

Project Statement — Emily Siner

The Abortion Beat: Covering The Story Of Social Change

On Sept. 12, 2015, the Irish Times columnist Róisín Ingle published an essay about an “Experience” — with a capital E — that she’d never written about before. “My Experience,” she wrote, “is not something strange or unique or uncommon. It is something many other women in Ireland and around the world can relate to: I had an abortion.”¹

Those four final words were part of a seismic change in Ireland’s debate over the legalization of abortions. Three years before Ingle’s column, a woman named Savita Halappanavar died after being denied an abortion, launching waves of protests over Ireland’s constitutional ban on the procedure. Three years after Ingle’s column, the country voted two-to-one to repeal the amendment that had banned it. One could argue that Ingle’s candid column was an instigator, or at least a harbinger, of a movement of social and political change.

But my desire to spend three months in Ireland isn’t to study the effect female journalists had on the “Repeal” movement. I want to study the effect these women had on *journalism*. In the lead-up to the abortion referendum in 2018, how did female journalists change how they integrated their gender, religious, and political identities into their reporting, in a profession that tends to have strict firewalls between the public and private self? And how did they change how their newsrooms made critical coverage decisions? I will explore these questions in a multi-part documentary podcast using interviews and archival tape, with the guidance of media studies professors at Maynooth University. At the same time, I will work with diverse student journalists to improve their knowledge of podcasting and help them explore the same questions of identity and objectivity that professional newsrooms grapple with every day.

As a newsroom leader who’s led a team of journalists through some seismic changes of our own in America — including the election of President Trump and the Black Lives Matter movement — I have seen how moments of social reckoning can literally rewrite the norms of journalism. Now, as the U.S. is headed toward its own version of an abortion reckoning, American newsrooms would benefit greatly from learning how female journalists changed the way that Irish newsrooms approached abortion coverage over the past decade. My time as a Fulbright Scholar in Ireland will advance urgent knowledge and self-reflection on how abortion is covered by news media — and will ultimately improve journalism’s vital public service in both Ireland and the U.S.

Research

The debate over abortion in Irish society reached its peaks in 1983 and 2018, when the country voted on two constitutional referenda that would shape the nation’s social and political

¹ Ingle, R. (2015, September 12). Why I need to tell my abortion story. *The Irish Times*. www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/r%C3%B3is%C3%ADn-ingle-why-i-need-to-tell-my-abortion-story-1.2348822

agenda. In 1983, the Eighth Amendment, which gave unborn fetuses the same rights as the women who carried them, passed by a two-to-one margin. Thirty-five years later, the same margin carried its repeal.²

My research will focus specifically on the past decade, leading up to and following the 2018 Repeal vote, and how female journalists shaped the coverage of the “abortion beat” and, by extension, Irish journalism. As a national award-winning podcast producer and editor, I will explore this topic in a podcast using interviews with a wide range of female journalists, archival broadcast audio and other historical primary sources.

As Texas, Tennessee and other states pass increasingly restrictive abortion laws — in the hopes of forcing Supreme Court ruling that would allow states to outlaw the procedure altogether — the questions raised in this research are increasingly urgent. How might journalists in the U.S., especially female journalists, change the way the profession treats coverage of abortions? How should newsrooms react to these changes?

My research will be divided into two parts, plus an addendum:

I. After Savita: When female journalists started changing the norms

Researchers and journalists alike have documented how the 2012 death of Savita Halappanavar, a 31-year-old seeking an abortion in Galway, was a turning point for the movement to legalize abortion in Ireland.³ What has not been as deeply explored is how and why this changed the way *journalists* started to talk about abortion, and how their newsrooms reacted to these decisions.

Savita was not the first woman whose abortion experience sparked outrage in the Irish public. Ireland has had a long and tangled history of traumatic abortion stories that made headlines: the X Case in 1992, Miss C in 1997, D v. Ireland in 2006, Miss D in 2007, and the landmark case of A, B and C v. Ireland in 2010.⁴ Savita’s case, however, opened up a new era in which Irish journalists were willing to renegotiate their personal and professional identities in order to speak more candidly about the topic. In addition to Róisín Ingle, who was already known for her highly personal columns, the *Irish Times* reporter who originally broke the Savita story spoke publicly about her abortions several years later. That writer, Kitty Holland, said an editor had discouraged her from sharing her own abortion story for fear that it would “compromise [her] perceived objectivity on the abortion issue.”⁵

In interviews with journalists like Ingle and Holland, I will explore why the Savita story changed how female journalists navigated their intersectional — and at times conflicting —

² *1937 - 2019 Referendum Results*. (2021, April 2). Government of Ireland. Retrieved September 13, 2021, from <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/32ea7-1937-2019-referendum-results/>

³ Cullen, P. & Korolczuk, E. (2019) Challenging abortion stigma: framing abortion in Ireland and Poland, *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26410397.2019.1686197>

⁴ *History of Abortion in Ireland*. (n.d.) Irish Family Planning Association. Retrieved September 13, 2021, from <https://www.ifpa.ie/advocacy/abortion-in-ireland-legal-timeline/>

⁵ Holland, K. (2018). Abortion, Regret and Choice. U. Mullally (Author), *Repeal the 8th*. London: Unbound.

gender, political and professional identities, and how these decisions changed the norms within their newsrooms. I will also include interviews with anti-abortion writers, like Breda O'Brien at the *Irish Times*, who found herself reacting to a tide of changing sentiment.

II. The coverage: How newsrooms navigated objectivity and personal narrative

When public broadcaster RTÉ hosted a prime-time televised debate about the Repeal referendum in 2018, producers gave the “Yes” and “No” campaigns “equal opportunity to air their arguments.”⁶ This wasn't a purely internal decision: They were required by Irish broadcast regulations to strive for “fairness, objectivity and impartiality” in reporting on referenda, which has sometimes been interpreted (albeit erroneously) as a mandate to give each side “equal airtime.”⁷ The resulting debate received hundreds of complaints accusing the broadcaster of favoring the anti-abortion side and ignoring the voices of women who had received abortions.⁸ The debate is no longer even available online.

Even when objectivity and balance are not mandated by law, the question of how best to approach abortion coverage is one of the most vexing for journalists. (I speak from experience as a reporter and editor, as well as from research.) Most find it easiest to treat abortion as a two-sided political question, rather than a nuanced conversation with intersectional questions relating to health care, income, gender identity and religion. Very few stories in the U.S. or Ireland related to abortion include the voices of people who've gotten abortions.⁹

But in the months leading up to the Repeal referendum, some outlets did try a more complex and person-centered view. The *Irish Times* invited “women and men, as well as doctors, midwives and other professionals involved in administering healthcare to women” to share their individual experiences around abortion in first-person columns. Several other newspapers featured similar personal narratives.¹⁰

As the intensity around the abortion debate grows in the U.S., it's important for those journalists to understand how newsrooms evolved their ideas of what kind of coverage best served the public. What debates took place over broad coverage goals and granular wording? How did female journalists within newsrooms initiate or complicate those debates? For this, I would interview Claire Byrne, who hosted the RTÉ debate, as well as female editors at a few Irish news outlets, like Christine Bohan at TheJournal.ie. Editors have a unique role of power

⁶ McGarry, P. (2018, May 29). RTÉ received 1,277 complaints about abortion debate. *The Irish Times*. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/rt%C3%A9-received-1-277-complaints-about-abortion-debate-1.3512987>

⁷ BAI publishes updated guidelines on referenda coverage. (2018, March 13). Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. Retrieved September 13, 2021, from <https://www.bai.ie/en/bai-publishes-updated-guidelines-on-referenda-coverage/>

⁸ McGarry

⁹ Grant, W. (2019, November 15). The invisible women: Reflections on Irish media's coverage of abortion.

Retrieved September 9, 2021, from

<https://shado-mag.com/opinion/the-invisible-women-reflections-on-irish-medias-coverage-of-abortion/>; Woodruff,

K. (2019). Coverage of abortion in select U.S. newspapers. *Women's Health Issues*, 29(1), 80–86.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.whi.2018.08.008>

¹⁰ Ralph, D. (2020). *Abortion and Ireland: How the 8th was overthrown*. Palgrave Macmillan.

and decision-making in newsrooms but still have to navigate the wishes of reporters and higher-ups, and their stances on coverage issues often reflect and influence the rest of the industry.

III. An addendum: The post-Repeal years

While my research will focus on the years before Repeal, I will also explore how conversations around abortion coverage have changed since 2018. As U.S. journalists have understood for years, the legalization of abortion does not end the debate. In fact, it can lead to murkier disputes about when the procedure should be limited and how it should be administered. Are female journalists holding onto their philosophies on coverage and personal expression that they developed pre-Repeal? Or are they covering this new phase differently?

Overall, my proposed research will serve multiple purposes. First, by incorporating personal interviews into an audio podcast, it will become a resource that journalists in the U.S. will find engaging and enlightening, and one that I can present widely to journalism conferences and classes. Second, it can be archived as part of the National Museum of Ireland's ephemera collection around the Repeal campaign. Finally, I will work with Anne O'Brien at Maynooth University, my host institution, to co-author an academic paper on this topic that can serve as a more formal discussion point for journalists and other researchers.

As the leader of a public radio newsroom in Nashville, Tennessee, I know these research questions are of great personal interest. I have reported on abortion debates in the American South over the past seven years, and they are becoming more prominent and frequent on the national stage as conservative politics gain influence in Washington and in the courts. I, and other U.S. newsroom leaders like me, could improve the vital service of journalism by examining how journalism in other countries have approached their coverage of this controversial topic — evaluating both what went well and what didn't. Likewise, in Ireland, practicing journalists and scholars alike would benefit from an outsider's perspective on how media outlets debated abortion coverage, a topic that has not yet been widely studied.

Teaching

A third of my time as a Fulbright Scholar will be dedicated to guest-lecturing and mentoring students at Maynooth University's Department of Media Studies.

My experience has given me a unique perspective that will serve me well as a Fulbright Scholar. Although I do not work full-time in academia, I am frequently invited to guest-lecture in university classrooms and to the public, including leading intensive workshops or seminars on podcasting and interviewing. These are complex skills that are in demand within multiple fields. Podcasting, for example, is a burgeoning tool for businesses and academics to share their work, and it requires knowledge of audio production and long-form storytelling techniques. As the

executive editor of a Peabody Award-winning podcast — one of the highest national awards in broadcast media — I will be able to help students develop expertise in these skills and engage critically and practically with the media profession. I'll also be able to share real-world examples of how media theories are put into practice in professional newsrooms, and provide guidance and mentorship for students wanting to go into journalism or related fields.

I'm especially interested in teaching at Maynooth University because of its exceptionally diverse student body. The university has the highest percentage of non-traditional and underserved students in Ireland, and these are populations that have historically been excluded (explicitly or structurally) from journalism jobs. That, fortunately, is changing, and I will be eager to not only help these students make connections in the field but also learn from their perspectives.

Between the proposed teaching and research, my time as a Fulbright Scholar in Ireland will help further the pursuit of thoughtful journalism around abortion, develop the next generation of critically thinking media scholars, and advance U.S.-Irish relations by creating a dialogue about media coverage on a pivotal topic that continues to be relevant in both countries.