (16% of $N = 294$). We also divided the total dataset ($N = 294$) on the basis of number of articles published per month. Table 3 outlines the monthly breakdown of the published articles.

Table 3

Monthly breakdown of all newspaper articles that mentioned Beef Plan Movement (N = 294)

Month of publication	Articles that mentioned “Beef Plan Movement”	
	No. of articles published	% of total articles ($N = 294$)
November 2018	10	3.40
December 2018	7	2.38
January 2019	13	4.42
February 2019	13	4.42
March 2019	5	1.70
April 2019	3	1.02
May 2019	10	3.40
June 2019	3	1.02
July 2019	26	8.84
August 2019	105	35.71
September 2019	61	20.74
October 2019	9	3.06
November 2019	13	4.42
December 2019	16	5.44
Total	294	100

We found that the farming and mainstream newspapers published the largest number of articles that mentioned BPM in August 2019 (105 articles); followed by September at 61 articles. Following this discovery, we then divided the total data ($N = 294$) into the following three categories for further measurement and analysis: ‘Before the national beef protests’; ‘During the national beef protests’; and ‘After the national beef protests’. The category identified as ‘Before the national beef protests’ measured all articles published between November 1, 2018 and June 31, 2019 (eight months); the category identified as ‘During the national beef protests’ measured all articles published between July 1, 2019 and September 31, 2019 (three months); and the category identified as ‘After the national beef protests’ measured all articles published between October 1, 2019 and December 31, 2019 (three months). Table 4 presents a breakdown of the coverage per category.

Table 4

Association between All Newspaper Articles and Timeline Categories during the Beef Crisis (N = 294)

Newspaper titles	No. of articles per category		
	‘Before the national beef protests’ (01/11/2018 to 31/06/2019)	‘During the national beef protests’ (01/07/2019 to 31/09/2019)	‘After the national beef protests’ (01/10/2019 to 31/12/2019)
Sunday Independent	0	3	0
Irish Independent	0	34	5
The Irish Times	2	34	10
Irish Daily Mail	0	11	1
Irish Examiner	0	4	1
Irish Farmers’ Journal	44	59	10
Farming Independent	18	47	11
Total articles	64	192	38
% (N = 294)	22	65	13

The highest volume of coverage that BPM received from the national and farming newspapers occurred ‘During the national beef protests’ at 65%; by contrast BPM received its lowest coverage ‘After the national beef protests’ at 13%. Importantly, BPM also received very low coverage in the national press ‘Before the national beef protests.’

‘Before the National Beef Protests’

We found that the newspapers published 22% of the articles that mentioned BPM ($N = 294$) ‘Before the national beef protests.’ Of these articles ($n = 64$), the farming press ($n = 2$) published 97% of the stories, 69% by the *Irish Farmers’ Journal*, and 28% by the *Farming Independent*. A further analysis of the content also found 77% of these farming articles ($n = 62$) to be news stories; 10% satirical stories (specifically published on the *Irish Farmers’ Journal*’s ‘Dealer’ page); 8% opinion stories; 3% analysis stories; and 2% letters to the editor. BPM featured in one front-page article of the *Irish Farmers’ Journal* during this eight-month period, while BPM featured on two front page articles of the *Farming Independent*, firstly on November 6, 2018 (headline: ‘New beef group aiming for 40,000 members to drive united agenda’); secondly on March 5, 2019 (headline: ‘Dairy calf prices plummet as shipping backlog hits trade’.) We found *The Irish Times* to be the only national newspaper ($n = 5$) to mention BPM during the same period before the meat factory protests, the newspaper first referenced BPM in an article on Thursday, May 9, 2019 (headline: ‘Beef industry struggling with worst crisis in 40 years, says farmer’). *The Irish Times* published a second article that mentioned BPM on Saturday, May 11, 2019 (headline: ‘Beef farmers bite back in campaign for better prices: Nearly 1,300 highlight concerns about power enjoyed by

factories’). Both of *The Irish Times*’ articles linked to coverage of a beef crisis event called Beef Summit organized by the *Irish Farmers’ Journal* in Ballinasloe, Co. Galway.

‘During the National Beef Protests’

We found that the newspapers published 65% of the articles that mentioned BPM ($N = 294$) ‘During the national beef protests.’ Of these articles ($n = 192$), the farming press ($n = 2$) published 55% of the stories (or 106 articles), the *Irish Farmers’ Journal* published 31% of the articles, while the *Farming Independent* published 24%. A further analysis of the content found 64% of these newspaper articles ($n = 106$) to be news stories; 16% opinion stories; 12% analysis stories; 7% satirical stories (specifically published on the *Irish Farmers’ Journal*’s ‘Dealer’ page); and 1% letters to the editor. The *Irish Farmers’ Journal* mentioned BPM in eight front page articles over the period, on July 10, 2019; July 31, 2019; August 7, 2019; August 14, 2019; August 21, 2019; August 28, 2019; September 4, 2019; and September 18, 2019. Meanwhile, the *Farming Independent* mentioned BPM on seven front page articles over the period, on July 30, 2019; August 6, 2019; August 13, 2019; August 20, 2019; August 27, 2019; September 3, 2019; and September 10, 2019. By contrast, of all the articles that mentioned BPM ‘During the national beef protests’ ($n = 192$) the national newspapers ($n = 5$) published 45% of the articles (or 86 articles), 18% published by the *Irish Independent*; 18% by *The Irish Times*; 6% by the *Irish Daily Mail*; 2% by the *Irish Examiner*; and just 1% by the *Sunday Independent*. An analysis of the content found that 89% of these newspaper articles ($n = 86$) included news stories; 5% analysis stories; 5% opinion stories; and 1% letters to the editor. During this period, we found that the *Irish Independent* referenced BPM on two front page articles on August 9, 2019; and September 5, 2019; however, we also found that BPM did not feature in a front-page article of *The Irish Times*; *Sunday Independent* or *Irish Daily Mail* during this period. The Nexis Advance U.K. database did not provide page numbers for the relevant *Irish Examiner* articles.

‘After the national beef protests’

We found that the newspapers published 13% of the articles that mentioned BPM ($N = 294$) ‘After the national beef protests.’ Of these articles ($n = 38$), the farming newspapers ($n = 2$) published 55% of the stories (or 21 articles), the *Farming Independent* published 29% and the *Irish Farmers’ Journal* published 26%. An analysis of the content found 67% of these articles ($n = 21$) to be news stories; 14% satirical stories (specifically published on the *Irish Farmers’ Journal*’s ‘Dealer’ page); 9% opinion stories; 5% analysis stories; and 5% letters to the editor. Although we found that the *Irish Farmers’ Journal* did not reference BPM in a front-page story during this period; the *Farming Independent* mentioned BPM in one front page article during this period on October 15, 2019 (headline: ‘Protesters halt MII entry to Beef Taskforce meeting’). By contrast, the results showed that of all the articles that mentioned BPM ‘After the national beef protests’ ($n = 38$), the national newspapers ($n = 5$) published 45% (or 17 articles) these included 26% by *The Irish Times*; 13% by the *Irish Independent*; 3% by the *Irish Daily Mail*; 3% by the *Irish Examiner*; while reference to BPM did not appear in a *Sunday Independent* newspaper article between October 1, 2019 and December 31, 2019. An analysis of the content found 70% of these national newspaper articles ($n = 17$) to be news stories; 18% analysis stories, and 12% opinion stories. BPM did not feature in a front-page story of the selected national newspapers during this period.

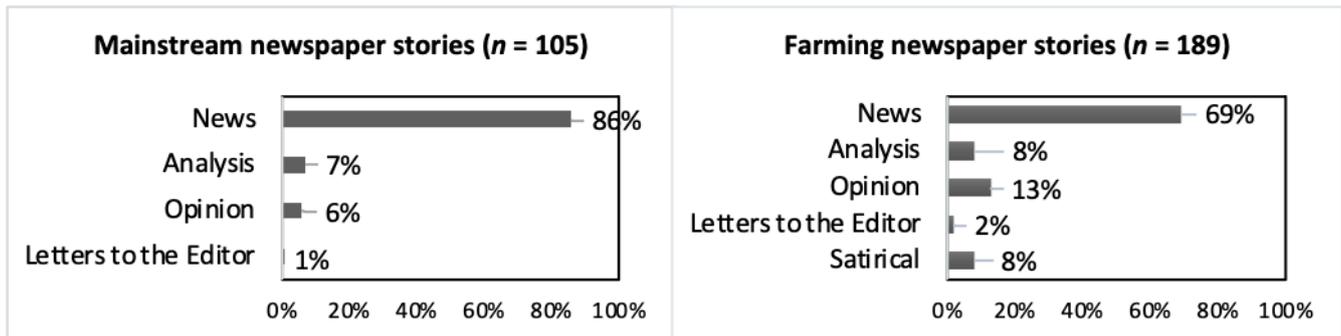
Discussion

Three significant results emerged from the analysis that demonstrate key differences between the coverage of the Irish beef sector crisis in both media. Firstly, we found the national newspapers to be significantly slower to report on the beef sector crisis, with strong evidence that several mainstream print publications waited until the situation escalated to national protest point before reporting on the event. This conclusion is supported by a number of factors: the farming newspapers ($n = 2$) published 97% of the articles printed before the protests; while just one of the five national newspapers, *The Irish Times*, referenced BPM in an article before the full-scale national beef protests erupted. However, *The Irish Times* did not publish this article until May 9, 2019, six months after the grassroots farmer entity had formed and amassed a claimed membership of up to 20,000 farmers. Interestingly, this specific article by *The Irish Times* reported on an event organized by the *Irish Farmers' Journal* to address the Irish beef sector crisis. Furthermore, this result is also supported by the finding that 82% of all national newspaper coverage ($n = 105$) of the crisis, occurred during the factory protests. The *Sunday Independent*, the most widely read newspaper in Ireland, did not report on the crisis until the situation had escalated to the point of farmer blockades outside the country's meat factories in August 2019, this discovery is important too. However, we also acknowledge that the *Sunday Independent* belongs to the same newspaper group as the *Farming Independent*, therefore, readers of the *Irish Independent* may have followed coverage of the beef crisis in the Tuesday supplement. Similarly, we acknowledge that readers of the *Irish Examiner* may have followed coverage of the beef crisis in its weekly *Irish Examiner Farming* supplement, a title not included in this analysis. Nevertheless, these detections raise a legitimate argument that the national newspapers may be out of touch with issues affecting Irish farmers despite the importance of the agricultural sector to the national and rural economy (DAFM, 2020). This result corresponds with previous studies from Reisner and Walter (1994) and Nelkin (1995) who found that mainstream media coverage of the agricultural industry tends to focus on crisis stories that receive a high level of attention for a short period of time. Moreover, it also corresponds with arguments from Pawlick (2001) and Boone et al. (2000) that overall coverage of agriculture in mainstream media has declined. Theoretically, in consideration of the agenda-setting function of the media (McComb & Shaw, 1972) and the quantity of coverage theory (Mazur & Lee, 1993), these results raise legitimate questions about the importance that mainstream media editors and mainstream media readers attached to the Irish beef sector crisis given the underreporting of the event before the meat factory protests erupted.

Secondly, our results indicate that there may be a lack of journalistic resources dedicated to the agricultural brief in mainstream newsrooms. This result is again supported by the very limited mainstream newspaper coverage on Beef Plan Movement before the national farmer protests began and after the protests ended. Furthermore, this result is supported by the discovery that 86% of all mainstream newspaper articles on the beef crisis ($n = 105$) transpired to be 'news stories', with just 7% 'analysis stories'; and 6% 'opinion'. Figure 1 shows the contrast in the type of articles that mentioned BPM in the mainstream and farming newspapers between November 2018 and December 2019.

Figure 1

Contrast of Article Types on Beef Plan Movement during the Irish Beef Crisis 2018–2019 (N = 294)



These results, in combination with previous research from Trench (2011) and Nisbet et al. (2015) on the key roles of mainstream specialist correspondents to serve as critic and interpreter on new developments, raise important questions about the level of context on the beef crisis provided to non-farming audiences prior to, and after, the protests. From a theoretical perspective, these results also call into question the mainstream newspapers' social contract (Sjøvaag, 2010; Schudson, 2008) to accurately inform citizens on issues relevant to their lives.

Thirdly, our analysis suggests farming newspapers are much more in touch with the issues affecting farmers. Both the *Irish Farmers' Journal* and *Farming Independent* started writing about BPM up to nine months earlier than some of the national newspapers. Both newspapers published a combined 62 articles before the protest campaign began. Although the majority of these articles appeared as 'news stories' (77%), the farming newspapers ($n = 2$) published a reasonable number of analysis and opinion stories (11%) too, which suggests that readers had some context of the reasons behind the rise of Beef Plan Movement before the situation escalated. Similarly, during the protests the combined coverage from the farming newspapers comprised of 64% 'news stories' with 28% analysis and opinion. These results support the findings of previous studies from Allen (2010) and Stuhlfaut (2005) who wrote that farm publications serve to counteract political and other vested interests, improve the marketing system and foster pride in farming as an occupation and way of life. Moreover, these results correspondent with arguments that journalists reporting on farming and food production possess a knowledge of the sector, particularly when it is one of a country's major economic industries, as is the case in Ireland (Kubitz et al., 2013; Rogers, 2003; Williams & White, 1991). However, following recent research by Rutledge–Prior & Beggs (2021), we also acknowledge the debate regarding the presence of persistent crisis or agrarian narratives in farming publications that have been criticized as a strategy to justify government support for the sector. Nevertheless, from a theoretical perspective, our results imply that the farming newspapers fulfilled their "social contract" (Sjøvaag, 2010) over the 14-month event as the publications kept readers regularly informed on developments at key stages throughout the entire crisis.

Conclusion

Our results clearly indicate a disconnect between the speed at which coverage of the beef sector crisis first appeared on the pages of the farming newspapers compared to when the story first appeared on the pages of the country's prominent mainstream newspapers. Although mainstream newspaper reporting on the event increased substantially and expeditiously as the status of the crisis escalated to protest level, our evidence of early

underreporting based on volume of articles indicates that an opportunity to disseminate contextual information about issues that led to the crisis to the general public may have been missed. In terms of possible implications, the early gap in reporting raises legitimate concerns about the editorial importance and extent of resources assigned to the vital agricultural brief in modern mainstream newsrooms in Ireland and raises important questions about the pace and frequency of agricultural news stories being delivered to the public. Furthermore, the evidence of slow reporting before the protests began poses questions about the level of understanding and importance that the general public attached to the issue which could have knock-on consequences for policy, politics, and public support for agriculture, a sector of significant importance to the Irish economy. As a result, and in light of the agenda-setting (McComb & Shaw, 1972), quantity of coverage (Mazur & Lee, 1993) and social contract (Sjøvaag, 2010) functions and duties of the media, the strong recommendation of this study is that managing editors of mainstream newspapers consider the appointment of dedicated agricultural correspondents to increase the volume of agricultural news output and to ensure consistent reporting; or to consider providing access to agricultural journalism education and/or training opportunities for general-interest news reporters that will be assigned to report on agricultural news in the future as the sector shifts to different modes of production. Such a development would ensure readers have an accurate and informed understanding of the issues affecting Irish agriculture, while also mitigating against the potential emergence of knowledge gaps between farmers, journalists, the public, and policy makers.

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research

This study is limited by its sample, newspapers included in the Nexis Advance U.K. database and the *Irish Farmers' Journal* archive, by its design in that it focused on just one major national news event relevant to the Irish agricultural sector, and by its strictly quantitative approach which did not include an analysis of the quality of the newspaper articles investigated for this study. We agree that it would be beneficial to conduct a separate qualitative content analysis of the frames and sources of this study's dataset through a separate research paper at a later date. However, we also firmly contend that the contribution of this study to the literature of the field surpasses these limitations in that it provides a novel investigation into agricultural journalism in Ireland for the first time. The fact that the findings of this study support some findings of previous international studies on media coverage of agriculture, particularly in relation to shifts in the proportion of mainstream news dedicated to covering agriculture should provoke robust questions from both the academic and professional journalism fields. Such questions might include whether the farming media agenda has any influence over the mainstream agenda and, if not, what are the implications of this evolution for agricultural policy and public perception of farming as production systems shift to meet higher environmental and climate change demands (Rust et al., 2021; Sweeney & Hollifield, 2000; Mazur & Lee, 1993). We believe this study also provides the basis for a deeper qualitative study of mass media framing of agricultural news in Ireland.

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