2007

Institutional Change and Irish Public Broadcasting

Kenneth W. Murphy

Dublin Institute of Technology, kenneth.murphy@dit.ie

Follow this and additional works at: http://arrow.dit.ie/despart

Part of the Art and Design Commons, Communication Technology and New Media Commons, and the Mass Communication Commons

Recommended Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ARROW@DIT. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of ARROW@DIT. For more information, please contact yvonne.desmond@dit.ie, arrow.admin@dit.ie, brian.widdis@dit.ie.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License
INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE AND IRISH PUBLIC BROADCASTING

Kenneth Murphy

Public service broadcasters are centrally concerned with the making and remaking of the public, negotiating the bounds of publicness and generating place-specific publicity. In recent times the relationship between public broadcasting and public broadcasters, as dedicated institutions, has become problematic. Recent discussions regarding the potential distribution of public service licence fees and the desired institutional depth of European public broadcasters point to the overall ambiguity with which the form of an institutional presence for public service broadcasting (PSB) is now regarded. The debate regarding the necessity of maintaining an institutional presence for public broadcasting has been in gestation since the earliest days of cable and satellite. However, in the present circumstances, as we move towards a market-driven, international, digital broadcasting environment characterised by increasingly fragmented delivery and consumption patterns, the institutional design of public broadcasting and its place in a new policy settlement has been opened up for re-interpretation. The present essay will interrogate how this issue has been played out in the Irish context. As new legislation is developed to create the basis for a unified regulator for the broadcasting sector it is increasingly clear that another major reassessment of the institutional basis of the broadcasting sector in Ireland, and what configuration of institutions will best deliver PSB, cannot be far behind. The essay will consider the challenges of shaping institutional consonance in a new media landscape. It will then briefly consider how the question of institutional design has been dealt with historically in Irish broadcasting, explore the values implicit in its legislative status, recount recent moves towards the repositioning of the public broadcaster, RTÉ, in an emerging policy settlement and evaluate potential developments within this settlement.

Institutions and Public Broadcasting

The challenges facing public broadcasters are many but centrally include the complexity surrounding what it means to be ‘public’ and what it means to be a broadcaster in present times. One response to these uncertainties is to question the legitimacy of the institutional organisation of public broadcasting and point to decentralised market-based solutions as adaptable and flexible in providing programming and innovation relative to public demand. However, the institutional turn in the social sciences also points to the continued importance of ‘institutions’ or formal organisations in giving expression to normative criteria for public service delivery. Philip Schlessinger, in a submission to the UK communications regulator Ofcom, has proposed that institutions provide a preferable mode of public broadcasting because they ‘benefit from the efficiency that comes with having a common purpose … because institutions provide frameworks of value and models of practice and operate as a system of socialisation for those who join them’. This
latter argument for institutional efficiency appears to be one that is under much pressure within a wider move towards market solutions in public life. Both the pressures and the problems facing public institutions in broadcasting are compounded by wider currents of thought that question their efficacy. In general we can take these currents of thought seriously as they tend to underline political and economic interest groups that have a stake in market modes of media development. Two explicit theoretical positions can be labelled as the semiotic democratic and third way approaches, whereas a more implicit dimension derives from neo-liberalism.

The first current of thought that underlines a move away from institutional centrality in public broadcasting can be labelled that of semiotic democracy. In this framework the sheer increase in bandwidth for the delivery of diverse television programming has led to a situation wherein ‘active’ audiences are provided with a wealth of material from which to generate a wealth of meanings. In this model the plural public is well served by pluralistic publicity. Thus the reality of the pluralisation of publics and the uncertainty regarding exactly what public broadcasting entails is solved by dependence on an underlying market framework. Thus the funding of specific institutions for public service, and a unitary public sphere, is no longer tenable. Proponents of this position tend to suggest that these institutions have largely neglected or misrepresented plural groups within society, crowbarring them into the collective ‘we’ of the nation. In a more consciously modernist approach, third way theorists tend to underline the importance of a social market in the delivery of public policy agendas. This involves a well-regulated public and private sector, complemented by community and not-for-profit enterprises delivering public goods. In this line of thinking forms of ownership are no longer important; it is how goods are delivered that counts. This social market discourse gives rise to a post-liberalisation ‘new public interest’ geared towards the citizen-consumer. Within this social market discourse, the wider processes of market development and the marketisation of public institutions tend not to be problematised. For example, the BBC’s role in generating diverse content via the private independent television production sector tends to be celebrated but the potential limits placed on its subsequent use of those public goods due to the retention of copyright by the private companies is not discussed. Neo-liberalism, of course, has an implicit consequence for the institutions of all kinds under public ownership; either they are subject to privatisation or they are reconfigured to behave as if they are private organisations, using market-based modes of operation to satisfy consumer demands. It is contended by Foucauldian analysts of neo-liberalism that as values and models of practice change within these institutions, their constitution of the public also changes. Thus the individuation at the heart of neo-liberalism posits a reorientation towards the consumer as opposed to the citizen.

It is important to note that these trends of thought, through one means or another, do make the connection between institutional forms and the related way in which the public and publicness is articulated. Thus it can be argued that, on the basis of socio-economic and socio-cultural inequalities, a pursuit of institutional form and related re-interpretations of publicness remains central to democratic media policy making. The discourse of democracy entails a shaping of institutions based on the complexity of the dynamics of the public. To proceed it is thus necessary to consider how public institutions have embodied public values in the past and to consider the normative frameworks that emerge for a reshaping of democratic media policy in the present tense. It is these normative frameworks that provide a map for future institutional design and open the way
for a re-interpretation of the public and publicness. However, before doing so, it is important to evaluate the broader structural shifts which impact on PSB.

Broadcasting is being reconfigured to very different cultural, spatial, social, technological, economic and political logics. To consider these logics in further depth it is necessary to single them out; however, it is best to think of these logics as mutually constitutive and resulting in the incorporation of broadcasting more fully within the field of the cultural industries:

- **Spatial:** globalisation points to the spatial reordering of politics, economics and culture with an emerging global system reducing the barriers to movement of production and distribution around the globe. In broadcasting, the flow of programming and intellectual property has increased whereas formerly national television cultures are relocated within corporate owned and transnationally regulated broadcasting systems.

- **Cultural:** international systems of cultural exchange give rise to hybrid cultural forms where the global and the local are in constant dialogue. Hybrid genres and process of glocalisation are evident in broadcasting.

- **Social:** identities and subjectivities are increasingly formed around plural markers of difference arising out of culture, sexuality, gender, race and geography. In general, class as a marker of difference has declined and the materiality of the other markers of difference tends to be under-expressed. In cultural consumption this gives rise to different taste publics and increased complexity for representative media organisations.

- **Economic:** the market mode of distribution has become the hegemonic basis for producing and distributing goods. This market mode underlines attempts to find new growth regimes for capitalism based on varied paradigms such as post-Fordism, informationalism and post-industrialism. Thus liberalisation, privatisation, commercialisation and re-regulation are macro policy approaches that restructure modes of production. Supply-side economic policy making is increasingly centred on concepts of competitiveness, flexibility, reflexivity and networked organisation. Increasingly, broadcasting as a cultural industry is implied in this policy approach.

- **Political:** centrist approaches have emerged in democratic polities together with the decline of political visions oriented around alternative models of development. For broadcasters, the emergence of consensus politics impacts on their civic political role in society. Alongside this, civil society and varied social movements emerge to articulate non-party-political politics.

- **Technological:** the emergence of digital technologies as the infrastructure of new economic paradigms engenders new logics of production, distribution and consumption and new media services and experiences. Under the rubric of digitalisation, broadcasting (as with other ‘old’ media industries) must negotiate these new organisational and consumption logics. For all broadcasters the process of operating in digital environments presents the need for strategic reorientation.

In each of these broad developments, historically specific institutional factors mediate the way in which they are articulated. Thus political economy, history, institutions, culture and social specificities all play a role in shaping the particular negotiation of these factors. For broadcasting, the reality is no different. However, given that the value systems underpinning broadcast structures may be contingent, it is necessary to consider how the particular expression of the public interest may be reasserted. As such a re-statement of the
underlying values implicit in broadcasting regulation in the twentieth century can be considered.

In its classic formulation PSB in Western Europe complemented the variously redistributive, national-cultural, centralised, and potentially egalitarian mesh of institutions that helped to regulate Fordist welfare capitalism. The holy trinity of public broadcasting’s mission to inform, entertain and educate related to broader ideas about the democratic, civilising and social responsibilities of the state. Citizens in a democracy should be informed about their political choices, be united through access to a wide variety of culture, and, all equally, should have the opportunity to improve themselves and society through education. The state no longer seeks to regulate in such a way, and such a mode of regulation no longer makes sense. The new socio-cultural dynamics (pluralisation) and an emerging techno-economic paradigm (digitalisation) place homogeneous and top-down concepts of the ‘public’ and the public interest under strain. Yet late modernity is still characterised by material inequality, plurality is not guaranteed by the market, critical publicity is still a vital dimension of democracy, common bonds are needed to sustain diversity, and unrestrained inequity continues to logically undermine the social foundations of democracy. In short, the conditions for democratic values still pertain whereas present political conditions exacerbate the need for an expansion of democratic values. In broadcasting, the long-evolving contexts of support for political, social and cultural citizenship are still a state and therefore regulatory responsibility. However, even if these values do pertain, they do so in a radically different media environment.

The core democratic values distilled from twentieth-century policy goals such as universal service, universal access, public service, plurality and diversity are, according to McQuail and Van Cuilenburg, those of access, freedom and control/regulation. Access refers to the openness of communication structures and the media that they carry. It also refers to the ability to send communications, either through representative or participative means. Freedom refers to the relative autonomy for communicators from governmental, economic or social and political forces that may hinder exchange of meaning. Control/regulation points to the need to proscribe access that works counter to basic human rights and the necessity for accountability on the part of accesses. In general terms, these goals hold to a Habermasian conceptualisation of the public sphere without following through on an ideal-typical condition of rationality. Publicity and publicness thus have rational dimensions but also involve affective, aesthetic and agonistic dimensions that arise out of differing collective/individual experiences of the public sphere legitimised by the universal rights of citizenship. The conditions of critical publicity are thus no longer equated with a purely statist conceptualisation of the exercise of public reason although the state can guarantee the conditions on which collectivities of unequal power can both represent themselves and their claims. On the other hand, rationality is implicit in the formulation of accessible public spaces so deliberative practices reside in the overall planning and execution of policy goals as opposed to the outcome. In general, what this points to vis-à-vis broadcasting is the continuing importance of critical publicity, access, relative autonomy and multi-genre, multimedia, multi-topical service delivery. It points to the benefits of a public service system that would provide a shared communicative space capable of managing difference and reassertion of the quality of equality.

Thus public policy that moves in the direction of the re-articulation of social, political and cultural goals can be elaborated through concepts such as capabilities, civil society,
participative parity and cultural democratisation. The capabilities approach, developed from the work of Amartya Sen, highlights the importance of media in general in contributing to the ability of citizens to realise real opportunities generally available in society. At a basic level policies directed towards media literacy are crucial here whereas universal access to educational, cultural and informational media is also important. This requires state support/regulation for myriad media sources as well as the technologies/literacies that support them. The civil society dimension points to the importance of varied groups in society that contribute to the political constitution of society. Here there is recognition that party politics is no longer strictly representative. The realisation of a pluralistic media system is related to the recognition of different value systems at play within social groups and the necessity of making adjustments relative to those value frameworks, and, hence, engendering participative parity. However, market frameworks are unlikely to meet demands for ‘pluriversalism’, especially for less advantaged groups, so state support is still a necessity. Markers of plurality in the media would thus not rest on the multiplication of genre, forms or markets but on the actual success of a media system in representing the varied members of society. Cultural democratisation points to the wide availability of cultural resources throughout a media system and the way in which different genres and forms are treated in a non-hierarchical manner; quality in any given genre is prioritised. This reflects the reality of routine cultural discernment yet does not distinguish between high and low culture. It can be suggested that public service media, in varied ways, already embody these dimensions.

Other commentators point to the cultural commons, open source media and decentralised open networks as fleshing out some of these principles towards a more technologically literate digital public policy. The deployment of digital networks and the move to digital standards in existing analogue media change the dynamic of production and consumption and introduce a blurring of the line between producers and consumers of media. Access to these networks presents the possibilities of developing a cultural commons wherein non proprietary technology and content allow the generation of ground-up socio-cultural environments and cultural forms. This represents a departure from the consumerist ethos of corporate colonisation of cyberspace and an alternative to paternalistic dimensions of traditional public media. However, the latter can provide the basis for dialogue between representative and participative media. This would safeguard the relevance of public media in future environments where turning on the television will soon present a similar experience to going online. Open source technology refers to software solutions that are generated on a not-for-profit basis, thus circumventing the proprietary and closed nature of commercially developed technologies. The code that underlines the software is open to all and thus constantly adapted, improved and open to individual or group customisation. Urrichio cites the example of the City of Munich managers who introduced the Linux operating system, in favour of Microsoft’s, for its 14,000 public computers in an effort to further empower its citizens. Open source can be complemented by shareware—software programs available for free that enhance accessibility and creative control over cultural production. All of this is made possible by the logic of peer-to-peer networking available through decentralised networks. In each of these cases questions of access, freedom and control/accountability are negotiated vis-à-vis non-proprietary standards utilised by self-organising groups. These possibilities provide logics and alternatives that have democratising potentials providing the basis for re-imagining the public.
What should be clear from this is that we are talking about the reassertion of an ideal typical construction for public policy in communications—one that provides a structure of ambition oriented towards a disciplined reinvention of both the publicly owned institutions of communication and the very notion of the public that underlies their ethos. Whereas the real conditions of political economic pressure that surrounds the institution of public service practice is paramount, without consideration of alternative spaces for the generation of public practice there is a danger that whereas public institutions may persevere into the digital universe, if their ethos and practices are simply aligned with private practice then privatisation of purpose may also occur. It is the contention of the remainder of this article that in relation to the restructuring of RTÉ that policy transfer has occurred wherein beneficial elements of European corporatist approaches to socio-economic co-ordination have been potentially undermined by a concurrent tendency to neo-liberal institutional (re)design. This institutional design will impact on how the public is constituted.

Against this contextual backdrop, the following sections will provide a historical perspective on how the institutional basis of Irish broadcasting developed in the way it has. The article will then consider the more recent phase of restructuring and address how questions of RTÉ’s ongoing relevance have been dealt with. It suggests that a central explanation of RTÉ’s institutional reshaping can be attributed to a larger policy environment of neo-liberal corporatism. Inherent in this policy approach is a duality through which RTÉ was, through public consultation, regarded as a public broadcaster, but through private consultancies restructured to behave more like a private broadcaster. The normative frames of access, freedom and control/regulation are utilised in this excavation.

**Situating RTÉ as Public Broadcaster**

RTÉ is a dual-funded public broadcaster that has responsibility for two national television channels and four national radio channels. It has been central to the Irish broadcasting landscape since its establishment as radio broadcaster 2RN in 1926. For the most part it has operated as a monopoly, although liberalisation introduced national and regional competition in broadcasting in legislation in 1988. It operates as an integrated broadcaster but since 1994 it has been legislatively compelled to outsource a percentage of its television programming to the independent sector. As a small nation, the licence fee awarded to the public broadcaster allows it to compete strategically within the international broadcasting environment that has always prevailed due to Ireland’s proximity to the British mediascape and, since the 1980s, the availability of cable and satellite technology. However, the new private, local and community broadcasters complain that RTÉ’s access to public funds allows it to behave anti-competitively and effectively undermine the basis for competition in broadcasting within Ireland. This creates a tension wherein RTÉ contributes to pluralism vis-à-vis the international broadcasting environment, but is accused of impairing pluralism on the domestic scene. As policy makers seek a new policy settlement in relation to broadcasting, they must negotiate this structural dilemma. Although offering domestically generated content, RTÉ’s distinctiveness is often called into question. Contributing to this is the fact that RTÉ’s dual-funding mandate compels it to be commercially competitive. As a McKinsey survey of public broadcasters around the world has suggested, it is these less distinctive mixed-revenue public broadcasters that are increasingly open to scrutiny in the new open market environment in
which they operate. As neither ‘pure public broadcaster’ nor ‘commercial operator’ they become increasingly difficult to distinguish and thus legitimate. Thus, there are increasingly hard choices to be made regarding the institutional development of the Irish broadcasting sector as competition bites and public funding is, for the most part, channelled into the single public broadcaster. Added to this, the basis for creating incentives for public service duties amongst other indigenous broadcasters is decreasing in the digital universe. These structural logics, which are replicated in other countries, point towards a reassessment of the exclusivity of the licence fee. However, it is necessary to consider how broadcasting has developed historically, in order to consider its potential futures.

Institutions in the History of Irish Broadcasting

RTÉ’s precursor, 2RN, was developed in 1926 as a state-run broadcasting monopoly. It represented a rather under-funded and defensive aspect of the new state’s communication policy. A licence fee was raised to help fund the service complemented by an erratic approach towards the benefits of advertising revenue. From the initial plans to introduce television broadcasting into Ireland it was proposed, at several levels, that the propagation of public or national broadcasting may occur within a privately owned publishing model. One company, the Michelson Group, proposed that it could be licensed to build and operate a broadcasting infrastructure, but that the government might specify public service content that it would thus carry. Whereas the suspicions of both the Department of Communications and Finance eventually led to the rejection of this approach, it is significant that RTÉ Television came into being at a time when the government was largely shifting away from state investment in enterprise and moving towards foreign direct investment. The key argument that persuaded the modernising prime minister, Sean Lemass, to retain state ownership over broadcasting was that of the future maintenance of cultural autonomy. For a post-colonial nation, this rationale had a particular force and resonance. However, behind the scenes, successive civil servants used the currency of this argument as a vehicle for their more specific commitment to a normative public service agenda, modelled on the BBC and wedded to a concept of relative institutional autonomy. This careful masquerade was essential in circumstances where both the Church and political elites demonstrated wariness towards both state intervention and the new medium. It was also a necessity of the practical but taboo appropriation of British socio-institutional innovation. The new television service was not without its objectors. Varied activists opposed it on the basis of its lack of attention to Irish language content, its Dublin-centric agenda, its liberalism and its inaccessibility. This led to varied attempts to establish rival television and radio services on a local basis. However, it was not until the 1980s that these isolated PR stunts became a groundswell.

Despite the early activism of language nationalists and community broadcasters, the key pressure for an alternative to RTÉ arose from the demand for local English language stations broadcasting Anglo-American popular music programming. Implicit in the mushrooming of illegal radio broadcasters was the latent demand for liberalised radio services. The first significant rethinking of the institutional basis of broadcasting in Ireland occurred during the 1980s when both the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael parties showed themselves to be open to the concept of liberalising broadcasting in answer to myriad pressures, both national and international. The Labour Party, on the other hand, sought to develop RTÉ as the institutional hub of any expanded regional or local broadcasting. Fianna
Fáil in government was the first to act on its intentions. It introduced legislation in 1988 which created the basis for a number of local broadcasting stations, a national radio station and a national television station, to be overseen by an independent regulatory authority. Whereas, subsequently, local radio thrived, national radio and television had difficulty getting off the ground. This led to the then Communications Minister, Ray Burke, signalling plans to alter the channel identity of RTÉ’s second radio station, divert advertising revenue towards the private sector and disburse the licence fee amongst different broadcasting interests. Whereas these policy measures were rejected, Burke did manage to place a cap on RTÉ’s advertising revenue and tie it to the licence fee in a way which essentially gave the government control of RTÉ’s revenue-earning potential. As it later emerged, Burke had been taking payments from private broadcast interests, in return for favourable legislation. Thus, at this early phase, political patronage, antipathy to RTÉ and marketisation in international broadcasting combined to shape a structure that did little to anticipate how the institutional configuration may operate in an overall system of broadcasting. That is, the rationality inherent in the policy was as much motivated against RTÉ as it was for a mixed but complementary broadcasting environment.

If liberalisation demonstrated early benefits for diversity in radio outlets then the dynamic for television was different. The inability to get the financial backing for a competitor to RTÉ led the subsequent minister, in a centre-left government, to shift attention to developing plurality of provision within RTÉ. This coincided with the intention within the EU’s Television without Frontiers Directive to develop the economic base of independent television production in Europe through the enforcement of commissioning quotas on broadcasters. Since RTÉ television was, in effect, the only domestic outlet for independent television producers it became the life source of the then diminutive production sector. RTÉ’s indigenous production budget now supported a plurality of independent producers which operated in close co-operation with the broadcaster. It is this institutional innovation that has contributed to an input of programming into Irish broadcasting rather than the eventual arrival of the independent broadcaster TV3 in 1998, which has yet to have significant impact on indigenous production.

Neo-liberal Corporatism and the Limits to Autonomy

Restructuring in Irish broadcasting has always centred on the public broadcaster. Since the mid-1990s, growth in the advertising market has assisted the establishment of the Irish language station TG4 and the commercially run national television broadcaster TV3. This in turn created new pressures for RTÉ. Along with competition for advertising revenue, TV3’s failure to live up to its original commitments on content quotas were at various times blamed on (1) RTÉ’s overcharging of network fees, (2) RTÉ’s alleged use of the licence fee to undercut advertising rates, and (3) RTÉ’s use of the licence fee to bid for high-profile, non-PSB content. In the face of these charges TV3 rescinded regulatory obligations whereas the regulator IRTC/BCI appeared to lack any policy instruments to penalise it. At one point TV3 pointed to the possibility of moving exclusively to the cable and satellite platforms if it was forced to honour its public interest obligations. Thus the ability to wring public service concessions from the commercial competitor were minimal whereas the pressure on the former monopolist was mounting.

Moving into a soon-to-be fully digital environment, the screen output of the public broadcaster and its ability to respond to a multi-distributional multichannel interactive
environment had exposed the problems facing RTÉ vis-à-vis finances, internal organisation and responsiveness to change. Thus the eventual policy move labelled ‘restructuring public sector broadcasting’ was informed by a number of cross-cutting agendas:

- Both European and national government pressure for increased clarification on what PSB entailed, how it was funded, how these funds were used and the impact of RTÉ’s activities on other broadcasters.
- The pressure from commercial operators for more transparency in RTÉ’s operations, the narrowing of its operation to market failure, reduction in its privileges and recognition of their public service content.
- A growing crisis within RTÉ itself in relation to its diminutive licence fee revenue, its over-reliance on commercial revenue, its increasingly untenable cost base and its inability to adjust to technological change and competition due to entrenched financial insecurity and historical under-funding.
- A transfer of broadcasting policy responsibilities from RTÉ to the emerging institutional nexus of Irish and EU regulatory bodies.

By 2000, the emerging competition-led policy paradigm in communications and its accompanying regulatory structure created the contexts for a review of public services in general. Added to this the incumbent government had shown itself ideologically averse to public-sector expansion, in the interests of private-sector development. It is in this context that the policy approaches to restructure public broadcasting took on a dual approach, commensurate with a general policy environment of neo-liberal corporatism. According to Boucher and Collins, the Irish political economy is characterised by a dualistic European neo-corporatism (social partnership) that is accompanied by American institutional redesign (flexibilisation, outsourcing and productivism). In summary, public service institutions are preserved, but only as a quid pro quo for the introduction of flexible work practices and productivist-based mechanisms of operation. This is accompanied by a relative reduction in state presence to make way for market enhancement. This logic appears to have been grafted onto the reform of public broadcasting. On the one hand, via the Forum on Broadcasting, the legitimacy of the public broadcaster was openly tested in a public consultation with significant input from key stakeholders. On the other hand, consultants were hired to evaluate and prescribe an internal restructuring of RTÉ. Throughout this process the consultants drew on neo-liberal technologies of government whilst orienting RTÉ to internalised market governance, bringing it more in line with market-based modes of operation. What is key here is the way in which ‘productivism’ was introduced as a key measure of success for the public broadcaster’s operation. That is, the measurable calculus of quantity of output has overridden other priorities in the measurement of public broadcasting. For public broadcasting, which aspires to distinctiveness, this can reduce the agency of its schedulers and producers, narrowing the necessary autonomy to offset quantity of output against the quality of output relative to its public purposes. Certain genres of programming can be expensive relative to eventual output measured as broadcast time. For example, observational documentary or investigative journalism require intensive research and field recording time that may only eventually yield one half hour of programming. Thus public broadcasting has become enmeshed in the rhythms and temporalities of private business reducing its autonomy to
deepen the quality of its programming. The settlement on quantity as a marker of efficiency is perhaps less a political choice and more the outcome of a political culture.

The approach to restructuring involved a number of component dimensions. It began with the clarification of RTÉ’s legislative status under the 2001 Act followed by the creation of an independent body to convene a ‘forum on broadcasting’ which held a number of public meetings and consultations and then reported back to the government with recommendations, foremost of which was the desired centrality of RTÉ in the institutional mix of broadcasters and the need for a licence fee increase to fund its purposes.23 Parallel to this the government commissioned a number of consultants’ reports on the ability of RTÉ to implement change within the organisation. As mentioned above, this process was led chiefly by private-sector expertise who brought with them their own rationalities for restructuring the public broadcaster. These two phases were then followed up by the Department’s summation of the Forum’s findings and an outline plan for a new framework of operation for the public broadcaster. RTÉ was to survive, but in doing so it lost a degree of autonomy and a reduced profile within the overall broadcasting landscape. In general terms RTÉ was brought more in line with other market-governed public-sector enterprise. The mechanisms through which accountability, transparency and, however incidentally, a reduction of autonomy were achieved can be observed in the development of the public charter, new trading agreements, a commitment to government-mandated programming objectives, the eventual dissolution of the board of governors to be replaced by a single regulator for the broadcasting sector, the top slicing of 5 per cent of the licence fee to be used as contestable funds, its reconstitution as a commercial state company with a board of twelve members and its opening up to consistent audit and rationalisation in return for an index-linked licence fee. Whereas this settlement appeared to produce a mixture of positive moves towards popular accountability and recognition of the limitations of concentrating all resources on a single institution within a public service system, it also points to a further reduction in the freedom of a public broadcaster to oversee its own operations, independently of productivist pressures. One senior television producer echoes others when he sums it up thus: ‘you are conscious of dealing in a world in which performance is measured, and sometimes measured in terms of figures, and sometimes you do wonder the extent to which other equally important measures of the success of a television programme are being used’.24 RTÉ has always been sandwiched between international logics and domestic demands, but has previously been allowed a degree of autonomy to pursue its public service mandate.

Public Broadcasting and Residual Conservative Corporatist Values

Whereas unpacking the concept of public broadcasting is a notoriously difficult process, doing so at a moment of widespread political, economic and technological change brings added difficulties. However, using a historical institutionalist perspective, it can be suggested that RTÉ has continually had to negotiate the conservative corporatist values that characterise other nation-building institutions.25 Unlike the UK, Ireland has had no ongoing policy cycle charged with the review and evaluation of the structure and purpose of broadcasting in wider Irish society at given intervals. Indeed, such a lack of open policy cycles points to the centrality of broadcasting in the eventual construction of the space of ‘the public’ in Irish society. This latter-day structural lack partially deprived public broadcasting of the contexts in which it could live and breathe. Instead, the concept of PSB
was discussed only at times of perceived crisis or impending structural change. Thus it may be suggested that public broadcasting in Ireland has tended to be rather under-theorised in relation to its ‘high order’ values, lacking the systemic support of the wider development of a public sphere. Nevertheless, it is possible to characterise Irish public broadcasting as having certain particular dimensions. Irish public broadcasting tended to be developed in internalised processes with informal input from major power holders in Irish society. Defined negatively, that is against what it is not, it has been defined structurally as opposed to philosophically/sociologically and has tended to rely on some formulation of a cultural imperialism/cultural nationalism thesis to legitimise its existence. In general terms, its broad mission of contributing to the democratic, cultural and social life of the country has been developed incrementally. In the first phase of Irish radio broadcasting, the state-run radio broadcasting entity was developed within the post-colonial rationale of technological imperative, cultural nationalism and information control. The negotiated purpose of the service was to sediment collective identities within the young state through a steady diet of Irish/Ireland and Gaelic culture whilst demonstrating Ireland’s independence and modernity to the world. The second phase of television coincided with greater liberalisation in Irish society. The broadcaster attained an increased degree of independence, became more outward looking and was more readily recognised as being involved in the democratic process. Thus, as well as educating and entertaining, RTÉ was now charged with informing. In 1974, a Broadcasting Amendment Act broadened the definition of national broadcasting to include a more liberal secular conceptualisation of broadcasting as a resource for citizenship, pointing to a move beyond a narrow cultural nationalism. Thus RTÉ as a broadcaster attempted to develop its purposes as a liberal-secular broadcaster but continually met resistance in this regard. In these circumstances, RTÉ tended to render its own critical function invisible, that is, its commitment to public discourse, ethical social relations and humanism tended to be under-articulated, whereas its centrality in the maintenance and marketing of Irish cultural identity and parliamentary democracy carried political and commercial clout. RTÉ presented structuralist arguments which had relevance, and support within, the sociological and institutional particularities of Ireland’s particular encounter with twentieth-century modernity. Thus if RTÉ existed within a tension of being a national public broadcaster, then it has yet to be allowed to move on from this previous incarnation and reinvent what a socially sharing institution, such as public broadcasting, does in the contexts of an increasingly pluralistic media society.

The conservatism at the heart of the mandate for public broadcasting is not untypical of institutions developed by nascent democratic states. The conservatism emerged as the institution negotiated its place amongst the longer established institutions of nationalism, religion and party politics, all of which have regarded themselves as popular expressions of the public and therefore crowd out any notional space of a negotiated public sphere. In a nation which has afforded few resources towards the development of social rights and social policy, RTÉ, as a potentially socially sharing institution, has had little room to manoeuvre, and has thus remained purposefully ambiguous about its functions and purpose. To be a national commercial broadcaster, has been its legitimating function in political-economic terms.

In the UK, public broadcasting emerged as an institutional expression of social democracy; RTÉ, however, has always had to negotiate its position within the institutional matrix of ‘corporatist conservatism’. At the heart of this matter is the legislative framing of RTÉ’s purpose as a public broadcaster. In both its legislative basis and the re-statement of
its purposes in the recently developed charters, RTÉ is mandated to ‘reflect the social, cultural and democratic values of Ireland’. As a broadcaster with a central role in generating publicity and channelling public opinion towards the political elite, the broadcaster also has a central role in the formation of social identities. Purely reflecting values will re-enforce and consequently suppress alternative claims for voice and justice. In contrast, where there is a strong understanding of the role of public broadcasting as incrementally facilitating social change, in Ireland, the mandate for public broadcasting tends to sediment already existing social identities. In the UK, the BBC has been rearticulated within a social contract which emphasises improving individual capabilities, enhancing multiculturalism, democratising technological development and supporting civil society. It has, arguably, retained relative autonomy within the expression of a new social contract. In Ireland, the public purposes of public broadcasting are stifled in a changing media environment. They still carry the values of corporatist conservatism at a time of accelerated social change. Added to this, the autonomy of the institution of public broadcasting is increasingly reduced.

At the present moment of socio-economic and related media change, RTÉ’s purposeful conservatism now presents itself as a further rationale for its reduction as an institutional base for broadcasting. In order to consider this ambiguity, it is also imperative to consider the impact of RTÉ’s dual funding. Limited potential revenue, a lack of access to the licence fee and increased reliance on commercialism has meant that the higher order values of PSB such as innovation, quality, diversity, range, plurality and distinctiveness have often been the subject of past critiques of RTÉ’s performance. For its harsher critics, RTÉ has never been more than a state-owned national broadcaster with commercial instincts, catering for formal democratic politics and constantly seeking out the largest audiences with mainstream entertainment. More nuanced readings point to the degree to which RTÉ has successfully negotiated its lack of systemic support, harnessed advertising revenue for public purposes and contributed to a wider public life, albeit with great difficulty. However, present moves to restructure the organisation do little to expand the role of the ‘public’ in ‘public’ broadcasting. Indeed, the space for distinctive practice has become much thinner. Given the conservative corporatist remit of a national public broadcaster, alternative public provision may be best sourced from outside the broadcaster. However, the absence of state funding points to the difficulties inherent in generating new public media institutions.

**RTÉ/Independent Sector as Third Way in Irish Broadcasting?**

RTÉ no longer has the kind of discretion it once enjoyed to decide on its own schedules and activities based on its own consideration of the purposes of public broadcasting. Its external commissioning is now, following restructuring, linked more closely to the market mechanisms of output. It was also an essential element of the government’s negotiations with RTÉ that, in return for a licence fee increase, the broadcaster became more mindful of its ‘other customers’, that is, the advertisers. RTÉ, alone in Irish broadcasting, can deliver the kinds of audiences that the advertisers want, but has hitherto asserted that this was not its chief purpose. By tying external commissions to TV ratings (TVRs), RTÉ has at once been structured to become more commercially oriented and also more populist in its programming. There is now also a Chinese wall between commercial and licence fee revenue that make cross-subsidisation of programming less of a
possibility. Indeed, there is now a clear division of labour in relation to what can be made in RTÉ and that which goes out to the independent production sector. RTÉ’s productions have become studio bound, with all long-run fixed-cost programming staying in house, whereas location programming is now handled by the independents. The immediate result of this schism is that RTÉ’s core public service informational programming has become indelibly bound to the live studio. Either through news, current affairs or talk-based programming the space of discourse is that of the studio. Thus those who work within the value system of the public service system are precluded from engaging in a range of genres that can be considered significant in addressing different ‘taste publics’ (a term that refers to the differentiation of publics via their cultural consumption).

However, RTÉ commissions as a public broadcaster and its Independent Production Unit (IPU) has created a relationship with the independent sector that sees its public service values translated into external productions. In a number of ways the outsourcing of programming has become compatible with a changing public service remit. The independent sector sustains a greater range of voices being brought to bear on RTÉ programming, reflecting RTÉ’s commitment to diversity, but doing so within an overall framework of its codes and guidelines, retaining significant input into the form, genre and ethos of particular programmes arising out of the needs of the schedules. Independent producers testify to an ongoing negotiation with the broadcaster that does not involve a significant amount of editorial interference from on high. They also testify to the domestic focus of programming which to a large extent is valued for its cultural relevance. The ‘flexible’ nature of labour in the independent sector is often cited as the basis on which access is secured for new writers, directors and producers, thereby preventing generational stasis in the broadcast talent. In general the independents allow for economies of scope that extend the genre range, values and talent in a way that the bureaucratic structure of RTÉ cannot. A precursory analysis of schedules indicates an increase in genre range and an annual renewal of programming. Independent producers point thus to a convergence between the public broadcaster and the private sector as the relationship between schedulers, IPU and independent companies becomes more symbiotic and operations within RTÉ are more aware of the independents’ mode of operation. This points to a genuinely new entity in PSB that goes beyond mere quota filling and sees RTÉ develop into a mixed-base broadcaster with differential organisational logics combined within its overall structure. Thus RTÉ has emerged out of a great deal of structural change as a mixed-revenue broadcaster encompassing two different cultures of production and retaining an overall steering role in relation to its ultimate determination of schedules within the requirements of its charter and commitments. However, it is not clear how this role is to expand beyond independent/RTÉ integration. The independents are ultimately micro businesses, aware of the relationship between their continued success with commissions and RTÉ’s need to have them drive TVRs and output. The relationship with the broadcaster has led to a convergence of operation whereas the sector itself is made up of many ex-RTÉ staff, drawn from a similar socio-economic background. In these circumstances, the much vaunted flexibility of the ‘Indies’ also underlines their vulnerability—so-called pluralism in output can quickly become advertiser-driven copycat TV populism. Additionally, as independent companies experience the need to expand into larger markets, it is not certain as to whether they will retain an institutional orientation towards the values and ethos of RTÉ. Lastly, as with broadcasting elsewhere, it is likely that the terms of trade vis-à-vis
copyright will move to favour the independents. This will present difficulties in relation to the potential accessibility of these semi-public goods in the digitally archived future.

A Third-sector Pluralism?

Since the launch of TV3 and the development of the community sector, from the independent regulator the concept of three pillars of public broadcasting in Ireland has emerged; the dedicated public broadcaster; the commercial sector; and community broadcasting, all overseen by the overarching sectoral regulator. This presents a scenario for the reconfiguration of the institutional organisation of broadcasting overall and points to the need for policy innovation in relation to a new policy settlement for the emerging broadcasting sector in Ireland. However, if RTÉ’s shift in internal productivist regime and continued weddedness to the values of corporate conservatism continue, it is likely that justification for its retention of the licence fee revenue will increasingly be open to challenge from the other pillars.

RTÉ’s development of a third way emerges out of a combination of both pragmatism and incremental adaptation that is the hallmark of the development of public broadcasting in Ireland. However, whereas it has much that is beneficial in terms of securing the broadcaster’s future and also developing its programme repertoire, there is space for development of its capacity to forge a relationship with an increasingly pluralistic society, via both representation and access to the airwaves. If anything, this is where a structural deficit has emerged in Irish broadcasting with the commercial and political incentive to serve a broadly homogeneous concept of the audience. Critics charge that centralised parliamentary politics and the consumer culture tend to be over-represented in relation to the needs of securing as large an audience/licence fee as possible. This makes it difficult to depart from largely consensual areas of experience and thus has a tendency to under-represent non-party politics and the under-consuming classes in terms of allowing access to circulation of their own stories and representing those to the majority culture. The relationship between the public broadcaster and the independents points to increased diversity vis-à-vis RTÉ’s previous schedules but also a degree of convergence between RTÉ’s present output and that of UK, European and American channels now available to the majority of the population. Given the nature of RTÉ’s reduced production base and large-capacity spend on outside programming there is space to take risks and innovate in ways that may not always please the productivist logic of governance. This can involve co-productions between Indies/community producers, communities/public broadcasters in varied combinations. In the past this type of programme approach has been shown to hold its own in schedules when approached in imaginative and creative fashion. In fact the emergence of factual entertainment, if handled within a public service mode, can engage with complex issues of social change whilst also allowing access to the screens and a degree of control over representation for invisible groups within society. It is strategies such as this that point to the future of a distinctive public broadcaster with a justifiable access to public funding. However, given the structural pressures towards the consensual dynamic, rationalisation and competition, it demands imaginative policy making to allow for this space. RTÉ has previously been successful in expanding the plurality and diversity of programming available across the airwaves. What is now missing is any conceptualisation of how a publicly owned institution may, in terms of procedure and output, further contribute to the plurality of production and diversity of output. As in most third way
politics, the mysterious third sector appears to be missing in Irish national broadcasting. Attempts to shift the frame in relation to the challenges facing public broadcasting in increasingly plural and diverse societies suggest the potential for an innovative institutional design for the public broadcaster that may meet some of these challenges.

If community broadcasting is to be more than local commercial broadcasting it needs a degree of public support. Conversely, if RTÉ is to expand its access beyond the independent commercial television production sector it could develop a relationship with this dimension of programming. This can occur through straightforward transfers via commissioning or through a level of infrastructural support in relation to technology transfer, training and subsidies. As RTÉ looks to the digital future and expanded channel capacity, it could stand to gain a community channel that schedules a programme mix of offerings from around the island. The model of Current TV, now available on satellite television, is instructive. This is a digital channel that is based almost entirely on user-generated programming. The selection and scheduling of programming is in turn based on a website which allows popular participation in these processes and acts as a resource for the actual process of programme production (supported via open source technology and creative commons licensing). This cross-platform approach would allow for nationwide access to content produced on a mainly local basis. Concurrently the website could provide the basis for submission of programming from communities of interest and individuals with the resources to contribute to the programme mix. This again would enhance RTÉ’s legitimacy as a public service provider, widen access, deepen plurality and enhance communities. These are the new contexts in which an institution of public broadcasting needs to consider its mission.

Conclusion

In this article I have suggested that a new policy settlement is developing in communications, relative to an evolving social contract. In Ireland the negotiation of this settlement takes place within a broader social contract, emerging out of Ireland’s political-economic model and the requisite socio-institutional adjustment. This adjustment points to a rethinking of the place of the hitherto primary institution of public broadcasting, RTÉ, within a changing concept of the public interest in broadcast communications. Whereas socio-cultural and technological change point to the need for a shift in the purposes of broadcasting institutions, there is a danger that the publicly funded element of the broadcasting mix is losing its *raison d'être* through its increased convergence with the commercial television sector. However, this danger can be balanced with input from differential sources of programming that would also support the concept of a three-pillar approach to public broadcasting.

NOTES

3. Andrews, ‘Modernisation or Marketisation’.
5. McQuail and Van Cuilenburg, ‘Media Policy Paradigm Shifts’.
7. Dahlgren, ‘Public Service Media, Old and New’.
10. Coleman, ‘From Service to Commons’.
11. Urrichio, ‘Beyond the Great Divide’.
15. Savage, Irish Television.
16. Ibid.
17. Gorham, Forty Years of Broadcasting.
18. Doolan, Sit Down and be Counted.
21. All of these accusations have been rejected by the relevant regulatory bodies.
22. Boucher and Collins, ‘Having One’s Cake and Being Eaten Too’.
27. Quinn, Maverick.
28. Horgan, Broadcasting and Irish Public Life; Corcoran, RTÉ and the Globalisation of Irish Television.

REFERENCES


Kenneth Murphy, Centre for Media Research, University of Ulster, Coleraine Campus, Cromore Road, Coleraine, Co. L’Derry, BT52 1SA, Northern Ireland.