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Past, Present and Future - Confronting the Challenges of an Evolving Digital Landscape in the Official Report of the Houses of the Oireachtas

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Introduction

The Official Report of the Houses of the Oireachtas has for almost a century recorded the proceedings in Ireland's national parliament. It occupies a unique reporting space as an apolitical report of political proceedings. The Debates Office, which produces the Official Report, has experienced many of the same challenges that have faced most producers of a print medium and has had to embrace changes – sometimes unwillingly – because of technical advancements and increasing demands in the parliamentary space. The methods employed to produce this report have changed utterly since it began in 1922 but the report itself has seen only minor alterations in appearance. Reporters and editors keep to deadlines usually seen in print or television newsrooms but the debates, nonetheless, are recorded with history in mind. Is there still a role for the Official Report in our constantly evolving digital landscape?

The Work of the Debates Office

The 'No-Spin Zone'

The core function of the Debates Office of the Houses of the Oireachtas is to produce “the written record of everything that is said in public sittings of the Houses of the Oireachtas and their parliamentary committees.”(Oireachtas, 2020c). In common with many parliaments from the Westminster gene pool, this “Official Report” has come to be regarded as the “definitive account of parliamentary proceedings” (Edwards, 2016: 145). As a result, what is produced as a record of each sitting of the Dáil, Seanad, ordinary and special committees by the team of reporters, editors and support staff, led by the Chief Reporter and Editor of Debates, facilitates and enables the vital scrutiny of Irish parliamentary business. The “Hansard” of Westminster has been described as “the ultimate ‘no-spin’ zone” in reporting parliamentary events (UK Parliament Open Lecture, 2013), so does this amount to a completely authoritative account of parliamentary proceedings being produced by the Chief Reporter and Editor of Debates?

Transformation?

Edwards questions whether Hansard-style parliamentary reports can be a true “no-spin” zone when words spoken by parliamentarians are transformed into a written text, edited by reporting staff and even subject to a correction process by the public representatives themselves (Edwards, 2016: 145). However, the Debates Office in the Oireachtas, in common with other parliamentary reporting bodies, does not contend that it produces a verbatim account but rather it is “substantially verbatim” because “reporters in the Debates Office may edit speeches lightly to correct obvious errors, to check grammar and syntax and to omit the false starts and verbal redundancies that

sometimes make a word-for-word account difficult to read, while losing nothing of the meaning.” (Oireachtas, 2020d).

The act of editing creates new texts that present or “(re)present” work (Shillingsburg, 2006) so even in providing this written record in a “substantially verbatim” form with the express purpose of helping to keep the Oireachtas and, by extension, the Government to account, the Debates Office and its Chief Reporter function as editor and are subject to the questions asked of any edited organ. In considering linguistic aspects of Hansard-style reporting, for example, it is clear that transcribers and editors “omit performance characteristics of spoken language” (Mollin, 2007: 187). As discrepancies are noted more often between the report and clips on social media, will political consequences as described by Edwards become more common and problematise the editorial role of the Debates Office? As ways of accessing both historical and current political debates increase with digital advances, is there a danger the Official Report will lose authority?

Ballatore and Natale, in considering the example of the e-book, describe how we subscribe to a narrative of older media being overwhelmed or replaced as a mechanism to “make sense of the transformations that media change provokes” (Ballatore and Natale, 2016: 2379). The Official Report, since its establishment in 1922, has been consistent in its reporting of Oireachtas debates according to specific editorial purview while embracing technical innovation where warranted to improve the report and where it would help carry out its stated remit (Oireachtas, 2020b). It is at once historical archive and living document of parliamentary debates but if it is to remain a vital component parliamentary accountability, it must continue to meet and embrace the challenge of technical and digital advances.

How We Consume Political Debate From the Houses of the Oireachtas

The Official Report as Archive

We can consider the unique position of the Debates Office in the Irish political sphere. It is both archive and continuing record of parliamentary debates (Oireachtas, 2020). As noted by O’Donnell, its own staff see its archive role as an overriding motivation of the work, indicating “the main purpose of the Official Report lies in its importance as a historical record of parliamentary debate” (O’Donnell, 2013: 97). Lending legitimacy to this role of historical record, the Oireachtas indicates that “fundamentally, the Debates Office has been doing the same job since its establishment in 1922” (Oireachtas, 2020a).

The Debates Office in this regard stands apart from newspapers, television and, in more recent years, social media and digital platforms. It is not produced with the aim of reporting news or events from parliament but rather recording these events as history, mirroring in some part the exercise of scholarly editing, including editing as interpretation. As Mollin notes in a linguistic analysis, Hansard-type debates change speakers' lexical and grammatical utterances to more conservative or formal variations in order to suit the written rather than spoken audience (Mollin, 2007). Slembrouck, meanwhile, goes further, arguing that Hansard, written in the form of "dramatic dialogue" is "essentially written language" and the editorial process filters "spokenness" into a more formal structure (Slembrouck, 1992: 104).

More Than This?

If the Official Report has "been doing the same job" since 1922, the world around the Houses of the Oireachtas, sited on Kildare Street, has certainly changed immeasurably since the parliament was in its infancy. Newspapers reported proceedings in the Oireachtas for decades, with political journalists the "conduits" of parliamentary proceedings for the public, but only since the 1960s and the arrival of an Irish television service did political reporting see an uptick (Rafter, 2009: 95). As noted by Hunt, the installation of television cameras in 1990 to cover proceedings from both the Dáil, Seanad and committee rooms laid the groundwork for the current position where proceedings from all forums of the Oireachtas can be streamed on the Internet (Hunt, 2010), meaning a citizen today can access live or review every minute of Oireachtas proceedings from anywhere in the world.

Schreibman speaks about mass digitisation and the "social" edition (Schreibman, 2013), albeit in reference to scholarly editing, but the reporting of events in the Oireachtas may not be immune to such a phenomenon. There were indications of the importance of social media and digital platforms in the 2016 general election, when candidates noted its usefulness (Gallagher and Marsh, 2016: 99-110) but the effect seemed magnified in the 2020 election when Sinn Féin gained a large amount of first-preference votes when it "won the social media campaign" (Little, 2021: 716).

The effects of social media are not just seen outside the debating chambers. Its perceived importance is perhaps indicated in part of a Dáil debate between Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett and the Taoiseach concerning student nurse pay:

I want to tell him that there is fury about that. A total of 250,000 people watched the video of that exchange between the Taoiseach and myself, while 120,000 have watched the exchange on the same issue between myself and the Minister for

Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. (Richard Boyd Barrett *Dáil Debates*, 1000, col. 623, 11 November 2020)

Jones argues that any increased ability to communicate laterally and quickly mobilise through digital platforms can be a powerful tool (Simanowski, 2016: 233) but does such political reporting supplant the authority of the Official Report outside or even inside the Houses of the Oireachtas? If the main purpose of these debates is to function as archive, is it even relevant to ask whether burgeoning social and digital platforms are a threat to the purpose of the Official Report?

(Re)Presentation

The answer to such questions may lie in the future. Shillingsburg, in the context of scholarly editing, argues that despite a focus on the study of composition, revision, publication and transmission, we must be knowledgeable about the technology being used (Shillingsburg, 2006: 95). If we agree with Slembrouck's assertion that Hansard-style texts are an institutional practice of discourse representation and that the understanding of parliamentary reporting standards requires attention to elements that are specific to parliaments (Slembrouck, 1992), it seems clear that the Official Report is and will remain uniquely positioned as an invaluable and inviolable repository of parliamentary debate, the "no-spin zone" of which Sutherland speaks. At a time when social and digital platforms bring with them problems of trust erosion, the Official Report could at once cement its reputation of historical authority while building a new reputation as an agent of transparency. O'Sullivan argues that the "dynamics of ... communication" have been altered by the emergence of technology because of a greater ability to engage with the public (O'Sullivan, Long and Mattson, 2016: 387). Could the Debates Office, using gateway digital advances such as linked open data, be a vanguard of transparency for the Houses of the Oireachtas as a whole as an answer to a decline in traditional media and potential drawbacks in newer digital platforms for the purpose of scrutinising the work of the Oireachtas?

How Consumption of the Debate is Changing in the Digital Age and the Role of the Official Report in the Face of Change

Keeping Parliament in the Public Eye

It has been speculated that if the public had greater exposure to the work being carried out by public representatives in the Oireachtas, ordinary citizens may be more inclined to engage with that work (Hunt, 2010). Moreover, the Houses of the Oireachtas itself indicates that it is a principle of parliamentary democracy that the proceedings of those parliaments should be held in public and the

record should be published (O'Donnell, 2013: 98). However, as outlined above, for the great majority of its existence, aside from the Official Report, such engagement came only through newspapers and the work of political journalists and, later, television.

The traditional forms of journalism, rooted in print and television, may have had editors who functioned as gatekeepers of information. However, having a small number of journalists deciding what political stories to report and how they are to be covered has the potential to lead to an atmosphere where “pack journalism” prevails, a joint focus in which “self-censorship” may become evident (Rafter, 2009: 98); this may not lead to the reporting bringing about the greater engagement envisaged by Hunt.

Emerging Social Media and the Erosion of Established Sources of Information

It has been suggested that Ireland has in the early years of the 21st century seen significant disenchantment with politics, leading to a growing populist movement comprising mostly left-wing, anti-elite and anti-establishment parties or individuals, with social media use in campaigns an important tool used by these political actors, particularly in influencing younger voters arriving at the decision on a preferred candidate (Marsh, Farrell and Reidy, 2018). In these volatile political fora, the relationship between voters and politicians is dramatised, even as “a battle between good and evil”(Quinlan and Tinney, 2019: 288). This may be comparable to O’Sullivan et al.’s argument that in scholarly writing, a tension is evident between those who wish to see the *status quo* maintained and those who wish to “explode” these structures (O’Sullivan, Long and Mattson, 2016: 385). A Dáil debate that again involves Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett and the Taoiseach illustrates this:

The Taoiseach: It is wonderful that the Deputy can boil it down to one slogan, to one hashtag, but public policy never gets developed on a hashtag. It is time people realised that.

Deputy Paul Murphy: #RepealThe8th.

The Taoiseach: That is the point. That is the bottom line.

Deputy Paul Murphy: #WeWontPay.

The Taoiseach: It is legislation, it is public service pay talks-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: #MarriageEquality. (Dáil Debates, 1002, col. 188, 8 December 2020)

Rafter concludes his examination of traditional journalistic coverage of the Oireachtas somewhat pessimistically by arguing that “a formalised secretive media system” runs against the basic motivations of the profession and should give way to a model of open access (Rafter, 2009: 103) but the Fourth Estate may already be in the process of being bypassed by social media and digital platforms as the means of scrutinising the work of parliament and, by extension, co-ordination of political movements (Shirky, 2011: 30).

New Role, Same as the Old Role?

There are various means by which members of the public can become more involved with the work done by their representatives in the Oireachtas (Hunt, 2010: 71). MacCartaigh and Manning, meanwhile, noted even at a time when many digital platforms were in their infancy or non-existent that if the Houses of the Oireachtas did not assert itself in questioning its role and effectiveness, others would fill the void (MacCartaigh and Manning, 2011).

The Debates Office has time and again embraced technological change and has again demonstrated initiative in asserting itself by publishing its work in the open XML format and making the files available as open data at <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/open-data/>, thus promoting transparency and, through this, parliamentary accountability. This is an extension of its work in the 1990s to digitise historical debates for viewing by a wider audience, first on digital media and then on the web (Oireachtas, 2020b). There have been academic attempts to analyse debate transcripts in the past (Herzog and Mikhaylov, 2017; Laver and Benoit, 2002) and such work should be made easier with the availability of debates in an open format. There is potential for even further improvement by making the debates available as linked open data (Bizer, Heath and Berners-Lee, 2008) and there have already been examples of linked open data principles being applied to debates in the European Parliament (van Aggelen et al., 2017).

The strength of the Official Report is in its unique position of authority. Edwards argues correctly for greater transparency in the Hansard process (Edwards, 2016) and the natural path to achieve such transparency is for the Debates Office to once again adapt to digital change by embracing such change. In an era when transparency may be more difficult to come by yet more vital than before, the reliability of the Official Report may be more valuable than any time since its establishment.

Conclusion

The overarching question of this paper might lead to a binary choice for the Debates Office and the Chief Reporter; faced with the myriad challenges of an evolving digital landscape, is it a case of adapt or die? The task of shining a strong light on the workings of a parliamentary democracy remains vital but the traditional print and television media are struggling to stay afloat in a sea of competing and sometimes chaotic digital platforms, so the production of the Official Report remains important, perhaps now more than ever. It faces its own dilemma, however, of increased scrutiny on its work because of greater instantaneous access to video records of the same debates. The answer for the Debates Office may seem counter-intuitive; it is not to abandon its institutional practices but rather to embrace this scrutiny and meet those demands with even greater transparency of its own. It is, after all, an appropriate course of action for the reporters of democratic truth.

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