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Introduction

While many sports have significant followings in Ireland – including association football, rugby, horseracing, boxing and golf – Gaelic games are uniquely indigenous amateur sports that attract large audiences. Played primarily in Ireland and among the Irish diaspora, they have made an important contribution to the formation of local and national identity (Cronin 1999; Cronin, Duncan and Rouse 2014; Rouse 2015). The decision of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), the organization responsible for the games’ administration, in 1887 to use the dividing line of parishes (sub-county territorial units) for its clubs (today numbering 2,271) ensured that Gaelic games would be defined by place, a crucial factor in their subsequent popularity. Competing principally in club competitions within the same county, these clubs have developed into key social and cultural components of local communities across Ireland. The choice of the county boundary for GAA games’ elite level also had far-reaching consequences, not least the increasing importance of counties for Irish people’s own sense of social identity (Cronin, Duncan, and Rouse 2011). Each of the island’s thirty-two GAA county boards fields teams selected from intra-county clubs in “All-Ireland” national competitions in both Gaelic football and hurling.

On the eve of the return of national broadcaster RTÉ’s flagship Gaelic games program, “The Sunday Game,” in May 2020 RTÉ Sport released a promotional video. It featured crowd shots, celebratory moments, scenes of action, and legendary figures from GAA history. Bookended by images of gated pitches and empty streets and stadiums, it concluded with the title, “This too
shall pass.” The much-quoted adage was employed here to capture both the enormity of what Irish people (and people globally) had been enduring during the crisis and the promise of a return to a key element in their lives (Duffy 2020). The promotional video emphasized many issues that highlight the centrality of Gaelic games and the GAA in Irish society: its role in defining social identity, particularly through Irish people’s association of Gaelic games with local areas and counties; the passion and commitment involved in the sports concerned; and the employment of these sports in a narrative focused on overcoming (Duffy 2020).

This chapter examines the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on Gaelic games through an analysis of the media discourses surrounding these sports. There is an enduringly close interplay between print and broadcast national media in Ireland despite an increasingly globalized and anglophone media environment (Horgan and Flynn 2017). Gaelic games regularly eclipse other sports in the volume of sports reporting devoted to them. While, ordinarily, the GAA is subjected to extensive critical commentary, especially for the near-professionalism, costs of preparation of the elite inter-county teams, and consequent internal divisions, coverage of the organization during the lockdown was overwhelmingly presented as uniquely emblematic of a collective national effort, bringing out the “best” in “us.” It came at a fraught moment in Irish society, against a political backdrop of a general election (February 2020) in which housing and health service crises eliminated the sitting government’s majority, and a new government would not form until late June. In this context the celebratory focus on the GAA illustrates how “sports media variously contributes to, obscures and helps negotiate or contest collective identities, solidarities, divisions and hierarchies within and across nation states” (O’Boyle and Free 2020, 5). Media narratives of heroic frontline service and charitable and pedagogical work by GAA athletes were widely interspersed with celebrations of Gaelic games’ cultural value.

The significance of national live public service broadcasting as an agenda setter for other media is also especially noteworthy in the Irish context. Hermes and Hill (2020, 5) highlighted how, during the pandemic, television internationally, but specifically terrestrial live television, recovered a social centrality as a “platform for cultural citizenship,” a “space in which to think about, reflect on and (re)form identities that are embedded in communities of different kinds, both existing in real life and virtually.” In Ireland the national public service broadcaster became a fulcrum connecting government messaging, national organizations such as the GAA, and consumers as citizens. This centrality contrasts with ongoing concerns about its future viability following reports of mounting debts and little sympathy from Ireland’s center-right government in Autumn 2019 (Free 2021, 4). A symptom of RTÉ’s plight and Ireland’s center-right dominated political sphere (successive governments have only partially employed powers to ensure events of national sporting significance are available on free to air television under a 1997 EU directive) is its loss of rights to broadcast major national and international sports events to subscription-funded competitors (Flynn 2020).
The chapter principally covers the period from March 12, when the Irish government announced initial Covid-19 restrictions, followed shortly thereafter by the suspension of Gaelic games fixtures, to May 10, the broadcast date of the first 2020 episode of RTÉ’s “The Sunday Game.” As with other sports internationally, the gaps in sports media programming left by the absence of fixtures were filled with retrospective items focusing on classic moments and players from the past. RTÉ, Irish language broadcaster TG4, and particularly the Irish online television sports channel Eir Sport1, which currently holds the majority of GAA archive rights (Moran 2020a, 16), featured past games from the All-Ireland Championship in both hurling and Gaelic football, while prominent players featured regularly in radio and print media retrospectives and debates considering the possibility of games returning. Apart from retrospection, two themes dominated Gaelic games coverage in this time period. Firstly, there was a recurring focus on the serious impact on the GAA, its athletes, and national sports-media of the cancellation of its elite and local level events over its peak Spring-Summer season. As evident in “The Sunday Game” promotional video discussed above, a second major theme was the GAA’s key role in responding to the crisis and in articulating a discourse of overcoming, both in terms of the association’s challenges and wider Irish society.

The Lockdown Challenge for the GAA

On May 19, the *Irish Independent* reported the stark warning of Mary O’Connor, CEO of the Federation of Irish Sport (an umbrella sport organization), that sports bodies were, “facing potential ruin,” including some that “may not survive” the financial impact of Covid-19 (Roche 2020a, 44). The GAA is among the largest of the Federation’s affiliates. The considerable media coverage it attracted included a focus on the larger national picture and overall economic cost to the association. However, there were also pieces considering the impact on local communities where GAA clubs across the island – described by one journalist as “the lifeblood of the GAA” (Crowe 2020) – are often central to communal gatherings and occasions. A significant feature of much commentary was the GAA’s role in the wider community and in responding to challenges the virus presented across many areas of Irish life. However, there was also a discernible change in the tone and commentary of GAA members, particularly in May when a more pragmatic approach developed as discussions focused on a possible return to play.

The GAA was initially criticized regarding the slow pace with which it provided direction in responding to the crisis. On March 12, the day the Irish government announced initial restrictions, including banning outdoor mass gatherings of more than 500 people, Ewan MacKenna of the *Irish Independent* called for the GAA to “do the right thing” and “act now in Covid-19 crisis” by canceling fixtures (MacKenna 2020, 50-51). That day it was also reported that a GAA player from a county Meath club was in isolation following a positive
Covid-19 test (Anonymous 2020a, 51). Despite this, GAA games were scheduled to continue in that county and across the country on the weekend concerned (Anonymous 2020b). GAA players were themselves concerned. In the *Irish Daily Mail*, former Kerry Gaelic footballer Kieran Donaghy suggested that games should be “shut down or played behind closed doors” for the health and wellbeing of the wider population (Lanigan 2020a, 62-63).

Following then Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar’s announcement on March 12 of the first wave of restrictions, the GAA issued a joint statement with the Ladies Gaelic Football Association and the Camogie Association declaring the suspension of “all activity at club, county and educational levels until March 29 (inclusive)” (GAA 2020a). The GAA’s decision preceded the wider shutdown of public facilities, including shops and restaurants both North and South of the border. This contrast was noted in Irish media over the following days. As the GAA operates on an all-island basis, it was also challenged by the differing approaches taken in responding to the crisis within the two jurisdictions of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (within the UK). The RTÉ News (2020a) website carried these concerns on March 14. Schools and universities remained open in the North for a week longer than the South and the sectarian political lines were clear in the differing responses from Unionist and Nationalist politicians north of the border. The latter called for a policy aligned with the South while the former looked to leadership from the UK parliament and government. As Sinn Féin’s Michelle O’Neill, Deputy First Minister in the North, remarked, “I believe there’s a growing call for the schools to be shut immediately. We have the churches closing down masses, we have the GAA, we have soccer, we have rugby, we have hockey; people are actually taking decisions in advance of government” (RTÉ News 2020a).

**Contributing in the Community**

Through March, as further restrictions were introduced, most media commentary regarding the GAA focused primarily on its members’ contribution in the community. As former Tyrone all-Ireland winning footballer, Paul Devlin, remarked in the *Belfast Telegraph*,

> While people like myself and indeed my Tyrone team are very keen to get down to business again, we have to reflect on the impact that this particular virus has made on the wider community . . . . This all helps to keep sport in its place. (Campbell 2020, 42)

On March 16, the *Irish Examiner* began a “#CoronavirusSolidarity diary.” Unsurprisingly, GAA members were prominent in the campaign. The opening diary noted that “Local GAA clubs throughout the country are mobilising to help elderly neighbours and people in isolation. Club committee officers in many areas are coordinating volunteer efforts” (Digital Desk staff 2020). A
similar discourse was evident across the media more generally, such that Michael Kelly of the *Irish Independent* observed he was “inspired by the stories of GAA clubs working together with local parishes to check in on people who live alone, make arrangements for meals on wheels or just offer a few words of encouragement or concern over the telephone” (Kelly 2020, 21). GAA members also participated in communicating the message to stay at home and socially distance, including through posting videos on social media (Anonymous 2020c). GAA members’ contribution to supporting the fight against Covid-19 eventually prompted the GAA President, John Horan, and General Secretary, Tom Ryan, to issue an open letter to all members (widely reported on April 2), commending them as “a light and a standard for the people who they represent.” The letter also proclaimed that “the GAA ultimately, is all about People – People working together for a goal” (Horan and Ryan 2020).

On March 17, print and broadcast media also covered extensively the announcement that Croke Park, the GAA’s major stadium and headquarters, would be available as a drive-through Covid-19 testing center (Griffin 2020, 8). Other GAA grounds around the country, including Páirc Uí Chaoimh (Cork), the Gaelic Grounds at the Limerick Institute of Technology, and Semple Stadium (Thurles) were also made available as testing centers within two days (Clifford 2020, 56). Nowlan Park in Kilkenny and local clubs in Northern Ireland later joined the list (Bogue 2020, 37). Official suppliers of GAA merchandise also contributed. On April 3 the *Irish Examiner* reported that Azzurri Sport Ltd. had delivered “5,000 free, reusable masks to over 40 outlets in its first week” (Dunphy and Parker 2020).

The crisis additionally facilitated GAA cross-community support initiatives in Northern Ireland – a role historically more challenging due to its association primarily with the nationalist community. In a *Belfast Telegraph* report (April 2) unionist DUP MLA Christopher Stalford, member of the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly, praised the Bredagh GAA’s work with Ballynaféigh Apprentice Boys Flute Band in supporting vulnerable people: “This virus doesn’t recognize where you hang your hat on a Sunday. Let us all move forward together” (Preston 2020, 9). This cross-community development was also evident in a joint statement (April 9) by the GAA, the Irish Football Association, and Ulster Rugby calling for their supporters to “enjoy Easter at home” (Anonymous 2020d).

**Financial Impact**

However, while coverage of the GAA’s community contribution continued into April, concerns mounted regarding the overall financial impact of the suspension of games, and how a return might be facilitated. Despite the absence of player wages (the GAA administers amateur sports) the organization was nonetheless financially exposed. Ongoing costs included some 500 paid employees (RTÉ News 2020b), maintenance of stadiums, and insurance costs. As noted by the CEO of the Federation of Irish Sport, Mary O’Connor in June, GAA clubs estimated that “they still have 85% of fixed costs” to cover,
including such costs as “insurance repayments, facility maintenance, a lease that they might have on a facility, or a commercial loan, or a commercial mortgage” (O’Connor 2020). The association was also more dependent on gate receipts for funding than other associations given the primarily national nature of its sports and its consequently limited revenue from broadcast rights. While the GAA agreed a five year (2017-2022) €80 million deal with broadcasters in 2016 (Moran 2016), concerns were expressed in the Irish Times on April 17, “that broadcasters will be negotiating refunds by the end of the year” due to “a best-case scenario . . . much reduced programme of events” (Moran 2020b).

Although the GAA accounts for a huge proportion of sports coverage in Ireland, its 2019 Annual Report (GAA 2020, 190) showed a combined annual income from broadcast rights sales and sponsorship of just under €20 million, compared to €36 million from gate receipts.

Depressingly headlined “Silence and stagnation stalk clubs in cold storage,” Dermot Crowe’s (March 29) Sunday Independent article examined the experiences of representative GAA clubs some two weeks following the suspension of games. While providing a bleak picture, Crowe also stressed the clubs’ centrality to rural Irish communities. As Piaras Coyle, the chairman of Gaodh Dobhair (in Donegal) opined,

> The GAA club is the heart and soul of the parish, it has been hopping recently, and it just all came to a standstill . . . You eat, sleep and drink the club and what is going on in it. All that is taken away from you now. Everything is so negative at the minute. (Crowe 2020)

On April 3, Tom Keane, treasurer of Kerry County Board, detailed the huge projected financial impact on the board’s income (which was €6.1 million in 2019), not just through the absence of gate receipts: “The GAA Store in Killarney is closed with a loss of revenue there, as well as a loss of revenue from the hire of pitches at the Centre of Excellence.” Keane also remarked that many “sponsors might be even closed down at this present time, hotels and the like. Are they in a position to carry on with sponsorship? Who knows?” The reference here to “hotels” etc. as local sponsors signifies how GAA clubs are closely tied to the local economy – Kerry, in particular, relies heavily on tourism. The potential downturn in sponsorship would be symptomatic of the financial health of the sponsor, not necessarily less broadcast exposure. The article also suggested that plans to develop new GAA facilities were now in doubt (Anonymous 2020d).

One tension increasingly apparent as the crisis developed was that between GAA clubs within counties and the thirty-two elite level county teams, including around the developing debate concerning how Gaelic games would return. Partly inspired by the exemplary role of club volunteers in assisting vulnerable groups during the crisis, calls for club competitions to resume prior to elite inter-county competitions reignited tensions that had arisen following the publication of the GAA’s Annual Report in February 2020. In this report, General Secretary Tom Ryan explicitly stated that spending of nearly €30
million on elite inter-county team preparation from total association gate receipts of €36 million in 2019 was neither “sustainable” nor “desirable” (Ryan 2020a, 36). The metaphor of “runaway train” for this expenditure was widespread before and during the lockdown (for example, O’Rourke 2018; Finnerty 2020; Verney 2020a). Repeated calls to prioritize club rather than county level competitions were heeded when a plan to return to games was finally announced on June 5.

There was some discussion of games possibly resuming “behind closed doors,” as eventually occurred when Bundesliga soccer in Germany resumed on May 16. On April 14, the Irish Daily Mail (Gallagher 2020, 55) and Irish Examiner (Fogarty 2020b) discussed the possibility, as did the Irish Independent on April 16, with former Dublin football manager Pat O Neill remarking that, “to get it back up and people interested, maybe that’s what they’ll have to do” (Roche 2020b, 42). However, some GAA members could not envisage this prospect. Philip Lanigan’s (2020b, 50) Irish Daily Mail article, entitled “No fans? No point playing,” reflected a broad feeling that the games were primarily for supporters as the players represented their communities. The financial incentive of a “behind closed doors” prospect was also lacking. Conor McKeon (2020) noted in the Irish Independent that, “bums on seats is effectively the GAA’s business model as possibly the only sporting organization potentially unable “to stage matches without paying customers” given that almost half of its annual revenue comes from gate receipts.

The financial impact on the GAA was also evident in the staff paycuts the association announced at the beginning of April. Some media reports suggested that the association may be able to deal with the financial fallout better than other organizations. According to Richard Curran of the Irish Independent,

In Ireland, the FAI [the governing body for association football in the Irish Republic] and GAA head office at Croke Park announced pay cuts for 500 employees . . . The GAA has the financial muscle to handle something like that. Irish soccer is in a very different place. (Curran 2020, 16)

However, this “financial muscle” was limited. The Irish Times later carried a sobering remark by General Secretary Tom Ryan that “the hit could be as great as €60 million.” Specifically stressing the GAA’s heavy reliance on the inter-county Championships for funding Ryan said that, “All we have is matches. That’s all we have. We don’t have an international organization that can come to our aid” (Keane 2020a, 25).

By April 29, the Irish Times reported that Croke Park was under considerable pressure. The finances weren’t “ruinous at present” despite “picking up some serious tabs, e.g. around €5.5 million for insurance and doing some heavy lifting on sundry other expenditure as well as long-fingering income streams like registration fees.” However, “general governance” was “stressful” (Moran 2020c, 19). Further paycuts were announced for GAA staff. The Irish Times reported on May 1 that,
Employees are facing steep reductions in May and June, ranging from 15 per cent to 40 per cent, which come after initial cuts announced at the beginning of April ranging from 10 per cent to 20 per cent. In addition the GAA announced it was “availing of the financial support available under the [Irish government] Temporary Covid-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme as far as possible in order to reduce the financial impact on employees and the GAA.” (Moran 2020d, 12)

The extent of the organization’s financial challenge was outlined by association President John Horan on May 10 on RTÉ’s flagship GAA series “The Sunday Game.” Horan indicated an overall loss of €50 million, broken down into €25-30 million centrally from the absence of county games and the remainder from the loss to county boards and clubs across the country. Horan also alluded to the association’s lack of financial reserves, providing the rather bleak assessment that Gaelic games were unlikely to return while social distancing restrictions continue, given their “contact sport” nature. Furthermore, despite the Irish government’s announcement in its May 1 roadmap for reopening Irish society that Gaelic games could return on July 20, Horan remarked that he did not foresee GAA games before October given the organization’s dependence on volunteers. He also referred to current insurance arrangements such that the association would be responsible if a player contracted Covid-19 while playing or training. Significantly, Horan stressed that if GAA games returned, the club game at local county level rather than the elite inter-county competitions at national level would be prioritized.

The “Sunday Game” also foregrounded GAA members contributing in the community during the crisis, including Tipperary inter-county hurler and Garda (Irish police officer) Pádraic Maher who stressed the importance of helping “the vulnerable and the community in general, be there for them and show some kind of solidarity for them and give them some reassurance that everything will be okay and if they need any help that we’re here to help them.” Dr. Caroline O’Hanlon, an Armagh footballer, also commented on her experience as a doctor in the community, intercut with shots of her preparing for work and donning PPE. Horan observed on the same programme that in addition to making GAA stadia available for testing,

20,000 actual members of the organization [are] out on the ground working and I’m sure when they started off this process they thought it might last a couple of weeks but it’s heading into two months now and those 20,000 volunteers are actually working with 35,000 homes in which they are bringing pharmacy supplies, and shopping supplies.

Horan’s remarks connect with a broader GAA focused media discourse of national inclusivity and collective will during the lockdown. This was exemplified by the extensive coverage of the “#DoItForDan” campaign.
During the crisis an extraordinary range of fund-raising efforts emerged, often involving current or former GAA athletes and sports journalists. An exemplary case was the “#DoItForDan” campaign, launched on March 5, one week prior to the introduction of the first Covid-19 restrictions. Former Laois GAA stars Niall and Aisling Donoher started the campaign for their one-year-old son who was diagnosed with Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) Type 1 and Scoliosis, the typical life expectancy for which is 18-24 months. The campaign sought to raise €2.1 million for treatment only available in the US. The funds were successfully raised by the end of April, largely due to GAA members’ successfully attracting large numbers of individuals to typically exercise-based fund-raising activities. That both parents had represented county Laois in Gaelic football was widely mentioned in campaign appeals and media reports.

The campaign connected various strands in the narrative of Ireland’s containment of the virus, highlighting the GAA’s centrality to Irish society, both as an organization and embodiment of shared cultural values. For example, reporting his personal challenge to do 1000 pushups for the campaign, and also for PPE for frontline workers, Irish Independent journalist Michael Verney enthused at the,

physical feats which people have accomplished when the need is greatest. Be it a marathon in a garden as Mayo hurler Cathal Freeman ran to raise PPE funds for frontline workers or GAA clubs running and walking for Do it for Dan, their efforts have been breathtaking. (Verney 2020b)

The cumulative accomplishment of activities undertaken individually under GAA club identities chimed with RTÉ’s April/May 2020 lockdown themed variation of its annual January/February weight loss show “Operation Transformation” (2007-). Subtitled “Keeping Well Apart,” it was a pun on its mission to foster “wellbeing” through exercise regimes and the lockdown imperative to maintain social distance (“well apart”). A reported Facebook remark on a club’s attempt to raise funds by individually walking, running or cycling “400k in a day” is representative:

“Today there wasn’t a ball kicked or a group training session or a match or any of us standing on the bank or up in the stand watching a Balto game but we came together as a club by staying apart and we did our bit for Dan,” said a spokesperson for Baltinglass GAA Club. (Anonymous 2020e)

Communal purpose and empathy featured prominently in an edition of RTÉ’s weekly chat show “The Late Late Show” (May 1), in which several GAA players and sports presenter Evanne Ní Chuilinn reflected on the campaign. Ní
Chuilinn stressed the GAA’s national reach and symbolism, with “tentacles in every little community” as “a natural organic network.” Former Kilkenny hurler Henry Shefflin idealized a native charitable impulse: “It was the sporting community, but I think it was Irish society as a whole. Dan captured their hearts and minds.” In an interview the following day, Shefflin more specifically related “Dan’s story” to memories of his own son lying ill in a children’s hospital years earlier, reflecting that,

if there’s a single positive to take from this virus . . . . maybe it’s that people had the time to stop and read what was actually happening to Dan Donoher. Because in other circumstances, they might just have glimpsed a headline and kept on going (Hogan 2020).

In these remarks, Shefflin emphasizes empathy, mutuality, and critical reflection on lived experience – with the GAA as both metaphor and exemplar of Irish society. This connected affectively, if not directly, with widespread critical discussion in Irish media (for example, Taylor et al. 2020) of how long-enduring inequalities in areas of Irish society were necessarily being addressed in the crisis; the demands of containment required temporary reforms in such areas as hospital accommodation, treatment of the homeless, and the introduction of Covid-19 payments for furloughed workers. These measures may prove temporary, and may yet be followed by an austerity program to rival or exceed that which ensued in Ireland after the 2008 financial crisis. Each of the parties in the coalition government that formed in July 2020 (Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party) had been in government for some of the intervening 12 years, during which social inequality in Ireland deepened considerably. However, such sentiments clearly resonated beyond the narrow sphere of sport at the height of the lockdown. The GAA is often considered a conservative organization (Doak 1998; Fulton and Bairner 2007), but its amateur basis and ethos of voluntarism and service have a progressive potential that may be key to its survival. Such campaigns evince a nostalgia for the experience of mass participation, highlight the ordinariness and community situatedness of Irish sporting celebrities, and offer a proximation and idealization of the collective experience of sport as symbol and exemplar of national integration.

**Concluding Remarks: Sport, Media and the “National” during Lockdown**

The Covid-19 crisis has presented unprecedented challenges for sporting organizations across the world. The period of lockdown across many countries globally undermined the structures that have supported sporting practices, particularly in the arena of professional sport heavily dependent on spectator attendance, viewership, and engagement for its financing. However, the pandemic has also highlighted the importance of sports’ organizations and sport media in facilitating and encouraging responses at local and national level to
the challenges Covid-19 has brought. In the Irish context, the rhetoric of shared sacrifice and collective discipline that was evident during the early months of the Covid-19 crisis signifies the GAA’s unique role as an amateur organization touching every part of Irish society through its players’, administrators’, volunteers’ and supporters’ family and social connections.

The strangely anachronistic status (by international comparison) of the GAA as a largely nationally, geographically bounded amateur organization is such that national broadcaster RTÉ still broadcasts most of its major events and became the logical outlet for policy announcements during the lockdown. The absence of international sport, especially suspended English Premiership soccer, from Irish sports media and transnational subscription services gave the GAA, RTÉ, and the “national” a renewed centrality, with broadcast discussions of the GAA as metonymic and metaphorical gauges of how “we are doing.” In this respect it exemplified how, as Evens et al. (2013, 72) argue, even in the increasingly commodified and marketized sphere of sport, public service broadcasters can continue to, “offer a forum for democratic debate and cultural exchange against a background of a deregulated global media system,” and “treat people as citizens rather than consumers.”

The duality of the GAA as metaphorical and metonymical of the national experience was exemplified by the May 31 edition of “The Sunday Game Classics”. At this point contributors were calling for resumption of training and competition with risk containment measures as soon as possible. They represented perspectives that were already contributing to the changing critical environment informing the GAA’s published “roadmap” on June 5. The roadmap permitted first local club competition (from July 31), then inter-county competition (from October 17). That the contributors, all former players, also hailed from particular professional or business backgrounds, typified how the sporting-related discourse of the GAA was always implicitly “about” the challenges facing the nation generally. Former Galway hurler turned sport performance psychologist Tony Óg Regan described players’ “helpless and hopeless” limbo of uncertainty, extending his earlier comments (Keane 2020b) on the initial “denial,” then “grief,” “anger and frustration” players were experiencing. This echoed comments from club members in a location report and was reinforced by regular television pundit, former footballer and schoolteacher Colm O’Rourke, who stressed the necessity to take teenagers, “away from their electronic devices – physically and mentally, wellbeing is a big issue.” That O’Rourke described himself as “a risk taker” in advocating an earlier return illustrates what presenter Joanne Cantwell called a “movement in relation to this issue” in preceding weeks. The GAA Covid-19 advisory group representative Dick Clerkin (a “lean management” specialist) also noted change in the public’s “acceptance of risk,” stating that the GAA “must be as agile as we can.”

This move towards the interlocking discourses of managed risk, organizational agility and “trust” (e.g. Lanigan 2020c) at local level prefigured the GAA’s “roadmap, which in turn followed the phased approach in the Irish government’s “roadmap” for lifting restrictions on citizens. Administrators’
and members’ pragmatic acceptance of an element of risk appears to signify a balancing of safety concerns with cultural value, sustaining meaningfulness for players and volunteers whose interest might diminish, and the overall psychological “wellbeing” of participants, from players to supporters, resulting from participation. However, its longer term and more cautious timescale (initially three weeks behind the schedule permitted by government) reflects its avowed commitment to the insurance of safety rather than an economic “bottom line” of revenue generation through paying supporters’ attendance. The cautious acceptance of risk and agility reflected the tensions within the GAA, in turn representative, both metaphorically and metonymically, of broader tensions within government and society concerning how best to proceed. That public service broadcaster RTÉ, somewhat beleaguered pre-lockdown both financially and through the questioning of its legitimacy from a largely hostile corporate media sector, should be the fulcrum for the rehearsal of these perspectives, tensions and anxieties signifies a reversal (albeit perhaps temporary) of what Roddy Flynn (2020) calls “the decline of the national” as core to its identity and status.

On the other hand, despite this symbiosis, the GAA’s financial plight could yet be significantly worsened by late 2020 even if elite inter-county contests are viable, given its low level of broadcast and sponsorship revenue compared to other sports. The economic and cultural are not mutually exclusive. If mass attendance is not viable, and if contests can only take place “behind closed doors” or with a fifth or quarter of pre-lockdown capacity due to social distancing protocols, even if broadcast live on terrestrial television, the economic value and cultural symbolism of Gaelic games may be significantly diminished.

However, bracketing financial considerations, a surprising feature of the renewed significance of RTÉ in this period was its contribution – along with Irish language broadcaster TG4 and national and local print media – to a possibly temporary or longer term reshaping of the cultural geography of the GAA. By “cultural” we mean the sense of the symbolism of place and wider spaces in the imagination of inhabitants – with the recommencing of local club competitions in advance of elite inter-county competitions. The live broadcasting of club games taking place within county boundaries placed the intra-county club competitions center stage on Irish television for the first time and appears to have contributed to rapidly increased demand for live streaming of more games direct to consumers as the GAA moves progressively into OTT (“Over the Top”) provision following initial experiments with the GAAGO service for members of the Irish diaspora from 2014 onwards (Moran 2020e). In the event that the expensive to stage inter-county championships are cancelled or curtailed in 2020 for financial reasons, or due to a second wave of the virus and/or restrictions on geographical movement, this combination of factors might enhance the local rootedness of the GAA and contribute to reversing the dominance, as national spectacles, of the elite inter-county contests.
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