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Defining the Audience: Redefining Public Service

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Murray Defining the Audience: Redefining Public Service.

The Role of Ratings in Scheduling in RTÉ Television

Scheduling used to be thought of as little more than a matter of sticking programmes in slots. Today however, as a result of fundamental changes in the European broadcast sector, scheduling plays a central role in public broadcast institutions. It has changed from a marginal administrative function, guided by instinct, to a highly rationalised organisational system. At the heart of this system is audience measurement, a systematic and scientific means of knowing the audience. Through the schedule-led system, audience measurement data has come to govern every facet of public service broadcasting.

Today, as a result of increasing competitive, financial and political pressures, ratings dominate strategic decision making in public broadcast organisations. Although they are only a very small part of what can be extracted from the sophisticated system of audience measurement, these indicators dictate production and commissioning decisions. They have become a core component of the creative process and thereby act as a form of control by management over producers. Ultimately, ratings data constitutes the primary means by which the broadcaster knows, and serves, its public.

This chapter presents a case study of scheduling practices in Radio Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ), Ireland's public service broadcaster¹. It begins with a historical overview of the transformation of scheduling from an administrative to a strategic function in the context of wider organisational change. Drawing on accounts from key individuals involved in scheduling

¹ This chapter is based on a study of scheduling practices in RTÉ Television over a fifteen year period, 1990 - 2005. Drawing on Weber's theory of rationalisation, the study analyses the rise of scheduling management as part of a wider organisational response to the demands of competitiveness, cost efficiency and accountability (see Murray, 2011).

and production in RTÉ, the chapter then analyses the role of audience measurement data in shaping programme output. It argues that the emergence of scheduling management, and the dominance of ratings, signals a fundamental shift in the concept of public service broadcasting and in the relationship between public broadcasters and their audience.

Ireland

RTÉ is Ireland's public service broadcast organisation, which provides, *inter alia*, two national television channels on a free to air basis throughout the Republic of Ireland. The organisation is funded through licence fee receipts and commercial revenue. Commercial revenue makes up approximately fifty percent of RTÉ's income, leading Shaw *et al.* to describe it as 'a highly commercial public service broadcaster' (2010: 8). Furthermore, although the sector was only officially deregulated in 1988, RTÉ has always operated in a competitive environment. From the beginning, channels from the UK, Ireland's nearest, same-language neighbour, were available, initially along the East coast and border counties, due to signal spill-over, and later across the country via cable and satellite (Kelly and Truetzschler, 1997: 119).

In the mid-1990s, however, competition became an even more pressing reality for RTÉ. Due to the wide availability of cable and satellite distribution systems, RTÉ was 'thoroughly inundated by English language [] TV' (Humphreys, 1996: 190). Domestic competition was also imminent: the Irish language station, TG4, and a private commercial channel, TV3. When launched in 1998, TV3 posed a serious challenge to RTÉ because it was available across the country on a free to air basis, directly targeted the Irish audience and competed for the same pool of advertising revenue. The rise in competition led to an inevitable decline in audience share. This was an issue for public broadcasters across Europe since, as Hujanen points out, audience

share is now ‘considered critical for political legitimization [sic]’ (2000: 76). It was a particular concern for RTÉ because of its high dependence on commercial revenue. Meanwhile, industry analysts expressed concern about RTÉ’s ‘unimaginative approach to programme scheduling’². As a result, RTÉ, like broadcasters across Europe had to work much harder to hold on to audiences. It was in this context that scheduling and audience measurement took on strategic importance.

Broadcasters had always recognised the value of arranging programme output to suit audiences’ lifestyles (Moore, 1993: 85). However, once they had to compete for the attention of the audience, they began to pay more attention to scheduling and programming practices (Ytreberg, 2000: 26). In RTÉ, there was a growing realisation that, in the multi-channel era, good programmes by themselves were not enough. Rather a programme’s value also lay in how it connected with other programmes to build an overall package. Thus, schedule design would be critical in the busy, multichannel environment.

Of course the programmes are the fundamental building blocks, but what they build is the schedule. The programmes can bring people in to a schedule and if the schedule is correctly designed those people can be held on to or increased in number. And then our commercial colleagues can sell that value and there’ll be more money for programme making and the quality of the whole thing can rise. That was the basic thesis. (C³)

Multi-channel competition also forced public broadcasters to reconsider their duty to the audience and how this should be fulfilled. Indeed, the increased emphasis on scheduling was initially justified as being more attentive to the needs of viewers, a response to accusations of paternalism and elitism levelled at public broadcasters at this time (Hellman, 1999: 229). This, coupled with the pressures of increasing competition, led to a new audience-oriented approach to programming.

² ‘RTÉ: Losing Audience in Multi-Channel’. Market Analysis report, 1997. Available at www.medialive.ie [Accessed June 2011]

³ Seven individuals involved in scheduling, programming and production in RTÉ were included in this study, identified by letters A to G.

At the beginning of that period, a lot of it was about people's gut instinct, what worked. And by the end of the 1990s... people are starting to have to realise... it's not a matter of looking into my heart and seeing what's good for the people of Ireland. You've actually got to attend to how people are behaving and have some sense of what they want (C).

Since RTÉ is dual funded, it has always engaged in the production of ratings figures to sell advertising slots. From the early 1960s, audience measurement was conducted by TAM Ireland Ltd. The company originally provided monthly reports on viewing levels and audience composition for programmes. By the early 1990s, the sample size was 430 homes and ratings were available by noon the following day (Harper, 1993: 56). However, as multi-channel competition became a more urgent reality, RTÉ came to rely on ever more sophisticated measurement tools. In 1995 the contract to provide television ratings was awarded to international media marketing company AC Nielsen⁴.

The availability of more detailed, scientific data about the audience strengthened the scheduling function in RTÉ. Before, the Controller of Programmes and heads of production departments made programming decisions, based on their experience and instinct. Now, armed with 'objective, verifiable information', the Head of Schedule Planning could 'seek to be persuasive' about the design of the schedule (C).

It changed the approach because you had some objective basis for saying, last night the schedule performed like this – this is what the people thought of that. And therefore the programme editors, managers, commissioners, makers had to react to that. They couldn't just say, 'that doesn't matter'. (C)
Over time, the Head of Schedule Planning began to have more influence over the overall shape and content of the schedule and worked side by side with the Controller of Programmes.

Looking back, the former Head of Schedule Planning surmises that by the late 1990s, scheduling 'was on the cusp of transition from an administrative to a strategic job' (C). At this

⁴ Historically the contract for measuring TV viewing was held by RTÉ; then jointly with TV3 and TG4 when they came into existence. In 2007, TAM Ireland was established to oversee the audience measurement contract, which is currently held by Nielsen. Its members include advertising agencies and all broadcasters which sell advertising in the Irish market. It is similar to the UK body, BARB, but with a broader management structure.

time, other public broadcast organisations around Europe were moving to give ‘primacy’ to the schedule (Abercrombie, 1996: 133; Hujanen, 2002: 104). However, in order to fully exploit the power of scheduling as a management tool, certain structural changes were necessary. These came about in the early 2000 and were prompted by wider economic and political pressures for cost efficiency and accountability.

Organisational ‘Reform’

While RTÉ grappled with intensifying competition in the late 1990s, the organisation was also experiencing severe financial difficulties. RTÉ had already introduced new working practices and reduced staff numbers (Hazelkorn, 1996). In spite of this, by the late 1990s the organisation was operating at a loss and was under intense scrutiny in relation to its spending. Therefore, by the early 2000s RTÉ recognised it would have to address its costs and improve accountability in order to justify any increases in public funding.

Over 2002 and 2003 RTÉ engaged in major organisational restructuring, designed to improve accountability, increase revenue and strengthen output⁵. As part of this, the RTÉ Television Division implemented two key changes to position scheduling as the central management tool. The first was the establishment of the Programme Strategy Group (PSG), composed of senior management personnel from all areas of the television division. This group is responsible for the overall strategic direction of the schedule and decides on the content of each slot. The second was the introduction of the Schedule-Based-Budgeting and Planning

⁵ This followed a review by external consultants, Logical and KPMG. Logical and KPMG (2002) RTÉ Strategic Framework Report, Dublin: RTÉ.

system (SBBP), a budgeting system which marries production and commissioning activities to the financial management of the organisation. As a result of these changes, the PSG maintains strategic, creative and budgetary control over programme output. Audience measurement plays a key role in this process.

Scheduling as a Management Tool

Rather than planning on a season by season basis, the PSG now prepares the schedules up to a year in advance. This allows for financial and strategic planning. Using the schedule as a framework, management can plan and budget for productions and acquisitions. Long-term planning also allows management to evaluate the success of past schedules. For example, at the time the interviews were carried out, Sunday evening had been identified as an area where RTÉ could improve audience share.

So...you're looking at a Sunday night and you're going 'was that successful, yes we'll keep that. Where were the gaps on Sunday night? Let's look at the audience, where are we missing audience, what do we need to do, what kind of money do we need to spend in order to make that slot successful... (E)

Hujanen argues that evaluation constitutes one of the key cycles of scheduling; it is closely linked with strategic planning 'because of its importance in connecting past and future perspectives in the strategic process' (2002: 79 – 80). In assessing the performance of past programmes, RTÉ makes use of qualitative information, gathered in the Audience Reaction Panel, an on-line audience survey which measures viewers' reactions to specific programmes or the overall service. The Audience Reaction Panel is a useful tool; however, it was only set up in 2007 and as this response indicates, it has limited use. The main considerations are cost and audience share: 'was it value for money, was there a sponsor... you know, all these factors contribute to whether we think it worked or it didn't... but the first thing we look at is the

numbers: did it rate in the slot?’ (D).

Some respondents downplayed the importance of audience measurement data and insisted that scheduling is also based on gut instinct. Nevertheless, because the advertising trade hinges on ratings, RTÉ management must pay attention to them.

...all the programmes we make and commission, ...we assess what we think those programmes will do ...and if you’re expecting a programme to get a 20% share and it ends up with a 10% share, whereas that is not the only criterion by which you would judge that programme, it is still a significant factor. (B)
Since audience share has become so critical for public broadcasters both for political legitimacy and financial survival, management at RTÉ are unwilling to risk a drop in ratings. Furthermore, advertisers are willing to pay more if they can accurately predict the audience share for a programme (Napoli, 2001: 7). These factors result in a tendency towards repeating tried and tested formulas:

you decide, okay, once *You’re a Star* finishes, we want to have another programme that will attract the same kind of audience, that will have a competitive element, that will be fun, that will be glitzy and that will fill a whole hour between half six and half seven. (B)
The programme that was eventually commissioned to replace *You’re a Star* met these criteria; *Celebrity Jigs and Reels* was a dance competition with well-known contestants aimed at a family audience. The advantage of this method from a commercial perspective is that it is easier to predict the ratings for the new programme. However, the schedule-led system reduces the opportunities to introduce new ideas. Born argues that the effect of the schedule-led production system is ‘to encourage a shift in the mindset of the entire production community towards thinking in ever more standardised terms’ (2004: 311).

Budget Control

The schedule not only acts a planning tool, it also works ‘as a measure of economic control and resource allocation’ (Hujanen, 2002: 102). Before the organisation restructured, television output

departments operated on their own, without outside interference. As one respondent explained, ‘in the past, we were only responsible for our costs. We just spent money. We’d a budget. You argued for a budget, you got it, you spent it and some other crowd called Sales sold the airtime’ (C). Now though, ‘there’s a greater degree of accountability’ to the Finance Department (E). Spending is closely monitored and must be tied to available revenue.

Under the SBBP system, the budget and the schedule work ‘in tandem’ and all production, acquisitions and commissions are ‘based around the available budget’ (F). The system ties all spending to the schedule, ensuring that only programmes that fit the needs of the schedule are produced or acquired. This contributes to cost efficiency by preventing unnecessary expenditure on programmes that have ‘little chance of getting on screen’ (Born, 2004: 256). Yet it goes even further by matching the budget for a programme to its anticipated revenue.

Under this system, a programme’s budget is based on its intended slot: ‘so, the money tends to chase the slot.... We know the value of the slot and how much we need to spend to get good numbers’ (D). Audience ratings therefore play a crucial role in calculating the budget for a programme. Webster *et al.* argue that ratings are a useful instrument ‘in working through the costs and benefits of a programming decision’ (2006: 61). If a programme can attract a large, commercially valuable audience, RTÉ may justify a bigger budget.

So, a very obvious example is half six on Sundays, we know we can do really well there... so, we are going to move money and concentrate as much possible to fill that slot with home production – big family entertainment shows – because we know we can compete there. (D)
Equally, programmes that are not expected to achieve a high audience share will receive a budget to match. Programmes that compete against soap opera are a particular case in point.

Soap opera is hugely popular in Ireland and as such the budget-slot logic dictates that RTÉ should not ‘waste’ money on programmes which are scheduled against it.

[There is] no point in trying to compete with the soaps, basically, 'cos it's just a complete waste of money because the audience just seem to love soaps, you know, so... you would not put money into a peak time, high-end entertainment programme...because it just wouldn't get the audience. (E)

Economically, this is a rational approach, but it means that certain slots receive less investment than others. As one respondent put it, 'on RTÉ 2, we have mostly acquisitions between 7 and 9; that's not ideal... but we can't afford to put money into home production when you are up against a very, very strong RTÉ 1 schedule' (E). This respondent's acknowledgment that 'that's not ideal' highlights the tension between the economic logic of using resources efficiently and the need to serve those audiences who do not watch soap opera.

The budget-slot logic dictates that no more should be spent on a programme than is necessary to win the anticipated share for the slot. It reflects an attempt to impose a commercial rationality, whereby programme budgets are calculated strictly on the basis of cost versus revenue. However, while this might make sense from a commercial perspective, as one respondent explained: 'the reality of it is it isn't that easy' (D). At times, competing factors and obligations prevent a straightforward matching of budget to audience share.

Prime Time, RTÉ's current affairs programme, is one of the station's flagship programmes. In 2005, television critic Shane Hegarty commented, 'for a broadcaster continually asked to defend the licence fee, *Prime Time* is now indispensable'⁶. Because of the show's strategic importance, *Prime Time* warrants a bigger budget than is strictly necessary for that slot.

You know the *Prime Time Investigates* that are on for the next four weeks? They'll do good business, but they're very expensive to make. Like, there's one of them, I think, coming up that does lots of secret filming and that costs a fortune so, you know, economically, you'd say 'well, put the money somewhere else', but as I said that logic applies most of the time, but not all of the time. (D)

This comment indicates that RTÉ management recognise that a purely commercial approach is not always appropriate. Yet, while it may not always be possible to measure a programme in

⁶ *The Irish Times*, June 4, 2005

strictly economic terms, management make a conscious calculation of its ‘invisible earnings’ (Murdock, 1993: 136). The longer term benefits of political or public good-will that *Prime Time* generates, even though this has no direct monetary value, make the investment worthwhile.

RTÉ also provides a strand of documentaries about the arts, as part of its commitment to Irish cultural programming⁷. However, unlike news and current affairs, which are popular with audiences in Ireland, arts programming has limited appeal⁸. Therefore, there is a considerable cost involved in providing arts programming with limited commercial reward. Management recognise that they must include genres that may not attract large audiences, but they will seek to offset any losses by scheduling such programmes in less competitive slots. For example, the *Art Lives* series is usually scheduled at 10.15pm on a weekday evening, whereas *Prime Time* occupies a 9.30pm slot. Furthermore, management will endeavour to balance the books through complementary scheduling. That is, if they invest heavily in a programme that is not likely to achieve a very high share, they are careful to schedule a popular show on the other channel.

Arts Lives is expensive and a full *Arts Lives* commission could be seventy or eighty grand, but we know that’s not about getting numbers; it’s about the quality of the idea and the production. At the same time, we’ve *Desperate Housewives* on RTÉ2 – that’s no accident!

(D)

If RTÉ were to operate on a strictly commercial basis, arts programming would not appear at all in the schedule. These examples show that, for RTÉ, this is not always appropriate. However, by applying a strategic approach to scheduling, RTÉ can fulfil its public service duties while, at the same time, maximising audience share.

In the cases of *Prime Time* and the *Arts Lives* series, the shows warrant extra investment because they form an important part of the public service output. At other times, there may be

⁷ RTÉ is now subject to a public service charter, which details a range of financial and programming requirements, in addition to the statutory obligations laid down in legislation. See RTÉ ‘Annual Statement of Performance Commitments’. Available at <http://www.rte.ie/about/pdfs/rte-asofpc-2011.pdf> [Accessed June 2011]

⁸ The news bulletins and the current affairs show, *Prime Time*, are frequently among the top rated shows on Irish television.

more peculiar reasons for overriding the budget-slot logic. One respondent gives the example of *Léargas*, an Irish language documentary series.

Léargas goes against *Corrie* [*Coronation Street*]... that's expensive for that slot, it's way above the odds for that slot, but, well, the next question is 'well, why are you playing it there'. Because when we did play it at seven, it was dying on its arse. And we need to get the audience watching at seven so they'll watch through to half seven, at half eight; you know... we can't afford to lose, like, a huge audience coming off the back of the news and we have to hold on to them while we've got them. (D)

This example highlights the complexity of the scheduling process. Establishing a strong audience share at the start of prime time is important to maintain flow throughout the evening. *Léargas* was moved because it was damaging the viewing figures for the rest of the evening. Commercial logic would dictate that the show should be removed from the schedule altogether. However, as the respondent puts it, *Léargas* 'is not about numbers'; it is not scheduled in prime time to earn advertising revenue, but because it is an important part of RTÉ's public service output.

Nevertheless, even though RTÉ cannot always act according to a strictly commercial logic, the respondents explained that they still try to operate in a cost-effective manner. For example, in the case of Irish language programming, RTÉ has reduced the number of episodes in the *Léargas* series and instead made another Irish language documentary series, *Scannal*, which relies on archive material and is therefore cheaper to produce. One respondent spoke about this new programme as a very sensible solution and also pointed out that it had performed well in the ratings. This example shows that where possible, RTÉ management endeavour to bring a programme's budget closer in line with the audience share it is likely to achieve.

The SBBP system has given management full control over spending, allowing them to allocate resources according to audience share, or where appropriate, on the basis of some other criteria. This contributes to greater cost efficiency and accountability, critical in an environment where public broadcasters must demonstrate value for money. However, the schedule-led system

also gives management full control over the activities of producers, to ensure that all programmes meet the needs of the schedule.

Production

In RTÉ, the Television Division is now organised in such a way that production, acquisition and commissioning functions serve the needs of the schedule, as decided by the PSG. This ensures a flow-through from strategic planning to programme output. That is, the schedule comes first, programmes second, or as Ellis puts it, the schedule ‘orders programmes’ (2000: 33). Born identified a similar strategy at work in the BBC, as this quotation from a finance executive illustrates, “now, the most important thing is the transmission strategy: you decide what you want in the schedule and make programmes to fit, to deliver what you want them to deliver” (2004: 306). This is a radically different approach to the offer-led system, where producers deliver programmes into the schedule (Ellis, 2002: 132).

Once the PSG has decided on the needs of the schedule, and allocated the budget for each slot, these are communicated to producers via commissioning editors.

...so you sit down with the commissioning editors and you go ‘right, we want you to look for this... and we try to make it specific... we say to them... ‘we’d like a Lifestyle programme on Monday night that is male skewing’, et cetera, et cetera. So, we give them as much information as possible... (E.)

Whereas before, producers were given basic direction in relation to the programme topic, the PSG provides much more detailed prescription. Producers are still expected to come up with ideas, but they must fit the parameters set by management. The former independent producer explained, ‘they are quite specific now in telling you the time slot and the audience they have and what’s filled it before and what they’re looking for’ (G). Production companies must incorporate these elements into their pitch if they are to be successful in the commissioning

round. This kind of direction is helpful for producers seeking a commission – ‘you can’t operate blind’ – and they adapt to this formulaic approach:

...they’ll say, “What’s really worked for us over the past five years” and they’ll name four or five shows that have really worked for them. So you’re obviously gonna use your head and say, right, those are the four or five shows that worked prior to this in this slot so they’re looking for more of the same. (G)

Even where the PSG has not identified a particular type of programme, the main priority is to attract the specified target audience for the slot. Therefore, even if producers are asked to come up with new ideas, they are aware that ‘it’s only going to work if it takes that audience’ (G).

you know they want a family programme for say, eight thirty on a Sunday night. ... so you’ve gotta say, what can that be really, if you’ve only got a half an hour, then it has to be some sort of game-show, quizz-y type thing ... and if you get the half six to half seven slot on a Saturday night then that’s going to be talent-based because what will you get teenagers and small kids and a family all to watch at that time. (G)

As this comment highlights, industrial norms and traditions impose their own limitations on the producer. However, the most significant limitation is that the slot and the target audience have been prescribed by management.

The ratings-driven approach has now also become the *modus operandi* for producers. A member of the PSG described how producers are expected to access audience measurement data themselves and incorporate it into their programme development.

...so you can actually go and say ‘who’s available in that slot, who watched it last year, what are other people watching on other channels’, so you just really examine the slot from every single aspect and at the end you go ‘well, my main core available demographic at that time is: this’, and then you can tailor your material to it ... which is to me common sense, you know... (E)

As Hujanen argues, whereas before the imagined audience for a programme might be based on the producer’s instinct or anecdotal evidence, today it is ‘based on a careful analysis of the audience-research data in relation to the particular slots’ (2002: 119). This ensures that programmes are now oriented towards the target audience for the slot. The ratings-driven approach was used for an Irish language history series *Scannal*.

Scannal was a concept that was created as a result of looking at how audiences behaved and looking at who didn't watch soaps at half seven on a midweek night ... and they said 'what would those people like' and the answer they came up with was a bi-lingual programme, which was fact based and went behind the scenes of some scandals in recent Irish life and could tell the stories well using the archive - a very successful programme.

Now ... that's a qualitatively different approach, a conceptually different approach. (C)

This is indeed a 'qualitatively different approach' to programme making. Whereas before a producer's autonomy within certain guidelines was considered 'the guarantee of quality' (Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 198), today they are expected to conform to a methodology and orient their programmes to an abstract audience, constructed from quantitative data. Thus audience measurement acts as a mechanism of indirect control over producers.

Creativity is essential for the vitality of broadcasting culture, to allow new ideas and formats to emerge which might better reflect the concerns and interests of the public. Croteau and Hoynes argue that 'innovation and risk taking – including promoting fresh perspectives, developing new formats, and welcoming controversy – are part of what it means to serve the public interest' (2006: 37). Autonomy and freedom from commercial pressures are vital in safeguarding artistic motivation and encouraging creativity (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007: 534). However, creative freedom is limited by the schedule-led system.

Scheduling management removes the buffer between creative work and commercial concerns, by linking programme planning directly to revenue and audience share. It also exerts control over producers, not through direct hierarchical control, but via the schedule and the ratings-driven production method. It therefore restricts autonomy and creative freedom. Yet, there was a strong sense from respondents that their priority is not to protect a producer's autonomy, but to ensure that programmes meet the needs of the schedule.

I think the day is gone when you can go 'I've a great idea; I'll make a programme about fruit! 'Cos I think I really should.' You can't do that anymore, you have to know where it's for and why you're making it. There needs to be a rationale. (E)

The facetious comment about making programmes on a whim reveals an attitude amongst

management that the old system indulged the elitist, artistic motivations of producers. By contrast, they argued, the ratings-driven approach is more sensitive to the needs of audiences.

You see, back then I think... programme making was often thought of as a kind of electronic authorship. You know, 'making a programme is like writing a book and ... I'll write the book I want to write'. Whereas now, I think, it's much more about saying 'what does the audience want'. (C)

Management regarded the new system as a more appropriate and rational, or 'common sense', way to serve the audience in the current environment (E). When challenged on whether the schedule-led system negatively affects production by limiting creative freedom, one respondent replied emphatically, 'No, I think it's very positive. Look, people, the public pay for this' (C). This suggests that management have accepted and internalised the principles of accountability and value for money as core elements of public service. It also underlines the fact that serving the audience is now taken to mean reacting to ratings.

Defining the Audience

Hart argues that for communication to take place, it is necessary to know the audience (1991: 44). By the same token, public service depends on the broadcaster knowing, and understanding the needs of its audience. Today, broadcasters can no longer rely on informal, tacit knowledge. For political and competitive reasons, they must work to strengthen their relationship with viewers; the schedule is the basis of that relationship. Particularly through the incorporation of ratings data into programming strategies, the schedule-led system creates a direct link between the broadcaster, the audience and programmes.

Ratings data offers a seemingly "objective, scientific" means of knowing the audience. Broadcasters feel empowered by them, able to identify who is available throughout the day, to predict programmes that might be popular, and finally to measure how many people watched.

Nightingale argues that, among professionals, this justifies ratings data ‘as the only pictures [of the audience] worth having’ (2004: 238). Furthermore, ratings are the currency of advertising sales, but more than that, they are the standard by which public broadcasters are judged (Flynn, 2002: 173). Consequently, ratings are a crucial part of a broadcaster’s defence of its performance and the schedule-led, ratings-driven system is upheld as being more alert to the needs of audiences.

Ratings, however, produce limited knowledge about the audience. They define people according to demographic categories of interest to advertisers, but they may fail to capture more relevant social and cultural groups. Furthermore, ratings cannot measure audience interpretation or response to programmes (Nightingale, 2004: 236 – 237). As Webster and Lichty argue, they transform the moment of meaningful engagement with media into standardised and measurable time-units (1991: 179).

Hartley argues that ‘the audience is a construction motivated by the paradigm in which it is imagined’ (2002: 11). Thus, the use of ratings means that public broadcasters know their audience, not as a public with shared interests but as a market model of individuals. Within the market model, audiences are conceived as consumers of media and as commodities or markets to be bought by advertisers (Croteau and Hoynes, 2006: 38; Smythe, 1981). Within the public sphere model, on the other hand, audiences are perceived as a public (Croteau and Hoynes, 2006: 38). Here, the audience is regarded as a democratically and culturally engaged collective body, ‘a set of citizens who share and pursue objectives and interests’ (McQuail, 1992: 2). It recognises their common interests, their need for a shared discursive space and their right to access, and be represented within that space (McQuail, 1992: 2).

Rooted in the nation state and often considered as a mass, relatively homogenous entity

the term public has lost some of its currency in the context of political and social change (Søndergaard, 1996: 6). Moreover, with multi-channel television and the emergence of personalised viewing habits, it is more difficult to think of viewers as a collective. Nevertheless, media services that recognise audiences as publics are vital for democratic debate and for social cohesion. Lowe and Jauert argue that public service media can ‘maintain the ties that bind’ and ensure ‘intercultural understandings’ (2003: 28); Blumler describes this as social knitting (1998: 56). It can also facilitate inclusive and informed political debate (see Habermas, 1989; Søndergaard, 1996: 8). As public communication becomes increasingly mediated, and since television is such an integral part of daily life, these functions are more important now than ever (Blumler, 1998: 54; Dahlgren, 1995: 2).

Certainly RTÉ contributes to the formation of public opinion through some of its programming and in this way fulfils an important role in ‘activating’ publics (Dayan, 2001: 756). However, Livingstone argues that the media can deny the possibility of audiences becoming publics ‘via strategies of exclusion’ (2005: 11). The schedule-led system embeds such strategies of exclusion. Since RTÉ depends on commercial revenue, it must prioritise those segments more highly valued by advertisers. Meanwhile, lower valued segments are seen as marginal groups who must be accommodated in the schedule rather than as equal members of society. This prejudice is reflected in the budget/slot logic, that is, setting budgets and assigning slots on the basis of audience share.

Redefining Service

Adopting this approach has been crucial to RTÉ’s financial survival, since it depends on advertising revenue and must allocate its resources prudently. It also addresses the broadcaster’s

need to maintain a strong position in the sector and secure political support. As the former independent producer reasoned, ‘they would argue ... “if you want a unique Irish broadcaster the only way we’re going to survive is, we’ve got to have bums on seats”’ (G). Therefore, RTÉ has had to balance public service with popularity.

There was undoubtedly a strong sense of a public service ethos among the members of the PSG, particularly those with responsibility for programmes. However, this is conditional on the need to retain audience share and earn commercial revenue. This imperative means that programming and investment decisions must be based on a commercial rationale. As outlined earlier, the budget-slot logic ensures that smaller, less commercially valuable audiences are served, but at low cost and without risking advertising revenue. This represents a more pragmatic approach to public service, which RTÉ has adopted in response to environmental conditions. It also reflects the market model of the audience that has come to dominate public policy.

The emergence of the schedule-led, ratings-driven production system is the product of market-based policies that have reshaped the European broadcast sector and redefined the concept of public service. Since the entire market system and the political sector measures performance in terms of audience share, public broadcasters are forced to prioritise ratings. As Syvertsen points out, public broadcasters now legitimise their performance in terms of how well they ‘satisfy the interests and preferences’ of their audiences (1999: 7).

The rise of scheduling management therefore reinforces and formalises a new understanding of public service. In 1999, Syvertsen commented that ‘what we are witnessing today is a systematic struggle to shift the content of the concept from two traditional interpretations toward a new, third meaning: from broadcasting as a *public utility* and *broadcasting in service of the public sphere* toward *broadcasting in service of the audience*’

(1999: 7, author's emphasis). She argues that this shift reflects greater responsiveness on the part of policy makers and broadcasters 'to the individual media consumer than to the audience as a culturally interested, democratically oriented body' (1999: 9). Scheduling management has given formal structure to this new version of public service.

Through scheduling management, public broadcasters know their audiences through ratings data, and serve the public on the basis of audience demand. While public broadcasters must serve all members of the public, scheduling management favours certain members of society over others. It may therefore act as a divisive force, reinforcing and even actively creating economic and social inequalities, rather than contributing to common bonds (see Gandy, 2004: 336; see also Turow, 1997: 199 – 200). In this way, although it claims to put audiences to the fore, the schedule-led, ratings-driven driven production system may ultimately destroy public service.

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