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# **Television in Ireland before Irish Television: Nationalist Rhetoric and International Programming**

**Eddie Brennan**

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Typical of an international tendency, the history of television in Ireland has been framed by national boundaries. This paper argues that viewing the history of television solely through institutional sources and a nation state-bound perspective obscures transnational influences and homogenises diverse audience experiences. Moreover, such histories may serve to reproduce a limited range of types of nationalist rhetoric. The research presented here explores the history of television in Ireland through life story interviews. This reveals views of the nation, its global context and processes of social change quite different to those discussed in orthodox histories. Arguably, this shift in historical sourcing can transform the relationship between media histories and nation states. De-focusing the national may serve to separate media history scholarship from an unannounced but persistent attachment to state-nationalism.

## **A Dominant Narrative**

The claim that television arrived in Ireland on 31 December 1961 is commonplace. However, the claim only makes sense when the word 'television' refers solely to television broadcasting rather than viewing, and when 'Ireland' refers only to the Republic of Ireland and not the island. This interpretation, more concerned with the state's ability to broadcast than people's ability to watch, is typical of histories of television in Ireland. Indeed, the 'history of television in Ireland' is, essentially, a history of public service broadcaster Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ). Moreover, the history of RTÉ as 'television' has been told within a dominant narrative that subsumes the medium into Irish parliamentary and cultural politics. This institutional

history of Irish television is too often passed off for, and accepted as, the history of television in Ireland.

Academic accounts portray RTÉ's opening night on 31 December 1961 as part of the emergence of a 'New Ireland'. The broadcaster was to serve as a catalyst for Ireland's cultural transformation. Writers present a polarised vision of the ailing forces of tradition and their modern, confident and open-minded successors. An anxious, elderly politician, President Eamon de Valera, jars with the glamour and excitement of the evening. He puts something of a damper on proceedings, offering stern warnings about television even as he inaugurates the new station. Academics have ritually cited a passage from his inaugural speech where he compared television with atomic energy. He admitted that television made him feel 'somewhat afraid'. While it had the capacity to 'build up the character of the whole people' it could also 'lead through demoralisation and decadence to disillusion' (*The Irish Times* 1 January 1962) (also cited by Savage 1996: xi, Morash 2009: 172, Cormack 2005: 274, Horgan 2001: 84, Wylie 2007: 237, Gibbons 1984: 21; Pettitt 2000: 147).

De Valera's energetic, modernising counterpart, was the new Taoiseach Sean Lemass. Contrasting with the ideals of national self-sufficiency attributed to de Valera, Lemass defended the mainly imported content of the new broadcaster. He opined that 'the reasonable needs of the Irish people... would not be satisfied by programmes restricted to local origins' (Lemass quoted in *The Irish Times* 1 January 1962) (also cited by Morash 2009: 171; Savage 1996).

Accounts have used de Valera and Lemass as literary devices. De Valera embodies the spent force of Catholic, protectionist conservatism. Lemass represents modernisation and openness. That night, 'Old Ireland', defensive, myopic and out of touch, began to decline as its successor thrived with the introduction of television as

a natural ally. In this, the history of the opening night typifies the dominant framing of the history of television in Ireland. It presents a dichotomous vision of a complex reality. Television is subsumed into the politics of Irish modernization expressed through a set of binary oppositions rooted in the 'old' and the 'new'.

Academic commentaries on television in Ireland have depended heavily on institutions as historical sources. They have relied on what Jerome Bourdon describes as sources 'from above', the state and broadcasters, and 'from the side', press and other media commentary on broadcasting (Bourdon 2015: 12—16; see also Dhoest 2015: 66). Of course, Ireland is unexceptional amid an international tendency to offer national broadcasting histories based on institutional sources (see Schudson 1991: 188-189, Curran 2009: 1, O'Sullivan 1991, Dhoest 2015: 66, Penati 2013: 7—8).

One could attempt to explain the omission of British programming, for example, from the history of television in Ireland as a nationalist bias. However, a simpler explanation is that British programmes left relatively few traces in sources 'from above' and 'from the side'. People were unlikely to write to Irish newspapers to complain about British broadcasters. There was little political capital to be gained from condemning British broadcasters in the Irish parliament. Many of the aspects of television experienced in Irish homes lay outside the game of Irish politics. As such they have been overlooked because academic commentaries have viewed television through the lens of Ireland's parliamentary and cultural politics as recorded by the State, RTÉ and Irish newspapers. Concerns lying outside this game, and its official records, have gone unseen and unreported. As a result, academics have amplified

some ideas about television and Irish society while silencing others.

### **History as a Vision of the Nation and the World**

The key point to be made in this paper is that these histories are not only limited they are also, effectively, nationalist. The new Ireland that began to emerge in the 1960s was dependent on a wholesale embrace of international culture, technology and capital, which came chiefly from American transnational corporations (Bell and Meehan 1988: 77). The dominant narrative not only describes Irish politics but becomes part of it by perpetuating a simplified vision of social change. RTÉ is cast as a modernizing force in an increasingly open and outward looking nation. Here, the work of academics and cultural commentators is compatible with the interests of the nation state and the national broadcaster. By reproducing the mythological binary of 'old' and 'new' it offers the state's, and RTÉ's, preferred visions of itself. By only looking inward, the dominant narrative also transmutes Ireland's dependent modernisation into a willed, autonomous national project.

Nationalist ideologies must often provide not only a vision of the nation but also its global context. An image of a 'global other' may serve as an exemplar or a point of comparison to justify nationalist ideologies and state policies (Çinar 2010: 91). Such visions may change over time. Çinar describes how Turkey looked to France in the 1930s as its model of civilisation. However, Turkish nationalists began to look to America as their model for development as the US rose to global prominence after the second world war. A subtle vision of the Irish nation and its 'global other' is present in the dominant historical narrative on television. It downplays some international influences and erases others. Programmes from America, Ireland's new vision of progress and chief source of investment, gain some acknowledgement. Many programmes from Britain have been erased. However, as one changes from institutional sources to life story interviews, different visions of the nation, its global context and processes of social change become apparent.

## **Personally Remembering the Global**

As Alexander Dhoest argued ‘any historical account of media which excludes its audiences is incomplete’ (2015: 65). This ongoing research aims to complement the dominant narrative using life story interviews as sources ‘from below’ (see Bourdon and Kligler-Vilenchik 2011, Dhoest 2015, Penati 2013, O’Sullivan 1991). These interviews can tell us about how Irish people have experienced television at different stages in their lives. Importantly, the resulting data are not just about television but also about the connections between the medium and social practice (Bourdon and Kligler-Vilenchik 2011: 35)<sup>1</sup>. The research has unearthed programmes and practices that failed to register in institutional histories. The work also reveals a diversity of experience attached to television that is absent from other histories. Importantly, for the purposes of this paper, television offered a variety of experiences of the national that transcended the boundaries of the nation state.

## **Television and a Nation Beyond the State**

Television helped to internationalise the experience of news and foreign politics. Dubliner Matt Fossett remembered watching news footage of the US presidential election on his family’s television in 1960. He was struck that ‘this must have been the first US Presidential election to have been seen by large numbers of Irish people’ and that this probably added to the excitement of Kennedy’s Irish visit in 1963. He reckoned that ‘although live TV coverage from the US via Telstar was still a few years off, there was already enough film footage on TV to make Kennedy a very familiar and charismatic figure in Ireland in 1960’. Sheila Farrell recalled her neighbours coming to their house to watch coverage of JFK on the BBC.

Kennedy’s death in Dallas in 1963 was, unsurprisingly, a common ‘flashbulb’ memory ‘of a sudden, dramatic’ event that is ‘remembered vividly and in great detail’ (Bourdon and Kligler-Vilenchik 2011: 40). Fionnuala Murphy recalled how, working in

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<sup>1</sup> This, of course, creates its own methodological difficulties given the nature of memory, and people’s ongoing exposure to television’s ability to edit and mediate memories of its own past. For Dhoest, oral history can ‘enrich our understanding, not only of processes of remembering but also of the past’ with the proviso that ‘one remains aware of the partial and constructive nature of audience memories, and that other historical sources are used to frame and corroborate these memories’ (2015: 65).

a bakery, she had to deliver bread to a relatively wealthy home. Her own family had no television in 1963. She remembered the owner of the house saying 'oh come in come in 'til you see this, because this is history in the making'. She was brought into the sitting room to see her first sight of television and the Kennedy funeral. The assassination also stood out for Mark Regan. He recalled how in his own home, like many others, JFK's picture hung on the wall alongside that of the pope. He remembering seeing the president 'jerk back in the seat in the motorcade'. This was his first television experience that as he put it 'brought it home to you'. It was 'the one that sticks out' (Mark Regan).

People also had more positive memories of media events with sport playing a prominent role. A number recalled the dramatic World Championship snooker final in 1985 between Steve Davis and Dennis Taylor. Mark Regan again remembered how Taylor had beaten Davis 'in the final round, the final frame, the final ball'. He had watched every game of it. People recalled Irish victories in the Agha Khan equestrian competition hosted in Dublin. Tom Shiels harked back to Ireland's relative success in the 1990 World Cup. He thought it was a cliché but that, nonetheless, the World Cup had been a major event.

I rarely hop up off the seat in front of the television and jump around but in that famous soccer match people always talk about, who scored? Was it Niall Quinn? But for me it wasn't the score. As far as I could see it was whoever saved. And when Packie Bonner [the Irish goalie] saved it I knew they were going to win. Because you could get it in but it was stopping it. And when Packie Bonner saved it I just exploded (Tom Shiels)

People vividly recalled the *Live Aid* charity concert in 1985. Philip Roche was uncertain of the year but remembered that it had been a warm sunny day. He remembered Bono performing on stage and jumping into the crowd. There was 'Freddie Mercury and all that jazz. It was huge' (Philip Roche). Tom Shiels supposed that there was 'a big Irish dimension because of Geldof'.

All my friends and everything would have been a bit cynical because of *Live Aid* but I watched it from beginning to end. And I can't imagine myself doing that with a television programme, watching something all day from beginning to end, and recording it. And I just thought it was terrific and not particularly from an Irish angle, just all these great acts coming together.

As he noted this was ‘before a lot of pop music was on telly. It was before MTV or anything. So you really did get a chance to see people you wouldn’t’.

In his analysis of flashbulb memories, Bourdon found the nation to serve as a common frame through which interactions with television are remembered (Bourdon 2003: 30). The memories related here reflect different types of connection with an Irish nation. Sporting events like the World Cup in 1990 and were examples of a nationalism that Mike Cronin described as being ‘statist at the administrative level, and symbolic on the pitch’ (1999: 142). They allowed ‘national prestige to be played out on the sports field with all of the supporters of that nation investing their identities in the fortunes of their representatives’ (Cronin 1999: 127). The Kennedy assassination, which Bourdon notes as the ‘paradigmatic example of “flashbulb memory”’ for Americans, had great resonance for Irish people because of Kennedy’s Irish roots. Here nationalism transcends the nation state and is diasporic. *Live Aid* was recalled simultaneously as a feast of global pop culture and representation of Irish people through Bob Geldof and U2. Dennis Taylor, from Northern Ireland, was warmly remembered as part of a national sporting moment. The nation was central to many memories. However, unlike most histories of television in Ireland, these recollections suggest that the nation, as people experienced and remembered it, went beyond the borders of the Republic of Ireland. Other memories, however, lay quite outside any recognisable form of Irish nationalism.

### **Television in Ireland before Irish Television**

Considering early adopters of television and the role of British broadcasting in the Republic of Ireland underlines the limitation of taking ‘television’ to be synonymous with RTÉ. Television in Ireland started with British programmes. Most writing on the origins of RTÉ point to the reception of British channels in the Republic, often described as ‘fallout’ signals, as part of the cultural and political motivation behind the creation of an Irish broadcaster (see Savage 1996: 18, Cormack 2005: 273, Horgan 2001: 79). However, thereafter, there is no history of these audiences and no



account of the ongoing presence of British broadcasting in Irish homes.

In 1955 there were an estimated 4,000 television sets in Ireland with 50 new sets being sold every week (see Morash 2009: 168). By 1958 there were an estimated 20,000 television sets in the country (CSO 2000: 57). Shortly after RTÉ's launch, in 1963, the number of television households had leaped to an estimated 237,000 (McLoone and Mac Mahon 1984: 150). This gives some justification to saying, hyperbolically, that television arrived with RTÉ. Nevertheless, in the same year, almost half of Irish television households were receiving British channels (McLoone and Mac Mahon 1984: 150). This proportion remained consistent for twenty years<sup>2</sup>. With the advent of satellite and cable distribution, this upward trend continued. By 2010, almost 9 in 10 Irish homes had access to British and other international channels (Comreg 2010: 71). Following the dominant narrative, television reshaped Irish values by breaking a culture of silence, particularly around sexuality, through discussion and debate. Yet, the programmes from the BBC and Ulster Television (UTV) that Irish people watched and discussed are absent from history.

Radio introduced international broadcasting to Irish homes. Remembering radio, people spoke about Irish and British programmes without any reference to stations. British-made family favourites like *The Archers*, *Mrs Dale's Diary* and *Listen with Mother* were interspersed through recollections of Irish shows like *The Kennedys of Castleross* and *Dear Frankie*. Many narrators remembered family media habits that formed around British programmes. Television did not mark a sudden invasion but rather the continued presence of British and other international broadcasts in Irish homes.

Television reception in Ireland in the 1950s was often sporadic. Matt Fossett described how the 'reception was unreliable most of the time, and on clear nights, especially in summer, the picture and sound would fade out from time to time'. One

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<sup>2</sup> This dipped to almost one-third of the national total as broadcast coverage for RTÉ spread westwards into counties that initially could not pick up any television transmissions. By 1983, however, half the television households in the country had access to British channels once more (McLoone and Mac Mahon 1984: 150).

could never 'sit down with the confidence that one would get to see an entire programme' (Matt Fossett). Like radio, people recalled that watching television programmes, and particularly variety shows and dramas, became a family habit. Sheila Farrell recalled how the first television star she could recall was Alma Cogan who would sing every week on UTV backed by the Beverly sisters. Weekly rituals would later emerge around *Coronation Street*, *Emmerdale* and *Crossroads* as much as they did around later Irish productions like *Glenroe*. Watching BBC and UTV became habitual in some Irish households before the arrival of Irish television.

Matt Fossett commented that 'among those of who watched television before RTÉ, 'there was a definite alienation from most things Irish and an empathy with most things British or American'. He admitted that this 'probably applied only to a very narrow age cohort at a particular time and within a narrow social stratum'. Nonetheless, he thought that early viewers 'identified with a more Anglocentric world than those who did not watch TV, or those whose TV experience began with [R]TÉ'. He recalled how he, and his family, were passionately supportive of England in the World Cup in 1966. They 'were astonished to encounter people who did not share this passion'.

Fossett also recalled how, in 1961, his family began to notice a huge tower dominating the landscape beyond their back windows. This was the RTÉ transmission mast. He continued:

I don't remember my parents being particularly enthused at the prospect of a home-grown television channel, although they had been, and continued to be, listeners of Radio Éireann. They were happy and comfortable with the concept of television being the way it was, a British thing (Matt Fossett).

If television started as a British thing this quickly changed with the arrival of RTÉ which, ironically, was to give Irish viewers much greater access to American programmes. Fossett again recalled how a complaint from a Gaelic language group listed the proposed US programmes that would fill the schedule There was *Bat Masterson*, *Have Gun Will Travel* and *I Love Lucy* among others. The list was meant to be negative but children like himself were, as he put it, 'delirious at the prospect'. He observed that American television programmes differed from their British counterparts in that 'most British programmes were studio-based with little or

no filming on location’.

Studio drama always gave me a claustrophobic feeling. American drama series were largely shot on location, presumably on film, and exuded a sense of the great outdoors... I always experienced a sense of exhilaration when the scenes on TV moved outdoors and, conversely, a sense of feeling cooped up when the action was studio-bound... The two existing British channels broadcast only a few US programmes. In contrast, it seemed that the bulk of non-home-produced content on TÉ (Telefís Éireann) would comprise American pre-recorded programmes. Oh Happy Day! (Matt Fossett)

After the opening of RTÉ, westerns became a staple part of the Irish television diet. *Stoney Bourke*, *Temple Heuston* and *The Virginian* became household names. Tom Shiels recalled that the first television show he had seen on RTÉ, when his family finally got a television, was *Leave it to Beaver*. There were piles of what he referred to as ‘middle class shows’. *The Donna Reid Show* and *Father Knows Best* offered, as he put it, ‘our view of America’. Philip Roche recalled his childhood favourites from the 1970s. They were a mixed bag of British and American shows like *Scooby Doo*, *The Man from UNCLE*, *Catweazle*, *Doctor Who*, and *HR Puffinstuff*. The Irish experience of television was decidedly international. However, histories have paid little attention to the experience of US programmes and none to British ones. Histories based in institutional sources have been similarly blind to the broader social changes that accompanied television.

### **Television and the Changing Use of Space**

The initial arrival of television was an occasion for neighbourly gatherings. People without television would hope to be invited to watch programmes by friends. Tom Shiels remembered that he ‘used to play with kids in the hopes that they’d bring us in to see the television programmes’. He would also travel to relatives who owned a set. One of the earliest programmes he could remember was a biography of Abraham Lincoln that he saw on his uncle’s television. Matt Fossett recalled how in 1958 his aunt and uncle lived in a council estate about a mile from his family. Since ‘they were one of the few families with a television set, they were very popular with the neighbours’.

On Saturday afternoon the house was thronged with neighbourhood kids who left their shoes at the door and sat in rows on the floor in front of the TV to watch the *Lone Ranger*. They were cheerfully plied with bread and jam and mugs of tea by my aunt. Depending on my uncle's mood, which was notoriously volatile, they were sometimes allowed to stay on to watch *Six-Five Special*, *Boots and Saddles* or *Wells Fargo* (Matt Fossett).

Not all recollections of communal viewing were so positive. Sheila Farrell recalled how her family were working class early adopters of television. Neighbours would frequently invite themselves in to watch BBC programmes. This often came as a cost and an inconvenience to her parents but, nevertheless, good etiquette demanded that it be suffered.

And that was a cost to my mother because people would come in and, of course, she'd have to entertain, provide sandwiches and tea and biscuits. And that might mean that my father wouldn't have meat in his sandwiches for his lunch the next day because money, it wasn't an infinite resource. You know what she had every week was what she had to do [with]. So in that sense, that's how it affected her. She had people coming in expected to be, whether they expected to be or not, they had to be entertained if you like (Sheila Farrell).

Notably, neighbours did not need to be invited to make such impositions, 'they'd say I believe this programme is on, I'd really like to see it, may I come in and watch it? In the culture of the day a refusal would have meant a loss of face. This, of course, was to change as Irish homes mirrored international trends and became increasingly self-contained with connections to the outside world managed through, and mediated by, technology.

Philip Roche remembered that the arrival of their first colour television was the occasion of a gathering as neighbours assembled to watch a World Cup soccer tournament. But then 'everybody else got a colour television so the communal thing was fractured... everybody was staying in their own house to watch their colour TV'. Television was only part of a raft of changes in the home. People 'started getting cars, then they started building walls between the gardens. So, the whole thing, television actually was part responsible for breaking up communities, ironically' (Philip Roche).

Mark Regan thought that after television families were more likely to 'sit down

and watch television rather than meeting the neighbours'. This was possible because television could provide a form of artificial company. Similarly, Philip Roche felt that television had offered company to his mother who lived alone. Programmes like *Crossroads* and *Emmerdale* provided stimulation and something to discuss with visiting relatives. Apart from that, he felt that 'it just kept the house warm... it was just a bit of life in the house'. Both felt that the sense of company that television provided removed the need to visit neighbours for companionship, news or entertainment. As Mark Regan put it 'you found that you didn't need to [visit]. And then I suppose the neighbour got the television and they didn't need you either'.

Television offered new forms of connection through cultural and social capital. As Matt Fossett put it, 'in school, those of us who watched TV had a currency of language and reference that others did not share'. Philip Roche also saw that television was 'a communal thing in so far as you'd watch it with people and you'd talk about it with each other or in school'. Mark Regan 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 with peers. For Regan, *The Fugitive* was a key topic on his school bus during 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)

Television became part of a new social arrangement that connected and divided people in novel ways. This mirrored the transformations in the use of space that accompanied modernisation and suburbanisation across the United States and Europe.

Television was instrumental in transforming space. It merged the indoor with the outdoor, and the private with the public space (see Spigel 1992, Meyrowitz 1985). Lynn Spigel wrote that, like modern architectural interiors, television was part

of a private sanctuary that excluded the outside world but also served as an expanse that could incorporate it (Spigel 1992: 101). For Spigel, this interest in 'bringing the world into the home' can be understood as part of a broader historical process in which family houses changed to incorporate social space. Television moved public entertainment into the home (see Spigel 1992: 111—112). Spigel describes 'an odd sense of connection and disconnection' in the new suburbia. There was 'an infinite series of separate but identical homes, strung together like Christmas tree lights on a tract with one central switch'. That central switch was 'the growing communications complex, through which people could keep their distance from the world but at the same time imagine that their domestic spheres were connected to a wider social fabric' (Spigel 1992: 101). For the 'new Ireland', national distinction lay in becoming more like the rest of the west with the United States as an exemplar. Histories within the dominant narrative cannot countenance the transformations in the use of space as a media-related change. Television in the home is synonymous with progress and is taken for granted. Moreover, these quiet transformations left few institutional traces. Thus, they go unseen.

### **The Limits of the Transnational?**

The complex technologies and divisions of labour involved in television production mean that it is inevitably transnational. Transnational media histories then are necessary to understand processes of media development. However, transnational media histories may have their limits. For example, one narrator, Tom Shiels remembered the 'Our World' broadcast, a collaboration between international broadcasters in 1967. He remembered The Beatles performing *All You Need is Love* for the first time. 'That was the British contribution' for the night and 'people were blown away by it'. He remembered watching this on RTÉ but Ireland did not contribute to the *Our World* broadcast. This type of event is a perfect focus for transnational media history (see Lundgren 2015). However, the transnational is rooted, not only in the national, but also in the institutional. The *Our World* broadcast, although it touched Irish viewers, has gone unmentioned by Irish histories of television. It would also likely go undetected by a transnational history incorporating

Irish television because it left few traces at the institutional level<sup>3</sup>.

### **De-Focusing the National**

Nation-bound media histories may, in an admittedly very modest way, be part of the social construction of the nation states in which they are written. They may reproduce nationalist ideologies through preferred narratives and categories because of a dependence on sources from above and from the side. They can obscure external influence and perpetuate imagined, hermetically sealed spaces of homogeneous media experience.

Sources from below, like life story interviews, can reveal a very different experience of television in terms of the nation, its global context and processes of social change. In the Irish context, such a historical approach could be described as being post-nationalist since it challenges the way that the homogeneity and autonomy of the nation state has been imagined, heretofore, by orthodox media histories. As such, a by-product of the use of sources from below is that they may afford a separation between media history scholarship and state nationalism.

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<sup>3</sup> There is a need not only to look across nation states at the level of institutions we also need to move down into societies to understand how media have been used and understood. For comparative work the 'translocal', as used by Darling-Wolf, may offer a type of transnational history from below (2015).

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