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# Cathode Ray Memories: Television as Memory and Social Practice

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# **Cathode Ray Memories: Television as memory and social practice**

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New Year's Eve 1961 was, for some, a pivotal date in Irish history. It was the moment when a new medium entered Irish society and became a harbinger of, and a catalyst for, social change. The Irish public service broadcaster Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ) started transmission that night with a gala launch in the Gresham Hotel in Dublin. In accounts of the night, new and old Ireland are personified in Eamon Devalera and Sean Lemass respectively. In these accounts 'traditional' Ireland began to decline that night while its 'modern' successor quickened with the introduction of television as a natural ally. Morash, for example, describes this transition.

In this moment we see in a split screen, as it were, showing two Irelands. In one, we might see a modernising, new Ireland relishing its porous boundaries; in the other, an older, conservative Ireland of fixed and knowable values, bounded and preserved within the island of Ireland. However, it might be more accurate to say that what was on display that night were two forms of Irish modernity, one established and one just coming into being; either way, it was clear that the medium through which these differences were being staged clearly belonged to the new. (Morash 2009: 173).

Television had arrived. Like much of the history of television in Ireland, accounts of RTÉ's opening night offer a simple, polarised vision of a complex reality. This vision is based in binaries of old vs new, tradition vs modernity, religion vs secularism and so on. These remain important accounts of how television changed Ireland. Nevertheless, many important questions go unmentioned. They are obscured by the reinforcement through repetition of a dominant social progress narrative. The

medium is seen as a vector for cultural influence but is not seen to be worthy of study in itself because the technology is naturalised. This is an ideological blind spot.

## **Methodology**

There may be a form of social ventriloquism here, where journalists, broadcasters and academics have spoken for the Irish public but rarely to them. Nick Couldry argues that ‘commentators on media (and their sources) are often part of a technophilic elite’. Moreover, they are likely to be part of society’s ‘mediated centre’ where they are close to power and the means of media representation. As such, their interpretations of media are ‘tied up with their own strategies of distinction’. To maintain their central position, media need to emphasise the powerful and positive difference they make to society. To maintain their access to media, commentators may need to do the same.

Couldry argues, that to avoid a situation where only a single group get to define the role of media in society, there is a need to pay attention to what all people do with media (2012: ix). He emphasises the need to pay attention not to media but to media-related practice (2012: 37). That is, looking beyond content and institutions to see what people are doing with and around media. This work aims to address media-related practice retrospectively.

The pilot research uses life story interviews. As Bourdon and Kligler-Vilenchik have written ‘life-stories of television viewers offer a different perspective on television history, one that encompasses the perceptions of viewers, and analyses the medium as part of the fabric of everyday life’ (Bourdon and Kligler-Vilenchik 2011: 44). Life-story interviews can tell us about how people have viewed television at different stages in their lives. The resulting stories are not only about television but also about the contacts between television and social practice (Bourdon and Kligler-Vilenchik 2011: 35).

Finally, it is essential to note that memory is not an objective or unchanging recording of the past. Memory is reconstitutive, social and dynamic. It is shaped by circumstances in the past, as well as by conditions and interests in the present. Memory then, as identified by Maurice Halbwachs, is intertwined with social power (Halbwachs 1992). The ‘collective memory’ of a nation is intertwined with institutional power through memorials, school curricula, media and so on. Nevertheless, as identified by Bourdon and Fowler among others, counter memories or oppositional memories that recall the past differently to the dominant institutional narrative also exist (Bourdon and Kligler-Vilenchik 2011: 37; Fowler 2005: 57). Unlike interview respondents, official memories of RTÉ tend not to remember that early television was not the universal medium it is today.

### **Television and Social Status**

As most commentators will readily admit, television did not arrive in Ireland on New Year’s Eve 1961. Also, RTÉ’s opening night was not a national media event. And, to be fair, no commentator explicitly claims that it was. However, when discussing live addresses of pivotal national importance, like de Valera’s ‘atomic power’ speech, no one has been at pains to point out it was watched by relatively few.

Television did not arrive in Ireland with a party in the Gresham hotel. It appeared piecemeal in wealthy households over the course of the 1950s. It took almost another 20 years, up to 1979, for 93 per cent of the population to live in homes with television (Chubb 1987: 73). RTÉ’s first transmission could only be picked in Leinster and was unavailable to rest of the country. Geography and social class shaped access to early television in Ireland.

Mark Regan came from a large farming family who bought their first television set shortly after RTÉ started broadcasting. The arrival of a Bush television in their kitchen was big family

occasion. He described how they ‘couldn't wait for it to come on’. The attraction ‘wasn't so much what was on but the fact that somebody else came into your kitchen... [and] that they were telling you stories’ (Mark Regan). Tom Shiels came from a Dublin working class background. He recalled seeing his first television programmes in the houses of relatives and neighbours. He had spent much of the early 1960s ‘longing for television’. He recounted an early childhood fantasy where he imagined that he might be able to look into the illuminated valves in his parents’ radio set and see the presenter speaking. He recalled how he used to play with kids ‘in the hopes that they’d bring us in to see the television programmes’. He also talked about how his uncle, a successful electrician, possessed 3 things that marked you out as being ‘just a little bit up’ or as having ‘a really good job’. These were ‘the telephone, a car, it was a Morris Minor, and a television’ (Tom Shiels). Like much cultural consumption the adoption of television, and one’s attitudes and aspirations towards it, appear to have been shaped by one’s distance from economic necessity.

### **Habit Forming Broadcasts**

Television affects people’s use of time. It is important, however, to note here that this is not unique to television. It has its origins in radio. Fionnuala Murphy mentioned one of her earliest memories of the radio was to, on a Christmas Eve ‘just gather around it and hear that Santy was taking off from the North Pole’. Tom Shiels recalled several weekly appointments in his family for BBC radio programmes. This continued with television. Mark Regan described how, growing up on a farm, the television news and weather forecast became something of a family ritual, observed daily at 6:00PM and again at 9:30PM.

He also described how shows like *Bat Masterson*, *Stoney Burke* and, above all, *The Fugitive* had to be seen every week. As he put it ‘you had to be up to speed’. It appeared that these shows had to be seen, not just for the intrinsic pleasure of watching them, but also to be able to

competently discuss the programmes among peers. Regan described how *The Fugitive* was a key topic on his school bus in the 1960s.

And that would have been the conversation going in on the bus in the morning. Quite often there'd be lessons to do but you'd be saying how Barry Morse was as Lt. Girard, what he was like last night. Oh yeah that was always spoken about. That was the big thing. I suppose you could say *Dallas*, when that came on years later, the same thing. *The Fugitive* was a big thing (Mark Regan)

Regan noted that 'it was important when television came first that you turned it on when it came on', i.e., when RTÉ started its broadcast day. During the summer the start of programmes would effectively call him in from play. The set would then remain on for the evening but, because he was young, would be 'told when to go to bed, it'd be 8 or 9 o'clock, or 10 o'clock and I'd be told off you go to bed' (Mark Regan).

### **Television as part of the Family**

Television apparently became a resource within families to express affection and solidarity. For example, on rare occasions children were allowed to stay up late to watch exceptional programmes. Philip Roche explained that 'it was a big thing to be allowed to stay up to watch TV'. He added that 'it's a special, you know, its like you're being treated special. You're being given a chance to watch late night TV'. Many of these exceptional occasions for Roche were around sporting occasions. Tom Shiels recalled being allowed up to watch *The Great war* a documentary that created a lifelong interest in history.

Philip Roche also talked about how he no longer watched television at the time of the interview. The reason for this, he explained, was because he had watched it as a way to spend time with his parents. Television was an 'integral part of their routine' and so he slipped into their

routine. He saw television as part of the fabric of the home and the family but not necessarily a positive one.

But, I'd say the television is almost like another family member in the house. It's talking and it's looking and it's moving, you know, and it has to be attended to. (Laughs). You flick it on and you flick it off, you know, and its like that I suppose the way mobile phones are like another family members that's distracting from [you] listening to somebody else (Philip Roche).

### **Flashbulb Memories**

Bourdon's work understands television memories to fit broadly into two 'frameworks of memory', the framework of the family and that of the nation. Wallpaper memories were associated with family habits while flashbulb memories were seen to be more commonly related with national events like the death of a leader for example. Ironically, many of the flashbulb memories that emerged among respondents were international events. The attacks on New York and Washington on September 11th 2001 were mentioned. The most commonly shared flashbulb memory, however, was the assassination of John F. Kennedy. While the death of President Kennedy was a US event, some respondents memories intertwined the familial and the national. Mark Regan again recalled being on the family farm and his mother sharing the news that the President had been shot. Sitting together to get the news the family learned that Kennedy was dead. He also shared a recollection that his family, like many, would have had a picture of John and Jackie Kennedy alongside a picture of the Pope. He was at a loss, however, to recall which pope that had been.

### **Remembering Mediations of Media?**

Some memories appeared dubious because they were devoid of context. Seamus Clancy talked about how 'Kennedy would have been something you'd have to watch because it was part of life'. He was sure there 'wasn't an hour where I wasn't looking at the television to find out what was

going on' (Seamus Clancy). Beyond this, no detail of where he was, or who he watching with was furnished. Similarly Fionnuala Murphy's abiding memory of Bloody Sunday was of Father Edward Daly coming to the aid of Jackie Duddy and waving a white handkerchief.

When Philip Roche was asked to recall controversies on television he referred to a Late Late Show interview with Annie Murphy, the mother of Bishop Eamonn Casey's son. He had seen this recently on RTÉ's archive show *Reeling in the Years*. Central to the concept of collective memory is the idea that memories that are communicated survive. Those that are not communicated or represented die out. To some extent then, communicative power confers the ability to shape what is remembered and how

Academics have described RTE's opening night as a historic national event. However, most people could not see it. The words of LeMass, Devalera, Cardinal Dalton and so on hold the interest of academics. They did not, however, catch the attention of the Irish public on New Year's Eve 1961. Exceptionally, Tom Shiels had a vivid recollection of the night.

Funnily enough, the night that RTÉ came on, it was a big gala night in town, and I happened to be. We would never be, I lived in Finglas, but my grandfather was in hospital in St Mary's in the Park in the Phoenix Park and with my mother I was going to visit. Although it was my father's father. And we were on the bus going though, and it was snowing that night, very unusual around Christmas time. And it was New Year's Eve I think and I remember the searchlights outside the Gresham Hotel (Tom Shiels).

Despite his recollection of that night Tom Shiels's family did not get television for another few years. His first recollection of watching RTÉ was seeing *Leave it to Beaver*, an American teenage show. There is a danger here that, in the absence of a complementary narrative, RTÉ's opening night may be remembered by default as a national media event. Similarly, the history of *Irish television broadcasting* may be remembered by the mediated centre as a proxy for the *history of television* in Ireland.



## Conclusion

There is a question here about how the relationship between media and society are described and remembered. There is a dominant institutional narrative in historical accounts of television in Ireland. Arguably, media, and media-connected elites, need to believe in the power of media. There is a need to understand how individuals, who do not share the same interests in how media are remembered, recall television.

However, there is a need for caution here. People's memories of television are not 'true' accounts of the past. Memory is dynamic. An account of the past will be shaped by an individual's trajectory, current position and interests. Nevertheless, it appears that memories of socially embedded media experiences offer the best chance of accessing what television meant to people and how it was used. Research needs to elicit not only what people watched but also when, with whom, why and so on. Memories based in content rather than context are, perhaps, more likely to be re-written through communicative power. And this, through history books, archive shows and retrospectives, is where the 'mediated centre' can re-shape media memories. The dominant narrative does not need to be denied. It does, however, need to be complemented.

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