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Thirty Years A 'Growing: The Past, the Present and the Future of Irish Broadcasting

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Early Years

Way back in the early months of 1960, the then British Prime Minister, Harold McMillan – whose most memorable phrase until then had been his salutation to the British public 'You've never had it so good' – made a six-weeks tour of the African continent. By the time Mr. McMillan arrived in Cape Town he was geared up for another phrase-making speech, this time to the assembled members of the South African Parliament: 'The wind of change is blowing through this continent, and, whether we like it or not, this growth of the national consciousness is a political fact. We must all accept it as a fact, and our national policies must take account of it (3 February 1960).' That speech itself is long forgotten, but the phrase 'the winds of change' is still remembered. They were, indeed, beginning to blow then in South Africa and, in more recent times, have reached hurricane-force on occasion.

When I look back on my own more than thirty years in broadcasting, that phrase holds special resonances for me. In European broadcasting – and certainly in Irish broadcasting – if there were any winds blowing in the early 1960s they were only the gentlest of zephyrs, relatively balmy, mostly cooling and invigorating us, rather than knocking us out of our stride or dramatically off-course.

Consider the broadcasting environment in this country some thirty years ago. There was then one medium-wave radio service – no VHF – and, out of the 24 hours of the day, that service was closed for longer than it was open. There was one television service, known variously as 'Telefis' or 'Bealach a Seacht' – or, less kindly because of the number of studio programmes relying on 'talking heads', 'radio with eye-strain'. These television programmes – all in monochrome – were received by only 290,000 homes in the State. The transmission standard was 625 lines and also 405 lines for those homes already possessing older receivers. In certain parts of the country – mainly in the Northern areas and along the Eastern seaboard – UK services could already be received; BBC Northern Ireland since 1953, for the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, and UTV since 1959. But there was no BBC 2, no Channel 4, no satellite, no cable, no home video or camcorders, although the American company, AMPEX, had launched video for the broadcasting trade in 1956. There were no remote switches for 'zapping' and no rental video shops. But there were plenty of cinemas where we queued, patiently, and often in the rain, for memorable (forgettable?) epics such as *West Side Story*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *The Guns of Navarone*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *La Dolce Vita*.

Commercial television had already taken off in Britain with Roy – later Sir Roy – Thomson describing his Scottish TV franchise as 'a licence to print money'. Lew Grade got on board also at an early date providing entertainment which owed its genesis more to the music hall than the new TV medium. This prompted one wag to announce that Britain now had two types of television, high grade and Lew Grade.

With Telefis Éireann developing, and other services rapidly becoming available throughout Europe, that zephyr of Force One I mentioned earlier stepped up a couple of notches in 1962 when we saw, via Telstar, a satellite transmission from the United

States. I can still remember the date – 23 July – and the live baseball game from Chicago included in the transmission, the striking face of Big Ben and Richard Dimbleby's dulcet tones providing the British link. However, at the time there was no hint of Marshall McLuhan's 'global village'. That satellite transmission was regarded as no more than an 'interesting' experiment.

Major limiting factors then, in both production and distribution technology, virtually ensured that broadcasting was still a state monopoly – not in the strictly commercial sense where the customer could be exploited, I hasten to add. It was highly regulated and, mostly, a very responsibly run monopoly, but a near-monopoly nonetheless. And, perhaps inevitably given technical and other restraints, it was not the adventurous forum we know today, which may have fathered the (anonymous) description 'Television is the bland leading the bland' or which led the comedian Groucho Marx to conclude 'Television is a medium of entertainment which permits millions of people to listen to the same joke and yet remain lonesome'.

Throughout the 1960s many factors began to work to produce a more open and questioning approach to the issues of the day: John F. Kennedy was President of the United States; Pope John XXIII presided over Vatican Council II; Western economies generally prospered. Foreign travel was no longer the preserve of the wealthy and business classes – the 'package' holiday business was up and running. In our own country there was a new air of dynamism, a new emphasis on 'get up and go', on the arts, on music, on culture, on the opening of windows on society as a whole. There was tragedy, too, in the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and his brother, Robert, and Martin Luther King. The Vietnam War raged on. Conflict continued in the Middle East, China under Mao Tse-Tung remained a closed society, and the Northern 'Troubles', dormant for a number of years, suddenly erupted again. All of these developments were reflected by broadcasting in numerous ways, not least in informational and analytical programming. Television was now 'on scene' at many events throughout the world. *Seven Days* on television and *This Week* on radio were outstanding examples of Ireland's contribution.

In the United Kingdom in 1968, BBC 2 was launched, providing new programme diversity. There was mounting pressure for a second UK commercial channel, although Channel 4's birth was some years down the road. But, all in all, the 1960's brought a golden age to broadcasting in these islands and I consider myself fortunate to be able, now to say, 'I was there'.

Difficulties and Restructuring

In the 1970s, there were more difficult times with the world oil crisis hitting open economies like our own particularly hard. There were also key developments affecting broadcasting in that decade. Firstly, the introduction of licenced cable television to Ireland. It began in 1970 and, in those early days, it was forbidden for a single system to have more than 500 subscribers. This measure was adopted to moderate the growth of cable and give the then single channel RTE television a reasonable chance of competing with our much more affluent neighbours across the Irish Sea. Gradually, the '500 restriction' was relaxed and, by the middle of the decade, serious debate was taking place about choice in television. In the event, it was decided that RTE should set up and operate a second channel. On 2 November 1978 the second TV channel opened with a major entertainment programme from the Opera House in Cork as the chosen launch vehicle.

Secondly, the technology of broadcasting, particularly on the radio side, was becoming very 'user friendly' – and I'm not talking about the arrival of the 'trusty tranny'. As a result, many unlicenced local stations began to pop up all around the country. RTE had only one radio channel to counter this development and, if only on that account, was at a disadvantage against 'the pirates' as they were known. An early

response was Radio na Gaeltachta, launched in 1972. Eventually, the Government decided that a second national RTE radio channel should be approved and Radio 2 (now 2FM) was born on 31 May 1979. It immediately proved popular, with a lively mixture of music, news and other programming. But many of the pirates continued to operate – and some to flourish – for another ten years. Broadcasting legislation in 1988 eventually brought order to that whole scene and laid the foundations for the Independent Radio and Television Commission to regulate and oversee it.

By the end of the 1970s, the zephyrs of the 1960s had become brisk and slightly chilling winds. RTE had two colour television channels (colour had come in 1971), but four UK channels were now widely available. We also had three national radio channels, but there was a plethora of unlicensed operators for most of the decade as well. Competition was the name of an intensely fought game.

The 1980s brought little respite. Now the satellite was starting to intrude in earnest into our scene. At the same time, through miniaturisation, production equipment had become portable, lightweight and not very costly. It was now possible to make programmes, particularly those of a simpler kind, very easily and distribute them by renting a transponder on a satellite. The European Commission in Brussels also began to take more than a passing interest and broadcasting began to feel the consequences of the Treaty of Rome – particularly in relation to trans-frontier broadcasting and opposition by the Commission to 'exclusive' deals for rights to sporting and other events, which were seen as potentially in breach of the anti Competition Articles in the Treaty.

Around the same time – in the mid-1980s – the Government also commissioned a detailed consultancy analysis of RTE. All of us in the organization recognized this as the equivalent of a gale warning. Why? We were producing only thirty per cent of our television output, the remainder coming from foreign sources. Morale was low and the bank overdraft was high: too high at £10 million. It was a time for in-depth analysis of our function and future. Outside RTE, the Government-ordered survey was interpreted as part of an anti-RTE bias, a desire to clip RTE's wings, a continuation of an argument which always seems to fill the void between Government and broadcasters, not only in Ireland.

In the period since the consultants produced their report¹, all of us in RTE have got stuck into the many priorities which needed to be addressed. Hours of television transmission increased from 3382 hours in 1978 to 7600 hours last year (1991). In the same period, home-produced material has reached 45 per cent of all transmissions. And the RTE share of the multi-channel audience has risen to 50 per cent. The bank overdraft has been eliminated and the number of employees reduced by 350. The licence fee – £4 for black and white in 1962 – remains at £62. There has been no licence fee increase for six and a half years, despite inflation. All this has been achieved in a broadcasting environment where 70 per cent of homes now have considerable choice, provided by external television services, and where 30 per cent of homes have video recorders.

1. Stokes, Kennedy, Crowley (SKC), *Review of Radio Telefís Éireann, 1985*. Dublin: the Stationery Office [eds.].

Influence of RTE

This has been a fairly rapid tour of the Irish broadcasting scene over the last thirty or so years. Later I will return to other issues which have exercised corporate thinking and attitudes during the period. But perhaps I could now dwell on what difference the much increased availability of radio and television has made over that time in Irish society.

Television, particularly, is regularly trumpeted as the most powerful instant medium in the world. (The American entertainer Ernie Kovacs once said that television is a medium because 'it is neither rare nor well done'). We are all aware, I think, of the mountains of paper which have been produced on television and its real or imagined influence. Boiling it all down, it seems to me that broadcast television is a modest enough agent of change in society and it is quite an exaggeration to attribute Svengali-

like powers to it.

In particular, it has always struck me how readily politicians accept this notion of the alleged power of television. When they do a 'good' interview the feedback from their immediate colleagues and party supporters can lull them into believing that actual achievement does not matter so long as you do well on the 'box'. There are times when I feel that too many of our politicians take the short term view of events, rather than a more considered and gentler reaction. I realize how seductive the 'sound' bite on television and radio can be in terms of reaching large audiences – thousands of people no politician could hope to reach through old-style public meetings and door-to-door canvassing. And the politicians have some justification for blaming 'the media' in creating the rent-a-quote syndrome. There are times when the instant response could be replaced by more thoughtful analysis.

Not that I share Hilaire Belloc's political epitaph:

Here richly, with ridiculous display
The Politician's corpse was laid away
While all of his acquaintance sneered and slagged
I wept: for I had longed to see him hanged.

And I am certainly not advocating the response of the former Prime Minister of China, Chou En-Lai, who was once asked what thoughts he might wish to impart on the French Revolution. He thought for several minutes and then said 'It's too early to tell'.

In case anyone feels that I am about to embark on a politician bashing exercise, let me emphasize here that I admire and respect most of the politicians I have met over the years. Unlike those of us in the media world, politicians have to seek their mandate directly from the people – every few years in general, and every few months in the not-too-distant past. They plough a difficult and lonely furrow and are certainly not overpaid for their commitment and lengthy hours of service to their constituents. But I do feel they place too much emphasis on the power of broadcasting and broadcasters. Of course, broadcasting does have its influences on the way we shape and live our lives – not always without controversy. In earlier days, the majority of broadcasts were rehearsed and recorded, a more leisurely approach allowing time for assessment and review where required. Many so-called 'live' programmes were, in fact, recorded shortly before transmission time – others were made up of pre-recorded segments with only the studio links 'live' in that sense of the word. And, on radio, some programmes had time delays of ten or more seconds built-in, allowing producers and editors the facility of hitting a panic button to eliminate foul or abusive language or defamatory material before it could be aired.

That changed in the late 1960s and early 1970s through a combination of new broadcasting technology and the availability and much wider access to an improved telephone network. The result: the birth of the 'phone-in' and 'talk-back' radio. Today, telephone participation is encouraged in some television programmes, but it does impose certain visual constraints and, consequently, is not always successful. However, the 'phone-in' has become an essential part of radio programming – a safety valve for those wishing to let off steam or make their views known on the issues of the day. From *Morning Ireland* through the Gay Byrne and Pat Kenny shows to Marion Finucane's *Live Line* and other programmes you can hear the authentic voice of Ireland. Given the present rather cumbersome parliamentary procedures, which do not allow for immediate full-scale debate on major issues, broadcasting has become the instant vox populi, with radio fulfilling a role which many people now see and refer to as the 'Parliament of the People'. Ideas are exchanged, contentious issues are debated – sometimes deadly serious, sometimes frivolous and humorous. And the RTE audience figures underscore the programming popularity. But 'live' programming in this purest form brings with it the attendant need for extremely stringent application of 'balance and fair play' set down in the Broadcasting Authority Act.²

2. Broadcasting Authority Act (1960) [eds].

Most of you here this evening will be more than familiar with essential law for journalists, one of the most vital elements for anyone training for, or even contemplating, a career in either the writing or broadcasting media. You will appreciate that in the 'live' programming path there are many potential pitfalls under the broad heading of 'libel'. Given the litigious nature of many Irish people and the sometimes more than generous awards made by Irish juries, this is an area of obvious concern for anyone engaged in broadcasting. The spoken word may speed like an arrow, but sometimes it can return with the speed of a rocket – with a libel writ attached. The old newspaper adage 'when in doubt, leave out' applies equally to broadcasting. The necessity for accuracy and certainty is something we must be aware of at all times, whatever the programme. But before 'leaving out' or 'leaving in', programmes are subjected to a fairly rigorous editorial process designed to provide balance without extracting all the teeth from a particular item.

These restraints are essential, particularly in so-called 'investigative journalism'. Campaigning journalism does have its place in broadcasting – but journalistic 'courage' must always be tempered by journalistic 'justice' within the laws of the land, which are there to protect all of us. Despite the editorial over-viewing I mentioned, we have had our share of libel and other legal battles over the years. Mistakes do occur, however rigorous the editorial procedures. When we are in the wrong, we say so with alacrity. When we feel we are in the right, we fight. Libel actions, however, are sometimes like playing Russian roulette with all the barrels loaded. The jury system, one feels, is frequently loaded against the large corporation – judgements sometimes seem to be based on the David versus Goliath syndrome, the small man versus the big, bad business giants who can afford to pay over large sums in damages without feeling too much pain. I am not complaining about justice or damages. It is the size of awards which cause concern and, we hope, will be addressed in any review of judicial procedures.

While on legal matters, it may be opportune now to refer to Section 31 – a sub-judice situation at the moment for us because of our appeal to the Supreme Court against a High Court's decision in July last³. This Ministerial Order as you may know has to be renewed annually – the date is in January – and this has been done by successive Administrations for more than twenty years. Over that period our internal guidelines to interpret the Order have been reviewed from time to time. In the recent High Court decision our interpretation of the Order was judged to be faulty. If the Supreme Court confirm the High Court decision we will naturally have to re-write our internal procedures. At all times, as a Statutory Corporation we must observe the law, most particularly in the case of decisions handed down by the highest court in the land.

Another development is the wide-scale impact of advertising on all our lives particularly the television variety. Advertising as we have come to know it probably had its origins in the 1870s to the 1890s, with an American saying of the time:

The man who on his trade relies
Must either bust or advertise

That saying or slogan – 'it pays to advertise' – has permeated literature and even music ever since. Few Irish companies would disagree with that. Advertising on both radio and television is part of the overall broadcasting frame. To some it is intrusive, but most viewers and listeners accept it almost as part of programming. The reality is that Irish broadcasting could not have developed in its present form without advertising, or a totally unrealistic licence fee. The tremendous technological changes we have seen in recent years could *not* have been funded solely from the licence fee, which has not been increased for almost seven years. So revenue from commercials and other enterprises have been essential elements in keeping RTE up with a plethora of broadcasting competitors. The Government imposed 'cap' on advertising is something we have constantly opposed because of its unfairness to RTE and we would sincerely hope it is one area which the current Government review of Broadcasting will address.⁴

3. The current order made under Section 31 of the Broadcasting Authority prohibits interviews or reports of interviews with spokesmen of any organization 'styling' itself IRA, Sinn Fein, UDA, INLA, and any organization prescribed under the (British) Northern Ireland (Emergency Provision) Act 1976. The order also specifically bans broadcasts made by or on behalf of Sinn Fein and Republican Sinn Fein. RTE has interpreted the Section to mean that any interview on any topic with a member of the organisations listed is prohibited. In March 1993 RTE lost its appeal (to the Supreme Court) against a High Court decision that its blanket ban on broadcasting interviews with members of Sinn Fein was wrong and that Section 31 was being misinterpreted by the station. (eds.)

4. In July 1993, the cap (or restrictions) on RTE's income from advertising was removed by the Broadcasting Authority (Amendment) Act 1993 [eds].

In more than 30 years, there has been dramatic change in the fabric of Irish society – not always for the better. Critics of societal change lay much of the blame at the door of television. The medium, they argue, which opened our windows on the wider world, also ushered in many of the malign influences which nowadays blight our lives. The portrayal of sex and violence on television, they claim, has led to a lessening of respect for the law and an alarming diminution in regard and appreciation of women and weaker elements in society.

Certainly there has been change – but this has been part of normal evolution. In the arts, in culture, in education, broadcasting has played a significant and positive role which cannot be overlooked. Indeed, the programming 'mix' has included programmes which included violent scenes – but nothing, I suspect, to match the violence so unhappily still with us up the road in Northern Ireland; in the 'ethnic cleansing' in Yugoslavia; in the Gulf War; in Latin America; in South Africa – the list of real time violence, man made and cruel, is part of our everyday lives, not some fictional violence created in a Hollywood studio. RTE has a careful system of evaluation in all programming. There is a pre-screening process which determines what programmes should be transmitted, where they should appear in the schedule in order to protect family values and the younger elements. The portrayal of sex and violence are key elements in this decision making process. But RTE restraints do not and cannot apply to a whole new area the rapidly growing home video market, the development of pan-European broadcasting on satellite and cable with little or no restrictions on the type of quality of programmes they transmit.

For the moment, state broadcasting is holding its own against international consortia with massive financial and other media related resources. The main reason is that national broadcasters reflect national values – in entertainment, in arts and culture, in sport and most emphatically in news and current affairs. Whatever enticements external broadcasters now offer, the national audience remains with the national broadcaster for its interpretation of news and other developments. But round-the-clock European and world news channels, with multi-lingual sound-tracks and 'regional' opt-outs based on national or linguistic territories, could easily change that.

Broadcasting is not an inexpensive activity, despite the massive miniaturization of both transmission and receiver equipment and consequent reduction in costs. Major sports event such as the Olympics, World Cup rugby and soccer are being sold-off to the highest bidders. International news coverage is costly and, for a small company like RTE, frequently prohibitive.

The whole shape of broadcasting is changing before our eyes. Not for the first time, broadcasting is at a cross-roads. It is no time for complacency. Will Rogers, the American humourist, probably said it all: 'Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there'. Broadcasting is not number one on everyone's agenda. But its impact on all our lives is such that we should be aware of where it is going – hopefully along one of those motorways leading from that cross-roads and not in to a long, narrow cul-de-sac. And I hope that those of you here tonight, many of whom will no doubt form the Irish broadcasting bench of tomorrow, share that fundamental concern that I have.

Note: Inaugural Annual Lecture on the Media in Ireland, Dublin Institute of Technology, College of Commerce, Rathmines, 22 October 1992.