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Problems of broadcast funding: *Crimeline* and sponsorship

Amanda Dunne

Problems of broadcast funding

In recent years, the dominant trend in broadcast regulation in Europe has been to place the consumer not the citizen at the centre of policy. While technological change has also provoked phenomenal changes in broadcasting and its marketplace, the irrefutable tension between the interests of the citizen and those of the consumer, between 'quality' programming and 'mass' audiences, and between the 'public service' ethos and the interests of commercial broadcasting is more directly a function of policy (Dahlgren, 1995). Thus, the dogma of 'consumer sovereignty', best epitomized by Margaret Thatcher's efforts to deregulate broadcasting in the United Kingdom during the late 1980s and early 1990s, has deliberately generated a 'laissez-faire' approach to television, creating a situation wherein the capacity of the state to regulate broadcasting has deteriorated. Deregulation has meant that programming content and financing of broadcasting has been left increasingly to the mercies of the market, leading to a new tension between 'privately generated' advertising money and 'publicly generated' media revenues; in turn, it has been argued that the amount and nature of the finance available for production has a direct impact on the quantity and quality of programming, and on the 'ethos' of the broadcaster (Garnham, 1994). The pressure to be competitive and to maintain a commitment to public service broadcasting has forced many broadcasters to radically reassess their activities to maximize audience share. The former Director-General of RTÉ, T.V. Finn¹, foresaw such a tension when, in 1984, he advocated the notion of 'semi-controlled competition', a set of rules that would allow for some protection of the public service element of broadcasting while acknowledging the inevitability of competition (Finn, 1984).

Globally the premier source of broadcast funding has been advertising, which fulfils a dual role. On the one hand, it has freed television from direct government control and encouraged broadcasters to meet viewer needs, e.g. information and entertainment, and to ensure a continued demand for its services. Contrarily, it has left television subject to market forces and vacillating economic trends, fostering a criticism that it too often panders to 'lowest common denominator' programming, e.g. low-risk, populist programmes designed to appeal to a mass audience. It is often argued that this relentless pursuit of large market share has contributed to a trivialization of cultural products (Stevenson, 1995)². However, as the market for information has become global, broadcasters have responded by seeking out new opportunities; the fragmentation of the market has ironically offered a 'salvation' to commercial and national broadcasters as they realize they can sell more to valuable niche audiences. Specialist broadcasters, such as MTV, have sought to cater for age- and interest-selective niche audiences (Price, 1995), while national broadcasters have divested themselves of a narrowly targeted version of national identity, a process termed 'de-pillarization'.

This proliferation in the number of broadcasters has inevitably increased competition for advertising revenue. The amount of revenue generated from the sale of advertising has not, however, grown in line with the amount of broadcast hours or in line with production costs (Seaton, 1994)³. Global and uneven economic pressures have meant that there is intense competition for smaller amounts of money. Public service broadcasters, many of whom are partially funded by advertising like their commercial brethren, have found themselves in a weakening position; advertisers no longer need them to reach a national audience with so many commercial alternatives available

1. In the same essay, Finn accurately predicted the difficulties facing the funding of RTÉ: the stagnation of advertising revenue and the lack of political support for an increase in the license fee.

2. Some commentators argue that competition reduces quality in commercial as well as public service television. For example, game shows represent better value for money as they cost less than dramas and documentaries. As good performers in the ratings, they attract more advertising revenue. The trend towards developing mass-appeal programmes such as soaps and game shows is increasing as evidenced by programmes such as *Lucky Numbers* (Sky), and *Talking Telephone Numbers* (ITV), etc. See Sepstrup, 1991.

3. Many advertisers are choosing direct sales and marketing techniques such as direct mail or point of sale promotions over conventional media advertising. Sponsorship is one such method.

the policies of Fianna Fáil and mounted a strong challenge to the legitimacy of the government. The mass circulation newspaper offered advantages other than the size of audience which could be reached. Clearly, a mass circulation press would prove more difficult for the government to suppress using traditional means. That is, the government would find it more difficult to stifle a modern daily newspaper than to ban the traditionally small-scale republican publications. The Press' claim to represent all the people of Ireland was a safeguard against the kind of suppression that had hindered republican papers in the past. It seems that Cumann na nGaedheal hoped that the new paper would fail to establish a commercial basis and would disappear of its own accord. When asked in the Dáil whether he would suppress *The Irish Press*, Cosgrave replied that 'by the looks of the first issues it will suppress itself' (IP, 5 September 1931:III).

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(Sepstrup, 1990). Hence, the revenue available to public service broadcasters is now more thinly spread.

In turn, advertisers also face threats from the fragmented market. They must now spend more to reach an audience which may be smaller than that previously enjoyed. Increased choice through the growth in the number of cable and satellite stations, contrary to expectations, has not resulted in lower advertising costs; indeed, the splintered audience is now more difficult to reach (Clarke and Bradford, 1992). In addition, the avoidance of advertisements is a significant audience trend – viewers leave the room during ad breaks, zap or watch subscription channels⁴. Broadcasters are reluctant to provide audience reach figures for advertising breaks to advertisers increasingly concerned about reaching consumers. This has resulted in the phenomenon of 'clutter' as advertisers combat audience fatigue and disenchantment with many, shorter and attention-grabbing advertisements to a increasingly sophisticated market (Carter, 1993).

Advertisers are also being legislated out of several lucrative markets, such as toy, alcohol and tobacco markets, further diminishing their domain (Summer, 1993). Advertisers are particularly fearful of regulation; Mars, Kelloggs and Heinz commissioned a study on advertising in the late 1980s which advocated the lobbying of governments and the formation of pressure groups to stem the tide of re-regulation of television advertising⁵. It contended that less advertising would result in lower quality, and less cultural and political programming due to lack of adequate finance (Mattelart, 1991). RTÉ, for example, has recently banned all advertising around children's television⁶. The Authority decided to replace the advertising breaks with 'informercials', public service adverts that would educate and inform the young audience. This move is significant in light of the increasing interpenetration of advertising and programmes in children's television (Mattelart, 1991).

Thus, it appears that the benefits of advertising expenditure may have reached a plateau, through a combination of economic variables, questionable efficacy, legislative restrictions and public distrust. If this is true, there is a clear and ominous link between decreasing advertising and broadcast revenue. In Ireland, RTÉ has been increasingly dependent on advertising for revenue; in 1994, 51 percent of its budget came from this source, while only 36 per cent came from the license fee, and 13 per cent from other commercial sources. Against this grain, the recent government Green Paper on broadcasting, *Active or Passive. Broadcasting in the Future Tense* (1995), noted the danger of such reliance and advertiser influence:

While there is no evidence to suggest that it is the case, does the reliance by RTÉ for so much of its revenue from commercial sources including sponsorship run the risk of compromising its editorial integrity?

Michael D. Higgins, Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, affirmed in the Green paper, a commitment to reducing the national station's dependence on advertising by increasing the license fee, possibly by indexation. The possibility of increasing the license fee by approximately £30 to cover the cost of Teilifis na Gaeilge and RTÉ's sports coverage has been mooted; however, it is unlikely that such a move would either be popular or feasible given the size and income of the population in the country. It is equally unlikely that the government would be able to fund the increase required from its own sources. It has now been announced that the license fee is to be raised by £8, considerably lower than the figure initially suggested.

While consumer expenditure on media remains quite constant as a percentage of GDP, consumer expenditure to support a proliferation of channels without a reduction in production costs does not exist (Garnham, 1994). While the cost of television production and the number of channels is growing, the revenue to support these developments does not exist. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that channels will

4. This phenomenon is known as 'grazing' in the industry.

5. The central hypothesis of this 1988 study was that new European legislation on television advertising would have a negative impact for advertisers, television stations, consumers and 'culture and politics'.

6. At the end of 1995, the RTÉ Authority decided that they should be no advertising transmitted around children's programmes on either of their two stations; no sponsorship would be permitted either. An insider estimated that £100,000 in revenue would be lost by this decision.

either close down or alternatively production standards will fall dramatically. It is within this context that the need to discover new sources of broadcast funding has become very urgent. That this search is linked to the necessity of (re)structuring market mechanisms in order to encourage and ensure diversity rather than hinder it has equally become pressing (Dahlgren, 1995).

Rise of sponsorship

Given the economics of the marketplace and increased doubts as to whether traditional brand advertising does increase sales significantly, if at all, advertisers have begun to spend an increasing proportion of their marketing budget on non-traditional forms of advertising. Major advertisers have begun to turn increasingly to direct sales and marketing techniques, including sponsorship, barter and product placement. While product placement is illegal in many countries, and barter has been slow to take hold in Europe, sponsorship has become the newest potential source of broadcast funding. Together these three 'new' forms of advertising grew at a faster rate than media advertising during the 1980s, and now exceed advertising expenditures in mass media.

Corporate spending on sponsorship accounted for £287m in the UK in 1990, and \$3b in the US in 1992. Spending by the 'below-the-line' sector (which includes sponsorship) has steadily out-paced 'above-the-line' expenditures, e.g. conventional advertising (Mattelart, 1991). It is estimated that up to three times this amount is spent 'exploiting associations' (Thwaites, 1995). This method is considered to be most effective when combined with other forms of advertising (e.g. spot advertising around sponsored programmes), and when there is a clear visual link between the sponsor and the programme (e.g. where the logo or company name is placed beside or over the programme name in the opening titles and end credits).

Advertising trades on an assumption that there is a direct correlation between sales, and audience size and composition. The growth of sponsorship is proof of advertisers' desire to expand their role from that of merely producing an advertising spot to 'co-producing' programming. With it, a company or product can benefit from an association with a programme and increase the prospect of 'narrowcasting' to a more valuable and significant audience. In the United States, Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) reaches three per cent of the national audience, and has proved very attractive to corporate sponsors (this audience tends to be more upwardly-mobile and more educated), thus being of great benefit to their image (Ford and Ford, 1993). As early as 1987, Saatchi and Saatchi set up a production unit for sponsored television programmes, describing them as 'free, ready-made programming' (Mattelart, 1991). The advantage of such programmes is that they essentially provide free programming to the broadcaster, which is an attractive proposition. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is an increasing presence of advertiser-produced programming, e.g. game shows like *Wheel of Fortune* made by Unilever, on European television.⁷

7. Proctor and Gamble were involved in the co-production of the mini-series, *Marco Polo*, with RAI and Dentsu in the early 1980s.

As broadcast production funds shrink, the relationship between sponsorship finance and programme costs will undoubtedly strengthen (Tobin, 1990). This form of funding offers specific audiences and associations to advertisers while providing much needed revenues to producers. RTÉ television's stable of sponsored programmes now includes *Crimeline* sponsored by Hibernian Insurance, *The Tuesday Movie* sponsored by Satzenbrau, *2TV* sponsored by Coca-Cola, *Beyond the Hall Door* sponsored by Irish Permanent, *Challenging Times* sponsored by *The Irish Times*, and *Across the Line* sponsored by Mars. Previously, sport had been the only sponsored element of RTÉ television's (although radio had had some notable 'sponsored' programmes) output since the very early years of the station. In fact, coverage of major events such as the World Cup (soccer and rugby) and the Olympics would not have been possible without sponsorship.

Given the dramatic changes in broadcasting and its marketplace, it would be naive to ignore sponsorship's potential as a vital source of funding: it is unlikely to go away and it provides a very real opportunity to supplement or indeed replace revenues gained from advertising. The patronage embodied by such sponsorship can, however, often be seen to be of a very commercial and penetrating kind. The tendency to try to hide the commercial intention of the communicator is somewhat problematic, from an ethical and awareness point of view: the audience often knows of the fiscal relationship between the producer and the sponsor. Some research has shown that audiences are highly conscious of sponsors associated with the programmes that they watch; quantitative and qualitative research conducted by MTV, the music channel, affirms this awareness (Dell, 1996). This may be due to MTV's highly media-literate audience and the particular symbiosis between the sponsor and the programme, which on MTV closely matches that of the sponsors in most cases⁸. Drama and light entertainment are therefore often considered better programmes for sponsorship as there is less likelihood of conflict of interest arising between the sponsor and the programme.

On the other hand, the more stimulating a programme and the greater its impact on the viewer, the more likely a programme is to attract support from a sponsor. Here, control is the key issue; a sponsorship agency whose function is merely the pairing of a programme with a sponsor would ensure that there is no direct link between the producer and the sponsor, and no risk of untoward influence or control (Ford and Ford, 1993). In this instance, the subversion of a programme's editorial line is the greatest concern arising from sponsorship⁹. These and other issues will be examined in the remainder of this article, which looks in detail at the relationship between RTÉ, broadcast funding and sponsorship in terms of a case study of a singular 'success' story, *Crimeline*.

Crimeline: a case study

In 1992, a new genus of crime programme appeared on RTÉ. Replacing *Garda Patrol*, *Crimeline* began broadcasting once a month in a prime-time Monday night slot. The programme was a radical departure from *Garda Patrol* which was a low-budget programme presented by the Gardaí with no use of live-action or security footage and predominantly concentrating on lost property. It would be fair to describe the programme as functional in a limited way though unsophisticated and uninteresting.

There was a general feeling that *Garda Patrol* had outlived its usefulness, certainly on the part of the Gardaí and, independently RTÉ saw merit in moving in the direction of the type of crime prevention programme exemplified by *Crimewatch UK*. RTÉ made a number of approaches to the Gardaí with this in mind but failed to attain the level of co-operation necessary to produce such a programme. From a broadcasting perspective it was imperative that the production team would be given access to the level of detail required to reconstruct serious crimes, e.g. access to witnesses, scenes of crimes, etc. Furthermore, the programme would require access to security videos inside banks and building societies, etc. Thus, while the desire to produce a programme of this nature was there, RTÉ did not possess the wherewithal in terms of Garda assistance to realize the concept.

David Harvey, an independent producer, brought together the disparate elements to make such a programme by enlisting the co-operation of the Gardaí and the financial backing of Hibernian Insurance. As in the case of *Crimewatch UK*, the programme's model, the structure presents an unchanging opening sequence which clearly identifies the programme as *Crimeline* and unambiguously represents its status as a 'law and order'/crime programme. The shot sequence that begins each programme represents the process of justice from crime to sentencing in powerful visual motifs, accompanied by dramatic and stirring music. It also visually represents the link between the Gardaí and *Crimeline* and, later, *Crimeline* and the Gardaí. The association of the Gardaí and Hibernian is broken by the shot sequence. The piece is dominated by a sense of tension

8. *MTV's Most Wanted*, a requests programme, is sponsored by Durex. The image of the company fits that of MTV: risqué, adventurous, daring and young.

9. There was an incidence on ABC, an Australian public service channel, where a cookery programme was found to have nineteen different, unacknowledged sponsors. It is this kind of situation that leads to suspicion of sponsorship.

and urgency and the pace blurs the boundaries between the differing elements of the piece created by fast-paced editing and fast-paced shots. The sequence is in 'postbox' format with a telephone cord on the top and bottom of the frame and the colour changes from black to blue during the sequence. (See Table 1)

Table 1

| OPENING SEQUENCE | |
|------------------|---|
| 00.00 | Garda Logo. |
| 00.04 | Sequence of one long shot from each of the three reconstructions. Edited on a crescendo with a 'tearing' effect on each edit. Accompanied by a voice-over by David Harvey beginning 'On <i>Crimeline</i> tonight.....' |
| 00.28 | Montage of shots – Phone being dialled 1850 40 50 60 appears beneath the picture. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person talking on phone. • Garda on radio with flashing blue lights behind. • People running down shadowy alley. • Dusting for fingerprints. • Squad car travelling at speed. • Fingerprinting. • Person being put into a squad car. • Person being handcuffed. • Judges' gavel striking. |
| 00.52 | Fades into the <i>Crimeline</i> logo. |
| 00.58 | The logo flips over turning into <i>Hibernian</i> logo. The titles 'in association with' and 'Insurance' fade up above and below. |
| 01.03 | Opening sequence ends. |

The reconstructions aim to jog memories; in addition, they make good television. *Crimeline* tends to reconstruct particular types of crime, usually violent ones, such as murder, rape, robbery with assault, and missing people. Interestingly enough, missing people cases tend to have the best response rate from the public (Harvey, 1995), with rape cases also receiving a high level of response (Murray, 1995). Appeals for people to phone in permeate each segment of the programme; the phone number constantly appears in 'straps' as do the programme and Garda logos during the reconstructions. This connection is religiously reinforced. The 'update' lasts no more than four to five minutes, but rarely reveals any further information. It appears to renew the sense of crisis, and further exhorts the viewing public to telephone before midnight. The structure of *Crimeline* serves the dramatic urgency of the hunt for the criminal with regular promises of more crime and drama to come; it uses 'teasers' before the advertising breaks and during the programme, combined with a constant fast-pace, moving the audience from one type of crime to the next.

Crimeline is sponsored by Hibernian Insurance, one of the largest insurers in Ireland. The company covers the cost of all elements of the programme with the exception of the studio time and facilities supplied on the night of transmission by RTÉ. The estimated cost of one programme is approximately £18,000, a considerable investment on the part of Hibernian as the format had been untried in Ireland and could have failed miserably.¹⁰ However, as the programme currently achieves ratings in excess of 900,000 viewers each month, and has topped the TAM ratings in 1994-1995, the investment represents good value for money.

10. As noted by David Harvey when interviewed in November 1995.

Crimeline has also provided an opportunity to develop a very positive association for Hibernian with the Gardai and crime prevention. This is the strength of sponsorship over conventional advertising; it creates an environment where the sponsor can bask in the reflected glow of a programme's success and absorb some of the attributes of the show. Within the business community, there appears to be a belief that Hibernian's sponsorship of *Crimeline* is an excellent and enviable deal, and may pave the way for further programme sponsorships in the future (MacCann, 1995). In concrete terms, research has shown that the awareness level of Hibernian as the sponsor is fairly high and is increasing with each series. A study in February 1995, showed that 95 per cent of the population were aware of *Crimeline* while just over twenty per cent of adults were spontaneously aware of Hibernian as the sponsor. This is slightly more than double the linkage level recorded two years earlier (Hibernian Insurance, 1995). For people aware of the sponsor, it appears to induce a positive feeling among them towards Hibernian. In addition, people already insured by the company are more conscious of the sponsorship, and see it as an endorsement of the company.

As the national broadcaster, RTÉ is understandably conscious of the ethical concerns surrounding the show's integrity; the programme falls broadly into the area of current affairs, an area not usually deemed ideal for sponsorship by the UK's Independent Television Commission (ITC), Ireland's Independent Radio and Television Commission (IRTC) or the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). Consequently, RTÉ has had to put certain regulations in place to ensure the editorial integrity of the programme. These are:

- People are not allowed to use the programme to promote their products.
- There will be no presence on the programme of employees of the sponsor.
- No items will appear on the programme that relate to the sponsor's business.

The difficulty, however, is that it is impossible to preclude items that relate, even if indirectly, to the sponsor's business, because many items on the programme, by virtue of the fact that the 'items' are crimes and that the sponsor is involved in the insurance of property against crime.

Despite the best intentions of all concerned to prevent *Crimeline* becoming a tool of the crime industry, the nature of the *Crimeline*-Garda-Hibernian association is ephemeral and therefore impossible to regulate. This is not to say that this linkage exists in the minds of any of the viewers despite Bryan O'Higgins', Garda Press Office, belief that it does, and Norman MacCanns', Hibernian Insurance, belief that the programme is viewed as a Garda endorsement of Hibernian. As Hibernian are not selling a direct security product, it was deemed that such a relationship would 'not to be too much in conflict with the programme'. This can be a matter of interpretation: how indirect a security product is insurance? how much in conflict is too much? These questions form the basis of the problematic nature of *Crimeline*, a programme that is part crime prevention, current affairs, community affairs and drama, that is not made by RTÉ or commissioned by it, and that embodies the uneasy marriage of public service broadcasting, commerce and the state police force. It is this unease that prompted RTÉ to appoint its own editor, John Caden, to the programme in order to ensure the editorial independence of *Crimeline*.

Crimeline's unique position in the television schedule, a top-rated programme not made by RTÉ itself, poses many problems. RTÉ, while maintaining editorial control, actually has no control over the exploitation of the programme nor do they own the concept. A distinction can also be drawn between editorial control and control of the production process, which in reality rests with Midas, the programme's producer. RTÉ is also open to criticism that behind the worthy exterior of the programme, it is simply a vehicle for audience-maximizing violence, as has been said of *Crimewatch UK* (Dunkley, 1988).

The programme structure, however, implies a link between *Crimeline* and the Gardai, and *Crimeline* and Hibernian which raises the thorny issue of whether it is ethical to allow one insurance company an association with the Gardai, however indirect. For Hibernian, the association is a positive one, reflecting well on the company but viewer awareness of them as the sponsor is lower than they would like. There also seems to be some ambiguity among the audience as to whether this link takes the form of advertising or of sponsorship. For the Gardai, the programme provides a useful public relations vehicle, portraying them in a positive and sympathetic manner. It also gives a sense that something is being done (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994).

The interaction of these three different parties in the production process, each with their own agendas and motivations, is highly problematic. The programme is, however, a significant prime-time draw, having out-stripped RTÉ's in-house productions in the ratings, and RTÉ would be loath to lose it. Indeed, programmes of this nature appear to be here to stay: in the UK, there is *Crimestoppers*, *Crime Monthly* and the spin-off of *Crimewatch UK* called *File* (Minogue, 1990). In Ireland, *Thou Shalt not Kill*, a kind of retro-reconstruction programme using old murder cases, was broadcast recently. These programmes' success suggest that there are audiences to be won with crime. Moreover, in an era of increasing commercialization, with RTÉ pressurized to deliver audiences and TV3 waiting in the wings, the temptation to sensationalize is great.

Funding and public service broadcasting

The problems arising out of the interdependence of sponsors and broadcasters are not the fault of any one party; rather, they derive from the funding system and the pressures of the market. These difficulties are exemplified by *Crimeline* and are particularly acute for RTÉ which endeavours to serve two masters: the public purse and the competitive market. RTÉ, in its response to the government green paper, states its belief that adequate funds from the license fee must be the cornerstone of the service (RTÉ, 1995). This is a view echoed throughout Europe (Groombridge and Hay eds., 1995). To this end, RTÉ recommends indexation. While RTÉ's dual funding has encouraged the company to appeal to large audiences in order to attract advertising and to make a significant contribution to the cultural and political life of Irish society, its position increasingly needs clarification. It may be that like the BBC, RTÉ needs a charter which specifically details its role in Irish society and guarantees the amount and nature of its funding¹¹.

Ireland, with a tiny independent sector, is sorely in need of additional sources of funding. Independently produced programmes are made for approximately half what they would cost if RTÉ were to make them and in many instances, commissions are insufficient to meet production costs in a very expensive industry. In the case of *Crimeline*, that the programme had to be financed from the private sector was a direct result of RTÉ's financial difficulties. Independent production companies are run by a skeletal staff of full-time employees and freelancers hired on a project-by-project basis. Staff are frequently paid at lower rates for what is very skilled and intensive work schedules due primarily to the low cost structure of the industry.

At present, RTÉ's stringent watchdog policy on sponsorship has forced it to adopt a more subtle role in commissioned programmes. It is understandably determined not to allow free advertising to escape onto the screen. This serves to re-emphasize the need for regulation of this areas rather than ignoring it. In most countries the regulation of the media has been altered in favour of the owners and advertisers¹², raising questions about the balance between 'private ownership' and the 'public good', as it can be argued that the market has no intrinsic loyalties, except to itself (Price, 1995). Some systems of regulation serve the cause of democratic deliberation better than others, and account needs to be taken of whether there should be a distinction between regulation of political discourse (news, current affairs etc.) and of popular culture (entertainment,

11. RTÉ policy which is determined largely by the RTÉ Authority is subject to the Authority's composition, thus the agenda of the Authority becomes that of the broadcaster to some extent. The decisions of the present Authority would not necessarily be in tandem with those of previous Authorities. A more coherent and consistent policy mechanism is needed.

12. This is evidenced in Ireland by the case of TV3 - when a suitable bid for the franchise was not found in the early 1990s, the franchise lapsed. It was resurrected in the last year due to regenerated commercial interest in the venture. In fact, the competition for advertising revenue in this country has increased as UTV and Channel 4 are now selling airtime in the Republic.

advertising, etc.). These issues directly affect the regulation of *Crimeline* because it crosses the boundaries of current affairs and drama.

The conundrum of commercial finance for public service television is not, however, merely fiscal. Historically, public service broadcasting has been independent of industry and the state, providing an arena for diverse social groups to communicate with one another and viewing the public as citizens not consumers. This ethos is threatened by commercial pressures unless carefully regulated. *Crimeline* embodies one prospective future of the relationship between public broadcasting and private commerce. In many countries, there has been a total abdication of policy in favour of the market place (Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, 1995). Cultural and political intervention needs, however, to take account of social differences; the EU has sought to create a common cultural space through subsidies and co-productions, where the disparate elements of European culture can gain expression. It is a truism that since the market for information and entertainment is now global, regulation must also take place at an international level; the EU has a greater role to play. The French have led the initiative to promote European culture, but more support is necessary. This should be forthcoming from smaller nations, like Ireland, which are more culturally vulnerable than larger nations.

There are considerable implications for RTÉ as an agent acting in the 'public sphere', to frame this debate in Habermasian terms. The whole purpose of the public sphere is to enable people to reflect critically on themselves and on the practices of the state (Stevenson, 1995). Legal and financial support from public authorities to ensure the pluralism of information must therefore be forthcoming (Groombridge and Hay, 1995). The citizen has the right of access to information and ideas from a plurality of sources. Information is not a commodity, it is a public good. A two-tiered system (subscription and PSB) of access to information and entertainment increases the gap between those who have and those who have not, thus diminishing the common ground necessary in any society for its members to communicate with each other. It cannot be denied that people depend greatly on the media for the ideological framework with which they orientate themselves in their society. As the media are both the agents of the dominant ideology and its subjects, the push towards privatization and the decline of publicly-funded cultural organizations has serious implications for the range and diversity of public expression and the availability of television as a forum for all social groups. The public sphere consists of an intricate set of social spaces and practices; its democratic nature cannot be assumed but it must be constantly attained (Dahlgren, 1995).

The economics of commercial television, and to a growing extent, public service television, centre on the exchange of audiences for advertising revenue. This affords a large degree of control over the direction of cultural activity to business in its capacity as advertiser and sponsor, and in many instances has resulted in the reduction of diversity. The narrowing of the field of public discourse is therefore one of primary concern. Culture plays a vital role in shaping 'imagined communities', shared values, life styles and political goals – these form the basis of a society (Dahlgren, 1995). Public service broadcasting embodies a public cultural space that is invaluable in a society's on-going interaction with itself. The nature and the quality of its funding is vitally influential to the way that it performs this function.

Sponsorship is yet another manifestation of the increasing presence of commercial interests in broadcasting. Whether this influence is beneficial or detrimental in an Irish context has to be assessed. *Crimeline* provides a useful testing-ground because of the issues that it raises. These issues are of broader concern to RTÉ as they illustrate the potential conflicts and contradictions of market pressures facing the public broadcaster as it seeks to straddle the public and commercial spheres.

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