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# Media Education in Ireland: An Overview

Brian O'Neill

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## Irish education – a decade of reform<sup>1</sup>

The Irish educational system is frequently celebrated as a world class system that is held in high domestic esteem, has contributed substantially to Ireland's economic success and been compared very favourably with our counterparts elsewhere in the European Union. Such contentment belies the fact that it has also been a system very slow to change, is notoriously centralised and has only in the last decade instituted significant legislative reform that will enable and facilitate the growth of new curricular areas such as media studies – the topic of this article – an area in which Ireland lags substantially behind our European counterparts.

This article examines the origins and development of media education in the primary and secondary levels of the educational system. The rapid development and popularity of media-related courses, predominantly of a vocational nature, at third level arguably requires separate attention. In this instance, it is media teaching within the core curriculum for a general student population that is in question, whether as a subject in its own right or as part of another subject, such as English. A consideration of the position and role of media studies within Irish education is now timely: calls for education to be more relevant and attuned to the world in which we live have been answered by significant curriculum change and, it is felt by its advocates, media education offers a paradigm of what education should be like in today's complex, information-dominated world (Masterman, 1985).

Historically, Ireland's approach to school curriculum development has been a highly centralised one, closely monitored by the Department of Education and Science. The formation of the statutory National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) from its predecessor, the advisory Curriculum and Examinations Boards, was a crucial step towards a more responsive and flexible system of curriculum development. A number of innovations have followed from this. The Junior Certificate programme, comprising the three year junior cycle of secondary education was introduced in 1989, replacing the Intermediate and Group Certificate examinations. It now provides a single unified programme for students aged between twelve and fifteen years, emphasising knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies. It also emphasises qualities of 'responsible citizenship in a national, European and global context'. It is in this context that the majority of students encounter media studies as a formal element of the curriculum. The child-centred and integrated curriculum of the primary system, first introduced in 1971, has undergone a sustained process of review since 1990 and a revised national curriculum is now being introduced on a phased basis.

The traditionally academic senior cycle programme that prepared students for higher education is undergoing restructuring, in part due to the increased participation rates, and in response to its outmoded university-oriented approach. An optional transition year programme has now been introduced offering students opportunities for personal and social development. Its interdisciplinary and student-centred nature has provided interested teachers with extensive opportunities for the development of media education modules. The established Leaving Certificate examination is the terminal examination for the majority of students in the fifteen to eighteen age groups. Students take at least five subjects, though in practice seven to eight is the norm. Recent revisions of Leaving Certificate syllabi have included the inclusion of the study of film in the English curriculum.

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1. Cf. <http://www.irlgov.ie/educ21fe33a.htm> for a brief description of the Irish education system. The definitive history is Coolahan (1981).

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A vocational orientation to the senior cycle programme was introduced with the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), first introduced in 1989 and expanded in 1994 to include link modules for preparation for work. The Leaving Certificate Applied is a new self-contained two-year programme involving a cross-curricular approach rather than a subject-based one with a strong vocational and personal development emphasis. It incorporates modules in communications studies with media studies elements.

Much of the impetus for the decade of reforming measures that Irish education has undergone stems from the 1992 publication of the government Green Paper *Education for a Changing World*. The Green Paper articulated what all partners in education had long expressed. The educational experience, particularly in the second level which had remained largely unchanged for many years, was an examination-intensive system, unsuited to many, and biased towards a fact-acquisition academic approach to the neglect of the development of critical thinking. The education system as a whole was over centralised, making curriculum innovation enormously difficult. A wide ranging debate on the future of education, its content and structures, developed and culminated in such events as the National Education Convention in 1993<sup>2</sup>, a government White Paper *Charting Our Education Future* (1995), and *The Education Act* of 1998. The direction of educational development is now clearly charted and a number of key targets have been identified. The key target for second level education is that by the year 2000, ninety per cent of those commencing second-level education will complete senior cycle. The completion rate in 1995 was seventy seven per cent. Reforms of the junior- and senior-cycle curricula are to be continued, catering for the wide range of ability levels now participating in second-level education and preparing students fully for effective participation in a rapidly changing society. The work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is also now underpinned by law thus ensuring a greater responsiveness to curricular change and innovation. How media studies has fared and what its future prospects may be within this general environment of change is considered in the remainder of this article.

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2. See Report on *The National Education Convention*. Dublin: Government Publications Office, 1994.

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3. I am indebted to Lynskey (1990) *Media Education and the Irish Second Level Curriculum* for some of the following historical information.

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### **The development of media education<sup>3</sup>**

The manner in which media education has developed in Ireland, while closely influenced by educational developments in the United Kingdom, has not necessarily followed the same pattern. The chronological development in media education from a 'protectionist' paradigm, in which education seeks to inoculate against the adverse effects of media, to a 'critical' paradigm that seeks to empower students and to foster critical awareness (see Buckingham, 1998; Hart and Hicks, 1999) does not strictly apply. Where it has been formally offered, media education in Irish schools has generally been presented in an enabling and positive fashion, based on its intrinsic motivating features and the enthusiasm for media education by dedicated groups of teachers. On the other hand, it is also true that the progress of media education in Ireland has been particularly slow. The most positive forms of media education have been developed for marginalised areas of the curriculum, such as vocational programmes where teachers were given a large degree of flexibility to develop new approaches. Its entry into the mainstream curriculum has been a late, cautious and piecemeal one with little prospect of media studies in any extended sense being a core curriculum element for the majority of Irish students.

Implicitly, of course, the traditional response of education to the media, and Irish education is not an exception, has been 'innoculationist'. O'Halloran (1992) observes how the original Primary Curriculum handbook (1971) pointed to the 'parallel education' which children received through:

the flood of information stimuli and exhortations conveyed by sound and image by which the pupil is assailed outside the school through

posters, cinema, television, strip cartoons, radio and popular songs. (1971:20).

Mc Loone (1983) linked this tendency in Irish educational thinking with the neglect more generally of the arts and creative expression. The relatively late arrival of television in 1961 was symptomatic of a more general fear of technology and the potential of film as an expression of culture, for example, was not recognised until the mid 1970s. Equally, a xenophobic nationalism combined with the cultural conservatism of Irish Catholicism exerted strong influence on Irish education at least until the 1960s. Ironically, however, some of the earliest initiatives in Irish media education were promoted by the Catholic Communications Centre, founded in 1968, which in addition to publications such as *Introduction to the Mass Media* (1985) also ran training programmes in well equipped studios for teachers and students in media production techniques.

The origins of media education in Ireland can be traced to the late 1970s and early 1980s when the education system was recognised to be under severe pressure and in need of reform. At that time, Ireland had one of the youngest populations in Europe with over fifty per cent of the population under twenty five. The demographic pressures on an ancient system coupled with cut backs in public spending and poor job prospects for many school leavers placed the entire system in crisis. At the same time, cultural change, the opening up of Irish society, as well as the obvious centrality of popular culture in young people's lives made the contrast between in-school and out-of-school life all the more apparent. Isolated efforts by teachers to develop media studies were galvanised and co-ordinated to some extent by the education department of the Irish Film Institute which in the absence of any other body assumed responsibility for the development among teachers of a culture of media education. In addition to offering seminars and courses in film and media studies, the Film Institute acted as a catalyst for the promotion of media awareness not just in schools but among the Irish public generally. A number of high profile joint conferences and summer schools between the IFI and RTÉ, the national public service broadcaster, created an environment in which the media's contribution to and representation of Irish life was critically debated. A well attended National Media Education Conference held in Dublin in 1985 and addressed by leading UK media educationalists such as Len Masterman, David Lusted and Eddie Dick created the impetus for the setting up of the Teachers' Association for Media Education (TAME). The purpose of TAME was 'to support and encourage teachers of media education in both primary and post-primary schools' and to act as a lobbying group for curriculum provision, in-service training and the development of teaching resources for media studies. It was partially successful in each of these aims though once the modest provisions for media education in the Junior Certificate English syllabus were instituted (see below), the activities of the organisation fell into abeyance. A contributory factor was also the financial crisis experienced by the Irish Film Institute and the winding down of its education department between 1986 and 1990.

As noted above, it was in the vocational area where media education made its first formal entry into an Irish curriculum in 1978. The now defunct Vocational Preparation and Training Programme, designed for early school leavers, included in its communications syllabus a requirement to study 'media among other elements of communications'. An expanded version of this programme in 1984 listed among its aims for communications studies 'to develop an awareness of the nature and function of communications in contemporary society' and to enable students to 'acquire greater social competence'. The objectives of this programme indicated that 'in addition to competence in the basic communication skills, an ability to cope with the various systems of communication, including mass media, would be required'. Students should know, furthermore, about the different kinds of mass media, processes of production, decision making, truthfulness, objectivity and bias. Students would also be encouraged to engage in practical production of news sheets, radio programmes, video magazine

programmes etc. to give them an insight into media processes as well as developing their communicative abilities.

This admirable and well-balanced syllabus was a successful element of the programme as a whole and gave many teachers a long awaited opportunity to introduce a more relevant engagement with contemporary culture into the curriculum. The difficulty from the point of view of those who had campaigned for recognition of media studies in the school curriculum was that it had been restricted to the vocational area and not seen as something that was fundamental to all education. This distinction between the traditional curriculum in the secondary school and the more practical curriculum of the vocational sector was perpetuated throughout the rest of the 1980s as the system itself expanded in an unplanned way to cater for the needs of industry and a bulging youth population with too few places at higher education. A range of vocational programmes were developed sometimes locally and with uncertain certification as post-Intermediate Certificate and post-Leaving Certificate courses, nearly all of which incorporated some elements of applied communications studies but for which skills acquisition was the primary emphasis. These efforts culminated eventually in the development of a new senior cycle programme, the Leaving Certificate Applied, whose integrated, modular and cross-disciplinary approach gave considerable emphasis to communications studies as a core element of personal development.

The campaign to incorporate media studies within the mainstream of the academic curriculum was led by the various interests of Film Institute of Ireland, the Teachers' Association for Media Education, and the Association of Teachers of English. In the context of an overall review of the curriculum at primary and second level, some measure of success has been achieved with a media component being incorporated into the integrated primary curriculum and into the English syllabus, and in varying lesser degrees in the Visual Arts and Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE). The transition year programme which allowed schools to develop their own curricula also received a boost with the setting up a Transition Year Curriculum Support Service and many schools offer media studies as an integral element of such a programme. Such curriculum reforms now see elements of media education at strategic points throughout the educational system: from junior cycle to transition year to senior cycle. While notable inclusions have been achieved, the result is also a disjointed one and the failure to establish media studies as a curricular unit in its own right at any level must remain a disappointment.

## Provision for media education

A major revision of the primary school curriculum has taken place and a new revised curriculum is due to be introduced to all schools from September 2000.<sup>4</sup> The new curriculum retains the child-centred approach while emphasising clearer learning objectives, appropriate assessment methods, literacy and numeracy, the arts, Irish, science, European awareness programmes and the promotion of health and well-being, including relationships and sexuality education. While media studies remains formally absent from the primary curriculum an attempt has been made to incorporate media education, more generally conceived, in a cross-curricular manner. It is clear that the revised curriculum recognises the prevalence of media in children's lives and encourages the use of media material as aids to learning across the curriculum. However, the most ambitious approach yet to media education is introduced in the block known as Social, Personal and Health Education. An integral element of this block from infant classes upwards is an exploration of media through such topics as advertisements aimed at children, the distinction between fact and fiction, the portrayal of family and school life in the media, types of information and the techniques used to communicate in newspapers. The central role that such issues occupy in this programme marks a significant innovation for media education and a change in its fortunes, the benefits of which will be felt downstream in the educational system.

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4. Cf. *The Primary Curriculum Newsletter*.  
<http://www.irlgov.ie/educ/curriculum/issue1.html>

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The major responsibility for media education in the second level curriculum falls on English language teachers. The first step towards a universal provision for media studies was made in the revision of the Junior Certificate English programme in 1989 when it was suggested that English, while 'retaining the best elements of English teaching would allow teachers to introduce new elements such as adolescent literature, classroom drama and media studies'. The Junior Certificate, representing the final phase of compulsory schooling, aims at breadth and balance in its curricular approach and aims at relevance to the cultural, economic and social environment of the individual in its curriculum provision. The teaching of English at Junior Cycle aims to develop the personal proficiency of the student in the arts and skills of language defined as 'personal literacy, social literacy and cultural literacy' (*Junior Certificate English Syllabus: 1*). While media literacy has become one of the defining principles of what media education is about, the elaboration of the principles of literacy in social and cultural dimensions in the syllabus is clearly more functionally oriented and mass media literacy is defined in this context. The syllabus refers to reading newspapers, having a critical consciousness with respect to language use and writing within the discipline of media forms such as radio and television and does create a specific curriculum space for the study of media. Teachers are given a high degree of freedom to develop syllabus units within the overall programme combining literary and media genre in a variety of ways, choosing their own texts and materials to achieve the objectives of the programme. Units can focus on a central text (e.g. novel or Shakespeare play) or group of texts. Alternatively, a unit can be structured around a theme or cultural topic (heroes and heroines, conflicts and contrasts, advertising) (*Junior Certificate English Syllabus: 6*).

The teachers' guides elaborate on how a media studies unit can be incorporated into the programme. Introduction to Media Studies, for example, is an introductory unit for first year students (age twelve to thirteen), and encourages them to think and talk about the media as products/processes. Through linguistic exercises, students can begin to approach such media-specific concepts as visual communication, selection and construction, and develop an awareness of their own interaction with the media. The context for such an introduction is articulated in a 'protectionist paradigm'. Features highlighted include the persuasiveness of the media, the power of the image and the significance of selection/construction in media news making. Students, it is suggested, 'could take a "nasty" character from a novel or story and write a sympathetic description of him/her. Construct a sensational news item from a selected poem' (*Junior Certificate English - Guidelines for Teachers: 85*).

A unit on advertising follows the 'Introduction to Media Studies' unit and introduces basic visual literacy/semiotic concepts of denotation, connotation, anchorage, preferred reading, target audiences and representations. Less 'protectionist' in description, it enables a wide discussion of knowledge and interaction with advertising in the media and encourages an awareness of the 'range of media products in society, media as a source of pleasure and personal consumption of media products' (*Junior Certificate English - Guidelines for Teachers: 86*). It also opens possibilities for creative, practical work in advertising in order to illustrate principles of targeting audiences and extends its analysis to television programme opening sequences, the moving image and film. More negatively, a section on representation in advertising images looks at how stereotypes represent and attract audiences and this has been a frequently repeated theme in the examination of the course.

While the openness of the new English syllabus and its inclusion of media studies have been widely welcomed, a major drawback to the entire approach, as acknowledged by teachers, is its mode of assessment. As Coy (1997) notes, 'The biggest obstacle to teaching the Junior Cert. course is the Junior Cert. exam. It has reduced English, once again, to a written subject despite the promise of the syllabus' (Coy, 1997: 96). In one of two examination papers, media studies is now formally examined but in a textual way in the form of written responses and analysis of visual elements. Thus, an examination in 1998 used a newspaper advertisement for Kellogg's. This depicted a teenager's bedroom

and asked questions such as: (1) what image does this advertisement portray of the lifestyle and values of teenagers? (2) Do you feel teenagers are being exploited in this advertisement? And (3) Do you think it is an effective way of promoting the product?

In an examination paper of 1999, following a transcribed segment of *The Simpsons*, students were asked, 'From what you observe in your own home and elsewhere list the bad and good effects of television on family life in general and discuss whether its use should be regulated by parents'. This is not representative of all the opportunities that media study at the junior cycle allows, but much of it in this vein is unnecessarily restrictive and limiting.

The transition year programme (TYP) is a unique phenomenon in Europe with a year long programme allocated to personal and social development and maturity, structured between the junior and senior elements of the second level system. A work placement is an integral part of the transition year. Seventy five per cent of schools now offer a transition year and thirty per cent of those schools have now made it a compulsory element for their students. A unique feature of the TYP is that schools are free to develop their own local approaches and with the support of a Transition Year Curriculum Support Service can integrate a variety of cross-curricular modules on offer around a core of general education units. Media studies has been a popular element chosen by many schools for inclusion with transition year (Kelly, 1998). The freedom that the TYP offers represents a significant opportunity for teachers to develop ambitious projects, new forms of teaching and learning and modes of assessment without the constraints of a formal examination syllabus. Studies of media representation, of visual awareness and education, film analysis and processes of media production have been typical elements used by teachers in such programmes. Teachers of English often develop the introduction to media offered in the junior cycle and introduce in the transition year the type of social and cultural analysis required of the new Leaving Certificate programme. Experiential learning through the production of magazines, videos and films, as well as work placements in media and cultural industries have been valuable experiences for many students. Despite the proven contribution of a transition year to the enhancement of overall student performance, not every school offers the programme and within those that do, it is not always a mandatory element.

At the senior level, the most significant innovation has been the introduction of film as a prescribed element of the English syllabus alongside the traditional literary genres of poetry, drama and fiction. The syllabus develops the Junior Certificate emphasis on literacy and oral skills in personal, social and cultural domains. The term 'language' is acknowledged to include visual forms of communication and the role of media, film and theatrical experience are seen as significant. The programme also introduces a more sophisticated approach to the analysis of all texts which looks to their 'embedded nature in history, culture, society and ultimately personal subjectivity' (Leaving Certificate English Syllabus: 3). The designated areas of language use are now defined across 'lines of information, argument, persuasion, narration and aesthetic uses of language'. Areas of development to encourage media analysis are clearly outlined so that students should study documentary films and media reporting for the language of information, political speeches and advertising for the language of persuasion and films for the language of narration. Similarly, in the traditionally privileged literary section of the aesthetic use of language, teachers and students are also encouraged to 'view films as complex amalgams of images and words' (Leaving Certificate English Syllabus: 13). Students must still study one literary text in detail but at higher level are now also required to study texts in a comparative way taking into account historical and cultural contexts. Film as a text is included as part of this comparative study which must also include other literary genres.

The Leaving Certificate Applied is the latest curricular innovation in media studies at second level. It marks a new departure for senior cycle education and offers an alternative to the traditional subject-based approach of the dominant examination programme. It results from what is viewed as a major achievement in Irish education

that virtually all the age seventeen to eighteen cohort now remain in full time education. The programme is currently offered in approximately 200 schools and is aimed at those whose needs are not met by the academic Leaving Certificate programme. Thirty per cent of the programme consists of general education, thirty per cent vocational education and twenty five per cent for vocational preparation. Communications media represent one module in a broad-based and cross-curricular approach to communications that emphasises social and cultural skills of literacy, discrimination and awareness. Units on newspapers, radio, television, film and advertising aim to give students an understanding of the different media, develop critical thinking and communicative skills and to enable them to learn media techniques and technologies. Much of the emphasis is on engagement with a range of media content – newspaper coverage, radio and television programmes, advertising – learning the critical terminology to describe and analyse it, and to examine some of the underlying conditions of its production. Other modules in the social education curriculum likewise draw on media as a learning resource and a tool in the study of the social context of contemporary issues, the social and political process and the centrality of the media to active citizenship. A process of media education permeates the programme and seeks in an integrated way to stimulate critical thinking and active participation by using the readily available resources of media.

## Conclusion

The principles of media education have been acknowledged by educationalists and all the principal stakeholders in Irish education as highly desirable and in many ways ideal for the development of the types of creative, technical and critical skills required in today's world. Definite advances have been made over a twenty year period to a stage where media is recognised as a topic within the school curriculum, strategically placed at each level of the school system so that every student has some exposure to the critical examination of media content. However, following what has been a ten year period of radical re-evaluation, legislative reform and significant curriculum change in Irish education as a whole, the case for an integral curriculum place for media studies has not been won. It is a decade that has witnessed the development of new subject areas such as Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). For the first time religion has become an examination subject. It is also a decade in which information technology has received massive funding at all levels. Media education, by contrast, has languished within existing curricula or been developed in specifically vocational directions. A number of constraining features also remain which do not augur well for its future development. Following a decade of curriculum change, the education system is likely to undergo a period of consolidation. Despite the willingness and enthusiasm of teachers generally to innovate, *The Education Act of 1998* retains the centralised system of accountability and control under the Department of Education. A proposal by the previous administration to democratise the system through devolved, regional boards of education was dropped by the present government. There also remains considerable public pressure on schools to concentrate on academic performance given the dominance of the examination results-related points system in Irish education and the increasing number of calls for the publication of a results league table for Irish schools. Such conditions are not conducive for the type of major curriculum revision that the introduction of a required media studies subject would involve, whatever the merits of such a case might be.

The contrast with parallel developments in response to the needs for information technology skills could not be greater. In a 1998 Action Programme for the new millennium, the government committed itself to an investment of IR£40 million over three years to equip every school in the country with computer resources, to ensure that all teachers are trained in computer skills, and to engage in an ambitious programme of research to integrate technology in teaching and learning across the curriculum.<sup>5</sup> The aims of achieving computer literacy and being equipped to participate in the information

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5. Cf. <http://www.irlgov.ie/educ/it2000/>

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society have, for reasons of Ireland's future economic well being, received massive encouragement and investment. To date, in partnership with Eircom, the main telecommunications company, the Schools IT 2000 programme has supplied all schools with multimedia computers and free Internet connections; a network of Education Centres around the country have trained teachers in information technology, and, in partnership with INTEL, an on line curriculum resource *ScoilNet*, the Irish part of EuropeanSchoolNet (EUN), has been established. A *School Integration Project* has been set up to promote whole school development in relation to ICT integration and a new research project in partnership with IBM *Reinventing Education* has been announced. These extraordinary developments indicate the type of vigorous response that can be made to modernise education when the need arises and, with reference to 'preparing students for the information society', point all the more to the urgency for a more far reaching and imaginative media education initiative.

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