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Television in Ireland: A History from the Mediated Centre

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Abstract

This article identifies and critiques a dominant narrative in the history of Irish television, which is too often passed off for, or accepted as, the history of television in Ireland. The history of television in Ireland has been written within an institutional framework and depends on the cultural binary of tradition and modernity, 'old Ireland' and 'new Ireland'. This dominant narrative fails to interrogate television as a medium. It provides an account of the Irish broadcaster RTÉ rather than an account of the arrival of a new medium. Ironically this narrative which hinges on the role of television in opening up Irish society is itself quite closed in terms of the stories it tells and the questions it asks. The prevalence of this narrative can be explained by an academic dependence on institutional sources and in flawed ideas on the relationship between media and society. It will be argued that it is necessary to turn to non-institutional sources to complement and balance the factual and ideological blindspots in the dominant narrative.

Keywords: ideology, television, media historiography, Radio Telefís Éireann, Ireland.

Article

The claim that television arrived in Ireland on 31 December 1961 is commonplace[1]. However, such claims only make sense when the word 'television' is interpreted to refer solely to television broadcasting rather than viewing, and when 'Ireland' refers only to the Republic of Ireland. This interpretation, more concerned with the Irish State's ability to broadcast than people's ability to watch, is typical of historical approaches. Indeed, the history of television in Ireland is, essentially, just a history of the public service broadcaster Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ). Moreover, the history of RTÉ as 'television' has been told within a pervasive dominant narrative, which subsumes the medium into a clash between tradition and modernity. This article attempts to identify, explain and critique this dominant narrative in the history of Irish television, which is too often passed off for, or accepted as, the history of television in Ireland.

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[1] Tovey and Share, for example, write that 'television arrived in Ireland at 7pm on New Year's Eve 1961 though for a short period prior to that, some enthusiasts on the east coast were able to pick up British TV signals' (2000: 376).

Telefís Éireann was launched on New Year's Eve, 1961. The gala celebration was broadcast live from the Gresham hotel in the centre of Dublin[2]. Many academic accounts portray the opening night as a pivotal event in modern Irish history. It was part of the emergence of a 'New Ireland'. The new channel was to serve as a catalyst for Ireland's cultural transformation. That night, it appears, complex processes of social change obligingly presented themselves before the cameras. Ireland was about to move from a regime that stifled individual freedom to a cosmopolitan society that was open to foreign investment, ideas and culture. Academic representations of this night offer clear-cut characters and an easy-to-follow plot. They present a polarised vision of the ailing forces of tradition and their modern, confident and open-minded successors. A worried clergyman, Cardinal D'Alton, and an anxious elderly politician, President Eamon de Valera, strike a jarring contrast to the glamour and excitement of the evening. They appear defensive; helpless in the glare of a technological future that they can neither control nor understand.

Cardinal D'Alton, the Archbishop of Armagh, 'appeared on the screen to welcome the new service and to warn parents not to allow their children to become television addicts, no matter how meritorious the programme' (*The Irish Times* 1 January 1962) (also cited by Gibbons 1984: 21; Savage 1996: 1; Morash 2009 172—73). Horgan remarked on the 'gloomy attitude of the former Taoiseach, Eamon de Valera, who warned his audience about the dangers of the new medium even as he inaugurated its first broadcast[3]' (Horgan 2001: 84). Academics have ritually cited the following passage from de Valera's inaugural speech.

> I must admit that sometimes when I think of television and radio and their immense power I feel somewhat afraid. Like atomic energy it can be used for incalculable good but it can also do irreparable harm. Never before was there in the hands of men an instrument so powerful to influence the thoughts and actions of the multitude. The persistent policy pursued over radio and television, apart from imparting knowledge, can build up the character of the whole people, inducing a sturdiness and vigour and confidence. On the other hand, it can lead through demoralisation and decadence to disillusion (*The Irish Times* 1 January 1962) (also cited by Savage 1996: xi, Morash 2009: 172, Cormack 2005: 274, Horgan 2001: 84, Wylie 2007: 237, Gibbons 1984: 21; Pettitt 2000: 147).

Morash emphasises how 'later in the evening, the elderly Eamon de Valera peered myopically into the camera, and amid all the champagne and marching bands, introduced a sombre note of

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[2] The service was initially called Telefís Éireann. It was later combined with radio under the name Radio Telefís Éireann.

[3] De Valera also alluded to the positive qualities of television and expressed his hope that the audience would demand beneficial programming over damaging content.

warning in words resonant with the tones of Vigilanti Cura[4]' (2009: 172). For Robert Savage, de Valera's warning 'quite dramatically illustrates a turning point in the modern history of the nation'. Ireland was 'emerging from the social and economic torpor that had paralyzed the state since its founding' and there was little that the 'venerable President' could do about it (1996: xii). Cormack claims that 'de Valera was right to liken television in Ireland to an atomic blast [sic]' because the 'Ireland that met television had been very much a traditional and closed society' (2005: 274).

De Valera's counterpart, offering hope of escape from cultural and economic stagnation, was the new Taoiseach Sean Lemass. For Horgan he was 'symbolic of the departure of the political old guard' (2001: 83—84). Lemass defended the mainly imported content of the new broadcaster, opining that 'the reasonable needs of the Irish people...would not be satisfied by programmes restricted to local origins (Lemass quoted in *The Irish Times* 1 January 1962) (also cited by Morash 2009: 171; Savage 1996). This is in contrast to the ideals of national self-sufficiency attributed to de Valera. Academic accounts have used de Valera and Lemass as literary devices. De Valera embodies the spent force of Catholic, protectionist conservatism while Lemass represents modernisation and openness. That night, 'Old Ireland', defensive, myopic and out of touch, began to decline as its successor quickened with the introduction of television as a natural ally. Morash describes the television station's launch, and the contrast between de Valera and Lemass, as a moment when social change, normally slow, complex and difficult to discern, became manifest.

> In this moment we see in a split screen, as it were, showing two Irelands. In one, we might see a modernising, new Ireland relishing its porous boundaries; in the other, an older, conservative Ireland of fixed and knowable values, bounded and preserved within the island of Ireland. However, it might be more accurate to say that what was on display that night were two forms of Irish modernity, one established and one just coming into being; either way, it was clear that the medium through which these differences were being staged clearly belonged to the new (Morash 2009: 173).

Accounts of the opening night present a dichotomous vision of a complex reality. This is not to say that they are false. They reflect important aspects of the relationship between television and the culture and politics of the Republic of Ireland. However, they also leave much that goes unquestioned and unspoken. In this they typify the dominant narrative that frames the entire history of television in Ireland.

Prevalent in history, sociology and media studies the dominant narrative is bound up with the modernisation of Irish society and the decline of the former hegemony of tradition, Catholicism,

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[4] This was a Papal Encyclical on the dangers of motion pictures from 1936. This informed Irish legislation on the censorship of films in 1939.

and introverted nationalism. Questions about the social consequences of television as a medium are lost as they are subsumed into the politics of Irish modernisation. Thus, many questions about how Irish people's social practices changed alongside the new medium are ignored. In its failure to countenance certain facts, and to ask certain questions, the dominant narrative is ideologically conservative. Of course, this claim may initially appear wrongheaded because the story of Irish television, as it is told, is the story of an escape from repression to freedom; from silence to the ability to speak and be heard. Before asking why this story dominates we need to take some time to understand what it says.

Breaking the Silence

The Lemass government is commonly seen to have initiated Ireland's economic modernisation. RTÉ is credited with spearheading a parallel process of cultural emancipation. The channel's cultural significance has to be considered in the context of the longstanding censorious activities of the Irish Catholic Church, lay organisations and the Irish State. From the mid-nineteenth century the Catholic Church had imposed a culture of silence upon the discussion of sexuality. This served, in part, as an ideological support to an agrarian economy. Inglis describes how 'beyond the confessional there was a silence' which, 'imposed in homes, schools, the media and other institutions', 'created and maintained the practices of postponed marriages and permanent celibacy' essential to the preservation of an agricultural economy where only the first-born son could inherit the family farm (see Inglis 1998b: 36). After Irish independence, state censorship of publications and films was imposed through a confluence of Catholicism, class-based anxiety about social order, and cultural and economic nationalism (Woodman 1985; Morash 2009: 138—147, Horgan 2001: 12). In the 1960s Ireland began to look outward to foreign markets and investors. Deference to authority, and the silence and shame around sexuality began, at a glacial pace, to recede. RTÉ challenged Ireland's system of moral censorship, particularly, through entertainment programmes that pushed back the limits of what could be publicly discussed.

Woodman, Inglis, Savage and others have argued that television opened Ireland up to foreign cultural influences. For Inglis, 'television changed the face of Catholic Ireland because the practice and discourse of imported programmes was at variance with traditional Catholic principles. They portrayed life-styles in which religion had little or no importance. The concentration was on urban individuals rather than on rural family life' (1998a: 92). Indigenous programmes are also seen to have played a role here. Over the course of the 1970s Irish drama productions became increasingly forthright in their treatment of sensitive social issues. Initially coy social representations gave

way to the discussion of contraception, marital affairs and divorce in serials like *The Riordans* and *Bracken* (Gibbons 1996; Sheehan 1987, O'Connor 1984). For many, such serial drama reflected and facilitated social change in Ireland (Gibbons 1996, Silj and Alvarado 1988, Sheehan 1987, O'Donnell 1999). However, when it comes to television as a force for change in Ireland academic literature has placed the most concerted emphasis on the role of the iconic *Late Late Show.*

The Late Late Show has been broadly identified as the most identifiable and effective site of television's influence on Irish society. Hosted by Gay Byrne, the show was created in 1962. Its format blended the conventions of entertainment and serious discussion. Horgan claimed that the show 'was to have a profound effect on Irish social mores' (2001: 89). For Ferriter the show quickly became seen to be 'the bane of the upholder of "traditional" values' (2009: 374). It traded in 'the revelation of intimacies in the glare of the studio lights, the disclosure in public of things that had never been disclosed in private' (O'Toole 1997: 145). O'Toole argued that the show, and its presenter, were remarkable precisely because of the silence that suffocated private expression and public debate in Ireland. In 1997, he wrote that 'it is the silences that have made Gay Byrne what he is in Ireland'. These silences 'at the breakfast table, the silences around the fireside, the silences on the pillow'. Without them Byrne would merely be a 'superbly professional broadcaster, confident, adaptable, quick thinking and fast talking - and no more'. With these silences, however, Byrne became 'the voice in which the unspoken can be articulated, the man who gives permission for certain subjects to be discussed. His is the voice, calm, seductive and passionless, in which things that would otherwise be unbearable can be listened to'. Byrne's achievement was 'founded on Irish people's inarticulacy, embarrassment and silence…' (O'Toole 1997: 146-7). O'Toole captures a point of consensus in the dominant narrative. *The Late Late Show* marks the beginning of television giving voice to what 'Old Ireland' had silenced.

Robert Savage wrote that the show was one of the 'most provocative features' on RTÉ and that it 'deserves all the credit it has received for helping to open up Irish society' (Savage 2010: 207). Lance Pettitt set out the range of social issues that the programme is credited with influencing.

> According to one study[5], *The Late Late Show* has not just aired topics but has been influential in changing social and moral attitudes. It has provoked legislative change and shifted the boundaries of taboos in Irish social discourse on a variety of topics, including unmarried mothers, Travellers' rights, infanticide, different kinds of sexuality, marriage and clerical celibacy (Pettitt 2000: 169—70) (also cited by Savage 2010: 207).

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[5] This study is not described beyond a reference to Collins, L. '"Late Late" dying soul of the nation' *The Sunday Independent.* 9 August 1998.

Pettitt argued that the *Late Late Show* 'challenged authority, which public figures had hitherto *assumed* [Italics in original]*,* and tackled the shibboleths of Irish society in a domestic forum that was disarmingly open for its time'. It 'provoked discussion within Irish homes, in the national daily press and Dáil Éireann'. (2000: 169). The programme is credited with addressing myriad difficult issues but sexuality takes centre stage in academic literature,

Ferriter reports that 'any discussion of sex was, of course, as mesmerizing to the audience as it was uncomfortable' (2009: 376). He quotes novelist Colm Tóibín who maintained that 'there were so many people "who had never heard about sex"' (Ferriter 2009: 376) (also cited by Bowman 2011: 221). Academics have repeatedly cited Tóibín's descriptions of watching the show with his family as an illustration of its social effect.

> Down in Enniscorthy when I was a lad we all sat glued to it. We were often glued by embarrassment that someone was talking about sex: there were older people in the room who didn't like sex being talked about. If the *Late Late Show* had not existed it is highly possible that many people would have lived their lives in Ireland in the twentieth century without ever having heard anyone talking about sex. If any other programme had mentioned sex, it would have been turned off. Turn that rubbish off. But nobody ever turned the *Late Late Show* off. The show was too unpredictable (Tóibín 1984: 66) (also quoted by Sweeney 2007: 78; Morash 2009: 180; Horgan 2001: 89; Pettitt 2000: 169).

The story of the *Late Late Show*, and by extension that of RTÉ, is one of television prising open Ireland's culture of silence. Televised discussion and debate gave individuals the vocabulary and the social licence to discuss issues for themselves. John Bowman wrote that 'what has been witnessed is the empowerment of the individual, the strengthening of rights based on individual choice rather than the old hierarchical society with answers handed down from those already characterised as "well-nigh infallible in all matters"'(2011: 232). Thus the dominant narrative emphasises RTÉ's catalytic role in the Irish State's modernisation and cultural liberalisation. Nevertheless, it offers only a narrow vision and is preoccupied with institutions.

Closed Accounts of Openness

The limitations of taking 'television' to be synonymous with RTÉ are apparent if we consider, as just one example, the case of early adopters of television and the role of British broadcasting in the Republic of Ireland. Watching television in Ireland began with British programmes. Most writing on the origins of RTÉ point to the reception of British channels in the Republic, often described as 'fallout' signals, as part of the cultural and political motivation behind the creation of an Irish

broadcaster (see Savage 1996: 18, Cormack 2005: 273, Horgan 2001: 79). Cormack notes that the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) had 'generated much of the concern about the detrimental cultural influences of television'. She describes how it was 'especially galling to cultural nationalists' that the broadcast of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation was 'watched eagerly, if guiltily, in the Republic'. Morash cites a short article from the *Irish Times* under the headline *Rush Order of TV Masts* (see Morash 2009: 168).

> A rush order of 125 television masts left Cardiff Airport for Dublin yesterday in an Aer Lingus plane. The aerials, ordered by Dublin radio dealers, are of a special type designed for use outside the range of normal television broadcasts. Some for use in Dublin, were attuned to the Holme Moss transmitter and the new Belfast booster station. Others, designed for use in Cork and Wexford, were attuned to the Wenvoe (Glamorgan) transmitter. All of them, it is understood, are to be erected in time for the Coronation (*The Irish Times* 27 May 1953).

Ireland was not broadcasting its own programmes in the 1950s but television was already present in some homes and had already found a place in national discussion and debate as mediated by the press. *The Irish Times* reported that a man had been arrested for smashing a television with a hatchet in a Dublin pub on the day of the Coronation (17 June 1953). A humorous letter from a reader in Tullamore described how his attempt to mount a television aerial on a public water tower was treated as a treasonable act by local authorities, described as the 'County Kremlin' (*The Irish Times* 22 June 1953). By May 1954, the *Irish Times* was publishing BBC television listings.

In 1955 there were an estimated 4,000 television sets in Ireland with 50 new sets being sold every week (see Morash 2009: 168). By 1958 there were an estimated 20,000 television sets in the country (CSO 2000: 57). Shortly after RTÉ's launch, in 1963, the number of television households had leaped to an estimated 237,000 (McLoone and Mac Mahon 1984: 150). This might give some justification to saying, hyperbolically, that television arrived with RTÉ. Nevertheless, in the same year, almost half[6] of Irish television households received British channels (McLoone and Mac Mahon 1984: 150). This proportion remained consistent for almost two decades.

> In 1979, 45 per cent of televisions in the Republic would receive British (including Northern Ireland) programmes, and… these programmes had a considerable attraction. Almost six out of ten Dubliners watched at least some British programmes each day, as did four out of ten urban families generally. Rural—that is, mainly farming—people and the people of Munster generally did not because they could not (Chubb 1987: 73)

It took almost 20 years after 1961 for 93 per cent of the households in the Republic of Ireland to have a television set (Chubb 1987: 73). The proportion of television households receiving British

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[6] 48 per cent of television households could receive British channels in 1963 (McLoone and Mac Mahon 1984: 150).

channels dropped to almost one-third of the national total as broadcast coverage for RTÉ spread westwards into counties that initially could not pick up any television transmissions. By 1983, however, half the television households in the country had access to British channels once more (McLoone and Mac Mahon 1984: 150). With the advent of satellite and cable distribution, this upward trend continued. By 2010, almost 9 in 10 Irish homes had access to British and other international channels[7] (Comreg 2010: 71). Nevertheless, the dominant historical narrative on television in Ireland is blind to Irish audiences' engagement with British programmes.

If television was consequential in liberalising Irish culture then British channels had a part to play. Yet, the programmes from the BBC and Ulster Television (UTV) that Irish people watched and discussed are absent from academic commentary[8]. Writing in *The Furrow* in 1958, Ethna Conway discussed the merits of the BBC's *Lifeline* programme which had openly addressed homosexuality and prostitution (1958: 33). It is impossible to know how many people in the Republic of Ireland managed to see these programmes. Nevertheless, a year after RTÉ's launch roughly half of Irish viewers had ready access to such broadcasts. While the *Late Late Show* is regularly mentioned by academics for breaking Ireland's culture of silence, the influence of more forthright British channels, apart from their role as 'fallout' signals, goes unmentioned. Ironically the consensus on how television opened up Irish society is somewhat blinkered and introspective. The limitations in these accounts stem, in part, from methodology but they are also rooted in flawed thinking about the relationship between media and society.

An Institutional Lens

Academic commentaries on television in Ireland have depended heavily on institutions as sources of historical evidence. They have relied on what Bourdon described as sources 'from above', the state and broadcasters, and 'from the side', the press and other media reportage and commentary on broadcasting (Bourdon 2015: 12—16; see also Dhoest 2015: 66). It is important to note that Ireland is unexceptional amid an international tendency to rely on institutional sources (see Schudson 1991: 188-189, Curran 2009: 1, O'Sullivan 1991, Doest 2015: 66, Penati 2013: 7—8). Work based in such

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[7] 87% of households were multi-channel (Comreg 2010: 72).

[8] Morash does acknowledge that Irish people were watching television from the early 1950s. However, his subsequent discussion concentrates on the institutional creation of RTÉ rather than on the activity of Irish television audiences (2009: 168—169). Pettitt also acknowledges multi-channel viewing and comments that after 1976 the availability of British programmes undermined Irish attempts at censorship of paramilitary groups (2000: 149–150).

sources can, of course, be invaluable. Detailed archival research, like Savage's, demonstrates the complex political, economic and technological forces, national and international, that shaped RTÉ as a broadcaster. In much other work, there is a pronounced interest in the political machinations within and around RTÉ (see Horgan 2001, Doolan, Dowling and Quinn 1969, Bowman 2011). The methodological difficulties with a dependence on institutional sources begin where they have been used, not as a means of understanding RTÉ, but as a way of divining how Irish people used and understood television and acted in relation to it.

As we have seen above, writers have consistently used institutional, press and even literary sources as indicators of how Irish people experienced, and thought about, the new medium. There is, in much academic work on the subject, an assumption that what RTÉ transmitted, and what newspapers printed about those transmissions, can be read as a direct reflection of how Irish people thought about television. Earls provides an example of this in his description and defence of the methods he used in understanding *The Late Late Show*. The study of the programme proved difficult because many archive copies had been deleted. Nevertheless, he argued that 'because the show has been at the top of the TAM [Television Audience Measurement] ratings for 20 years' the public were 'deeply familiar with its format and its presenter'. And while Earls could not access the national debate by other means he found that the national press had taken part in and reported upon the controversy that followed certain episodes. He notes that his study is somewhat uneven in that the 'controversies of the 1960s received more attention because the public debates which followed were far more extensive than any which occurred in the seventies' (Earls 1984: 107–8).

Although he did not describe them explicitly, Earls recognised 'the limits of this methodology' (1984: 108). The 'public' are described as a monolith whose familiarity with the presenter and the show's format is taken for granted. More importantly, however, the press is accepted as a direct reflection of how the public experienced and discussed television and its controversies. Earls does not mention the possibility that controversies from the 1960s may have simply received more newspaper coverage when RTÉ was still relatively new and newsworthy. Many commentators have succumbed to similar shortcomings but have been less ready to admit to them. Researchers typically cite newspapers as if they flawlessly channelled the perceptions and opinions of Irish people. The role of news values and other journalistic processes of selection and framing are ignored.

One could attempt to explain the omission of British programming from the history of television in Ireland in terms of a nationalist or pro-RTÉ bias. However a simpler explanation is that British programmes left relatively few traces in sources 'from above' and 'from the side'. People were unlikely to write to the *Irish Independent* to complain about UTV. The belly aching of rural

county councillors was unlikely to be directed towards, or heard by, the Director General of the BBC. There was little political capital to be gained from condemning British broadcasters in the Dáil. British broadcasts were inside Irish homes but lay outside the game of Irish politics. They have been overlooked because academic commentaries have viewed television through the lens of Ireland's parliamentary and cultural politics as recorded by the State, RTÉ and Irish newspapers. Concerns lying outside this game, and its official records, have gone unseen and unreported. As a result, academic literature has amplified some ideas about television and Irish society while it has silenced others.

Television, Power and Belief

In the 1950s with the arrival of the earliest television sets, there was a research opportunity to understand how the new medium would affect Irish society. As in many other countries, this research never took place. As O'Tuathaigh argued most of the claims about television's influence in terms of 'secularism, changing ideas on morality (public and private), on perception of the ethical and moral dimensions of power and public office, on a sharpening awareness of social inequalities' were 'more in the nature of assertion than analysis' (1984: 99). Chubb echoed this. He argued that in discussing the effect of television on political attitudes and behaviour in Ireland there was simply a lack of data. He ventured a suspicion, however, that the 'mass media actually communicate less to politicians about the feelings and desires of the public and less to the public about the whys and wherefores of ministerial action than either politicians or newspeople like to believe' (Chubb 1987: 78). Links and dependencies between broadcasters and politicians may give rise to closer ties with each other than with audiences or voters. There may be an overestimation of their communicative influence on the public when their main influence may be upon each other (see Chubb 1987: 78–9). This foreshadows a central concern in media studies generally and media history in particular. There may be a misplaced belief in the power of media.

A belief in the power of television is central to broadcasting as an activity. Individuals need to believe in the power of programmes to muster commitment to production. Broadcasting organisations need governments and companies to believe in the power of television to justify licence fees and advertising costs. As Couldry observed, media institutions have an interest in maintaining their position as '"central" social infrastructure'. Accordingly, these interests 'influence the accounts that media outlets give of the difference media make to social life' (2012: ix). The problem, for Couldry, is 'that media studies has invested too heavily, and no doubt in many cases unwittingly, in the myths

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that encircle its object of analysis' (2003: 6). Pointedly, he asks why we, as critical thinkers, should build one of the media's 'starting assumptions' into our own (2003: 8). Rather than accepting broadcasters' claims about the social centrality of their work at face value we need to see that such claims themselves are ideological (see Couldry 2003: 8). Rather than being media outsiders Irish academics have been caught up in power structures surrounding RTÉ. Rather than serving as disinterested critics they have amplified the ideological power of Ireland's mediated centre and have embraced its fundamental claims of social centrality.

Couldry simultaneously raises the concept of the 'mediated centre' and dismisses it as a myth. Nevertheless, if we accept that the centrality of national broadcasting is mythic it is, nevertheless, rooted in material, institutional and symbolic power. Following Bourdieu, 'centrality', or symbolic power, will tend to flow to people and institutions that already possess it (1985: 731). The history of television in Ireland has perpetuated a narrative that reinforces RTÉ's national historical importance because it has been institutionally intertwined with the broadcaster. Couldry argued that academics may be tied to media in the sense that their own 'strategies of distinction' may depend on them as means of publicity (Couldry 2012: ix). This is visible in RTÉ's ability to socially consecrate academics who are allowed to speak through radio and television. As can be seen in the citations above, the history of Irish television is heavily dependent on a small number of texts. As such certain events, voices and perspectives may be disproportionately amplified. It is worth noting that many key texts have been published by, or in association with, RTÉ (e.g., O'Connor 1984, Farrell 1984, McLoone and McMahon 1984, Sheehan 1987). Also, many key, well-cited commentaries were written by former RTÉ staff (e.g., Bowman 2011, Farrell 1984, Earls 1984). It is unsurprising that studies of television in Ireland have taken the emancipatory power and social centrality of RTÉ as a fundamental assumption that justifies not only broadcasters' work but also academic research upon it.

The dominant narrative's silence around television as a medium betrays a form of technological conservatism. Technology, which is a product of, and sometimes a vector for, social, political, economic and scientific processes, is invisible (see Sterne 2003). The history of television in Ireland is the story, not so much of a country adopting a new medium, as it is one of a clash of two incompatible visions of how society should be organised and how life should be lived. Television is remembered is as a site of struggle between advocates of 'tradition' and 'modernity.' 'Television' and RTÉ are taken to be synonymous. So, television is represented as part of a liberal, modernising

counter-hegemony that opposed and eventually replaced the Catholic agrarian hegemony as embodied by Eamonn de Valera. The appearance of a new technology, which affected habits, relationships, psychology and the use of public and private space, is effectively ignored. The focus is on institutional controversy and programme content. The medium, its affordances and the practices it that encouraged or discouraged are invisible. In the dominant narrative, television, as a technology and a set of related social practices, is not something to be questioned. It is to be silently accepted as being natural and inevitable.

Conclusion

A central aspect of the symbolic power of media organisations is their ability to shape how their history is written and how their social contribution is remembered. There are political stakes in the way that media, and their historical role, are imagined and represented. As such, there is a need for a more open and egalitarian way of exploring and describing the history of television. To avoid a situation where only those attached to the mediated centre get to define the role of media in society, we need to step beyond the methodologically and ideologically limited narrative that has dominated to date. It is necessary to pay attention to what all people and 'not just a technophiliac elite' have to say about media (Couldry 2012: ix). Histories of television in Ireland are blinkered. Yet, in the absence of other accounts, they have become the background common sense on how television has interacted with Irish society. In 1984, McLoone and MacMahon noted that 'most worthwhile writing on television in Ireland has tended to concentrate on the institutional structures of RTÉ and on the relationship between RTÉ and the State (1984: 8). Little has changed in the intervening 30 years where commentators have continued to divine historical changes in public culture related to television by using political, academic and journalistic reactions to RTÉ and its programmes.

As Dhoest argued 'any historical account of media which excludes its audiences is incomplete' (2015: 65). The blind spots in the history of television in Ireland are not beyond repair. There is an opportunity here to complement the dominant narrative with accounts from Irish people who lived through television's arrival and development. While it is too late to study audience reaction to television as a new medium the life-story methods of Bourdon and Kligler-Vilenchik, Dhoest, Penati, O'Sullivan and others offer a possibility here (Bourdon and Kligler-Vilenchik 2011, Dhoest 2015, Penati 2013, O'Sullivan 1991). Life-story interviews can tell us about how people have

viewed television at different stages in their lives. The resulting stories are not just about television but about the connections between television and social practice (Bourdon and Kligler- Vilenchik 2011: 35). This, of course, creates its own methodological difficulties given the nature of memory, and people's ongoing exposure to television's ability to edit and mediate memories of its own past. For Dhoest, oral history can 'enrich our understanding, not only of processes of remembering but also of the past' with the proviso that 'one remains aware of the partial and constructive nature of audience memories, and that other historical sources are used to frame and corroborate these memories' (2015: 65). Nevertheless, this approach would mark a departure with people being spoken to rather than being spoken for. Such attention to the memories and experiences of people, unattached to the 'mediated centre', may allow academics to throw into relief the historical visions of television that are products of institutional interests, procedures and memory practices. Future histories might benefit from the use of sources 'from below' where people's recollections of how they used and reacted to television can complement the ways that government records, RTÉ archives, and press articles say they did. This identification of a dominant, but limited, narrative is a first step towards that end.

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