

1996-01-01

## New Technologies and Changing Work Practices in the Media Industry: the Case of Ireland

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### Recommended Citation

Hazelkorn, E.(1996) New Technologies and Changing Work Practices in the Media Industry: the Case of Ireland. *Irish Communications Review*, Vol.6.

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# New technologies and changing work practices in the media industry: the case of Ireland<sup>1</sup>

Ellen Hazelkorn

1. I am grateful for research conducted by Eoin Kilfeather, and for RTÉ's help and encouragement for that research. I am also thankful for comments on an earlier draft of this paper from Tom Gormley, James Wickham and Brian O'Neill. All errors and omissions remain mine.

## Context

The broadcasting environment in Ireland is the most competitive in Europe. RTÉ's revenue is strictly limited. The licence fee has not increased since 1986. Advertising revenue is controlled by law. The preservation of a comprehensive and effective radio and television service can only be sustained by the most efficient and cost effective approach to the production of programmes of quality.<sup>2</sup>

2. RTÉ Advertisement in Irish Independent. 25 January 1992.

In Ireland as elsewhere, the convergence of economic, political and technological developments is forcing through a redefinition of public broadcasting and a restructuring of its work practices. Former all-encompassing broadcasting corporations are being divested of their production capacity, and transformed into publisher-contractors. Effectively, production is being separated from broadcasting. For those working in what had previously been regarded as secure employment, new technology has instigated phenomenal changes. The past several years have witnessed two major industrial conflicts at RTÉ: new technology, de- and re-skilling, and compensation lie at the heart of these disputes. The response from the trade unions has often been aggressive but also defensive. Where change has occurred, it has been quite complex; deskilling and reskilling occurring in tandem. The introduction of new media technologies is seen as a means of reducing costs and bringing out greater efficiencies. The effect of this compendium of change extends, however, far beyond the particulars of public broadcasting to map out a new frontier for broadcasting and media production generally.

This paper is an initial exploratory investigation of the impact of technological and political change on the broadcasting labour force and environment by focusing on Ireland's public broadcaster. Three interrelated issues will be examined:

- 1) what are the causes of these changes, both immediately and in the future?
- 2) what are the implications for the labour force in Irish broadcasting?
- 3) what are the broader implications of these changes?<sup>3</sup>

3. These questions have been adapted from similar ones asked by Sparks, 1982.

## Politico-economic causes

Irish broadcasting began in 1926 with radio. Modelled on Reith's formula for public service broadcasting as represented by the BBC, 2RN was erected under the watchful eye of the civil service, as a vehicle for promoting national sovereignty and cultural/religious identity; most programmes were home-produced and any material which affronted Catholic principles were self-censored. In contrast, the arrival of Radio Telefis Eireann in 1960 coincided with a phenomenal rate of economic change, transforming Ireland within a decade from an agricultural to an industrial society. Over the decades it has powerfully challenged traditional cultural forms and vented the aspirations of an emergent urban middle class, whose allegiances are increasingly attuned to continental Europe, undermining the primacy of the countryside in national life.

- RTÉ (1995) *RTÉ Response to the Government Green Paper on Broadcasting* Dublin: RTÉ.
- RTÉ Trade Union Group (1995) *Response to the Green Paper on Broadcasting* Dublin: RTÉ Trade Union Group.
- Schlesinger, P. and Tumber, H. (1994) *Reporting Crime* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Seaton, J. (1994) 'Broadcasting in the age of market ideology,' in *Political Quarterly*, 65:1,29-38.
- Sepstrup, P. (1990) *The Transnationalization of Television in Western Europe* London: John Libbey.
- Sparks, R. (1992) *Television and the Drama of Crime* Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Summer, D. (1993) 'Harnessing pesterpower' in *The Financial Times*, 23 December, 8.
- Stevenson, N. (1995) *Understanding Media Cultures* London: Sage.
- Sweeney, J. (1992) 'Where fear and loathing stalk the set', in *The Observer*, 10 May.
- Thwaites, D. (1995) 'Corporate sponsorship by the financial services industry,' in *Journal of Marketing Management*, 10,743-763.
- Woolley, B. (1984) 'Crimewatch: an arresting programme', in *The Listener*, 23 August.

From the start, commercial interests were absent from broadcasting. This view was inspired by a conservative interpretation of 'public service' overdetermined by economic realities, most notably the absence of a middle class. Over time, a small population (3.5m) and public commitment to an extensive welfare state with accompanying high tax burdens atop a relatively underdeveloped economy have forced Irish broadcasting to rely on a combination of licence fees and advertising revenues for funding. These tight financial margins have necessitated RTÉ television's heavy reliance on American and British programmes, and prohibited any private commercial radio or television service operating, the former until recently. Effectively, broadcasting policy has mimicked economic policy generally; the state filling the vacuum, promoting, regulating and deregulating sections of the economy for pragmatic never ideological reasons and in ways always beneficial to private interests.

While RTÉ has always faced competition from British broadcasters (BBC and ITV), it has never faced a direct or real threat to its principle sources of revenue, the licence fee. Furthermore, it has been protected by a popularly endorsed strong public service remit. During the 1970s and 1980s, however, fundamental changes in the broadcasting market including the mogulization of media ownership and the multiplicity of (public and commercial, terrestrial and satellite) broadcasting channels and new media technologies coincided with growing ideological acceptance of private ownership and competition (Ostergaard, 1992).

Domestically, a deepening fiscal crisis of the state undermined hitherto unquestioned loyalty and subsidization of a range of public services; while Irish broadcasting has been financially autonomous (with access to the exchequer funding never being mooted), its right to levy increases in its licence fee is subject to government approval. Since 1986, high levels of unemployment perched upon a dependent economy, and popular discontent with high personal taxation have prevented such approval<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, criticisms were levelled against RTÉ's news and current affairs coverage of Fianna Fáil, which some alleged led to the demise of its 1987-led government.

In response, the Irish government introduced a series of legislative and policy changes which have deregulated the broadcasting and telecommunications environment, restricted the public broadcaster's (RTÉ) participation into satellite broadcasting (DBS), and increased the opportunities for private ownership and independent production. The Radio and Television Act, 1988, established the Independent Radio and Television Commission (IRTC) with authority to licence national, local and community radio stations, and one national television station<sup>5</sup>. These domestic initiatives were matched by similar initiatives in the UK, USA and throughout the EU. A 1989 EU directive, *Television Without Frontiers*, recognized the right to the free flow of televisual materials and prohibited the erection of national barriers to transborder data flows; in order to become competitive, European media products must find secondary markets and be cost-effective. Despite confirming its commitment to public service broadcasting and adopting the language of 'cultural autonomy', the most recent pronouncement of government policy, as evidenced in its green paper, *Active or Passive? Broadcasting in the Future Tense*, continues to favour a policy of managed privatization.<sup>6</sup>

In many respects these political initiatives have been a reaction to, not an attempt to construct, the broadcasting environment. A growing number of technological innovations have fundamentally altered broadcasting; satellite, cabling and MMDS ensure that increasing numbers of the Irish population can view British television for little or no extra charge.<sup>7</sup> Despite heightened production standards and costs, the increasing user-friendliness of media technology alongside its relative cheapness has meant that broadcasting need no longer be the preserve of large media organizations. This 'democratization' of media production has further stimulated the dismantling of the public broadcaster's 'monopoly' and favoured local commercial and community radio which is a relatively inexpensive and accessible medium.

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4. Approval for a licence fee increase of £8 was finally granted in July 1996.

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5. Political considerations are alleged to have influenced several of these decisions: the licence to transmit the first commercial national radio station was granted to alleged sympathisers of Fianna Fáil, while the minister intervened in pressing RTÉ to concede a more economical charge for Century Radio's use of the national transmission network and in seeking to create an alternative news service (McCann, 1990).

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6. Approximately two thirds of the population live in 'multichannel' areas, and a third of the television households have cable television. The latter are able to receive the Irish and British national television programmes as well as between six and ten (mainly) English language satellite stations. For a fuller discussion of broadcasting in Ireland, see Hazelkorn, 1995a.

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7. Ironically, UTV's assault on the Republic's audience was assisted by a government 'capping' of advertising revenue earned by RTÉ which effectively forced advertisers to seek alternative platforms. It was introduced in 1988 ostensibly to shift advertising revenue away from RTÉ and towards the fledgling national commercial radio station, Century Radio, which collapsed shortly thereafter.

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One effect of these pressures is evident in the high proportion of inexpensive, studio-based discussion, 'talk-based' and imported programming. The former provide crucial anchor points in the RTÉ schedule while continuing to reduce reliance on acquired programming from 65 per cent in 1984 to 50 per cent in 1995. While this programming is favoured by Irish audiences, much is described as lacklustre, dull and timid, continuously drawing upon a small pool of 'experts'. Today, RTÉ enjoys a 48-50 per cent share of all peak time home viewing in multi-channel areas. The multiplicity of viewing choices available to the Irish public, the more aggressive approach taken by UTV,<sup>7</sup> likely competition for the licence fee from commercial and community radio (and possibly TV3), the establishment of an Irish language television station (Teilifis na Gaeilge), and proposals to curtail advertising revenue pose serious threats to its status. Set against a background of an ideological undermining (or at best questioning) of public confidence and support for state institutions in general, it seems likely that RTÉ will be operating in a less favourable political and public atmosphere in the future.

### Technology and the labour force

The conjuncture of these developments (economic, political and technological) have forced RTÉ to adopt the methods (and to a large extent the aims) of commercial broadcasting. A 1985 government-commissioned study (SKC, 1985) assessed the challenges to broadcasting 'in the era of competition', and recommended changes in restrictive work practices and conditions of employment, and a shift towards commissioning and purchasing of independent productions. It was also strongly critical of RTÉ for failing to take advantage of new technologies, where such technologies would reduce manning levels and costs. As a result, a new management strategy was adopted. It accepted the need for technological innovation and deployment of new media technologies, although promised there would be no compulsory redundancies; job reductions would be achieved by 'natural wastage' and early retirement. By the end of the decade, these changes were seen as insufficient to meet the challenges posed by other television broadcasters who had embraced new technology with low manning and cost structures.

From inception, technology and technological change have been central to radio and television. The introduction of FM radio broadcasts, the invention of transistor radio, and the move to colour television increased the consumption of media products in the 1970s. More recently, computerization and digitalization have swelled the possibility of media platforms, often enabling new audiences to be captured by simply reformulating existing media products onto new technologies.<sup>8</sup> New technologies have also led to significant changes in media production techniques and practices, most notably smaller crews and simplified post-production.<sup>9</sup> These developments have generated economies<sup>10</sup> while substantially raising production standards.<sup>11</sup> Digital technologies have also altered or eliminated many traditional skills required in the media production process by rendering them obsolete or less efficient. They have shifted the balance between large media institutions and small independent production facilities in favour of the latter.

RTÉ has not been a market leader in the early adoption of new technology, partly due to the financial constraints under which it operates. Its decision to implement changes in working modes and practices was demanded by the new broadcasting environment and the problems it posed particularly for broadcasting in and by a small peripheral society. All these developments have serious implications for those working in the sector, most particularly those employed by state broadcasters.

### Engineering<sup>12</sup>

Major changes have occurred in transmitter technology through microelectronics, and specifically modular circuits. Previously requiring a team of round-the-clock engineers, these transmitters are now unmanned. The modular design means that if a transmitter develops a fault, the circuitry can be removed and replaced in minutes, and

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8. For example, music previously recorded on records now on CDs; films previously for cinemas now on video or CD - thus enabling super-profits to be made.

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9. For example, CCD (charged coupling device), a light sensitive microchip, has enabled video-tape based, portable cameras to replace 16mm film cameras, and compact cassette tape has superseded quarter inch tape recorders as a portable sound recorder.

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10. Video tape is cheaper than film and can be reused. This equipment is technically more sophisticated - cameras now include both lighting and sound - and lightweight so they can be operated by one person with less training.

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11. EFP and ENG have allowed pictures to be immediate and transmittable.

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12. The following account comes directly Kilfeather (1994).

repaired off-site. They are also controlled directly from the studios, an innovation important with respect to increasing managerial control of production. The decline in the demand for engineers to man the transmitters has, however, been partially offset by newly created demand for engineers to service the growth of IT systems.<sup>13</sup> The fact that engineering skills are 'portable' means that they can be applied to new technologies with little difficulty, a situation that is not repeatable in other areas.

### **Radio**

The introduction of digital technology has led to substantial changes in work practices and to the virtual disappearance of traditional skills. The latter procedure, especially operative within the news division, involved a journalist's taped interview being edited by a sound operator under the former's supervision. Self-editing, based upon the digital encoding of sound which can then be viewed as a waveform and spliced 'virtually' on a computer screen, is suitable for those with little or no sound operating background. Because it involves less hand-to-eye co-ordination, it eliminates more traditional and skilled methods of editing as practised by sound operators. While journalists welcomed greater control over their work, the introduction of self-editing marked a new expectation by management for staff who had previously not been required to do any technical work.

### **Digital Switching**

The move from analogue to digital equipment in broadcasting has had major implications for processing information. Traditionally, the central apparatus room (CAR) or switching centre was responsible for routing outside channels and internal audio and video sources<sup>14</sup> to and from the various production and post-production areas. It involved a process similar to an old-fashioned telephone exchange, patching a wire from one socket to another. The entire process has now been replaced by integrated circuits and touch screen VDUs, controllable from anywhere in the studio. This technology has also transformed that part of television studio operations which mixes sound and vision for live broadcasting, provided cues and announces programmes, and sends out the broadcast signal. Both tasks have been automated and staff redeployed.<sup>15</sup>

Coupled with self-editing, digital switching enabled the capability to 'go directly to the transmitter network', thereby making it possible for a single presenter to control programme output on radio, without necessitating a sound operator to be present. These self-operated studios are especially cost-effective for RTÉ's all-music second channel, which has a minimum of 'talk radio content'. It does, however, again raise expectations about the skills required by previously technically unskilled presenters.

### **Graphic design**

Traditionally, artistic skills were important for the production of titles and graphics for television. The practice was to produce artwork on paper and then film it with a camera. New technology has revolutionized this process, replacing some of the skills with conceptual dexterity. The creative tasks and editorial decisions have been merged with consequences for both technical and creative workers. Contrary to expectations, increased quality of work and speed of delivery has increased the demand by producers and consumers for graphics, with the result that staff have increased in this section. In turn, this has accelerated the introduction of digital technology, forcing graphic designers to integrate their skills with other technical aspects of production, transmitting their work from computer to video tape directly without involving a video tape operator. New technology of video-compositing will have an equally great impact on design by integrating it directly with digital video. Together with digital non-linear video editing, the process of video post-production will be further revolutionized, combining the skills of video editor, graphic designer and sound mixer. This will again raise expectations about the skills required in video post-production.

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13. For example, RTÉ is installing a network based payroll system which will enable producers to input data on appearance fees and salaries without the necessity of submitting paper documents.

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14. For example: VTRs (video tape recorders), studio camera, OB (outside broadcast) sound and vision, etc.

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15. This is a rare case in RTÉ of automation replacing skills and jobs directly. Unlike manufacturing industry, these technicians have become involved in more creative aspects of media production through redeployment. However, it does place greater control of the production process in the hands of management.

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16. This gives a permanently rigged set of diffuse, high output, lights which provides broad, even illumination of a studio requiring only key lights and backdrops to be lit. This has been made possible by halogen lighting technology which allows for higher lighting output than obtainable from standard incandescent lights of a similar power rating.

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17. Modern CCD, charge coupling device, cameras allows their use in much lower lighting conditions than was possible with film cameras. It also allows material shot remotely to be sent by microwave link from regional studios, where previously an outside broadcast (OB) unit would have been required.

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18. During the 1980s, Sky and NBC had sent out one-person camera crews. Interviewees suggested that RTÉ is not intending to introduce one-person crews at this point as this reduction is not always matched by efficiencies.

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19. A similar trade-off for mobility and flexibility has been accepted by the use of cellular telephones to replace skilled OB technicians.

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### **Lighting**

The introduction of new saturated lighting rigs<sup>16</sup>, which are quickly rigged and derigged, has altered the skills required for lighting technician and lighting electrician. While there has been an increase in the number of studios under use at any one time, saturated lighting has contributed to deskilling of lighting in broadcasting. The operation can now be substantially carried out at the flick of a switch. Consequently, the numbers of studio electricians has fallen.

However, a new post of sound and lighting operator (SAL), incorporating lighting electricians together with sound recordists, has been created. It could be argued that this has resulted in deskilling both tasks as the final operation is not as skilled as that of the previous three-person crews. In so far as these two-person crews are used primarily for news and current affairs, which does not require as high sound and lighting quality as drama or music productions, the argument could be made that only the low skill element has been displaced. The new multi-skilled SAL is a more rewarding job.

### **ENG/EFP equipment**

The introduction of electronic news gathering (ENG) and electronic film production (EFP) equipment has revolutionised media production. The technical user-friendliness, lightweight and technical capability<sup>17</sup> of video over film processing has virtually led to the replacement of the latter by the former. The fact that video cameras also include the sound and lighting capability means that work practices appropriate for cinefilm crews are no longer required. The 1992 dispute in RTÉ began when management sought to introduce two-person crewing for news and current affairs programmes, thus displacing the need for both a lighting electrician and a sound operator. In this regard, RTÉ was heavily overmanned compared to the norm.<sup>18</sup> While there is some disagreement over whether sound quality has suffered, video's efficiency is seen as a welcome trade-off.<sup>19</sup>

The move to ENG and video has also led to a change in maintenance skills; while the equipment is more reliable than cinecameras, the increased number of VTRs and cameras, and RTÉ's commitment to 'in-house' repairs where possible, has led to increased numbers employed. In contrast, the skills required for transferring film to videotape for broadcast has been overtaken by ENG and EFP technology, thus eliminating the need for telecine transfer.

### **Labour restructuring**

The changes experienced by RTÉ are not unique. Similar changes had already been recorded in the USA, UK and throughout western Europe. Indeed, in comparison with other experiences, RTÉ had shown itself to be a reluctant user of new technology. However, by 1988, technological developments could no longer be ignored. *Competing in the New Environment - Our Strategy for Survival* (RTÉ 1988, 2,6) was a detailed account of RTÉ's response to the changed media environment:

We must produce and transmit more and better programmes at lower cost and with fewer staff. This is the essence of the challenge which we face and must overcome. If we fail to do so now we risk getting into a spiral of decline which will become impossible to halt and which would undoubtedly have disastrous consequences for RTÉ and RTÉ staff...

Multiskilling must become the norm, and while preserving... essential production and operational core skills and maintaining programme quality and output standards, staff in general will need to cover a range of duties for which they are competent or for which they can, with limited effort, be trained and scheduled to work as a team... reasonable flexibility within a team concept has to be the norm.

Remarkably similar in tone to the UK *Broadcasting in the '90s: Competition, Choice and Quality - The Government's Plans for Broadcasting* (HMSO, 1988, 10.2-10.4, p41), it emphasized flexibility, efficiency and lower costs. It illustrates that for RTÉ, the restriction of work roles was not permissible within the new competitive and 'technologically determined' work environment.

Labour flexibility is the key advantage of new media technologies. Single-operator crews, not part of RTÉ's agenda at the moment, are fast becoming the industry norm, particularly for news and current affairs. With the introduction of self-editing, there is greater convergence between the technical and the production sides of broadcasting, eliminating traditional boundaries; for example, technicians are retrained as journalists and journalists reskilled to edit their own interviews.

Camera crews are expected to be news editors as well at no extra charge. We could be out all day and then be asked to cut for three or four hours. In the end, they're asking one operator to do everything including the line feed (Croft, 1995).

Unlike its counterparts in the UK and the USA, however, the prevailing political and public climate in Ireland has proven itself intolerant of large-scale redundancies especially by state institutions. Thus, RTÉ has used a combination of early retirement, redeployment, retraining and alterations in staffing structures to effect the necessary cost efficiencies required by increased demands of competition and commercialization. RTÉ's social responsibility masks the full extent of the impact of new technology on labour structures through the vagaries of internal staff mobility options. Thus far, the pace of change has been able to absorb the level of redeployment and retraining, albeit the unions have expressed concern that the speed of change might begin to outpace the organizational ability of the corporation to absorb displaced labour. In such circumstances, the major union has set itself against the

allocation of members to a 'Redeployment Pool' where it is made clear to them that they are not seen as making a valuable contribution to the organisation (SIPTU, 1992).

The two recent industrial disputes, 1991 and 1992, began when RTÉ sought to introduce two person camera crews without trade union approval for the level of compensation to be awarded to members displaced by technology.<sup>20</sup> The unions claim that they did not seek to overturn the decision to use new technology but rather only compensation for those members affected by its introduction. In this regard, the dispute illustrates the inability of the unions to influence the 'product strategy' of RTÉ as regards the quality and nature of programmes produced (Kilfeather, 1994). Previous efforts to influence the nature and extent of technological change had also been thwarted<sup>21</sup>. Explanations for this failure rest to some extent on union unwillingness to become involved in retraining, preferring instead to negotiate increased wages. Worrying from labour's point of view, must be the fact that RTÉ views technology as a means to reduce labour costs and achieve greater efficiencies.

Another aspect of labour restructuring has been changes in employment categories. The government had introduced an embargo on full-time employment in the public sector in the early 1980s in a drastic effort to reduce the huge deficit on current expenditure. Despite RTÉ's relative financial autonomy, it was still overdetermined by these fiscal pressures and by labour force changes within its competitors. In this context, the 1985 consultancy study of RTÉ had also firmly recommended retrenchment in staff numbers. RTÉ has a stated policy of making new appointments and promotions by contract only.<sup>22</sup> This trend towards casualization of the labour force is illustrated by the figures: in 1988, 2146 people were employed, 99 of whom were in non-permanent employment; in contrast, by 1994, only 1973 were employed of whom 330 were in non-permanent employment. This represents an increase of the total employed in non-permanent positions from 4.6 per cent to 16.7 per cent. Over the same period, 212

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20. RTÉ, who had sought the opinion of the Labour Court, believed that the introduction of new technology was covered by the Broadcasting in the 1980s agreement with the major trade union, the ITGWU, in 1982. It had allowed for the introduction of new technology in return for pay increases of approximately 25 per cent for many members.

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21. The trade unions had attempted to influence the manner and pace in which two person crews using high power lights would be introduced. While they viewed this change as 'inevitable', they sought to subject the use of such lights to electrical and operational safety checks by the state's scientific and technical institution, EOLAS. A dispute ultimately arose over financial compensation.

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22. RTÉ employs people in a number of 'categories': Permanent and Pensionable: this is the most secure of the contracts and those employed these terms have been assured that they will not be subject to involuntary redundancy; Continuous Employment: this refers to fixed term contracts which carry the same pension and other rights as permanent and pensionable contracts; they are usually given to people who are promoted from a permanent and pensionable post; Employment Contract: these are fixed term contracts with portable pension rights and have been favoured by RTÉ for recent appointments; Temporary Contract: these are contracts for three months to 3 years; they are frequently given for the duration of a programme series and then allowed to lapse. NB. A change to a continuous employment contract can not be regarded as a real change in employment status as the person involved retains their permanent and pensionable rights while being promoted to a higher salary in their contact position.

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people took early retirement. (See Table 1) The figures show that while permanent and pensionable jobs have been lost, RTÉ has, to some degree, been replacing them with contract staff.

**Table 1**

RTÉ CASUALIZATION, 1988 AND 1994

Year	employed	non-permanent	% non-permanent
1988	2146	99	4.6
1994	1973	330	16.7

Source: RTÉ

A closer examination illustrates that the pattern of casualization of employment is not universal. There is a marked contrast between employment patterns in the technical and production divisions albeit all areas showed a fall in the numbers employed. Technical areas, such as radio and television facilities, show a steady contraction in permanent and pensionable employment, with no comparable increase in non-permanent employment. For example, total engineering staff fell from 379 in 1988 to 199 employed in 1994; of which non-permanent contract staff constituted 26.1 per cent in 1988 but only three per cent employed 1994.<sup>23</sup> Thus, no new employment has been generated in this area. In contrast, permanent and pensionable staff in production areas, most notably in television programming, radio and news, are being re- or displaced by non-permanent contract staff; the latter has increased from 10% to 19.9%, from 3.8% to 15.8%, and from 2% to 28.2%, respectively (see Table 2).

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23. This figures includes both employment contracts and temporary contracts.

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The relationship between technology and labour restructuring within RTÉ is complex and often contradictory. While competitive and political factors have stressed technological innovation, other factors have slowed its implementation and effects. Both deskilling and reskilling are occurring, sometimes in tandem. Their impact has been felt unevenly by the labour force; for example, while all areas have experienced a decline in employment, new employment is less likely in technical areas most affected directly by new technology. This suggests that when the embargo on permanent and pensionable employment is lifted, new recruitments would only be likely in non-technological areas. This represents a real and potential shift in the balance of skill/power relations between technology ('blue collar') and production ('white collar') jobs. This rebalancing carries significant implications for 'productivity' as new media technology opens up the possibility for a shift from 'variable' (wages) to 'fixed' (plant) capital by reducing the production process and the cost of production. Effectively, technological developments have enabled many more people to make programmes more easily. People with little or no technical skill can with little or no additional training undertake traditionally quite skillful operations, a factor illustrated by the experience of self-editing (Croft, 1990). Additionally, the latter workers carry none of the benefits of premium (e.g. unsocial or overtime hours) payments associated with the formally well-organised technical staff.

**Table 2****EMPLOYMENT CATEGORIES IN SELECTED DIVISIONS IN RTÉ,**

1988 AND 1994

		Total staff	Permanent Pensionable	Continuous Employment	Employment Contract	Temporary Contract	Non- Permanent Contract%
<b>Radio</b>							
Facilities	1994	58	57	1	0	0	0
	1988	91	89	1		1	1.1
Engineering	1994	199	190	2	6	0	3
	1988	379	359	11		99	26.1
<b>TV</b>							
Programmes	1994	351	239	42	60	10	19.9
	1988	399	302	57		40	10
Radio 1	1994	177	127	22	27	1	15.8
	1988	212	177	27		8	3.8
News	1994	142	102	0	39	1	28.2
	1988	137	118	16		3	2.2
RTÉ Total	1994	1973	1508	135	292	38	16.7
	1988	2146	1867	180		99	4.6

Source: RTÉ

Note: Non-permanent contracts includes those employed on both employment or temporary contracts.

Another factor is gender. Women constitute only 31.8 per cent of full time but 60 per cent of part-time staff (see RTÉ, 1991; Gallagher, 1990; Gleeson, 1995). The technical areas of media production (lighting, camera, sound, etc.) have traditionally been male bastions but these areas are most vulnerable to incursions of new technology. In contrast, women are likely to be employed on contract as production support staff (e.g. administration, researcher, production assistants, secretarial, receptionist, programme director, etc.)<sup>24</sup>. Employment patterns within RTÉ, like its international counterparts, continue to show a strongly segregated skill and grading structure: men dominate the technical areas while women are over-represented in administrative activities. While RTÉ is an 'equal opportunity employer', distinctions in recruitment and promotion continue to be highlighted. Although skill sounds like something that can be measured objectively, skills have increasingly become a 'masculine prerogative' (Arnold and Faulkner, 1985, 46). Indeed, the demarcation between 'women's jobs' and 'men's jobs' is as strongly marked as ever throughout the industry<sup>25</sup> (see Table 3). One explanation for the significant recruitment of women into some production grades, categorized as 'pink collar' or 'velvet' ghetto, is the declining status of the specific medium (e.g. radio vis-à-vis television, broadcasting vis-à-vis film) (Zoonan, 1994: p50; Grunig, 1993: 278; Viswanath et al, 1993: 217; Hazelkorn, 1995b).

For obvious reasons, journalists and producer/directors have more readily embraced multi-skilling than their technical counter-parts; the former see it as a means of enhancing their control while the latter as one of losing control over the finished product. The evidence further suggests that women are more likely to be the benefactors or victims (depending on one's analysis) of casualized employment in the sector. Given the media's predilection to image, gender factors such as 'technological know-how' and 'personality-looks' may play a key role in explaining new forms of sex-segregation, e.g. behind vs in front of camera, directing vs producing<sup>26</sup>. Technology may be capable of bridging the gap between conception and execution in the 'artistic' production process but the rewards are not necessarily evenly distributed (Kilfeather, 1994).

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24. An exception is vision-mixing.

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25. For example, the ability to hold a camera is often used against women on the basis of the person's height or camera's weight. The following table gives comparable data on employment by gender within the independent film and television sector in Ireland:

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26. Women usually appear in front of and men behind the camera. Is this relationship derivative of gendered technology? Martin (1995) argues that 'women [are] generally found...before the camera...because, in bourgeois society, women are often identified as objects and men as subjects with technical skills'.

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**Table 3**

DISTRIBUTION OF MALE AND FEMALE EMPLOYEES IN INDEPENDENT FILM & TELEVISION  
PRODUCTION COMPANIES AND FACILITIES HOUSES, 1995

Group	PERMANENT					CONTRACT		
	Male No	%	Female No	%	Total	Male No	Female No	Total
Production Management	82	77	24	23	106	9	5	14
Production Support	18	16	97	84	115	7	9	16
Operational	122	83	25	17	147	26	4	30
TOTAL	222	60	146	40	368	42	18	60

Source: Statcom Report/FÁS, *Training Needs to 2000*, p16.

### Implications for broadcasting (in Ireland)

A revolution hit broadcasting during the 1980s; terms such as 'commercialisation', 'casualization' and 'deregulation' have been used to describe some of the changes. The most radical of these was the establishment in 1982 of Channel 4 in the UK which proffered a new model of broadcasting. It 'created a new industrial model', formally separating production from broadcasting, thereby transforming the 'integrated factory production into the publisher model' (Tunstall, 1993, 10). This process was seen as a means of stimulating the development of an independent production sector, from which both the BBC and ITV were to commission 25 per cent of programming. In Ireland, compared to other European countries, the changes are quite modest, especially in light of the recent government pronouncements in support of the preservation and strengthening of public service broadcasting (Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, 1995). Nevertheless, the success of the Channel 4 model corresponded with the demands of the domestic economy, politics and technology.

The 1985 report commissioned by the Irish government from SKC, followed the same free market strategy it had previously advocated for the BBC and Channel 4. It proposed a radical shift in the financing, labour structures and programming regime within the state broadcaster, and the creation of an independent commercial production sector. Essentially it proposed a form of 'managed privatization' of RTÉ, a strategy which involved a combination of fiscal and legislative restrictions on the state sector and incentives to the private sector. In so doing, it proffered the possibility of jump-starting an independent commercial broadcasting sector, a strategy that paralleled one which had engineered the Irish industrial revolution post-1960s with critical success (Hazelkorn, 1995c).

The historic conjuncture of these changes go much further than the proposition for a de- or re-regulated broadcasting policy. The revolution inspired by the advent of new media technologies has brought about fundamental changes in work practices and the structure of employment:

- 1) a continuing decline in full-time employment<sup>27</sup>;
- 2) a move towards casualization of employment through a shift towards short term contracts, lasting either for several months or a series' duration;
- 3) an erosion of the demarcation between the technical and production areas both within broadcasting and between broadcasting and film, and a rebalancing in the power relationships between the two;
- 4) slimmed-down production teams (including camera crews, but also the elimination of sound and video operators, etc.);

27. RTÉ's Strategy for Survival sought to bring about a reduction of 10 per cent via voluntary redundancy, a figure that has been revised upwards. Employment in RTÉ reached a height in 1984, when 2376 people were employed.

- 5) the contracting-in of programming and/or skills from independent production and facilities houses;
- 6) the routinization (or redefinition) of many previously skilled tasks, including for example journalism.

Many of these changes correspond to the normal economic developments whereby technology is introduced in order to reduce labour costs and secure competitive advantage and audiences. The insatiable appetite of the latter, potentially larger than the nation state, has accelerated formulaic broadcast programming. Combined with the shift towards electronic and digital technology, media production is being transformed into an industrial form similar to other mass production industries. These changes pose a serious challenge not only to the state broadcaster but broadcasting in general.

Given the relatively small media production market in Ireland, these production and facilities houses are necessarily small: 84 per cent employ ten or less, and 69 per cent five or less people (Statcom/FAS, 1995, 16). Many were former RTÉ employees who opted for early retirement during the initial mid-1980s de-manning. While operating on a financial precipice, they survive through a combination of flexible work practices and multi-skilling<sup>28</sup>, a low-cost base with few overheads, contracting in both labour skills and equipment as required. It is their ability to significantly undercut the cost of programme production by the state broadcaster,<sup>29</sup> because of the latter's rigid structure of secure employment contracts and conditions of employment, that signals the most revolutionary challenge to broadcasting and to its labour force while granting a greater influence over the labour force.<sup>30</sup>

Essentially, the independent sector is a freelance sector – more aptly referred to as a 'system of sub-contracted labour' (Chanan, 1980, 127) – although the precarious nature of much of the employment precludes an accurate picture. Between 1991 and 1994, permanent employment increased by 18 per cent but freelance employment grew by 58 per cent. Of the 3,500 people employed in the entire audio-visual industry in Ireland, including those employed by RTÉ, almost half or 1500, are freelance (Coopers and Lybrand, 1994: 6, 10). While, the trade unions still control access to employment in the sector through a closed-shop policy, they are in no position to present any serious challenge. More flexible work practices, the often intimate employment relations, where recruitment and promotion is often on a basis of personal contact and the 'old-boys network', and the precarious and spasmodic nature of media production work militates against this. This is well illustrated by the 1992 strike in RTÉ; ostensibly over the size of camera-crew, some union organisers did proclaim it as a strike in defence of trade unions against a 'management offensive'. Despite the unions' 'success' in persuading the majority of their members to stay outside the gate, new technology had simplified broadcasting to the extent that a few managers<sup>31</sup> could sustain the national radio and television station. New media technologies which have resulted in the reduction in size of camera crews have made it more difficult for unions to 'produce technical arguments to support their negotiating position' (Sparks, 1992:26). The open acknowledgement by union strategists that the strike was lost illustrates the depth of decline from its legendary bargaining strength of the 1970s.

The UK experience is timely. In 1988, all UK broadcasters and their regulators employed 50,000 people; today, it is less than 40,000<sup>32</sup>. Fewer jobs today are due almost entirely to casualization and subcontracting engendered by policy decisions deliberately aimed at bolstering an independent sector. 'Many elements of production and support services have disappeared into the murky world of the self-employed and the small company' (Phillips, 1995). The 1994 UK Skillset survey estimated that 54 per cent of the 28,000 production workforce were freelance or working on short-term contracts compared with 39 per cent in 1989 (Life, 1995). That over half of this workforce was employed in the independent sector illustrates its vulnerability. While the Irish situation is a long way off from the UK, where the independent sector is fast approaching being the largest production base in the country, the announcement that TV3 intends to

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28. A survey of independent film and television production and facilities houses in Ireland found that 'some crossover/overlap in job functions is a feature in over two-thirds of companies surveyed (68%), and that three-quarters of these companies have a "considerable" degree of job crossover/overlap. Further analysis indicates that the crossover is most frequently within jobs in the television production area, and between production and production support jobs. For example, a producer may also be responsible for direction, or it can be the case that research, production co-ordination and floor management may be combined' (Statcom/FAS, 1995, 17).

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29. In 1994, RTÉ paid the independent sector approximately £22,000 per hour programming; this figure is the total value of commissions £5,527,902 divided by 258 total hours commissioned. Economies of scale with a series affect these figures. These costs are also conditional on the type of programme produced; game and talk shows are cheaper to produce. Difficulties in comparisons with in-house costs are attributable to the fact that many of the cost factors involved can be treated as internal 'public goods' and their pricing is entirely arbitrary. In the private sector, market prices always operate so that a price will always be arrived at.

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30. See, e.g. 'Independent sector is blamed for latest wave of BBC job cuts', *Broadcast*, 24 September, 1993.

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31. Over 10 per cent of total staff are designated as management.

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32. Only Rupert Murdoch's BSkyB has recruited; 637 more people but only 136 in programming. Most are in low-paid subscription sales and fulfilment personnel. Average pay was down by 9.4% to stg£16,149, TV's lowest (Goodwin, 1991).

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33. New UK legislation is likely to permit more television stations being established on the Channel 4 model.

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operate as a 'publisher', with an annual budget of £6m (£10-12m initial capital costs) and a staff of 100, suggests clear parallels.

The Channel 4 model<sup>33</sup>, therefore, promotes not merely another way of organizing broadcasting: while the process encourages a certain semblance of aesthetic freedom – offering the potential for a greater variety of programming sources – it conforms to key political and economic strategies. By actively encouraging the transfer of media production from the secure employment environment of the state to the market-driven environment of the commercial sector, it is revolutionising media production processes and organisations.

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