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The Media Coverage of the Galway Film Fleadh

Whether you're a filmmaker unveiling your latest work, or a consumer seeking a first look at a favorite director or actor's new movie, film festivals revolve around one particular goal: exposure. A powerful force that provides exposure to attendees, content contributors, and their work is the media. In today's digital age this coverage is becoming increasingly prevalent and important. As a journalist myself, I took a closer look at how the Galway Film Fleadh was promoted and covered by internal festival personnel and external media outlets. Additionally, I wanted to examine how the Fleadh measures up to the coverage of other film festivals around the world. After personal experience and research, I believe the Galway Film Fleadh receives and generates adequate media exposure, takes a unique approach to external coverage, and has room to grow and improve its presence in the journalistic production sphere.

Before I dive into the Fleadh's current state of media coverage, it is important to understand some background on the relationship between film festivals and journalism. According to Marije de Valck, "film festivals do not suffer from a lack of attention" (de Valck, Kredell & Loist, 2016, p. 67). People who visit festivals spread information and knowledge by word of mouth in casual and serious discussion. Like most storytelling, the journalistic buzz surrounding festivals originated in settings like coffeehouses, salons, literary societies, and

through newspapers (de Valck, Kredell & Loist, 2016, p. 83). However, this tradition declined with the spread of elite-dominated mass media in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

Although the word of mouth medium has in fact declined, written media coverage is still alive and well for the Fleadh. Daniel Simmons, the Fleadh's Publicity Co-ordinator Assistant, said print journalists are the most common kind of journalist at this festival. "I think there's a kind of feel of quality with printed advertisements and articles these days," he explained. "The lack of trust in the [broadcast] media has really pushed filmmakers to prefer their films to be pushed by print." Simmons added that local television news reporters do make occasional appearances, though. Household names like Melissa Tomei and Ireland native Barry Keoghan, who both had films premiering at the Fleadh, piqued local television news interest. So, it appears primarily big-name films get promotion and coverage from visually-focused journalism at this festival.

The exposure the outside media provide benefits a film festival as a whole and the specific films being featured. In some ways it is the job of the festival to promote itself and attract journalists to attend. In the Fleadh's case, print media reigns superior again with their distribution of press releases. "We have contacts we've built up over the years...the Galway Advertiser and others, who we send out our press releases to so they can send representatives to get their story," Simmons said. On [the Fleadh's] side of things, the press releases allow us to embellish the truth...we can say the theater was packed even if it wasn't, and we can use adjectives to give it a bit of flavor which is something journalists might not do." Simmons added that sometimes other companies will take and modify the Fleadh's press releases to create their own spin on a story. This type of journalism is not the cut-and-dry kind I've been advised to

practice—but it reminds me of my own experiences working in sports journalism and making “propaganda” content to promote a specific team.

Looking at a broader scope, festivals that are more mainstream revolve around the press and have an enormous team to “control” the masses. The Festival de Cannes, for example, is “one of the largest media events in the world, covered by more than 4000 journalists and over 2000 media outlets from around 90 countries (Association Française du Festival International du Film, 2018). A festival of this size requires a substantial amount of media organization and has a coordinator for each medium: print, digital, and audiovisual. Cannes requires journalists to complete an application for accreditation as early as February—three months before the festival launches in May. Journalists can be denied from covering the festival on-site and must fill out multiple applications if their reports involve more than one kind of medium.

The Galway Film Fleadh has a much more casual atmosphere, according to Simmons, whose job is to interact with any and all journalists who want to cover the festival. “We don’t have scheduled blocks of sit-down times with journalists and personnel with the films,” he said. Journalists will contact Simmons directly with inquiries about interviewing specific filmmakers or actors. Simmons will then advise the journalists to arrive at the desired screening about 30 minutes ahead. If the journalist is late or cannot make that time frame, Simmons tells them they’re on their own. “I think the really good thing about the Fleadh is that it is so casual. There’s no red carpets, no velvet ropes, no VIP areas. Everyone is on the same level.” This vibe is something the Fleadh’s publicity team takes pride in and aims to maintain throughout the event.

The laid back nature of the Fleadh came as a shock to me. As someone who constantly operates on a down-to-the-minute sports journalism schedule year-round, I had expected every

film festival to be more rigid with its press. Daniel explaining the press situation as a free-for-all stressed me out! I have been in those situations before—it's a race against the clock, as well as other journalists, to get your questions in for your coverage. At the same time, I see the positives of this system. It gives smaller journalists a greater opportunity to get their stories in and it puts more responsibility on the reporter. Since the Fleadh maneuvers with a small team—only three full-time festival staff year round—having less strict press parameters makes sense after all.

The Fleadh might be on to something with its journalist-friendly operations. An article published in *The Hollywood Reporter* this June announced that festival giants Toronto and Sundance were planning to add 20 percent more media credentials to lure underrepresented journalists to these major film events (Sun, 2018). Part of this push comes from this mindset—since film festivals act as a platform for presenting diverse work that tells diverse stories, all kinds of storytellers should have the chance to cover these events.

Social media has become an integral way film festivals can internally cover and promote themselves to audiences around the world. Simmons says social media has taken on a larger role for the 30th Film Fleadh and many of the physically printed informational items were instead posted online on social media. The Fleadh uses four primary social media outlets: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. The Facebook page weighs in at 13,000 “likes” and averaged at about four posts a day during the festival. The Twitter page has over 15,000 followers and posted as many as eight tweets a day, including up-to-the-minute screening time changes for films on a particular day. The Instagram profile was the weakest social media link at only 2,600 followers and posts reaching an average of 40 “likes.” Overall, the content across these three platforms was sharp, consistent, and high quality. From my personal experience managing an organization's social media, the Fleadh does a sound job at telling their own story.

The fourth platform, YouTube, stands as its own entity. FleadhTV serves as the festival's broadcast network and publishes video content to their channel and the three other social platforms. As an aspiring broadcast journalist I took particular interest in this channel and the kind of pieces it produced. The channel has 556 subscribers and only posts content just prior, during, and just after the festival—it lies dormant the rest of the year. There were 93 uploads to the channel in the last month, a majority of the videos were trailers for certain films that would be shown at this year's Fleadh. Of the 93 videos, 18 were original content made by FleadhTV personnel. These were all generated during the week of the festival. The videos varied in format and topic. A recurring style were three and four-minute packages on a specific movie from the festival—complete with one-on-one interviews from the director or lead actor and sneak peak film footage relevant to the topic of discussion. An interview with Billy Keoghan about his experience playing Spencer Reinhart in *American Animals* is an example of this content on the channel. Other uploads included a four-minute piece on the LGBTQA+ focus this Fleadh took this year, which highlighted several films from the genre.

While sufficient in quantity, the Fleadh's video production quality, ironically, is not as sharp as it should be. First, the framing and format of interviews is inconsistent and appeared sloppy at times—tops of heads were cut off, interview subjects were framed too widely or awkwardly off-center. Second, certain pieces contained spelling errors in on-screen text. For example, the LGBTQA+ piece had “marriage” spelled wrong within the first five seconds. Thirdly, the timeliness of the content was lacking. Packages recapping specific movies were uploaded up to five days after the film premiered, making the content seem outdated. In my opinion, these three shortcomings hinder the professional appearance of the Fleadh and their production team. It is worth recognizing there is a very small staff that handles this type of

internal coverage for the festival. It is possible the festival does not have the resources to create tighter content. However, I think contributing more consideration and effort to video production would give the Fleadh more credibility and generate a positive outlook of its internal coverage/promotion.

With all of this discussion about the Fleadh's reception and execution of media coverage, it's key to consider one final question: how important is the media to the festival itself? Daniel Simmons said it depends on the publication. "Timing is of the essence," he explained. "We don't want journalists trying to set up interviews with people pertaining to films that have already screened." The explanation, like many in the film industry, is money. "Our main focus with the media is about selling the film. We want people to know about the film premieres at the Fleadh before they happen, so they'll pay to come see them." Simmons emphasized that coverage after the film's showing during Fleadh week does not help this venture and will often tell journalists they are on their own if they want to set up an interview post-screening.

After analyzing how the Galway Film Fleadh fits into a broad scope of media coverage, it is evident this smaller-scale festival makes a solid attempt to promote itself during the time of year relevant to the occasion. Its casual, "level playing field" approach to outside media interviews by those involved with the films sets it apart from other larger film festivals around the world. The Fleadh's individual social media coverage holds a relatively strong presence, given the size of the event. The video production for the festival generates unique ideas for pieces and packages, but has room to grow in execution of detail and precision. With a perfect balance of these elements, the Fleadh can encompass a strong media presence internally and externally.

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