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Television in Ireland before Irish Television: 1950s Audiences and British Programming.

Eddie Brennan

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The claim that television arrived in Ireland on 31 December 1961 is commonplace. However, the claim only make 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.

RTÉ’s Opening Night

Academic accounts portray RTÉ’s opening night 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 downer 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’.

De Valera’s energetic, modernising counterpart, of course, 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’.

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'.

This is not to say that this narrative is false. However, it leaves much that goes unsaid and unexplored. In its failure to countenance some facts, and to ask certain questions, the dominant narrative is ideologically conservative. This claim may appear odd because the story of Irish television, as it is told, is the story of an escape from repression to freedom; from silence to the ability to speak and be heard. Before I explain why this narrative dominates we need to take a moment to understand the

story it tells.

Breaking the Silence

RTÉ is credited with spearheading a process of cultural emancipation that paralleled Ireland's economic modernisation.

The channel's significance has to be understood in the context of the longstanding censorious activities of the Irish Catholic Church, lay organisations and the Irish State. From the mid-nineteenth century the Catholic Church fostered a culture of shame and silence around sexuality. This ideologically supported a post-famine agrarian economy that regulated fertility and farm inheritance. After independence, state censorship of publications and films was imposed through a confluence of Catholicism, class-based anxiety about social order, and cultural and economic nationalism. In the 1960s Ireland began to look outward to foreign markets and investors. Deference to authority, and a silence and shame around sexuality began, at a glacial pace, to recede. RTÉ challenged

Ireland's system of moral censorship, particularly, through entertainment programmes that pushed back the limits of what could be publicly discussed. Both imported and indigenous programmes played a role but academic literature has placed the most concerted emphasis on the role of the iconic *Late Late Show*.

Created in 1962, the show was hosted by Gay Byrne. As Fintan O'Toole wrote it traded in 'the revelation of intimacies in the glare of the studio lights, the disclosure in public of things that had never been disclosed in private'. Byrne became the voice in which the unspoken could be articulated. The show gave permission for certain subjects to be discussed. Here O'Toole captures a point of consensus in the dominant narrative. Most notably in relation to sexuality, *The Late Late Show* marks the beginning of television giving voice to what 'Old Ireland'

had silenced.

The story of the *Late Late Show*, and by extension that of RTÉ, is one of television prising open Ireland's culture of silence. Televised discussion gave people the social licence to discuss issues themselves. The dominant narrative is a story of cultural emancipation. Nevertheless, it offers only a narrow vision that is preoccupied with, and limited by, institutions.

Closed Accounts of Openness

The limitations of taking 'television' to be synonymous with RTÉ are apparent if we consider, as just one example, the role of British broadcasting in the Republic of Ireland. Television in Ireland started with British programmes. Writings on the origins of RTÉ point to the early reception of British channels in the

Republic. These, so-called, ‘fallout’ signals are seen to have politically motivated the creation of RTÉ. However, in a kind of doublethink, historians usually acknowledge and ignore British broadcasting in the same breath.

In 1954, Irish daily newspapers were publishing BBC television listings. By 1955 there were an estimated 4,000 television sets in Ireland with 50 new sets being sold every week. By 1958 there were an estimated 20,000 television sets in the country. Shortly after RTÉ’s launch, in 1963, the number of television households had leaped to an estimated 237,000. This might give some justification to saying, hyperbolically, that television arrived with RTÉ. Nevertheless, in the same year, almost half of Irish television households received British channels. If television was consequential in liberalising Irish culture then surely British channels had some part to play?

British programmes are not a focus in my current research but they have inevitably arisen as part of people's recollections of television from its earliest days. British programmes were present in Ireland during the 1950s and for some these early programmes became a powerful part of an engagement with, and an identification with, with internationally mediated culture.

Given the expense of a television set and the fact that all available channels in the 1950s were British, there is a temptation here to assume that early adopters were all wealthy with cultural ties to Britain. Wealthy Dubliners were, of course, early adopters of television but the new medium was not confined to the well-off. A number of respondents recalled how their working class parents had not only owned television sets but had bought them outright. Television was seen by some, alongside the car and the telephone, as a mark of social status.

The value of television as a status marker appears to have varied from group to group, and from time to time. From the early 50s to the mid-60s, television as a luxury for the wealthy, for example, became declass . For the less well-off, television changed from an ostentatious investment to an everyday appliance.

As in many other countries, in Ireland early viewing was often collective viewing. British programmes provided the occasions that many used to visit, or to angle to be invited by, television households. For many Irish people then, beyond those who owned a set, their first encounters with television were with British programmes. Their early favourites, and indeed many of their personal examples of exemplary programming, came from Britain. Tom Shiels mentioned the ITV sci-fi serials *Pathfinders to Venus* and *Pathfinders to Mars* as two of his early favourites.

Mary Cooper's earliest recollection a television star was of watching Alma Cogan on UTV accompanied by the Beverly Sisters.

Of course, British channels were far more forthright in sexual matters than RTÉ was in its early days. Mary Cooper recalled the kind of embarrassment watching British television that is often described in the context of the Late Late Show. A British programme about venereal disease led to maternal unease and a suggestion that she leave the room.

Despite the presence of television in Ireland in the 1950s, the programmes from the BBC and Ulster Television that Irish people watched and discussed are absent from academic commentary. In 1958, the Catholic journal, *The Furrow*, reviewed the BBC's *Lifeline* programme which had frankly discussed homosexuality and prostitution. It is impossible to

know how many people in the Republic of Ireland managed to see these programmes. Nevertheless, a year after RTÉ's launch, like Mary Cooper's family, roughly half of Irish viewers had ready access to such broadcasts in their own homes. While the *Late Late Show* is celebrated for breaking the silence, the influence of more explicit British channels, apart from their role as 'fallout' signals, goes unmentioned. Ironically, the consensus on how television opened up Irish society is itself somewhat blinkered and introspective. The limitations in these accounts stem, in part, from methodology but they are also rooted in flawed thinking about the relationship between media and society.

An Institutional Lens

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. It is important to note, of course, that Ireland is unexceptional amid an international tendency to offer national broadcasting histories based on institutional sources.

One could attempt to explain the omission of British programming 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. British broadcasts were

inside Irish homes but lay outside the game of Irish politics. 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.

Television, Power and Belief

In the 1950s with the arrival of the earliest television sets, there was a research opportunity to understand how television might affect Irish society. As in many other countries, this research never took place. As such most of the claims about television's influence in Ireland are assertions. The issue here today is not

that these claims lack empirical backing but that they betray a misplaced belief in the power of media.

A belief in the power of television is central to broadcasting as an activity. Broadcasting organisations need governments and companies to believe in television's power to justify licence fees and advertising costs. As Nick Couldry observed, media institutions have an interest in maintaining their position as “central” social infrastructure’. Accordingly, these interests ‘influence the accounts that media outlets give of the difference media make to social life’. For Couldry, we as media scholars have invested too heavily in the myths that encircle our object of analysis. Pointedly, he asks why we, as critical thinkers, should build one of the media's ‘starting assumptions’ into our own. Rather than accept broadcasters’ claims about their social centrality at face value we need to see that such claims

themselves are ideological. Rather than being media outsiders historians of Irish television have been caught up in power structures surrounding RTÉ.

The history of Irish television depends heavily on a small number of central texts. As such, certain perspectives may be disproportionately amplified. It is worth noting that many key texts have been published by, or in association with, RTÉ. Also, many central, well-cited commentaries were written by former RTÉ staff. It is perhaps unsurprising then that the social centrality and emancipatory power of RTÉ are foundational assumptions in the history of television in Ireland. Rather than serving as disinterested critics, historians, and sociologists, have amplified the ideological power of Ireland's mediated centre while overlooking audience engagement with the UK, and the US, as centres of mediated modernity.

As media history, the dominant narrative is also flawed in that it ignores television as a medium. Ideologically, this betrays a form of technological conservatism. Technology, which is a product of, and often a vector for, social, political, economic forces, is invisible. The history of television in Ireland is not the story of a country adopting a new medium. Instead, it narrates a clash of two incompatible visions, old and new, of how society should be organised and how life should be lived. The focus is on institutional controversies and programme content. The arrival of a technology that profoundly affected habits, psychology, relationships, and the use of public and private space, is ignored. The social practices that television encouraged or discouraged go unseen. In this narrative, television, as a technology and cultural form, is not to be questioned. It is to be silently accepted as something natural and inevitable.

Part of the symbolic power of media organisations lies in their ability to shape how their history is written and how their social contribution is remembered. There are political stakes in the way that media, and their historical role, are imagined and represented. We need more open and egalitarian ways of exploring and describing the history of television. This ongoing work uses life story interviews as a means of accessing Irish people's memories of television in the context of everyday life. The identification of a dominant narrative and its underlying structure was a necessary first step here. Audience recollections of British broadcasting and its centrality to their experience of television are among the unanticipated themes that this work has yielded to date.