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Facing Challenges: Irish Public Television in the Digital Age

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The last ten years has seen Ireland, now dubbed the 'Celtic tiger' of Europe, achieve an economic turn-about that has left most pundits reeling. Until recently economic, political and social commentators referred to Ireland as a peripheral late-developing society, with associated difficulties of little indigenous manufacturing, small-scale and inefficient agriculture, a weak infrastructure and a 'culture of migration'. In contrast, writers today focus almost exclusively on optimistic economic forecasts, predicting a decline in unemployment to less than 2 per cent and a continued growth rate of approximately 7 per cent per annum for the next five years. While there are some suggestions of gloom on the horizon – escalating house prices, inflation and labour shortages – Ireland seems to have defied arguments that peripheral economies *can not* escape marginalization and dependency.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, buoyed by an emergent political consensus, Irish policy makers strategically targeted first the electronics industry and, more recently, the information and communications technologies, with a particular emphasis on information distribution and cultural content products, as a means for 'jump-starting' Irish economic growth. Using very formalistic and statist mechanisms, the strategy entailed taking advantage of rapid social structural changes to link high education/skill and creativity with digital technologies to leap-frog historic and geographic limitations of the earlier industrial revolution.

As the Information Society takes shape, Ireland has a unique window of opportunity . . . Ireland can carve out for itself a strong and sustainable position as a location of competitive advantage for information-based services . . .¹

In many ways, Ireland is ideally situated to benefit greatly from the opportunities being offered by the Digital Age and the Internet. Ireland has a Diaspora of some 70 million in every corner of the world and the Internet is the perfect technology with which to tap that huge potential market.²

Policy emphasis has been on the liberalization, privatisation and diversification of the broadcasting, cable and telecommunications marketplace, active promotion of Internet and e-commerce technologies, and significant investment in technological infrastructure. Because cultural content, of which Ireland is seen to have an abundance, will be a primary product in the new millennium, the cultural industries – electronic broadcasting, print media and publishing, multimedia and the digital arts, film and the performance arts – have been identified by policy makers as lying at the heart of Ireland's economic future.³

¹ *Information Society for Ireland. Strategy for Action*, Forbairt, 1996.

² *Ireland: the digital age, the Internet*, Forbairt, 1997.

³ Ellen Hazelkorn, 'Digital technologies, work practices and cultural production in Ireland', *Economic and Social Review*, July 1997.

The Irish broadcasting and the wider environs of the audio-visual sector, until relatively recently, was dominated by Radio Telefís Éireann (RTE), established in 1960 under a Reithian mantle of public broadcasting and often accused as operating a state monopoly. Since the 1980s, there has been a rapid growth in the number and formats of media providers. Teilifís na Gaeilge (TnaG), the Irish language station, began broadcasting in October 1996 followed by TV3, Ireland's first commercial station, in September 1998. The popularity of local, community, special interest and commercial radio stations has further challenged the once-prevailing wisdom that a country with a population as small as Ireland's (3.6m) could only handle a limited number of media. These developments have placed RTE, as the national broadcaster, into an increasingly competitive situation, albeit it's fair to say that it has faced competition from multiple UK stations since its inception. Nevertheless, declining audience figures and peak-market share, rising costs of programme purchase and production, and its own deteriorating financial position, set against a background of an ideological undermining (or at best questioning) of public confidence and support for state institutions, mean RTE will be operating in a less favourable political and public atmosphere in the future.

The greatest change (and challenge) in television provision, and consequently to RTE, will be the introduction of digital television, especially from the UK where it is already an option. Following fierce lobbying, RTE's bid to remain a major provider of digital television in Ireland received ministerial approval⁴. It is proposed to form a strategic partnership, Digico, with public and private interests, at a cost of £40m, of which RTE will hold up to 40 per cent. Digico will be responsible for establishing, marketing and operating six multiplex sections, offering a total of 30-50 channels with a capacity to reach 95 per cent of the population. RTE will have one of the multiplexes; TnaG and TV3 will share a second, while the remaining four will carry a variety of subscription channels. Analogue broadcasts will continue over the next ten years while facilities are upgraded for digital transmission at a cost of £30m – the price of RTE's own admission to the Digico consortium. Digital transmission is likely to begin in the latter half of 2000. While these plans maintain a commitment to public service broadcasting, the recent sale of Cablelink, Ireland's largest cable television operator (of which RTE owned twenty per cent) illustrates an equally strong, if not stronger, commitment to liberalization and competition.⁵ Thus, commercial operators will be able to invest up to 60 per cent in Digico, which should satisfy cable and MMDS suppliers who have been actively awaiting 'a supporting financial and political climate to attract the very significant capital investment that will be required.'⁶

Enthusiastic endorsement of digital terrestrial television (DTT) for Ireland is contained in the Broadcasting Bill, 1999, the first major broadcasting legislation since 1988⁷. But such comment understates the significance of the Bill, which is 'quite revolutionary in its implications'.⁸ In addition, the Bill establishes a Broadcasting Commission – replacing and effectively enhancing the powers of the Independent Radio and Television Commission (IRTC) – as the regulator of 'codes and rules relating to taste and decency of broadcast programme material, broadcast advertising and a range of other broadcasting related matters' whether transmitted by cable, satellite or terrestrial means. RTE will remain outside the arm of the Commission, continuing to be governed by its own albeit subsidiary⁹ Authority, as long as it provides programming which is 'free-to-air and . . . universally available' – the definition proffered of public service broadcasting. However, once RTE succumbs to competition and offers pay-TV, pay-per-view or some other form of subscription service, it becomes answerable to the Commission. Given competitive and financial pressures – there is neither provision for index linking the licence fee or additional funding to cover the move to digital – will RTE be able to remain outside? The Bill also proposes to establish TnaG on a statutory basis, but with no new source of funding and with a weaker (albeit perhaps more

⁴ Silé de Valera, Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands outlined government strategy for digital television when introducing the Broadcasting Bill, 1999 on Thursday, 28 May 1999.

⁵ See Wolfgang Truetzschler, 'Ireland' *Handbuch*, Hans-Bredow Institut, 1999.

⁶ See Deloitte and Touche, *A Strategy for Digital Television and Broadband Communications Services (Dublin 1998)*

⁷ Heretofore, there have been three main Acts: the Broadcasting Authority Acts 1960-1993 which regulates the public broadcaster RTE; the Radio and Television Act 1988 which contains the regulations applicable to private commercial broadcasting; and the Broadcasting Act 1990, which, inter alia, facilitates the implementation of the EU Directive on Television Broadcasting.

⁸ Michael Foley, 'New legislation provides for digital TV', *The Irish Times*, 29 May 1999.

⁹ See Muiris MacConghail, 'Bill mainly concerned with digital television', *The Irish Times*, 29 May 1999.

realistic) commitment to Irish language programming,¹⁰ and reverses a previous proposal to abolish the Broadcasting Complaints Commission.

At the heart of the new Broadcasting Bill lies the definition of public service broadcasting:

- (a) . . . a comprehensive range of programmes in the Irish and English languages that reflect cultural diversity of the whole island of Ireland, and . . . that entertain, inform and educate, provide coverage of sporting and cultural activities and cater for the expectations of the community generally as well as . . . special or minority interests and which, in every case, respects human dignity . . .
- (b) . . . programmes of news and current affairs in the Irish and English languages . . .
- (c) facilitate or assist contemporary cultural expression.

While there is much in this definition to recommend itself – indeed it can be argued that it gives as much protection as possible to public service television within the rules of the EU¹¹ – its remit does not extend to the commercial sector. In this respect, the Bill side-steps one of the fundamental issues of digital television – quality programming – and the survival of small public service broadcasters in a competitive global marketplace. The new Broadcasting Commission will only exercise a ‘light touch’, concerned with ‘codes, rules and contracts’ and not with standards, quotas or ‘story-telling’. Indeed, on this question, public debate in Ireland has been quite muted. Even the Oireachtas (Parliament) committee entrusted to debate such issues has failed to grasp its nuances or complexities. A government green paper, *Active or passive? Broadcasting in the future tense* (1995) had sought, by way of a series of questions, to prompt a wider debate about globalization and its effect on national culture, and the impact/role of broadcasting on national identity but was rather ineffectual. A more recent RTE-sponsored series of public meetings was similarly received.

Such a response is not surprising given the almost universal endorsement of the strategic targeting and marketing of Ireland as an ‘information gateway’, an English-speaking beachhead between the USA and Europe. Indeed, government endorsement of DTT is a fundamental element of this strategy. However, while the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands expresses concern that public service broadcasting must cater for the ‘specific needs and the culture of Irish viewers’ or ‘risk . . . creating a two-tier society’, her counterpart, the Minister for Public Enterprise, is endorsing digital television because of its potential to use the television to ‘trade electronically’:

Ireland has a chance to become the hub of all of Europe for e-commerce . . . I want business to wake up to this. What we need now is a leap in awareness.¹²

Until recently, there seemed little urgency about digital television, but government is fiercely committed to carving out a niche in the digital world. It has introduced a raft of decisions, inter alia: the abandonment of Telecom Éireann’s monopoly on telephony (December 1998) followed rapidly by its flotation (June 1999); the sale of Cablelink (April 1999) with over 350,000 subscribers or 80 per cent of cable television subscribers to US-owned NTL; the digitalization of paper and the US-Ireland agreement on encryption (September 1998); a £60m ‘seed capital’ investment in public-private partnerships (over the next three years) to deliver broadband technology across the country. In this context, it is not surprising that the committee charged with looking at the new Broadcasting Bill is expected to advertise for ‘expressions of interest’ from potential investors even before the Bill is passed!¹³

¹⁰ See Ellen Hazelkorn ‘Ireland: from nation building to economic priorities’, in *Decentralization in the Global Era. Television in the Regions, Nationalities and Small Countries of the European Union*. London, John Libbey, 1995, and ‘Competitive Challenges for Irish Television in the Digital Age,’ in *Proximity Television and the Information Society in Europe. The experience of television in the regions and cities of the European Union*. London, John Libbey, 1999, forthcoming.

¹¹ I am grateful to Michael Foley for this comment.

¹² Sean MacCarthaigh, ‘What we need now is a great leap in awareness [interview with Mary O’Rourke, TD]’, *The Irish Times*, 3 March 1999.

¹³ Foley, Op. Cit.

The juxtaposition between the objectives of public service broadcasting and the demands of the Information Society is being severely tested in Ireland. A pessimistic view would suggest that the advent of digital television in the year 2000 with 30 new channels will leave little room for an indigenous film and television culture through which Irish people can view their own experiences. A more positive view is that the digital revolution will create an insatiable demand for (English-language) programming content over multi-formats, which Ireland is especially well placed to provide.