

Adapted from *The Irish Times* 4<sup>th</sup> January 2012. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio-web/can-tg4-recapture-some-good-feeling-about-irish-1.439000?mode=sample&auth-failed=1&pw-origin=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.irishtimes.com%2Fculture%2Ftv-radio-web%2Fcan-tg4-recapture-some-good-feeling-about-irish-1.439000> (Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> April 2012).

## Can TG4 recapture some good feeling about Irish?

**Niamh Hourigan**

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TG4 aims to give viewers another eye on Ireland and its language – has it succeeded, or does it perpetuate hang-ups about Irish asks Niamh Hourigan

The 50th anniversary of the first RTÉ broadcast provides an important opportunity to consider its Irish language offspring service, TG4.

Although fully independent of RTÉ since 2007, the national broadcaster continues to play a significant role in TG4 through the provision of news and other programming.

When my book *Escaping the Global Village*, which dealt with the campaign to establish the broadcaster was published in 2003, it was already clear it had become a force for innovation on the Irish media landscape. The service had transformed the image of Irish television and introduced new programme formats and work practices which were quickly copied by other broadcasters. However, it was also clear some activists who were involved in the campaign were disappointed that the service was not more deeply embedded in local Gaeltacht culture. They also had concerns about the standard of Irish used on the service.

A critical point was reached in 1999 when the station changed its name from TnaG to TG4, positioning itself as the fourth major television service in Ireland. The schedule was also revamped, with more primetime slots devoted to English-language programming, and with less popular Irish language programmes being positioned around these sure-fire audience winners. Sixteen years on from its initial launch, it was inevitable the pace of innovation would slow as the service moved to maturity. Yet the resoundingly positive public response

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to the TG4 general election debate between the three party leaders last February illustrated how firmly the station has established itself as a player.

A changing economic climate means tough times ahead, however. Advertising revenues are down in all sectors and government grants to cultural and media industries are being reduced. With cost bases increasing due to VAT, it is an appropriate time to ask whether TG4 can recapture some of that early innovative spirit in order to meet the challenge.

A successful cornerstone of TG4's schedule has always been children's programming and the station may offer an entire children's service on digital in the future. Its current children's programming relies heavily on re-dubbed imports, and I notice that my own children favour programmes such as *Global Grover* and *Tar ag Spraoi le Sesame Street* over *Dora* and *Spongebob*, which can be easily accessed in English on other channels. One mum at the school gate said to me: "As soon as they understand the remote, it's harder to get them to watch the Irish versions." It may be time for TG4 to look further afield to source new and original children's programme formats.

The slogan *Súil Eile* (another eye) has been the guiding vision for adult programming. TG4 has undoubtedly delivered another perspective in terms of lifestyle programming, documentaries, film and drama. The recent six-part thriller series, *Saor Sinn ó Olc*, provides a particularly good example of TG4 drama at its best. The station has even exploited its niche status to broadcast the remastered director's cut of *The Exorcist* ahead of other Irish and UK channels. Tough times in Ireland, however, have meant that adults are increasingly drawn to current affairs juggernauts such as *Prime Time* and *Tonight with Vincent Browne*. As current affairs programming tends to be strongly language-based, requiring a high level of language competency, it is difficult for TG4 to compete on this front.

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This brings us to the elephant in the room. Fulfilling its public service remit to broadcast programmes in the Irish language will always be a hugely complex task for TG4 because attitudes to the language are so complex. Census data and Irish language attitudes surveys continually show a high proportion of the Irish population is favourably disposed towards the language. Yet, smaller numbers of Irish people speak the language every day, and within this population, there is huge variation in their language competence.

Fine Gael may have been surprised at the support for compulsory Irish in the Leaving Cert during the last election campaign, nevertheless, there is no doubt the policy of compulsion combined with poor teaching has left a significant number of Irish people with a marked hostility towards the tongue.

The tensions were very evident during the recent controversy about the exclusive broadcasting of a Leinster-Munster Pro 12 League rugby game on TG4. Former Irish rugby international Neil Francis was publicly critical, saying: “I have no idea what commentators or the analysts are saying, and I have no idea whether they are any good or not – and I suspect 99.5 per cent of the people who had to watch the match on the channel didn’t either.”

TG4 pulled its highest audience ever for a rugby match for the game, with official figures showing 635,000 people tuned in at some stage. However, online message boards show a mixed reaction to the commentary, with some contributors asking why TG4 couldn’t provide a red button English-language commentary, as is provided by Welsh language broadcaster S4C.

The key source of the tension here was the exclusive rights of TG4 to the game. Here in another form was compulsion – Irish citizens being forced to grapple with the Irish language – and it was clear a considerable proportion of them didn’t like it.

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To be fair, TG4 has historically prioritised accessibility in sports coverage, particularly successfully in relation to snooker, where commentary was in Irish but analysis was provided in English. The broadcaster has also provided English language subtitles on a range of programmes, making them accessible to those with little language competence and to the hard-of-hearing.

In the case of rugby commentary, a solution may lie in the adoption of a Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh-style GAA commentary which moves fluidly between English and Irish. There is huge overlap between GAA and rugby support, particularly among Munster rugby fans, so this style of commentary would be familiar and accessible enough to keep them tuned in.

Although this type of bilingualism horrifies some language purists, it may have to become an increasingly central part of any coherent survival strategy. It is no accident that Hector Ó Eochagáin is one of the most successful transition personalities from the Irish language service. A master of bilingualism, his real achievement has been to establish bilingual spaces on both TG4 and the mainstream RTÉ service.

Given the cost base of television, TG4 must recognise the importance of its role as a shop window on Irish language culture. Its main remit must be to entice and retain viewers from the large sector of the Irish population who have mediocre or poor language competency, but an interest in the language.

I am currently researching transformations in Irish identity, and when interviewing migrants, I have been very struck by their openness to the Irish language. Already bilingual and sometimes trilingual, they are mystified by Irish language hang-ups.

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These new Irish will add another complex layer to TG4's audience. Within the complexity there is also opportunity; for innovation, for playfulness, for laughter and most importantly for providing another perspective on a society experiencing profound transformation.