



Provided by the author(s) and University College Dublin Library in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite the published version when available.

<b>Title</b>	Irish-language broadcasting: history, ideology and identity
<b>Authors(s)</b>	Watson, Iarfhlaith
<b>Publication date</b>	2002
<b>Publication information</b>	Media Culture and Society, 24 (6): 739-757
<b>Publisher</b>	Sage Publications
<b>Item record/more information</b>	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10197/5633">http://hdl.handle.net/10197/5633</a>
<b>Publisher's version (DOI)</b>	10.1177/016344370202400601

Downloaded 2021-06-15T03:22:59Z

The UCD community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters! (@ucd\_oa)



© Some rights reserved. For more information, please see the item record link above.

# **Irish Language Broadcasting: History, Ideology and Identity**

**Iarfhlaith Watson**

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN, IRELAND

## **Introduction**

This paper is a short introduction to Irish language broadcasting. The current situation can best be appreciated with some insight into the history of Irish language broadcasting. The Irish language has been broadcast on radio and television for the past 75 years. Radio was the only broadcasting medium involved for the first half of that period, until domestic television broadcasting began in 1962. Changes to broadcasting have come one after the other since then. To mention a few examples, over the past 30 years Raidió na Gaeltachta, Network2, 2FM, TG4 and TV3[1] have emerged, not to mention cable, satellite, and digital television and the internet. Although there has been more Irish on television since the advent of TG4 than ever before (see Fig. 1), there are four domestic Irish television stations and many spillover and satellite stations. The percentage of time devoted to Irish language programmes is very small. Irish language programmes are neglected in the ‘chaos’.

TG4 emerged and operates within a wider context. This context is the modernization of Ireland over the past forty years. A modern ideology emerged in the late 1950s that questioned the traditional nation building ideology. This modern ideology is the context within which market forces came to the fore. TG4 is caught between the Irish language and market forces, which may be the motivation behind

the large number of English language programmes broadcast by TG4 to attract a larger audience.

The mass media are often equated with the public sphere. The public sphere is an important element of democracy. This is where citizens come together as a public to debate issues and form public opinion on which the state can draw. The mass media play an important role in the public sphere. TG4 can be a public sphere for Irish speakers. This is a normative argument that encounters problems when confronted with reality. Regardless, TG4 is an Irish language television station, where Irish speakers, at the very least, can have common experiences in a mythic domain.

## **History of Irish Language Broadcasting**

### *The First Radio Station in Ireland*

A White Paper on broadcasting was prepared by the Postmaster-General (J. J. Walsh) as early as November 1923 --- the civil war having ended only six month earlier. During that winter the government debated whether or not an independent company should run Irish broadcasting for profit. However, on 28 March 1924 it was decided that the Post Office would run it. It was clear from the outset that the Irish language would be an element of the service. During the debates the Postmaster-General pointed to the negative effects on the restoration of the Irish language if Irish people could hear only British broadcasts.

The first radio station to be established in Ireland was 2RN (understood to mean ‘to Erin’[2] --- a compliment from the British Post Office) which began broadcasting

on 1 January 1926. This was basically a Dublin station as it usually could be received only within a 25-mile radius. In the opening speech Douglas Hyde[3], alluding to the role radio was to play in the promotion of the Irish language, claimed that ‘a nation is made from within itself, it is made first of all by its language’.

Insert Figure 1 here

### *The First National Radio Station*

A national channel using a more powerful transmitter was discussed during the second half of the 1920s. However, rather than increasing the power of the Dublin transmitter, the government decided to provide several low-power stations. As it turned out only one other station was built --- in Cork. Cork's 6CK was officially opened on 26 April 1927. Some of the programmes were produced in Cork, but most were relayed via telephone lines from 2RN. On 30 September 1930 Cork stopped producing its own programmes altogether. Eventually a national channel was established in the early 1930s (Radio Áth Luain). It began by broadcasting the Eucharistic Congress held in Dublin in June 1932.

This was no coincidence, another central element of the national narrative was the establishment of a ‘Catholic corporatist order’ (O’Dowd 1992: 33). The Irish language was not the only discourse incorporated into the national narrative, Catholicism also played a central role. With state construction of a national narrative came a discourse on Irishness, which emphasized a distinction between Irish people, in general, and others, specifically the English. Among the discursive elements were speaking a different language (Irish), having different religious beliefs and practices (Catholicism), playing different sports (hurling, gaelic football etc.) and even having a

different socio-economic structure built around a rural agricultural society. These discursive elements had emerged in the previous century with Catholic emancipation (1829), the Gaelic League's (1893) support of the Irish language, and the Gaelic Athletic Association's (1884) promotion of Irish sports. The national narrative was reflected in broadcasting, through the inclusion of religious, sporting and Irish language programmes on radio.

During the 1930s there was an expectation that an Irish language channel might be established. In 1935 T. J. Kiernan was appointed Director of the radio station. He encouraged the formation of a committee in each county to which he would offer broadcasting access. The first committee formed was in Galway, where they hoped access would result in the establishment of some kind of Irish language station. When this was not forthcoming the committee lapsed. This was perhaps the first prospect for a separate Irish language broadcasting channel.

None the less, Radio Éireann (RÉ)[4] did manage to devote over four per cent of its airtime to Irish language programmes. This situation improved during the 1940s when over eleven per cent of airtime was devoted to Irish language programmes (see Fig. 1). Maurice Gorham, who was Director of Broadcasting in Radio Éireann (1953--60), gives an informative account of radio broadcasting up to the mid-1960s in his book *Forty Years of Broadcasting*. Gorham (1967: 136--40) claimed that nearly all types of programmes broadcast in English during the 1940s had their counterpart in the Irish language e.g. *Nuacht* and *Treimhseachán Teann* as well as talks and discussion programmes, poetry readings and plays, children's programmes and Irish language learners' programmes such as *Is Your Irish Rusty?* and *Listen and Learn*. However, during the 1950s the percentage of airtime devoted to Irish language programmes decreased to less than nine per cent.

## *Television in Ireland*

From 1953 onward R   began to consider the factors involved in establishing an Irish television service. As with radio in the 1920s, there was talk of television being a commercial venture. On 6 November 1957 the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs (Neil T. Blaney) declared that Ireland would have television and that it would be ‘largely commercial in character’ and that proposals would be considered. The first proposal was made by Gael-Linn (an Irish language organization). Perhaps this was the first opportunity for an Irish language television channel. However, on 7 August 1959 the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs (Michael Hilliard) announced that television (and radio) would be operated by a semi-state board (the RT   Authority) funded by licence fees and advertising. The legislation necessary to establish the Authority was passed on 6 April 1960.

Even with the establishment of television the Irish language continued to hold an important role. This was reflected in the Broadcasting Authority Act (1960), Article 17 which stated that ‘In performing its functions, the Authority shall bear constantly in mind the national aims of restoring the Irish language and preserving and developing the national culture and shall endeavour to promote the attainment of these aims’. However, according to Gorham (1967: 315) the politicians and ‘practical men’ did not value Radio   ireann’s work for the national culture and would have preferred high listening figures from continuous mass entertainment. In relation to the period of the early 1960s when the Authority took over he noted that ‘such guidance as came down from above was to the effect that Radio   ireann programmes ought to be brightened and popularized; Irish language broadcasts and ‘long-haired’ music

were understood not to be highly valued'. Moreover, only six per cent of television airtime was devoted to Irish language programmes (see Fig. 1).

Doolan, Dowling and Quinn (1969: 295), who worked in RTÉ in its early years wrote a book called *Sit Down and be Counted: The Cultural Evolution of a Television Station*. In the chapter on the Irish language (entitled 'Bad Smell in Our House') they claimed that

because of the neglect from which Irish language programmes have suffered for years, Irish-speaking directors in the station do not wish to be associated with them. Whoever is in charge of an Irish language programme understands that it will be broadcast at an unfavourable time and that the facilities and finances available to a comparable English language programme will not be made available to it ... (Author's translation from Irish).

Furthermore, RTÉ had a policy --- called the diffusion policy --- of introducing a few words of Irish throughout the range of programmes. This policy was popularly called the 'confusion policy'.

### *Raidió na Gaeltacht*

In 1969 Gluaiseacht ar son Cearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta, a civil rights group, began demonstrations in Galway, demanding rights for people in the Gaeltacht[5]. The group set up their own illegal radio station --- Saor Raidió Chonamara (Free Radio Connemara). Although the authorities closed down the station, demands for an Irish language station continued. Raidió na Gaeltachta (RnaG --- the Irish language Gaeltacht station) was initiated as a result of demands for an Irish language service. Although there were questions in the Dáil (lower house of parliament) about an Irish language station, the Director General of RTÉ (Tom Hardiman) by-passed the need

for authorization from the Oireachtas (Irish Parliament) in 1970 by deciding to set it up within RTÉ. RTÉ hired seven people to run RnaG (six teachers and one business man). RnaG began broadcasting in April 1972 and was nationwide within a few years. For the first time there was a separate Irish language broadcasting channel.

As a Gaeltacht station RnaG seems to do quite well (although research is infrequent). A survey carried out by sociology students from the National University of Ireland, Galway in 1979 found that 35 per cent of all Gaeltacht people listened to RnaG ‘yesterday’ (Fahy 1989); and a study carried out by the MRBI (Market Research Bureau of Ireland) in November 1988 found that RnaG had 43 percent of all adult radio listening in the Gaeltacht. More recently the MRBI carried out a survey (on 3 April 2001) from which they discovered that RnaG has forty-one per cent of the Gaeltacht radio listenership (this increased from thirty-two per cent in an earlier MRBI survey conducted in 1995).

### *Teilifís na Gaeilge*

The position of the Irish language on television disimproved over the following decades. During the 1970s the percentage of television airtime devoted to Irish language programmes decreased to less than three per cent, this decreased even further to two per cent during the 1980s and 1990s (see Fig. 1). During these decades there were demands by Irish language organizations for improvements to the situation as well as a number of official reports with recommendations for improving the position of the Irish language on television. The vast majority demanded improvements to the position of the Irish language on RTÉ1 and, later,



RTÉ2/Network2 rather than advocating a separate Irish language television channel. (See Watson 1996, 1997a and Hourigan 1998).

Primarily, the options that were open to improving Irish language television broadcasting were: firstly that RTÉ assign a definite block of time on one channel for broadcasting through Irish; or, secondly, more Irish programmes be assimilated into RTÉ's schedule and spread across both channels; or, the final option was to establish a separate Irish language channel. However, RTÉ did not support any of these suggestions (Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht 1995).

In 1980 Coiste ar son Teilifís Gaeltas was instituted by Irish language activists in the Gaeltacht. They started by setting up a short-lived pirate television station. Subsequently, in 1987, Meitheal Oibre ar son Teilifís Gaeltachta was set up. The group broadcast illegally from Ros Muc, County Galway in November 1987 and in December 1988. In 1989 FNT (Feachtas Náisiúnta Teilifíse – national television campaign) was set up as an umbrella pressure group. They demanded that a station be established for the Gaeltacht and all the country. This marked a shift from demands for a Gaeltacht community-type channel to demands for a national channel.

The establishment of the separate Irish language channel, TG4, may be the result of pressure from FNT or may be due to the interests of individual ministers such as Máire Geoghegan-Quinn (as Minister for Communications, 1991--3) and then Michael D. Higgins (as Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, 1993--7). Regardless, TG4 began broadcasting on 31 October 1996. Thus, 70 years after the first broadcasts in Ireland an Irish language television channel began broadcasting. (See Watson 1999).

## **TG4: Caught in a Dialectic**

TG4 is faced with a number of contradictory and conflicting forces through which it must manoeuvre. Paradoxical ideological demands are being made on TG4 to provide Irish speakers and non Irish speakers with a public service and entertainment.

Ideology is about how particular ideas and ways of behaving support particular positions of power. In modern Ireland one can discern two contradictory ideologies battling it out. Each, in its turn, influencing the ideas and behaviour of those who created and those who run TG4. Thus, TG4 must manoeuvre between these contradictory social forces, these ideologies.

### *Nation Building*

In the early years of independence the state engaged in a nation building project. This project was ideological. This ideology was a continuation of the Irish nationalist ideology of pre-independence Ireland (late nineteenth century and early twentieth century). It contained certain ideas and ways of behaving which supported the new state. Part of this project entailed emphasizing the distinctiveness of 'Irishness'. This ideology promoted Irish sports, Catholicism, rural society and economy, and, of course, the Irish language. The effort was to create a homogeneous citizenry.

The conception of ideology employed here draws on John B. Thompson. Thompson (1994) argued that there are two conceptualizations of ideology. The first is the most common; he called this the neutral conception of ideology. For some authors, ideology is simply a system of beliefs or symbolic forms and practices. However, the second is a critical conception of ideology which

...is primarily concerned with the ways in which symbolic forms intersect with relations of power. It is concerned with the ways in which meaning is mobilized in the social world and serves thereby to bolster up individuals and groups who occupy positions of power (Thompson 1994: 135).

It is this second conception of ideology that is employed here.

A central element of this nation building project was the Irish language. The state attempted to both restore and preserve the language. In terms of restoration the education system was crucial. The aim was to teach as many people as possible to speak Irish. According to Pádraig Ó Riagáin (1988: 7), from the Linguistics Institute of Ireland, it achieved a certain success, because 'were it not for the fact that the schools continue to produce a small but committed percentage of bilinguals, the maintenance of this small minority of Irish speakers would long since have failed'.

On the other hand the survival of the Gaeltacht appears to be of symbolic importance for the Irish language. The state perceived that the decline of the Gaeltacht was due to high emigration. Thus the industrialization of the Gaeltacht during the 1970s is one example of the restoration policy. This effort was important in terms of stemming the tide of emigration --- the population of the Gaeltacht as a whole increased from about 70,000 to about 80,000 during the 1970s. However, it was not a wise socio-linguistic policy --- the percentage of Irish speakers in the Gaeltacht as a whole decreased from 83 per cent to 77 per cent during the same period.

### *The Mass Media*

The mass media were also employed in this nation building project. From the time 2RN began broadcasting on 1 January 1926 radio appeared to be a wing of the state,

manifesting elements of its ideology. What was crucial was not that listeners hear what they wanted to hear, but rather that they hear what the state wanted them to hear. As Richard Hayward (a writer from Northern Ireland) had said in 1925 ‘the regular transmission of a song or a play in the national language will be a powerful factor in the creation of a national being...’ (quoted in Cathcart 1984: 42). Thus the state appeared to be attempting to mould its citizenry.

The restoration and preservation of the language were also manifested in the content of radio broadcasts. Restoration efforts were centred on learners’ programmes such as *Is Your Irish Rusty?* and *Listen and Learn* (half a century ago) and on a policy of including ‘cúpla focail’ (a few words) whenever possible throughout the schedule. The preservation efforts were reflected in programmes for Irish speakers and especially in the public radio structure of Raidió na Gaeltachta.

### *A Modern Ideology*

According to Liam O’Dowd (1992: 33), from Queen’s University Belfast, there was an ideological offensive launched by certain academics, economists, civil servants and politicians during the 1950s and 1960s, which has persisted in the decades since. This included a shift away from the protectionist rural agricultural socio-economic structure to a more market-driven economy, a more ‘modern’ society. This new ideology was liberalist.

Gramsci’s (1971) concept of traditional and organic intellectuals helps illuminate what was going on in the 1950s. Gramsci (1891--1937) opposed economic determinism and emphasized the role of the individual in making historical change. He argued that intellectuals play an important role in forming ideologies and in social

cohesion. Swingewood's (1991: 211) claim that 'traditional intellectuals evolve through a process of "uninterrupted historical continuity"' explains the inclusion of discursive elements of the national narrative, which had emerged in the previous century, within the discourse on distinctiveness. O'Dowd (1992: 33) argued that clerical and church-affiliated intellectuals were prominent in the period from the 1920s to the 1950s. Traditional intellectuals attempt to link the past with the present and maintain historical continuity, while on the other hand organic intellectuals try to create a sharp break with the past, they 'belong to social groups aiming to direct the whole society, "experts in legitimation", who emerge as a result of changes in the mode of production' (Swingewood 1991: 211) such as that which has occurred since the 1950s. The intellectuals who emerged in the 1950s to launch an 'ideological offensive' were, according to O'Dowd (1992: 33), 'a small number of leading civil servants, politicians and academics'.

The new ideology contained its own preferred ideas and ways of behaving which supported their position of power. This ideology at first tended to concentrate on ways of behaving, especially on economics. The focus was on the modernization of the Irish economy. This was a new ideology, a new national project. The tendency was to conceal its clearly ideological aspects and to ignore the nationalism of the earlier ideology. However, with the outbreak of the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland the liberal ideology began to redefine the nationalism of the earlier ideology. This was manifested in the liberalization of the compulsory elements of the education system, the civil service and the Broadcasting Authority Act, 1960, associated with the Irish language.

Another manifestation of the liberalization promoted by this new ideology was the creation of the RTÉ Authority as a body with relative autonomy from the state. Furthermore, there was the expectation from the time when Edward Roth, an

American, was appointed first Director General of RTÉ in November 1960, that the programmes which would be broadcast would be those programmes the viewers wanted to see and not those programmes the state wanted to ‘impose’ on the viewers. This is where ratings began to gain a central role. This also manifested a shift away from efforts to mould citizens toward efforts to offer consumers choices. Mary Kelly (1992: 82), from University College Dublin, has argued that ‘public service television and radio are constantly negotiating the interface between national commitments, expressed in terms of home productions which would represent and reflect Irish interests, perspectives and values, including the Irish language, and commercial and profit making demands’. This reflects the conflict between the two ideologies.

### *The Dialectic*

TG4 is caught in the crossfire between these two opposing ideologies. Each ideology promotes its own nexus of ideas and ways of behaving. Thus the traditional ideology expects TG4 to both promote and restore the language. Two difficult and, to some extent, contradictory demands in themselves. However, the modern liberal ideology makes further demands. It expects TG4 to be commercially viable, raising finances via advertising revenue. This, of course, directs attention toward attracting a large audience to gain the ratings required by advertisers.

None the less, one must not forget that rights are a central component of the liberal philosophy. This adds a further component --- Irish speakers have a right to be informed and entertained in Irish.

Overall, therefore, there is conflict about whether TG4 should have a large or small viewership. There are elements of both ideologies on both sides. However, it must be added that they do not necessarily correspond with each other.

In support of the small viewership the traditional ideology emphasizes the importance of preserving the language where it is spoken. Thus the emphasis is on a service purely for Irish speakers, perhaps going so far as to support a ‘community television’ approach. The liberal ideology supports freedom of choice and rights. Therefore, those who choose to speak Irish have the right to be informed and entertained in Irish. TG4 should therefore provide a service for Irish speakers.

In support of the large viewership the traditional ideology expects TG4 to ‘convert’ non Irish speakers and to focus especially on children and young people to ensure the inter-generational transmission of the language. On the other hand the liberal ideology emphasizes the importance of attracting a large viewership, high rating and thus advertising revenue.

### *Caught between a Rock and a Hard Place*

TG4 is caught in a dialectic, a battle between two ideologies. As a result there are many conflicting and sometimes exclusive expectations --- to focus on children and young people, to appeal to Irish speakers in the Gaeltacht, to provide Irish speakers throughout the country with a television service and to attract a viewership which includes non Irish speakers as well as Irish speakers.

From the beginning TG4 envisioned their viewers to include the population of the whole island of Ireland rather than focussing on the Irish speaking minority. Prior

to its first broadcast TG4's Information Editor Pádraig Ó Ciardha (1996) made this point clearly:

We are a television service and we regard the whole country...island as our viewers. It happens that the programmes will be broadcast in Irish, of course it also happens that subtitles in English will be available on teletext for all recorded programmes, therefore we are not (...) restricting ourselves to those who speak and understand the Irish language. Also there are different ways to make a schedule more attractive even if it is in a minority language, for example we have a whole television channel and we have permission, and we have the resources to use the spare time of the channel to broadcast programmes of the type that will attract a big audience. To attract people to the channel and thus to the Irish language service, which will be part of the channel, that's one thing. The second point I think, and it is important (...) on this island a few hundred thousand people is not a bad audience at all certainly some of the programmes with the biggest resources and publicity on RTÉ at the moment have a very small audience. I hesitate to use examples but I'll give you an example: the TAMs which *Black Box*, the big new arts programme, gets are a quarter the TAMs *Cúrsaí Ealaíne*, a programme which is broadcast in Irish, is getting --- *Black Box* has one and *Cúrsaí Ealaíne* has four or five. (...) With the number of channels increasing it is only mathematics that the size of an audience of a channel will decrease. Therefore with things like Niche Channels as they're called, Nostalgia Channels, Sky Movies Gold, Sky Sport --- often they are not looking for a big audience, they are looking for a particular audience and, as advertisers will explain to you, millions, tens of millions of pounds are spent in this country on advertising to get an audience of a million people and really all you need of that million is the right fifty thousand. Therefore, to put it in context, it is not the size of the audience that is most important to advertisers, for example, but the standard of expenditure and income which people have, the people who have the income to spend. Therefore, I'm not trying to say that the measures of commercial market are the only measures we have. I'm just saying I don't accept this opinion that certain people have that the excellence of a station is the same as the number of people watching it. You can't forget the viewers; but more than ratings is involved in relation to the excellence of the station. (My translation from Irish).

On the one hand Ó Ciardha said that TG4 would attract a large audience and on the other hand he claimed that the size of the audience would not matter if TG4 could attract a small audience with a large expendable income. In other words, the market is clearly the major consideration.

When one examines the service which TG4 provides it is interesting to ask why they provide this kind of service and not another. In addressing this question here, the



analysis is focused on the way in which the service appears to manoeuvre between two ideologies attempting to support both positions of power. It will be interesting to see how Irish society will continue to change over the next few years and decades and how TG4 will reflect changes in the dominant ideologies (as well as more technological changes such as digital television).

## **TG4 and Identity**

In the Green Paper on Broadcasting (Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht 1995: 203) the question was posed:

Should there be a single, generalised public sphere in any state or is it more useful, in countries incorporating ethnic and/or linguistic minority communities, rather than the single language nation state, to think of a minority public sphere existing inside or alongside the dominant one?

The Green Paper confines their use of public sphere to the mass media. From this perspective, the existence of TG4 is equated with the existence of a minority public sphere.

However, there is more to the public sphere than that --- the public sphere is fundamentally about democracy. The public sphere comes into existence every time individuals gather together to form a public to debate issues of public interest. The mass media play a central role in informing citizens and providing them with the opportunity to voice their opinions publicly.

Because of the size of the public the mass media are crucial in the role they play. The mass media provide citizens with information and with the opportunity to voice their opinions in public. This is where TG4 is important in providing Irish speakers

with information and with an opportunity to participate in Irish. TG4 could be considered to be an important part of an Irish language minority public sphere.

RnaG provides people in the Gaeltacht with more access to the airwaves and creates a more normative version of the public sphere than TG4. As a community-based radio station it deals with issues that are of relevance to people in the community and provides its listeners with the opportunity to phone and discuss issues at length. Some Gaeltacht activists wanted TG4 to be a Gaeltacht television channel along the lines of RnaG.

The minister who established TG4 was Michael D. Higgins. In relation to the decision to establish TG4 Higgins said:

(...) I always stressed that I was taking a decision from the principle of broadcasting diversity and citizenship rights rather than...rather than a revivalist strategy. Yes it would help, of course, the use of Irish and whatever, but that wasn't the primary purpose, my purpose was very much in relation to the form of indigenous culture, of establishing certain kinds of principles of sovereignty in relation to culture, but also more importantly was contributing to diversity. (Higgins 1998).

### *Democracy*

The public sphere is a place where debate can occur and a consensus form. This consensus should then be considered a public opinion. The difference between this and the popular public opinion to which we are accustomed today is that the former emerges from public debate, whereas the latter is the most common opinion of individuals (who may be neither fully informed nor have had the opportunity to discuss the issue).

In a democratic society government is expected to take on board public opinion. The public sphere functions as a 'place' where people can be involved in democracy. However, it is expected that the public is a single entity from which a consensus emerges. This does not take into consideration the diversity within society.

Habermas' public sphere contains rational critical debate and critical public reflection. His emphasis has been on a single public sphere. Even where the two distinct public spheres of the literary and the political were concerned, Habermas argued that there was an illusion of a single public sphere. The ideal behind the single public sphere was that it would be possible for the public to reach a consensus. However, this was not the case because differences of status impinged on the fundamental principles of inclusivity and accessibility so that some groups were excluded from the single public sphere.

Fraser (1993: 122), a prominent critic of the concept of public sphere, promoted the concept 'multiple public spheres', considering a single public sphere to be unjust as it functions to the advantage of dominant groups, she contended that 'arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public'. Also, Habermas (1993) was not averse to competing publics, and considered that perhaps it is a more democratic alternative, as long as these 'publics' are internally democratic.

The participants in the public sphere are citizens. This approach considers participation in the public sphere to be a central aspect of citizenship. However, there is considerable confusion between the terms 'citizen' and 'consumer'. It is argued by many authors that citizens are treated as consumers. Thus, for example, the electorate has a choice of candidates at an election. The argument here is that citizens have freedom of choice à la consumers but no opportunity to participate as citizens. The

ideal is for citizens to participate in the public sphere by debating issues in public. The reality is that 'citizens' participate in the public sphere as consumers --- mainly by watching television but never debating the issues.

There are a number of points which reinforce this. Firstly, viewers remember very few facts from news and current affairs, which makes it hard to use such programmes as an information resource for individuals, therefore, perhaps it would make more sense to speak of the mythic domain of meaning production (Dahlgren 1987: 41). The mythic domain primarily involves emotions and collective messages rather than cognition and specific facts. Secondly, citizens can make no 'political' use of the news, beyond being informed, because there is no 'point of access' (Jensen 1990: 67). Thirdly, the division between news-type programmes and entertainment-type programmes is becoming blurred (Carpignano et al 1990). All television viewers, therefore, seem to be more consumer than citizen, even when it comes to factual programmes.

### *Identity*

Although individual Irish speakers already feel that, to an extent, they are part of a wider Irish speaking community, there is a feeling of being alienated within this fragmented community and that this community has little relevance for their lives. The strength of this feeling varies according to individual circumstances. However, to have a common experience, to be informed through a common language and to have common interests discussed on television can strengthen the feeling of being part of a wider community and form the basis of a sense of common identity. 'Consumption' of television programmes can be considered to be participation in 'culture', which

some authors claim is part of citizenship i.e. cultural citizenship. Based in looser definitions, Irish speakers can participate as citizens in the public sphere by watching TG4. While this may not be, or may be only tangentially, relevant to democracy TG4 is a public space in which Irish speakers can participate by watching its programmes.

On that point, Jensen (1990: 60) claimed that television can also be ‘a source of social identity or self-legitimation, providing a sense of belonging to a community, (sub)culture or political order’. (See Calhoun 1993e: 6, Dahlgren 1987: 41, Jensen 1990: 68, and Peters 1993: 566 for similar comments). One could put it as Habermas (1989: 162) did, that ‘The deprivatized province of interiority was hollowed out by the mass media; a pseudo-public sphere of a no longer literary public was patched together to create a sort of superfamilial zone of familiarity’. This ‘superfamilial zone of familiarity’ is provided by TG4. A sense of belonging is important for Irish speakers. However, without participating in the public sphere the common experiences presented on television remain beyond the control of the individual, although they may feed into personal conversations etc.

While the ideal public sphere does not exist, TG4 provides the Gaeilgeoir[6]/Gaeltacht community with a ‘superfamilial zone’ in which Irish speakers can consume Irish language television. More than three-quarters of Irish speakers do not live in the Gaeltacht, which suggests that the Irish speaking community is largely fragmented. One could argue that there is no Irish speaking community, just Irish speaking individuals isolated in an English speaking society, as well as a few Gaeltacht communities. Perhaps a public space is necessary to allow a community to exist and to form its sense of self. Heller et al (1994: 169--70) claimed that a public sphere is necessary for identity construction, they argued that

identities are not supplied by immediate experience or feelings, and the themes are not present in the experience and memories of the participants as an immediate reflection of events and encounters. They need to be elaborated, transformed, and legitimated through public communication, taking into account existing themes and identities and working upon them with resources available to the participants. More importantly, all this must happen publicly, the 'grammar' of public communication having characteristics significantly different from those of private communication.

They argued that identities do not emerge from the lifeworld of the individual, but depend on a wider legitimation. This legitimation occurs publicly and therefore depends on the public sphere and mass media. If this is correct TG4, in expanding the 'public sphere' for the Gaeilgeoir/Gaeltacht community, plays a vital role in the construction of identity.

### *Cultural Citizenship*

Marshall's theory of citizenship was based on the development of citizenship in Britain from the eighteenth century until post world war two. He divided citizenship into the civil, the political and the social, which he claimed developed during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. The three aspects of citizenship are three types of rights. Civil rights are individual rights of freedom and liberty, such as freedom of speech, of faith, to own property, to engage in contracts, and to justice. The main institution of civil rights is the court. Political rights involve the right to participate in politics as elected or voter. The main institution of political rights is parliament, as well as local government. Social rights involve economic welfare and security as well as participation in the 'social heritage'. The main institutions of social rights are the education system and social services.

There is also cultural citizenship, according to Turner (1991). Cultural citizenship raises the issue of cultural, as opposed to political participation. Citizenship is primarily about participation – usually it is about political participation and sometimes economic participation. It is also about membership of a society. Membership is at the heart of citizenship, and participation in the culture of a society is considered crucial to membership of it.

It can be argued that viewers of TG4 are consumers, not citizens, but once cultural citizenship is taken into account consumers become citizens. This is a certain blurring of the distinction between consumption and citizenship. However, cultural citizenship appears to be part of what Marshall outlined as the social element of citizenship and, therefore, part of the social rights of citizens is to participate in their own culture.

Cultural citizenship is about identity and as such can be related to the identity politics that has emerged in the past few decades. In that context the emergence of a new political sociology that accepts the political as part of everyday life sheds some light on the how watching television can be considered an aspect of citizenship. As Nash (2000: 2--3) put it:

There has been a ‘paradigm shift’ in political sociology, away from state-centred, class-based models of political participation, or non-participation, toward an understanding of politics as potential in all social experiences. New political sociology is above all concerned with cultural politics, understood in the broadest possible sense as the contestation and transformation of social identities and structures.

Even TG4’s motto ‘súil eile’, which translates as another eye, meaning another way of seeing the world, suggests cultural contestation and transformation. (See their web page: [www.tg4.ie](http://www.tg4.ie)).

In this context the emergence of TG4 may be perceived as an element of citizenship rather than purely consumerist. Consuming Irish language programmes is an element of participation in cultural citizenship even if it is a culture-consuming rather than a culture-debating public. In this light the provision of Irish language 'products' is a social right. This is an argument made by Irish language organizations, and acceptable within the liberal ideology.

The active citizenship of a culture-debating public of Irish speakers is limited by the fact that the national public sphere is almost entirely English speaking. This means that participation in the national public sphere is limited to the English language. However, Irish speakers have demanded the right to be entertained and informed in the Irish language, thus raising the question of cultural citizenship. In this case TG4 provides Irish speakers with the opportunity to be integrated into the Irish speaking community and culture.

## **Conclusion**

Programmes have been broadcast in the Irish language on radio and television since 1926. During the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s the Irish language was virtually non-existent on television. Irish speakers could watch a daily five-minute summary of the news, a weekly half-hour talking heads programme and a few short children's programmes. With the advent of TG4 there are far more programmes being broadcast in Irish.

In attempting to provide the public with programmes in the Irish language, TG4 are subject to market forces that demand larger audiences than the Irish speaking public can provide. To overcome this TG4 devote almost half their airtime to



programmes in English. These market forces entered public service broadcasting with the emergence of the modern ideology since the late 1950s. Another ideological shift may have been emerging since the late 1980s. New and interesting developments, which have been unfolding over the past few years, such as the undermining of authority (especially clerical, political and organizational), economic prosperity and the Northern Ireland Agreement, may all be associated with a new ideology. If this is the case, there may be new factors bearing on TG4.

Perhaps 'Mono', a new programme on RTÉ1, which, the producers claim, deals with the multicultural experience in twenty-first century Ireland and 'is presented by Nigerian film studies graduate Bisi Adigun and Canadian-born Indian Shalini Sinha' (<http://www.rte.ie/tv/mono/>), is a manifestation of an emerging ideology. 'Mono' and TG4 may be the first of many broadcasting niches in which different identities, which are isolated and fragmented, are elaborated, transformed and legitimated by television.

New political sociology and European social movement theories have emphasized the political importance of identity to such an extent that cultural consumption has become an act of citizenship. Many of TG4's supporters have argued for these cultural citizenship rights and were successful because their claims appealed to both the earlier nation building and the later liberal ideologies. It remains to be seen, however, how far these cultural citizenship rights will be extended to those who cannot appeal to the positions of power in the emerging ideology.

## Notes

1. Raidió na Gaeltachta (RnaG) is an Irish language radio station, which began broadcasting in April 1972. Network2 and 2FM are the second national television and

radio stations respectively (2FM broadcasts ‘popular’ music), they were originally called RTÉ2 and Radio2 and began broadcasting in the late 1970s. TG4 is the Irish language television station, originally called TnaG (Teilifís na Gaeilge), which began broadcasting on 31 October 1996. TV3 is the first commercial television station in Ireland, which began broadcasting in September 1998.

2. Erin, or more accurately ‘Éireann’, is the Irish for Ireland.
3. Douglas Hyde later became the first President of Ireland (1938--45).
4. Radio Éireann (translated as Ireland Radio) is the name given to the national radio service prior to the Broadcasting Authority Act (1960).
5. The Gaeltacht is an appellation employed to describe certain geographical areas containing a diverse group of communities that are predominantly Irish speaking. These communities are mainly in the West of Ireland, including areas in Counties Cork and Kerry (south-west), County Galway (west), Counties Mayo and Donegall (north-west), but also including a small community in County Meath (mid-east) and in County Waterford (south-east). The Gaeltacht population contains over two per cent (2.4%) of the entire population of the country, however, close to a quarter (22.9%) of the Gaeltacht population are not Irish speakers. According to the 1996 census Irish speakers living in the Gaeltacht account for almost two per cent (1.75%) of the population of Ireland. In terms of the numbers, there are 82,715 people living in the Gaeltacht and 61,035 of them are Irish speakers (including migrants with school Irish).
6. A ‘gaeilgeoir’ is an Irish speaker. This usually refers to Irish speakers who live outside the Gaeltacht Irish speaking communities.

## Bibliography

- Calhoun, C. (1993) 'Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere' in Craig Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. London: MIT Press.
- Carpignano, P., R. Andersen, S. Aronowitz and W. Difazio (1990) 'Chatter in the Age of Electronic Reproduction: Talk Television and the "Public Mind"', *Social Text* 25/26: 33--55.
- Cathcart, R. (1984) 'Broadcasting --- The Early Decades,' in B. Farrell (ed.) *Communications and Community in Ireland*. Dublin: Mercier Press.
- Dahlgren, P. (1987) 'Ideology and Information in the Public Sphere,' in J. Slack and F. Fejer (eds) *The Ideology of the Information Age*. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht 1995 *Active or Passive? Broadcasting in the Future Tense: Green Paper on Broadcasting*. Dublin: Government Stationery Office.
- Doolan, L., J. Dowling and B. Quinn (1969) *Sit Down and be Counted: The Cultural Evolution of a Television Station*. Dublin: Wellington Publishers Ltd.
- Fahy, T. (1989) 'Listenership up 10 Percent', *Irish Broadcasting Review* 8, pp. 56--7.
- Fraser, N. (1993) 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy' in Craig Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. London: MIT Press.
- Gorham, M. (1967) *Forty Years of Broadcasting*. Dublin: RTÉ.
- Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Habermas, J. (1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Habermas, J. (1993) 'Further Reflections on the Public Sphere,' pp. 432--455 in C. Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. London: MIT Press.
- Heller, M., D. Nemedi and R. Rényi (1994) 'Structural Changes in the Hungarian Public Sphere under State Socialism', *Comparative Social Research* 14: 157--171.
- Higgins, Michael D. (1998) Personal Interview with the author 4 June 1998.
- Hourigan, N. (1998) 'Framing Processes and the Celtic Television Campaigns', *Irish Journal of Sociology* 8: 49--70.
- Jensen, K. (1990) 'The politics of polysemy: television news, everyday consciousness and political action', *Media, Culture and Society* 12: 57--77.
- Kelly, M. (1992) 'The Media and National Identity in Ireland,' pp. 75--90 in P. Clancy et al (eds) *Ireland and Poland: Comparative Perspectives*. Dublin: Department of Sociology, University College Dublin.
- Nash, K. (2000) *Contemporary Political Sociology: Globalization, Politics, and Power*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Ó Ciardha, P. 1996 Personal Interview with the author 19 February 1996.
- Ó Riagáin, P. (1988) 'Introduction', *Language Planning in Ireland: International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 70, pp. 5--9.
- O'Dowd, L. (1992) 'State Legitimacy and Nationalism in Ireland,' pp. 25--42 in P. Clancy et al (eds), *Ireland and Poland: Comparative Perspectives*. Dublin: Department of Sociology, University College Dublin.
- Peters, J. (1993) 'Distrust of Representation: Habermas on the Public Sphere', *Media, Culture and Society* 15: 541--71.
- Swingewood, A. (1991) (2nd ed.) *A Short History of Sociological Thought*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Thompson, J. B. (1994) 'Ideology and Modern Culture,' pp. 133--41 in *The Polity Reader in Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

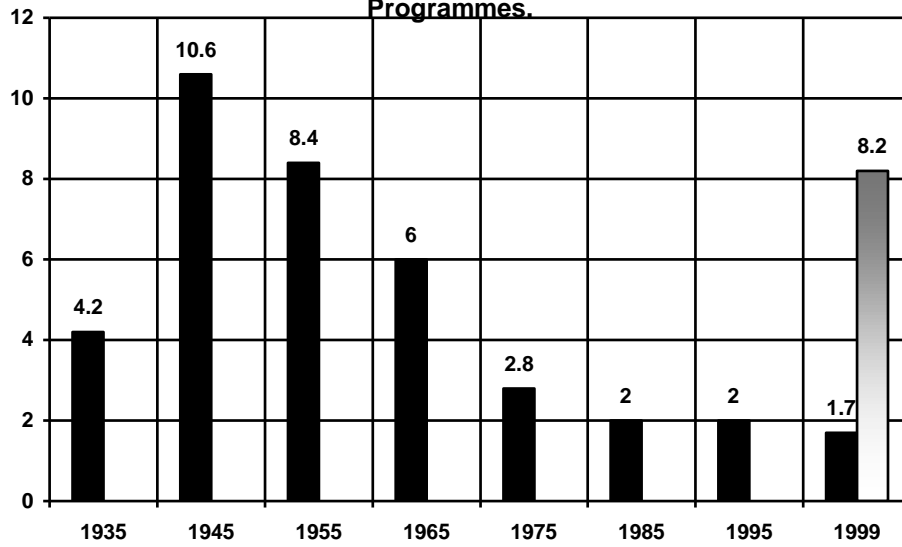
Turner, Bryan S. (1991) 'Further Specification of the Citizenship Concept: A Reply to M. L. Harrison', *Sociology* 25(2): 215--18.

Watson, I. (1996) 'The Irish Language and Television: national identity, preservation, restoration and minority rights', *British Journal of Sociology* 47: 2, pp. 255--74.

Watson, I. (1997a) 'A History of Irish Language Broadcasting: National Ideology, Commercial Interest and Minority Rights,' pp. 212--30 in M. Kelly and B. O'Connor (eds) *Media Audiences in Ireland: Power and Cultural Identity*. Dublin: UCD Press.

Watson, I (1999) 'A Paradoxical Endeavour: How Efficacious Citizenship Must Undermine Itself in the Absence of a Democratic Public Sphere: A Study of the Public Sphere, Corporatism, Pluralism and Citizenship in the Formation of the Irish Language Television Channel Teilifis na Gaeilge', PhD dissertation, Dublin, University College Dublin.

**Figure 1: The Percentage of Total Broadcasting Time on Radio (RÉ) 1935-55 and Television (RTÉ) 1965-99 (last bar includes TnaG and TV3) given to Irish Language Programmes.**



**Iarfhlaith Watson** is college lecturer in the Department of Sociology, University College Dublin, Ireland. He is a member of the Boards of the International Visual Sociology Association, the Sociological Association of Ireland and the Association of Bahá'í Studies (English Speaking Europe). He is also Associate Editor of the *Irish Journal of Sociology*. His recent publications in the *British Journal of Sociology*, the *Irish Journal of Sociology*, the *Irish Communications Review* and elsewhere have been in the area of Irish language broadcasting. He is currently developing his interest in governance in a global context.

### **Abstract**

Irish language broadcasting is discussed. The history of Irish language broadcasting is outlined from the 1920s to the present. Irish language broadcasting since the 1960s is placed in the context of two competing ideologies – a traditional and a modern ideology. These ideologies are the foundations on which contradictory demands placed on TG4 are built. The conflict between minority rights and market forces are discussed in relation to TG4. It is argued that although TG4 might be expected to offer Irish speakers a public sphere in which they can participate democratically as citizens, it is more likely that TG4 plays another important role of offering a mythic domain for the construction of identity.

## **Keywords**

Media, Citizenship, Democracy, Minority, Ireland

## **Contact Details:**

Dr Iarfhlaith Watson  
Department of Sociology  
University College Dublin  
Belfield  
Dublin 4  
Ireland

[iarfhlaith.watson@ucd.ie](mailto:iarfhlaith.watson@ucd.ie)

00 353 1 706 8569 (Tel)  
00 353 1 706 1125 (Fax)