

The Irish Language and Radio: A Response

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Most of the debate in the seminar centred on television and on the Irish language television station TG4 in particular. This is disappointing as any discussion of language and media needs to include all of the media broadcasting in the lesser used language and to place these within their overall broadcasting and linguistic contexts. This response gives a brief overview of Irish language radio in Ireland today but points out a few difficulties with the round table discussion of Irish language television first. TG4 is discussed as though it were well resourced, and as if it is providing programming solely in the Irish language (albeit with subtitles) for a significant part of the viewing day, every day. This is simply not the case. The demands placed upon TG4 to serve a diverse and highly differentiated Irish speaking population are too great before ever considering its impact on the language use of its viewers. Irish speakers are as diverse and highly differentiated a group of people as any randomly selected group of English speakers. They are scattered through the land and are not always found in concentrated pockets such as the Gaeltachtaí (officially designated Irish speaking areas). English speakers are catered for by three national channels (RTÉ, Network 2 and TV3) and by a plethora of foreign channels which enable niche marketing and narrowcasting to cater for specific groups and tastes. TG4 usually broadcasts only six hours per day in Irish and caters for viewers from all age groups, tastes and backgrounds, although it does try to focus on children. The responsibility for language revival cannot be placed on the media alone and certainly cannot be laid on the shoulders of one television channel which is lost in a sea of English language, niche market alternatives.

The discussion ignores the question of Irish language programming on RTÉ television since 1962. Questions such as the amount of programming in the Irish language on RTÉ and on Network 2, the position of programmes in schedules and the resources allocated to them need to be considered. Issues such as style, genre and quality also require attention. Unfortunately very little research was done on audience reception of these at the time and any discussion of these now must be speculative and tentative.

The debate does not place the viewing experience in the limited form offered by TG4's six hours per day in Irish and the occasional programme on RTÉ 1 adequately within the overall context of the lack of consistent state planning for language, the lack of political will at government level to carry through on its stated national aspirations (Barbrook, 1992; Watson, 1997) and the lack of real resources to accomplish this.

The biggest problem with focusing on television, and on TG4 in particular, however, is that while television is regarded as the most popular, and some would say the most influential medium in society today, it completely ignores

the importance of radio as a medium in itself. Furthermore it ignores the role of radio as an instrument of language maintenance, acquisition and development and the part it plays in affecting cultural attitudes and values. The extent, range and type of programming on radio in Ireland should be considered. Radio has the longest history of broadcasting; (75 years in Ireland), it has the highest number of stations by far; and the greatest variety of station types (all three sectors – public service, independent commercial and independent community). Irish radio carries home produced programming almost exclusively, unlike the four national television channels which buy in much of their programming from abroad, primarily from Britain and the USA. While Irish radio's output is predominantly in English, the physical amount of hours of programming in the Irish language is also greater in aggregate than that of Irish television. This comprises Irish language programming on RTÉ, Radio One, the entire output of Raidió na Gaeltachta (the only national channel, either radio or television, with near to full single language coverage), the entire output of Raidió na Life, (the community station based in Dublin), some hours of programming on community stations nationwide and the occasional use of the language in the commercial radio sector.

The Role of Radio

Noting these points it is useful to position Irish language broadcast media in the general mediascape of Ireland today. A cursory look at the raw numbers of stations in the country, without any investigation of the hours of actual programming, the resources provided for these, or the quality and style of broadcasts, is revealing: see Table 1.

Table 1 Terrestrial stations in the Republic of Ireland, 2001

<i>Terrestrial stations in the Republic of Ireland 2001</i>	<i>Irish language stations</i>	<i>English language stations</i>
National TV station	01	03
National radio station	01	04
Local radio station (commercial)	00	22
Local radio station (community)	01	13

Any discussion focusing on particular media in the context of lesser used language broadcasting should also take into consideration the following questions: funding, the lack of political will, the context of language planning on a national basis, the competence of the listening /viewing public, cultural attitudes to the language and the attractiveness and quality of the programming provided. Research in these areas is necessary; some attention has been paid to the use of the Irish language on television – almost no research has been carried out for the radio sector.

Radio, as a medium, is used by its listeners in a number of ways and these have important implications for questions of language maintenance, development and acquisition. Radio is an intimate, flexible, portable medium. It works off the imagination as it is an aural medium. It frequently operates as a secondary

medium and performs the social function of enabling listeners to feel connected to their world even if they are physically, socially or emotionally isolated from it (Crisell, 1994). Radio is intimate because while it addresses mass audiences, it addresses each member of that audience as an individual on his/her own (Barnard, 2000; Boyd, 1994; Crisell, 1994; Fornatale & Mills, 1980). It is often an accompaniment to some other activity and forms part of the background to an individual's daily routine. Radio is immediate, cheap and accessible. Listeners can tune in at all times of the day and in most locations. They feel they can have instant feedback to or input into their station's programming, even to the point of attempting to go on air themselves through the ubiquitous phone-in. This is not the case with television where most programmes are prerecorded and where, in the case of live programming, information without pictures, i.e. phone-ins, are more difficult to handle. Crisell (1994) divides listeners into two types – those who take a predominant role in using radio as a source of information or entertainment, and those who take a subordinate role and use radio as an accompaniment to other activities. There is a distinction between members of the audience as listeners and as learners, as passive absorbers and as active negotiators of meaning. Radio often goes unnoticed though not unheeded, (Hargrave, 1994). Tony Schwartz believes that:

people don't remember radio as a source of information because they do not consciously listen to it. Rather, they bathe in it and sit in it. Just as we are not conscious of breathing, we're not actively aware of radio-mediated sound in our environment. (Quoted in Fornatale & Mills, 1980: xxvi)

People may not pay much attention to radio but, like the air that they breathe, it will affect them. The extent and direction of this effect is difficult to assess (Crisell, 1994). Any socio-linguistic analysis of lesser used language broadcasting would do well to note this difficulty for media and communication researchers of the medium in the dominant language. No more than any other medium, radio cannot and does not, work in a vacuum. It is generally accepted by communication theorists and researchers today that for ideas and attitudes to be shaped and moulded by a mass medium they must be already present in popular culture (Fiske, 1990; McQuail, 2000). If we know so little about how radio in a dominant language affects the attitudes, values and behaviour of its audiences, how much less can we assume to know about the influence of a limited amount of exposure to Irish language broadcasting on audiences of mixed competency in the language? There is a clear need for research in this area to be conducted from both a socio-linguistic and a media and communications perspective. There follows a brief overview of the extent of Irish language usage in the three sectors of Irish radio – public service, independent commercial and independent community.

Public Service Radio

From the early days of its foundation RTÉ has been hampered by lack of finance and trust on the part of government with regard to Irish language programming. The particular antagonism of advertisers and 'pragmatic businessmen' towards the use of the language on a widespread basis and their influ-

ence in both government and civil service circles further ensured that programming would be geared towards the majority of monoglot English language speakers in Ireland (Horgan, 2000; Savage, 1996). Whatever hope there may have been among some language activists, educationalists and the occasional politician, that radio, and later television, would provide a back-up support to the Irish being taught in schools and for the provision of a comprehensive service in their own language for native speakers in the Gaeltacht and beyond, it never happened. The dependence on commercial income militated against this from the outset and this attitude has prevailed since. Programmers who are positively disposed to the language and language activists themselves have accepted 'the logic of economic pragmatism' and a level of service far below their hopes.

Clearly the industry understood, from early on, that the numbers of listeners were low. RTÉ was afraid to publish figures for Irish language programming in the 1950s (Savage, 1996) and to this day Raidió na Gaeltachta is not included in the JNRL (Joint National Radio Listenership survey) biannual survey. The need for programmes to be 'popular', to pay for themselves, has been the strongest argument against providing a comprehensive service in Irish. As long as institutions and cultures believe that all programming has to be able to pay for itself by delivering large numbers of listeners to advertisers, then Irish language programming cannot be expected to be a major part of schedules. But should economic considerations be the only criterion? Is it good enough for RTÉ to deliver such a paltry amount of programming in Irish? RTÉ has a public service remit to provide programming in the Irish language enshrined in legislation and this requirement has been written into successive broadcasting Acts, most recently in 2001.²

Restoration of the language was a national policy in the early years of the state; this changed in the 1980s to a policy of promoting bilingualism. Richard Barbrook places RTÉ's programming policy in the context of a shift in the general political aims and aspirations of successive Irish governments – a move from cultural autarchy to economic aggression on a wider stage (Barbrook, 1992). Whichever cultural policy was espoused, the economic imperative has been the primary one which determines scheduling decisions in RTÉ. There now exists a widespread belief that Irish language programming cannot be self-financing, that it is unpopular and that if it must be produced at all, it should be inserted in schedules where it will cause least disturbance to the majority of viewers. This has been contradicted by high viewing figures where quality programmes of relevance to the viewing population have been aired. For instance *Léargas*, the Irish language current affairs programme on RTÉ 1, regularly achieves audiences of 300,000, yet the resources for further quality, prime time programming are not forthcoming. This pattern of neglect has been long established and is difficult to change. Triona Quill notes that:

Even in the 'radio era', when the rhetoric of restoration was at its peak, this rhetoric was never matched in terms of the practical – especially financial aid which might have made Irish language broadcasting more attractive to its audiences. (Quill, 1993: 19)

The Independent Sector: Commercial Radio

The culture of economic pragmatism which exists in government, civil service and RTÉ circles outlined above would seem to absolve the commercial sector from any responsibility in the provision of Irish language programming. The 1988 Broadcasting Act³ requires the licensing commission (the Independent Radio and Television Commission, the IRTC) to have regard to the quality, range and type of programmes in the Irish language to be provided by applicants for commercial broadcasting licences. However this was not a priority for the commission in the first 10 years of its existence. Many local commercial stations included proposals for Irish language programmes in their initial applications, but these have rarely materialised. Where they did, they have largely been discontinued since and there is no record of any action taken by the commission in respect of breaches of contractual commitments on language grounds.

In the last two years, however, the IRTC has shown a more positive and pro-active approach towards broadcasting in the Irish language. In a joint initiative with Foras na Gaeilge they established an Advisory Committee on Irish Language Programming for the independent sector in 1999. Membership of this committee is drawn from the independent commercial and independent community radio sectors and from Irish language promotional bodies. The committee drafted and published a policy document (IRTC/Foras na Gaeilge, 2000) and has begun a process of training and development to facilitate and encourage the provision of Irish language programming on the independent airwaves. This is a welcome development but it may be too little and too late.

The Advisory Committee itself has no representative from the independent national radio channel 'Today Fm' and no mention at all is made of TV3, Ireland's only national independent television channel which has not, to date, carried Irish language programming. The IRTC policy statement⁴ lays the emphasis on encouraging stations to begin broadcasting in Irish but it does not address the difficulty which commercial stations, run as profit maximising businesses, have – that of making money. If Irish language programming was believed to be a profitable venture, many of the stations would have been broadcasting some programmes in Irish since 1989. The fact that they have not means a mammoth task of persuasion must be undertaken. The age of compulsion is long gone and it is not clear why commercial broadcasters will pay for programming which will not pay for itself let alone bring in a profit. Unless there is some provision in legislation backed up by sanctions, it would appear that Irish language programming on commercial channels will not happen.

The Independent Sector: Community Radio

Community radio stations have produced more Irish language programming than their colleagues in the commercial end of the independent sector. However this has been achieved at huge personal cost to those involved. Working for nothing, without resources, committed voluntary groups already stretched to the hilt by their other language activities have been producing programmes on almost all of the community radio stations on at least a weekly basis and often more frequently. These are generally magazine type shows, although at least three stations have carried programmes designed to teach the language to beginners.

The student stations appear to have the most pro-active approach to the language with the highest number of programmes per week in the sector.⁵

Raidió na Gaeltachta and Raidió na Life

There are two bright stars in the firmament of Irish language radio – Raidió na Gaeltachta and Raidió na Life and both deserve some comment.

Raidió na Gaeltachta

Raidió na Gaeltachta (RnaG) was founded in 1972 to broadcast to the three main Gaeltachtaí. From the start it had a policy of broadcasting a high standard of spoken Irish, mainly by native speakers. It is often credited with enabling speakers of the three dialects to become more familiar with each others' speech and in recognising themselves as part of a wider linguistic community. The controversial move, under the Head of RnaG, Pól Ó Gallchóir (Now Head of TG4), to move onto the national stage and address the needs of all speakers of Irish throughout the island, can be read both negatively and positively. It can be seen as turning away from the communities of native speakers, mainly in the west, who want local coverage of their local issues, or as a mark of confidence that a national community of Irish speakers exists and that their media needs must be met through the language in the same way as the media needs of English speakers are catered to by four national radio stations, 22 independent commercial radio stations and the 14 licensed community radio stations. (This has been TG4's approach from the outset).

However therein lies the problem. There is only a small pool of speakers scattered throughout the land. Although there is no general agreement as to the exact number of fluent and regular speakers of the language, there is agreement that the overall percentage is small (Barbrook, 1992; Hindley, 1990; Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1994). These speakers, who are all bilingual, reflect all of the diversity of English speakers in Ireland. They live in urban and rural backgrounds, come from all socioeconomic backgrounds, have varying levels of education and at least as wide a range of hobbies, tastes and interests as those who do not speak the language. As bilingual citizens they are catered for in the English language on Irish radio but they demand the right to have Irish language programming.⁶ Where the English speaker has a huge choice in radio stations no matter where he/she lives, the Irish speaker living outside of Dublin can only receive RnaG. Many of these English language stations, national and local, are narrowcasters who maximise audience figures and loyalty by targeting niche markets and by gearing content and style to particular segments of the audience. RnaG has to cater for all ages and tastes through one channel and it has to contend with a difficulty which none of the English language radio stations have – the difference in language competencies of its listeners. Native speakers, fluent adopters of the language, well educated leisure speakers, learners of varying degrees of competency are all members of the potential audience of the public service broadcaster. Many of those at the lower end of competency have simply been ignored by RnaG; it cannot be all things to all listeners and it has prioritised with an eye to its original mandate – to provide a full radio service to the Gaeltachtaí.

the same public service tradition as the BBC or RTÉ did in English before the Second World War. In the first half of the last century national stations generally catered to all age groups, classes and tastes in one block. It was possible to 'address the nation' on a single channel and a national public service radio station was an instrument in the national project of building 'a single nation' (Andersen, 1991; Barbrook, 1992; McDonnell, 1991; Watson, 1997). That mediascape is long gone – separate channels were set up in RTÉ – Raidió na Gaeltachta itself for the Irish language lobby in 1972, 2Fm for youth in 1978, Lyric for AB1 listeners to classical music in 1999 and Radio One for all others, especially for the older citizens. The pantheon of independent stations has shown the same trend. It is most obvious in Dublin with the arrival in 2000 of Lite Fm, a middle of the road station for 25 to 40-year-olds, a new youth/dance station about to come on air and the advertisement of a licence for a religious station in 2001. Community stations based on student populations such as WIRED Fm in Limerick and FLIRT Fm in Galway add to this fragmentation of the audience, not to mention the recent resurgence of pirate broadcasters concentrating on young fans of dance music. This development fits the global pattern of diversification in all fields of postmodern society, of niche marketing, and of narrowcasting. Depending on one's ideological standpoint, this development can be seen as enhancing the provision made for special needs and interests or as a way of increasing the potential to exploit the market. Whichever view is taken, it leaves RnaG increasingly handicapped, broadcasting in a minority language to a diverse audience in a homogeneous manner which has been abandoned by all other broadcasters.

Raidió na Life

Irish speakers in Dublin are better served than those outside the capital as they can tune into Raidió na Life. As a community radio station it is, to borrow Jeremy Booth's phrase, 'A Different Animal' (Booth, 1980). It first came on air in 1993 following a five-year struggle with the IRTC to grant it the right to communicate with the community of Irish speakers in the greater Dublin area. It concentrates mostly on a young audience and the majority of its volunteer broadcasters and staff are in the 18–40 age group. Programming content and styles reflect this, ranging from current affairs to discussion of the club scene in Dublin. The station has an eclectic music policy with many specialist music shows and regular showcasing of up and coming young Irish acts. All speech is in Irish and music with lyrics in Irish, English and other languages is played.

Raidió na Life now broadcasts for seven and a half hours a day, Monday to Friday and for 12 hours a day on weekends. However it operates off an extremely low budget and in very cramped physical conditions. It depends on the goodwill and support of Irish language bodies for its existence. For instance, Foras na Gaeilge provides the accommodation for the studio and offers the station a chance to generate revenue through the use of the recording studio – Stiúideo a Seacht; Gael-linn provides equipment at a very low rent and all of the Irish language promotion bodies try to assist it financially to varying degrees. However, this level of grant aid is so minimal that only three people can be employed on a full-time basis, with the support of one person on a part-time contract.

All of the programming is by members of the Irish-speaking community in Dublin on a voluntary basis. This is normal practice for community stations in any country. Indeed it is one of the main aims of the community radio movement that the station be owned and controlled by the community and that programming be by members of that community. This enables two-way communication, as the slogan of an African community radio station 'Le radio qui vous écoute' articulates succinctly. However when there is no other provision by the state for a particular audience, the dependence on voluntary efforts to provide a comprehensive service is not good enough.

Approximately 100 volunteers pass through the station on a weekly basis, but there is a high degree of turnover here. It is estimated that in the eight years since its launch, nearly 1500 people have been involved in broadcasting on Raidió na Life. Raidió na Life is not included in JNRL surveys, none of the community radio stations are. This is because of their not-for-profit motive and because community radio stations are more about rates of participation, furthering the right to communicate and community building than they are about raw numbers of listeners. While they take advertising, they draw on a diversity of sources to maintain independence. This again is an indication of the relationship a community station has with its listeners – it is a partnership rather than the sale of blocks of listeners to commercial advertisers. (Jankowski *et al.*, 1992). When research has been carried out on the listenership of community stations such as Raidió na Life, this has been empirical and the emphasis has been on numbers of listeners rather than in terms of their own aims and the ways in which the stations are used by members of the community. A survey conducted in conjunction with another station, FM104, in 1995, two years after the station had commenced broadcasting, showed the listenership of Raidió na Life to be 13,500. An IRTC audit in 1999 showed that Raidió na Life was achieving 1% of total audience share. This percentage was used to justify the removal of Raidió na Life from the frequency it had occupied since 1993 to enable a new commercial station, about to come on air, to maximise its advertising potential in the Greater Dublin area. The old frequency had allowed the station to broadcast to the scattered community of Irish speakers in the counties surrounding the capital but it now broadcasts to a greatly reduced area and can no longer reach Irish speakers in counties Kildare, Louth and Wicklow. The figure of 1% is misleading in itself and gives a false impression of the success or failure of the station. The primary aim of Raidió na Life is to build the network of Irish speakers in the Greater Dublin area. This requires a high rate of active participation in the station, an aim of community broadcasting in itself. If raw numbers of listeners were a valid indication of the success or otherwise of the station (and community broadcasters insist that they are not), then the share of Raidió na Life's potential audience should be measured appropriately. How many of the people who can understand Irish tune in on a regular basis to the station? More important, how many of the 15–35 year old Irish speakers living in the Dublin area listen to the station? Most important, what percentage of this age group have been actively involved with the station since its launch? These questions have never been asked.

The enthusiasm, creativity, energy and quality of much of the programming of Raidió na Life in its short history are reflected in the recruitment of many of its volunteers to the ranks of other radio and television stations on a paid basis.

People who were first trained by Raidió na Life as volunteers are now broadcasting in English on local radio and on national television and many more of them have gone to RTÉ television, TG4 in particular, as Irish language broadcasters and programme makers.

Unfortunately, insufficient funding and the relentless search for resources leave little time or energy for a tiny staff and a committee of volunteers to concentrate on programming, training and development. This leads to disillusionment, exhaustion and ultimately to high levels of burnout. Raidió na Life is running out of steam and needs an injection of cash, of state aid and support, if it is to begin to realise the potential which its foundation recognised. It has never been given the resources and support it needs to build on the efforts of its many volunteers to grow and develop. The lack of funding and government support for this community, not-for-profit, people led station is a disgrace.

The seminar has raised important questions about the role of the broadcast media in maintaining and supporting lesser used languages. It has concentrated on the Irish language and on TG4 in particular. Any future debate should include the important medium of radio as well as that of television. Radio broadcasts more hours, it consists of more live and indigenously produced programming, it exists at national, local and community levels and in the three sectors of broadcasting. It has a longer history than television and it reaches into more areas of people's lives – work space, travel and leisure time than any other medium. Any future discussion of lesser used languages and broadcasting must however be preceded by qualitative research on language and media use and this should be conducted from the perspectives of both socio-linguistics and of media and communication theory.

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Notes

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2. The Broadcasting Act of 2001 states that: 'The RTÉ Authority shall: a. provide a comprehensive range of programmes in the Irish and English languages that reflect the cultural diversity of the whole island of Ireland and include, both on television and radio ... programmes that entertain, inform and educate, provide coverage of sporting and cultural activities and cater for the expectations of the community generally as well as members of the community with special or minority interests and which, in every case, respect human dignity, b. provide programmes of news and current affairs in the Irish and English languages ...' (Broadcasting Act, 2001).
3. The Broadcasting Act of 1988 which set up the independent broadcasting sector and the Independent Radio and Television Commission (IRTC) as its regulatory body states that: 'The Commission shall have regard to the quality, range and type of the

programmes in the Irish language and the extent of programmes relating to Irish culture proposed to be provided' (Broadcasting Act, 1998).

4. The IRTC policy statement in regard to Irish language programming reads: 'The IRTC respects the unique place the Irish language holds for people on this island as a language of communication and as a cultural and linguistic expression of their identity. In order to recognise the status of the Irish language, the first official language of the state, the IRTC encourages the use of Irish language programming as part of normal programming. In accordance with each individual station's style of broadcasting, the IRTC envisages that this programming could take many forms and have a multiplicity of purpose [sic]. The IRTC will seek to promote and develop the use of Irish language in natural and relevant ways and is committed to increasing the proportion of Irish spoken on air' (IRTC/Foras na Gaeilge, 2000).
5. Wired Fm received £5000 and Cork Campus Radio received £10000 from the HEA (Higher Education Authority), which enabled the employment of an Irish language officer in these stations in 1999/2000 to develop further programming.
6. Richard Barbrook's article has an interesting discussion on this important shift in the rationale for the provision of Irish language programming.

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