The Fair City Production Line: An Examination of Soap Opera’s potential contribution to the Public Sphere

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Abstract

Between December 2000 and February 2001 the Irish soap opera *Fair City* ran an unprecedented, risky and controversial abortion storyline. This came before a looming referendum on the legality of abortion. Here, *Fair City* was not just offering entertainment, but provoking debate and discussion on a divisive issue in Irish society. In this case, and many others, it appears that soap opera, by promoting such discussion, may contribute to the formation of public opinion in contemporary civil society. Heretofore, most academic studies have overlooked the possible consequences of soap opera for civil society, public opinion and the democratic process. This study breaks with this by using Habermas’s concept of the public sphere to describe and explore the ways in which soap opera may affect social and political life. In a further departure from former studies that have studied audiences or soap operas texts, this work offers an in-depth investigation of *Fair City*’s production process. It explores the programme’s potential contribution to public life by uncovering how its production system shapes what social issues it can and cannot address and how it may address them. Habermas offers an underlying conceptual structure for the study. Production research, however, necessitates a conceptual model that can explain everyday production work and decisions within a complex globalised broadcasting environment. To this end, the study employs a Bourdieuan perspective as a middle-range theory. This allows *Fair City* to be understood as the emergent product of numerous struggles to define the show’s form and content.

I argue that shows like *Fair City* are a necessity for smaller national broadcasters like RTÉ in a harsh and competitive global broadcasting environment. Such production line soap operas provide dramatic entertainment to large repeat audiences at the lowest possible cost. Soap opera’s competitiveness depends on a highly rationalised, factory-style of production. However, this low-cost, high-speed, production routine geared towards maximising audiences, constrains what *Fair City* can and cannot say. Accordingly, certain public issues simply cannot be introduced to the public sphere through soap opera. This may have significant consequences for discussion, debate and the formation of public opinion in democratic societies.
The Fair City Production Line

An Examination of Soap Opera’s potential contribution to the Public Sphere

Introduction

Every year, almost 6,000 Irish women travel to Great Britain to have an abortion (Inter-Departmental Working Group on Abortion. 1999). Although Irish society has been increasingly liberalised in the past 40 years, abortion is still a contentious issue. Recent decades have witnessed an ongoing, and often bitter, abortion debate. Despite the coverage of abortion referenda in the press, and the clash of conflicting opinions on Irish television and radio talk shows, abortion is not an easy subject to talk about in Ireland. It can raise passionate and polarised points of view. In the political debate that surrounds abortion, various ‘pro-life’ and ‘pro-choice’ groups speak on behalf of Irish women. Beyond the statistics that are regularly presented, the women who travel for abortions – mainly to Great Britain – are generally invisible and silent. Their stories are seldom heard in Ireland.

In January 2001, Kay McCoy had an abortion in a London clinic. Unlike the other hundreds of Irish woman who had abortions in Great Britain in the same month over 600,000 people watched her story on television. Kay McCoy is a character in Fair City, a soap opera produced by Ireland’s state broadcaster Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ). Abortion, a difficult issue usually discussed at a policy level in current affairs programming, was thrown into the spotlight of prime-time family viewing where viewers of all ages were emotionally engaged. Kay, and her husband Malachy, were followed through painful arguments and decisions, through to the performance of the
abortion and the emotional fallout in their relationship. In a country where the discussion of abortion carries a taboo this was a significant media event.

The first episode of *Fair City* was broadcast in September 1989. Shown once a week, the show was a much-anticipated return to urban soap opera for RTÉ. The station’s only other urban soap opera, *Tolka Row*, had ceased production in 1968 (see Sheehan 1987: 122). The new show was the subject of considerable hype and expectation. Despite, or perhaps because of this, *Fair City*’s first season was a major disappointment. Over a million viewers watched the show’s first episode. After this viewing figures declined with each passing week. Many within RTÉ expected the show to be axed. RTÉ’s Director of Television Production at the time described the situation.

Now *Fair City* had run 17 episodes and there was a big question mark over its future. This had been for several reasons. One was the audience, by far the largest audience had been for the first show and the 17 or the 16 that followed showed a fairly relentless fall in audience figures. And if you’re doing something like a soap actually you expect the reverse trend if it’s working. (Former Director of Television Production).

*Fair City* was seen as a costly production, with an out-of-control plot, produced by a cash-strapped broadcaster. In the event, the Director of Television Production granted the show a stay of execution. He also increased its output to two episodes per week. After its first year *Fair City* underwent a major reshuffle with the replacement of the show’s producer, series editor and many of its cast. The producer recounted how the new series editor voiced an ambition to ‘make *Fair City* the best soap on television’. Given public perceptions of the show this seemed highly unrealistic.

In 2002, *Fair City* was Ireland’s third most popular television programme, gaining a peak audience of 659,000 viewers. Its audience figures often surpass those of the imported soap operas *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*. Over half a million
Irish people are regular *Fair City* viewers (www.medialive.ie). The show is successful, cost effective and highly attractive to advertisers (The Project Team 1998: Appendix III; medialive.ie/Banners/Tvrte/rte2002.html).

There may be more to *Fair City*, however, than popular entertainment and advertising. Although Kay McCoy’s abortion stands out among recent storylines, *Fair City* regularly represents contentious social issues, ranging from drugs and crime to racism and health problems. When combined with entertainment such social messages are unobtrusively brought to a large and emotionally engaged audience. This begs questions about the possible role of *Fair City*, and similar programmes, in the media and public life in general.

**A Promise or a Threat?**

Soap opera has the potential to promote greater involvement in civic life. First and foremost, the genre may provoke discussion and debate. Soap operas can provide a ‘way in’ to talking about social and personal problems that might otherwise lie outside of polite everyday conversation. On 7 March 2002, Ireland held a referendum on a proposed constitutional amendment to render abortion illegal under most circumstances. This would have included serious foetal abnormality, pregnancies resulting from rape, and the risk of suicide to a mother through trauma or mental illness. Decision-making in such a case, and in any mature democratic process, depends on the formation of public opinion through free and open debate. Yet debate can be stifled by a stigma attached to an issue or anxiety over being castigated for one’s opinions. In Ireland there is still trepidation and social awkwardness about discussing abortion. However, by asking, for example, ‘what did you think about Kay on *Fair City* last night?’ one can explore others’ opinions on abortion with little risk. (see Livingstone 1988: 73; Singhal and Rogers 1999: 144).
Soap operas can break the silence on personal problems that people may be too afraid to share with others. In this sense, they can empower people by ‘normalising’ personal experience and reducing stigma. For example, the popular 1970s RTÉ soap opera *The Riordans* portrayed a character who suffered from paranoia. Viewers who had experienced mental illness wrote in praise of the show, which made them feel ‘less lonely’ (Burrowes 1977: 28). John Yorke, a former executive producer of *EastEnders* offered a detailed account of a contentious storyline dealing with sexual abuse.¹ He explained that the story, involving a character’s sexual abuse by her uncle, ‘was not an issue we embarked on lightly’. The programme’s producer and storyline writers consulted with the Samaritans, child psychiatrists and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). All, according to Yorke, said the same thing “‘This story needs telling. Will you please let people know that this goes on’”. The BBC ran a helpline following the episodes, which had been watched by twenty million viewers.² This received hundreds of calls. Callers offered painful personal accounts of their experiences of child sexual abuse. Yorke explained that:

For many we were the first people they had ever spoken to about their experiences. Some wanted to know whether there was a time limit for reporting a crime. Some called wanting to know how to support friends or relatives who had been abused. A few survivors were concerned that they too might become abusers and were also looking for help. But the overriding message we got was simply “Thank you for making us feel less alone.” (Yorke in *The Guardian* 4 September 2002).

The soap opera genre has the potential to educate and inform. Again *The Riordans* proved to be a highly effective means of surreptitiously disseminating information on modern farming methods (Burrowes 1977: 2; Gibbons 1996: 58). Mal

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¹ The *Guardian* article used as a source here was based on the text for a speech to be given by John Yorke to the Bishops Conference for Clergy and Other Ministers in St Albans on 5 September 2002.

² Although Yorke does not state so explicitly, this is likely to be the figure for viewers in Great Britain only. *EastEnders* regularly gains Irish audiences in excess of 500,000.
Young, Head of BBC Drama Series called attention to government-backed campaigns by Channel 4’s *Brookside* and the BBC’s *EastEnders* to promote literacy (Gibson and Hartley-Brewer in *The Guardian* 17 September 1999). Soap opera has been used in the developing world to promote literacy, family planning and health education (Singhal and Rogers 1999; Nariman 1993; Elkamel 1995). In Brazil soap opera frequently acts as a forum for political commentary (*The Economist* 21 January 2003). By promoting discussion, debate and education soap opera can empower people to improve their lives. As Young described it soap operas not only reflect society ‘but end up affecting, gently changing, the way we think about our lives, and those around us’ (Yorke in *The Guardian* 17 September 1999).

Soap opera also has a darker side. It can play a destructive role in civil and political life. Put simply, the genre may be an addictive distraction from civic engagement (Livingstone 1988: 67–8; Hatherell 2002: 14; Putnam 2000: 243). To understand and enjoy a soap opera, viewers must devote time to following the show, learning the characters’ personalities, their histories and so on (Geraghty 1981: 25; Livingstone 1988: 73). Following all the episodes of Ireland’s three most popular soap operas, *Fair City, EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*, takes six hours a week. Soap operas, beginning in the early evening also serve to create an audience inheritance where viewers, having watched an hour and a half of ‘their soaps’, are likely to stay in front of the television for subsequent programmes. Soap operas may not just be time intensive in themselves but can also be used to bait audiences for further viewing. There is an opportunity cost attached to soap opera, where simply being in front of the set implies we are not involved in sporting, communal or political activity.
This is not to mention the many related newspaper and magazine articles, which are increasingly part of the soap opera experience. The genre requires not only a large amount of time but also a considerable amount of learning. Learning about soap opera ‘reality’, however, may do little to help us to understand our lives and the world around us. Soap opera may distract us from the social processes that shape our personal lives. In 1998, Deirdre Rashid, a Coronation Street character was condemned to 18 months in prison for fraud. Coronation Street viewers were sufficiently exercised by this fictitious imprisonment to mount public opposition. Granada television, the programme’s makers, received hundreds of viewer complaints. Incredibly, a British Labour MP, Frasier Kemp, called on his colleagues to join a ‘Free the Weatherfield One Campaign’ (Donnelly in The Irish Times 2 April 1998). Further to this, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, lent his support to the campaign. He gave a tongue-in-cheek statement to The Sun newspaper on the issue. This angered many justice campaigners. By intervening on behalf of a soap opera character, the government offended the friends and families of real Britons unjustly incarcerated at home and abroad. In The Irish Times, Deirdre Falvey described this as a Prime Minister ‘cynically caressing his people by campaigning to free a fictional character from a non-existent prison’. She concluded by asking whether soap opera had ‘replaced the reality of community for many people?’ (Falvey in The Irish Times 2 December 2000). The ‘Free the Weatherfield One Campaign’ was the brainchild of the Prime Minister’s ‘spin doctor’, Alastair Campbell. The New Statesman credits Campbell, ‘adroit at diversionary tactics’, with using the bizarre soap opera campaign at a time when Tony Blair was exposed for lobbying Romano Prodi on behalf of

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3 Member of Parliament.
4 Weatherfield is the name of the area in which Coronation Street is set.
5 A British tabloid owned by the Rupert Murdoch controlled News Corporation.
6 Romano Prodi was President of the European Commission from 1999 to the time of writing.
Rupert Murdoch\(^7\) (Maguire in *New Statesman* 6 September 1999). Here, soap opera’s popularity provided an opportunity for public theatre that proved more expedient than political transparency.

Soap opera may distract people from politics and civic engagement. In a poll commissioned by the editor of *Whitaker’s Almanac*, just over eight in ten Britons were able to identify Tony Blair (83%) and George W. Bush (83%) as world leaders. Only one in ten could name five senior British government ministers. Although at the time of the survey Britain was preparing to wage war against Iraq, only a quarter of respondents could identify its leader Saddam Hussein. Despite their political ignorance almost half of the 1063 adult respondents could name five characters from the BBC soap opera *EastEnders* (Carvel in *The Guardian* 21 October 2002).

Most of Europe is currently marked by a democratic deficit with low voting figures and widespread political apathy (*The Economist* 29 June 2000). Ireland is no different with unprecedented low voter turnout at recent elections and referenda. In Ireland’s most recent referendum on the Nice Treaty only one third of the electorate exercised their vote (O’Toole in *The Irish Times* 9 June 2001). During a Dáil\(^8\) debate, Brendan McGahon, a Fine Gael TD,\(^9\) implicated soap opera in the perceived rise of political ignorance.

So many people are not tuned in and do not have a clue why politics are necessary… How can people who, in their tens of thousands, watch fantasy soaps such as ‘*Glenroe*’, ‘*Coronation Street*’ and ‘*Fair City*’ relate to political manifestos. They just cannot do so. They are living in a fog. That is part of the problem — they fail to appreciate why politics are necessary…(Dáil Debates 31 May 2001).

\(^7\) Rupert Murdoch, controlling shareholder of News Corporation, has frequently used overt and covert methods to convince politicians across the world to further liberalise laws controlling cross-ownership of media industries (see Pilger 1998: 445–485; Herman and McChesney 1997: 70–77).

\(^8\) The Dáil is the lower house of the Republic of Ireland’s parliament.

\(^9\) Standing for Teachta Dáilé, Irish for a member of the Irish parliament.
Soap opera is a genre born out of advertising (Brown 1994: 8; Cantor and Pingree 1983: 32). It is, of course, so named because initial broadcast serial dramas were sponsored, and often made, by companies like Lever Brothers and Proctor and Gamble. Most soap opera exists in symbiosis with advertising. Advertisements generally pay for soap opera production. In turn the genre provides an environment conducive to effective advertising. Despite heavy competition from ‘reality television’, soap opera remains the ‘the best way to offer advertisers the chance to reach a lot of women viewers with one commercial’ (The Economist 5 February 2000). This symbiotic relationship may warp soap opera representations of reality. Frequently, soap opera ‘reality’ fails to show poverty, human rights abuses, ecological destruction and other less entertaining aspects of the world we live in. Many hold that portraying such problems could discomfit audiences, creating an atmosphere that is less conducive to consumption (Klein 2000: 165-190; Herman and McChesney 1997: 6-7).

Soap opera stories are based on various problems and crises. However, some commentators hold that these problems are predominantly personal, divorced from the society in which they are embedded. (Devereux 1998: 101; Porter 1982: 125-6; Feuer 1986: 496). They require personal solutions. They may, then, facilitate a conservative ethos, where possibilities for social change are ignored in favour of the need for personal transformation. Margaret Thatcher is famously quoted as pronouncing that ‘there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families’. Perhaps soap opera could be accused of mirroring this philosophy. Responsibility and blame for problems fall on the shoulders of

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10 Interview with Margaret Thatcher in Woman's Own, October 3 1987.
individual habits, attitudes and lifestyles. Perhaps, by stressing the personal, soap operas deny the role of social forces and ignore the possibility of collective action.

Soap opera is regularly condemned for many more reasons. It may affect children’s education, it sets poor moral example, it fails to adequately represent minority groups, and the list goes on. Opinions on soap opera have been moulded to some extent by cultural elitism. Soap opera is seen as the fast food of television drama, popular, mass-produced and unwholesome (see Cantor and Pingree 1983: 56; O’Donnell 1999: 8). This may, in part, explain why tirades against soap opera are more common than comment on its positive potential. The role of soap opera in civil society is ambiguous. It is a highly profitable genre. It dominates audience figures for television, the dominant mass medium in Western society. It has the potential not only to entertain but also to inform and educate. At the same time, it may promote excessive consumption, ignorance and political apathy. It is accused of causing all manner of social ills. This poses an important question. What contribution can soap opera make to civil society? Does it offer a promise or pose a threat to civic engagement?

There is a considerable literature devoted to the study of soap opera. Predominantly, it has addressed three questions, ‘who watches soap opera’, ‘why’ and ‘how does the genre affect its audience’. Most of this literature has originated in cultural studies, with much of it adopting a feminist perspective on the genre (Brundson 2000; Ang 1985; Dyer et al. 1981; Brown 1994; Feuer 1986; Modleksi 1986; see also Philo and Miller 2001: 55-62). The production of soap opera and its structural determinants have been largely overlooked.11 There is, however, a more important gap in this literature. Heretofore, the study of soap opera in Western

Europe and the United States of America has overlooked the genre’s potential role in public life.

The Aim of this Study

Unlike most former analyses of soap opera, this study aims to make a contribution to the understanding of soap opera’s role within civil society. It contends that programmes like Fair City can play a role in forming public opinion by encouraging discussion on difficult or taboo issues. To explain and justify this position, soap opera is located and discussed in terms of the debate surrounding Habermas’s concept of the public sphere (see Habermas 1989; Baker: 1993; Hohendahl: 1993; Eley 1993; Peter 1993). Of course the type of public contribution that a programme like Fair City can make is determined by what it can and cannot represent in its storylines. Here, it is necessary to move beyond Habermas’s theoretical model, employing a Bourdieuan perspective as a middle-ground theory to explain and explore how cultural production takes place and how it is shaped by society. This allows us to understand the form and content of Fair City as the emergent product of numerous struggles between producers, editors, writers and so on. It also stresses that to understand Fair City we must understand how the show and RTÉ have been shaped by today’s globalised economic and political environment. Unlike most soap opera studies, then, this study concentrates not on the audience, or the text, but on the soap opera production system. It explores its possibilities and limitations. A detailed analysis of how Fair City is made reveals what the show can and cannot say. This work explores, and explains, how the funding, organisation and culture of this production system shape Fair City’s potential contribution to discussion and debate in Irish society.
Chapter One

Fair City’s Abortion Storyline and Public Discussion

*Fair City* made a daring departure from convention by deciding that Kay McCoy, a central, sympathetic character, would have an abortion. The storyline provoked vocal opposition and debate among viewers, in the press\(^{12}\) and on radio. Ironically, similar storylines are commonplace in British soap operas, shown in Ireland, which do not arouse the same passions among Irish audiences. To understand, initially, why the programme should have caused such a reaction it is necessary to consider *Fair City* within the context of previous Irish soap operas.

**Sexuality and Silence in Traditional Ireland**

Until its industrialisation in the 1960s Ireland had a predominantly agrarian economy and a conservative Catholic and nationalist culture. A strict code of sexual morality was central to traditional Irish society. This is explained in part by an elective affinity between a viable agricultural economy and a ‘stem-family system’. Here property inheritance – and consequently the opportunity to marry – was restricted to one child. Theoretically, then, fewer marriages should have led to fewer births and increased living standards (see Inglis 1998b: 159–77 for a fuller discussion). More importantly, however, this pattern of inheritance prevented the subdivision of the family farm prevalent before the famine (Akenson 1988: 27). The Catholic Church lent ideological support to the system. The Church’s dominance in public life meant that people, but particularly women, risked their honour and livelihood as well as their

soul through extra-marital sex (Akenson 1988: 36; Inglis 1998b: 13). This perpetuated a pattern of postponed marriage, for some, and permanent celibacy for others.

Sexual morality overshadowed issues of public morality in Church teachings, which emphasised the sanctity of the traditional family (Lee 1989: 656). Irish women, in their role as housewives and mothers, were seen as the heart of a stable family, which was, in turn, the lynchpin of a viable agrarian economy. Alongside this, Irish mothers were conduits for Church teaching, a bridge between the Church and their children. Irish mothers were central to economic, family and religious life for most of the twentieth century (Inglis 1998b: 178–99; Lee 1989: 206).

Before industrialisation the ideal vision of Irish life was exemplified in the devout farming family. Silj et al. note that with Irish industrialisation the main values in question ‘in the debate on conservation or progress’ were ‘the family and the rural community’. These were generally combined, they remark, in ‘the image of the small family-run farm which until recently was the key economic unit in the Irish economy’ (1988: 98). Irish traditionalists held up the rural ideal over urban living, which, it was seen, could only destroy bonds with the land, the family and the Church. This ideal was also reflected in economic policy. Until the 1960s Ireland remained relatively isolated from foreign commerce (O’Hearn 1998: 36; Wickham 1986: 74). The advent of television in 1961 created a new window on foreign culture and lifestyles through a dependency on imported programming (Nic Ghiolla Phádraig 1995: 596–7; Tovey and Share 2000: 372). Before this, however, there were no ready alternatives to the Catholic-nationalist consensus. The Church exercised powerful control over public discussion, particularly, in matters of sex and reproduction.

Beyond the confessional there was a silence. The silence was imposed in homes, schools, the media and other institutions. It was this silence which
created and maintained the practices of postponed marriages and permanent celibacy (Inglis 1998b: 36).

Many Irish people lacked the confidence, vocabulary and social licence to discuss such matters for themselves. The resulting public silence was a powerful conservative force in Irish society.

**Modernisation and Cultural Change**
Ireland entered a new age when Séan Lemass replaced Éamon de Valera as Taoiseach\(^{13}\) in 1959. Ireland’s economic protectionism was abandoned with a policy of industrialisation based on exports and foreign direct investment (FDI). As Bell and Meehan describe it ‘having been one of the world’s most closed economies, Ireland became one of the world’s most open’ (1988: 77). There soon followed a raft of social changes. Agricultural employment declined with an accompanying increase in migration to growing cities, chiefly the capital Dublin. As a central support for industrialisation, education became an increasingly important means of achieving and transmitting wealth (Clancy 1985: 482–3). Children, who could be seen as economic assets in farming, became long-term dependants while in education (Fahey 1995: 216–7). This, combined with a newfound materialism, saw a decline in marital fertility (Courtney 1995: 52–4). There has been a decline in religious devotion encouraged by urbanisation, increased education, increased female empowerment, returning émigrés, and high consumption of foreign media (Inglis 1998b: 209–10). The birth of Irish television broadcasting not only coincided with this new age; it was also to become an important driver of social change.

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\(^{13}\) The Republic of Ireland’s Prime Minister.
Irish Soap Opera Reflecting a Social Rift

There was not, of course, and still has not been a smooth or clear-cut transition from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’ Ireland. For the past forty years these two opposing economic and cultural models, like two tectonic plates, have pushed against each other. *Fair City*’s abortion storyline is evidence that tremors of public outrage and controversy can still occur. As, what is ultimately, a state-controlled cultural institution, RTÉ was built on this social fault line and, accordingly, its soap operas have reflected these tensions in Irish society.

RTÉ is a complex technical organisation. From its inception it has depended on creativity and knowledge from abroad. In some respects RTÉ became quite cosmopolitan. Silj et al. note how ‘RTÉ attracted particular types of people who, in the Irish context could undoubtedly be defined as liberal or radical’ (1988: 103). This, however, did not reflect the intentions of many who had lobbied for the creation of RTÉ as a means of preserving traditional Irish culture.

While it is true that the creation of RTÉ was in-line with a clear cut ideological programme intended to propagate traditional values, it is also true that the years during which Irish television came into being and grew up were the years in which Irish society was going through rapid and innovatory processes of change and RTÉ took part in this liberalisation (Silj et al. 1988: 103).

Despite this, the station remained subject to strong conservative forces within the Irish State and civil society. RTÉ, and its programmes, became a focal point for the conflict between traditional and modern Ireland. Accordingly, much of the dramatic conflict in RTÉ soap opera concerns modernity versus tradition, urban versus rural and, most importantly, discussion and debate opposed to silence. Owing to the tensions within Irish society, and RTÉ itself, the transition from silence to the open announcement of social problems has been difficult and gradual.
**Slowly Breaking the Silence**

Irish soap operas have provoked controversy, discussion and debate on a number of taboo issues. The ventilation of such issues by Irish soap opera has been a difficult and slow process. The breadth of issues to be tackled by RTÉ soap opera and the intensity with which they have been handled has expanded gradually since the station’s first drama serial in 1964. There are, however, still issues that are considered to be inappropriate or risky for a soap opera operating in Ireland’s peculiar cultural background (Hatherall 2002: 41). As this research will show, Irish soap opera developed a momentum that was difficult for producers to break with.

RTÉ’s first soap opera, *Tolka Row*, was set in working class Dublin. It was produced from 1964 to 1968. The show has been praised for its portrayal of working class life, and, particularly, the life of working class women (Sheehan 1987: 122–8; O’Connor 1984: 125). Despite being pioneering in this regard the show made little impact in matters of sexuality or reproduction. McLoone singles out the display of a pregnancy within marriage as a significant event. He sees it as an ‘important ideological intrusion into a culture that had once deemed the birth scene in *Gone With The Wind* too explicit for the rural simplicity of Ireland in the Forties’ (1984: 62). Sheehan observes, however, that *Tolka Row* failed to ‘break any new ground in the realm of personal relationships, particularly with respect to the sexual division of labour’. In her opinion the show’s depiction of gender roles in Dublin was more traditional than that in RTÉ’s later rural soap operas (1987: 125). Gibbons sums up the show by citing television critic Peter Cleary who saw that despite the attention it paid to some social problems ‘*Tolka Row* never stepped on any toes’ (1996: 56).

*The Riordans* was first broadcast in 1965. In its early days it quietly supported a vision of stable rural family life. The show was peculiar in its brief not only to
entertain but also ‘to get across surreptitiously ideas about good farm management
and farm practices’ (Gunnar Rugheimer quoted by Burrowes 1977: 2). Gibbons argues that *The Riordans* released farmers from ‘an unquestioning reliance on time-
honoured farming methods’ and thus ‘brought about a situation in which a rural
audience was more receptive to social change, and more open to criticizing traditional
norms’ (1996: 58). With its success in disseminating information, Wesley Burrowes, the show’s writer, decided to expand the show’s role.

It seemed to me that we could now begin to use the agricultural themes as a
backdrop to the human and social aspects of rural life. My plan, if it could be
called that, was to go on chronicling human relations. But if in the lives of the
same people, something of wider social significance were to crop up, then we
would prefer to plunge into the heart of the issue rather than skirt round its
edges (Burrowes 1977: 18).

Aspects of *The Riordans* were to become the subject of contentious debate in RTÉ
and the country as a whole. Burrowes described a ‘Tic’ within RTÉ, referring to a
nervous disposition among managers, who occasionally pre-emptively removed
dramatic material considered to be potentially problematic. They would ‘prejudge the
conscience of the viewers’ rather than declare their own judgement (Burrowes 1977:
Burrowes proposed that one of *The Riordans’* central characters would become
pregnant outside of marriage. Maggie Nael, an 18-year-old, would carry the
pregnancy to full term refusing to divulge the name of the father. Burrowes felt that
‘to follow a young unmarried girl through the time of her pregnancy in a small rural
community, would be an interesting and revealing journey. The ‘Tic’, however,
decided it could not be aired because “the viewers won’t take it” (1977: 20).

Tenaciously, Burrowes pushed the story through via a new English Protestant
character. As Sheehan notes this distanced the storyline and made it less highly

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14 The show was so successful in this regard that, subsequently an entire show, Telefís Feirme, was
charged for an Irish Catholic audience (1987: 159). The story was resolved when the young girl returned to England to have her child adopted by her parents. The storyline still received a number of audience complaints. Burrowes cited one complaint, printed in the *Evening Herald*, that there should be ‘a story-line about unmarried Irish girls having illegitimate babies in England’ on ‘a family-viewing programme on TÉ¹⁵ at 7:45 on a Sunday evening’ (1977: 21). Burrowes was mystified by ‘the idea that morality varied according to the day of the week and the time of the night and the choice of TV channel and the nationality of the subject’ (Burrowes 1977: 21).

Burrowes saw that many in RTÉ had ‘been long aware of a double standard in their audience’. Irish audiences have been noted to apply completely different standards of acceptability to home produced programmes and imported ones (Burrowes 1977: 57; Sheehan 1987: 160). In an incident in *The Riordans*, a character, Ed Phipps, had a marriage proposal rejected by Jude Hyland. He went on to ask ‘what if I wanted to make love to you?’ To which Jude replied ‘I wouldn’t allow that. And it’s not just because of moral principles though I suppose that’s part of it…’ (Burrowes 1977: 57). This provoked angry reactions from viewers who saw it as an attempt by Burrowes to subvert the nation’s morals. To Burrowes the audience were inconsistent in their criticism and moral concern.

The only comfort I can take from this phenomenon is the knowledge that people would not be so upset if *The Riordans* were merely characters of fiction. If Shirley Maclaine were to express the same sentiment to Jack Lemmon, it would not matter, because however likeable they are, they are not our friends as Jude and Benjy are, and so they cannot let us down (Burrowes 1977: 57).

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¹⁵ *Telefís Éireann*: in its early years people referred specifically to the Irish television service rather than to RTÉ the combined radio and television service.
It appeared to Burrowes that Irish fictional characters were seen as pleasant fictions with which people could identify. That was until they crossed the line into unacceptable aspects of morality when they became unacceptable instruments of moral propaganda. Audiences, in his opinion, failed to apply the same criteria to imported dramas.

In *The Riordans*’ fifth season Burrowes made another attempt to get Maggie Nael pregnant. The second time round he advised superiors about the proposed story who told him to “start it and see how it goes”. Burrowes decided to have Maggie display apparent symptoms of pregnancy in the belief that management ‘could hardly change their minds about a *fait accompli*’ (Burrowes 1977: 36). Although audience members had anticipated a pregnancy story at this stage, management told Burrowes that ‘on no account was Maggie to become pregnant’. This posed a unique dilemma for the show. Already Maggie’s pregnancy was an open secret and there was keen audience anticipation. If Maggie were not to be pregnant, it would appear ridiculous to pass her symptoms off as a minor ailment. A doctor suggested that the same outward symptoms could be caused by lymph sarcoma, a potentially fatal cancer. Cancer, however, has proved a difficult topic to approach through Irish soap opera (see Chapter Nine). It was felt that the story would ‘cast a heavy shadow on the programme for a long time to come’ (Burrowes 1977: 38). Maggie was diagnosed with lymph sarcoma only to be reprieved by further tests which revealed a benign lung disorder. Thus, management anxiety about asking the audience to identify and engage with the familiar Maggie Nael as a ‘fallen woman’ dragged a potential point of discussion into farce.

Another *Riordans* story line attempting to explore infidelity, and its effect upon a marriage, was altered considerably. A proposed affair between Benjy Riordan
and Collette Comerford was reduced beyond recognition. Their relationship was reduced to Benjy being attracted to Colette on holiday and kissing her furtively behind a bush. Members of the drama department and the show’s cast had objected to the proposed affair. Despite the radically reduced storyline there was much indignant opposition from the press and members of local government (Burrowes 1977: 96–7; see also Sheehan 1987: 159–60).

The show provoked many other controversies. Maggie Nael, who eventually married Benjy Riordan, decided to use the contraceptive pill. For Sheehan this accurately, and sensitively, reflected the slow Protestantisation of Catholic Ireland (Sheehan 1987: 161). The episode was remarkable because it portrayed the Catholic Church in a compassionate and non-judgemental light. Fr Sheehy, the local parish priest, explained that if Maggie’s decision to take the pill had been made with an informed conscience in the light of Church teachings then she had ‘done all that anyone could ask’ of her (see Burrowes 1977: 86; Gibbons 1996: 63–64). While there were favourable reviews, ‘individual viewers, provincial newspapers and county councils heaped censure upon RTÉ, Wesley Burrowes and everyone connected with propagating, or even acknowledging, such views’ (Sheehan 1987: 160–1; see also Silj et al. 1988: 101).

With these and other controversial storylines The Riordans opened up previously hidden areas of Irish life, public and private. In the first teenage pregnancy story, and many others, Burrowes felt that ‘the point was not to find a solution’ but ‘simply to have the subject discussed’ (Burrowes 1977: 21). Sheehan cites Burrowes’ opinion that The Riordans ‘fulfilled its most important function… in its challenge to traditional values’ (1987: 131). The show had certainly provoked more controversy and discussion than its quiet beginnings suggested. As Sheehan describes it at the end
of the 1960s ‘it was possible to proceed with storylines that went much further than ones that had been over-rulled in early or mid-decade. Even Maggie, never mind Benjy, could have an affair by the late seventies’ (Sheehan 1987: 162).

**Bracken**

*Bracken* appeared as a six-part mini-series in 1980. It returned in 1982 with a further six episodes. The series maintained the fictional universe of *The Riordans*. A fictional mountain separated Leestown, home of *The Riordans* from the townland of *Bracken*. However, as Gibbons writes ‘to pass from one community into another’ was ‘in effect, to enter a new moral continent’ (1996: 67). The series followed the life of Pat Barry, a former labourer on *The Riordans*’ farm. The show had clearly abandoned any notion of rural idealism. The countryside in *Bracken* was portrayed as a barren place without the security of community or family (Silj et al. 1988: 93–4; Sheehan 1987: 344). *Bracken* had lost many of former serials’ inhibitions. Sex was frequently portrayed as a casual pleasure or as a strategy to gain social advantage. O’Connor notes that women were treated as ‘pawns in the power struggle between two male protagonists’ (1984: 129). Throughout the series, Pat Barry is locked in a land dispute with his wealthy neighbour Ned Daly. Attempting to gain leverage Barry eventually seduces both Daly’s daughters and his wife. A relaxed attitude to religious and sexual morality is clear at the marriage of Pat Barry and Daly’s daughter. Barry quips that he will miss his virginity, having already slept with the mother and sister of his bride (Sheehan 1987: 348). Sheehan sees that *Bracken* resembled foreign soap operas like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* in its freer more confident portrayal of sex.

It was a far more open and confident break with old taboos that seemed to draw strength from what had been made acceptable by foreign television. It did so unfortunately, with fantasy figures, which were more akin to those of foreign television than to real people drawn from real Irish life (Sheehan 1987: 348)
The show has been criticised for this flight from the social realism normally found in Irish soap opera (see Sheehan 1987: 348). Gibbons and Silj et al. see it as a departure into melodrama (Gibbons 1996: 67–9; Silj et al. 1988: 93). The series is charged with having treated women as sexual fantasies or objects (Silj et al. 1988: 93; O’Connor 1984: 129). Surprisingly, *Glenroe*, a subsequent rural soap opera was to witness a return to a more coy treatment of sex and reproduction.

**Glenroe**

*Glenroe* followed the lives of Dinny Byrne and his son Miley, two characters from *Bracken*. The show is anomalous in the evolution of Irish soap operas. From *Tolka Row* to *The Riordans* through to *Bracken* there is a clear movement towards more liberal and open portrayals of sexuality and reproduction. In this regard, *Glenroe* was regressive. The coyness of *Glenroe* was in marked contrast with *The Riordans* and *Bracken*.

In a retreat from the individualism of *Bracken*, family and community in *Glenroe* were ‘far more solid and congenial’ (Sheehan 1987: 350). *Glenroe*’s families were far less conventional and stable, however, than those in *The Riordans*. Sheehan points out that in *Glenroe*’s first year the ‘majority of characters were single, widowed or divorced’ (1987: 350). *Glenroe* was, however, undeniably coy. The series’ central romantic couple Biddy and Miley were apparently chaste until their wedding day. After marriage they used the Church approved ‘rhythm method’ of contraception. Here coyness was taken to an extreme. Rather than announce or discuss this decision, Biddy simply marked a calendar for Miley’s benefit (Sheehan 1987: 364). Biddy’s behaviour is a clear step back from the position taken by Maggie Riordan. *Glenroe* is replete with examples of this reluctance to deal with sex, family...

Silj et al. offer that *Glenroe* was a far less socially committed programme because it was produced at a time when the ‘initial anxiety and the pressure for liberalisation had to some extent faded’ (1988: 103). The programme also proved more popular with older audience members. Devereux sees that *Glenroe*’s position in RTÉ’s schedule, 8:30 on Sunday nights, caused its producers to regard it as family viewing where the discussion of sexuality and difficult political issues was seen to be inappropriate (1998: 100). This appears to have been a reoccurrence of Burrowes’s ‘Tic’ where producers prejudged audience opinions rather than take a risk.

*Glenroe*’s conservatism, however, might also be explained by the genuine expectations of its audience. Sheehan recounts an incident where Mick Lally, the actor who played Miley, was interviewed on a morning news programme. He announced that he was to leave *Glenroe* in protest against a proposed nude scene where Miley and Biddy would make love before their marriage. Although this was done as an April fool’s day joke ‘there were thousands of phone calls and letters to RTÉ taking it at face value and praising Mick Lally for taking his stand against nudity and pre-marital sex and for keeping *Glenroe* “wholesome”’ (Sheehan 1987: 364).

*Fair City* and Kay McCoy’s Abortion
As an urban soap opera, occupying a weekday slot, *Fair City* has presented audiences with a very different vision of Irish society to *Glenroe*. *Fair City*’s producer described how he felt that *Glenroe* had an ‘ethos’ of reassurance while *Fair City* tried to represent the reality of urban life. *Fair City* has addressed a number of issues ignored by *Glenroe* and previous Irish soap operas. The show’s storylines have featured AIDS, drug use, homelessness, organised crime and so on. In 1999, a *Fair
City character, Niamh, had an abortion following an affair. Some viewers objected to this but it failed to cause the controversy provoked by the Kay and Malachy abortion storyline. As with Wesley Burrowes’ first attempt to introduce single motherhood, Niamh was neither a central nor sympathetic character. Thus the audience were spared the upset of a character with whom they identified doing something they could not accept.

Soap operas require a central meeting place for their characters. This role is now normally served in British and Irish soap opera by a local pub. An essential dramatic device, the pub draws private crises into the community and prevents a succession of claustrophobic dramas behind closed doors. Fair City’s social hub, McCoy’s Pub, is owned by Kay McCoy and her husband Malachy. After the death of her estranged husband Noel McCoy, Kay befriended a local priest Fr Malachy Costello. Their friendship developed into romance and Malachy eventually left the priesthood to marry Kay. They adopted an adult son, Lorcan, but had no children of their own. Until her unexpected pregnancy in late 2000, Kay had given up hope of ever conceiving a child. However, her joy at conceiving a child was short-lived.

During a routine check-up, an obstetrician voiced concern over Kay’s age. The doctor suggested that she have an amniocentesis test, which is used to detect in utero foetal abnormalities. Middle-aged women who are at higher risk of complications often use the test. Amniocentesis is quite common in the UK but in Ireland it is not a very well known, or well-understood, procedure. Amniocentesis is

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16 As we will see, one letter writer to the show bemoaned ‘what a shallow, whinging coward’ Kay had become. Like Niamh, Kay was now seen to be ‘totally self centred and selfish’ (Viewer’s letter 6 January 2001). Hatherell’s research found that viewers had some sympathy for Niamh following her involvement in a sexual harassment case. She was identified as an active but not central character (Hatherell 2001: 66).

17 Fr. Malachy had just returned from missionary work in the Philippines.

18 Although her exact age is not made explicit, Kay McCoy is clearly a character approaching middle age.
also contentious in Ireland. It carries a small risk of miscarriage. More importantly, it can provide information that may prompt a woman to have an abortion. For Kay the test results would indeed provoke her decision to terminate her longed-for pregnancy.

From the beginning of the story, Malachy voiced his opposition to abortion. He was initially opposed to the amniocentesis test because of its possible ramifications. He saw that the purpose of the test was ‘to provide information which causes some people not to go on with their pregnancies’ (Fair City 6 December 2000). In an episode on 6 December 2000 Kay foreshadowed the possibility of an abortion.

MALACHY Believe me, Kay. If, God forbid, there is something… Untoward with the baby… Then we’re better off dealing with it when the time arises.

KAY It’s not as simple as that Malachy. There are different, types of complications…

MALACHY I know. And whatever they are, we’ll just have to deal with them.

KAY Not necessarily A PAUSE

MALACHY What do you mean, not necessarily? You can’t turn back the clock, Kay. I mean you are happily… Unbelievably going to have a baby. And we’ll just have to have faith that, whatever the circumstances are, God will help us to deal with them.

SHE LOOKS AT HIM

What?

KAY Malachy. When you get to my age. There’s a genuine risk… There are certain things, that it’s just not possible to deal with. And we have to be prepared for that.

MALACHY What do you mean?

KAY There are options, Malachy.

MALACHY MALACHY LOOKS AT HER

You’re not saying what I think you’re saying are you?

SHE DOESN’T ANSWER

HIS FACE DROPS. HE CAN’T BELIEVE IT

KAY LOOKS AT HIM

(Fair City 6 December 2000)

Kay went ahead with the test. Malachy conceded in his initial objection to the test and arrived late at the clinic to accompany her. Each assured the other of their support, regardless of what happened.
The results of the test did not arrive until after Christmas. Malachy put this down to the fact that it was ‘silly season’ and nothing was ever done at Christmas (Fair City 26 December 2000). Immediately after Christmas, however, Kay was presented with devastating news. Her foetus was found to be affected by Trisomy 13 syndrome, a catastrophic chromosomal abnormality. Malachy accompanied Kay on a second visit to a consultant. He and the audience were left in no doubt as to the severity of the disorder.

A consultant described Trisomy 13 as a rare but unmistakable condition. She announced that ‘even if the child makes it to full term, she will suffer severe mental retardation and physical retardation’. This would involve ‘misdevelopment of the skull and the brain, as well as facial deformity and possible malfunction of the heart and intestines’. Every aspect of the child’s development would be affected by the disorder. There was no chance of anything ‘approximating a full life’. It was made clear that ‘almost half of affected infants don’t survive beyond the first month and about three quarters die within six months’ (Fair City 3 January 2001).

Kay was, of course, devastated by the news. Malachy initially eluded it by claiming that there might have been a misdiagnosis or that there could be treatments they were unaware of. Eventually accepting the diagnosis he pondered how they would deal with the child’s condition. He harked back to his time as a missionary working with disabled children. He had no doubt that they would ‘manage somehow’. He remarked that they could see how other people had dealt with the problem. To this, Kay responded ‘I think you know how they’ve handled it’ clearly alluding to abortion. For Malachy this was ‘not an option’. He saw this as the child they had longed for. The ensuing argument between Kay and Malachy proved to be the storyline’s most controversial moment.
KAY This is not what we wanted
MALACHY We’ll be able to give her all our attention. We won’t be distracted.
KAY IS SILENT And you haven’t lost the baby. That must mean something.
KAY What does it mean, Malachy? What’s the bright side of that?
MALACHY She’s still alive. There’s a chance.
KAY A chance of what? That I’ll give birth to it? That we’ll struggle to keep it alive and pretend it’s not a monster? Wake up, Malachy.
MALACHY Not a monster, Kay. This is our daughter. It’s what we prayed for. We should be thankful.
KAY Do you feel thankful? Do you think God’s done us a big favour?
(Fair City 3 January 2001).

Malachy insisted that this might be part of God’s plan for them. Kay vented her anger renouncing God and, what she saw as, his cruelty. She felt that she had been led on. God had watched them celebrate the ‘wonderful miracle’, ‘knowing all the time what was inside me, what kind of horror’ (Fair City 3 January 2001). By this episode’s end, Malachy and Kay held resolutely opposite points of view. Kay felt that she had no choice, she had to have an abortion and soon. Malachy saw that this was ‘killing a child’ and could not support her decision.

Malachy confided in two people in the lead up to Kay’s abortion. One was a neighbour, Barry. The other was friend of Malachy’s from the priesthood, Fr Bertie. Echoing Fr Sheehy from The Riordans’, Fr Bertie offered non-directive advice and adopted a free interpretation of Church doctrine. He asked, for example, if there was ‘any risk to the mother?’ Malachy was unsure. Bertie suggested that he find out. Malachy retorted that regardless of any risk it did not ‘justify an abortion’. Bertie placed the ‘evil’ of abortion in the context of the ‘evils’ of everyday life.

BERTIE We’re steeped in evil, even the best of us… So we all need forgiveness. Every minute of the day. Wouldn’t it be very
arrogant to look up, through the blurred glass of our sins and imperfections, and declare that this, or this, is unforgivable? There’s only one thing greater than our capacity for evil, and that’s God’s capacity to forgive

(Fair City 4 January 2001).

Malachy felt that Bertie was wandering from the central issue here. His central concern was that the Church could ‘only countenance harm to the unborn when it’s a direct result of life saving treatment to the mother’. For Bertie such positions could be ‘unrealistically clean-cut’. He asked if Kay was depressed. Malachy responded hastily that she was not suicidal and he was ‘not going down that road’. This was remarkable in that Bertie, a priest, opened up the question of whether suicide constitutes sufficient risk to the life of the mother to justify abortion. This question was at the centre of the then looming abortion referendum.\(^{19}\)

Bertie’s essential point here was one of tolerance. He was not setting out to justify abortion but was saying that it is an undeniable aspect of life in Ireland today. It was therefore something that Malachy, and the audience, should seek to understand. Bertie knew that Malachy would try to persuade Kay to ‘do what’s right’ but suspected that this would not work. In that case, he felt that Malachy should try to ‘see her side’. He asked him to consider the child, ‘a poor creature with nothing. No will. No hope’. Rhetorically, he asked Malachy ‘what kind of life will it have?’

Malachy firmly believed that this was a black and white issue. For Bertie it was the ‘greyest of grey areas’. His last words to Malachy were that he should talk to Kay and above all he should ‘listen to her’. Malachy was not won over by Bertie’s counsel. Nonetheless, here was a cleric declaring, before the audience, that abortion

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\(^{19}\) The Taoiseach Bertie Ahern had committed to holding another referendum on abortion during the life of his government whose term was due to end in early 2002.
was not a taboo to be shunned and condemned but that it is part of life open to
discussion, debate and informed individual choices (Fair City 4 January 2001).

Malachy makes a last minute appeal to Kay (Fair City 5 January 2001) (© RTÉ 2001)

Kay was resolute about having the abortion despite a last minute plea from
Malachy. Kay confided in two friends, Dolores and Pauline. Dolores asked Kay if
she was certain that her decision was right. Kay responded that she had weighed up
all the options and knew what she had to do. In a subsequent conversation, Dolores
and Pauline considered whether Kay’s choice was right. Here they resolved that it
was not up to them to judge her but merely to offer her understanding and support.

DOLORES When is she going? Has she got an appointment yet?
PAULINE In the morning.
DOLORES And do you think there’s any chance she might change her
mind?
PAULINE No… it’s highly unlikely. Not from the way she sounded when
she was talking to me.
THERE IS A SLIGHT HESITANCY, THEN…
Do you think she’s right, what she’s doing?
DOLORES A LITTLE AWKWARD
I can’t think of it in those terms. It’s not black and white. It’s
just a case of doing what’s best for all concerned. It’s too easy
to judge people when it doesn’t affect you.
(Fair City 4 January 2001).
Pauline ended up accompanying Kay to a clinic in London where the abortion was performed. Kay was depressed and incredulous that she has ended up in ‘one of these places’. The abortion was a traumatic procedure for Kay.

An Irish nurse tends to Kay (Fair City 5 January 2001) (© RTÉ 2001)

In its aftermath, Kay’s relationship with Malachy broke down. Malachy lived away from Kay for the month of January. The relationship was patched up again when Malachy was persuaded by Lorcan to forgive Kay and to understand her position. As was to be anticipated for such a departure from Irish soap opera convention, the story left a considerable controversy in its wake.

**Reaction to the Abortion Storyline**

*Fair City*’s representation of Kay McCoy’s decision to have an abortion probably remains the show’s most controversial moment. The show’s producer declared its inclusion as one of the most difficult and stressful decisions he has had on the show. The storyline, however, made clear soap opera’s potential to stimulate discussion and debate in public life. Viewers’ letters expressed varying degrees of opposition to the story.\(^{20}\) Letter writers were overwhelmingly female and predominantly from rural

\(^{20}\) The views expressed here came predominantly from viewers who wrote to the show’s production team, i.e., producer, series editor and storyline writers.
backgrounds (see tab.1). Two institutions wrote in complaint, the National Association of the Mentally Handicapped in Ireland (NAMHI) and For Life, an anti-abortion group. One of the male letters came from a government minister, writing on behalf of a male constituent.

**Tab.1 Gender and Geographical Backgrounds of Letter Writers**

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Some viewers objected to the abortion storyline on the basis that it was inappropriate for younger viewers. As one viewer put it in a letter to the producer:

> A programme being shown at 8’o clock in the evening where children are watching should not go into such detail about abortion or anything of the sort. On last nights episode Kay McCoy was to go down to have a procedure done to ‘stop the heart beat’. How do you explain that to an 8-year-old child?

Many viewers and organisations strongly opposed what they regarded as a eugenics sub-text to the abortion storyline. For Life, the anti-abortion group formally protested against the story, finding it offensive and disturbing that ‘the national broadcasting service should advocate that the means of dealing with those with disabilities should be through abortion’. It added that ‘that this type of “Nazi” eugenic thinking has no place in any modern society and ought to be relegated to the dustbin of history’ (Viewer’s Letter 10 January 2001).

Kay’s use of the word monster in reference to her unborn child was found to be deeply offensive by viewers who wrote to, and telephoned, the production office.
The office received numerous calls of complaint after the show’s transmission on 3 January 2001 (see Appendix II). The episode also provoked controversy on the Gerry Ryan radio show\(^{21}\) (4 January 2001). The National Association for the Mentally Handicapped of Ireland (NAMHI) expressed distress on behalf of parents upset by the use of the word monster (NAMHI Letter 12 January 2001). Kay’s use of the word jarred with many audience members’ perceptions of her character.

Maybe you feel you were accurately reflecting the shock of a first time mother at hearing she was expecting a badly handicapped child. I think not, I just cannot believe that any mother, especially one like Kay, who went through so much to be with Malachy (ex-priest and associated disapproval etc.) would then turn around and sound so cold. No!! (Viewer’s letter 4 January 2001).

The ‘Pro-Life Campaign’\(^{22}\) protested that the story did nothing ‘to ease the burden of families and children with multiple special needs’. In its view, the show represented another missed opportunity ‘to meaningfully address the issues of adequate respite care and support for such families’. It saw that ‘rather than boldly confronting the issue’ the show had made the task of building a life-affirming, inclusive and caring society all the more difficult’ because it had publicly questioned ‘the equal dignity and inherent value of unborn children with a disability’ (Pro-Life Campaign Press Release 13th January 2001).

**Abortion Propaganda?**
Many more viewers were outraged by what they took to be outright propaganda supporting abortion. As one protested, ‘we don’t want abortion in our country, but your soap is encouraging it’ (Viewer’s letter 13 January 2001). Another found it sad that ‘an Irish soap opera on an Irish station would introduce abortion’ (Viewer’s letter 22 January 2001). The storyline, in one view, ‘brought abortion into our living rooms

\(^{21}\) This is a popular phone-in show on RTÉ’s 2FM radio station. For a discussion of the role of talk radio in the public sphere see O’Sullivan 1997.

\(^{22}\) This was a non-denominational group campaigning for a Yes vote in the constitutional referendum.
and indeed was almost an advertisement for it’ (Viewer’s letter 4 February 2001).

Mindful of the then anticipated abortion referendum one letter writer felt that RTÉ was effectively telling people to vote for abortion (Viewer’s letter 15 January 2001).

Concerned viewers accused RTÉ of pushing a ‘liberal agenda’. Many saw that the station was merely continuing in a tradition of railing against the influence of the Catholic Church and conservative forces in Irish society (see Fennell 1993: 188–196). Both commentators and viewers accused *Fair City* of bias in the way the abortion story was played out. Some saw that Kay was acting out of character suggesting, for them, a pro-choice bias. As noted above, this was not the first time for *Fair City* to deal with abortion. The key difference between this and Niamh’s abortion was that Malachy and Kay were central and highly sympathetic characters. This was the story’s key break with the conventions of Irish soap opera. One viewer bemoaned ‘what a shallow, whinging coward Kay has become. She and Niamh seem to be cut from the same cloth, totally self centred and selfish’ (Viewer’s letter 6 January 2001). Others complained that the programme was far more sympathetic towards Kay’s position than that of Malachy who opposed the abortion. A prominent Catholic newspaper echoed this view.

To me the writing seems driven more by ideology than character. Each character represents a different side of the debate and for the most part the actors mouth the arguments as if it was *Prime Time* during an abortion referendum. And what of the writers’ attitudes? Both sides are represented, but Kay is much stronger in her views, more emotional, more human, whereas Malachy tends to use rational and theological arguments that in dramatic terms seem more cold less convincing – well articulated pro-life arguments but presented without a strong human resonance (O’Regan in *The Irish Catholic* January 11 2001).

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*Prime Time* is one of RTÉ’s flagship current affairs programmes.
The Use of a Hard Case

The perception that *Fair City*’s abortion storyline was ‘pro-abortion’ was compounded by the fact that the story made use of a ‘hard case’. That is, a particular, but rare, physiological defect that could be used to make a compelling and emotive argument for abortion in limited circumstances. Many pro-life groups see such cases to be powerful propaganda tools in the hands of pro-choice activists. The following quotation was taken from a pro-life website, which was used as part of *Fair City*’s programme research notes.

Many parents are convinced that children with severe genetic disorders will only know pain, and therefore choose abortion. They see the decision to abort as disconnecting life support for a dying, suffering child. They are also likely to be recruited by abortionists as public spokespersons for late abortions, in order to generate the perception that their situations are typical of parents choosing late abortions (*Fair City* research notes).

Many viewers felt that the choice of such a rare condition would ‘soften people’s attitude to abortion’. The potential power of the ‘hard case’ to shape debate was made clear in the following year’s abortion referendum, which proposed a constitutional amendment to make abortion illegal in Ireland under most circumstances. On 25 February 2002, a letter from Ms Deirdre de Barra to *The Irish Times* described her experience of Irish abortion legislation.

Recently I was told that the 16-week old foetus I was carrying had a severe chromosomal abnormality, incompatible with life, which would result in death soon after birth. This was a very much-wanted baby, but the trauma of this news was vastly exacerbated by the thought of being forced to carry to full term a foetus which would never know extra-uterine life. The current media focus on the forthcoming abortion referendum has thrown into sharp relief the very real lack of attention to the substantive issue of fatal abnormalities in the unborn, and the mental and physical detrimental impact on the mother… If there is a constitutional requirement to hold a referendum, I appeal, on behalf of the hundreds of women who undergo this untenable trauma every year, for recognition of severe foetal abnormalities as a case for humane intervention. It is a risible irony to allow the obstetric profession to carry out amniocentesis tests which identify these chromosomal abnormalities, and then demand that the harrowing results be ignored. I do not advocate social abortion on
demand. This, in my opinion, is a very separate issue (*The Irish Times* 25 February 2002).

On the 7 March 2002 a referendum rejected the constitutional amendment. A joint press release from the Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) and British Pregnancy Advisory Service declared that ‘the stories of the women at the centre of the abortion debate won-out today. The Deirdre de Barra’s of Ireland garnered the sympathy and support of voters’ (7 March 2002). Similarly the IFPA claimed that:

During this referendum campaign, we began, for the first time, to hear from the women who make the silent journey to England. Deirdre de Barra and others have forced the Irish people to confront the need for legal abortion in Ireland in certain circumstances. These women have left people thinking and sooner or later we must deal with reality (7 March 2002).

Before this, however, *Fair City* had also made public one of those silent journeys to England. Kay McCoy’s case bears a striking resemblance to that of Deirdre de Barra. Mirroring the effect attributed to the de Barra case, this story, like many soap opera stories, was created with the intention of leaving people thinking and talking.

**Soap Opera, Discussion and Debate**
Complaints from individuals and organisations suggest that the storyline did indeed provoke discussion on abortion. I gained additional reaction to the storyline through a brief questionnaire distributed by email. This was addressed to people active in the areas of gender equality, reproductive rights and adult education. There were very few responses to this but it did provide some interesting insights into the effects of the abortion storyline. One respondent, a lecturer in women’s studies, found the story to be useful in facilitating class discussions.

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24 The questionnaire was distributed through a mailing list provided by the Women’s Education, Research and Resource Centre (WERRC) in University College Dublin.
I have been teaching women's studies in the community for five or six years now, and learned very early on not to allow discussions of abortion during class time because the general public understanding of the issue was still very much at the Church pulpit level, and dissenters faced scathing and often vicious personal attacks from their classmates. This year, we broached the subject as a direct result of the Kay and Malachy storyline, which was currently running, and the sophistication of responses, and the increased respect shown towards all positions was marked (Angela O’Connell UCC).

Similarly Valerie Moore felt that for people who had no experience of abortion or women who have had abortions that such storylines brought these issues to public attention and were ‘thought provoking’. She found that such portrayals allowed ‘the viewer to relate to the experience and explore his/her own views in a safe environment and at his/her own pace i.e. if the viewer finds it all too much they can remind themselves that "its only telly"’. Evelyn Mahon considered programmes like Fair City to serve an important ‘agenda setting’ function in the discussion of family planning matters.

The controversy surrounding the abortion storyline demonstrates that soap opera can encourage discussion and debate in the national media and also among families and individuals. Soap opera, then, plays an important role in a movement from a culture where norms and values are accepted on the basis of authority and tradition to one where they become amenable to rational discussion and potential change. Commenting on the abortion storyline Valerie Moore described how it opened up a debate:

Between those who would put forward rules of conduct – coming from religion, or custom, or authority – and those who find these rules inadequate for making complex life decisions and seek instead to arrive at their moral judgements after weighing up all the likely consequences of any course of action.

25 Valerie Moore is Access Officer in the Institute of Technology Tralee.
26 Taken from correspondence with Valerie Moore.
27 Correspondence with Evelyn Mahon, lecturer in sociology Trinity College, Dublin.
To publicly announce issues like abortion, drug use, marital violence, racism and so on is neither to condone nor condemn them. It is, however, to acknowledge that these things exist and to invite reflection upon them. Politically, then, *Fair City*’s coverage of sensitive issues related to the family, sexuality, health and so forth is a pronounced movement away from the traditional Irish Catholic culture of silence.

**Private Dramas and Public Life?**
One of the key changes Irish society in the past forty years has been a transformation in public debate and discussion. The former silence, enforced by the Catholic Church has been replaced by a more open and free discussion of sex and reproduction. As we have seen soap opera has played a role in bringing issues, which could not formerly be publicly announced, into public life. Irish soap opera’s have been sites of conflict where the ideals of traditional Ireland have clashed with an emerging liberalism. This has been manifest in the programmes themselves, in audience reactions and, within RTÉ, conflicts between writers, producers and managers. These conflicts have generated a certain caution within RTÉ. Wesley Burrowes’ ‘Tic’ and *Glenroe*’s coyness are two examples of this. In almost forty years of Irish soap opera no programme had dared to portray a central, well-liked character terminating a pregnancy until Kay McCoy’s abortion in *Fair City*. This was a considerable break with Irish soap opera hitherto. The storyline also clearly demonstrated soap opera’s capacity to affect public life by encouraging discussion and debate. Ironically, it is soap opera’s contribution to public life that has been overlooked by the majority of academic work investigating the genre.
Chapter Two

Soap Opera and the Politics of Pleasure

As we have seen soap operas may make a significant contribution in public life. In Ireland they have been the site, and the source, of conflict over how society should be represented. This study aims to explore and characterise the potential contribution that *Fair City* can make to debate and discussion in Irish public life. To begin it is necessary to develop a fuller understanding of soap opera by addressing past studies of the genre. The majority of studies here come from the British cultural studies tradition. As we will see this work has provided a useful guide to the soap opera genre and the way in which it represents society. It also provides useful accounts of soap opera audiences and their viewing behaviour. In this it has stressed the relationship between women, soap opera and patriarchal domination. Thus the cultural studies approach has explained soap opera largely in terms of personal and cultural politics.

Despite the value of these studies I will argue that the cultural studies tradition has made two very important omissions in its approach to soap opera. While these studies explain in large part how soap operas represent society they do not explain why this is so. They provide little insight into soap opera production or the economic and political processes that influence it. There is no explanation of why soap opera represents society as it does in terms of cultural or practical constraints in its production. No mention is made of the pressures of the surrounding broadcasting environment. Such studies cannot, therefore, explain how soap opera can create diverse or unconventional representations of society. These past studies, for example,
do not explain why a programme like *Fair City* would break with convention as it did with the Kay McCoy abortion storyline. Most importantly, the cultural studies tradition has overlooked the public role of soap opera. While these studies have explored the personal and cultural politics of soap opera they have not addressed how soap opera may affect public information, debate and opinion.

**Understanding Soap Opera and its Audience**

Televised soap opera appeared in the 1950s, inheriting its narrative form, its time constraints and its commercial breaks from serial drama on radio. Many doubted that the transfer from radio to television would work. Critics thought that housewives, overburdened by household tasks, would be unable to both watch, and listen to, televised soap opera. It was predicted that loyalties would rest with radio (Cantor and Pingree 1983: 47). Within a decade of its introduction in America, televised soap opera had entirely replaced its radio counterpart (Cantor and Pingree 1983: 37). Its success lay in its ability to attract loyal, long term and predominantly female audiences. The genre is a product of a particular political and economic milieu. It could not have developed as it did outside a developed capitalist system. The advertising industry, and the consumer industries that they served, gave soap opera its name and the money it needed to thrive. From its earliest days soap opera has been shaped by pressure for large audiences where time and money are in short supply. These origins have shaped soap opera’s evolution. As we will see, like an inherited genetic code, they are still present in the form and content of today’s soap operas, including *Fair City*.

The soap opera genre describes a number of types of serial drama with ongoing open-ended narratives. British and Irish soap operas have inherited
numerous traits from the genre’s American origins. They also, however, have important differences. The greatest contrast between British and Irish soap operas and those from the United States lies in their level, and type, of social engagement. Britain made its earliest soap operas in the late 1950s and early 1960s. At this time, British television soap operas still had strong roots in the theatre. A movement towards increased social engagement on both stage and screen influenced them. The most famous change in British television was the emergence of social realism. This was led by producer/directors like Ken Loach and Tony Garnett. Television dramas like 'Cathy Come Home' and 'Edna the Inebriate Woman' brought audiences a naturalistic ‘slice of life’. Social realism portrays working class life from within a working class perspective. The settings, characters and stories aim to emulate those available in everyday working class life (see Jordan 1981: 28). Social realism has profoundly influenced British and Irish soap opera. This is obvious when we compare the class backgrounds of characters in American, British and Irish Soap Operas. American soap opera characters are predominantly middle class while British characters are for the most part working class. Livingstone notes this distinction.

There are many indications that both British programmes and their audiences differ qualitatively as well as quantitatively from those in America. In general, British programmes seem both more down-to-earth, mundane and slower in pace, and yet also more ambitious, attempting to portray working-class communities coping with contemporary social problems. The genre is

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29 British and Irish soap operas are made, predominantly, to be viewed at prime time. Early afternoon shows are in the minority. British and Irish soap operas have never been broadcast with the frequency of American daytime serials. Typically, shows like Fair City, EastEnders or Coronation Street will be screened three or four times a week with an omnibus edition on Sunday afternoons. With regard to budgeting, British and Irish soap operas occupy an area between the American daytime serial and prime time serial. British soap operas such as Coronation Street and EastEnders have considerable budgets but would never cost as much per episode as Dallas or Dynasty. Fair City is among the least expensive soap productions in Europe. For example, RTÉ’s Fair City had a cost of 3206 Swiss francs per minute in 1998. The only station to produce a less expensive soap was Yleisradio Oy (YLE) of Finland (The Project Team 1998: Appendix III). Despite this it gains high audience ratings, unlike American daytime productions.
often thought of as being responsible, realistic and educative (Livingstone 1988: 56).

Many US prime-time serials deal with an American super-rich elite, like the Texas oil barons of *Dallas*. British soap operas are typically located in working class areas. Granada's *Coronation Street* is set in an old Manchester industrial district. *EastEnders* occupies the markets of London's East End. *Fair City* is set in Carigstown, a fictional suburb on Dublin’s less prestigious north side.

British soap operas are not only set apart by class but also by the breadth of social issues they frequently address. *EastEnders* and particularly *Brookside* stand out for having frequently addressed issues like rape, suicide, unemployment, homophobia and so on. In Ireland, as we have seen, *The Riordans* and more recently *Fair City* have addressed contentious social issues from landlord exploitation to contraception and abortion (Gibbons 1996: 65). This type of social engagement is an intrinsic aspect of British and Irish soap opera.

The contrast between British and American soap operas can, however, be tempered somewhat. It has been pointed out that the self-employed and small business owners in fact dominate many soap operas that purport to represent the working class. Employees, when they do feature, are generally involved in 'clean' service industries. Many characters may be accepted as part of a working class community regardless of their material position. Membership of soap opera’s *ersatz* working class communities depend more on a character’s behaviour and associations than on how they make their money. Jordan echoes this using the example of *Coronation Street*.

Only Hilda Ogden of the long-standing characters is of the working class proper, joined recently by two women factory workers and one night-shiftman – and in his case the genre demands that we do not see him at work. Yet by its

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30 America’s working class is, perhaps, more likely to feature in comedy than soap opera. This is visible in shows such as *The Simpsons, King of the Hill* and *Married with Children*. 
insistence the programme manages so well to *seem* to be about the working class that even such obviously bourgeois characters as Mike Baldwin are seen as deviant members of the working class, rather than as members of another fraction (Jordan 1981: 31).

It can also be said that while British and Irish soap operas may portray more of working class life than their American counterparts, this is by no means an anti-commercial position. Viewers from all class positions, and many nationalities, tune-in in their millions to watch *Coronation Street* (Falvey in *The Irish Times* 2 December 2000). British and Irish viewers appear to prefer the 'down-to-earth' and everyday nature of indigenous soap operas (O’Connor 1990: 15; Livingstone 1988: 64).\(^{31}\)

**Who Watches Soap Opera?**

Traditionally, soap opera audiences have been regarded to be mainly female. Most past studies have concentrated on female viewers and their uses of soap opera\(^{32}\) (see Brundson 2000; Brown 1994; Dyer et al. 1981; Hobson 1982; Livingstone 1988).

Early views of radio soap opera audiences, as described by Buckingham, saw the genre as a means of escape for socially isolated housewives.

The typical listener was identified as a lower-class housewife who used the soaps as a means of escape from her isolation in the home and as a source of advice on her emotional problems. Her lack of understanding of the complexities of adult life led her to mistake the fantasy world of the soap operas for reality. Listeners with more discriminating perspectives and with a wider range of experience were, it was argued, less likely to be satisfied with the stereotyped characters and situations which soaps provided (Buckingham 1987: 5).

This view of the soap opera audience has not changed much in recent years. Many critics today see the typical soap opera viewer as being incapable of discriminating between fact and fiction. They are the type of person who will try to apply for a job at the *Crossroads* motel or be surprised that the Catholic Church permitted *The*  

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\(^{31}\) This was supported by market research, preceding the creation of *EastEnders*, which showed a majority of viewers to prefer a working class setting for a proposed soap opera (Buckingham 1987: 13).
Riordans’ Fr. Sheehy to advertise washing machines in his spare time (Buckingham 1987: 5; Burrowes 1977: 17; see also Gibbons 1996: 62). Buckingham warns that this ‘identikit picture’ of the soap opera audience is false in many ways. While acknowledging that women and the working class dominate it, he claims it is more socially mixed than expected.

Even in the case of radio soaps in the early 1940s, a significant proportion of the audience was middle-class and in more recent times, it has become increasingly representative of the population as a whole, including larger numbers of men and young people in particular. In many ways it is dangerous to generalise about the demographic composition of soap opera audiences, without at least making distinctions between different types of soap opera (Buckingham 1987: 5).

That soap opera audiences are becoming more heterogeneous is evident in the inclusion of more young characters and strong male characters in soap operas like Fair City. Despite this, soap opera audiences remain female for the most part.

In the period from 28 August 2000 to 15 February 2001, Fair City had an average audience of 540,000 adult viewers (over 15). On an average day, 63% of all adults viewing were women. Six in ten audience members were over 35 years of age. More than one third of the audience was over 55 years of age. The majority of the audience, just over half came, from a skilled or unskilled working class background. One third had middle class or upper middle class backgrounds, while one fifth had farming backgrounds (RTÉ Audience Research Department). Fair City, like the

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32 These have concentrated on soap opera as a pleasurable weapon against, or anaesthetic to, patriarchal power.
33 Burrowes recounted this comment. A viewer had failed to make the distinction between Tony Doyle, the actor, and his Riordans character, Fr. Sheehy.
34 Dyer has speculated that is because there is a greater ‘need for women to see themselves mirrored in society’s representations than for men due to women's marginality in political, economic and power structures’ (Dyer et al. 1993: 37).
35 Women and older people are overrepresented in the Fair City audience compared with the composition of Ireland’s population. Just over 50 per cent of Irish people are women while only 20 per cent are over 55 years of age (www.cso.ie).
36 RTÉ audience research figures are compiled using the AC Nielsen ‘peoplemeter’ system.
majority of soap operas has, then, a predominantly female audience, which is also mostly middle aged and working class.

**Why do People Watch Soap Opera?**
There is no simple answer to why people watch a programme like *Fair City*. Past studies, however, have identified a number of social and psychological roles which soap opera fulfils. It is necessary to explain these to gain a better understanding of how audiences use soap opera and, more importantly, how producers of soap opera view their audience. Unsurprisingly, the chief reason that research respondents give for watching soap opera is escapism and entertainment (Livingstone 1988: 66; O’Connor 1990: 15). For most commentators, however, the fact that people watch soap opera because they enjoy it cannot be taken at face value. The cultural studies tradition has concentrated on the concept of ‘pleasure’, which is seen as a complex socially located phenomenon. It is most frequently discussed in the context of gender and social class (Brown 1994: 168–9; Tulloch 2000: 61–9; Fiske 1987: 314–5; see Philo and Miller 2001: 58–9). The concept of pleasure is central here. It is the source of much of the value, and most of the shortcomings, of the cultural studies approach to soap opera.

**Soap Opera as Part of Everyday Life**
Soap operas are broadcast in regular weekday slots. They may act as part of a regular and sometimes reassuring daily habit. Viewers often structure their use of time around soap operas. This is evident in Hobson’s research where women reported changing their daily routines, such as their mealtimes, to catch *Crossroads* in a changed slot (1982: 103). As Hobson reveals habitual soap opera watching is not accidental.

Of course, it must be realized that television companies do set out to create the habit of viewing at a certain time. The fixing of certain blocks of the schedule
is to catch the audience and fix the viewing ‘habit’ in the hope of holding the audience for the evening (Hobson 1982: 116).

As part of an everyday routine then soap opera may get built into a sense of security and normality for viewers. Livingstone has asked whether ‘viewing such involving and dramatic lives enhances the experience of one’s own world as mundane by contrast, thereby increasing the desire to view soap opera (1988: 67–8). This implies a risk of soap opera ‘addiction’, which Hatherell sees as a key aim for Fair City (2001: 14). The ‘routine’ of soap opera watching is also cemented by the social roles that soap opera may serve. It may serve as a form of knowledge or ‘cultural capital’ and, in turn, be a means of building and maintaining a network of social relations (Bourdieu 1986: 243; Brown 1994). Viewers find pleasure in commentating on soap opera. A degree of expertise in the conventions and history of a soap opera can be built up through years of viewing. This knowledge can be the basis of conversations, catching up on recent episodes, discussing episodes in the distant past and speculating on future developments (Geraghty 1981: 25). One of Livingstone’s respondents commented that ‘soaps give you something else to talk about to friends instead of the weather or the Government or sports’ (1988: 73). For Livingstone ‘this is important in relation to the social construction of reality’. Talking about events portrayed can serve several functions. Viewers may demonstrate opinions, check and explore ‘differences in perception or judgement’ and share experiences. Perhaps most importantly soap opera commentary can be used for ‘demonstrating consensus or normality, cueing discussion of significant issues or providing a safe and convenient forum for such discussions’ (1988: 73). As stated at the outset Kay McCoy’s abortion was one such ‘safe and convenient forum’. As we will see, however, most commentators have concentrated on personal issues avoiding institutional politics.
Soap Opera as an Ersatz Community
Soap operas allow viewers to look into other private lives and to vicariously inhabit alternative communities. As Hobson writes, they create ‘the illusion that the characters and the location exist and continue to exist whether the viewers are there or not’ (Hobson 1982: 33). A majority of viewers in Livingstone’s research felt they could establish some relationship with characters. Livingstone recorded these relationships in varying strengths. The weakest form of relationship was described as ‘relating’ to a character. For example, a viewer might say that a character strongly reminded them of somebody. The long-term nature of soap opera allows viewers to build strong relationships with soap opera characters. Livingstone argues that only soap opera can offer presentations of characters over a period of years. Accordingly she says that ‘one should expect far greater involvement and concern for soap opera characters than for other television characters’. It is likely then that ‘seeing one’s favourite characters, or the character one identifies with, adopt a particular moral stance or engage in certain social actions’ will have a greater effect (1988: 70). Livingstone reports that in some cases viewers may feel themselves to be part of a soap opera world. One of her respondents provided an example of this.

It is possible to identify with many of the characters, to see families on screen suffering trauma, going through happy times, illness, bereavement and all the situations that combine to make up life, it gives you a feeling of belonging, of not being the only one that has to face up to the everyday tensions (Livingstone 1988: 71).

Soap operas provide an emotional experience. According to Livingstone this emotional experience ‘provides the “hook” that keeps one watching, the involvement that makes one care about events and characters and the arousal that makes one feel that the whole experience matters’ (Livingstone 1988: 73). Fair City stories must also be emotional stories (Hatherell 2001: 14–17). Qualitative audience research for Fair
City saw emotion as the ‘hook’ that can create addiction (Hatherell 2002: 14). As later analysis reveals, the need for emotion, and emotion of the right kind and intensity, may obfuscate the inclusion of certain social issues (see Chapter Nine).

Soap Opera’s Portrayal of Reality
As mentioned earlier, British and Irish soap opera draw heavily on ‘social realism’.

There is, however, a peculiar form of ‘soap opera realism’ (Jordan 1981: 27). To describe this we must initially recognise how soap opera negotiates the division between public and private life. Feuer describes this:

The dominant binary opposition informing television’s representational practices is that of inside the family/outside the family. Both the episodic series and the continuing serial have as their ‘irresolvable’ cultural contradiction the need to explain factors which in reality are ‘outside’ in terms of the ‘inside’. For television, both the economic and the socio-political cannot be thought of except in terms of ‘inside the family’ – an impossible dilemma (Feuer 1986: 495).

It is debatable that all television addresses the ‘outside’ only through the ‘inside’. Recent dramas, such as the RTÉ commissioned No Tears and Channel 4’s one-off play, Dockers have demonstrated that private lives and global economic processes can be united within a television drama.37 It is undeniable however that soap operas do deal mainly with the ‘inside’. Jordan points out that Coronation Street, for example, excludes any phenomenon that cannot be seen to be caused by personalities who are plausibly present in the community or the home.

This means, in effect, that most social explanations, and all openly political ones, are omitted. The differing situations, the troubles or successes, of the

37 No Tears dealt with a scandal over contaminated blood supplied by the state-run Blood Transfusion Services Board (BTSB). The programme dealt not only with the lives of the victims and their families but simultaneously showed the work of doctors, scientists and politicians involved at higher levels. Michael Noonan, who was Minister for Health at the time of the scandal, described the series as ‘legally risky’ because of its fictional portrayal of the Minister (Dundon in The Irish Examiner 28 January 2002). It was the sixth most watched programme in January 2002 (www.medialive.ie). Dockers dealt with the long running Dockers’ strike in Liverpool. The scope of this drama ranged from the personal and familial effects of the strike up to the role of government and trade unions and on to the international organisation of labour organisations.
various characters are explained largely in terms of their (innate) psychological make-up, occasionally attributed to luck (Jordan 1981: 29).

Jordan has further pointed out that these narrative omissions, a characteristic of soap opera realism, only become clear to viewers when there is an attempt to remedy them. When *Coronation Street* took up the issue of unemployment, one became ‘uncomfortably aware that the attempt to treat this in the personal terms which are all that the genre allows is inadequate’ (Jordan 1981: 33). As we will see *Fair City* also has problems portraying such issues. The reasons behind this, however, are many and varied.

Another omission becomes clear when Hobson notes that real world events are often included in soap opera scripts. She describes how the wedding of Prince Charles and Princess Diana was included in the script of *Crossroads*. This was a slight production risk, given that the show was recorded three weeks in advance. If the wedding had been cancelled for some reason there would have been a production disaster. Hobson says that, despite such risks, producers do ‘take a chance and include such references whenever possible, to add to the reality of the series (Hobson 1982: 34). It is interesting, however, that less picturesque real world events such as conflict in Northern Ireland, for example, have gone unmentioned by the everyday ‘reality’ of *Coronation Street* (Jordan 1981: 33). The ability of the soap opera form to mirror reality is limited. It is not initially clear to what extent producers are aware of how soap opera realism may limit their representation of everyday life. It is questionable, however, whether Julia Smith, producer of *EastEnders*, was being ironic when she said:

> We decided to go for a realistic, fairly outspoken type of drama which could encompass stories about homosexuals, rape, unemployment, racial prejudice, etc. in a believable context. Above all, we wanted realism. Unemployment, exams, racism, birth, death, dogs, babies, unmarried mums – we didn’t want to
fudge any issue except politics and swearing (Julia Smith in Buckingham 1987: 16).

Jordan claims that soap opera realism, like any form of realism, is not about loyalty to reality but about ‘fidelity to a moral idea’. In this light, she says, *Coronation Street* appears to be Victorian in the sense that ‘its most notable self-perpetuating convention is a reiterated demonstration of a belief in the fundamental warm-heartedness and solidarity of the industrial northern working classes’ (Jordan 1981: 29). Such caricatures of groups and individuals are a common trait of soap opera realism (Jordan 1981: 37). As Hobson points out if *Coronation Street* had been portraying the reality of northern England in the 1970s and 1980s, rather than a parallel ideal, there might have been ‘at least one black family living on the street’ (1982: 32). Similarly, the production pressures that shape *Fair City* give rise to a form of ‘*Fair City* reality’ where certain stories fit into the programmes ‘ethos’ and others do not. Finally Jordan argues that programmes like *Coronation Street* are not trying to pass off soap opera realism as reality. They are instead to be treated as a pleasant artifice (see Jordan 1981: 39). However, this pleasant artifice may become damaging when it dominates television drama as a source of discussion and debate in society.

**Patriarchy, Pleasure and Soap Opera’s ‘Strong Women’**

Many commentators see that the form and content of soap opera is oriented predominantly towards pleasing a female audience mainly through the prevalence of strong female characters. Hobson argues that part of the popularity of soap opera lies in its traditionally portraying a range of strong women. Soap operas ‘show women of

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38 Fair City’s producers described the unwritten rules and conventions of the show as a programme ethos. These unwritten rules for what *Fair City* could and could not say are explored in detail in Chapters Eight to Ten.
different ages, class and personality types, and offer characters with whom many members of their female audience can empathise’. Male characters, she notes, generally do not occupy central roles. They often feature as a ‘romantic interest, sometimes as comic characters or “bad” characters’ (1982: 33). Part of the pleasure for women watching soap opera then is that its characters defy patriarchal social stereotypes.

Here the analysis of soap opera pleasure can become complicated. Jordan argues, for example, that the strong women of soap opera are themselves stereotypes. Through their use of social realism British and Irish soap operas easily accommodate the portrayal of resilient working class women. Soap operas depend on easy characterisation where characters can be quickly and easily read. This frequently leads to the use of stereotypes. Jordan sees that this may be the case with soap opera matriarchs ‘since working-class women have stereotypically been allowed to be much stronger characters than their middle-class equivalents’ (1981: 32). As such, then, the strong women of soap opera may not present a strong ideological challenge to a patriarchal status quo.

Soap opera may perform the opposite ideological function by validating a woman’s life in the home, excluded from public life. As Hobson observes, soap operas are chiefly about ‘the problems of everyday personal life and personal relationships’ (Hobson 1982: 34). Soap opera may make viewers happier because ‘when their own problems are portrayed they can enter a community of others who, through experiencing the same problem, can be imagined as understanding and validating the viewer’s own experience’ (Livingstone 1988: 56). While British and Irish soap operas represent working class life, albeit in a highly stylised fashion,

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39 Jordan refers to a view where working class women must be resilient in the face of inevitable exploitation and disadvantage.
according to Hobson they ‘cut across classes by sharing with their predominantly female audience the problems which are experienced by women whatever their age or class’ (1982: 34). Hobson sees soap opera as a progressive form for women (1982: 35). Lovell claims that soap opera provides ‘the pleasures of validation, and of self-assertion’. For her this explains, in large part, soap opera’s popularity with women (Lovell 1981: 51). It is possible, however, to see soap opera as a form of patriarchal ‘bread and circuses’.

By its very nature it does have to validate positively what women are and achieve in the sphere of the world to which they are confined— that is, soap opera validates relationships; it is not about social structures, material realists, physical strength, dramas of career and struggles for power (Dyer et al. 1993: 37).

Soap opera may then encourage the acceptance of female social exclusion, denying possibilities for change. Despite this, Lovell sees that ‘this is still an important extension of the range of imagery which is offered to women within popular forms’ (1981: 52). Also the pleasures of soap opera, according to Lovell, are, reflective and double-edged. In an analysis of Coronation Street she notes that:

It offers women a validation and celebration of those interests and concerns which are seen as properly theirs within the social world they inhabit. Soap opera may be the opium of the masses of women… it may also be… a context in which women can ambiguously express both good humoured acceptance of their oppression and recognition of that oppression, and some equally good-humoured protest against it (Lovell 1981: 51).

The pleasures of soap opera then are seen to be complex and loaded with gender politics. However, the emphasis on the ‘strong women’ of soap opera as a source of pleasure may fall foul of a curse affecting much content analysis. This lies in an assumption that analysts’ perceptions match those of the audience (see Eco 1995: 122). This is particularly important in the case of soap opera where audiences and analysts are more likely to be from different class backgrounds. Livingstone has
cautioned that while much attention is paid to strong female characters, few of her research respondents consciously thought that this was something which attracted them to soap opera. It did not seem ‘to be an explicit source of pleasure for viewers to see women thus represented’. Livingstone notes that women may appreciate the ‘realism’ of female characters but ‘this begs the question that viewers’ perceive the “realistic” female characters as those same strong and independent figures that commentators find salient’ (Livingstone 1988: 77). It could be noted for example that one of the most popular characters on Fair City in recent years was Billy Meehan (see Kearney in The Irish Times 15 December 2001). Meehan was a criminal thug who beat his pregnant girlfriend so badly that she miscarried. While viewers did not identify with him, he provided intense dramatic conflict. He demonstrated clearly that soap opera is more than a simple vehicle for strong female characters.

A Conflict between Patriarchy and Profit
Sheehan comments that American daytime dramas commonly featured themes like ‘marital breakdown, frigidity, extramarital sex, alcoholism, professional malpractice’.

She argues that they did so however within ‘tightly circumscribed boundaries’.

Although these serials featured many transgressions of traditional values, it was unthinkable to question those values. Whatever problems and pitfalls characters encountered in their pursuit of the American dream, they never ceased to believe in it. Their tragedies were due to natural disasters or human failings, but there was nothing wrong with God, marriage, motherhood, apple pie or the American way (Sheehan 1993 http://www.comms.dcu.ie/sheehanh/itvsoap.htm).

Sheehan sees that these shows represented a ‘conservative form produced by an extremely conservative and confident society’ (Sheehan 1993 http://www.comms.dcu.ie/sheehanh/itvsoap.htm). It is tempting to see that soap operas may reinforce patriarchy as well as the values of capitalist ideology as part of a dominant ideology (Brown 1994: 6–10). The commercial logic of soap opera,
however, contradicts this. Soap operas are ostensibly about ‘the family’. The drama of soap opera, however, requires that families are constantly rent asunder and reconstituted in different forms. Soap opera’s representation of the family is a chimera.

Much of the skill of the programme (and of the success of the genre) can be seen in the way in which it omits what is sociologically the normative grouping of mother, father, two children, while still managing to assert that it is just about such groups (Jordan 1981: 32).

Soap reinforces the idea that it is about family with its conversations over kitchen tables and the predominance of intimate indoor scenes. According to Lovell, Bill Podmore, a Coronation Street producer saw the marriage of two characters, Len and Rita Fairclough, as a problem. Marriage, Lovell reports, was seen to diminish a character. The marriage of the two characters was not so much a narrative closure as a problem to be resolved (Lovell 1981: 47). The problem was eventually solved when Rita left home. Soap opera cannot exist if it is based on stable, happy families. Lovell makes this clear taking Coronation Street as an example.

In a sense, the conventions of the genre are such that the normal order of things in Coronation Street is precisely that of broken marriages, temporary liaisons, availability for ‘lasting’ romantic love which in fact never lasts. This order, the reverse of the patriarchal norm, is in a sense interrupted by the marriage and ‘happy family’ interludes, rather than vice-versa (Lovell 1981: 50).

Soap opera, then, cannot offer simultaneous support for capitalism and patriarchy. Existing soap opera forms depend on audience ratings for their survival even among public service broadcasters (see Buckingham 1987: 2–3). It is an inherent ideological contradiction of this ‘conservative’ genre that it not only offers visions of life outside of a patriarchal orthodoxy but that it must do so to survive. As we will see, Fair City,

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40 It may be as Jordan suggests that the real ‘families’ in soap opera are the communities they represent (Jordan 1981: 25).
like all soap operas, depends on the creative destruction of families, romances and friendships. Otherwise there is no drama and no audience.

**The Politics of Pleasure**
The literature on soap opera is notably marked by the influence of the cultural studies tradition originating in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham (see Harris 1992: ix). The CCCS adopted a Gramscian perspective, which sees social order in capitalist societies not as a simple top-down form of physical and cultural domination but as a space of contest between competing cultural forces (Harris 1992; Bennett 1994: 225). In this view, social élites control society not by pure coercion but by leading people to believe that an existing social hierarchy is natural and compatible with their own interests (Gramsci 1994: 215; Brown 1994: 3–5; Bocock 1986: 32–3). Social control depends on a supportive ‘common sense’; accordingly the CCCS stressed the political nature of everyday cultural practices. Displaying their academic lineage, many soap opera studies address the genre as a site of political struggle.

After the Second World War, Britain witnessed a resurgence in conservative politics and culture particularly among the British working class (Carnie 2002: 4). Carnie sees that this undermined ‘traditional Marxist assumptions about the working class’ and ‘questioned the traditional Left’s exclusive reliance on political and economic categories’ (Carnie 2002: 5). This coincided with a turn in British Marxism away from traditional economic concerns towards cultural matters.

The privileged place that political economy traditionally has had within classical Marxism and that gave Marxism its revolutionary character has been displaced by culturalist accounts of the reproduction of capitalist social relations that increasingly divorce critical practice from political activity (Bell 1995: 73).
Thus, much of the politics of the CCCS, and the soap opera literature it inspired has concentrated not on ‘concrete’ questions of economics, employment and so on, but on questions of cultural domination and resistance. Here politics is understood to relate to language, culture and personal choices rather than public policy or the democratic process. Studies have found soap opera to be political in a number of respects but ‘pleasure’ is the nexus through which the political characteristics of soap opera are united. Although the ‘politics of pleasure’ has predominated in the study of soap opera, as we will see, it has a number of shortcomings.

Initially, many commentators perceive that soap opera’s popularity marks it out politically as a site of cultural resistance. It is seen to be part of the culture of common people, particularly working class women, standing in opposition to elitist ‘high’ culture (Fiske 1997: 19; Brown 1994: 5; Philo and Miller 2001: 55). As we have seen the genre is thought to empower women, in many cases, in resistance against patriarchal oppression. Brown, for example, argues that women’s discussion of soap opera is an intrinsic part of the pleasure it provides. She holds that such discussions, and the informal groups they form, can create consciousness of, and solidarity against, patriarchal pressures (Brown 1994: 179). Similarly, Ang finds that soap operas allow women to fantasise. This, in her view, makes the genre an important site of emancipation and empowerment for women. Fantasy allows women to escape the limited ‘subject positions’ imposed upon them by capitalism and patriarchy by ‘trying out’ alternative identities (Ang 1985: 134; Ang 1990).

Many commentators see the way in which audiences watch and interpret soap operas as another source of political activity. Viewers can resist the ‘preferred readings’, the messages which producers intend to get across, through acts of ‘semiotic guerrilla warfare’ (Eco 1995: 135–44). That is to say, they can use their
own linguistic or symbolic resources to negate messages of cultural domination by adapting a programme’s meaning to their own social background. This subversion of intended meanings is again seen to be a source of politically significant pleasure. It is possible, however, that the political power of audience agency has been overestimated. Brown has gone as far as to describe audiences laughing at soap opera as a form of political resistance. She found that ‘women in soap opera groups have a space to experience great joy through laughter at both soap opera’s excessive portrayal of women and the excessiveness of the contradictions in women’s actual lives’. Their ‘raucous laughter’ became a ‘transgressive act’. In this way women ‘speak with their bodies’ in a ‘tangible experience of their resistive pleasure’ (Brown 1994: 177). Here the political potency of ‘pleasure’ may be questionable.

The Problems with the Politics of Pleasure
The Gramscian perspective stresses that resistive cultures may be assimilated by dominant cultures neutralising their effectiveness as forces of opposition. The cultural studies tradition has stressed female pleasure as a form of resistance. Ironically it overlooks the fact that this has long been a feature of the culture industries, particularly advertising. Harris mentions a marketing study attempting to ‘construct the modern shopping mall as a public place for the new woman’ that focused ‘on her body as a site of pleasure’. Cultural studies, he argues, have simply attempted a normative inversion of consumerism claiming that it is a type of ‘proto-resistance’ (Harris 1992: 14; see also Philo and Miller 2001: 68–9). Women are apparently empowered by their guilty viewing of soap opera, which is seen as trash, because they are resisting patriarchal judgements. In this ‘transgressive act’ they carve out a space that is their own. It grants an exclusive feminine pleasure. The same logic is currently applied to the promotion of cigarettes. Moog points out that
when the tobacco industry goes hunting for women today its weapons are promises of ‘pleasure and freedom’. Smoking, like soap opera, permits the pursuit of pleasure and a transgression of traditional gender roles without any real change in gender equality. It is possible that the liberating effect of soap opera, like that of cigarettes, may be more perceived than actual.

Cultural studies, most notably through Stuart Hall, has stressed the ability of audience members to actively construct rather than passively receive media messages (see Hall 1980). This recognises and explains that mass communications takes place between cultures and sub-cultures. It also avoids dehumanising audience members as ‘cultural dopes’. However, many studies have now turned their backs on media content and production to focus exclusively on how audiences create their own media messages. This overemphasis on the audience’s freedom of interpretation is highly problematic. While it is supposed to be a celebration of symbolic resistance many commentators see that it is an academically and politically regressive position.

The project of reception study, in the illuminating early work of David Morley, had been developed precisely to refine the understanding of ideological influence by attention to specific media treatments and the forms of viewer response to them. The irony is that this was then followed by a ‘turn to ethnography’ in which many protagonists pursued what was in effect an ‘anti-power’ thesis, not so much a revision as a rejection of the idea of the media as agencies of political and social influence (Corner 2001: 155).

Philo and Miller protest that ‘issues of truth have been treated as passé in favour of speculation about the possible meaning of texts. The focus of study moved to the generation of meaning rather than the content of media and its possible relation

to audience beliefs’ (2001: 38). If we assume that audiences can re-fashion media products to suit their needs and desires then producers are relieved of any obligation to produce varied, innovative or representative programming. This approach also glosses over any potential role for soap opera in disseminating information. Audiences cannot take away information or ideas about an issue such as abortion, for example, if it simply does not feature in a programme. Irish soap opera has been significant in creating debate around contentious social issues. If programmes like *The Riordans* and *Fair City* did not raise issues such as birth control the audience could not have simply read them into the programme. Viewers can re-interpret or reject what television puts before them. They cannot, however, infuse programmes with information which they are unaware of and which programmes do not present.

A similar position is represented by the tendency to celebrate the fact that soap opera audiences valorise what is often denounced as ‘trash’. This can be seen as resistance to élite culture. It is also true, however, that commercial media producers are unlikely to disagree with this since it legitimates the production and recycling of such programmes. Philo and Miller see that there is a ‘fateful confusion in the work of populists’. They ‘confuse people’s culture with the products provided by capitalist corporations’ (Philo and Miller 2001: 56). The celebration of the popular is necessarily underpinned by an assumption that people make free choices about the cultural products that they identify with. Here, the free market ideal is applied to the cultural sphere. Free market ideas, however, are difficult to apply to broadcasting because broadcasting is supply-side led (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 1999: 203). In television tastes and preferences are led by what production makes available and not by what consumers want. Those who celebrate the popular and
valorise the viewing of ‘trash’ as acts of resistance argue the same line as the controllers of global media conglomerates.

For the exponents of consumer culture and those who celebrate the ‘popular’ there are two key assumptions: first that there are no means of establishing cultural value and, second, that popular culture is seen to emerge from below. It is apparently not imposed from above, nor do the cultural industries appear to have much to do with the formation and transformation of beliefs, tastes or values. Here we see a regurgitation of the official myth of the cultural industries that they simply follow public tastes (Philo and Miller 2001: 55).

Rupert Murdoch insists, for example, that his sensationalist newspapers and television programmes give the people what they want. They offer an alternative to the stuffy élite culture of public service broadcasting and broadsheet newspapers. The owners and controllers of global media conglomerates, like Murdoch, have no conflict of interest with the ‘relativism’ or ‘populism’ of cultural studies. They too insist that common people know what they want.

Many writers on soap opera celebrate the ability of audience members, particularly the ability of women, to understand and critique soap opera. It appears excessive, and patronising, however, to celebrate the fact that people employ their basic human faculties and have not abandoned them entirely to television. This again is a conservative position. The ‘resistance’ celebrated by such writers is not only a basic attribute of being human but it is also largely politically insignificant. Philo and Miller argue that, what are dignified as, acts of resistance are often trivial (2001: 56). Gitlin offers a scathing critique of the glorification of cultural consumption.

Resistance, meaning all sorts of grumbling, multiple interpretation, semiological inversion, pleasure, rage, friction, numbness, what have you—‘resistance’ is accorded dignity, even glory, by stamping these not so great refusals with a vocabulary derived from life-threatening work against fascism—as if the same concept should serve for the Chinese student uprising and cable TV grazing (Gitlin 1991: 336).

Moreover the use of the term politics implies conscious and willed competition over ideas and actions (see Garnham 1993: 179). It is unknown to what extent audiences
are aware of challenging patriarchy by laughing at Coronation Street for example. As Livingstone points out audience interpretations and intentions may differ widely from those attributed to them by researchers.

**Avoiding the ‘Masculine’ Public Sphere**
The cultural studies approach to soap opera overlooks the genre’s relation to public issues. Issues such as gender equality in employment and pay, for example, are passed over because of an almost exclusive concern with how women are portrayed and perceived. Again, this marks a conservative position by engaging with cultural aspects of gender but failing to address the physical and economic conditions to which they are connected. Culture is the paramount concern but political and economic relations are ignored. This, it could be argued, suggests an aloof position that requires a privileged distance from material necessity and temporal concerns.

Since most of the commentary on soap opera has come from a feminist perspective there has been a tendency to concentrate on female audience experience. This has concentrated on women’s role in the private sphere. There has been a concentration on the ‘popular’, as the voice of the oppressed, rather than the ‘public’, which is seen to suggest a totalising hegemony.

Feminist scholars… have often found it more congenial to work from a sense of the ‘popular’, whichever direction they then may wish to pursue, than relate their work to the idea of the ‘public’. They have found discussion of this idea both within the media industry and outside to be framed within masculine terms (Corner 2001: 156).

Public life has been overlooked by most soap opera studies. Soap opera is seen to be significant in a personal political sense but is not regarded to have any potential to affect public life and politics. A concentration on pleasure and the avoidance of public issues has left the social role of soap opera unclear. As discussed in Chapter One soap opera has provoked considerable debate on public issues in Ireland. Kay
McCoy’s abortion is one recent high-profile example. This begs questions as to the nature of soap opera’s potential contribution to public life. These questions, however, have not been answered or addressed by the dominant cultural studies approach to the genre. While soap opera is watched privately it informs public discussion and debate. It is therefore important that the analysis of the genre move beyond the living room into the public sphere.
Chapter Three

Soap Opera and the Public Sphere

To understand soap opera in public life one must move beyond the ‘politics of pleasure’ explored by former studies. I will explore soap opera by using Habermas’s concept of the public sphere to clarify the relationship between soap opera, discussion and debate in a democratic society. However, the traditional view of the public sphere, which overlooks entertainment in public life, needs to be adjusted. The public sphere needs to be understood not only in terms of factual rational debate but also in terms of impressions, emotions and imagination. Breaking with former studies I will argue that to begin to understand the potential contribution that Fair City can make to public life it is necessary to look not at the audience, but at production. Thus we can understand what Fair City can and cannot announce before an Irish audience.

Reality Television?
As early as the 1970s, Mander insisted that television’s ‘inherently believable’ images have in many cases begun to replace real experience. He argues that in a single generation, America has ‘become the first culture to have substituted secondary, mediated versions of experience for direct experience of the world’. He holds that ‘interpretations and representations’ are now accepted as experience, and the difference between the two is obscure to most people (Mander 1978: 24). Other commentators have noted the rise of the visual as a primary source of knowledge and experience in contemporary societies. Tulloch refers to a ‘visual epistemology’ where, knowledge and experience collapse into visual perception. Seeing becomes the dominant means of knowing and experiencing (Tulloch 1990: 121). Baudrillard takes this position to extremes, where images not only replace experience but the two
collapse upon each other becoming indistinguishable. Finally the real is replaced by
the image (Baudrillard 1994: 363). Beyond the image, Baudrillard claims, there is no
truth and no objective social reality (1996: 5).

The ‘reality’ of television is politically significant because it can affect
perceptions of society. Gerbner et al. see that television, particularly entertainment,
has become the ‘primary common source of socialization and everyday information’
for otherwise mixed populations (1994: 18). Their longitudinal research indicates that
heavy viewers\footnote{According to Gerbner et al. “Television viewing is usually assessed by multiple indicators of the
amount of time respondents watch television on an “average day.” Because the amount of viewing is
used in relative terms, the determination of what constitutes “light,” “medium,” and “heavy” viewing is}
are more likely to have a view of reality that agrees with that
portrayed by television. They find that it is the pattern of ‘settings, casting, social
typing, actions, and related outcomes that cuts across program types and viewing
modes’ that ‘defines the world of television’ (1994: 20). This leads to a process of
‘mainstreaming’ where divergent opinions and cultures become blurred by the
common socialising role of television. Thus, they write, ‘television may have become
the true 20th century “melting pot” of the American people–and increasingly of other
countries around the globe’ (Gerbner et al. 1994: 28). Heavy viewers’ perceptions of
older people are one example of this ‘cultivation’ effect.

For example, we found that television drama tends to sharply underrepresent
older people. Although those over 65 constitute the fastest growing segment
of the real-world population in the United States, heavy viewers were more
likely to feel the elderly are a “vanishing breed”–that compared to 20 years
ago there are fewer of them, that they are in worse health, and they don’t live
as long–all contrary to fact (Gerbner et al. 1994: 29).

Similar results were found in relation to violence. Ubiquitous television violence was
found to cultivate a ‘conception of reality in which greater protection is needed, most
people “cannot be trusted,” and most people are “just looking out for themselves”
Gerbner’s position, however, cannot be accepted uncritically. Defleur and Ball-Rokeach have questioned the ‘cultivation’ approach on methodological grounds. They point out that cultivation research has used a ‘forced choice’ questionnaire method. Respondents have, thus, had to choose the answer that they find least objectionable rather than one that truly reflects their worldview (1989: 263). They also point out that the cultivation model largely ignores external factors. They argue that levels of crime in a neighbourhood, for example, are more likely to shape fears and attitudes than television (Defleur and Ball-Rokeach 1989: 263). The cultivation model then may overlook the role of everyday experience in tempering media messages and in shaping our view of social reality.

This relates to, what is perhaps, the most damning criticism of the cultivation model. It ignores the power of viewers to create personal and frequently resistive readings of television programmes. This has been demonstrated repeatedly through research. One example is to be found in Nolan’s audience research on Orange, Green and Yellow. This was a documentary attempting to reconcile differences across Northern Ireland’s sectarian divide (see Nolan 1997: 107). Despite the integrative intentions of the programme makers, viewers formed resistive and opposing readings informed by nationalist and unionist ‘dominant ideologies’. This, Nolan points out, is contrary to ‘cultivation’ research claims that television absorbs and homogenises ‘people with otherwise diverse orientations’ (1997: 119). It appears then that the cultivation approach may overlook the audience’s capacity to resist and subvert messages deliberately encoded into a programme text. The cultivation approach is made on a sample-by-sample basis, using as close to an even three-way split of hours of daily television viewing as possible (Gerbner et al. 1994: 26).
accused of seeing the audience to be passive in the face of ‘mainstreaming’ television messages. It has been repeatedly demonstrated, however, that audiences are highly active in their choice and interpretation of television programmes (see Kelly 1997: 24–35; O’Connor 1997: 70–4; Nolan 107–26; Eco 1995).

Writing in 2002, however, Gerbner et al. claimed that the cultivation approach has itself been misread in the context of other research paradigms. They claim not to ‘minimize the importance of specific programs, selective attention and perception’. Nor do they overlook ‘specifically targeted communications, individual and group differences, and research on individual attitude and behavioural change’. They argue, however, that ‘giving primary attention to those aspects and terms of traditional media effects research risks losing sight of what is most distinctive and significant about television as the common storyteller of our age’ (Gerbner et al. 2002: 44). Gerbner et al. do not dispute the contentions of ‘active audience’ research, accepting that ‘the polysemy of mediated texts is well established’ (Gerbner et al. 2002: 49). They also point out that:

From the cultivation perspective, though, to say that audiences’ interactions with media texts can produce enormous diversity and complexity does not negate that there can be important commonalities and consistencies as well across large bodies of media output (Gerbner et al. 2002: 49).

Cultivation research accepts then that people use, see and understand television programmes differently. However, rather than asking audience members what they think of television programmes in general or in particular cultivation research ‘looks at exposure to massive flows or messages over long periods of time’.

The cultivation process takes place in the interaction of the viewer with the message; neither the message nor the viewer are all-powerful. In a sense, cultivation looks at the “master text” composed of the enduring, resilient, and residual core that is left over when all the particular individual and program-specific differences cancel each other out (Gerbner et al. 2002: 48).
The cultivation model does not see messages being foisted upon the audience but rather ‘a continual, dynamic, ongoing process of interaction among message, audiences, and contexts’ (Gerbner et al. 2002: 49).

Gerbner et al. concede that ‘mainstreaming’ may not be a universally strong phenomenon. This is because international media may not be as ‘stable, coherent and homogeneous’ as those in the United States (Gerbner et al. 2002: 58). The degree of ‘mainstreaming’ that is likely to occur will depend on the level of diversity present in a national media system (Gerbner et al. 2002: 61). It must be noted, however, that increased commercialisation of media is likely to give rise to greater levels of ‘mainstreaming’.

The privatisation of former public service broadcast systems around the world and the march toward globalization in programming, distribution and marketing together make the need for international cultivation analysis more critical than ever (Gerber et al. 2002: 60).

Possibilities for international mainstreaming are magnified by new media technologies. Digital signal compression is currently leading to an explosion in the number of available channels. New channels, however, are being filled from an ever-narrowing production base. Gerbner et al. point out that this process of commercialisation is likely to decrease the diversity of representations made available in society through the media. They note that one consequence, for example, of ‘the monopoly of market orientation’ is the ‘absence of poor (i.e., low-income) characters and of diverse ideological (i.e., political, religious) orientations’ (Gerbner et al. 2002: 61). Echoing this in an Irish context, Kelly has noted that coverage of the poor tends to be omitted from media coverage particularly in news and current affairs. This, she holds, is partly due to ‘the predominance of a particular type of economic comment… a very strong economistic orientation… accepted and propounded by central political, economic and academic elites in our society’ (Kelly 1984: 7). As commercialisation
and the concentration of media power increase concerns with the mainstreaming effect of television become more salient. It is possible that the dominance of soap opera in international schedules is an example of mainstreaming driven by commercial necessity. Before exploring the expressive limits of the soap opera genre, it is necessary to describe in more detail how soap opera may contribute to public life.

Soap Opera and Citizenship
T.H. Marshall described citizenship in terms of rights and obligations that were political, economic and social (1950: 10–11). Arguably, however, there is more to full membership of today’s society. The choices that citizens make in affairs of the state and the market place are now largely based on information provided by mass media (McQuail 1977: 71; Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht 1995: 144). Increasingly, it is mass media that provide information on politics, consumption and personal development (Inglis 1998a: 111; Chubb 1987: 73). The mass media often misrepresent, or fail to represent at all, less powerful groups in society like the poor or the homeless (Integra Media Forum 2000; Devereux 1998; Kelly 1984). There is growing evidence that traditional inequalities in economic and political power are being replicated in information inequality (see Preston 2001: 212). At a time when social reality is largely mediated, Marshall’s definition of citizenship may be augmented to include the right of groups and individuals to be seen and fairly represented through mass media (see Dahlgren 1995: 137). Television has the potential to expand or reduce the pluralism and diversity of social representation. It has the potential to exclude or more fully include people as members of society. Soap opera is very important in this regard since it possesses unique abilities to publicise social issues and groups that may otherwise go unmentioned.
Information and representation are essential components of citizenship. They are necessary to allow citizens to participate in their democratic rights and duties. However, inclusion and participation in society depend not only on information, but also on information that is universally accessible, relevant and interesting. Television drama, and particularly soap opera, has been demonstrated to create public interest and provide effective information on a range of public issues. Studies, chiefly in South America and Africa, have found soap opera to be an effective means of disseminating public information because it can combine it with entertainment and emotional arousal (Elkamel 1995; Nariman 1993; Singhal and Rogers 1999). While government information campaigns may appear cold and factual, drama can cost-effectively demonstrate the relevance of a given topic to everyday life (see Elkamel 1995: 231).

Soap operas have been considered effective vehicles for public education in developing countries since the late 1970s. In 1976, Mexican national television broadcast *Ven Conmigo*, a soap opera promoting literacy (Elkamel 1995: 226). The same year over 800,000 people registered for literacy classes in the open education system. This was a nine-fold improvement on the number of registrations in 1975. Numbers in 1977 dropped to approximately 400,000 in the series’ absence (Elkamel 1995: 226). Another soap opera, *Accompañáme*, which addressed family planning is credited with being ‘the determining factor in the drop of Mexico's population growth rate from 3.1 to 2.5%’ during the period it was aired from 1977 to 1978 (Galindo and Poindexter, 1986 cited in Elkamel 1995: 226).

Television drama has also been shown to be an efficient means of disseminating information and altering behaviour. This has been demonstrated to great effect in developing countries in the areas of health and family planning. In
such countries television is one of the few choices available to agencies that wish to disseminate information and alter behaviour because of high illiteracy rates (see Elkamel 1995: 227). Elkamel’s work provides an account of the production, and informational assessment of *The Family House*, an Egyptian soap opera, which was intended to disseminate health information through drama. In initial focus group explorations, 83% of interviewees said that they liked the programme, while 79% felt they had learned from it (Elkamel 1995: 229). The programmes not only successfully conveyed health promotion messages but also social norms and values.

Viewers who said that they learned from the series were asked to state examples. Among the most frequently mentioned examples were: causes and prevention of AIDS, importance of belonging, roots, importance of giving sufficient care to one's children, the seriousness of drug addiction, the importance of good parent-child communication, benefits of child spacing and family planning, disadvantages of early marriages, as well as general good values such as patience, respecting other people's opinions and not giving up hope (Elkamel 1995: 230).

At the time of writing the BBC were still broadcasting a radio soap opera, with over 35 million listeners, into war-torn Afghanistan. The former Taliban government was, reportedly, unable to ban radio and the BBC’s *Naway Kor, Naway Jwand* (*New Home, New Life*) because of its overwhelming popularity, not only among rural women but also among Taliban soldiers (Skuse 2002; Brockes in *The Guardian* 23 October 2001). This series was based on the BBC radio drama *The Archers*, set in a fictional rural community and dealing with issues such as forced marriages, blood feuds, landmines and opium addiction. There was evidence that educational messages were picked up in Afghanistan through dramatic broadcasts. The use of radio combined with Afghanistan’s oral culture, it was claimed, led to a surprising retention of the storylines.

Letters poured in from listeners who learned, through the soap, to fill in the craters left by Scud missiles to stop them breeding malaria mosquitoes. After
a long-running storyline about landmines, listeners to *New Home, New Life* were found to be statistically less likely to be killed by a landmine than non-listeners (Brockes in *The Guardian* 23 October 2001).

The United Nations (UN) sponsored two writers from the BBC’s *EastEnders* to write a soap opera for African countries. As Matthew Baylis explained the UN realised some years before that people did not read posters or pamphlets and had been experimenting ‘with new ways to convey crucial messages on subjects such as HIV, female circumcision and human rights’ (Baylis in *The Sunday Times* 16 July 2000). The resulting soap opera, which played in Kenya, addressed the usual family based soap opera stories. In response to popular anger at the state of African societies it also addressed issues of global capital and political corruption. Baylis summed up the experience saying:

> The experience was overwhelmingly positive. I expected to leave Kenya feeling that the UN had ridden roughshod over the demands of drama, but I didn’t. Instead, I felt we were equipping east Africans with an entertaining vehicle with which to voice their own concerns  (Baylis in *The Sunday Times* 16 July 2000).

The RTÉ financed drama series *Relative Strangers* portrayed the death of a child through leukaemia. The child died because of the failure to find a suitable bone marrow donor. This coincided with, and likely prompted, a massive increase in calls to the Blood Transfusion Service Board (BTSB) from people willing to donate blood and bone marrow. Immediately after the episode featuring Jamie Becker’s fictional death the BTSB received over 100 calls from prospective donors. This was more than the total number of calls received during the previous year (Donnellan in *The Irish Times* 2 February 2000). This recent Irish example suggests that television drama cannot only raise awareness of public issues but may also prompt people into action.
Although there is evidence to suggest that television drama can have considerable informational and behavioural effects this view needs to be tempered. Despite the evidence he provides to support the case that television drama can have a powerful effect on society, Elkamel is careful to qualify this and to explain that causal explanations are to be treated with caution. He explains that in most cases ‘specific services, legislation and other structural adjustments, as well as other multimedia programs, were synchronised with such television campaigns’. It is also difficult to separate the contribution of each of these elements in behavioural change. He does, however, state that ‘it is reasonable to assume that the mass media component made a significant contribution’ (Elkamel 1995: 226).

Discussion and Social Change
Singhal and Rogers note that recent theory and research suggest that entertainment-education in the form of soap opera may act as a catalyst to trigger interpersonal communication ‘leading to changes in the social discourse of the audience’. It may ‘motivate audience individuals to talk to each other about what they learned from the entertainment-education message’ (Singhal and Rogers 1999: 144). They demonstrate that the radio soap opera Twende Na Wakati encouraged discussion among its audience on issues such as family planning, HIV prevention and alcoholism (Singhal and Rogers 1999: 166).

Married women in the 1995 survey who listened to Twende na Wakati were more likely to adopt family planning (49%) than were those who did not listen (19%). Furthermore, the non-listeners were only half as likely to talk with their spouses about family planning “many times” (32%) as were listeners to Twende na Wakati (66%). Exposure to radio soap opera led to spousal communication about family planning, which in turn was related to the adoption of family planning methods (Singhal and Rogers 1999: 166).
Like Elkamel, Singhal and Rogers caution that the mass media seldom effect social change on their own. They argue, however, that ‘media programmes can stimulate conversations among listeners that lead to change’. Such conversations ‘can create opportunities for social learning as people consider new patterns of thought and behaviour’ (Singhal and Rogers 1999: 171). Miguel Sabido is Mexico’s most prominent proponent of soap opera as a means of entertainment-education. Nariman cites Sabido’s argument that these soap operas have ‘filled a vital function in Mexico by helping to introduce formerly taboo development themes in a socially and commercially sanctioned manner’. Themes such as family planning, women’s rights and adolescent sexual education ‘have become customary elements in the everyday exchange of national dialogue’ (Nariman 1993: 101–2). One of the key ways in which entertainment-education soap operas work is by giving people the vocabulary and confidence they need to discuss taboo issues. As Nariman argues many ordinary citizens have never ‘formally articulated’ concerns about such social issues but many will recognise them once they see them articulated through soap opera (Nariman 1993: 128–9). As we have seen, in Ireland soap opera played a considerable role in breaking the traditional silence on sexuality and fertility control. Soap opera contributed to social change in Ireland by announcing what formerly was neither voiced nor considered. To further explain this process it is necessary to consider soap opera in relation to Habermas’s concept of the public sphere.

**Soap Opera and Public Sphere**

As stated at the outset, soap opera can affect public opinion and democratic governance. This effect, however, is unclear. The concept of the public sphere\(^{43}\) can

\(^{43}\) Published in German in 1962 as *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. The book only appeared in English in 1989. Habermas’s use of the German term Öffentlichkeit has been translated into English as ‘public sphere’. Habermas uses the term Öffentlichkeit to mean ‘the political principle of openness or
help us to better understand this process. Habermas describes the development of the institutions of a ‘public sphere’ in France, Britain and Germany during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While these institutions took on various forms they had a number of common characteristics that help to describe the nature and role of the ‘public sphere’. Primarily, ‘they preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from pre-supposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether.’ Habermas continues:

The tendency replaced the celebration of rank with a tact befitting equals. The parity on whose basis alone the authority of the better argument could assert itself against that of social hierarchy and in the end can carry the day meant, in the thought of the day, the parity of “common humanity” (1989: 36).

The public sphere does not describe an identifiable place or object. It describes a process of discussion and debate in civil society, outside the domestic private sphere but divorced from the control of the state (see Watson 2002: 749–50). For Curran the public sphere is ‘the space between government and society in which private individuals exercise formal and informal control over the state: formal control through the election of governments and informal control through the pressure of opinion’ (1991: 29). Peters sees the public sphere as a site for the generation of political legitimation (1993: 544). The concept describes, in an idealised manner, a situation where open communications, discussion and debate give rise to public opinion created through reasoned debate and discussion unaffected by money, politics or social status.

Habermas also points out that ‘discussion within such a public presupposed the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned (Habermas 1989: 36). The institutions of the public sphere brought about the explicit announcement of themes and problems that had lain hidden in the culture and power structures of their publicity, the means of publication (the media) and the sociological groupings which are the object of such publication (the body of citizens or readers)” (Peters 1983: 543).
societies (Habermas 1989: 37). The institutions of the public sphere created possibilities for social change by making certain norms, values and practices open to discussion and debate.

The public sphere adopted a humanist ideology, based on free ‘human’ relations. Ostensibly, everybody had the right to enter into discussion simply because they were human (see Habermas 1989: 33). This, of course, ignores the fact that women, the poor and the illiterate were excluded from public debate in the 19th century (see Habermas 1989: 33–8). Regardless, the public sphere provides a useful ideal type. As Habermas acknowledges the idea of the public sphere was not actually realised ‘in earnest in the coffee houses, the salons, and the societies; but as an idea it had become institutionalized and thereby stated as an objective claim. If not realized, it was at least consequential’ (Habermas 1989: 36).

**The Public Sphere of Letters**
In addition to the political public sphere of the nineteenth century, Habermas describes a preceding literary public sphere (Habermas 1989: 51). The separation of home life and economic activity caused by the industrial revolution created a new privacy among bourgeois families (Habermas 1989: 45). A new isolated bourgeois sense of self, unsupported by public life, lacked a stable, taken-for-granted view of the world. This psychologically necessitated validation and reflection. There was a need, in this new age, to establish novel visions of what life was like and how it should be lived. New norms and values needed to be established and reinforced. This was done, largely, by looking into other people’s private lives through the medium of

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44 This is of course the ideological conceit that is necessary for the development of the bourgeois public sphere. People must make the differentiation between bourgeois and homo. As simply ‘a man’ rather than an owner of property, one can relate on an equal level with others simply on the basis of their being human. This is of course a conceit because it was necessary to be propertied and literate in order to access this sphere of ‘human relations’ (see Holub 1991: 3—4).
The development of this public sphere of letters (PSL) depended upon the commercial mass production of culture (Habermas 1989: 15). Habermas points out that it could only have been supported through the postal services, periodicals, and other communications systems that had grown in regularity with a market society (Habermas 1989: 15). Access to literature could only be sustained because it facilitated the commercial growth of the printing and publishing industries. According to Baker, ‘the literary public sphere was constituted by the market institutions of bourgeois civil society’ (1993: 184–5).

For the eighteenth century bourgeoisie, literature, and the critical discussion it provoked, became a means of discussing and understanding themselves. The novel, for example, ‘is a response to the disappearance of "knowable communities"'. Such forms of social representation ‘offer panoramic surveys of the social horizon… they mediate society for us’ (Peters 1993: 565–6). A dependence upon mass-produced culture as part everyday life became prominent in the early eighteenth century and is central today.

Today, soap opera serves similar gratifications to the letters and novels of Habermas’s PSL. Berman comments that soap opera allows 'characters to empty themselves out, to cleanse themselves emotionally.' He sees the template for soap opera lying not in traditional drama or the novel but in the diary or journal (Berman 1987: 70). Many eighteenth century letters were written with the explicit intention of publication. Habermas mentions Pamela, often credited as the first novel, as a logical progression of this. Published in 1740, written by Samuel Richardson, this domestic novel arose from a collection of fictitious autobiographical letters. Pamela was to be a template for the British domestic novel. Cantor and Pingree mention Pamela as the
earliest point of origin of today’s televised soap operas. Like the many novels that followed *Pamela*, ‘soap opera stories are about ordinary people and the events of their daily lives. As in the English sentimental/domestic novel, characters in soap operas interact in a series of intertwined domestic or romantic melodramas’ (Cantor and Pingree 1983: 20). The sentimental/domestic novel was characterised by stories based in the intimacy of the private sphere. They were mainly stories about women, alone, in marriage, or as part of a family saga. They were also predominantly stories for women. Soap opera, it could be argued, continues this tradition, providing predominantly female audiences with ongoing emotional dramas from the private sphere. The soap opera audience wants, according to Berman, ‘to know about self and social class, about money, about rising and falling in the world, and about love’ (1987: 67).

**Spectacle and Representation**

Feudal Europe did not include any open site for public participation or discussion. The state was something for the public to behold and respect but not to participate in. As Peters notes, it involved the display of prestige over critical discussion, spectacle over debate, and power appearing before the people rather than appearing for them (1993: 545). Publicity in the medieval world was tied to the personal and divorced from principle or policy. The state was made public through feudal lords, their estates, personal effects and behaviour. Habermas states that ‘the staging of the publicity involved in representation was wedded to personal attributes’. These included ‘insignia (badges and arms), dress (clothing and coiffure), demeanor (form of greeting and poise) and rhetoric (form of address and formal discourse in general)’. Put simply it depended on ‘a strict code of “noble” conduct’ (Habermas 1989: 8).
The Decline of the Public Sphere
In the twentieth century, according to Habermas, we witness the collapse of the public sphere. Holub sees that the public sphere has been destroyed with its role ostensibly taken over by other institutions that ‘reproduce the image of a public sphere in distorted guise’ (1991: 6). Parliament, for example, had its ideological origins in the same industrial and political ferment that promoted the public sphere. As it develops, however, it moves away from its founding ideals. Informed reasonable debate gives way to a one-sided mastery of ‘sound bites’ and professionally crafted messages.

As we progress into the twentieth century, the free exchange of ideas among equals comes transformed into less democratic communicative forms, for example public relations. Party politics and manipulation of the mass media lead to what Habermas calls the 'refeudalisation' of the public sphere, where representation and appearance outweigh rational debate (Holub 1991: 6).

Echoing Adorno and Horkheimer, Habermas describes a transition from a ‘culture debating society to a culture consuming society’ (Habermas 1989: 159; see Adorno and Horkheimer 1972: 120–67). This is apparent in the relationship between politics and the mass media. Television, in particular, has played a major part in transforming political institutions. McQuail (1977) outlines several changes that have occurred in British politics since the advent of television. He recognises that ‘the connection with television can only be an assertion’ but argues that ‘the fact of some important institutional adoption is unlikely to be denied’ (McQuail 1977: 89). Television, McQuail notes, has led to a massive increase in the use of advertising for political purposes (1977: 89). Television contributes to personality politics. Once again ‘dress, speech, hairstyles and gestures’ define public access to affairs of state. In this sense, television contributes to the ‘refeudalization’ of the public sphere (Habermas 1989: 158). It is possible that soap opera contributes to this refeudalisation. Habermas sees that today the public sphere of letters has been corrupted.
The bourgeois ideal type assumed that out of the audience-oriented subjectivity’s well-founded interior domain a public sphere would evolve in the world of letters. Today, instead of this, the latter has turned into a conduit for social forces channelled into the conjugal family’s inner space by way of a public sphere that mass media have transmogrified into a sphere of cultural consumption. The deprivatized province of interiority was hollowed out by the mass media; a pseudo-public sphere of a no longer literary public was patched together to create a sort of superfamilial zone of familiarity (Habermas 1989: 162).

Soap opera may be seen as a product of, and a conduit for, advertising messages. The privacy of the family is penetrated not only by the state but also commercial forces through mass media. There is then only a semblance of discussion and debate. As Devereux argues RTÉ soap opera producers see entertainment as their key task. The coverage of social issues and the creation of social debate are not central aims (Devereux 1998: 102–3). Producers may, according to Devereux, adopt a hot potato approach to social issues (1998: 101). Issues may be raised and then dropped as quickly before there has been adequate time for exploration or discussion. Devereux concludes from his study that a limited treatment of social issues through RTÉ soap opera was the product of the ideology of its producers (1998: 124). He sees that soap opera, among other programmes, may be used as ideological tools to maintain the power of capitalist élites (1998: 124). Soap opera then may offer an ersatz community, a mirage of inclusion and involvement, which is merely a form of mass distraction from politics. In this view soap opera is the latter-day equivalent of jousting matches, royal pageants or public hangings.
Is Soap Opera Just Worthless Spectacle?
Analysts and scholars have generally omitted soap opera from debate on the public sphere. As Curran notes many see the growth of entertainment media ‘as a regrettable diversion from the media’s central democratic purpose and function’. Others have ‘simply ignored the existence of entertainment and discussed the media as if its political content was its central or defining characteristic’ (Curran 1991: 33). Curran highlights many of the positive social roles of television entertainment. It can comment on the nature of society and relations between diverse and divided social groups. It can provide understanding and a degree of empathy between different sections of society. Curran argues that some ‘seemingly apolitical material’ can embody ‘ethical codes or expressive values that lie at the heart of political creeds’. He cites, for example, ‘egalitarianism, mutuality and a belief in human perfectibility in the case of traditional social democracy, or possessive individualism, self-reliance and social pessimism in the case of neo-liberal conservatism’ (Curran 1991: 34).

Media entertainment, of course, also has less positive possibilities. It ‘can do the opposite: it can foster misunderstanding and antagonism through the repetition of stereotypes that provide a focus for displaced fears’ (Curran 1991: 33). It is in this context that the Goldsmiths Media Group asserts that ‘it is clear that fictional space such as soap operas can no longer be dismissed as irrelevant to our understanding of the public sphere’ (Goldsmiths Media Group 2000: 45). They continue:

On the contrary, they can be crucial to ongoing processes of national and cultural self-definition: for example, in focusing debates and tensions about national and local identity. In this broader context, the public sphere argument is subtly transformed: from being solely about the contents of debate in the public domain to encompassing the media’s role in stimulating private (as well as public) debate through their prominent influence over contemporary definitions of ‘the social’. This extends earlier analysis of ‘agenda setting’ in the media news into the fictional realm (Goldsmiths Media Group 2000: 45).

Habermas has described drama and theatre as hangovers from the feudal age
of representative publicity (Habermas 1989: 12–14; Peters 1993: 545). He disagrees with the use of spectacle in public life where an increase in human-interest stories, scandals, natural disasters and so on has replaced news of social institutions. The facts of the public sphere increasingly take on the characteristics of fiction. For Habermas ‘the world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only’ (1989: 171). The growth of entertainment and spectacle in public life is, for Habermas, synonymous with the refereudalisation of the public sphere. The extent to which soap opera can play a role in Habermas’s conception of the public sphere is questionable.

Again, the Goldsmith’s Media Group argue that Habermas’s conception of the ‘public sphere’ has concentrated on rational debate with a narrow definition of rationality. This excludes informal and emotive matters such as ‘identification, imagination, loyalty, even love’ although these ‘are a vital part of public life and political allegiance’ (Goldsmiths Media Group 2000: 44).

Excluded also are articulations of social issues outside conventional forms of debate; for example, the highlighting of social issues and controversies in television soap operas. It is unhelpful in discussing the mediated public sphere to separate artificially areas of ‘fact’ (news, documentary, discussion) from areas of ‘fiction’ (drama, sport, and more generally entertainment). We cannot simply reduce the non-factual aspects of media outputs to ‘only entertainment’ (Goldsmiths Media Group 2000: 44).

Peters sees modern media as a ‘means of imagining community’ (see also Anderson 1983: 9–36; McLoone 1991: 2–29). A problem today, however, is that ‘the making of such public visions has become largely undemocratic and is left to the experts or the commissars’. ‘Such representations’ Peters warns ‘may become monsters’ (1993: 565–6). The problem, then, may not be the use of spectacle in public life but the undemocratic domination of spectacle where only one way of uttering or imagining society is promoted. Peters argues that democracy in modern societies requires
certain forms of spectacle (1993: 563). The complexity of modern society has rendered it unknowable without forms of abstraction, whether it is in theory, statistics or art. Society today is not only made known but is also made real for people through representation. But what possible contribution can soap opera make here?

The Need for Diversity in Dramatic Representations of Society

As argued above, the mass media are a key source of knowledge on our social world. Much of what we know about certain issues and social groups is based on images and impressions rather than facts or experience. Mass media influence perceptions of every category of social life.45 ‘Homelessness’ can be taken as one example. The countless individual stories of homeless people are often understood, and imagined, under a limited set of images and narratives. Commenting on television coverage of homelessness, Liddiard argues that television often treats political and social issues as if ‘they were a form of public entertainment’. This can encourage public interest in homelessness but ‘it can nonetheless leave misconceptions and stereotypes as well as trivialising serious issues’ (Liddiard 1999: 77). He continues that for many members of the public homelessness means ‘rooflessness’. This excludes many of the ‘hidden homeless’, living with friends, living in temporary accommodation like bed and breakfasts and so on (1999: 79). The proliferation of such stereotypes through the media is a serious public issue.

Simplistic images of homelessness… may simplify the complexity of the homelessness problem. This may lead to ill-informed and simplistic solutions and proposals, as well as stigmatising the homeless as being somehow distinct from the rest of the population (Liddiard 1999: 80).

45 It should be borne in mind here, of course, that while mass media may inform our world views the power of media is tempered by personal experience and discussion with peers. Mass media tend to more profoundly shape our view of a situation when we have no direct access to other sources of information on it. This makes television a powerful medium in shaping our views of minorities with whom we have no direct dealings.
Stereotypical portrayals of homelessness, Liddiard continues, play an ‘important role in terms of framing policy approaches to the problem’ (1999: 80). Media discussions which portray the homeless as being ‘somehow different from mainstream society’ will provoke policy responses ‘of distinctive and segregated assistance, with the homeless representing a burden on welfare and the economy that should be reduced’ (1999: 85). Liddiard concludes that when it comes to mass media coverage of homelessness ‘the very real importance of the media may simply be in terms of modifying public perceptions of the homeless, and raising public consciousness of the problem we face’ (1999: 86). Such modifications of public perceptions depend on media messages that go beyond the usual stereotypes. Programmes that simply echo the popular imagination on various groups in society are unlikely to contribute to discussion, debate and the formation of new public opinions.

Possibly the most frequently quoted example of a programme which did break with convention and problematise the social fictions surrounding homelessness was *Cathy Come Home*. First shown by BBC in 1966, it was written by Jeremy Sandford who informed the screenplay with a considerable body of research on homelessness. The drama told the story of a young married woman with two children. She falls into poverty after her husband loses his job due to an accident. The family are followed though various states of poverty and homelessness. Eventually Cathy’s children are taken into care by the social services. Playwright David Edgar commented that ‘the play changed the way we think about housing… it changed the way we think about other things too - like the inner city, the role of the social services and even the political system’ (Edgar in Self 1984: 20). Curran saw it as a radical play that ‘dramatised the problems of homelessness and poverty in a way that stirred the conscience of the nation; it was part of a “cultural democratisation of broadcasting”’
Cathy Come Home is regarded as a television classic. It exemplified the power of television in highlighting social problems. Its power lay in its ability to provoke reflection upon, and discussion of, homelessness, which was previously an unproblematic taken-for-granted aspect of everyday life. It disrupted orthodox conceptions of homelessness by presenting a different way of imagining homelessness, its causes and its effects.

In Ireland, Louis Lentin’s drama-documentary Dear Daughter played a similar public role. Aired in 1996, it provoked a storm of controversy and a reappraisal of the Church’s role in running residential homes for children. It concentrated on the Goldenbridge orphanage in Dublin run by the Mercy Sisters. Inglis argues that through Dear Daughter ‘the ongoing, unquestioned predisposition through which nuns were perceived, known and understood was broken’. The documentary was part of a process of ‘revealing what was once hidden and silent’. When the media, chiefly through RTÉ, ‘lifted the lid’ on stories like Goldenbridge ‘what had remained private and individual quickly became public’ (Inglis 1998b: 228–9). The drama-documentary’s producer felt the programme had ‘enabled hundreds [of people] to break silence and reveal their brutalised childhood’s in orphanages, throughout the country’ (Lentin in The Irish Times 5 April 1996).

Cathy Come Home and Dear Daughter were both one-off productions written and researched specifically for the purpose of exploring and exploding myths about particular social issues. Soap operas, on the other hand, are not tailored to any particular issue. They are the product of an intensive form of production that may turn out as many as five episodes per week. Fair City currently turns out four episodes a week with occasional one-hour special episodes. Such production pressures may simply make it impossible to replicate the social impact of a one off
production. Despite this, soap operas are now seen in Britain ‘as spaces where
difficult social issues can be broached and debate stimulated’.

This ‘public sphere’ function of media fictions has begun to be recognised by
the state itself: Britain’s labour government, for example, has asked soap
production companies to address issues around drug education in their
programmes (Goldsmiths Media Group 2000: 44).

Soap opera can offer people a unique means of accessing, and re-imagining, areas of
social life they cannot access in reality. It has the potential to contribute to debate and
reflection in society. Of course, it may also act as mere diversion. The social
potential of soap opera depends on the diversity of social representations it can
present. Can soap opera address a broad range of social issues from different points
of view? This depends on the possibilities and constraints that exist in the system in
which it is produced.

**Production Processes and What Soap Opera Cannot Say**
A diversity of conflicting portrayals of society allows people to identify, and reflect
upon, how personal life is shaped by the social world. A lack of such diversity brings
us closer to a society that can only be imagined or uttered in one way, which is
Habermas’s fear. Television drama can provide a plurality of universally accessible
visions of society. The scale of today's society, however, prevents universal
participation in mass media production. Currently, only a small number of producers
can attempt to represent the diversity of public opinion through television. Does soap
opera, in its representation of society promote plurality, allowing society to ‘speak to
itself’? Or, as Devereux suggests (1998: 124), does it promote a single, dominant and
unreflective representation of society? To answer this question it is necessary to
understand how soap opera is produced and how this shapes the diversity of social
representations it may present.
Soap operas are never the products of individuals working alone. They are, by necessity, negotiated products, shaped to varying degrees by everybody involved in their production. Economic, political and technological forces, which act from outside a broadcasting organisation, also shape them. Television production is a site of conflict where many groups attempt to impose their own vision of 'good television' (Tulloch 1990: 180; Elliott 1972: 10; Millington and Nelson 1986; Doolan et al. 1969; Goldsmiths Media Group 2000: 38). As we shall see, *Fair City* is shaped by competing visions of good soap opera. In order to understand the expressive possibilities of *Fair City*, then, it is necessary to understand not only soap opera creators, and their decisions, but also the history, structures and culture that influence them.
Chapter Four

The Dynamics of Soap Opera Production

In order to know what *Fair City* can and cannot say it is necessary to understand how the show is produced and why these production methods are employed. We need, also, to understand the social processes that influence soap opera production. Here I will outline the dynamics of soap opera production. The production of a soap opera like *Fair City* is a complex phenomenon, shaped by myriad social influences. I will also investigate whether Habermas’ conceptual model can be used to research how soap opera is made. Habermas offers a powerful description of the place of open discussion and debate in democratic societies. By adapting the concept of the public sphere we can gain a clearer understanding of the role soap opera may play in public life. As we will see, however, his theoretical model cannot be used to research and understand the complexities of soap opera production.

A Lack of Production Research

In the sociological study of mass media there is a marked lack of research into how television is produced. Garnham protests that ‘the bibliography on production is shamefully bare’ (1990: 12). Elliott has noted that while there is often concern over television content ‘there have been few attempts to investigate the genesis of this content’ (1972: 6). The lack of production studies has been noted by a number of writers (Alvarado and Buscombe 1978: 2; Elliott 1972: 6; Gallagher 1982: 151–2; Halloran 1969: 5). Within the literature that does exist on production the majority of work has concentrated on the production of non-fictional programmes like news,
current affairs and documentaries. Elliott points out that 'most research on mass communications which has dealt with problems of production… has concentrated on non-fictional output' (1972: 157). Research on the production of television drama has been very rare.

As we have seen, soap opera can significantly affect society (Singhal and Rogers 1999; Livingstone 1988; Elkamel 1995). Despite its importance, Cantor and Cantor have speculated that cultural snobbery may underpin researchers' evasion of television production. They argue that because so many reject television as a cultural form, ‘very few media scholars bother to study how the socio-political and economic circumstances of its creative process influence the final forms the programs take, especially for television drama’ (1992: 2). This ‘snobbery’ is particularly pronounced in the case of soap opera. There are only a small number of studies dedicated to understanding soap opera production (see O’Donnell 1999; Devereux 1997; Newcomb 1991; Buckingham 1987; Cantor and Pingree 1983; Hobson 1982; Paterson 1981). Owing to this it is necessary to explore the production dynamics revealed by more general production studies in an attempt to understand the creation of soap opera.

Although it has largely been overlooked, production research is essential to understanding the relationship between mass media and society. For Elliott, production research asks why certain programmes are available. It asks how programme content is selected and created. It also asks how ‘television organisations and the “new priesthood” working within them perform their functions’. It can reveal how this somewhat arcane group perceives their role in society. Elliott continues that ‘to translate these questions into sociological terms, the central aim… is to throw light on the relationship between culture and social structure as it is mediated through
television’ (1972: 6). Production research can help us to understand how RTÉ acts like a prism refracting external social influences into its programmes. To fully comprehend *Fair City*’s contribution to the public sphere then we must understand how the programme and RTÉ are shaped by the social environment in which they are located.

**Contrasting Models of Organisation for Television Production**

There are two main principles of organisation in Western television production. One can refer broadly to an American system of broadcasting and a traditional European model.46 American broadcasting is generally commercial. Industrial manufacturers shaped American broadcasting ‘both directly in the sale of sets and indirectly in the supply of advertising money’ (Williams 1974: 35). The power of American television industrialists and the speed at which they expanded their markets outstripped attempts at State regulation (Williams 1974: 35–6). Today American television is dominated by a small number of major networks (ABC, CBS, NBC47 and Fox Television).48

European broadcasting developed in the opposite direction. Britain provides a typical example of the European model. British broadcasting set out to avoid the commercial free-for-all of the United States. This was done through the creation of a state controlled monopoly broadcaster, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The BBC, adhering to its founding Reithian49 principles, was obliged to act as a

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46 This is a broad simplification. Many permutations on these two basic models exist. Curran (1991) provides a discussion of alternative mixes of state control and free market broadcasting.
48 It should be noted, however, that cable companies, Direct Broadcasting by Satellite (DBS) and independent channels are increasingly challenging this (Cantor and Cantor 1992: 63–4).
49 John Reith, later Lord Reith, was the first Director General of the BBC. His view of broadcasting is now seen to be quite paternalistic. It essentially saw that the public should be given what they need rather than what they want. The key aims of broadcasting were to ‘inform, educate and entertain’. While there is greater emphasis on pluralism and diversity today Reithian ideas still inform the practice of public service broadcasting to some extent today.
source of coherent national identity and to act as a source of ‘quality’ information and entertainment (see Williams 1974; Gorham 1967; Cathcart 1984). Similar public monopolies emerged throughout Europe. This 'classic' model of European monopolistic public service broadcasting (PSB) has now all but disappeared. Most European countries are now characterised by a mixture of public service broadcasting and commercial television (Humphreys 1996: 200–1).

Used as ideal types, the two systems may be contrasted in a number of important ways. The most fundamental difference lies in the way in which broadcasting is paid for. The fact that commercial broadcasters make their money by 'renting out the eyeballs of the audience' means that they are pre-occupied with audience ratings figures (Gitlin 1983: 3). Historically, there has been a greater deference to national culture in European broadcasting than in American broadcasting. Even among some commercial European broadcasters there have been attempts to build prestige through the production of quality drama, documentaries and news (Alvarado and Buscombe 1978: 11–12). Gitlin argues that this is not the case in America. He quotes Arnold Becker, CBS’s Vice-President who said ‘I'm not interested in culture. I'm not interested in pro-social values. I have only one interest. That's whether people watch the program. That's my definition of good, that's my definition of bad’ (Gitlin 1983: 31).

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50 The public pays for broadcasting in both systems. For stations such as the BBC the public pay a licence fee. The public 'pay' for commercial television, in the first instance, by giving their time to advertisers. But consumers also pay premiums on advertised goods to offset consumer company’s advertising costs.

51 It should be noted, however, that increasingly public service broadcasters must gain high viewing figures in order to justify their broadcasting remit in the face of commercial competition (Herman and McChesney 1997: 46; Buckingham 1987: 2-3; Mulholland in The Irish Times 7 January 2000).
The Internal Organisation of Television Production
The way a television station is financed and organised affects its workers and programmes. Generally, television production is organised hierarchically. In commercial television or PSB, senior management has ultimate control over television production. Often senior management will design the initial specifications for a television programme. Senior managers also have discretion over whether a programme will be aired or not and when it will be aired (Cantor and Cantor 1992: 54). Managers and administrators, who may have no direct involvement in the physical production of a programme, address these fundamental issues. In this respect television is comparable to any industrial product. At the level of producers and production teams, however, television production is often characterised by a type of subsidiarity. Elliott found, for example, that work was turned over to a relatively autonomous, flexible work teams after senior management decision-making. At this level, television production could be compared to pre-industrial craftwork. The television producer, as head of a production team, is the linchpin of most productions (Alvarado and Buscombe 1978: 30; Elliott 1972: 128; Cantor 1992: 71; Tunstall 1993: 1). The producer is often responsible for a programme’s conception and execution. Newcomb and Alley have described television as a ‘producer's medium’ (1982: 88). They have also described these highly autonomous producers as artists. This may be an exaggeration but it does illustrate the individualistic nature of the producer's work. Past studies have found that studio crews are, generally, not creatively engaged in their work. In most cases they just do their job regardless of the genre they are working on (see Millington and Nelson 1986: 14). Elliott found that the work of studio crews was strictly regulated. They followed set routines and had

52 Gitlin reveals that Hill Street Blues developed initially because NBC executives insisted on a police show. The writers, Bochco and Kozoll, wanted to create a series about a hotel (Gitlin 1983: 279).
little room for change or creativity. Crews tended to deal with the tasks that they were responsible for rather than specific programmes. The culture and organisation of crew members was similar to production line workers (Elliott 1972: 129). Actors, on the other hand, may sometimes effect changes in scripts and storylines. Elliott reveals that valued cast members may occasionally make producer-like decisions (Elliott 1972: 86). Devereux supports this, describing how members of Glenroe’s cast, on occasion, affected story-line decisions (Devereux 1998: 106).

Elliott noted that, among the production team, roles were loosely defined and were changed to adjust to new circumstances. Work was organised around the central goal of getting the programme on the air rather than on the performance of routine tasks. The production team was found to be largely free from external control. It was accepted that their non-routine and 'creative' tasks should be carried out independently (Elliott 1972: 128). Although, within the production team, the producer had ultimate control over the production other team members identified personally with the work in hand and saw it as 'their work' (Elliott 1972: 128). As we will see Fair City’s producer enjoyed a considerable level of autonomy. Writers, on the other hand, failed to invest in or identify with what they felt to be a highly rationalised creative system.

The Rationalisation of Television Production

Rationalisation, the process of making television more efficient, predictable and controllable, has major implications for the organisation and culture of television production. As Gitlin makes clear, any investment of capital will entail an attempt to minimise risk. This means rationally containing and calculating outcomes.

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53 Production teams are assembled specifically for each programme. The principle members of a team are the producer, director, writer and editor.
Television production has been rationalised in a number of respects. Soap opera production is distinguished from other genres by its high level of rationalisation. Paterson has commented that despite the social realism of early British soap opera, this has been modified by the 'standardisation of production, the accumulative connotations of the narrative space and the imperatives of the continuous serial form' (1981: 56). Soap opera production is regularised to such a degree that it could be described as Fordist (see Lash and Urry 1994: 113). It employs dedicated tools and labour turning out a large volume of undifferentiated material. The dedicated tools of Fordist industrial production are assembly line machines; those of soap opera production are studio routines and, more importantly, programme formulae and conventions (see Lash and Urry 1994: 114). These formulae facilitate bulk production. They minimise surprises for steady audiences and they fit into producers' notions of what the audience want. Paterson argues that 'broadcasters believe audiences like repetition'. He points out that 'organisationally it is prudent to cope with the enormous demand for programmes by using formulae' and that commercial television requires stable and predictable audiences (1981: 59). The limited literature that exists on soap opera production suggests that it entails unsatisfying and insecure working conditions. Soap operas employ a strict division of labour but in this only provide insecure 'flexible' employment. Nobody is irreplaceable in soap opera. This is one of the aspects of soap opera that makes it such a valuable commercial formula. It is also one of the chief aspects of production that limits the range of expression available to Fair City’s writers and actors.

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54 The rationalisation of television is, however, incomplete. As we will see television production is often complex and unpredictable. It is unlikely that television can ever be rationalised in the same fashion as material goods industries.
Uncertainty in Production

Statistical audience measurement is one of the chief means of rationalising television. This provides, for many, a quantitative and standardised criterion of programme quality. Gitlin highlights, however, that this form of knowledge is ultimately unreliable. There is no exact science in television. Gitlin's research reveals that producers and network executives lack a formal, codifiable body of knowledge. Their existence as a closed professional group is justified by the possession of tacit knowledge. It is a 'feel' or a 'gut instinct' which separates television executives and producers from the rest of society and which justifies their salaries. Gitlin comments that while they will sometimes 'claim the warrant of science' most network executives ‘acknowledge the limits of their data’. Despite ratings-based predictions most shows fail to make a second season. For Gitlin, ‘knowing the limits, paradoxically, makes them feel knowing’ because producers also possess an arcane unscientific knowledge.

Instinct still counts for something in this unpredictable business. The premium stays on imponderables: an air of knowingness, or some ineffable quality of the person—like Fred Silverman’s famous “gut”—that enables him to divine a show’s chances (Gitlin 1983: 26–27).

Similarly Fair City’s producer and writers had a sense of what the audience wanted to see in a ‘Fair City story’. Minimising risk then does not always have scientific trappings. There are production axioms that describe what 'works' and what does not (Gitlin 1983: 23). The production of a show may depend on a producer or writer's track record (Gitlin 1983: 259–35; Turow 1982: 127). In this fashion, risk is minimised, as is the diversity of representations, by the fact that television is a largely

55 This information often comes as a Nielsen rating, a percentage of all possible viewers. Viewing may also be counted as audience share, a percentage of all people actually watching television over a given period.
closed, conservative social system that feeds off of itself for its employees and programme ideas.

Turow identified a number of unconventional programmes that succeeded on American network television. Although such programmes may get through, risk is mitigated by the fact that, even in America, a small fraternity dominates television. Gitlin found that the Hollywood television system has a set of unwritten rules. These rules are set and mastered by those who control the system, the network executives and the heads of the major production companies. These unwritten rules affect a form of social closure 'which in subtle and not so subtle ways keep interlopers out' (Gitlin 1983: 117). Being a member of the television fraternity signals that a producer knows the rules of the game (see also Turow 1982: 126).

Tunstall describes producers as living in 'isolated genre worlds' (Tunstall 1993: 2). They eat, drink and sleep their particular genre while ignoring all else. Burns takes this further, suggesting that producers become cognitively and emotionally immersed in every programme they make. This immersion, he holds, is necessary to deliver the commitment that programme production requires. Producers must believe in their shows. Burns writes that ‘this absorption demands emotional reinforcement and expressive demonstration. No kind of detachment is really permissible; commitment has to be – and be seen to be – deep, sincere and binding’ (Burns 1969: 69). Producers must give themselves heart and soul to the shows they work on. For Burns producers fail to see far beyond the show at hand. He bluntly describes television as an 'autistic world' (Burns 1969: 72). This immersion in work, social networks and unwritten rules may serve to maintain an industrial status quo discouraging any break with conventional representations of social life. It appears that such informal networks and unwritten rules are likely to be an essential element
of television production, not only in Hollywood but also in European broadcasting (See O'Neill 1993: 68–69). This study’s further analysis of networks and ‘rules of the game’ in RTÉ drama suggests, however, that they may provide the power to break with conventions as well as being a potentially conservative force.

**Imaginary Feedback**

Elliott sees that a fixation with audience satisfaction has overtaken television production (1972: 16). Again, Devereux revealed that Glenroe’s producers were preoccupied with entertaining the audience, which they deemed to be more important than the inclusion of social issues (1998: 103). The relationship between production staff and the audience, however, is not at all clear. While producers may aim to please the audience, their view of what the audience wants may not be founded in real feedback from viewers. While ratings may ultimately determine the fate of a show they do not indicate to producers what audiences liked about a show. There is also a considerable time lag between the conception of a soap opera story, for example, its production and its transmission. Production teams are often temporally separated from the audience. They may already be on another production by the time an audience has had an opportunity to react to their work (Elliott 1972: 140). Rather than relying on real feedback from the audience, which is often simply not available, production teams are more likely to be guided by the approbation of colleagues through ‘imaginary feedback’ (Elliott 1972: 159; Cantor and Cantor 1992: 96; Pekurny 1982: 136–7; Alvarado and Buscombe 1978: 251). As we will see, such second-hand notions of what the audience wanted shaped the form and content of *Fair City* stories.
Changing Relationships between Workers and Broadcasting Organisations

Relationships between workers and broadcasting organisations have changed in recent years due to the increasing 'casualisation' of television work. Many broadcasting organisations no longer offer secure employment. Tunstall’s study of television producers reveals that the British television industry has been transformed through casualisation, an increase in short term contract work, the closure of studios and a massive decrease in union power. Tunstall's interviews with producers reveal that what was once a job for life is now characterised by insecurity with typical contracts lasting no longer than two years (Tunstall 1993: 12–13). This is now also the case in RTÉ (Hazelkorn 1996: 33–4). Tunstall describes the new phenomena in terms of ‘slimming-down’ and ‘speeding up’.

The slimming-down affected not only the number of people on a camera-crew but the number of people responsible for researching, filming and editing a programme. Speeding-up took different forms in different genres; but in drama, for instance, a producer who in the mid-1980s might have had 15 days to film an hour's drama would by the early 1990s have been reduced to 10 or 11 days (Tunstall 1993: 13).

Technology has played a role in this transformation, which is clearly visible in the hectic output of Fair City. The production team now handles many jobs previously handled by technical crew. This has decreased the power of crews while increasing the workload and responsibility of producers (Hazelkorn 1996: 36).

Breed's 1955 study of conformity in newsrooms reveals a number of conditions that are conducive to conformity and commitment. Commitment may be encouraged by mobility aspirations where toeing the company line may improve one's chances of promotion. Breed also found that commitment was encouraged by the pleasant nature of the work activity and by the non-financial benefits that come from news work. High-morale and esteem were found to encourage a sense of obligation to the organisation. Breed's chief explanation for conformity and commitment lay in
the formation of 'reference groups'. These created a shared set of norms within the organisation that rewarded newsmen through membership of an in-group but also maintained conformity and commitment through a shared culture (Breed 1955: 279–281). Recent industry changes are at odds with the conditions for commitment described by Breed. It is likely then that the relationship between television workers and their employers is becoming more tenuous. Broadcasting organisations may be becoming locations for casualised, short-term employment rather than institutions that instil a culture and a code of practice in their employees. This is a central concern in soap opera production, which depends on many temporary and part-time employees. While some research suggests that production work is influenced by networks and unwritten rules, recent developments suggest that these informal controls may be changing or disappearing. On *Fair City* there was an identifiable culture and a way of doing things. However, the simple threat of unemployment also acted as a clear limitation on creative work.

**Control and Constraint**

Pressures, from both inside and outside broadcasting organisations, constrain television workers. Externally broadcasters are answerable to government regulators who can, through legislation, force broadcasters to change programme content and scheduling (See Cantor and Cantor 1992: 39–43; Alvarado and Buscombe 1978: 11). Numerous pressure groups, acting as informal regulators, can influence broadcasting decisions (See Gitlin 1983: 245–63; Devereux 1998: 105). Organisations are also strongly influenced by competitors in a fight for audience figures. Scheduling decisions are often made in the light of what competitors are showing at the same
time. Programme formats are frequently copied in attempts to emulate competitors' successes.\(^56\)

Internally production work faces numerous constraints. In-house censorship may be imposed in anticipation of the reactions of regulators and pressure groups (Gitlin 1983: 283). This is what Wesley Burrowes described as an RTÉ ‘Tic’ (1977: 20). Despite their high level of autonomy producers are always ultimately answerable to senior management. Interdepartmental competition may also affect production. This frequently focuses on access to scarce resources (Golding and Elliott 1979: 302). As Burns revealed in his study of the BBC, there may be a pecking order within an organisation where certain departments are favoured over others (1969: 65). Historically, RTÉ drama, given its high cost to output ratio, has been seen as the first department to suffer in budget cuts. Accordingly, *Fair City* is produced under an obligation to be highly cost effective.

Self-censorship is one of the most frequently discussed forms of production constraint. Self censorship assumes that past sanctions imposed on staff for programmes deemed to be inappropriate, by management or the government, are embedded in an organisation’s culture (see Kelly and Rolston 1995: 580). As with the case of Benjy Riordans attempted affair, producers may pre-emptively remove potentially problematic material in anticipation of possible opposition (see Burrowes 1977: 96–7). Self-censorship is, however, a complex issue. As suggested by Breed, it is likely to be encouraged by strong organisational commitment. A casualised work force is unlikely to internalise organisational norms and values in the same way as a permanent in-house staff and so may be less prone to self-censorship. Conversely their ignorance of the unwritten rules of the organisation may hamper their autonomy.

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\(^{56}\) This is evident in the late 1990's rash of reality shows, fly-on-the-wall documentaries and in the scramble for the 'Who wants to be a millionaire?' franchise.
Their casual status may also leave them incapable of insisting on content changes if they want another contract. As we shall see freedom of expression is often hampered in the production of Fair City through a lack of power and security among the show’s writers and cast.

**Soap Opera Working Conditions**

For many writers, soap opera production is distinguished by a shift in the traditional balance of power between producer and writer. While some contend that television is a producers' medium, soap opera commentators see that soap opera is generally controlled by its chief writer (Alvarado and Buscombe 1978: 30; Elliott 1972: 128; Cantor and Cantor 1992: 71; Tunstall 1993: 1; Newcomb and Alley 1982: 88). The chief writer is also the holder and interpreter of a soap opera's character ‘bible’. This is a record setting out character descriptions and their histories. All the narrative possibilities of soap opera are character driven. The bible, therefore, defines the parameters of what is possible within a production (see Buckingham 1987: 15). As we will see, in Fair City there was no formal bible but characters’ histories and personalities were a key determinant of permissible storylines.

There are of course limits to a writer's power. Cantor and Pingree describe their position as 'precarious' and like everybody else in soap opera production they are 'limited by the constraints of ratings, corporate policy, budget, cast, technical and logistical capability, and the implications of the past story, character, and “style” of a show (1983: 60). Cantor and Pingree note that writers are often more likely to break with convention when a show's ratings have fallen (Cantor and Pingree 1983: 59–60; see also Turow 1982: 124). This is also, however, the period when they are most likely to be fired. Breaks with convention produced under such conditions are likely
to be aimed at boosting audience ratings. This will not necessarily entail an increase in the diversity of representations of public issues. It is interesting to note here, however, that *Fair City’s* controversial abortion story coincided with RTÉ’s loss of *Coronation Street* to its competitor TV3. Also, as we shall see, the Kay McCoy abortion story contradicted the view that writers hold more power than producers in soap opera.

Chief writers do not produce finished scripts. They lay down the paths that characters will follow and set out how narrative strands will interact with each other. Scene-breakdown writers break these down into manageable scenes. The dialogue is then written, in Fordist fashion, by teams of dialogue writers. This is a largely powerless and de-skilled task.

The positions of dialogue writers and others on the production team are almost without power or freedom. Such roles, by definition, are powerless. Duties entail supplying appropriate dialogue and minor incidents. The head writer supplies the outlines for the stories, and even when the stories are very brief, he or she will edit the scripts, often revising them extensively (Cantor and Pingree 1983: 60).

Not only do dialogue writers lack autonomy, they must also work under time pressure to produce standardised material. The need for consistency in soap opera demands a generic form (Paterson 1981: 58). The need to appeal to, and maintain, steady audiences demands the use of a universally accessible linguistic register and stereotypical characters. As Geraghty has pointed out soap operas have to be ‘comprehensible to both the committed follower and the casual viewer.’ Characterisation then must be ‘swift and sharp: the immediate sense of what a

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57 Paterson has outlined how this applies to the production of *Coronation Street*:

Each episode is the collective product of conference, storyline writers and scriptwriter—with the scriptwriter credited as author. Coherence with preceding narrative detail, character development, continuity between scripts and maintenance of the ‘style’ of *Coronation Street* is
character is and what role s/he is likely to play has to be given quickly, using such elements as clothes and voice’ (1981: 19). Soap opera writing is limited by the demands of a division of labour, the former history of its characters and its fundamental ratings logic. As this study reveals, for *Fair City* writers, working as part of a rationalised team was a source of considerable creative limitation.

Despite the lack of autonomy that is attributed to soap opera workers by many commentators there are suggestions that the soap opera production process does provide some room for negotiation and autonomy. Devereux found that actors often partially re-wrote scripts that they found objectionable. One of *Glenroe*’s cast, a traveller, was frequently consulted on items of traveller language and culture to ensure that the programme’s representations were reliable (Devereux 1998: 105–6). Such possibilities were, however, very limited on the set of *Fair City*. Opportunities for cast and crew to contribute to creative decisions had decreased with the mounting rationalisation of the show.

**Breaking with Convention in Television Production**

Many researchers describe television as a closed, conservative system (see Devereux 1998; Gitlin 1983). Turow adopts an alternative approach studying how, on rare occasions, television changes rather than why it stays the same. Turow’s research explores the development of three shows that radically break with traditional form and content. His work has generated a number of hypotheses about the organisational conditions that may give rise to such ‘unconventional innovation’ (1982: 108). Turow hypothesises that many breaks with television convention are associated with crises in broadcasting organisations. He suggests that ‘unconventional shows tend to

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* ensured by the script editor. Thus no out of place characterisation is possible, and any biographical details in question are referred to the Street's biographer (Paterson 1981: 58).
be produced by companies, and sold to networks, lagging in the ratings or experiencing extraordinary changes in their competitive environment’. Innovative shows may tend to be produced ‘by firms not comfortably engaged in the ongoing production of other programs’. It also possible that the ‘coming together of an unestablished production firm with a network experiencing extraordinary problems or changes’ may favour the development and airing of unconventional shows (Turow 1982: 109).

Turow also points out that change is often driven by individuals, particularly those who are new to a position or ‘executives wanting to risk their current positions to move to more powerful ones as a direct result of their involvement in the programs’ (Turow 1982: 109). Finally Turow suggests that unconventional shows ‘are conceptualised outside the normal channels of typical production firm/network program development’. Due to this, and the fact that they are perceived to be risky, such programmes ‘take a much longer time than do conventional shows to move from the concept generating stage to the production and airing stage (Turow 1982: 109).

These hypotheses can be usefully applied to the study of creativity in Fair City’s production. They assist in understanding the possibilities within the show to break with television conventions and to provide more diverse representations of Irish society.

**How to Study Television Production?**

Production research employs a variety of methods and methodologies. Studies can be divided broadly between those that provide a richly descriptive close-up of production and those that give a broader structural overview. Studies such as Alvarado and Buscombe (1972) and Millington and Nelson (1986) avoid any extrapolation from
their observations into broader questions of social order and social change. These studies provide an in-depth description of television production and the work practices it involves. Such research also accesses the meanings and motivations held by cast and crew in their work. It is qualitative and interpretative. O'Neill has described this approach clearly.

To look at just what makes broadcast work meaningful, means beginning with participants or actors’ own knowledge and common-sense categories of what constitutes distinctness or meaning in the activity. It means looking at the background expectancies and assumptions which members use to interpret their situation and achieve intersubjective understandings. It means looking at the common wisdom and culture of the broadcast environment and how members of this exclusive club make sense of their private world (O'Neill 1993: 65–6).

Such research brings the reader into the production office or on to the studio floor. There is in-depth description of the setting, the work routine and so on. In many cases the reader meets the workers involved. Alvarado and Buscombe's study is filled largely with the voices of producers, writers, actors, technicians, directors and so forth. Millington and Nelson bring us onto the set of *The Boys from the Blackstuff* and move in detail through every aspect of the production from wardrobe to the production team. Elliott provides vivid accounts of how production meetings were held, the decisions that were made and the power play involved in making them (1972). Devereux provides similar reports from the set of *Glenroe* (1997 and 1998). Dawson provides an ethnographic account of some aspects of work on *Fair City* (1998).

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58 Alvarado and Buscombe have also included detailed studio plans, production sketches and so on. These add to the reader's sense of immersion within the production context (See Alvarado and Buscombe 1978: 129–139).
The majority of these in-depth interpretative studies, where researchers actually enter studios and production offices, are conducted through two main methods, in-depth interviews and observational research. Newcomb provides a brief but useful review of the application of these methods. The big advantage of observation lies in its 'on the ground' observation of production processes. This allows a detailed observation of the exercise of power in conflict, negotiation and decision-making. Perhaps its greatest opportunity lies in the ability to constantly refine questions, goals and direction as research progresses (Newcomb 1991: 100).

The difference between participant observation and non-participant observation needs to be mentioned here. Participant observation is frequently covert. Here the researcher assumes a role or an identity within the social milieu being studied. To perform such observation in television production would require that one had the skills and qualifications necessary to gain employment in television. For this reason, I have adopted a non-participant observation approach. But whether one acts as a crew member or purely as a non-participating observer the Hawthorn effect or observer effect is a threat to the reliability of any findings (see Sarantakos 1993: 246). Here Elliott makes the important point that while production staff may consciously or unconsciously act unusually before an observer they will not do so to an extent that threatens the production of a programme (Elliott 1972: 7). The research process may also, of course, affect the researcher. Newcomb points out that 'dependence on the goodwill of host institutions or individuals may result in too easy acceptance of their point of view' (Newcomb 1991: 101). In observation research there is the danger of 'going native', becoming familiar with a social milieu to the point that ‘there is little we find remarkable and we find it difficult to imagine how things might be otherwise’ (Elliott 1972: 174).
Observation, of any kind, is also restricted temporally to the period of observation. Thus it provides a 'snap shot' of production work which poses problems for any attempt to articulate findings with broader social processes. Interviews overcome this temporal restriction by offering access to historical perspectives where 'subjects have usually been involved in many projects, often for many years. They are thus able to point to changes caused by technological, financial, or regulatory factors' (Newcomb 1991: 101). Interviews also provide a multitude of perspectives on a given situation unlike observation research where one is confined to one's own perception of the production process. As with observation research, interviews can be used to develop the research process, creating new perspectives and new questions as new information emerges. The use of unstructured or semi-structured interviews leaves this possibility open.

Interviews also have their shortcomings. The reliability of respondents is never certain. Secondly, respondents, such as television producers, may be accustomed to answering questions on their work and may deliver 'canned answers' (Newcomb 1991: 101). In addition, while there is the danger of 'going native' in observation research, the insights gained from interviews are also essentially native. Interviews do not allow us to see television production as an alien and peculiar social setting. Many interviews 'add up to an industry’s view of itself' (Gitlin 1983: 14). This is undoubtedly valuable but such data need to be approached critically and skeptically. Every method has its shortcomings, it is important to mitigate this by triangulating methods as much as possible. This study’s data have been gained largely through a combination of interviews and non-participant observation. Documentary research also permitted me to locate and understand the production of *Fair City* within broader structural processes (see Chapter Six). As we will see in the
next section understanding television production requires that one merge global and local perspectives. This has informed the methods employed in this research and also the choice of the Bourdieuan framework that underpins it.

**Merging Global, Local and Personal Processes**

Unlike the qualitative and interpretative studies described above, many studies approach television production as a structural and institutional concern. Many researchers provide detailed studies of television production and the social systems in which it is embedded (Cantor and Cantor 1992; Pekurny 1982; Ettema 1982). They do not, however, provide the same level of interpretative detail as the studies mentioned above. We hear about the work of producers and so on but we hear about it from outside. We do not get to hear the voices of those involved in production and how they see and understand their work. These studies help us understand how the objective aspects of production are shaped and made regular by the social systems in which they are embedded. They do not uncover why or how television workers make decisions. They do not reveal the social and cultural origins of television workers’ ideas and what they hold up as their definitions of ‘the good, the true and the beautiful’ (Bourdieu and Haacke 1995: 143).

Both interpretative and structural approaches to production research leave gaps. Researchers like Muriel Cantor and Philip Elliott have attempted to merge micro-social and macro-social enquiry. They argue that we cannot fully understand interactions on a studio floor without also, for example, having some understanding of the global economic and political systems that affect media organisations. A satisfactory investigation of television production must adopt a technique that merges the macro with the micro. It must explain how global trends affect micro-social
interactions on the studio floor. Through this merging of the micro and the macro we can understand the production of *Fair City* and the breadth of representations it can provide. In addition to merging the global, the local and the personal, a deeper understanding of television production requires the merging of subjectivist and objectivist methodologies, where detailed ethnographic description of the workplace can be located within broader questions of organisation, finance, politics and so on.

**Exploring and Explaining the Complexity of Production**

Television has a range of cultures and modes of organisation. It exists as a socially bounded system, regulated through formal rules and also informal culture and social networks. Although it is, in some respects a closed system, television is changing. This is largely due to external pressures (see Chapter Six). New modes of work organisation are emerging. Recent changes have consequences for the work and occupational culture of people who produce soap operas. As noted above, an understanding of media production requires a marriage of macro and micro, subjectivist and objectivist, perspectives. It is necessary, then, to find a theoretical model that will allow a coherent investigation and understanding of this complex and changing system. Habermas’ concept of the public sphere can describe how soap opera affects discussion and debate in democratic societies. His conceptual model, however, cannot be adapted to the complexities of production research.

**Habermas and Production Research**

Habermas’ model, initially, appears to offer a promising conceptual model for the study of soap opera production. The concepts of lifeworld and system describe the kind of macro/micro, objectivist/subjectivist merger necessary to understand how
social processes are refracted into television programmes via the everyday decisions of television production staff.

As we have seen television producers operate on unwritten, and sometimes unannounced, rules. They depend on stocks of tacit knowledge. Often, they will know how to approach aspects of a programme, but cannot say what it is they know or how they came to know it. This can be described using Habermas's concept of the lifeworld. This describes a stock of socially accumulated knowledge that gives meaning to the world around us, and our actions within it. As Habermas describes it the lifeworld is formed from 'more or less diffuse, always unproblematic, background convictions' that serve as a source of 'situation definitions that are presupposed by participants as unproblematic' (1995: 100). Peters refers to the lifeworld as 'the everyday realm of face-to-face talk, experiences, traditions, understandings, norms and… solidarity' (1993: 557). The lifeworld is, as Peters suggests, a source of social integration. It is also a historical phenomenon, storing 'the interpretive work of preceding generations' (Habermas 1995: 70). It could be supposed then that people working on Fair City might share a common set of ‘background convictions’ that serve to bind them as a group. Not only this, resembling ideas about self-censorship, this shared sense of what is desirable or permissible is laid down by past members of the organisation.

The lifeworld cannot, however, be separated from the social domains in which the creation of meaning and action take place. Habermas articulates the creation of meaning with three distinct social domains. These are material, normative and subjective (Habermas 1995: 100). The lifeworld then does not only describe a stock of knowledge but also the background that makes this knowledge socially significant. Habermas writes that 'participants in communication assign the various elements of an
action situation to one of the three worlds and thereby incorporate the actual action
situation into their pre-interpreted lifeworld' (Habermas 1995: 100). The lifeworld of
an RTÉ drama producer, for example, would include not only knowledge of television
drama production but also the technical resources, ethics or rules and aesthetic
conventions that allow this knowledge to be used productively.

Linked to Habermas's concept of the lifeworld is his concept of the system. Small, simple societies can be held together through social integration made possible by a shared, implicit and unquestioned lifeworld. As societies become larger and more differentiated, there is a rationalisation of the lifeworld. This brings about a new reflexivity, such as that which Habermas describes in the public sphere (Habermas 1989: 56). Unquestioned tradition is thrown off; much of the knowledge previously hidden in the lifeworld is now open to discussion and reflection. The effects of this rationalization, however, are not wholly positive. Habermas writes that 'the rationalization of the lifeworld makes possible the emergence and growth of subsystems whose independent imperatives turn back destructively upon the lifeworld itself' (Habermas 1992: 186). The rationalisation of the lifeworld is ultimately the source of a rational bureaucratic 'system', based in expert knowledge, divorced from most people's everyday existence. Complex societies then become characterised not by social integration but by systems integration. The system is ruled and driven by what Habermas describes as the two steering media, power and money (Habermas 1992: 390). In complex societies, the lifeworld and the system can exist in symbiosis. This may take the form of simple co-existence where both exist but are visibly separate. This, however, may change as the legitimation and reproduction of the system requires intervention in the lifeworld. That is to say that systemic, bureaucratic imperatives become insinuated into everyday language, values and
Things are different when system integration intervenes in the very forms of social integration... the subjective inconspicuousness of systemic constraints that instrumentize a communicatively structured lifeworld takes on the character of deception, of objectively false consciousness. The effects of the system on the lifeworld, which change the structure of contexts of action in socially integrated groups, have to remain hidden. The reproductive constraints that instrumentize a lifeworld without weakening the illusion of its self-sufficiency have to hide, so to speak, in the pores of communicative action (Habermas 1992: 187).

Since the mid-nineteenth century, alongside the decline of the public sphere, the system has begun to permeate the lifeworld. The previously private realm of the family, for example, has been merged with the system through the welfare state and the commodification of all aspects of life (Peters 1993: 558). The lifeworld, mirroring the system, is now penetrated and shaped by political and economic power.

This conceptual model could be used to describe the position of the producers of Fair City. It may initially appear to offer the merger of macro and micro-social processes which production research requires. While producers have stocks of knowledge that are peculiar to their particular work, they are nevertheless inextricably bound into a surrounding global system. The global media system is, indeed, driven by the steering media of power and money (see Herman and McChesney 1997; Schiller 2000; Gandy 2002; Chomsky and Herman 1994). This informs producers’ work and the meanings attached to it. As the global commodification of media continues, one might speculate that the lifeworld of producers, once integrated by an understanding of television drama as creative expression, may be colonised by a global system where drama becomes a commodity. This is a pessimistic application of Habermas’ ideas to drama production. Habermas qualifies this by recognising the possibility of resistance by 'responsible actors' (Habermas 1992: 390). This is the
point where difficulties begin in applying Habermas' conceptual model to researching the production of *Fair City*.

There is some inconsistency in Habermas’ position on how cultural producers can resist the system. On one hand, Habermas acknowledges that resistance to 'the system' is possible among cultural producers; breaks with convention can happen. In his conceptual model, however, he does not allow for this possibility. The first obstacle to resistance comes in Habermas' denial that people may have explicit knowledge of the colonisation of their lifeworld by the system. ‘The mediatization of the lifeworld takes effect on and within the structures of the lifeworld; it is not one of those processes that are available as themes within the lifeworld, and thus it cannot be read off from the intuitive knowledge of members (Habermas 1992: 186). There is no room for the resistance of responsible actors here since people cannot resist phenomena whose existence they are incapable of recognizing.

Habermas describes the system as penetrating all social domains to the same extent. It is difficult to see how this may be applied to the television ‘system’. It cannot be said, for example, that public service broadcasting and commercial broadcasting, particularly in America, are steered to the same extent by the pursuit of political power and money. As Peters points out:

Habermas pays little attention to questions of media system: the differences between market and public-service models, for instance, do not inform the analysis of *STPS* [The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere]. In many ways, *STPS* is mostly the child of *Dialectics of the Enlightenment* [sic] (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1969) in its tale of a transition from ‘a culture-debating to a culture-consuming public’ (Peters 1993: 560). The steering media of the system do not, for example, equally guide the artistic avant-garde, community theatre, and soap opera. We might also enquire how Habermas can

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59 This poses the same problem as many models of ideology. It disallows any form of willed political action (see Garnham 1986: 19).
defend this view when the rationalization of the lifeworld has introduced reflection and an interrogation of what is taken for granted and seen as natural. According to Habermas, the influence of the system on the lifeworld is impervious to reflection and resistance.

The modern form of understanding is too transparent to provide a niche for this structural violence by means of inconspicuous restrictions on communication. Under these conditions it is to be expected that the competition between forms of system and social integration would become more visible than previously. In the end, systemic mechanisms suppress forms of social integration even in those areas where a consensus-dependent coordination of action cannot be replaced, that is, where the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld is at stake. In these areas, the mediatization of the lifeworld assumes the form of a colonization (Habermas 1992: 196).

Habermas' system could be likened to radon gas. The public cannot detect it without expert help, yet it invisibly and noxiously pervades society. This does not present rich opportunities for resistance. Compounding this Habermas does not provide any weapons with which 'responsible actors' can fight the invisible but ubiquitous influence of the system. Power in Habermas' writing is restricted to the steering media of the system. For Layder 'Habermas tends to view power as if it was a single type of phenomenon rather than something which takes on different forms and functions at many different locations in society’. He continues that Habermas understands power as 'something which is attached to political institutions in the service of societal goals’. He does not understand power as a 'circulatory medium which operates through the whole social body at even the most microscopic levels’ (Layder 1994: 204). This makes it difficult to understand how power operates in everyday encounters on the studio floor. There is a critical difficulty in exploring the work of Habermas's 'responsible actors'. If we cannot conceptualise power outside 'the system', how can we describe, and research, the power to resist it? This offers
little hope of understanding how and why programmes like *Fair City* may occasionally break with convention.

**Operationalising the Lifeworld?**

There are further difficulties with Habermas's model. As we have seen, to study the potential autonomy of drama producers, we must be able to discuss individuals, group cultures, organisational structures and national and global environments. Habermas’ concept of the lifeworld blurs these categories together and does not allow them to be picked apart.

Habermas tends to compact the world of everyday interaction into the wider social context. In Habermas’s case, this is done through the notion of the lifeworld itself. However, such ‘drawing together’ has the effect of eliminating the 'interaction order’... There is no distinction between the constraints and enablements that emerge from the preservation and reproduction of social identities in the immediate circumstances of encounters/and those of the wider social and cultural milieu. Nor is there any provision for the analysis of meanings and definitions of reality which are embedded in local circumstances and which cannot be simply read off from an analysis of system elements (Layder 1994: 205).

The lifeworld fuses action with the social domains in which it occurs. Using the lifeworld as a concept in research, we cannot separate out television producers' actions, their shared meaning and social milieu. Not only does Habermas fail to provide the 'resolution' we need to understand soap opera production but the ‘colonisation’ of the lifeworld by the system makes it impossible to conceptually pick apart the lifeworld from the system. If we accept that individuals’ lifeworlds are universally and evenly colonised by 'the system' we cannot differentiate between organisational and national specificities. Using Habermas's model, for example, we cannot differentiate between the structural constraints on a producer for Fox Television and *Fair City’s* producer. Habermas' model successfully fuses the concerns of phenomenologists and symbolic interactionists with broader systems
theory elements (Layder 1994: 205). The difficulty for research is that it does this too perfectly. The components are fused together with no user-serviceable parts. Habermas's model cannot be operationalised to research soap opera production. It is necessary then to look elsewhere for a middle-range theory that can facilitate an understanding of *Fair City*'s potential contribution to the public sphere.
Chapter Five

A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Soap Opera Production

This study aims to uncover *Fair City’s* potential contribution to the public sphere by revealing what it can and cannot represent within its production system. To do this, given the research limitations of Habermas’s lifeworld and system model, it is necessary to employ a middle-range theory that can accommodate this investigation. Bourdieu provides such a model, which has been successfully applied to other areas of cultural production but never to soap opera.

The Attractions of Bourdieu’s Sociology

Pierre Bourdieu has provided a comprehensive and coherent account of the processes surrounding cultural consumption and production. In researching soap opera it is necessary to overcome traditional divides in theory and research, for example, objectivist/subjectivist, structure-agency, macro/micro perspectives. Bourdieu’s model transcends these traditional dichotomies in both theory and research.

Social sciences have for most of the twentieth century been internally divided by a number of dichotomies (see Sztompka 1993). Typically perspectives on either side of such dichotomies have been useful, but inevitably incomplete. This is due to a general failure to assimilate the work of opposing perspectives. British cultural studies, for example, had been divided between structuralism and culturalism. Structuralism explained culture and social action in terms of overarching structures of power seeing little room for individual freedom. Culturalism, on the other hand, saw culture as an emergent phenomenon produced at a micro level largely divorced from large-scale social structures. As Bennett points out both perspectives are useful but
incompatible and, until recently, mutually exclusive (Bennett 1994: 223). Garnham and Williams argue that the value of Bourdieu’s work to British media and cultural studies is that ‘he confronts and dialectically supersedes these partial and opposed positions (structuralism and culturalism)’ (1986: 117). Fowler sees that Bourdieu renews ‘the active side of sensuous human practice which culturalism draws on’ while tempering the ‘expectations of rule-following’ and the underestimation of ‘creative disorder’ prevalent in structuralism (1997: 2). Bourdieu facilitates the study of the motivations and actions of television workers within the constraints of the television system. By allowing the recognition and study of individual decisions, within the context of overarching fields of power, his conceptual model allows a detailed exploration of how *Fair City* may address social issues. Unlike Habermas, Bourdieu allows for the resistance of ‘responsible actors’ (see Habermas 1992: 390).

Similarly, sociology has been divided by views that see people as either autonomous rational actors or the pawns of social structures. In this respect, Bourdieu has ‘combined elements of structuralism with approaches less hostile to the transformative potential of human beings’ (Fowler 1997: 2). Fowler sees the transcendence of ‘the sterility of the objectivist versus subjectivist debate within social theory’ as one of the most attractive features of Bourdieu’s sociology (1997: 17). Rather than treating television workers as automatons inside the television system or as completely free existential actors, Bourdieu’s model recognises a dialectical relationship between work practices and the structures in which they take place. Within Bourdieu’s model those who work on *Fair City* are not simply the puppets of the production system. Their individual actions shape that system.

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60 Bennett also makes clear that this theoretical impasse has been overcome by a general turn to a Gramscian perspective (Bennett 1994).
Simultaneously, however, actions and perceptions are affected by the history and practical necessities of the programme.

Fowler adds that, for Bourdieu, society has a double structure that is both objective and material but also subjective and cultural. Thus, people ‘collectively or individually, transform or reproduce their social structures, but they do so within specific social conditions’ including those that are internalised as part of their culture (1997: 23). In this respect Bourdieu’s model allows one to understand not only the effect of organisation and funding on television production but also incorporates into this the role of organisational culture, which is an essential component of the television system. As we will see there is a *Fair City* culture. There are stories that are *Fair City* stories and others that are not.

Garnham and Williams praise Bourdieu’s model for its historical perspective (1986: 117). They point out that one of Bourdieu’s central criticisms of traditional sociology has been its ‘genesis amnesia’; emphasising, that ‘Bourdieu is concerned to stress that all human action, unlike its reconstruction in science, takes place irreversibly in time’ (1986: 119). Soap opera production has a history. With historical momentum certain practices may be seen simply as ‘the way things are done’. The study of soap opera production requires the historical perspective provided by Bourdieu’s model. As we saw in chapter one, Kay McCoy’s abortion stood out, not just as a controversy, but as a departure from the historical precedents of Irish soap opera. To understand *Fair City*’s potential contribution to the public sphere it is important to know why it broke with convention on this occasion. It is equally important to understand to what extent the programme follows unwritten but historically durable rules.
Bourdieu’s sociology incorporates and integrates many elements that previously only existed separately in different sociological traditions. Accordingly, it can be broadly applied in research. Marlière argues that the ‘great advantage’ of Bourdieu's sociology is ‘that it can be applied to any social object and is powerful enough to analyse forms of social practice (behind those that are obvious and taken for granted), which have hardly even been detected by previous research’ (2000: 199).

Bourdieu’s model is particularly well suited to the study of soap opera production. As we have seen a programme like *Fair City* is the product of a complex negotiation of many influences from inside and outside RTÉ. Organisational culture, social networks and numerous power relationships affect the form and content of the programme. Externally, broadcasting organisations are constrained by economic, political and technical processes in their environment. Bourdieu's model can accommodate the work of individuals within organisational and social structures while recognising the dynamic and emergent nature of the relationship between the two. In order to begin to apply Bourdieu’s model to the study of soap opera production it is necessary to ‘unpack’ its various elements. Initially, it is necessary to address Bourdieu’s concept of social fields.

**Social Fields**

Rather than seeing society as a single entity, with a single set of goals and rules, Bourdieu sees that it can be divided into numerous fields. Possible examples are politics, sport, fashion or broadcasting. Each field 'prescribes its particular values and possesses its own regulative principles' (Wacquant 1992: 17). Fields are competitive spaces of uneven power relations. A person’s capacity for action in a given field is determined by their relative position of power within the field.
A field is a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. It contains people who dominate and others who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which the various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies (Bourdieu 1998: 40–1).

As mentioned earlier, television production is a site of conflict between diverse groups, each trying to impose their vision of how television should be made (see Elliott 1972; Gitlin 1983). It is also a bounded system with a peculiar set of ‘rules of the game’. Fields can be likened to games; they have peculiar rules and prizes (see Lamaison 1985: 113). People within a field strive to win the prizes it offers, while acting within the rules of the field. Unlike a game, however, part of the play within a social field is to play with the rules themselves. The ultimate prize is to alter the rules of the game to one's own benefit, where they favour one’s own skills and resources. Those who can impose the rules of a field are in a greater position to accumulate the prizes or ‘capitals’ available. As Wacquant points out, during these struggles ‘the very shape and divisions of the field becomes a central stake’ since to ‘alter the distribution and relative weight of forms of capital is tantamount to modifying the structure of the field’. This holds true even in bureaucracy, ‘the field par excellence of rules and regulations, playing with the rule is part and parcel of the game’ (Wacquant 1992: 17–18). We can view Fair City’s production as a social field where there is a struggle to define the programme and its stories. This is an uneven struggle between producers, editors, writers, cast and so on.

It is important to note that fields have histories. They therefore have historical inertia. When a person acts within a social field they are acting not only in the context of the present but also of the past. As Bourdieu explains past actions and expressions become sedimented in the structures and language of a field. In the
artistic field for example a particular kind of artist will be viewed, and will view his own work, in the light of artistic ‘traditions and norms inherited from the past’ (Bourdieu 1993: 140–1). In any field, one struggles not only against the power of the present but also the often-unconscious weight of the past (see Bourdieu 1990b: 163). To understand the production of Fair City within RTÉ it is necessary to understand not only present practices, but also the history of television drama within the station.

Dominant and Dominated Fields

In reality the social space is a multi-dimensional space, an open set of fields that are relatively autonomous, i.e., more or less strongly and directly subordinated, in their functioning, and their transformations, to the field of economic production. Within each of these sub-spaces, the occupants of the dominated positions are constantly engaged in struggles of different forms (Bourdieu 1985: 736).

Every field is characterised by dominant and dominated fractions. Similarly, some social fields have greater relative power than others. Bourdieu describes fields as exerting influence on the fields that surround them. The most powerful fields exert the greatest influence on weaker fields, influencing their form and how they operate. Bourdieu illustrates, for example, how the fields of politics and economics powerfully influence the field of journalism.

Bourdieu sees the field of journalism to be distinguished by the fact that it is influenced far more by external forces than other ‘fields of cultural production’. This is due to its dependence on market demand among readers and advertisers. There is, according to Bourdieu, a conflict between purist journalists, who wish to preserve an autonomous journalistic field, and those who are influenced by the market. Bourdieu offers the comparison of France’s prestige broadsheet Le Monde and the commercial broadcaster TF1. Bourdieu argues that this ‘conflict of the “pure” versus “market”'
can be seen in every field’ (1998: 53). In television drama, the same opposition can be found between prestigious single-plays and soap opera.

If we wish to understand the work of soap opera producers, or any other cultural producer, then there are a number of questions of power, inside and outside the field of cultural production, to be answered. Within the field there are questions of ‘position takings’ (Bourdieu 1993: 135). Those who enjoy prestige and power as ‘purists’ are in Bourdieu’s view least likely to collaborate with external pressures (Bourdieu 1998: 62). Those who lack power within the field of cultural production may be more inclined to produce popular material and cater for the demands of business and government. As Bourdieu puts it ‘if I want to find out what one or another journalist is going to say or write, or will find obvious or unthinkable, normal or worthless, I have to know the position that journalist occupies in this space’ (Bourdieu 1998: 41). That is not to say that a cultural producer’s work can simply be read as a function of the position of power they may occupy. A person’s position of power in any field is, in turn, a product of their knowledge of the rules of the field. Bourdieu describes this with reference to an interview with a television programme executive.

When I asked him why he staged one item before another, his reply was, simply, ‘it's obvious’. This is undoubtedly the reason that he had the job he had: his way of seeing things was perfectly adapted to the objective exigencies of his position. Of course, occupying as they do different positions within journalism, different journalists are less likely to find obvious what he found so obvious. The executives who worship at the altar of audience ratings have a feeling of ‘obviousness’ which is not necessarily shared by the freelancer who proposes a topic only to be told that it’s ‘not interesting’. The journalistic media cannot be represented as uniform (Bourdieu 1998: 26).

As noted above, an understanding of television production requires a merger of global and local perspectives. To fully understand the field of cultural production, and cultural producers, however, there are other issues of power to be considered.
One must consider the power of the medium in question. This has to be considered in terms of its market share but also the symbolic weight that it carries. There are clearly different opportunities in working for a national or regional broadcaster, single plays or soap opera (see Bourdieu 1998: 41). Whitemore colourfully describes this, seeing that there is a ‘remarkably rigid structure of class distinctions within television drama’:

> At the top are the aristocrats of the single play, then come those who work on prestige serials, followed by the manufacturers of the popular series, with soap opera labourers languishing at the bottom. Somewhere in the middle – the equivalent of skilled plumbers, perhaps or electrical engineers – are those who make dramatisations and adaptations (Whitemore in Self 1984: 1–2).

Bourdieu insists that, for a complete picture, one also has to consider ‘the position of the national media field within the global media field’ (Bourdieu 1998: 41). There is, for example, a major difference in the power held by British media compared with their under-funded Irish counter-parts. Again, this has both economic and symbolic elements, for example, more prestige attaches to employment by the BBC than RTÉ. It is far more prestigious, and lucrative, to work on the BBC’s *EastEnders* than it is to contribute to *Fair City*. As we shall see, RTÉ generally, and its soap operas, in particular have been strongly influenced by more powerful and prestigious broadcasters in neighbouring Britain.

Following Bourdieu’s logic, if we want to understand *Fair City* as a field we must ‘take into account the totality of the objective power relations that structure the field’. Here ‘invisible power relations’ translate into ‘personal conflicts and existential choices’ (Bourdieu 1998: 53). The work of individuals working on *Fair City* can only be fully understood then if we understand the history and power relations of the fields that influence their work. We must be aware then of where
RTÉ stands among other Irish and international television broadcasters (see Bourdieu 1998: 40). According to Bourdieu’s scheme all those fields that are dominant over RTÉ, predominantly politics and economics, penetrate it and influence its operation as a field. Accordingly the production of *Fair City* must be understood in the context of economic and political processes, past and present.

**Habitus**

To further understand Bourdieu’s conceptual scheme, and its application to this study, it is necessary to explore the concept of *habitus*, which allows Bourdieu’s break with traditional dichotomies in social theory and research. The combination of *habitus* and field allows a duality of structure. For Bourdieu, it is necessary to ‘escape from the realism of structure’ employed by objectivist sociology because it freezes structures ‘treating them as realities already constituted outside of the history of the group’. In doing this, however, he avoids ‘falling back into subjectivism’, which is ‘quite incapable of giving an account of the necessity of the social world’. In order to do this, social practice must be seen as the site of a dialectic between structures, which were created in the past, and culture, also shaped by the past. It is a dialectic between ‘the objectified products and the incorporated product of historical practice; of structures and *habitus*’ (Bourdieu 1990a: 52). Action is the result of the meeting of field, or structure, and *habitus*. The *habitus* is implicitly a product of history and can be seen as history embodied in the perceptions and dispositions of the individual or group. It ‘produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history’ (Bourdieu 1990a: 54).

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61 Despite the vintage of Whitemore’s statement, it is still quite relevant to drama production today. As we will see, soap opera is experienced by those who make it as a discredited form which fails to win them prestige or recognition.
The *habitus* describes a lasting, general and adaptable way of thinking that shapes the way we read, understand, and react to the world around us (Bourdieu 1984: 170; see Inglis 1998a: 11). It is a product of both social and material ‘conditions of existence’ that create in the individual a system of ‘durable, transposable dispositions’. The *habitus* is structured by the conditions of its creation and is, in turn, a structuring structure. That is to say it shapes how we react to the world around us. It describes a set of dispositions, inculcated by the possibilities and constraints of the conditions that shaped it. Thus the *habitus* tends to ‘generate dispositions objectively compatible with these conditions and in a sense pre-adapted to their demands’ (Bourdieu 1990a: 54). Practices that are impractical within a person’s original social and material conditions ‘are therefore excluded, as unthinkable’. There is according to Bourdieu ‘a kind of immediate submission to order that inclines agents to make a virtue of necessity, that is, to refuse what is anyway denied and to will the inevitable’ (Bourdieu 1990a: 54). Members of a group sharing similar ‘conditions of existence’ will have a similar *habitus*, which regulates the group. In the same way that birds can form a flock, through the *habitus* a group can ‘be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organising action of a conductor’ (Bourdieu 1990a: 53). Without a leader, and without explicit rules, shared perceptions and motivations can cause regular behaviour to emerge in a group. The *habitus* ‘insures the active presence of past experiences’ since it is deposited in people ‘in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action’. Thus it guarantees the ‘correctness of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms’ (Bourdieu 1990a: 54). We can then describe a *Fair City* *habitus*, an ‘obvious’ way of doing things that is the product of the programme’s history and practical necessities.
Garnham and Williams hold that the *habitus* ‘is a unified phenomenon’. It is, they write, ‘by definition not an individual phenomenon’ (1986: 120). They see that ‘the *habitus* is a family, a group and especially class phenomenon’. As described above, they see it as a logic produced by a common set of conditions of existence, which regulates ‘the practice of a set of individuals in common response to those conditions’ (Garnham and Williams 1986: 120). It is perhaps more accurate to say that the *habitus* describes a simultaneously individual and group phenomenon. In *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu writes

> Though it is impossible for all (or even two) members of the same class to have had the same experiences, in the same order, it is certain that each member of the same class is more likely than any member of another class to have been confronted with the situations most frequent for members of that class (Bourdieu 1990a: 60).

Bourdieu has applied the concept of *habitus* to both groups and individuals in *Distinction* and *The Field of Cultural Production* respectively. Similarly, others have applied it to groups of varying sizes and types. Inglis, for example, has outlined the nature and the origins of what he describes as the Irish Catholic *habitus* (Inglis 1998b: 17). *Habitus* is a flexible concept that can be discussed on a number of levels as long as there is a group of people with generally common experiences and possibilities (see Bourdieu 1990a: 60). One can therefore discuss, for example, an Irish *habitus*, an RTÉ *habitus*, or a *Fair City habitus*.62

We can describe then a *Fair City* *habitus* where crew and production team carry within them a distinct structured way of thinking about what good soap opera is

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62 Bourdieu demonstrates this with the field of journalism and its accompanying *habitus*. He points out that ‘the journalist’ is ‘an abstract entity that doesn’t exist’ (Bourdieu 1998: 23). What exist instead are journalists who differ in their gender, education, age, affiliations and the media that they work in. As noted above their field is characterised by conflict. However, Bourdieu insists that despite their differences, news outlets hide ‘profound similarities’ that are imposed by the necessities of the journalistic field. Market competition, in particular, ‘homogenises when it occurs between journalists and newspapers subject to identical pressures’ (Bourdieu 1998: 23). So to discuss a group *habitus* is not to say that the entire group in question are psychological or cultural clones. It is to say, however,
and how it should be made. This *habitus* would be the product of shared working conditions and the inheritance of a shared organisational history. While television workers may have infinite programme ideas and strategies this is not to say that anything is possible (see Lamaison 1985: 113). Since all those involved in *Fair City* shared a similar set of conditions and organisational history they were likely to share perceptions and understandings of how to make 'good soap opera'. As we will see, the stories they produced, and the issues they represented, bore the stamp of a shared *habitus*, which both enabled and constrained their creativity.

**The Forms of Capital**

The third element of Bourdieu’s model is the concept of capital, which exists in various forms. This creates the historical inertia of social fields.

The social world is accumulated history, and if it is not to be reduced to a discontinuous series of instantaneous mechanical equilibria between agents who are treated as interchangeable particles, one must reintroduce into it the notion of capital and with it, accumulation and all its effects (Bourdieu 1986: 241).

Capital, according to Bourdieu, ‘makes the games of society … something other than simple games of chance offering at every moment the possibility of a miracle’ (1986: 241). Bourdieu sees that it is impossible to make sense of the structure and functioning of society without various forms of capital, including, but not restricted to, economic capital. He is critical of economic theory that has ‘allowed to be foisted upon it a definition of the economy of practices which is the historical invention of capitalism’ (Bourdieu 1986: 242). He sees that by ignoring all the various forms of exchange in society outside of monetary exchange, which is profit-driven, all other forms of exchange are implicitly seen to be *disinterested* and without profit (Bourdieu

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that similar perceptions, predispositions and attitudes result from historically shared conditions of material and social possibility.
1986: 242). On the contrary, Bourdieu sees that all capitals are the source of interest and profit.

There are four fundamental forms of capital. Firstly, there is economic capital, ‘which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights’. Secondly, there is cultural capital, or forms of knowledge that are ‘convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the form of educational qualifications’. Thirdly, there is social capital, which is ‘made up of social obligations (“connections”)’. It is ‘convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital’, typically in finding employment (see Bourdieu 1986: 243). Finally, we can add symbolic capital, or the power to have prestige and respect attributed to one's views and actions (Bourdieu 1985: 731). Social fields are structured by the unequal distribution of capital. It is the relative scarcity of forms of capital within various fields that give actors, to a greater or lesser extent, the power to reap profits, and impose ‘the laws of a functioning of the field most favourable to capital and its reproduction’ (Bourdieu 1986: 246).

Bourdieu’s model of multiple forms of capital is useful in the study of soap opera production. For example, writers lack managerial power but they may still be able to exercise power through the use of ‘connections’ or the knowledge, prestige or charisma they may possess as cultural producers. This allows us to conceptualise and research the various forms of resistance that may be used by people working on Fair City. Habermas’s ‘responsible actors’ now have weapons to use against the influence of the system. According to many commentators, however, there are fundamental problems in applying Bourdieu’s model to conscious social resistance.
Is Political Action Impossible in Bourdieu’s Sociology?

Garnham sees the concept of doxa to be central to Bourdieu’s thought. Doxa describes the primary experience of the social world where there is perfect agreement between the world of thought and the world of experience (see Bourdieu 1984: 471; Bourdieu 1977: 171). It describes a situation where people do not discuss, or reflect upon, their culture. For Garnham, this is a major problem in Bourdieu’s conceptual model. Unlike Fowler, Garnham sees that Bourdieu’s sociology is very much hostile to the ‘transformative potential of human beings' (Fowler 1997: 2). He asks:

If this accurately describes the process of cognition, are we not all caught in an ineluctably determined fate? If our classificatory schemas are implicit, unconscious, and arbitrary, what room is there for willed purchase on the social world - in a word, for a political project? This implies either perpetual stasis or the search for the sources of social and political change in areas outside any possibility of human control (Garnham 1993: 179).

Following Garnham, Bourdieu’s model does not allow for the conscious transformation of the world. He compares it with the rigid ‘dominant ideology thesis’ put forward by structural Marxists like Althusser (see Althusser 1971; Abercrombie, Turner and Hill 1980). I contend, however, that Bourdieu does provide for breaks with convention, politics and conscious resistance.

To begin with, it is possible that Garnham overestimates the role of doxa here. He plays down the notions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, where aspects of the habitus do become open to conscious discussion, reflection and debate. The work of opening up hidden aspects of culture to discussion and reflection can in itself be seen to be a political project. In Free Exchange, Bourdieu argues that ‘from the moment there is a science of the social world, it inevitably reveals that which is hidden, and in particular that which the dominant do not want to see unveiled’ (Bourdieu and Haacke 1995: 54). It is in this vain that Bourdieu makes his commentary on television and journalism. In revealing the hidden structures of journalism and television he hopes
to provide ‘tools or weapons’ to media professionals ‘who are struggling to keep what could have become an extraordinary instrument of direct democracy from turning into an instrument of symbolic oppression’ (Bourdieu 1998: 12). A rupture between thought and experience, a disruption of doxa, can be brought about through scientific enquiry or even by posing a question. This also describes how soap operas may affect society by merely addressing an issue. Bourdieu’s sociology, in revealing hidden power structures behind what is taken for granted, is eminently political. A clear example of this lies in *Distinction*, which reveals the relationship between cultural consumption, class and social reproduction in France.

As Jenkins explains, in *Distinction* Bourdieu has ‘in his sights the consistent use of the notions of “taste” – as a sort of naturally occurring phenomenon – to mark and maintain social boundaries’ within classes and between classes (1992: 137–8). It is demonstrated that ‘taste’ as a product of the *habitus* is rooted in the class system. *Distinction* attacks the ‘symbolic violence’ inherent in cultural consumption and categories of taste. Taste is generally seen to be something that one naturally has, or has not. Bourdieu demonstrates that taste is learned through family background and the educational system. As a product of *habitus*, differences in taste arise from different living conditions. ‘Symbolic violence’ inheres in the fact that dominant class fractions ‘replace the difference between two cultures … with the basic difference between two natures, one naturally cultivated and another nature naturally natural’. In this way the aura around ‘good taste’ serves to legitimate and preserve class hierarchies (Bourdieu et al. 1990: 111).

The concept of the ‘cultural arbitrary’ is central to *Distinction*. This holds that cultural artefacts and practices have no inherent meaning. For example, Vivaldi has been seen both as a great musical rediscovery and, later, as tiresome supermarket
music. The music remained the same but socially created judgements changed. And so cultural practices and artefacts cannot be judged to be inherently good or bad. This is a serious point of contention for many commentators. Mander asks ‘what then are we to do?’ If we concede that all cultural choices are equally “good.” Bourdieu, she points out, never says (1987: 433). Garnham sees the cultural arbitrary to be at the core of Bourdieu’s sociology and to undermine its political potential (1993: 179). For Garnham and Mander the danger here is the risk of never being able to say that one cultural product is more valuable or more worthy than another. We may not be able to say, for instance, that quality drama and documentary are ‘better’ than ‘Reality TV’ or daytime talk shows. Unlike post-modern interpretations of culture, Bourdieu does not see cultural products to be without meaning (see for example Baudrillard 1996: 5). Rather, he sees that their meanings, and their value, lie in society, not in the objects themselves. Moreover, he sees meaning itself as the site of conflict.

Because of Bourdieu’s use of the cultural arbitrary there is an ‘element of play’ in the formation of social perceptions and divisions. This element of uncertainty leaves the perception and division of society open to contestation. The ability to reshape social perceptions is a fundamental form of social power in a struggle ‘to conserve or transform the social world by conserving or transforming the categories through which it is perceived’ (Bourdieu 1985: 728).

This ability to mould the principles of perception and division in society is contested on an everyday basis. People constantly defend their own social position and lifestyle by identifying, categorising and decrying those with opposing interests. This is a power game with players attempting to improve, or at least maintain, their social standing. While this game is played on the interpersonal level it is also played at a larger institutional level. This involves what Bourdieu refers to as the struggle for
‘the monopoly of legitimate naming’. This is also described as a ‘struggle over the production of common sense’ (Bourdieu 1985: 731). This is a struggle for the ability to impose, explicitly and publicly, a legitimate vision of the social world (Bourdieu 1985: 731–2). Dominant groups try to manage public perception in an attempt to shape public opinion and, most importantly, the social divisions with which people identify and ally themselves.

Not all players are equal in this game. There are powerful cultural actors who have a publicly authorised viewpoint. Bourdieu gives the examples of a “‘major critic,” a prestigious prefacer or a consecrated author (cf. Zola’s “J’accuse”)’. Above all these, however, is the power of the ‘legitimate viewpoint of the authorised spokesman or the mandated representative of the State’ (Bourdieu 1985: 732). Such an individual has:

- Official nomination, the “entitlement” that, like the academic qualification, is valid on all markets and that, as an official definition of official identity, rescues its holders from the symbolic struggle of all against all, by uttering the authorised, universally recognised perspective on all social agents (Bourdieu 1985: 732).

There are disparities in power in the struggle to impose the principles of vision and division in the social world. These disparities are reproduced over time because those who have the power to consecrate and preserve social groups use it to maintain or promote their own position. As we have seen, Bourdieu refers to the power to gain social respect for one’s views, position and practices as symbolic capital. As with money, this can be invested for future rewards. Bourdieu writes that ‘symbolic capital goes to symbolic capital’. So, ‘in the struggle to impose the legitimate view of the social world … agents yield a power proportionate to their symbolic capital, i.e., to the recognition they receive from a group’ (Bourdieu 1985: 731). Individuals and groups who can impose their categories and classifications upon the social world can
alter the way the social world is ‘perceived, uttered and constructed’. They have the power to impose new perceptions and divisions in the social world. Like a sorcerer who can summon and control a spirit by naming it, they can name and call up from society groups and phenomena that were not previously manifest.

The capacity to make entities exist in the explicit state, to publish, make public (i.e., render objectified, visible, and even official) what had not previously attained objective and collective existence and had therefore remained in the state of individual or serial existence – people’s malaise, anxiety, disquiet, expectations – represents a formidable social power, the power to make groups by making the common sense, the explicit consensus, of the whole group (Bourdieu 1985: 729).

In addition to politicians, academics, writers and so on, the mass media possess considerable weight in this conflict over the symbolic construction and reconstruction of society. Bourdieu identifies television as a major power in the constant partisan struggle to redefine society. A key stake in global and local politics today is ‘the capacity to impose a way of seeing the world, of making people wear “glasses” that force them to see the world divided up in certain ways (the young and the old, foreigners and the French …)’. Through these perceived divisions groups can be created and mobilised. This ‘mobilization makes it possible for them to convince everyone else that they exist, to exert pressures and obtain privileges, and so forth’. Television, for Bourdieu, ‘plays a determining role in all such struggles today’ (Bourdieu 1998: 22). In answer to Garnham and Mander’s concern about the relativistic or depoliticising consequences of Bourdieu’s use of the cultural arbitrary it can be seen that it is not a denial of politics. It is, rather, a vision of the operation of political and symbolic power at personal and institutional levels. In studying Fair City’s production process it also describes the conflicts between those involved. It reveals struggles to create legitimate visions of what soap opera is and how characters, plots and issues should be handled. These interpersonal struggles are also
institutional. Interpersonal struggles in production meetings may go on to shape the
groups, issues and perspectives that are made public through *Fair City*. Thus these
struggles serve as a filter for what is, and what is not, admitted to the public sphere
through *Fair City*.

**Soap Opera and the Field of Cultural Production**

People compete about culture and they compete with it. The very definition of
what can legitimately be called Culture – with a capital ‘C’ – is one of the
 sharpest bones of contention: is a pile of bricks Art, or is it a pile of bricks?
Answer: it’s Art when it’s in an art gallery (or is it?). Here it is the boundaries
of the field - the authority to define them *and* their substantive content – which
are at stake (Jenkins 1992: 128).

Bourdieu has applied the model of field, *habitus* and multiple capitals to the field of
cultural production. Like any field, the field of cultural production is a site of struggle
between dominant and dominated fractions that vary in their independence and
autonomy. The field of cultural production is unique, however, in that it does not
have one set of ‘rules of the game’ but two. For Bourdieu the literary and artistic
field, holds a dominated position in the field of power which ‘is itself situated at the
dominant pole of the field of class relations’ (see figure 1). Accordingly, for those
who are richest in the capitals of the literary and artistic, normal criteria of success are
reversed. Hence Bourdieu describes the field as the site of a ‘double hierarchy’. For
the field’s purists it functions as ‘the economic world reversed’ (Bourdieu 1993: 29).
The peculiarity of the literary and artistic field lies in ‘the fact that the more
autonomous it is’, (the more it acts according to its own logic), ‘the more it tends to
suspend or reverse the dominant principle of hierarchization’. That is to say that
purist artists who are devoted to the field of art treat the market, the general gauge of
achievement, with disdain. Bourdieu sees that the ‘literary or artistic field’ is a
constant site of struggle between two ‘principles of hierarchization’. Firstly, there is
the ‘heteronomous principle, favourable to those who dominate the field economically and politically (e.g., “bourgeois art”). Secondly there is ‘the autonomous principle (e.g., 'art for art's sake’) where endowment with capital specific to the field is seen to offer a degree of independence from the market. Here economic failure may be seen ‘as a sign of election and success as a sign of compromise’ (Bourdieu 1993: 40).

Despite this the field ‘continues to be affected by the laws of the fields which encompasses it, those of economic and political profit’ (Bourdieu 1993: 38–9).

Bourdieu asserts that ‘the weaker a cultural producer is, the less he is recognised according to the specific laws of his universe’. Thus, ‘the more he needs external powers, the more he is disposed to appeal to those powers in order to impose
himself in his universe’ (Bourdieu and Haacke 1995: 73). Accordingly, the field of cultural production is loosely divided between those who have high cultural and symbolic capital, specific to the field, with little money and those who enjoy commercial success who lack prestige in the artistic field. Following this model, soap opera, mass-produced and market-oriented, is one of drama’s least prestigious forms.

**Cultural Production and Class Conflict**

For Bourdieu the field of cultural production is the site of a proxy war between the dominant and dominated fractions of the dominant class. The dominant fraction, generally, produces wealth while the dominated fraction chiefly produces culture. In this struggle cultural producers tend to undermine the dominant fraction of their class by decrying wealth, which they lack, and extolling the virtues of culture, in which they abound. For Bourdieu, this is a struggle to ‘impose the dominant principle of domination’ or ultimately ‘the definition of human accomplishment’ (Bourdieu 1993: 41).

This struggle may lead to alliances of position between cultural producers and other dominated groups in society. Bourdieu notes that economically weak but symbolically dominant cultural producers ‘tend to feel solidarity with the occupants of the economically and culturally dominated positions within the field of class relations’ (Bourdieu 1993: 44). Similarly shaped social relations give rise to comparable perceptions and attitudes since all dominated groups struggle for greater recognition and power. This homology of position predisposes cultural producers to sympathise with the dominated. They aim to make culture a social priority over money and aspire to ally with the dominated and excluded in society. This does not imply radicalism or altruism. If a dominated fraction of the dominant class is to
achieve greater power, and to assert its vision of human achievement, this can only be done in alliance with other subordinated groups (see Marx 1992: 121–2). It is possible that soap opera producers may identify with excluded groups and see it to be in their interests to represent them. On the other hand, as producers of commercialized culture they may simply wish to succeed by attracting as many viewers as possible.

For Bourdieu, heteronomous cultural producers, or those ‘collaborators’ who lack in capital specific to their field, attempt to break down the barriers in their own field to make their work as legitimate as that of the purists. Thus, in ‘serving their own interests’ they ‘serve the interests of the dominant fractions of the dominant class, who obviously have an interest in there being only one hierarchy’ (1993: 41). Soap opera producers may, in providing populist television, contribute to the erosion of cultural power and the homogenisation of social representations. Here Bourdieu echoes Habermas’s concern about the colonisation of the lifeworld by the system. Unlike Habermas, however, Bourdieu offers a more sophisticated model of power, perception and resistance in everyday life. He leaves open the possibility for soap opera producers to resist the pull of economic power and to break with television conventions in their representations of society.

**Aspirations and Possibilities in Cultural Production**

To research television production one must be able to understand structures of power, which are seen and unseen, and the ways in which individuals interact with them. Bourdieu claims that cultural producers’ perceptions and judgements are linked to the positions of power they hold in the field of cultural production. The reading of any piece of art, even an artist’s view of his own work, is according to Bourdieu a product
of the field. Even an individual judgement is a ‘collective judgement’ in that a work of art will be read in relation to other works of art and the relative positions of power they hold (see Bourdieu 1993: 135). Bourdieu offers an example of this in the case of ‘middle-brow’ cultural products. These are mass-produced cultural products. The practical limits of their producers’ creativity are set by audience demand. Thus, the ‘technical and aesthetic choices’ made by producers of such culture are shaped by an ambiguous vision of the ‘average public’ or the ‘average viewer’ (Bourdieu 1993: 125). He gives an example of this quoting a feted French television writer.

"My sole ambition is to be easily read by the widest possible public. I never attempt a "masterpiece", and I do not write for intellectuals; that I leave to others. For me, a good book is one that grips you within the first three pages" (Bourdieu 1993: 125–6).

Bourdieu sees that the middle-brow art is characterised by ‘reliance on immediately accessible technical processes and aesthetic effects, or the systematic exclusion of all potentially controversial themes, or those liable to shock this or that section of the public’ (Bourdieu 1993: 125–6). Its characteristics, for Bourdieu, ‘derive from the social conditions in which it is produced’. He sees that exclusion from positions of high culture may not only be accompanied by a resignation to one’s fate but also to a denial of the merits of high culture in favour of the plain pleasures of popular culture.

The more a certain class of writers and artists is defined as beyond the bounds of the universe of legitimate art, the more its members are inclined to defend the professional qualities of the worthy, entertaining technician, complete master of his technique and metier, against the uncontrolled, disconcerting experiments of 'intellectual' art (Bourdieu 1993: 130).

The particular distribution of capitals in a field is also seen to affect expectations. In the same way that the class habitus is adjusted to conditions of existence, an artistic habitus may be adjusted to the conditions of possibility within the field of cultural production. In other words, one’s possibilities within the field,
based on the capitals one holds, become internalised as, more or less limited, expectations and aspirations operating through the *habitus* (Bourdieu 1993: 64).

Through the public meaning of the work, through the objective sanctions imposed by the symbolic market upon the producers' 'aspirations' and 'ambitions' and, in particular, through the degree of recognition and consecration it accords them, the entire structure of the field interposes itself between producers and their work. This imposes a definition of their ambitions as either legitimate or illegitimate according to whether their position objectively implies, or denies, their fulfilment (Bourdieu 1993: 136).

This introduces the concept of investment (see Barker and Brooks 1998). Like money on a stock market, capitals and time can be invested to particular ends. As with any prudent investor, investments of time and capital are most likely to be made when one can afford a loss or is quite sure of a profit. Bourdieu writes that the ‘propensity to move towards the economically most risky positions’ and the ability to remain in them ‘seem to depend to a large extent on possession of substantial economic and social capital’ (Bourdieu 1993: 67). This applies particularly to avant-garde art that precedes market demand. Artists, for Bourdieu, perceive positions within the field in terms of their possibilities, which in turn affects the nature of the investments they are likely to make. A position then may appear as a ‘sort of necessary locus which beckons those who are made for it (“vocation”) or, by contrast, as an impossible destination, an unacceptable destiny or one that is acceptable only as a temporary refuge or a secondary accessory position’ (Bourdieu 1993: 64). As we will see the ambitions of *Fair City’s* writers were tempered by their perceptions of soap opera as mere populist entertainment.

**The Economic Invasion of the Field of Cultural Production**

The field of cultural production may be more or less autonomous but is never independent of the surrounding fields of economics and politics. The influence of
these dominant fields may vary according to location and time. Bourdieu notes that changes in the field of cultural production are influenced by ‘the balance of forces between social agents who have entirely real interests in the different possibilities available to them as stakes’ (Bourdieu 1993: 34). Interests in cultural production do not begin and end among cultural producers. Cultural production has important political and, more importantly, economic effects.

Garnham and Williams write that cultural producers share ‘a mutual interest with the dominant economic class in maintaining the overall set of material class relations’. This is because ‘cultural capital must ultimately be transformable into economic capital or material resources’. Moreover, it is because ‘the dominant economic class now require the services of the producers of symbolic goods in the imposition and maintenance of orthodoxy’ (Garnham and Williams 1986: 123). This is clearly visible in the increased importance of media and advertising as aids to industry and as important industries in themselves (Klein 2000; Herman and McChesney 1997; Schiller 1971). Importantly, Garnham and Williams ask what effect the increased intervention of economic capital in the field of cultural production has on the operation of symbolic power among cultural producers. They ask also how ‘this might affect the field of force in the struggle between the fractions of the dominant class in a situation in which the economic interests of the dominant fraction directly threatens the cultural interests of the dominated fraction’ (Garnham and Williams 1986: 129). As pointed out in chapter four, the investment of economic capital in cultural production is generally accompanied by attempts to minimise risk.63

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63 Industrial capital may also enter the field, not as productive investment, but as sponsorship. Haacke describes this as ‘an exchange of capital: financial capital on the part of the sponsors and symbolic capital on the part of the sponsored’ (Bourdieu and Haacke 1995: 17). This may generate business but also a friendly political and regulatory climate (Bourdieu and Haacke 1995: 18). For Bourdieu, this ‘patronage’ is a ‘subtle form of domination that acts thanks to the fact that it is not perceived as such’.
Culture, particularly that disseminated by mass media, accounts for an ever-increasing proportion of industrial revenues. Garnham hypothesises on the consequences of the increased penetration of the cultural field by industrial capital.

Once capital moves into cultural production and distribution in a major way, a divergence develops between the economic and ideological interests of the dominant class, since, as in other social areas, the spread of capitalist relations of production and exchange is corrosive of inherited social distinctions and hierarchies (Garnham 1993: 188–189).

Garnham argues that, cultural and symbolic capital, the weapons used by the ‘dominated fraction of the dominant class’ in their struggle against the dominant fraction, may be taken from them. There is a risk then that Habermas’s monochromatic view of power may become a reality.

This hypothesis is echoed by Bourdieu’s observations. He sees that the emergence of ‘large collective production units in the fields of radio, television, cinema and journalism’ has been accompanied by a ‘decline of the intellectual artisan in favour of the salaried worker’. This implies a changed relationship between producers and their work. Following the discussion above, such a fall in position could be reflected in changes in cultural workers’ perceptions of themselves, their work and their place in society. Most importantly, collective ‘intellectual labour’ cannot lay claim to the ‘charismatic aura attached to traditional independent production’. Traditional cultural producers controlled their means of production and invested only their ‘cultural capital, which was likely to be perceived as a gift from grace’ (Bourdieu 1993: 131).

The demystification of intellectual and artistic activity consequent on the transformation of the social conditions of production particularly affects intellectuals and artists engaged in large units of cultural production (radio, television, journalism). They constitute a proletaroid intelligentsia forced to experience the contradiction between aesthetic and political position-takings stemming from their inferior position in the field of production and the

Like ‘all forms of symbolic domination’ it operates on ‘the basis of misrecognition, that is, with the complicity of those who are subjected to them’ (Bourdieu and Haacke 1995: 54).
objectively conservative functions of the products of their activity (Bourdieu 1993: 131).

Garnham stresses that ‘for the dominant faction, culture is no longer arbitrary’. The dominant fraction now has a direct interest in the structure and functioning of the field of cultural production. Accordingly, ‘members of the dominated fraction have to be brought within the disciplines of capitalist production’. He describes this as a ‘process of proletarianisation of the intelligentsia’. Moreover, he argues that it dissolves the structural separation of the fractions of the dominant class and ‘thus strikes at the very heart of Bourdieu’s theory’ (Garnham 1993: 189). He continues by arguing that this process may be more effective in maintaining the social status quo than the model proposed by Bourdieu in Distinction. This process does not cause ‘the misrecognition of social hierarchy as cultural hierarchy’. In dissolving cultural distinctions it ‘produces the appearance of dissolving social hierarchies’ (Garnham 1993: 189).

Rather than striking it down, this development is accommodated by Bourdieu’s model. In the cultural proxy war between class fractions, Bourdieu recognises that at any given time one fraction may have more or less influence over the cultural field. The economic invasion of cultural production may signal a period when the interests of the dominant fraction dominate. By ripping apart cultural hierarchies, this class moves closer to the goal of a single, monetary hierarchy, which Bourdieu has identified as their goal (Bourdieu 1993: 41). It is necessary then to explore whether, the rise of soap opera, as the dominant dramatic form on Irish television, is indeed symptomatic of an economic invasion of culture and the ‘proletarianisation’ of cultural production.
Bourdieu’s Blind Spot

Despite the expanse of Bourdieu’s work, there are important aspects of culture that he overlooks. Perhaps the most damning critique is that he offers an elitist sociology of culture. This, critics argue, is manifested in a disdain for popular culture. Mindful of his brief treatments of ‘middle-brow’ culture, Fowler points out that, ‘in Bourdieu's analysis of the art-worlds of capitalist societies, there is no popular art’ (1997: 152).

In her view, Bourdieu classifies the cultural field using ‘the values of the priestly or mandarin strata’ (1997: 157). Saliently, she highlights that 'what is missing from all his work is a detailed feel for the nature of popular culture within urban modernity'
(1997: 160). For example, Bourdieu has never studied youth culture and its potential for politicisation and mobilisation. Fowler offers that 'in his work of unmasking ideologies of art' Bourdieu ‘has left unquestioned certain social classifications' (1997: 4). This is apparent in Bourdieu’s reluctance to address the production and consumption of television.

For Fowler, Bourdieu appears to rest assured of the dominance of consecrated culture to the extent that he chiefly ignores popular culture. The increasing dominance of television, however, suggests that consecrated culture enjoys a very insecure hegemony (Fowler 1997: 27). Garnham remarks that there is only one reference to television in Distinction’s index. He finds this surprising in view of the centrality of television as a ‘contemporary cultural practice’. He argues pointedly that given its ubiquity and low cost, television ‘represents a key field for the study of the ways in which cultural consumption and appropriation is structured in ways that are not directly material’ (1993: 187). Research in the UK, he reports, has observed that in television viewing there has been ‘a significant breaking down of the class-based distinctions among types of cultural consumption and their related hierarchy of social values’ (Garnham 1993: 188).

Thus, for a project such as Bourdieu’s, which is concerned with the distribution of cultural practices and competences and their relation to the reproduction of the structure of social power, the case of television, the most widely shared and socially pervasive cultural practice, can hardly be ignored without making the whole theoretical enterprise vulnerable (Garnham 1993: 187).

Marlière notes that On Television is only a short essay, which came very late in Bourdieu’s work. There is, he points out, a marked contrast between Bourdieu and American and British social scientists who have long explored mass media and its role in propagating socially dominant ideologies (2000: 208; see also Garnham 1993: 188).
For Fowler, this failure to acknowledge popular culture is compounded by a view that popular culture is doomed to be socially-neutralised, mass-produced trash (Bourdieu 1993: 127). She accuses Bourdieu of consistently underemphasizing ‘working-class freedom (versus constraint), and the culturally creative energies that can come from underneath, as opposed to the many permutations of psychological domination’ (1997: 4). Fowler sees a need to escape from the idea that culture and cultural consecration is only ever imposed from above (1997: 155). Bourdieu, she claims, has not adequately dealt with the contemporary field of popular culture but instead rashly assumes that ‘all popular culture will be devoid of formal interest and written with withered ideological matrices’ (Fowler 1997: 162).

His is a self-conscious anti-populism which stresses the power of great families, great schools and even great buildings in an endless form of symbolic violence. But it possesses a fantastic consequence, particularly acute in depicting the subordinate class, whose *habitus* is simultaneously defensive and the product of a colonised sense of inferiority … these difficulties weaken his sociology of culture (Fowler 1997: 4).

This alleged elitism is linked to the accusation that Bourdieu wants sociology to be the primary source of knowledge of the social world, denying the truth-claims, and transformative potential, of journalism, literature and so on. In the case of journalism, Marlière suggests that ‘underlying Bourdieu's account of the media, behind the veil of scientific authority used to thwart journalists, is the dogmatic claim that the only truly informed observer of society is the sociologist’ (Marlière 2000: 209). Garnham sees Bourdieu to advocate ‘a form of the politics of the vanguard party in which the sociologist takes on the leading role’. Here:

Sociologists alone are capable of escaping, by self-reflexively analysing, the cultural and political trap that theory sets for everyone else. Only they are capable of unmasking the intellectuals, revealing their self-interested practice for what it really is, and thus seeing society as it really is. A familiar trope (Garnham 1993: 180–1).
In Chapter Three, I argued that entertainment and particularly soap opera could influence knowledge, perceptions and social practices; it was demonstrated that entertainment could play a role in social transformation. For his critics, Bourdieu denies this, and moreover, claims that such work should be left solely to sociologists. These claims are weakened, however, by Bourdieu’s later work. Speaking of the work of Hans Haacke and other artists he claims it is possible to create ‘unprecedented forms of symbolic action which will free us from our eternal petitions and will put the resources of the literary and symbolic imagination at the service of symbolic struggles against symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu and Haacke 1995: 20). Despite this Bourdieu has not explicitly attributed such potential to popular cultural products like soap operas. Moreover, he has never considered cultural products like soap opera as an impetus to discussion, debate and changes in public opinion.

**Gender in the Field of Cultural Production**

While Bourdieu examines class and its relationship with cultural consumption and production, Fowler accuses him of overlooking gender (1997: 134). She acknowledges that he has explored links between gender and class but he has ‘left unexplored many of the contradictions surfacing around gender within the “sacred island” of culture’ (1997: 138). As she demonstrates, mass culture has often been critically associated with femininity. Women have been seen as the chief market for, and victims of, sentimental novels, paperback romances and soap operas (Fowler 1997: 138–9).

Fowler finds Bourdieu to be insufficiently alert to ‘the peculiar disadvantage under which women labour in struggles over consecration’ (1997: 139). She shows that the generally dominated position of women in society is reflected in the cultural field. As a consequence of this, she suggests, a greater number of women have turned
to the despised middlebrow and popular literary genres (Fowler 1997: 144).

MacMurrough-Kavanagh’s finding that female writers were broadly confined to less-prestigious studio dramas in the BBC lends empirical support to this (1994: 416). The field of cultural production is then implicitly gendered, following dominant fields in a propensity to hold women out of the most autonomous and prestigious positions.

Following Fowler it is to be anticipated that there is an affinity between female cultural producers and the less prestigious cultural forms such as soap opera.

Dismal Science

Bourdieu is criticised for presenting a somewhat dismal view of the social world. Mander protests that ‘Bourdieu’s is a dog-eat-dog world in which human beings engage in ploys, artifices, strategies, bluffs and disguises to increase their own social and cultural capital to the disadvantage of others’ (1987: 443). He is in danger according to Fowler ‘of always effacing moments when artists may bear witness to the truth so as to highlight only how they use artistic works for status purposes’ (1997: 177). As noted above, Garnham sees that Bourdieu denies artists any opportunity to exert conscious, willed political influence. He sees that they are puppets of field and *habitus*, with ‘the participants in each of Bourdieu's field’s as governed by an ineluctable invisible hand as any participant in the Smithian free market’ (Garnham 1993: 183). Garnham writes that ‘a crude base/superstructure model’ underpins the little concern that Bourdieu shows with social change (1993: 183).

This is not borne out, however, by Bourdieu’s view of change in the field of cultural production. Bourdieu notes that parallels between economic upheavals and

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64 It could be argued that this is to misunderstand the emergent nature of Bourdieu’s model of field and *habitus* and the Smith’s ‘invisible hand of the market place’. The invisible hand describes how public
changes in cultural production do ‘not imply a relationship of direct determination’. Discussing the literary field, for example, he claims that it is only indirectly affected by economic and social changes. This may happen through the ‘the potential readership, which is itself linked to increased schooling, at secondary and also at primary level’ (Bourdieu 1993: 54). Changes in cultural production for Bourdieu are not caused by economic or social change but are rather reinforced by them.

Without ever being a direct reflection of them, the internal struggles [in the field of cultural production] depend for their outcome on the correspondence they may have with the external struggles between the classes (or between the fractions of the dominant class) and on the reinforcement which one group or another may derive from them, through homology and the consequent synchronisms (Bourdieu 1993: 57–8).

As mentioned at the outset, Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* is intended to escape the ‘usual antinomies’ of freedom and determinism, society and individual and so on. He writes that ‘the conditioned and conditional freedom it provides is as remote from creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from simple mechanical reproduction’ (1990a: 55). This is elaborated upon using wit as an example of how *habitus* enables and constrains action in a given field.

If witticisms strike as much by their unpredictability as by their retrospective necessity, the reason is that the *trouvaille* that brings to light long-buried resources presupposes a *habitus* that so perfectly possesses the objectively available means of expression that it is possessed by them, so much so that it asserts its freedom from them by realising the rarest of the possibilities that they necessarily imply (Bourdieu 1990a: 57).

Wit is seen as a mark of creativity, yet it has its limits. It depends on shared language, history and meanings. To follow Garnham’s interpretation of ‘ineluctable fate’ would be akin to saying that a skilled comedian is merely a puppet of language and history. The following section will look specifically at how Bourdieu’s model can be used to explain creativity within the constraints of the television field.

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benefits may accrue from self-interested trade as unintended consequences. It does not describe an overarching structure that inhibits individual freedom (see Galbraith 1987: 64).
Flexible Strategies and Media Creativity

Bourdieu’s model is further distinguished from Garnham’s structuralist interpretation in its use of flexible strategies rather than fixed rules for social action. The strategies that people employ are generated by *habitus*. Strategies, however, allow social actors to bend social norms and rules in order to continue to compete in their particular social field. The strategies managed by the *habitus* are ‘systemic yet *ad hoc*’ because they are triggered by the encounter with a particular field. The *habitus* creates and invents ‘but within the limits of its structures, which are the embodied sedimentation of the social structures which produced it’ (Wacquant 1992: 19). Despite this, such flexible strategies introduce an element of play and fuzziness into social life. Rather than resembling a game of chess, with fixed rules organisations are far less certain with people constantly improvising upon and altering existing practices and expectations. Bourdieu and Wacquant emphasise ‘that the lines of action engendered by *habitus* do not, indeed cannot, have the neat regularity of conduct derived from a normative or juridical principle’. This is because *habitus* operates in the realm of the ‘fuzzy and the vague’. It is a form of ‘generative spontaneity’ that operates in unplanned confrontations with ‘endlessly renewed situations’. The *habitus* ‘follows a practical logic, that of the fuzzy, of the more-or-less, which defines the ordinary relation to the world’. The *habitus* then poses a challenge for sociology.

The peculiar difficulty of sociology, then, is to produce a precise science of an imprecise, fuzzy, woolly reality. For this it is better that its concepts be polymorphic, supple, and adaptable, rather than defined, calibrated and used rigidly (Wacquant 1992: 22–23).

Creativity in media companies is frequently the result of this kind of *ad hoc* strategy. As Turow points out innovative programmes are ‘most likely to be generated and accepted by organisations experiencing unusual changes or competitive pressures’
Such a programme may be created, as one possible strategy, to safeguard the future of the organisation. It need not be motivated by a conscious desire to create a new programme forms or content. Similarly people may push new ideas with a view to improving their own position in the field. Again Turow points out that breaks with convention often accompany the ‘desire by an individual newly appointed to an important position to accumulate or exhibit power by taking risks and succeeding’ (1982: 108). He makes clear that where innovations have taken place in media organisations they have been the product of bureaucratic short circuits where normal procedures have been by-passed in favour of alternative development channels (1982: 126). Bourdieu’s fuzzy strategies suggest that individual autonomy and organisational change need not necessarily occur according to formal, predefined rules. To understand a programme like *Fair City* we must understand its unwritten rules and informal decision-making processes.

**Breaking with Television Conventions and Interpenetrating Fields**

Social action is produced by an interaction between *habitus* and a given field. The meeting of *habitus* with a newly encountered field can generate novel strategies. The hysteresis effect\(^\text{65}\) describes a mismatch in time between *habitus* and field. It is also possible for such a mismatch to occur across social space rather than time. Such a meeting can create strategies that deviate from the norm in a given field. Turow shows that innovations are often associated with people who are new to a company. He quotes Robert Wood, incoming president of NBC in 1970, who said that his earliest years as president ‘were the freshest’, afterwards, ‘you learn the ropes too

\(^{65}\text{A further possibility for creativity lies in the fact that }habitus\text{ is not generally fused with a social field, as Garnham suggests. This is apparent in Bourdieu’s account of hysteresis effects where }habitus\text{ may be adjusted to historical conditions that no longer exist (see Bourdieu 1990: 62). By recognising}
well and don’t think in new directions’ (Turow 1982: 121). Sewell sees that the transposition of perceptions, predispositions and attitudes across social fields can cause agency and innovation to flourish. Thus both *habitus* and fields may be transformed (Sewell 1992: 17). Social change then is promoted by the cross-fertilisation of social fields. This would suggest that a high degree of interaction and communication between cast, crew, writers and various bureaucratic levels would contribute to innovation and diversity in the production of *Fair City*. As we will see, however, the highly rationalised nature of the show’s production system prevented this from happening to any large extent.

**Creative Risks and Power beyond the Organisation**

Bourdieu indicates that actors who possess sources of external power are likely to have greater freedom than those whose resources are entirely bound up with a single practice, group or organisation. Organisations may inculcate a *habitus* in their workers that tends to reproduce the structure and aims of the organisation but this is not inevitable.

The *apparatchik*, who owes everything to the apparatus, is the apparatus incarnate and he can be trusted with the highest responsibilities because he can do nothing to advance his own interests that does not *ipso facto* help to defend the interests of the apparatus. He is predisposed to defend the institution, with total conviction, against the heretical deviations of those whose externally acquired capital allows and inclines them to take liberties with internal beliefs and hierarchies (Bourdieu 1981: 314).

If drama producers, editors and writers depend entirely on RTÉ for their livelihood they may be less likely to question, and deviate against, established conventions. If, however, they possess cultural, social or symbolic capital, which has value within and outside RTÉ, they may have more freedom to question such beliefs. They are also

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the social consequences of time Bourdieu’s model is further separated from structuralist accounts of social order (Bourdieu 1990: 107).
more likely to short-circuit the organisation’s bureaucratic structure. Turow has shown such external forms of capital permit producers to take creative risks.

In the case of producers Norman Lear (*All in the Family*) and Larry Gelbart (*United States*), at least, the motivation for tenaciously pushing an unorthodox program idea was not related to extraordinary changes or competitive pressures. Rather, it was related to the producer’s awareness of having a power base outside the television industry that allowed them attractive alternatives to television work if a network did not accept their proposals (Turow 1982: 125).

This is important in understanding soap opera production. As suggested above, the level and composition of capitals held by those working in television appears to have changed in recent years. There is a move from purist producers, rich in cultural and symbolic capital, to generalised television ‘labourers’. As we will see, in the case of *Fair City*, with this transformation, drama creators’ capacities for dissent and innovation have decreased.

**Bourdieu, Soap Opera and the Public Sphere**

Despite its faults, Bourdieu’s conceptual model can be readily adapted to the study of television production. It can work at macro and micro levels, linking broad social structures with individual experiences, thoughts and actions. As seen in chapter two, an account of structural constraints to the exclusion of personal experiences, or *vice versa*, cannot allow a full understanding of how television programmes are made. Transcending traditional dichotomies, Bourdieu explains social change and stability without exclusively emphasising determination over constraint.

While Bourdieu provides a conceptual model for the research there is a blind spot in his work. He has been justifiably accused of overlooking popular culture, television, and the role of women in the cultural field. Soap opera is a popular,
broadly feminised form of television. To employ Bourdieu’s model in the study of its production, then, is to address a significant gap in cultural sociology.

Habermas’s concept of the public sphere helps to explain the role of soap opera in society but, as we have seen, his model of lifeworld and system cannot be operationalised to study how Fair City is produced (see Chapter Four). As I have shown here Bourdieu’s conceptual model provides the flexibility and scope necessary to understand how creative decisions may be made within organisational structures. As argued here, social action is produced through the interaction of habitus and social field. I will turn now to explaining RTÉ, the field in which Fair City is produced. Given the peculiar nature of broadcasting, one cannot understand RTÉ as a social field without comprehending how it is located within its broader environment. To fully understand the form, content and prominence of Fair City in RTÉ television drama it is crucial to explain RTÉ’s historically dominated position within the global media field.
Chapter Six

Locating *Fair City* Production: RTÉ’s Dominated Position in the Global Media Field

Employing a Bourdieuan model, social action can be understood in terms of the interaction of field and habitus. Before entering into the empirical exploration of *Fair City’s* production, and the habitus that informs it, it is necessary to understand the operation of RTÉ as a field. As we saw in chapter five, the powerful surrounding fields of economics and politics shape the field of cultural production. These fields also mould the operation of RTÉ. As Bourdieu points out the possibilities of a media organisation can only be understood by considering ‘the position of the national media field within the global media field’ (1998: 41). We can only understand the everyday production of *Fair City* when we understand how RTÉ is penetrated and moulded by the pressures of the global media field.

Importantly, in the past two decades, there has been a sea change in the Irish broadcasting environment due to economic and political transformation. In this chapter, I will explain the relationship between these environmental changes and the running of RTÉ. As we will see, the station occupies an increasingly dominated position in the global media field. Indeed, to understand RTÉ one must be aware of Ireland’s historical dependency in the global media field. Continuing this trend, RTÉ’s ‘rules of the game’ are increasingly dictated by the powerful logics of international economics and politics. Using Habermas’ terms, one could argue that RTÉ is being colonised by the steering media of the system, money and power. As
we will see, however, the position of soap opera, as a force for the rationalisation of the lifeworld or for its colonisation by the system, is far from clear.

**Domination and Dependency**

The international and dependent character of RTÉ was apparent from its first transmission. Cultural protectionism and national pride had provided an impetus towards the station’s creation (Savage 1996: 46; Horgan 2001: 78–80). Regardless of this, from its opening hours, it was to betray a decidedly international orientation. *The Irish Times* found the new station’s ‘American accent’ to be unmistakable. The station had an initial output of 42 hours per week. Only four hours in every ten were devoted to home-produced programmes (29 December 1961). RTÉ imported its transmission technology, largely from British companies PYE and EMI (*The Irish Times* 29 December 1961). Since Ireland also lacked the knowledge to manage and produce television programmes, this too was imported. Edward J. Roth, for example, RTÉ’s first Director General was an American, experienced in commercial television. One of the first appointees to the new station was Philip Parker as Chief Engineer. Parker was an ex-employee of EMI who had operated in a technical training capacity for the BBC (*The Irish Times* 29 December 1961). The station’s first controller of programmes Gunnar Rugheimer was Swedish. He was to be instrumental in the creation of Irish current affairs television with Muiris MacConghail. Rugheimer was also responsible for the mix of discussion and entertainment presented by *The Late Late Show* (*The Irish Times* 29 March 2003; see Earls 1984). Many Irish staff members were recently returned migrants who had cut their broadcasting teeth with the BBC most notably Gay Byrne. With this cosmopolitan make-up, RTÉ did not turn out to be the buttress of national tradition that many had hoped it would be.
Although it is produced in Ireland, and only broadcast nationally, the production of *Fair City* is also permeated by international influences. RTÉ, and its soap opera production, must be understood in terms of a dominated or ‘dependent’ position within the global media field. In the same way that developing countries may be said to depend on the West for investment and industrialisation, so Ireland has historically depended on more powerful countries for broadcasting technology and programming (Bell 1995; Kelly and Truetzschler 1997: 113). As we have seen, to develop television broadcasting, Ireland had to turn to foreign sources of technology and training. Countries like Ireland were not prevented from having television, but had little option but to import technology, training and programming from America, Britain, France or Germany. American broadcasting has had a considerable influence on Irish television, particularly through imported programming. It is Britain, however, which has had the most pronounced effect on Irish soap opera. This tendency to follow the example of British soap opera can only be understood in the context of a broader economic, political and technical history.

In its operation RTÉ broadly follows ground rules laid by countries dominant in the global media field, which had set the precedents for what ‘good television’ looked like and how it should be made. Lacking knowledge, and any tradition in television, Ireland followed America and Britain’s lead in broadcasting. This is evident in the mimicking of foreign programme formats, such as quiz shows, chat

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66 Fair City can also be viewed in parts of Northern Ireland but RTÉ does not yet have blanket coverage there. The show was also transmitted in England on the now failed Irish channel called Tara.
67 For a fuller discussion of media dependency see Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht 1995: 131–2; Reeves 1993: 126–46; see also Bourgault 1995.
68 This can be further appreciated if we compare Irish television with the strategies employed by a more powerful country like France. In, what Kuhn describes as, a classic example of ‘technological nationalism’, France’s president de Gaulle chose an exclusive broadcasting format for France, SECAM (Séquentielle Couleur à Mémoire). This protected the French audio-visual industry and placed its technology on the world market. Its aims were to combine technological excellence and ‘economic nationalism’ (Kuhn 1995: 133-134). In protecting French industry there was the inherent intention to
shows and soap operas (see Kelly 1992: 81). As mentioned above, a large number of programmes were imported. The economies of scale possessed by America and Britain allowed programme ‘dumping’ at extremely low costs onto underdeveloped markets like Ireland’s (De Bens et al. 1992: 76–7; Tunstall 1977: 57; Kelly 1992: 81). This offered a cheap alternative to costly indigenous productions and was most pronounced in the case of expensive drama productions. RTÉ television drama is now dominated by imported and indigenous soap opera. As early as 1969, RTÉ’s format mimicry and high level of programme importation prompted three producers to describe the station as being just like any other international media organisation. They asserted that the ‘brave new Irish experiment, entering into the “new” field of television wound up with an organisation that could be interchanged with that of any other broadcasting organisation, anywhere in the world’ (Doolan et al. 1969: 23). This overstates the case. It is, nonetheless, true that Ireland’s media dependency has given rise to a broadcasting system suffused, from its earliest days, with British and American influence (see Tunstall and Machin 1999). More importantly for the production of Fair City today, however, ongoing changes in global media place RTÉ in an ever more dominated position in the global media field. Many of the station’s decisions in production and scheduling are now strongly informed by external exigencies. To understand Fair City’s ‘rules of the game’ and the surrounding field of RTÉ, it is necessary to investigate these pervasive and ever-increasing external pressures.

protect French culture. Ireland, of course, had no such capacity for economic or technological nationalism.
RTÉ: Broadcasting in a Hostile Environment

Siune and Hultén describe recent changes in the structure of Western European television as ‘a combination of liberalisation and commercialisation of the public sector’ (1998: 23). The last fifteen years have seen the abolition of European State monopoly systems (see Humphreys 1996: 200–1; Papathanassopoulos 2002: 15). Through deregulation, European airwaves have been opened up to new commercial broadcasters. In Ireland, and across Europe ‘the former strict and national regulation has been rewritten’ (Siune and Hultén 1998: 23). In the press and political discussion, the notion of viewers as consumers has broadly replaced that of the audience as citizens (Higgins 1999: 2; Gandy 2002: 448). In much of the debate surrounding Irish broadcasting there is an emphasis on the sovereignty of the consumer and the primacy of the free market (TV3 2002: 1–2; Schiller 2000: 121; Gandy 2002: 450; Curran 1997: 240). Programmes, or ‘content’, are seen primarily as commercial products.69 There is a general view that broadcasting should operate according to the same logic as any economic sector (Corcoran 2002: 2; Herman and McChesney 1997). The fundamental validity of public service broadcasting has been called into question. There are now major questions over what role PSB should play, how it should be funded, and indeed, if it should exist at all. PSB has lost its unchallenged legitimacy to the primacy of the market. Accordingly, there are increased pressures within RTÉ towards the commodification of programming. RTÉ’s dependence on Fair City as the mainstay of its drama production are in large part a result of this new broadcasting environment that is hostile to the public funding of broadcasting. It follows that what Fair City can and cannot say is also shaped by these external exigencies.
Economic Change and New Broadcasting Pressures

A struggle with economic adversity has long been a defining characteristic of RTÉ. Since independence there has been a long-standing reluctance among successive Irish governments to invest in public service broadcasting (see Savage 1996: 43–58). With licence fee funding long incapable of exclusively supporting it, RTÉ has also depended on Ireland’s small advertising market to fund its operation. RTÉ is a broadcasting hybrid depending on advertising revenue despite its PSB mandate. As a field, then, RTÉ is marked by economic scarcity and the discordant obligations of serving the public as citizens while needing to sell them to advertisers as consumers. Historically, financial scarcity has fostered much ingenuity in RTÉ. Defining moments in Irish broadcasting – the Eucharistic Congress in 1932 and the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1979 – have involved the creation of world-class broadcasts despite meagre resources. In recent years, however, there has been a qualitative change in RTÉ’s financial position with scarce public funds and commercial competition restricting the station’s operational scope. Before discussing the effects of this change it is important to understand where it has come from.

Trans National Corporations (TNC's) and the national economies they support have led recent changes in broadcasting. A new era has dawned since the early 1980s whose final form and effects are yet to be seen (Weymouth 1996: 1; Morley and Robins 1995; McQuail 1998). Like any social change, economic changes in broadcasting have not appeared overnight. They are rooted historically in the rise of global capital and media (Herman and McChesney 1997: 11–13). However, it is only in the post-war period that the ‘contours’ of today’s ‘global media system became apparent’ (Herman and McChesney 1997: 18).

69 The term content reflects the current climate of sectoral and technological convergence. Programmes may also be the basis for websites, merchandise, soundtracks and so on. Hence the
After the Second World War, the United States, unlike its allies and its enemies, emerged as a military and economic superpower. Now colossal, US TNC's faced a crisis of overproduction where domestic markets were saturated with consumer goods. Companies’ only possibilities for growth lay in the expansion of overseas markets with Western Europe presenting one of the best marketing opportunities. However, the expansion of consumer markets was dependent on advertising (Schiller 1971:195; Galbraith 1979: 145–8). European public service broadcasting monopolies, which did not carry advertising, were an obstacle to the marketing of US consumer goods. Initially then, the advertising industry is one key strand in the rise of the new broadcasting environment, which has shaped and promoted soap operas like *Fair City*. In 1971 Schiller stated forcefully that:

> Nothing less than the viability of the American industrial economy itself is involved in the movement toward international commercialisation of broadcasting. The private yet managed economy depends on advertising. Remove the excitation and the manipulation of consumer demand and industrial slowdown threatens (194).

According to Schiller, it became imperative for continued US economic growth that commercial media and advertising be insinuated into European broadcasting. The demise of public service broadcast monopolies and the growth in commercial broadcasting became a Holy Grail for advertisers. As Humphreys explains ‘the effect would be to reverse the balance of relations between advertisers and broadcasters’. Competition for advertising revenue was expected to bring down the prices that broadcasters could charge advertisers. In a competitive commercial system ‘the advertisers and advertising agencies could expect to gain the whip hand at last’ (Humphreys 1996: 173).

generic term ‘content’ is used increasingly in the telecommunications industry.
The US advertising industry, working for its own and its large corporate clients’ interests, contributed significantly to the struggle to commercialise global broadcasting. Its members used, and helped make prosperous and politically powerful, commercial media abroad, and they regularly threw their weight behind efforts to commercialise publicly owned media (Herman and McChesney 1997: 22).

Global, or US, advertising agencies often sided with European commercial and political lobby groups in attempts to overcome monopoly broadcasting. The US advertising industry had some success in opening up European markets. Schiller cites the creation of commercial broadcasting in Britain as one such success that was ‘largely a matter of industry ad-men manipulating complex political wires’ (1971: 195). Herman and McChesney comment that 'the J. Walter Thompson agency – based in the United States – was notorious for its behind-the-scenes role in the decision to introduce advertising to British broadcasting in the 1950s' (1997: 22).

Advertisers also adopted less conventional approaches to break into European broadcasting. Schiller calls attention to pirate radio stations that broadcast from boats off the British coast. Broadcasting a mixture of pop music and advertising, they found an enthusiastic youth audience. They were a seat-of-the-pants operation with a distinctly counter-cultural image. Despite this, as Schiller explains:

Behind them stood large-scale interests. In England, until the government actively intervened, both the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising and the Incorporated Society of British Advertisers lent indirect support to the pirates. A director of the ISBA stated “we recognize they fulfil a need. We would be happier, if they were on-shore and permanent” (Schiller 1971: 198).

The post-war period was characterised by this drive to open up new markets in material goods and commercial media services. The initial onslaught was not, however, to have a very dramatic effect on the monopoly status of PSB in most European countries. Europe’s first commercial broadcaster, Britain’s Independent Television (ITV) produced high quality programming in its early years and aimed to
complement rather than compete with the BBC (Ellis 2000: 25–26). Nonetheless the commercial foothold that was gained in this period was to expand. It would eventually not only affect the quantity of commercial television channels but also the quality of public service broadcasters.

The steady commercialisation of broadcasting has increased cost pressures on RTÉ. It has led to an increased reliance on programmes that can attract large audiences at a low cost. Such programmes will tend to involve populist entertainment rather than information or education. *Fair City* is an entertainment programme whose whole *raison d’être*, and means of surviving, is the attraction of large audiences. The soap opera genre is ideally suited to economically hard times. It combines high popularity with a relatively inexpensive production. One might argue then that recent economic changes and increased competition for advertising revenue have promoted the growth of public ‘spectacle’, through programmes like *Fair City*, over public participation. Advertising companies provided the impetus for the ongoing commercialisation of broadcasting; the means were made available in the late 1970s through new technology.

**New Technologies and New Pressures for RTÉ**

RTÉ has always been one of the less powerful players in the global media field. Ireland has never had the capacity to lead in broadcasting technology. This technological dependence has left a limiting legacy for RTÉ. The station must react to technical changes with no capacity to initiate or prevent them. An important example of such technical dependence – the *Stockholm Plan* – occurred before RTÉ’s inauguration. Under the plan, which allocated broadcasting frequencies to European
states, Ireland was only to be permitted five low powered transmitters. Accordingly, Ireland could not legally or technically broadcast across the Irish Sea. This position had been advocated by Britain, whose technical assistance was essential to the development of Irish television. The arrangement would protect Britain from any cultural or commercial influence from Irish broadcasting, while British channels could be received in Ireland. A report from the BBC Director of Engineering saw that beaming Irish television into Britain made no technical sense. He pointed out that the BBC had ‘actually looked after Ireland’s TV interest at Stockholm because they [the Irish] knew nothing about it.’ (BBC Director of Engineering in Savage 1996: 119). As Savage points out ‘while the cultural and commercial imperialism of British television had established itself inside the Irish Republic, there would be no reciprocation by Dublin’ (1996: 134). Thus, Ireland’s dominated position in the global media field was reinforced by this uneven space of competition. From RTÉ’s first soap opera, *Tolka Row*, there has been an obligation to compete with better-funded British soap operas with no hope of gaining viewers, or advertising revenue, from Britain. While RTÉ has long played on a tilted pitch, recent technical changes now oblige RTÉ to compete for viewers’ attention, not only against British channels, but hundreds of international channels.

Humphreys argues that ‘the main catalyst’ for recent economic changes, ‘giving practical force to the liberalisers' arguments, was undoubtedly the development of new technologies, especially the “new media” of cable and satellite’ (1996: 163). Most importantly these technologies have vastly increased the number of channels available in Europe. Channel numbers in Western Europe jumped from

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70 The transmitters were to be restricted to 50 kilowatts.
71 It is an irony that the Irish government readily accepted this limitation on Irish broadcasting despite a, now lapsed, constitutional claim on the six counties of Northern Ireland. Given the Republic’s weak economic state broadcasting to 26 counties was seen to be a sufficient burden (Savage 1996: 134-5).
35 in 1975 to an estimated 4,800 among the member states of the European Audiovisual Observatory in 2003 (http://persky.obs.coe.int; Weymouth 1996: 24). Some see that this has increased choice, diversity and pluralism in the media (The Economist 8 May 1997). Satellite and cable broadcasting have reduced spectrum scarcity, which previously provided a technical rationale for PSB as a natural monopoly. Thus new technology has removed an important rhetorical support for RTÉ and for all public service broadcasters.

Cable technology is perhaps less significant than satellite technology in its overall effect on European broadcasting. As Weymouth notes the effects of cable technology are usually strongest in small countries with larger, same-language neighbours (1996: 26). Thus cable has spread quickly in Ireland allowing people greater access to British television channels (see Kelly and Truetzschler 1997: 124). The globalising effect of cable technology, however, has only been realised in tandem with satellite technology, used as a local distribution system for satellite receivers.  

The advent of Astra satellite transmission, funded by Société Européene des Satellites (SES), effectively marked the end of ‘national’ broadcasting in Europe. For Kleinsteuber, Astra marked a new departure on a number of fronts.

Astra’s success marks a completely new situation in Europe. Until its emergence new broadcasting technologies had been decreed ‘from the top’, based on an alliance of industry, Telecoms and public service broadcasters. With SES though, a different type of commercial operator arrived that may choose to refuse any politically desired technical standards, if it does not suit its commercial interests (Kleinsteuber 1995: 14).

Astra satellites presented the opportunity for broadcasters to circumvent national regulation. Satellite entrepreneurs could up-link from Luxembourg, one of Europe’s least regulated countries, to audiences across Europe (1996: 170). Thus Astra

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72 This has become less important with the advent of Direct to Home (DTH) broadcasting from satellites. Cable, however, is by no means obsolete. Cable, and particularly newer fibre-optic cable, can carry digital television, telephone services and high-speed Internet services.
satellites have undermined the effectiveness of national regulation (Humphreys 1996: 164). Multinational broadcasting concerns were attracted to Luxembourg because of its lax broadcasting regulation. Sky television, for example, which competes in the Irish advertising market, was launched on the Astra system. Satellite technology has greatly increased the number of companies competing for viewers’ attention in Ireland’s small advertising market exacerbating existing funding problems.

Satellite transmission has also accelerated the deregulation of broadcasting. Cross-ownership legislation would have prevented Sky television’s chief shareholder Rupert Murdoch from running the channel from Britain. Similarly the German multinational Bertelsmann launched their RTL channel from Luxembourg. The channel later moved ‘home’ after German deregulation (Humphreys 1996: 170). National economies became threatened by the possible flight of multinational media capital if they failed to soften their regulation. Deregulation was considered a key criterion in the ‘locational policy’ of multinational media companies and soon led to 'competitive deregulation' (Humphreys 1996: 170). Once a country deregulated, neighbouring countries faced ‘unwelcome commercial pressures of a new quality and order of magnitude to do exactly the same’ (Humphreys 1996: 170). Irish broadcasting is caught in this deregulatory spiral. In its battle to win audiences Fair City must now compete not only against TV3 and British terrestrial channels but also against an array of international competitors available on satellite who have no legal obligation to make any informational or educational contribution to the public sphere.

**Digital Technology**

Humphreys sees signal digitalisation as the most important technical transformation to affect broadcasting (Humphreys 1996: 302). This technology stores and transmits
television pictures using the same binary code as computing. These signals can be broadcast by satellite, cable, telephone wire and terrestrial transmission. Uniquely, digital television signals can be compressed giving rise to an explosion in the number of channels potentially available. This finally relegates spectrum scarcity to the history books where a single traditional terrestrial channel can now carry as many as twelve digital channels (Papathanassopoulos 2002: 34).

The development of digital television, as with satellite and cable, has seen a skewed pattern of investment. Capital has been directed towards the development of infrastructure and away from programme production. Where traditional terrestrial broadcasting was characterised by spectrum scarcity, digital television is characterised by ‘content scarcity’ (see Siune and Hultén 1998: 30). Increased demand for programmes has caused massive inflation in the cost of premium entertainment programmes. As Corcoran explains:

The costs of television, whether delivered by cable, satellite or terrestrial relay, are very large and the cost of programme rights, talent and the most sought-after imported fiction is rising quickly. This is raising rather than the lowering entry barriers to the industry. The unprecedented emergence of global media conglomerates is enhanced by the change in the delivery system from analogue to digital, which is not accompanied by any large-scale increase in production (Corcoran 2002: 9).

In its technological form, and the cost structures it creates, digital television poses a considerable threat to public service broadcasters like RTÉ. For Papathanassopoulos, PSB stations face stronger opposition from digital than they have so far from satellite and cable (2002: 79). In a world of increasingly massive oligopolistic media firms, RTÉ is a broadcasting minnow. Regardless, it must bid against media conglomerates in their efforts to acquire premium programming. This poses a dilemma for any public service broadcaster. As RTÉ’s audience numbers drop due to increased competition there is increasing difficulty in legitimating the
licence fee. If the station does not devote funding to acquiring some premium programming, devoting it to indigenous programming instead, they are likely to lose further audience figures exacerbating their crisis of legitimation. On the other hand if investment in infrastructure and premium imports crowds out indigenous programming then RTÉ will be indistinct from commercial operators. This typifies the catch-22 position occupied by European public service broadcasters (see Buckingham 1987: 2–3). Soap opera, however, offers a way out of this bind. The genre allows the production of low-cost indigenous drama that fulfils a PSB mandate while simultaneously attracting large audiences.

The race to develop digital television has been described as a ‘winner-take-all-battle’ (Herman and McChesney 1997: 48). There is an extremely strong ‘first mover advantage’. Papathanassopoulos sees ‘an unwritten law of media’ that holds that ‘two delivery systems cannot survive in a single market’ (2002: 38). If a public service broadcaster’s territory is colonised by a commercial digital operator they are unlikely to be able to build their own competing service.

RTÉ was poorly positioned to achieve a ‘first mover advantage’ in digital television. As Papathanassopoulos explains the ‘introduction of digital television is extremely costly, since it requires a new infrastructure for both operators (transmission equipment, studios, etc.) and consumers (purchase of new TV sets and set-top boxes)’ (2002: 36; see also The Economist 21 November 1998). In its efforts to create digital television, RTÉ faced heavy costs drawn from stagnant or declining revenues. All attempts to create indigenous Irish digital broadcasting have so far

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73 Set top boxes that are specific to a particular commercial service provider decode encrypted digital television signals. This can be problematic. Consumers in Britain, for example, were uncertain about whether to subscribe to Sky Digital or OnDigital. If one subscribed to Sky then one could not access OnDigital, and vice versa. If a company went out of business then one would be left with an obsolete decoder unable to view digital services. Thus, set top boxes can act as ‘gate keeping’ devices, where digital operators can deny access to competing digital channels (Papathanassopoulos 2002: 50).
ended in failure. The collapse of the proposed Irish digital company Digico has proved costly for RTÉ. In 2002, under orders of the Minister for Communications, RTÉ had prepared to sell its transmission network to the proposed new company (see O’Toole in *The Irish Times* 4 June 2002). The administrative, legal and technical preparations for this separation and sale cost RTÉ over €6million (Keena in *The Irish Times* 25 October 2002). On 3 April 2002 RTÉ signed a deal with Sky digital allowing RTÉ channels to be carried by the satellite broadcaster. This now brings RTÉ television to over 39,000 Sky satellite subscribers in Ireland (Smyth in *The Irish Times* 11 May 2002). It appears entirely likely that Sky’s dominance over digital broadcasting will preclude the development of any indigenous broadcasting system.

There is an additional threat to Irish broadcasting from the BBC. A proposed free service would potentially offer over 100 British channels unencoded and with no subscription fee (Oliver in *The Irish Times* 3 June 2003). It is not envisaged that this service will carry RTÉ. There is a fear that viewers might become attached to this service overlooking RTÉ. This would badly damage RTÉ’s legitimacy as a public broadcaster and its advertising revenue. It is conceivable, however, that RTÉ might look for carriage on the system leaving the digital distribution of RTÉ in the hands of the BBC or Sky (Oliver in *The Irish Times* 3 June 2003). A loss over control of distribution would constitute a further and very serious loss of autonomy for the station.

Papathanassopoulos is resolute that ‘digital television, whether by satellite, cable or terrestrial transmission, is here to stay and will play a growing role in bringing television to mass audiences around the world’. This, he claims, is because ‘digital television follows the imperatives of the industry, not the technology itself’. Digital television was born of a need to replace existing television technologies whose
patent exclusivity was coming to an end and which had reached market saturation (Stubbe Østergaard and Kleinsteuber 1992: 66). Like Williams’ description of the origins of television technology, digital television is being developed for commercial reasons without any clear vision of the uses and effects of the new technology (see Williams 1974: 25).

**Convergence and Conglomeration**

New media technologies have brought about a level of media ‘convergence’. This refers to a convergence not only of media technologies but also sections of the telecommunications industry. In the past television, telephones, computers and so forth existed as separate distinct technologies. Today, digital technology provides a nexus where most communications can be accessed through a number of media. Digital television has the potential to combine the functions of newspapers, radio, telephone and so on. In the 1980s and early 1990s a massive level of technological convergence was anticipated. One of the ‘gurus’ of the coming age, Nicholas Negroponte, advised people in 1995 not to ‘worry about the difference between the TV set and the PC (Personal Computer)’, since in the future ‘there will be no distinction between the two’ (Negroponte quoted in *The Economist* 7 October 2000). It was expected that the advance of digital technologies would serve to dissipate the power of the major media TNC's (see Herman and McChesney 1997: 106). Anticipated convergence was a source of insecurity for traditional media corporations. Conglomeration was the main defensive tactic employed by firms in the face of a new, more hostile, digital age. Herman and McChesney note that media firms, and firms in the larger telecommunications sector, acted 'as much out of fear of the unknown as from coherent visions of what a converging communication market might
look like in ten or twenty years' (1997: 108). They needed to worry not only about their immediate rivals but also the prospect that large firms from other sectors could move in on them.74

The response of these companies has been to engage in mergers and acquisitions to build protective armor, as well as to establish joint ventures and strategic alliances with other firms to protect themselves from being blindsided while making forays into new terrain (Herman and McChesney 1997: 108).

Beyond this, giant non-media companies, which often dwarf their media counterparts, are now becoming involved in media. Providers of services such as telephones and water are adapting their underground networks to carry mass media services. Universal-Vivendi and the French construction company Bouygues are two examples. A broad range of corporations are now becoming involved in mass media as it is seen to be an important, and growing, section of the 'information society' (Humphreys 1996: 209). As a result the entrance and amalgamation of ever-larger entities in the global media field diminish the relative strength of public broadcasters like RTÉ. Thus the need to gain high audience ratings while relying on low budgets is further reinforced.

The Information Society

The information society generally describes a new type of social order to emerge as a result of the qualitative and quantitative change in Information and Communications Technologies (ICT's). It describes a post-industrial society where the generation of

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74 Weymouth addresses these processes of conglomeration and concentration in terms of various forms of integration (1996: 18). Many major media firms are characterised by vertical integration. This refers to ‘activities of a given media enterprise seeking or exercising control over all or some steps necessary for the production and distribution of a given media’ (Meier and Trappel 1998: 41). For example, News Corporation not only controls British Sky Broadcasting, which delivers the successful Sky Digital service, it also owns Twentieth Century Fox, which supplies many of the service’s top programmes. Horizontal integration refers to the expansion or concentration of ownership of the same
wealth depends on knowledge and information rather than physical resources. Similar ideas have been expressed under the banner of the knowledge society, post-industrial society and so on. The idea of an information society emerged in the United States, Europe and Japan between the late 1960s and the late 1970s (Preston 2001: 63). Daniel Bell has most clearly expressed the concept of the information society (Bell 1973: 37). Bell’s model of the information society, or the post-industrial society, has been heavily criticised (Preston 2001: 72–3; Robins and Webster 1999: 81). Despite this the concept has become prominent among business leaders and governments in the past decade. Countless information society initiatives have been launched in order to prepare for the coming new age of communications.

In essence these information society initiatives provide a happy meeting ground, or an especially convenient ‘strategic alliance’, between the specific economic interests and élites of the ICT-producing sectors and ‘leading-edge’ industrial users (such as financial firms) on the one hand, and the narrowly economistic orientations and productivist values of the neo-liberal political élites on the other hand (Preston 2001: 75).

Preston continues that this is an inversion of the progressive modernist visions that saw technology as a means to bring about a better society. In industrialists’ information society visions, he argues, ‘the production, diffusion and consumption of new technology-based commodified products becomes the singular end and measure of progress and social development’ (2001: 75). The development of satellite, cable and digital transmission systems have been encouraged in large part by the perceived need to develop information infrastructure for the imminent information society. Humphreys sees that ‘political decision makers were thus led by technocratic hype, and a good measure of industrialist pressure, to embark upon plans to develop their quite ambitious cable and satellite programmes as part of a much wider package of IT policies’. Moreover, he adds that entertainment was to be a key dissemination kind of media (Weymouth 1996: 19). For example, in Ireland, Independent News and Media control a
strategy in encouraging the early public adoption of this part of the information superhighway. This led by necessity to deregulation of controls on public service content obligations (Humphreys 1996: 171). Thus, an industrial emphasis on entertainment ‘content’ has contributed to the dominance of soap opera.

The promises of the ‘inevitable’ technological new age are at the heart of the new broadcasting environment. Many policy makers have surrendered to a form of technological determinism not seen since the 1960s. As Higgins notes ‘many politicians seem lost in awe or their eyes glaze over at the mention of the digital super-highway. It is as if it all were too exciting, too promising as a competitive tool in the market to be made amenable to regulation’ (1999: 5). Technology is seen to march inevitably onwards. Countries that do not adapt risk being left behind by the new communications age. With an obligation to keep abreast of technical developments RTÉ’s budgets have been further stretched by considerable investment in new information technology. The station has established a considerable presence on the World Wide Web in addition to its television and radio services (www.rte.ie; www.medialive.ie).

The Future Funding of Public Service Broadcasting

The future of public service broadcasting depends on continued public funding. Many public service broadcasters in Europe, however, also generate revenue from advertising. In 2000, only 32% of RTÉ revenue came from the licence fee with advertising, publications and other commercial sources providing 68% of all revenue (RTÉ Accounts 2000). Since 1988, there have been a number of representations at European level from commercial broadcasters to prevent public service stations from dominant share of the Irish newspaper market as we as multimedia interests (see Horgan 2000: 171).
benefiting exclusively from public funding while also making money from advertising. This, many private broadcasters claim, is a corruption of the market (Morris in *The Irish Times* 25 May 2001). Pressure from commercial broadcasters will continue in the future. Papathanassopoulos claims that 'the fate of public broadcasters in Europe will be decided in the larger European countries. As in the past, the smaller countries will follow' (Papathanassopoulos 2002: 76). Mindful of this, the future of many large public broadcasters across Europe is far from safe.

Most public service broadcasters face stagnant public funding since it is seen to be politically unwise to increase licence fees (Humphreys 1996: 232). At the same time, PSB channels cannot freely expand their use of commercial revenue. Although licence fees still play a ‘pivotal role in the financing of public broadcasting in Western Europe’, Papathanassopoulos sees that ‘it seems much more difficult to increase the licence fee in comparison to the past; it is certainly more difficult in comparison to electricity or telephone bills’. This is in keeping with a broadly neo-liberal consensus on low taxation in European politics. He comments that if he is right ‘a static or falling licence fee in a highly competitive environment means that public broadcasters have either to cut some of their organizational expenses or even to decrease their production costs (including their quality) (Papathanassopoulos 2002: 78). *Fair City’s* low cost production system is then a product of politics as well as economic and technical considerations.

Despite the lack of political will to support PSB there may also be a reluctance to abandon it. Again, Papathanassopoulos submits that ‘in an era in which politicians feel uncomfortable because of the increased power of the media and their owners, it is unlikely that a government will decide to abolish the licence fee (Papathanassopoulos 2002: 76). There is of course a complex dialectical relationship between technology, culture and society. Very useful discussions of this relationship are provided by Law (1991), Latour (1991) and Elias (1986).
2002: 78). The general situation, then is one where politicians and regulators fear abandoning PSB but will not challenge market orthodoxy by committing greater funding to it. This amounts to 'rhetorical support', where public policies give preference to the private sector (Papathanassopoulos 2002: 86).

Deregulation has seen the relaxation of a number of controls that formerly bolstered the position of public service broadcasters. Cross-ownership restrictions between media have been considerably relaxed (RTÉ 2002: 19). Similarly, new private broadcasters have been given the freedom to concentrate predominantly on spectacle and entertainment. Papathanassopoulos sees that deregulation ‘is a response to the imperatives of increasing international competition and the globalisation of television markets as well as a political prescription motivated by partisan and commercial interests’ (Papathanassopoulos 2002: 13). In most cases economic and technological forces have led regulation with legislators playing catch up. As Humphreys describes it, most new regulation has simply been the formalising of *faits accomplis* (1996: 219). Being harried by advertising lobbies, TNC's and the rising hyperbole of the ‘information society’ governments gave up national regulation in the hopes of developing successful telecommunications industries and infrastructures (see Bell and Meehan 1988; Bell 1995). Media investors 'were most likely to be attracted to locations where the regulatory constraints were suitably lax' (Humphreys 1996: 172). This was particularly attractive to governments because it incurred no direct financial cost. Costs were more likely to be cultural.

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76 RTÉ recently received a considerable increase in licence money of €43. This, however, came with strings attached. The increase will not be sufficient to clear RTÉ deficit. More significantly, 10 per cent of licence revenues are now earmarked for broadcasters other than RTÉ. Licence money can now be paid to the private sector. This may be seen as a further threat to RTÉ autonomy (see MacConghail in *The Irish Times* 7 January 2003).
Political Change

In much the same way as the former social-democratic hegemony was maintained with different emphases and priorities by previous governments of both Left and Right, the new neo-liberal hegemony is now actively being pursued with different emphases and priorities by governments of both Right and Left (O’Donnell 1999: 15).

As we have seen the new broadcasting environment has been shaped largely through economic and technological change. In an age of highly mobile multinational capital, national governments have lost much of their autonomy and have tended to be led by market imperatives. One of the imperatives of today’s global market is the maintenance of international competitiveness. For Ireland, dependent on foreign direct investment (FDI), this translates as low costs for business. There is a need to attract industry with a skilled workforce, relatively low wages, low taxation and efficient infrastructure (see O’Hearn 1998: 164–165). As Herman and McChesney see it:

Competitiveness in the world market depends on keeping costs down – including wages, benefits, and taxes on business and the wealthy – and avoiding inflation. Virtually all policy choices that directly serve ordinary citizens threaten ‘competitiveness’ or inflation. By 1996 Forbes magazine exulted in the fact that the world’s governments, be they ostensibly left or right, could no longer ‘interfere’ with the prerogatives of business without suffering an economic punishment that would bring them down; governments have effectively lost their power to govern (Herman and McChesney 1997: 32).

According to Herman and McChesney, TNC’s want to be assured that government policy in taxation and regulation will accommodate their interests. TNC’s can threaten to move to less costly international locations if their needs are not met. Governments have little option but to attempt to maintain economic growth through further deregulation in taxation, licensing, environmental law and so on (Herman and McChesney 1997: 34). In a dependent position, successive Irish governments have
been receptive to the representations of industrialists and technologists who have moulded the new broadcasting environment (see Bell and Meehan 1988).

**A Corporate Ideology**

Herman and McChesney contend that the stability of the global corporate system as it currently exists depends 'to no small extent' on the 'widespread acceptance of a global corporate ideology' (1997: 34). They outline what they consider to be its core elements. Firstly, the perceived superiority of the free market lies at its heart. The market is seen to be the fairest and most efficient means of allocating resources and organising society. Freedom, in this case, tends to be identified with the absence of constraint on commerce. Secondly, state intervention and regulation are seen to 'impose unreasonable burdens on business that impede economic growth'. It is seen that the role of the state should be kept to a minimum (Herman and McChesney 1997: 34–5). The corporate ideology is seen to ignore economic externalities and all forms of market failure. If violent television programmes, for example, encourage a more violent society, the cost to society falls outside the economic transaction between the programmes’ producers and those who pay for it. The cost to society is an externality. It does not count for companies and so it is not seen to matter. Similarly, markets do not work for all goods and services. Markets only deal in goods that people value more than they cost to be produced. In a representative broadcasting system many valuable programmes, appealing to minority audiences, fail to make a profit. If left to an entirely market based system such programmes would simply not be produced (Herman and McChesney 1997: 35; Department for Culture, Media and Sport. 1999: 206).
Finally, this ideology sees privatisation as an important means of allowing the market into public life and keeping government interference out (Herman and McChesney 1997: 37; Gandy 2002: 450). According to Herman and McChesney, the global commercial media are both symptoms and disseminators of this new ideology.

The global media are the missionaries of our age, promoting the virtues of commercialism and the market loudly and incessantly through their profit driven and advertising-supported enterprises and programming. This missionary work is not the result of any sort of conspiracy; for the global media TNC’s it developed organically from their institutional basis and commercial imperatives. Nor are global media completely monolithic, of course, and dissident ideas make their occasional appearance in virtually all of them. But their overall trajectory of service to the global corporate system at many levels is undeniable (1997: 37–8).

According to many commentators, one of the most potent aspects of the ideology of the new broadcasting environment is the fact that it is ‘commonsense’, populist and even fun (Humphreys 1996: 229; O’Donnell 1999: 15). In this it appeals to a generation of young citizens who are confident and liberal but also peculiarly conservative and materialistic (Amárach Consulting May 14 2002; The Irish Times 22 September 1999; Inglis 1998: 10–11). Higgins warns that increasingly commercialised broadcasting may be leading to the emergence of ‘an etiquette of being apolitical’ (1999: 2). As with the newspaper trade, media moguls have developed their markets by ostensibly offering what people wanted rather than what cultural élites considered them to need. Humphreys sees that ‘the promise of greatly increased consumer choice was the ideological battering ram deployed by the commercial broadcasting lobby during the fierce media policy debates of the 1980s’ (1996: 229). O’Donnell specifically identifies television as one area of public life where people have been prepared to accept large ‘doses of liberalisation’. He sees that new commercial channels – using soap opera as part of a broad entertainment strategy – have catered for ‘popular views, tastes and experiences’ that were ignored
by public broadcasters. This has become, he claims, the most ‘populist’ strand of neo-liberal ideology. As a result, O’Donnell writes neo-liberalism has appropriated notions of ‘fun’ and ‘glamour’ as its own. This, he claims, is ‘one of the greatest ideological steals of recent times’ (1999: 15). Thus, as noted earlier, the ‘pleasure’ of soap opera may not be so much resistance as surrender to a corporate dominated system. Echoing Herman and McChesney, the dominance of soap opera may be both a symptom and a disseminator of the new corporate ideology.

Soap Opera: the Dominant Genre in a Harsh Environment

As we have seen, television drama, as a field of cultural production, can be divided into more or less purist sub-sections. Historically, the field of television drama has operated as the ‘economic world reversed’ where dramatic kudos outweighed economic considerations. As this chapter has shown the logic of the field of broadcasting is increasingly colonised by the surrounding fields of economics and politics. This has had numerous effects on broadcasting output. In television drama the most visible change is soap opera’s rise to dominance.

De Bens and de Smaele observe that ‘television is increasingly and mainly a medium for entertainment, especially fiction’ (2001: 72). They emphasise that ‘with 37 percent of the overall broadcasting time, fiction is by far the most important programme category on European television’ (2001: 54). There has been a recent growth in entertainment programming across Europe. Soap opera production has increased as part of this new concentration on entertainment. This is intrinsically linked to the economic, technological and regulatory changes of the new broadcasting environment. The massive increase in commercial channels in combination with ‘light touch’ regulation has seen these new channels concentrate on entertainment to
the increasing exclusion of informational, educational and political programming (Brants and Siune 1998: 133).

As noted above, the new broadcasting environment has seen an increased emphasis on imported programmes, chiefly from the US. Recent research from de Bens and de Smaele appears to confirm the growth in this trend (2001: 52). They see that the growth in commercial channels is the key reason behind increased demand for imported entertainment programmes. The renewed concentration on imports has been a response to economic exigencies.

The high launch and start-up costs of the new channels and their initial unprofitability left little for domestic production, so import became the rule. American fiction was cheaper than European, and furthermore, ensured high ratings. Hence, the commercialization of the television landscape stimulated the inflow of American television programmes, especially fiction (De Bens and de Smaele 2001: 52).

De Bens and de Smaele do note, however, that competition has also forced public channels to increase their domestic production. Audiences prefer to see their own culture on the small screen. Despite this, the sheer number of broadcasting hours to be filled for both public and commercial broadcasters has seen an increased dependence on imports to simply fill schedules (De Bens and de Smaele 2001: 52).

While there has been an increase in domestic production this has been dominated by the growth in serials. The European Audiovisual Observatory (EAO) has noted a strong decline in one-off dramatic television productions. They conclude that this decline is most likely linked to the increase in television series and their popularity. They reveal that the series format is now more widespread in Europe than ever before. They display a steady upward trend where ‘over the five-year period, series have gone from 224 titles in 1996, which at the time represented 29% of supply, to 293 in 2000, equivalent to 37% of the format range’ (EAO: 9 October
2001). Series account for one half of British fiction while they make up three fifths of Spanish production. In Ireland’s small, dependent television production sector *Fair City* is the ongoing flagship of drama production.

It is hardly surprising that the series format is forcing its way into the industry and schedules of the largest European countries: series build audience loyalty by means of the regular recurrence of appointments; they guarantee a relatively extensive filling of scheduling spaces; they adapt both to prime time and to day time scheduling and can accommodate easily to a wide variety of narrative genres; finally, they can provide a large slice of successes (EAO: 9 October 2001).

O’Donnell sees that ‘the new commercial channels which have arisen with the increasing liberalization of Western European economies have been a crucial factor in the growth of domestic soaps in Europe’ (O’Donnell 1999: 15). Papathanassopoulos notes that ‘European television drama and comedy production reached record levels in 1999’. Market growth, however, was led by soap operas while ‘higher-quality content for prime time was decreased’ (2002: 20). Humphreys comments that the increase in such programmes is unsurprising when one considers the high costs and low revenues of many commercial broadcasters.

Faced with these economic realities, the new commercial broadcasters had every reason to rely upon the kind of programming that was most likely to maximise audience and that was at the same time relatively inexpensive. Such programming typically comprised light entertainment programmes, game-shows, cheap drama series and popular 'soaps' (Humphreys 1996: 230).

While this emphasis on low-cost and low-risk programming may have originated among new commercial broadcasters these pressures now increasingly apply to public service broadcasters. De Bens and de Smaele state that public service broadcasters have been, to some extent, ‘dragged into competition’ by commercial channels (2001: 72). Humphreys sees that advertising in itself is not necessarily intrinsically bad for public service television. He finds instead that it is ‘competition for commercial
sources of revenue’, rather than advertising itself ‘that is pernicious on the quality of service provision’ (1996: 244). While public broadcasters cannot be accused of simply mimicking commercial broadcasters there have been identifiable changes in their output in response to the new necessities of the broadcasting field. Siune and Hultén recount that:

According to some students of public service, the important changes are not to be found at the macro level of output but within different genres: news becomes sensational, current affairs becomes infotainment and talk shows, drama becomes soap opera... Drama and fiction, flagships for public service broadcasters, are still as important, but today single productions of the classics, opera and ballet are rarely found. There is more contemporary fiction, as a rule offered in serial productions (Siune and Hultén1998: 29)

The production of series now outweighs the production of one-off dramas across Europe. De Bens and de Smaele also note that ‘their concentration in prime-time is striking’ (2001: 69). The central thrust of the new broadcasting environment in broadcasting is economic. It is not surprising then that de Bens and de Smaele find that it is economic, rather than cultural, motives which are the basis of the recent growth in domestic serials (de Bens and de Smaele 2001: 70). McQuail sees that in such transformations investors and producers are simply adapting to the ‘predominant norm’ where the commercialized global media environment means that ‘there is no longer much real choice’ (McQuail 1998: 116). Throughout its history RTÉ has been constrained by economic exigencies. Fair City’s position as the flagship of RTÉ drama production is yet another ‘choice of the necessary’.

**Fair City and British Influence**

Soap opera has come to predominate in Irish television schedules through the influence of a harsh broadcasting environment that enforces competition for audience ratings and commercial revenue. This, in part, explains the current dominance of Fair
City in Irish television drama production. However, the form and content of Fair City can also be explained to some degree by RTÉ’s dominated position in the field of media and the accompanying international influence.

Until the 1960s Ireland had remained an economically and culturally closed society. The importation of foreign television programmes, as a result of Ireland’s media dependency, had a significant influence on public life. Early programme listings were filled with soap opera, comedy, westerns and adventures series from America. At the same time indigenous drama was very scarce (The Irish Times 29 December 1961). Although the shows imported by RTÉ were rather innocuous, they revealed a secular, modern world that had been pushed to the margins in Irish media. Such entertainment shows undermined the dominance of the Catholic Church in public discourse. As Inglis explains these shows:

Portrayed life-styles in which religion had little or no importance. The concentration was on urban individuals rather than on rural family life... A way of life was brought into Irish homes in which people were not limited in what they did and said by mothers and priests, but by police, doctors, and lawyers (1998b: 92).

In this respect, imported television drama contributed to the modernisation of Irish society. In addition to direct imports, the soap opera genre itself should be borne in mind as a cultural import. Over time, many of the storylines typical of foreign soap opera have emerged in Irish productions.

The urban soap opera, Tolka Row, preceded Fair City by 25 years. ITV’s flagship soap opera, Coronation Street, was first transmitted in December 1960 (O’Donnell 1999: 193). In McLoone’s opinion, Tolka Row was intended to provide an Irish alternative to Coronation Street (1984: 61). The series clearly had much in common with its British counterpart. It followed Coronation Street’s lead by attempting to mix soap opera with social realism. The show was set in a working
class area and focused on the strong female characters associated with British soap opera.\(^{77}\) Despite, its similarities with *Coronation Street*, *Tolka Row* did not realise the ‘kitchen sink’ fears of clergy and cultural conservatives\(^{78}\) (Gibbons 1996: 51). In spite of its urban setting, the show’s underlying culture and ideals were surprisingly rural. Mirroring the strong women of British soap opera, Rita Nolan was a matriarch and the anchor of all social life. The Nolan family, however, was cast as the linchpin of the community. *Tolka Row* portrayed urban life through the lens of an Irish rural ideal (McLoone 1984: 63; Sheehan 1987: 127; Gibbons 1996: 56). Rather than detracting from the centrality of the family, *Tolka Row* did not open any sphere of interaction that lay outside the orbit of the ubiquitous Nolans.\(^{79}\)

Unlike *Coronation Street*, *Tolka Row* was hampered by extreme resource shortages. The show was predominantly studio bound. Outdoor scenes were unheard of until the second series. Even then they were short and rare. Gibbons writes that this led to ‘visual tedium’. He also points out a fatal flaw in the absence of a communal meeting place, like the Rover’s Return pub in *Coronation Street* (Gibbons 1996: 55). Thus, all manner of problems were ‘invariably relocated and displaced onto a family context’ (1996: 55). The last three years of *Tolka Row* overlapped with

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\(^{77}\) O’Connor praises the show for giving an unprecedented insight into the lives of working class women (1984: 125).

\(^{78}\) Many Irish traditionalists worried about the possible corrupting and demoralising effects of television well before the first Irish broadcasts. Drama serials were picked out for particular attention. Gibbons reports that in 1961, the Ninth Annual Summer School of the Social Study Conference was devoted to the ‘challenge of television’. The conference expressed reservations about the possible negative effects of television on the Irish family and the farming community. A conference memorandum sent to Radio Éireann and the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs expressed particular concern that ‘the overall impact of the programmes on Irish television should be such as to convey the image of urban or city life as the only desirable one’. There was also concern that ‘any tendency towards associating an excess of sordid themes with rural life should be avoided’ (cited in Gibbons 1996: 49). The conference expressed the hope that most of the new channel’s programmes would have a rural bias. Gibbons sees this as an aspiration that television would reinforce and consolidate the Irish Catholic rural idyll (1996: 49). There was a fear that Irish drama would follow this unwholesome ‘kitchen sink’ tradition. Soap opera was seen to be a pernicious genre acting as a Trojan horse ‘smuggling in alien attitudes and values’ (Gibbons 1996: 51).

\(^{79}\) For Gibbons the family infiltrated the workplace and became a ‘kind of surrogate welfare state’ (1996: 54; see also McLoone 1984: 64–65).
the production of *The Riordans*, which started production in 1965. This in part led to its downfall since RTÉ could not fund two ongoing soap opera productions. The conclusion of the post-mortems on the series is that the centrality of the Nolan family was oppressive and dramatically dull (Sheehan 1986: 127; Gibbons 1996: 56). As noted earlier the commercial logic of soap opera requires that families be pressurised. Soap opera thrives on family difficulties, not stable families that act as social panaceas. The ‘kitchen sink’ was, eventually, to prove a better source of audience ratings and advertising revenue than piety and stability.

In its early days, *Fair City* carried a very pronounced foreign accent. Despite a succession of successful rural soap operas in *The Riordans, Bracken* and *Glenroe*, RTÉ had failed to make a convincing return to urban soap opera (Sheehan 1987: 367; O’Donnell 1999: 101). With an increasingly urbanised population, and the massive popularity of British urban soap operas, *Fair City*’s arrival in 1989 was long overdue. Hugh Linehan wrote that *Fair City* was launched in a direct bid to see off competition from *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* (Linehan in *The Irish Times* 5 April 1997). In its attempt to compete, RTÉ imported talent and knowledge to allow it to emulate its British rivals.

I mean when we started *Fair City* the entire operation was basically imported. The writers were English, they came from the UK… The directors all came from the UK. OK the actors were Irish obviously. It was actually in fact part of the weakness of the first series was that it came across as a kind of an imitation/parody of *EastEnders*… Because actually they’d all been recruited from *EastEnders*. (Former Director of Television, RTÉ).

In the course of this research *Fair City* continued to use predominantly British directors because staff in RTÉ, many felt, lacked experience in directing multi-camera soap opera. A qualitative research report commissioned by *Fair City* revealed a strong need to mark up against British competition (Hatherell 2001). This is manifest
in the strong and ongoing linkage between *Fair City* and its British rivals *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*.

Hatherell’s research explored the basic ‘need states’ that brought people to watch *Fair City*. The presentation\(^{81}\) of the research devoted an entire section to ‘*Fair City vs. Coronation Street*’. It was discovered that there was:

A fundamental difference in how respondents interact with *Coronation Street vs. Fair City*. It revolves around their relationship with the character. Respondents are intimately involved with the characters on *Coronation Street* and have highly emotionally charged relationships with many of them’ (Hatherell 2001: 19).

The report claimed that for *Coronation Street* viewers could almost say they had ‘been with’ a character rather than saying they had ‘seen’ a character. In contrast, *Fair City*’s characters were found to be held at arms length resulting in a less emotionally dependent relationship and consequently less compulsive viewing behaviour’ (Hatherell 2001: 25). To this end it was recommended that writers make *Fair City* more like *Coronation Street*, allowing viewers to gain ‘fly on the wall’ type access to the minutiae of characters’ lives. As programmes, *Fair City* and *Coronation Street* have the same ‘need states’; they both need large loyal audiences to generate steady advertising revenue. It is clear that *Fair City*, due to competitive pressures, not only marks but also seeks, in many respects, to emulate its competition.

*Fair City*’s identity as a programme then has not been established solely in the context of Irish television drama, past and present, but also in the context of British soap opera. The show is seen to be located somewhere between the ‘grittiness’ of *EastEnders* and the melodrama of *Coronation Street*. Hatherell’s report clarified this

\(^{80}\) This practice was discontinued in summer 2002 because the use of salaried staff directors rather than visiting directors allowed a reduction in costs.

\(^{81}\) The research was made available to me as an extended PowerPoint presentation rather than a standard written document.
employing a two dimensional map to locate the programme in the soap opera universe.

![Two-dimensional map diagram](image)

(Source: Hatherell 2001: 3).

Fair City’s audience, and producers, saw that the programme was located, in terms of its ‘risk’ and ‘reality’ somewhere between its two primetime competitors.\textsuperscript{82} Fair City is seen to occupy ‘solid territory’ and to have ‘consolidated positioning’ sitting close to Coronation Street, but not being as ‘harsh’ as EastEnders. Coronation Street steered into ‘safer’ territory through its use of humour. In all, this constellation of soap operas was seen to occupy ‘territory that has broad psycho-graphic appeal’ (Hatherell 2001: 13). Thus, the show’s identity, created in relation to British soap operas, plays a key role in producers, editors and writers’ perceptions of what is, and what is not, a Fair City storyline. This is a key determinant of Fair City’s potential contribution to the public sphere.

Despite the strength of foreign influences, local processes also shape RTÉ and Fair City. Despite the importation of technology and associated knowledge there are significant examples of television innovation in RTÉ. The Riordans, for example,

\textsuperscript{82}Emmerdale is an early evening soap opera and does not offer ratings competition to any of the top three soap operas.
was revolutionary in its use of outdoor broadcast equipment in drama production (Gibbons 1996: 57). Television representatives from around the world visited Ireland to witness its production. Although, *Fair City* was essentially an *EastEnders* clone in its early days it was forced to adapt because it alienated Irish audiences, who were not accustomed to its quick pace and large array of characters. Linehan commented that the ‘new soap opera was confused and boring, with too many characters and not enough plot’. *Fair City* was trying to copy *EastEnders* but the writers ‘didn't realise that the Irish are less direct than the English’ (*The Irish Times* 5 April 1997). The show survived and thrived by adapting to Irish audience expectations.

Regardless of the adoption of foreign technology and knowledge, RTÉ remains embedded in its local environment. It has not through globalisation or some form of technological determinism become a carbon copy of British or American broadcasters. It is still visible, however, that broadcasting is an intrinsically international activity. Following Bourdieu’s model, the strength of foreign influence on Irish broadcasting has been inversely proportional to Ireland’s relative power in the broadcasting field (1998: 53). As broadcasting technologies become more expensive and complex, Ireland and RTÉ have been more strongly swayed by countries and companies with technical and economic dominance. As such Irish television, and Irish soap opera, carry pronounced foreign influences.

**Acquiescence or Resistance?**

By examining recent changes in the broadcasting field we have gained a clearer appreciation of how RTÉ must operate and why *Fair City* is produced in its current form. Soap opera’s dominance is, in large part, the result of a new commercialised broadcasting environment. As noted from the outset, however, the social role of soap
opera is unclear. As Curran pointed out ‘seemingly apolitical material’, like soap opera, can subtly convey the norms or values that ‘lie at the heart of political creeds’ (1991: 34). I have argued here that RTÉ’s heavy reliance on soap opera is symptomatic of a new broadcasting environment and the corporate ideology that underlies it. It remains to be seen, however, whether soap opera is also a disseminator of this ideology. As pointed out in my introduction soap opera concentrates on private problems, which are often resolved through individual choices. This, one could argue, reflects the principles of the neo-liberal lobby, which has driven recent transformations in broadcasting. In this sense soap opera may be seen as a form of symbolic domination, a conduit insinuating system imperatives into the lifeworld.

Soap opera may also, however, be viewed as a form of cultural resistance. As we have seen, the soap opera formula permits RTÉ to produce popular indigenous drama despite financial pressures. This provides Irish people with a representation of their society and culture unavailable in imported dramas. *Fair City*’s prominence is a response to the constraints of RTÉ’s economic and political environment. Within this environment, however, the soap opera formula enables RTÉ to create indigenous, ongoing and popular drama that can, occasionally, create discussion and debate. Notably, the soap opera genre has allowed many less powerful regions and linguistic minorities to create popular drama despite a lack of resources. In Ireland, TG4 has broadcast *Ros na Rún* since 1996. Similarly there have been ongoing and relatively successful soap operas in the Welsh and Catalan languages (see O’Donnell 1999: 161–8). We return then to the fundamental question of the type of contribution that *Fair City*, and programmes like it, can make to the public sphere. Do such soap operas present an opportunity for the rationalisation of the lifeworld through discussion and debate by presenting diverse representations of social life? Do they,
on the other hand, simply represent a colonisation of the lifeworld by the system imperatives of power and money, stressing individualism and consumerism? To answer these questions satisfactorily, it is necessary to enter empirically into RTÉ to reveal the cultural and practical limits on what *Fair City* can and cannot say.
Chapter Seven

Environmental Change and Cultural Change within RTÉ

Producers’ perceptions of the form, content and social role of television drama have changed since RTÉ’s inception. There has been a cultural change in drama production. Here I describe a move away from purist principles held by many producers towards more heteronomous or market oriented criteria of quality. The principal manifestation of this change is in the newfound acceptability of the soap opera form as the mainstay of RTÉ drama. The formerly prestigious single play is generally accepted to be extinct. The research presented here corresponds with aspects of Bourdieu’s analysis of the field of cultural production. These interviews have concentrated on producers who worked in RTÉ at various times from 1961 to the time of writing. It suggests that producers’ career paths and the level and type of capital they possess shape their judgements on how good drama should be made. I argue here that this cultural shift, from purist to more generalist values is the product of the new commercialised broadcasting environment described in the previous chapter. It is a consequence of the economic invasion of the field of cultural production where cost pressures have necessitated increased rationalisation of production. Agreeing with the predictions of Bourdieu and Garnham this suggests the proletarianisation of television drama production; where it is being stripped of a cultural aura (Bourdieu 1993: 131; Garnham 1993: 189). Accordingly Fair City is now produced in a context that is constrained by the disempowerment and precarious employment of those who create it. As I will explain in the coming chapters, this narrows the range of issues that the programme can introduce into debate and discussion in Irish society.
An Individualist Culture

Drama producers are cultural producers but also managers. They display many traits that correspond with Bourdieu’s description of the field of cultural production. Like artists, many displayed a sense that something inexplicable called them to television drama, which could be seen as much as a vocation as a job (see Bourdieu 1993: 64). The producer of a long-running drama series, Producer B described this.

I: Could I ask you first of all, why are you involved in drama production and how did you get involved?

R: I got involved simply because I actually like it. I was always interested in it... forty years I've been interested in it, from the time I started working with amateur drama and things like that. I don't think you can articulate it really... there's an instinct or there's something that you feel... I suppose, in a way, it’s like asking a painter why do they like to paint, or asking a poet why do they like [poetry]. You know, it's because you have to do it (Producer B).

This sense of a personal calling contributed to a strong individualist culture among drama producers resembling that among artists (Bourdieu and Haacke 1995: 12–3). The relatively small size of RTÉ and the considerable power possessed by producers put a spotlight on their individual actions. Drama producers saw individual personalities, rather than groups, to be the motor of change within RTÉ. At the time of the research there was no independent drama department in RTÉ. There had, however, been widespread hope of a resurgence of drama within RTÉ (The Irish Times 27 November 1998). Many had hoped for a new personality to champion the flagging cause of drama within the station. This was inherently seen as an individual rather than a group task.

I know they (RTÉ) have been trying to develop writers ... Which I think is a very sensible way to go with it, but that was kind of spearheaded by [Name] who has since left the organisation ... So we’re a bit rudderless when it comes to drama at the moment. It’s a huge hole in what's going on here though, that there is not one person who's taken responsibility for it (Producer F).
Producer C, an ex-producer stated that the importance of individual personalities as a source of change in RTÉ had affected how he saw change in any organisation.

That's why I'm no longer a Marxist because it always comes down to character. Unless there's a Lelia Doolan sitting there waiting to take them on, it doesn't happen. We don't have the men or the women with the vision... There's no character being used by people. They haven't got the balls of Jack Dowling, Lelia Doolan who put their money where their mouth was...

(Producer C)

Power possessed and employed by producers was seen to lie with individuals rather than groups. The effectiveness of individual power was heightened by the importance of informal work practices in RTÉ. Informal work practices, however, have declined in RTÉ over its 40-year history. Fair City is now produced in a more rationalised context than that which existed in the first twenty years of RTÉ drama.

The Fuzzy Logic of RTÉ

RTÉ is a hierarchical bureaucracy, which operates on the basis of set procedures, rules and a division of labour. Nevertheless, some producers interviewed, particularly drama purists, had not experienced RTÉ as a very rigid bureaucracy. They used various forms of power in their work, which took advantage of the ‘fuzzy’ nature of RTÉ's internal organisation. Producers saw that RTÉ's bureaucratic structure was, to some extent, malleable. Authority could be challenged, rules could be twisted and rungs in the RTÉ hierarchy could be by-passed.

One ex-RTÉ producer said that allegations of censorship and management interference in drama content presupposed ‘a level of coherence and a level of internal discipline (in RTÉ) that simply isn't there’. Breaking with notions of RTÉ being dominated by either commercial or public service broadcasting logic, another producer maintained that there was no logic to RTÉ. He had produced a drama-
documentary, which provoked serious public debate for months following its transmission. Approximately one million viewers watched the programme. Using either commercial or public service criteria this programme was, one would imagine, a success. The producer proposed making a further three, similar documentaries. All three were turned down by RTÉ, leaving the producer unable to identify any rationale behind the decision. Challenging this idea, Producer D took the more complex view that there were in fact too many logics at work.

Well there are lots of different logics operating simultaneously. And you know that's what I meant in a way about the political nature of RTÉ. It's not political in the way that it's perceived to be political quite often from the outside. Its not a kind of right-left thing, its much more complicated than that. It’s like three-dimensional chess... There is a logic but there's a lot of logic, too much logic actually. Too many logies, which often intersect... (Producer D)

An organisation’s structure can never be understood in purely formal terms (see Wacquant 1992: 17–18). An understanding of power within RTÉ cannot be confined to the power formalised in professional positions. Work in drama production has relied equally on networks of informal relations. An emphasis on informal strategies, however, appears to have been more pronounced before the 1980s among relatively more purist producers. According to producers, various informal groups within RTÉ operated then with considerable power. They were compared to feudal baronies or miniature empires. Producer D described this as one of the complex informal political considerations that shaped programme decisions.

In many ways RTÉ is structured, well not structured, but operates, a little like a feudal system. And not even a very sophisticated feudal system. There's an element of, if you are a producer, it is very useful for you to have a champion, who will battle for you on behalf of your projects. And so quite often, X producer will be seen to be allied with Y manager. That may mean that Z manager is in conflict with Y manager and therefore regards, you know, my enemy's friend is my enemy. So it may be that then X needs the project to go through Z. And you know what I mean, these are quite often the

83 These are real names; the experience of these producers has been recorded in their book Sit Down and be Counted (1969 Dublin: Wellington).
considerations that are flitting round, and I mean by definition they are not formalised... (Producer D).

In bureaucratic organisations one’s level of power is expected to correspond to the position one holds within the organisational hierarchy. Bureaucratic power is formalised and visible. Other less visible forms of power do exist, however, within organisations. Power in RTÉ, it appeared, did not depend solely on one’s formal position within the organisation, but also on what one knew, whom one knew and how one was regarded. RTÉ producers have often achieved their objectives by using knowledge, connections or prestige (or what Bourdieu describes as cultural, social and symbolic capital, respectively (1986: 243)). The ‘fuzzy’ or highly informal nature of RTÉ provided a space in which staff could employ various strategies to achieve their goals, rather than being forced to adhere strictly to formal bureaucratic rules. The power of this type of strategy appeared, however, to be proportional to the volume, and type, of capitals an individual held.

**Informal Strategies**

Drama has historically occupied a weak position in RTÉ, largely because of its high cost to output ratio compared with other genres such as chat shows or sports programmes (see Stokes Kennedy Crowley 1985: 44). Obviously, RTÉ drama producers have always lacked the formalised power of higher management. Despite this, many drama producers were able to fall back on a number of resources that, occasionally, allowed them to realise their intentions despite opposition.

Underlining the individualistic and character orientated nature of their work, producers stressed how they relied on ‘powers of persuasion’, ‘social skills’ or the ability to ‘sell’ their ideas to Heads of Department. This was an integral part of a producer’s job. These struggles to ‘sell’ or ‘push’ programme ideas often took place
informally. An ex-drama producer, who worked in RTÉ in the 1960s and 70s, described some of the informal methods employed in trying to sell a programme.

There was a lot of fight going on for facilities. You would have a pet project that you wanted to do; you would talk to the Head of Drama... You could have a meal with [the Head of Drama] and keep pushing, pushing, pushing and eventually he might say yes or he might throw you out. And but you did an awful lot of that. You did your own pushing, if you wanted to do something, and you'd go over the Head of the Department (Producer A).

Many producers saw that getting things done in their work depended on sticking their neck out and challenging authority.

Given its historically weak financial position, RTÉ has always lacked funds and facilities (Edwards 1973: 105). There has always been a struggle among programme makers for these facilities. Producer A described how, in the 1960s, he often by-passed procedures and authority to win studio time for his dramas. One drama, for example, was refused production due to union difficulties. This resulted in a four-day gap in the studio schedule.

So I would watch the dates and sort of say ‘right there's two days down for a studio play’ or three days or one day. At one point I found four days and I couldn't believe this, we’d never had a four-day slot... I said terrific four-day slot now we can do a big play... I walked in to the controller’s office and I said ‘I’d like to do either Three Sisters... Hamlet... or Mother Courage’. And he said ‘oh let’s do Mother Courage’. And I said, ‘Great, thanks a lot’ and was out the door... I was in and out in five minutes. And I said Right, OK, I can’t remember who was Head of Drama at the time... I went back to whoever was Head of Drama and... I said I've got the commission, I've spoken to him (Controller of Programmes). ... we've got the clearance were doing Mother Courage. You know, sort of, ‘up yours!’ (Producer A)

As noted earlier, television programmes are not shaped entirely from the top-down. They are products of conflict and negotiation. This research revealed accounts of how, on occasion, conflicts arose between individual producers and also between producers and managers. These conflicts took place in formal or informal contexts, where many forms of capital, formalised and non-formalised, were used, and fought
for. These accounts suggested that producers’ work was shaped by constraints, such as resource shortages, but also by the use of cultural, social and symbolic capital and the confidence they supported.

Diverging from Devereux’s account of Irish soap opera production, this research revealed that social issues, which were not directly economic or political, heavily influenced producer culture (see Devereux 1997 and 1998). This influence was visible in the forms of power that producers pursued through their work. Drama producers had ambitions beyond making money and staying on the right side of those in power. They did not see that ‘good drama’ depended on political or economic acceptability. A production did not need to have been a financial success to be considered a ‘good drama’. Producers often admired dramas precisely because they challenged dominant views of society.

**Exemplary Programmes**

Television programmes reflect the culture and the society in which they are created. They may in turn serve to reproduce this culture (see Sewell 1992: 13). Programmes, which are recognised, admired and emulated by drama producers, provide an important insight into the *habitus* that has shaped the practice of drama production. The programmes generally regarded by producers as being exemplary point towards a concern with social issues and how individuals experienced them. Among the programmes mentioned most frequently, as being exemplary drama productions were *Strumpet City*, *Family*, *The Ballroom of Romance* and *Fair City*. Both *Strumpet City* and *The Ballroom of Romance* dealt with political and social issues, albeit retrospectively. *Family* was a short drama series co-produced by RTÉ and BBC. It

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84 The union objected to the inclusion of cast members who were not resident in Ireland.
represented present-day problems of social exclusion and domestic violence. Despite the fact that the programme dealt with uncomfortable social issues, it was a highly valued cultural referent among producers of drama in RTÉ. Producer D commented that ‘Family ... was very uncompromising. It was a brilliant piece of work and I think it is the one project which I'm proudest that RTÉ, during my period, was associated with’.

Producers praised *Fair City* as a show that had improved considerably. It was also praised for dealing with issues such as homophobia and marriage breakdown. Producers expressed high regard for a lot of British drama. Alan Bleasdale's *Boys from the Black Stuff* was frequently mentioned. Producer A described this drama series, which dealt with the plight of the unemployed in Thatcherite Britain, as ‘one of the classics of all time’. The influence of British social realism is, again, apparent here. Generally the dramas considered to be exemplary dealt with major social issues and their impact upon a group of characters. If these exemplary dramas are regarded as past practices which have shaped the *habitus* and practice of RTÉ drama producers it is increasingly difficult to support the view that there is an ideological consensus in RTÉ drama that excludes social problems as Devereux claims (1998: 146).

It appears that the opposite may be true. RTÉ drama producers display an active interest in promoting the interests of groups who are pushed to the fringes of society, such as travellers, homosexuals, the poor, refugees and racial minorities. This concurs with Bourdieu’s prediction of homology and alliances of position between the dominated fraction of the dominant class and other dominated groups in society (Bourdieu 1993: 44). This homology of social position it appears has predisposed drama producers to sympathise with many socially excluded groups.

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85 *Strumpet City* addressed poverty and industrial strife in turn of the century Dublin. The *Ballroom of Romance* dealt with some of the social and sexual pressures on women in rural Ireland.
Producers and Public Issues

Devereux’s claims about the ideological nature of RTÉ television were put directly to producers. There was universal and emphatic disagreement with this view. Producers provided a number of arguments against his analysis. As argued earlier, RTÉ, like any organisation, is not a culturally coherent monolith. It is made up of individuals and groups who compete for a stake in how the station is run. This lack of coherence, as Producer D said, challenged the credibility of Devereux's analysis. Producer D responded, ‘I don't think that there is that ideological coherence that is attributed. I mean I think there are both good and bad reasons why there isn't that ideological coherence’ (Producer D). He thought that if RTÉ producers must be labelled as having a particular ideology, it was one that saw value in representing marginalized social groups.

And in fact, to be absolutely candid, the truth is that RTÉ as an organisation, and the programmes division of RTÉ, is clearly left of the centre of Irish society. And it clearly has much more liberal views across a whole range of social subjects... goes out of its way actually in my experience. Whether in drama, or in documentary form, or whatever, to represent minority groups sympathetically (Producer D).

Notably, producers cited Glenroe as being a quality drama. It was also mentioned as a drama that had consistently made sympathetic representations of Irish travellers. Rather than being seen as token characters, travellers in Glenroe were seen as an intrinsic part of the show. Producer D commented that ‘Glenroe for example has a long tradition of representing travellers which actually extends back to The Riordans; it’s been a kind of preoccupation’. It was generally felt that the

86 It was decided to meet this issue head on. Producers are accustomed to being quizzed on their coverage of social issues. As such the use of the word ‘issue’ was something of a prompt to enter into ‘canned answers’. This question was intended to elicit an overt reaction to criticism while other questions approached the making of ‘good drama’ with more subtlety.
representation of travellers was biased, but biased in providing an unrealistically rosy picture of traveller life. It was noted that travellers were far more integrated into village life and were far more numerous in Glenroe than was typical of an Irish setting. According to Producer B ‘if you wanted to take it on the pure figures, the number, I mean to have two traveller families in a cast of about twenty is numerically well above what they should be’. Despite a small number of complaints from academic researchers concerning negative representations of travellers, most complaints came from the general public and were very different. Producer D explained.

RTÉ is usually criticised by the public, and certainly in terms of the letters that I get on drama, about our dramas. You know, by a margin of 99 times out of 100 the public’s complaints are why are travellers represented sympathetically (Producer D).

Despite criticism from audience members, producers persisted in maintaining a sympathetic portrayal of travellers. Devereux claims that producers are ideologically motivated in misrepresenting travellers and really only care about entertainment and ratings. Audience complaints, however, begged the question why producers persisted in representing travellers at all. Producers saw a value in representing travellers, which went beyond a populist commercial logic.

When asked about the representation of marginalized groups in RTÉ drama, producers spoke of their own concerns about issues that were being overlooked in RTÉ drama. Producer E spoke about the exclusion of the disabled from drama. Producer G and Producer A felt that xenophobia was an issue that needed to be addressed within RTÉ's drama. Other concerns included a lack of young people’s drama, a lack of acting parts for women, particularly middle aged women outside of soap opera. Producers were concerned about a range of forms of social exclusion in addition to those that were directly class related.
Good Drama is Socially Relevant

Producers agreed that one of the most important aspects of any drama was its relevance to society. Television drama, they said, is an important means of telling stories about ourselves, about our society and often about areas of our society that are commonly hidden from sight. Producer G clearly illustrated this view.

...I think drama is the single most effective way to reflect who we are, where we've been, where perhaps we want to go... if you like it can be a signifier of where our society is at a particular moment. What its prejudices are, what its anxieties are, what state of change it's at as a society. So what I hope to achieve therefore is to reflect that, so the audience say 'yes that does reflect who we are' (Producer G).

Producers saw the linkage of everyday feelings and events with broader social processes as a key component of television drama. There were numerous examples of this. Producer C said he would like to see drama in RTÉ about the existential angst of Irish capitalism, worked out in terms of marriage breakdown. Producer B cited Arthur Miller’s All My Sons as a piece of exemplary and socially relevant drama.

...It was about a man who had a factory and made faulty airplane parts. They were fitted to a plane and somebody died out in the war... And then it was the effect it had on his family because his partner carried the can, and got put to jail for it. And he, through various convoluted ways, got out of it. And then it started to affect his family because his son started to do a line with, and wanted to get married to, the daughter of the man he had shopped, basically, for the job. Now you could say, knowing that Arthur Miller was a left-wing person you would say what he's writing, politically, is the pressures put on by militaristic capitalist society on the individual to do this. Now, but it doesn't seem like that when you're looking at the play because you're interested in the people. Now, you could say that, but you could also transfer that play to Russia and say well this is the pressures put on by a communist regime on the individual which thinks the state is more important than the individual. Which of course is equally true. I mean look at Chernobyl (Producer B)

All My Sons was regarded as a great play, in part, because it links the personal and the social. This linkage between the individual and a broader social whole was generally seen as a fundamental part of making good drama. This added an undoubtedly political element to drama production, which producers were aware of. All drama,
according to Producer B, was latently political. He stressed, however, that producers were not free to promote their personal politics through their work. In *All My Sons*, he felt, one is not preoccupied with Miller’s politics because you're interested in the people. It was generally agreed that good drama should reflect society and social issues but this had to be balanced with other aspects of drama production, most importantly the need for dramatic conflict.

**Good Drama is based in Conflict**

In all good drama, producers said, there is conflict. Conflict may occur between characters, but it was seen to be more important that it happened within characters. Producer B expanded on the role of conflict in drama.

> It’s not the conflict between good and evil. It’s the conflict of all of us who are nearly good or nearly evil. That's the real conflict, and very often it’s the internal conflict... how do you write a good drama about Christ if you assume that Christ is totally good and is God? You can’t really then write a drama, you can only do it if you say he was also human, and he had failings... And it’s like if you have a political drama, if you have a drama say which is about the downtrodden workers, and the bosses going around in their Rolls-Royces. There's actually no conflict there you know. There may be confrontation, which is a different thing (Producer B).

It was seen that to be dramatic, situations and characters had to contain conflict. Simplistic characterisations of good and evil did not make ‘good drama’. Stories could not simply present solutions to social problems. Characters and stories had to be credible and coherent. Social issues could not be forced into a drama without addressing how they fitted in with its characters and storyline. If you shoehorn social issues into drama, according to Producer E, ‘you shoehorn at your own expense ... you have the problem that you alienate your audience ... because it will be immediately recognised that you're doing this sort of thing’. Representing society was regarded as an important part of a drama producer’s work. The job of the drama producer, nonetheless, was to make ‘good drama’. This involved more than
simply putting an issue on the screen. Social problems had to be carefully worked into a television drama amid artistic and practical constraints.

**Production Constraints**

Despite drama producers’ individualistic and socially concerned culture, criticisms of RTÉ drama for failing to address important social issues persist (Devereux 1997; Sheehan 1987: 426). It could be argued that the inability of RTÉ drama to tackle social problems to the satisfaction of commentators was less a product of the *habitus* of producers than it was of the objective constraints of RTÉ as a field. Producers did not blindly accept constraint. They were quite aware of what they could not do in their work. As pointed out earlier, producers often tried to resist constraints in a number of ways. Here I briefly point out some of the key constraints that drama producers have faced in RTÉ.

**Financial Constraint**

As suggested by the previous chapters, financial constraint has always been a concern for drama production within RTÉ. There has been a view long held among producers that drama is the first area of production to suffer in times of financial difficulty. Producer A described his experiences of this.

> Even when dramas never cost that much relatively speaking... you were the first to go if there was a cut back. Drama was the first to be cut back (snapping fingers). That was it, "Right we've got to save a big chunk of money". Right, bang, half the drama schedule is gone for the year (Producer A).

Financial restraint shaped very fundamental decisions about the kind of drama to produce and how to produce it. When asked why a programme might be refused a
commission by RTÉ, Producer F replied that ‘the perennial one with RTÉ is money’. The financial viability of a project is a primary consideration in any production.

From the producer’s point of view, first of all you have to ask yourself can I make this? Is this achievable? Because you can read wonderful things that had you the budget of Ben Hur times ten thousand, of course you could make them, sure it’d be brilliant... You have to be realistic. You have to cut your cloth according to your measure (Producer F).

Cost and viability was a concern for all the producers interviewed. While producers may have wanted to have better sets, better lighting and so on, the issue of cost had to come first. Here, Producer E infers in his description of Fair City that cost-effectiveness has been elevated to a production aim.

There’s a load of things that I would like to change in Fair City. There's loads of production values that I would like to increase or make better but I mean I am extremely pragmatic when it comes to the actual production of something like Fair City. I think that it has to have a cost effectiveness. I think it is only valid in the schedule if it is cost-effective (Producer E).

Producer E and Producer A can be contrasted here as two producers entering RTÉ at very different periods. Producer A entered RTÉ during the 1960s and was very much a ‘purist’ drama producer. Producer E on the other hand had been a general producer and had a relatively late introduction to drama. While Producer A saw finance as a constraint, Producer E suggested that cost-effectiveness had now become one of the aims of a drama rather than just an obstacle to be overcome.

**Changing Perceptions of Dramatic Form**

The form of a television drama affects the type of issues it may address (Williams 1974: 55–61; Altheide 1985: 14–17). The two televisual dramatic forms that are most commonly contrasted, by producers and commentators, are the single play and the soap opera. Both have inherent restrictions on how they address social problems.
The single play is, for many, the Holy Grail of television drama. It can focus on any social issue because it builds its situation and its characters from scratch. Single plays are, however, expensive and do not attract repeat audiences. The single play format is generally unpopular with advertising and sales departments (Tunstall 1993: 123) and is now practically extinct in RTÉ. A limitation of the single play in dealing with social problems is that it only engages audiences once and for a relatively brief period. As the work of Gerbner and his colleagues suggests, the power of television is more likely to lie in the constant reaffirmation of opinion (1994: 20). The single play is incapable of addressing a social problem in a fashion that renders it, for the audience, an ongoing part of everyday life.

Many criticise soap opera for taking up issues that are fashionable and then dropping them as quickly. The experience of soap opera producers, however, is that it cannot be changed quickly. Commenting on ridding *Fair City* of the problems it experienced in its first year, Producer D stated that correcting mistakes in a soap opera was a lengthy process.

For example, there were somewhere like twenty odd characters and basically my priorities were to get rid of, as soon as possible, about seven or eight of them. But I mean you can’t, unless you have a massive accident, you can’t really. So there was one person in particular that was top of my hit list, they had to go just because their character was disastrous. But I mean it took about three months to get that character out of the thing because there's so many. You know the plot lines are so interconnected. That if you take one character out here then OK we've resolved that plot. But then its all tied up ... its like an oil tanker you know, you can’t turn it that quickly. So I thought it would take about a year to turn it (Producer D).

Social issues cannot be simply dropped into a soap opera story line. Issues must match available characters and cannot simply be dropped in at random. So while social relevance is an important part of a good television drama and many producers want to address particular issues they may not be able to because of the restrictions of the dramatic form in which they work. The evasion of social issues in
television drama may often be the result of restrictions of form. As seen in the
previous chapter, the dominance of soap opera in RTÉ is a symptom of market
pressure and a lack of resources. The purported avoidance of social issues in RTÉ
drama does not lie in the direct ‘ideological decisions’ of drama producers (Devereux
1998: 124). Their political outlook is very much liberal or ‘left-wing’, as is to be
expected given their dominated position within the dominant class. A lack of
coverage of social issues lies, in part, in producers’ acceptance of conventionally
accepted forms of television drama, particularly soap opera. The general acceptance
of soap opera, not only as a dramatic form, but also as the mainstay of RTÉ drama,
indicates a transformation in the habitus of drama producers since RTÉ’s inception.
This is a cultural adjustment to the practical necessities of a recently transformed
global media field. As we will see, the dominance of a single genre creates
difficulties for the portrayal of certain social issues.

**Power, Career Paths and Perceptions of Drama**

The strongest proponent of the single play, among those interviewed, was Producer A.
He regarded the single play as the only way to address social issues through drama.
He described soap as ‘an absolute anathema’. As far as he was concerned soap opera
was not even drama. It did not have a playwright, it had dialogue writers. It was not
an authored product and it was mass-produced. Soap opera, he thought, picked up
issues and characters if they were convenient and then dropped them as quickly.

Producer B saw the single play as something that most drama producers
aspired to. He resigned from RTÉ when he thought that they would not be producing
any more single plays. At the time of the research, he worked in RTÉ on a freelance
basis. Despite this, he did not demonise soap opera in the same way as Producer A.
There was, he said, a skill and a craft to the production of soap opera, which is also capable of addressing social issues to some extent. Despite this, soap opera seemed to be a stopgap measure for him, a financial or professional means to an end.

Everybody would like to do the sort of one off drama. I mean there are a number of screenplays that I have... that I would certainly like to do, as distinct from just doing a soap every week. Clearly the difficulty is... getting this sort of thing through. I suppose everybody wants to do that one off thing or a number of one offs and about whatever happens to interest you at the time, different themes. So really, I would like to do something like that (Producer B).

Producer C had more radical views on the dramatic forms most appropriate to the coverage of social and political issues. He emphasised the influence of Brecht, the deconstruction of accepted forms and the polemical use of drama. He believed that ‘RTÉ should stay out of the middle ground, the co-productions, the heavy dramas, the single plays and concentrate on integrating drama into current affairs such as Vincent Browne is doing in his (radio) show’ (Producer C). He said many of the production values cherished by other drama producers should be sacrificed in order to deconstruct existing forms, because the ‘constraints of form stunt creativity’.

Producer C proposed the creation of a large amount of inexpensive drama produced cheaply using hand-held video cameras and largely untrained young crews. He saw that there should be no compromise between pure studio drama and this proposed form of cheap and spontaneous production.

... RTÉ should either be in a studio doing terribly intelligent studio bound programmes or out on the north side with two light weight cameras, working with fucking young actors and young screenwriters who are trying to write about drug-busting and about crime and about suicide (Producer C).

This form he thought would bring the audience closer to the issues addressed. He also thought that it was potentially a powerful source of training and creativity.

You will get back a wonderful football film; you will get back an amazing stage show. You will get back four pieces of shit probably but you will get
two pieces of gold out of it. At the moment we never see any gold so it's worth it, a quite modest investment of budgets (Producer C).

Producer E and Producer D felt that soap opera was a perfectly valid form of drama. Producer D defended this on the grounds of soap opera's ability to deal with social issues.

Soap is, to me, an absolutely legitimate form of television drama. It actually can handle certain things that other forms of drama find harder to handle. For example *EastEnders* introduced a character who was HIV+ about seven years ago. And I mean that character is still in the piece, still suffering from HIV, I mean there is no way a single play could have dealt with that in that kind of depth (Producer D).

Producer E saw that soap opera was an inevitable fact of working within RTÉ. As far as he was concerned the opportunity did not exist to use other forms particularly the single play. Mindful of the lack of an autonomous drama space within RTÉ, he explained that there was nobody in RTÉ sitting around saying ‘well I'm not going to do soap because “I am a drama director, darling”, you know, and “I will wait’, because they'll be put on to current affairs or whatever’. Increasingly, due to economic pressures, one cannot really speak of purist drama producers within RTÉ. It is for this reason that a ‘generalist’ television culture has become dominant.

Producer G and Producer F had an appreciation of drama and its importance within society but they tended to view drama as just another aspect of television. Their interests lay in the creation of good television rather than good drama. Producer G mentioned ITV's *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* as an example of good television. He praised it because ‘it is incredibly simple; it appeals to all the worst things which are greed and so forth, but it is riveting viewing. It is beautifully executed and I have no prejudices at all about that’. When asked about the alleged snobbery between drama producers over soap and single plays Producer F replied.
Well soaps not really drama is it? That what you hear all the time ... There is a hierarchy at play there that is quite laughable really because at the end of the day there's a bum on a seat be it in a cinema or in a sitting room that has to be held by what you're doing. And you're using exactly the same techniques and exactly same medium really. You’ve got actors, you've got a script, you've got a camera, and you’ve got an editor that puts it all together. It’s all the same (Producer F).

These varying views on what makes good drama can be related to the trajectories that these individuals had followed within RTÉ. Producer A entered RTÉ from the theatre. He was asked to join by Hilton Edwards, a senior Dublin theatre figure and RTÉ’s first Head of Drama. His tenure in RTÉ lasted until the late 1980s. Similarly Producer B's interest in drama spanned forty years. He displayed a deep knowledge and interest in the theatre. Both of these producers had been major figures within the Drama Department but had never gone on to senior management positions. Both felt they had entered drama as a vocation, as something they naturally had to do. They both reflected a purist approach to drama. Their knowledge, connections and prestige stemmed specifically from their creativity in television drama, and not in just making television in general.

Producer D and Producer E both had long-term interests in drama but did not have the degree of theatre involvement of a producer like Producer A. They were very mindful of commercial concerns within drama. They saw the rate of return on any investment to be extremely important. Returns, of a commercial or symbolic nature, would either improve RTÉ’s revenue or its international standing. They embraced soap opera as a form without reservation. They had both, at some time, gained upper managerial positions outside of drama. Their career trajectories within RTÉ had taken them through a number of programme genres and both arrived quite late in their careers to drama production. They had no involvement in the production of single plays and had missed out largely on what some referred to as the ‘Golden
Age’ of Irish television drama. This describes an ill-defined and idyllic period for drama production. The golden age was, however, certainly over by the late eighties (Sheehan 1987: 292). The drying up of drama production, particularly the demise of the single play dealing with social issues, signalled the departure from RTÉ of many producers such as Producer A and Producer B.

Producer F and Producer G were flexible producers. They had no stated connection with the theatre. They saw that drama while important was just another form of television. Rather than being drama producers they were television producers. They felt that they could turn their hand to any television genre rather than being restricted to drama alone. Producer G’s career had taken him through many genres and he had spent a long time in documentary production. Producer F had also covered a broad range of programmes and while experienced and trained in drama production, had only had limited involvement in RTÉ drama. Neither of them had gained any upper managerial experience. In all these cases levels of dramatic purism were clearly proportional to levels of experience and investment in television drama.

The rise of a more generalist television culture in RTÉ is compatible with Garnham’s thesis of proletarianisation (1993: 189). To use Bourdieu’s expression the ‘interests of the dominant fractions of the dominant class’ are being served by moving closer to there ‘being only one hierarchy’ (Bourdieu 1993: 41). With culture industries stripped of a cultural aura they can simply be assessed by their efficiency or profitability like any other industry. As television drama is stripped of a purist culture and body of knowledge it is, in effect, being deskillled. It is no longer a job for a specialised cadre but a task requiring non-specific training. This reduces the level of power held by producers, writers, actors and so on. An increasingly rationalised organisation where knowledge, connections and prestige are less important effectively
reduces the ability of staff with less formal power to challenge authority, to twist rules and circumvent RTÉ’s hierarchy. Staff, therefore, become more interchangeable. Their employment becomes less secure. As we will see on Fair City’s studio floor, and in its production office, deskill ing and insecurity serve to reduce worker autonomy by reducing the capitals they hold and can accumulate through the programme. Consequently, the diversity of issues that the programme can introduce into public debate is significantly constrained.

Self-Censorship, Memory and Power

Few producers reported any form of overt censorship. Some of the censorship that did take place appeared to be of a paternalistic form that sought to protect the public. When asked if one of his projects had ever been refused production, Producer A replied...

The one that comes immediately personally to mind is I wanted to do an adaptation of John McGahern's Barracks ... And the reason I was told we couldn't do that was we couldn’t bring cancer into people’s households.

Sex was also an issue where RTÉ management could consider that the public needed to be protected. Producer B commented that part of an unwritten RTÉ orthodoxy was the fact that ‘you would never in a drama have overt explicit sex... it wouldn't wash, you wouldn't have it’. Similarly Producer E said that there had been management involvement in the scripting and shooting of a rape scene in Glenroe. This was the only such incident he had come across but it was done to make sure that that it ‘was done in a way that was appropriate for the audience’.

In 1978 a drama series called The Spike was taken off the air after three episodes. The programme featured a nude model (with her back to camera) posing in an art class and was, ostensibly, taken off the air for this lapse in modesty. Opinions
differ among producers as to why exactly this programme was taken off the air. Not all are convinced that this nude scene was the main motivation. *The Spike* illustrates that producers’ perceptions of RTÉ, and of what makes good drama, are clearly related to power and career trajectories within the organisation. Theories of self-censorship assume that past sanctions imposed on staff for programmes deemed to be inappropriate, by management or the government, are embedded in an organisational *habitus* (see Kelly and Rolston 1995: 580). Past events may thus continue to affect the practices of an organisation. With institutional memory in RTÉ, however, it appears that what is remembered and how it is recalled depends on one’s trajectory through the organisation. *The Spike* provides an infamous case of censorship in RTÉ. The programme was critical of education, religious orders and Irish nationalism. It provoked public controversy. It is to be expected, following theories of self-censorship, that *The Spike* has entered into the RTÉ *habitus* deterring producers from revisiting this type of production. *The Spike* was discussed by a number of producers but its significance varied greatly among them depending on their career paths.

Producer A mentioned *The Spike* as a famous production that had run into a lot of trouble. He thought it had been good because it had attempted to criticise the educational system within a drama series. He pointed out that the writing was not great and that this was due to it being the work of an untried writer. Despite this, he felt it was ultimately political considerations that had caused the programme to be taken off the air.

Right from the very beginning it ran into problems, he (*The Spike’s* producer) ran into trouble. He ran into efforts to derail the production… certainly by people working in education who got wind of it. I’ve never remembered anything where the production was really so battered before it even started shooting. And then... it was whipped off the air by about three episodes in, out of six or something, on the ridiculous excuse that there was a nude shot... I mean there was a model. An art class, and he had a nude model in it. In long
shot I mean you could barely see the damn thing. And that was the terrific excuse and it was whipped off the air by the Director General (Producer A).

Producer B also saw that *The Spike* had been taken off the air because it had provoked powerful external groups into pressurising RTÉ.

I think the way in which it was handled was absolutely awful at the time. It was taken off air without any consultation. It was taken off-air by the DG [Director General], I believe through pressures from religious organisations, educational department things like that (Producer B).

According to Producer B, *The Spike* received hate mail and massive, extremely negative press coverage. Producer B thought that the production was flawed in the respect that it was politically too overt. It plainly criticised the exclusion of sections of the young population from the educational system by selection through exams. It criticised their ‘dumping’ into vocational schools or ‘techs’. It subsequently criticised the religious orders such as the Christian Brothers who ran these schools. He felt that its main fault was that instead of being subversive, it was too overt as it was quite clearly criticising the educational system. As far as Producer B was concerned religious and political pressure were the central reasons for this production being blocked, the nude scene in the art class was merely ‘the straw that broke the camel’s back’. Producer C took a similar view.

*The Spike*, which was a very gritty slice of life, shot in Ringsend School using the real pupils. Again that caused trouble and was taken off the air. So basically RTÉ gave in, in the 70s, to religious pressure and political pressure (Producer C).

As far as Producer E was concerned *The Spike* had been blocked because it had contained a nude scene. Producer D had a very different view of *The Spike*.

When asked about management intervention in programme content, with direct reference to *The Spike*, he replied.

I mean you can pull programmes and there have been a certain number of programmes pulled. *The Spike* was pulled and I guess it was pulled for two reasons. One because, you know, it was shocking and, you know, blah blah
The second reason and this is arguably the most significant, is that it was inept (Producer D).

According to Producer D there was no problem with delivering uncomfortable or radical messages through drama but it had to be done subtly and skilfully. He made a direct comparison between Family and The Spike. Both had similarly contentious content. Family was a commercial and critical success whereas The Spike was pulled after three episodes.

It’s the cackhandedness, it’s the fucking just bad drama, the ineptitude of The Spike that sank it. If you take Doyle's thing (Family)... Think of all that he touched, no problems ultimately from the public. No problems at all... That was because Doyle understands that less is more. The thing about some of these things that have gone to ground is just that they are so fucking badly done... If you want to be radical you've got to be clever. That's the other side of it... I mean anybody can fucking shock. But it's a skill to do it and to lay the punch with people going what the fuck was that? But to come in fucking flailing around and maybe land one or two half blows And people say, ‘ah what the fuck is he at’? It’s to hit and be out before people realise what is going on (Producer D).

Producer A, Producer B and Producer C placed the fault clearly at the feet of management who were trying to appease the religious and political powers of the day. As far as Producer D was concerned the programme was pulled because it was plainly inept. He saw that there was suspicion among some drama producers about management and their motivations. In Producer D's view there were two camps among producers.

Take the first series of Fair City. They thought that they were going to be hard edged. I mean, I saw it at that time, because they were unsure that Fair City was going to come back. You know, the murmur, there were two kind of groups that were murmuring about the thing. One was that it should be taken off because we ought to be investing money in making more features, documentaries about worthy subjects. And the other was (whispering) “it’s being taken off because it went a bit too far. It touched upon incest, you know”. If we’d taken it off it would have been because it was crap! (Producer D).
In his view there was an ‘infantile’ impulse to politicise such events and to relate them to a political cause even if the reason for a programme being pulled was simply that it was poor television.

Career trajectories, in shaping the individual *habitus*, have an effect upon the memory of an organisation. There is, however, a politics of memory at work. Positions and interests not only shape perceptions of the present but also the significance of the past. *The Spike* was, for producers rooted in a purist drama culture, a failed piece of social commentary and creativity tampered with by those who did not understand it. For producers adhering to a more general television culture, *The Spike* was either inappropriate or just bad television. Self-censorship then is highly problematic. Events do not simply enter into a collective memory. Here institutional memory itself is representative of, and a site of, power struggles within the RTÉ as a field. People in various positions, and on different trajectories were competing to impose a dominant vision of the station’s past.

**No Longer the Economic World Reversed**

We have seen Whitemore describe a hierarchical structure of distinction within television drama, with 'the aristocrats of the single play,' at the top, and 'soap opera labourers languishing at the bottom' (Whitemore, in Self 1984: 1–2). This hierarchy describes a purist view of television drama, where questions of profitability are overlooked, concentrating instead on the artistic properties of a production (Bourdieu 1993: 40). Commercial criteria are reversed; the most expensive and least lucrative type of production is the most prized and *vice versa*. The BBC inspired Whitemore’s hierarchy, where a robust drama department was sub-divided into sections for single
plays, series, soap opera and so forth. It does not reflect, and never has accurately reflected, drama production in RTÉ.

In the earlier years of RTÉ drama, this hierarchy could have been used, very loosely, to describe the views of RTÉ drama producers. Hilton Edwards imported a purist drama culture into RTÉ, by recruiting staff that he personally respected for their dramatic work. Producer A, who had been recruited by Edwards, epitomised a purist interpretation of drama. During his time as an RTÉ drama producer the most important aspect of a drama production was the artistic merit of a screenplay. In the sixties, Producer A claimed, viewing figures were never a consideration for him. What mattered was making a competent and faithful production of a screenplay. Such views were obviously facilitated by RTÉ’s monopoly position at the time.\(^\text{87}\)

Such a purist element was prominent among RTÉ drama producers between the early 1960s and the late 1980s. Good drama was recognised and produced through artistic criteria. Within the Drama Department, however, there was no organisational structure of distinction across dramatic genres. There are two reasons for this. First, there was not enough drama being made to justify the sub-division of the Drama Department. Secondly, drama producers, despite their best efforts, were unable to specialise in drama, let alone specialise, in a particular form of drama.

Many early members of the Drama Department entered RTÉ from prominent positions in theatre. The knowledge, connections and prestige, which flowed from the theatre, persisted within RTÉ. There was a desire among such producers to be producers of drama alone and to separate drama from other areas of television production. They struggled to develop an autonomous space for drama within RTÉ. They wanted to specialise in drama as others specialised in sport, news or current

\(^{87}\) It should be noted, of course, while RTÉ was the only Irish broadcaster it shared its audience better funded British channels. Thus, RTÉ did not enjoy the full power of a monopoly position.
affairs. However, RTÉ drama never did achieve the degree of specialisation, or separation from other activities, suggested by Whitemore's hierarchy or Tunstall's view of separate genre worlds (Tunstall 1993: 2). Whitemore and Tunstall were describing much larger and better funded broadcasting organisations.

We all tried to hold on to our autonomy within the drama department... the way it would work, you would get a memo or you might not. You might even just get a phone call, to come over and talk to the controller and be sent to a particular department, for the year or for a series... And you may regard yourself as firmly entrenched in the drama department but that was shit on... you'd finish up doing something like Shakespeare and be told well we need you to do Garda Patrol next week (Producer A).

Although there is scepticism about the 'golden age' of RTÉ television drama it is undeniable that the volume and diversity of drama activity in RTÉ declined dramatically in the late 1980s. By 1990, RTÉ's Drama Department had ceased to exist as an independent department. It had been merged with Variety Television. The battle for drama's autonomy had been lost. Increasingly, knowledge of television, rather than knowledge of drama, is prized among today’s producers. They harbour artistic aspirations like earlier drama producers. Some aspire to producing single plays. They think that drama is socially important, and believe that marginalized issues should be represented in television drama. They also, however, have a keen sense of the realpolitik of drama production. They operate with a far less purist view of television drama. They have adjusted to inevitable economic pressures within RTÉ. They do not see any room in RTÉ for 'lovies', people who may see that some programmes are below them because they are 'drama producers'. The schedule location of a programme, and good Nielsen ratings, are automatic considerations for producers today. Where some once considered soap opera as an anathema, as the backbone of RTÉ drama today, it is now seen to be a perfectly valid dramatic form.
An Adjustment of Judgements and Expectations

The recent acceptance of soap opera as the dominant form of television drama is the most notable transformation in the *habitus* of drama producers since RTÉ’s inception. It must be noted, however, at the same time that some purists considered soap opera an anathema, RTÉ was producing soap operas like *Tolka Row, The Riordans, Bracken* and later *Glenroe*. Soap opera has always had a place in RTÉ drama. There has not been a transformation from entirely purist drama, dominated exclusively by single plays and classics, to pure soap opera. Today, RTÉ continues to commission important short series and occasional single plays. The important change lies in the position of soap opera relative to other forms of drama. Although RTÉ continues to commission drama from the independent production sector, soap opera, in the form of *Fair City*, predominates in RTÉ television drama production. Many *Fair City* writers expressed concern that they were seen to be the voice of RTÉ television drama. The acceptance of soap opera among producers was again a choice of the necessary. As many involved in making *Fair City* explained there was simply no room in RTÉ for *prima donnas*, auteurs or any other manifestation of purism. Producers made ‘a virtue of necessity refusing what was anyway denied, willing the inevitable’ (Bourdieu 1990a: 54).

Those producers who operated in RTÉ before 1980 saw themselves as creative individuals who could deploy numerous strategies within an organisational structure that they perceived to be, to some extent, malleable. They claimed that the creation of art and messages of public significance came before any need to achieve high audience figures. Again, RTÉ’s position as Ireland’s only indigenous broadcaster was conducive to such views. Certain constraints on producers have always been internalised to some degree. Careful budget management, for example, has always
been an automatic consideration for producers but had been consciously resented by many.

Today, however, the nature of drama production has been profoundly altered. The need to fit perceived audience requirements and to gain high Nielsen ratings in various slots is now often accepted as a programme’s *raison d’être*. Producers’ skills have changed. They are no longer dedicated drama producers and lack the capitals, the knowledge, connections and prestige, which accompanied this position. Perhaps the most significant internalisation of necessity is producers’ acceptance of soap opera, as not only valid, but as the dominant form of drama in RTÉ. This marks a break with the elements of purist culture that formerly existed in RTÉ drama. This is an understandable acceptance of the inevitable given RTÉ’s dominated position within the global media field.

Even within the very small group of producers interviewed here, there were very different views about how drama should be produced. This difference and conflict was the product of their varying career trajectories, starting at different times and from different backgrounds. As discussed earlier, a new broadcasting environment has placed PSB under considerable pressure. The fate of RTÉ drama and changing expectations among producers, parallel this global movement towards commercialisation. When RTÉ was created there was room to fight for the creation of an autonomous drama space, a department whose staff worked purely for the production of drama. This fight has been lost. The reasons for this do not lie entirely within RTÉ. They lie equally in Ireland’s historical dependence within the global media field. Producers of RTÉ drama have become more generalised in their work. They are now concerned with the production of ‘good television’ rather than ‘good drama’. Ratings have now become the chief criterion for a programme’s survival. In
line with a general commercialisation and rationalisation of broadcasting, soap opera
has become the dominant form of drama to be produced by RTÉ. With the demise of
Glenroe due to flagging ratings, Fair City is now RTÉ’s flagship drama (Kearney in
The Irish Times 15 December 2001). The changes that have taken place in the last 20
years, both inside and outside RTÉ, have given rise to the peculiarly rationalised
context in which Fair City is produced. It is now time to explore Fair City’s
production process to understand how the constraints of RTÉ as a field, and the
habitus of the programme’s creators, circumscribe the public issues that the show is
more or less likely to present in the public sphere.
Chapter Eight

The Fair City Production Line and Declining Worker Autonomy

This study is concerned with how soap opera may contribute to discussion and debate in the public sphere. It is examining the contribution that RTÉ’s Fair City can make here through the diversity of social representations it can offer. The research has focused on the production of the flagship of RTÉ’s television drama, Fair City. Here I explore, in detail, the show’s productions system to understand what the programme can and cannot say. To understand the expressive possibilities of Fair City it is necessary to understand how its creators are constrained, and also enabled, by the social field in which they operate. As we have seen RTÉ drama appears to have undergone structural and cultural change in tandem with political and economic transformations in the global media field. Here I will reveal how these influences from the broader broadcasting environment are experienced in everyday work on Fair City and how they shape what the show can and cannot say.

Rationalisation and Possibilities for Breaking with Convention

As noted at the outset, the Kay McCoy abortion story marked a break with the conventions of Irish soap opera heretofore. The storyline promoted discussion and debate on a taboo and often bitterly divisive issue. Moreover, it did so before a looming referendum decision on abortion, implicating Fair City to some extent in Ireland’s political process. As argued earlier if soap opera is to make a positive contribution to debate and discussion in the public sphere then such breaks with convention need to be a regular occurrence. Only then can soap opera offer a diverse range of representations, ways of imagining our society and our selves. Thus, social
and personal problems that are taken for granted and go unquestioned can become the topics of discussion, debate, reflection and change.

As a social field, however, *Fair City*’s production system is weighted against such breaks with convention. As we have seen, the dominance of the soap opera genre within RTÉ is a product of historical dependence. More recently the genre has been pushed to the fore by the pressures of a global media field that is increasingly penetrated by political and economic logic. Inside RTÉ, on the show’s set these pressures mould the material conditions of *Fair City* as a field creating restrictions on what the programme can say and how it can say it. A lack of money is the key reason for soap opera’s dominance in RTÉ drama. Similarly, financial scarcity defines *Fair City*’s production. The show must attract large repeat audiences at the lowest possible cost. This, in turn, necessitates rigorous control over production with work on *Fair City* resembling many of the productive aspects of Fordism.  

The twentieth century saw an explosion in material production due to production techniques named after Henry Ford and inspired by Frederick Taylor’s scientific management (Ritzer 2000: 181). This involved fixed production lines where highly controlled, low-skilled workers produced vast numbers of homogeneous products through standardised labour practices. Fordism can be described through four central components, which are efficiency, calculability, predictability and control (Ritzer 2000: 12-14). This form of strict regulation is corrosive to the cultural capital, symbolic capital and autonomy that formerly characterised much television drama.

In response to the pressures of the global media field, RTÉ television drama has turned to broadly Fordist techniques in production and control. Soap operas, like *Fair City*, are the genre most suited to a routinised form of production where workers

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88 This understands that Fordism is not just a system of production but simultaneously a system of mass consumption (see Harvey 1990: 125—6).
perform limited repetitive tasks (Paterson 1981: 58). So, in soap opera, cultural production resembles more the traditional mass production of goods on an assembly line (for a fuller discussion of Fordism applied to cultural production see Lash and Urry 1994: 111—144; Blair and Rainnie 2000: 187—204; see also Morley and Robins 1995). The work, and the working conditions, on the set of *Fair City* strongly suggest that the ‘proletarianisation’ of cultural production, hypothesised by Bourdieu and Garnham, has been realised in television drama (Bourdieu 1993: 131; Garnham 1993: 189).

The central concern here is with the possible contribution that soap opera can make to Irish public life through discussion and debate. *Fair City* has made a positive contribution to what Habermas calls the ‘rationalisation of the lifeworld’ (1992: 186). It has publicly announced issues that were previously considered too dangerous or embarrassing to acknowledge. Thus it has contributed to greater discussion, debate and reflection in public and private life. Despite this, I argue here that increased rationalisation in television production, prevalent in soap opera, permits certain breaks with convention while discouraging others. The show’s production system discourages what Turow has referred to as ‘unconventional innovation’ (1982: 108). There is then a question over how and why the Kay and Malachy abortion story came about. Only by entering, in detail, into the production of *Fair City* as a social field can we understand the show’s expressive possibilities and limitations.

**The Fair City Factory**

*Fair City*’s cast and crew spent their working days between three main areas in RTÉ. Firstly, there was the studio, where most in-door scenes were shot. Secondly, the lot, 89 Ritzer has adapted this and described it as McDonaldization.
where Carigstown stood as a façade urban village, was used for recording external scenes. Thirdly, the canteen was used everyday by cast and crew for lunch and coffee breaks. Cast and crew ate here, but the canteen also offered an opportunity for relaxation and informal communication.

The intimate life of Carigstown took place on an RTÉ soundstage. The studio area was approximately 40 metres long and 25 metres wide. The entire ceiling was covered in lighting gantries. The floor was criss-crossed with cables. It was filled with the sets for *Fair City*'s houses, apartments, shops, pubs and offices. A pathway about two and a half metres wide ran between the sets to allow the passage of cameras and sound equipment. The sets were packed closely together; they stood cheek by jowl taking up most of the remaining floor space. The space between sets was littered with props, everyday domestic objects like couches, washing machines, bicycles and so forth.

Talking to the producer when first entering the studio, I was signalled to hush mid-sentence. Like a library or a church, the studio had an atmosphere that commanded quiet. No sound could be heard from outside when the studio doors were closed. Actors were encouraged to be quiet at all times, even during rehearsals. The studio depended entirely on artificial light. It gave no clues as to the state of the weather, it gave a sense of being insulated and isolated from the world outside.

The sets, made mainly of light wood, varied greatly in size. The three biggest and most elaborate sets were McCoy's pub, home to Malachy and Kay, the Bistro restaurant and the Galley bar. Some of the sets reproduced the entire ground floor of a house while others were no more than a single small room, such as the set for Treacy's bedsit. Most were built in sections to allow walls to be removed to make

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90 Malachy and Kay were the two characters involved in *Fair City*'s controversial abortion storyline.
91 Treacy was the drug-addicted mistress of the *Fair City*'s gangster character Billy.
room for cameras, and other equipment, if necessary. These were built and taken apart on a weekly basis. In some ways the sets appeared unrealistic and cheap. They were also quite fragile. During one shoot, a director asked an actor to slam a door to display anger. As he did this, two crew members held the set from the outside to stop it from wobbling. The cast and crew were well aware of the sets' shortcomings. Despite their shortcomings, however, the sets did appear realistic on screen. On this particular occasion the actor involved exclaimed ‘wow! Not a wobble’. In response a crew member joked 'yeah, but one collapsed at the far end (of the studio)’. The crew were well aware of the show’s budget limitations and frequently made fun of it in this way. This type of sarcastic and ironic humour was notable in the show’s production. This appeared to serve as a prevalent but impotent form of symbolic resistance to management control within the field of Fair City’s production (see Bourdieu 1985: 731—2).

The production of Fair City did not use much studio equipment. Typically there were three cameras and two boom trolleys. When I asked the producer what type of cameras the show used, he simply said that they used ‘old cameras that were in need of replacement’. Discussing the cameras, a crew member said that RTÉ’s

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92 Set rigging and re-rigging was normally done on Sundays.
93 I had a drink with a number of cast members at the end of work on a Friday evening. We were drinking on the set of McCoy’s pub, which serves real, and quite good, draught beer. Some of the make-up girls were offered wine from the galley bar but this turned out to be Ribena in resealed bottles. One crew member leaned against the bar, which gave way. Regaining his balance he cursed, saying that he kept ‘forgetting it’s only a set’.
94 Boom operators, who had quite a complex and demanding job, handle sound in the studio. They operate on boom trolleys with a platform about a metre and a half above the floor. Using directional microphones on the end of a telescopic arm they had to ensure that all dialogue was covered at a consistent level. Operators felt that there was a knack to this and you would know quickly whether you had it or not. Boom operators had to be synchronised with actors, camera operators and lighting technicians. A boom could not, at all costs, be allowed to appear in shot or to cast a shadow visible in the recorded programme. Boom operators had few complaints with their equipment. They explained that the technology was quite basic and had not changed a lot in recent years. They thought that their booms were probably more flexible than the booms of the 1940s, but apart from that the technology had remained more or less unchanged.
95 Fair City used Beta video cameras. They were normally mounted on large telescopic studio pedestals but could also be hand held or rigged on a light tripod.
newest cameras were in studio five. He described them as being ‘beautiful cameras’, which produced film-like pictures with good lighting. These were used for programmes like Winning Streak, football coverage and Who Wants to be a Millionaire. When I asked why these new cameras were not used for Fair City, he replied that the quality of the cameras used on Fair City allowed the programme to get away with what he saw as ‘shoddy sets’. In his opinion more advanced cameras would require ‘pristine sets’. Some of the sets' shortcomings were visible to the naked eye but did not show up readily on television. An improvement in camera technology, he claimed, would require a massive re-investment in the whole production. Echoing RTÉ’s historical funding problems and its dependent position in the global media field, Fair City's sets evidently did not receive massive investment. Members of the cast and crew were keenly aware of this in every aspect of their work.

**No Room for Stars in this Factory**

Immediately adjacent to the studio were the actors’ dressing rooms. In conversation, two actresses had complained about the smell in the wardrobe department. The state of the wardrobe department was unlikely to improve actors’ morale. It was quite badly kept and smelled of must and sweat. It had poorly maintained toilets. A cleaning rota in one of them had not been changed in months. Similar conditions were evident in the canteen. RTÉ’s canteen food was quite palatable and inexpensive. The level of hygiene in the canteen, however, was poor. The toilets were very poorly kept. They were covered in graffiti and were frequently dirty and blocked. One day the canteen was declared out of bounds. In conversation with a director and stage manager it emerged that the RTÉ canteen had been closed down by the Department of

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96 This was an independently produced quiz show that used RTÉ studios, crews and equipment.
Health on hygiene grounds. It was re-opened on the following Monday after steam cleaning. A stage manager explained that in her experience, queasy stomachs were common in RTÉ because of the canteen.

During one of my first conversations with some cast members, an actor complained that there were maggots on the set. Someone had left food on the set of McCoy’s pub, which had not been cleaned up for a number of days. These surroundings did not convey to the cast or crew any sense that they were highly valued or glamorous. It did not take long to realise that there was a distinct lack of glamour about the production of *Fair City*. There was equally a lack of any sort of pretension among the cast and crew. They were unassuming workers with a demanding job. Without any dramatic ‘aura’, the set felt more like a small factory or workshop than a glamorous or theatrical setting. These were cultural workers without large stocks of symbolic capital. There was no great level of prestige attached to their employment. They were engaged in the simple exchange of cultural capital for economic capital. The cast gave their time and skill as actors in exchange for their wages without any additional cultural or symbolic dividend.

**Rehearsals: the Start of the Studio Production Line**

The working week on *Fair City* began with rehearsals on Saturday morning. This provided a mental map of the coming week's work for the cast and crew. Four episodes were rehearsed in one day with actors reading their lines together for the first time. Studio scenes were rehearsed in the order in which they were to be shot. Outdoor, or Electronic Field Production (EFP), scenes were also rehearsed but would be shot in a different order towards the end of the week. Rehearsals ran from nine o'clock to five o’clock. Scenes were rehearsed in blocks; all the scenes in McCoy's
pub for example were rehearsed at once. If an actor was lucky all their scenes might be rehearsed quickly in one or two blocks. Otherwise, they could end up waiting hours for their scenes. Saturdays were long days for the cast with a lot of hanging around. Despite this, given the run of the week, it was relatively easy going.

At the time of the research, *Fair City* was a standardised product. Every episode contained four storylines. One tended to be ‘serious’, dealing with crime, family crises and the like. Another would offer light relief, while the other two would fit somewhere in between. Every episode contained 17 scenes and lasted a standard 25 minutes. On my first day in rehearsals I was introduced to a woman with a stopwatch and a clipboard. This was the Production Assistant (PA). She had the task of timing every scene in rehearsal ensuring that all the scenes added up to 25 minutes. This was a difficult job, despite the monotony of simply sitting and timing rehearsals all day; it required concentration and accuracy. There was no leeway for an episode to go under or over time. Apart from money, time was the scarcest resource in the production of *Fair City*. Soap opera is all about rationalisation. It is an efficient, calculable, predictable and highly controlled genre (see Ritzer 2000: 12—14). Rehearsals were an important first step in standardising each episode.

**The Production Run: Predictability and Control**

Mondays would begin with a production run, or the producer’s run as some called it. This was essentially a dress rehearsal where all the scenes for that week’s four episodes were rehearsed in episode order. The producer, writers, script editors, technicians, PA and so on would oversee this. One director saw the production run as an anachronism, which had been abolished on most British soap operas. He described it as a form of surveillance and control for the producer, script editors and dialogue
writers, allowing them to survey performances, character direction and adherence to
the script. Another director described the production run as a waste of time. He felt
that the same time could be better used for shooting or for extra rehearsals. To him
the production run was just for ‘people who had not bothered to read the script’.
During the production run technicians such as cameramen and sound engineers would
note the paths followed by characters to allow them to map out camera positions,
microphone positions and so on. Technicians could on occasion make minor changes
to scenes because of technical difficulties, for example a scene might be altered to
make room for an extra boom or to facilitate camera movements. The crew, however,
ever had any opportunity to intervene in the actual content of a storyline. Bourdieu
and Turow suggest that a high level of communication across occupations and levels
of hierarchy is likely to create a greater capacity to break with convention (Turow
1982: 121; Sewell 1992: 17). The cast and crew were effectively prevented from
contributing to the diversity of the show’s storylines and representations because there
was simply no time for debate between editors, writers and the crew over how the
show should progress. The rationalised structure of Fair City as a field meant that
control over the programme’s form and content rested predominantly with those at the
highest level of the programme’s production. These were the producer, editors and
writers. The cast did possess certain forms of capital and could employ certain
resistive strategies against management. As we will see, however, these were limited.

Since the production run was seen as a means of surveillance and control, I
anticipated that it would be a scene of conflict between actors, directors and writers.
One floor manager had described the production run as a forum where writers
attempted to protect their scripts, ‘their babies’ as he called them, from changes
suggested by the cast and director. This was not the case, however, in my limited
experience of production runs. I did not witness any conflict at all between actors and writers or producers.

From the point of view of scriptwriters and script editors, however, there was a serious purpose behind the production run. One script editor explained the many difficulties that could arise for her in it. She explained that occasionally actors would object to the ‘way that vocabulary is used’. Actors might feel that stories reflect badly upon them as a person, bearing in mind that their characters may not be too far removed from their real personality. She explained that actors are only given stories in ‘pockets’. The writers and editors, she explained, ‘are way ahead of them’ in foreknowledge of the story. Therefore actors may not know why they are being asked to say certain lines, but to drop them could prove disastrous for the future development of the story.

I have to be very careful, at the producer’s run on a Monday, that they actually say what they are given to say. The other thing that I am very careful about is that the writers have worked very hard on these. They are professionals; they have put together the scripts carefully. We have edited them carefully to maintain the smoothness of language and vocabulary and the movement of story and all of those things. Trying to make sure that they are actually all running together. So for an actor to change it, who is a professional actor but not a professional writer, to change it can actually throw things quite considerably. And I would be very precious about the writing. Once we have agreed on the writing… and said this is the script, I actually feel quite precious about seeing it run through. So yeah we can have a certain amount of difficulty about those things (Editor B)

Actors made their contribution without understanding the overall product or production process. Thus, they resembled Fordist factory workers who must act as cogs in a machine they can neither change nor fully understand. Despite the importance of the production run to the story team, many of the crew regarded it as a tedious anachronism. One stage manager called it the ‘Benny Hill run’ because it had a long line of people running from set to set to see each scene in episode order. During one production run a soundman made sheep-like noises as the group trailed...
back and forth between sets. This reflected the attitude of many of the crew who felt the production run to be procedural and of little value. The value of the production run, however, was clear to the people who were, in effect, the production’s managers, the producer and the script editors. It was a means of surveillance, control and standardisation.

For the dominated players in the field of Fair City ‘making fun’ of the show and its production was a form of piece-meal symbolic resistance. ‘Slagging’ the show, and the way in which it was produced, expressed dissatisfaction and a form of solidarity among cast and crew. This ‘slagging’ was also a means of distancing themselves from a low prestige genre. Thus it may have reflected the judgements of the cultural field. This could not, of course, affect any form of change in production practices. This type of humour effectively represented a form of resignation among the cast and crew. Given the pressures of competition and casual employment they had to accept the exigencies of the programme’s production. This was reflected in good-humoured resignation to the status quo and, more importantly, a lack of personal investment in the show.

**Studio Personnel**

During my first day on the set I was introduced to the three most important people on the production floor. These were the stage manager, the floor manager and the director. I was first introduced to the stage manager, who immediately made me feel welcome on the set. He generously offered me a studio headset to listen to directors' comments, camera orders and so on. The stage manager’s job was essentially to oversee and co-ordinate what was going on in the studio. This was a largely logistical task. They made sure that equipment, actors and crew were where they were needed,
when they were needed. One stage manager joked that their job was to ‘walk around’ because they needed to keep a check on cast, crew resources and so on they were constantly moving around the studio. The role of the stage manager was important but less prominent than that of the floor manager or the director.

**The Floor Manager and Emotional Efficiency**

The floor manager was in many respects a spokesperson for the director, who normally worked outside the studio. He relayed messages from the director to cast and crew. Floor managers operated on a three-week cycle. They worked in the studio for one week. The next week they would do preparatory work and the following week they would work away from studio on EFP. Beyond simply overseeing things and relaying messages the floor manager had a more delicate and subtle role. While the cast of *Fair City* did not see themselves as glamorous *prima donnas*, they were nonetheless involved in a form of emotional labour. High morale and a supportive atmosphere were essential for efficient and effective work. *Fair City* was, for the most part, an extremely smooth operation. During my time on set I did not witness a single occasion when an individual was reprimanded for making a mistake or for poor workmanship. I encountered very few criticisms of anybody's work. Production ran freely without any argument over how things should be done. I commented on this in conversation with a boom operator, who replied that it had to be like this because there could be no efficiency with conflict or a bad atmosphere on the set.

The floor manager had to balance efficiently shooting the show, within extreme time constraints, with maintaining a light-hearted and supportive atmosphere on the set. While he issued all the orders on set, this was done in a manner that was conducive to an efficient atmosphere. A typical example of this was when the floor
manager ordered quiet on the set before the start of recording. Typically he would say something like 'could we be very quiet on the set please'. Of course, nothing but silence would do but to say 'silence on the set' would have seemed too imperative. Another floor manager frequently commented at the end of a botched scene, 'we'll get there eventually'. In the production of *Fair City* there was an average of about 25 minutes to shoot a scene of between one and two minutes duration. There was no time to wait for a scene to work out 'eventually'. The value of such comments lay in the fact that they allowed the cast to feel relaxed, and to some extent, in control of their own work. The work of the floor manager provided a form of ersatz symbolic capital. The actors were not stars. They did not hold sway over the set. Despite this they were given a sufficient sense of autonomy to allow them to perform effectively.

Floor managers displayed a peculiar set of interpersonal skills. Technical crew were different to actors, and actors were quite different to writers. The floor manager had to be able to communicate with, and get on personally with all of them. He had to be able to mould himself and his conversation to suit the people around him. This ability to fit in with the diverse personalities and social types involved in making the programme was an essential part of a floor manager's job.

A director explained that a floor manager's job was to re-interpret directors' orders in a manner that did not disrupt the ostensibly easy-going but very efficient working of the set. One floor manager stressed that his job did not depend on 'dumb luck'. He had a post-graduate qualification in motivational management and used certain strategies in his work that allowed him to maintain the momentum of production without needing to bark orders at people. He remarked that he would often share a joke with cameramen or soundmen. This, he said, was a routine that was often used to defuse tension on the set and to maintain a pleasant working
atmosphere. He remarked that he occasionally needed to protect actors' egos. For example, recording could be halted because the director said that the acting was inadequate. Rather than saying this to the actor in question, the floor manager was more likely to claim that there was a technical hitch and that the shot needed to be taken again. Some actors were aware of this type of motivational management. On one occasion a scene with some questionable acting was halted. The floor manager listened to the director for a while and then said haltingly 'the level was…'. An actor interjected asking 'what the level of acting?' Regardless of the cast and crew's awareness of motivational techniques used by floor managers, work continued smoothly and tension was very rarely visible.

I witnessed a floor manager raise his voice on only one occasion. This was on a Friday. The atmosphere in the studio seemed more tense on Fridays because all of that week’s four episodes had to be shot by that evening. This was coupled with fatigue and the fact that some people, who were not working the following week, might be anxious to get away for the weekend. The floor manager became annoyed because people had repeatedly jammed the studio doors open. They had done this to facilitate the movement of props. This was a major problem not only because it allowed external noise into the studio but also because it was a fire hazard. The floor manager explained that there was a new fire officer in RTÉ and that if they were found doing this it would mean trouble for the show. He raised his voice, without shouting, and gave an authoritative telling-off. It was as if the crew had angered a normally mild-mannered friend. The floor manager later apologised to the cast and crew for the minor outburst but explained the importance of observing fire regulations in such a flammable environment.
The floor manager was almost as much of an actor as any of the cast. He needed not only to feign good-humour but also to conceal anger and discontent to prevent the disruption of production. This was a necessity given the peculiar nature of the work. Soap opera work is a highly rationalised form of cultural production. *Fair City*’s production process resembled a factory production line more than the theatrical roots of early RTÉ television drama. It demanded efficiency. However, it also involved creative and emotional work. This required a peculiar form of management that could combine efficiency with the necessary moral support. Theatrical and dramatic work has long been associated with a strong sense of individualism. The regimentation of such creative personalities can be a difficult task. The floor management of *Fair City*’s production appeared to have achieved this to some extent. In this respect the production departed from the Fordist management in material industries. Traditional Fordist techniques cannot achieve what Handy has described as the ‘herding of cats’ (1998: 184). Maintaining efficiency among workers in material production does not generally require the massaging of egos and the manufacture of group camaraderie. Again, this was an example of management techniques providing an artificial sense of status and autonomy. Despite the low autonomy and low symbolic capital possessed by *Fair City*’s cast and crew management allowed them to ‘have their head’. Pure Fordist management is based on clear rules, delineated roles and an absolute lack of worker autonomy. Unlike this *Fair City* management combined Fordist methods with a form of symbolic domination where actors misrecognised the level of freedom they possessed in their work.
The Director

The director would normally operate outside the studio in a small control room referred to as ‘the box’. Here he could oversee live footage as it came in from the studio floor. Footage was edited roughly as it came in from each of the three cameras used in most shots. This dramatically accelerated the production process. Fair City had a different director every week. Most directors were British and had worked on the major British soap operas like Coronation Street, EastEnders, Brookside, Emmerdale and Crossroads. Many cast members said they brought a wealth of soap opera experience to Fair City that appeared to be lacking in RTÉ. Some complained that, despite this, RTÉ would occasionally try to use in-house directors, already on the RTÉ payroll, to improve cost efficiency. 97 Many cast members felt that these directors had not gained enough experience or training. One actor complained that in-house directors were likely to be somebody who had just come from directing The Angelus and did not know the first thing about directing three camera soap opera. In this regard, RTÉ’s historical neglect of drama has acquired a momentum that still dogs the organisation’s attempts to develop it. As Bourdieu points out social fields have historical inertia. In any field, action takes place not only in the context of the present but also that of the past (see Bourdieu 1990b: 163). Many of the limitations on Fair City’s production were the product of perennial financial scarcity, which saw indigenous drama take second place to other genres and imports.

The ability to work at speed was an essential aspect of the director’s work. Indeed when cast and crew spoke of directors, ‘good’ was synonymous with ‘fast’. Occasionally actors resented a director’s tendency to be too perfectionist in his work. 98

97 This is in fact now predominantly the case with staff directors directing most episodes of Fair City since 2002.
98 On one occasion an actor was required to say the line ‘we must do that sunset in Wicklow thing’. The actor repeatedly said ‘that sunset thing in Wicklow’, which many Dubliners would regard as the same
For cast and crew the chief criteria for a director were that 'they know their stuff' and that they were efficient. Like everybody else in soap opera production they had to efficiently fulfil their particular limited task. They held little power to make a creative contribution to what was essentially a standardised product.

British directors found *Fair City* to be quite different to the British soaps they had worked on. One director felt that *Fair City* could be just as 'good' as many of the British soaps. It had good performances, but it had a peculiar system. Directors felt that they were not accorded the same esteem on *Fair City* that they enjoyed elsewhere. One director protested that *Fair City*’s production team had not 'looked up the part of the television production book which described what a director actually does'. He found it unusual, for instance, that the script editor edited dialogue. Final script meetings took place on Monday afternoons following the production run. Here the scripts were read through at speed noting any objections that editors or writers had to the dialogue, or the way in which the actors delivered it. One might imagine that steering the actors in their performances would be the task of the director. This was not the case. In script meetings the senior script editor made changes in actors’ performance that had been passed by the director. On the way to one script meeting I asked a director if he would be attending. He responded, as though he felt it to be quite unfair, that directors were not allowed to attend.

Creative control over the programme was thus wrested from the production floor. The management of the show’s form and content lay with those present at the Monday script meeting, the producer, script editors and, to a lesser extent, the writers. Again like a typical factory production line workers simply had to get on with their allotted tasks without intervening in issues of design, productivity and so on.

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thing. The director insisted that the scene be re-done about five times. The actor involved later said that he was getting 'pissed off' with the director, but that he could understand that the director could not

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Deprived of such key decisions the director’s role was largely reduced to logistics and supervision. This form of management was necessary to ensure continuity and standardisation in the show. If every visiting director was allowed to mould the show as he saw fit it would lose coherence. The show maintained a predictable and standard form because the ‘story team’ was adequately familiar with the show’s history to ensure continuity. The script meeting, and the exclusion of the director, mirrors Fordist production in two key respects. It guaranteed ‘managerial’ control over the production. It also ensured a standardised show, saving the audience from confusion and unwanted surprises. Inherent in this standardisation, of course, is a reduction of cultural capital, symbolic capital and autonomy for cast and crew.

The Cast
The *Fair City* cast was a very mixed group. They varied in their ages, their professional backgrounds, personal backgrounds and so forth. They could be divided into at least two types. Some actors had theatrical backgrounds and concentrated on acting as their career and their main means of earning money. Others had more heterogeneous backgrounds; they came into *Fair City* from having done short films or advertisements. These actors were more likely to run numerous jobs at the same time, working in their own companies, working in film and so on. They looked upon *Fair City* as an interesting way to make money and a useful entry on a curriculum vita.

All the cast members I met were very friendly and open to my research. They displayed none of the extroverted exhibitionism one might associate with a dramatic stereotype. Many of the cast and crew explained to me that there were no *prima donnas* in *Fair City* because there simply was not the time or the room for them. Not only was the symbolic capital associated with a theatrical aura absent, it appeared that

afford to have ‘fuck ups’ because it could affect his employment prospects.
it was unlikely to be tolerable within the production system. Unlike the experience of many other observers of media work, I did not at any stage feel out of place or out of my depth with these people (see Hansen et al. 1998: 35—65). They were very 'down to earth' in their conversations. Their conversations over lunch and coffee covered everyday work issues; 'Who will be directing next week?' 'When are you finished today?' They discussed mutual acquaintances, current affairs, food, home decoration and so on. I never felt that I was excluded from conversation through the use of a specialised language or body of knowledge. Unlike the purist drama producers discussed earlier they did not operate with a stock of social and cultural capital peculiar to television drama. The cast of Fair City was not a specialised, closed club. It was an open setting full of part-time and often short-term workers. Rather than offering any prestige, as a soap opera the show is somewhat stigmatised in the world of art. Other than paying their wages, Fair City did not confer a great degree of cultural or symbolic power upon its cast. As noted in Chapter Five, the field of cultural production is loosely divided between those who abound in cultural and symbolic capital, specific to the field, with little money and those who enjoy commercial success but lack prestige in the artistic field. Being mass-produced and market-oriented, soap opera is one of drama’s least prestigious forms.

The Cast's Work

Soap opera acting is hard work. Many actors described the tiring nature of their work. As one of them put it 'OK, we're not working in a coalmine' but they could still be 'left feeling like a wet rag by Friday'. On Fair City actors could end up working a seven-day week. The Monday production run involved all the cast members who were working that week. The show was shot in studio from Tuesday to Friday. Actors
'finished' work on Friday afternoon but, if they were acting the following week, had to be in the studio again for rehearsals on Saturday. Actors were formally free on Sundays. However, as some cast members explained they had to learn their lines on Sunday. They had four episodes to shoot in a week and there was very little time to catch up on set. Some actors found that they could not always find the time to learn all their lines. One remarked that if you ever saw a lot of post-its on the computer in his character’s office they were likely to contain lines from his script. Another told a story about a character handing out forms, the top one was not handed out however because it was a page of their dialogue. The cast, who in another genre might be considered artists, were reduced to being skilled workers.

Most of Fair City’s actors were very accomplished. Despite this the intensity of Fair City’s production process did not allow them to employ their full range of acting skills. One actor said that in Fair City there was ‘a mechanisation of something artistic, albeit artistic in small quotes’. He explained that a film director with a theatre background would allow actors to map out their scenes. In Fair City, however, actors’ positions are blocked out in advance. There was no time for character exploration. Most actors were hard pressed to read, learn and rehearse their material let alone fine-tune their performance. Scenes were rehearsed for the first time on Saturdays, and once again on Mondays. There was only a brief dress rehearsal before they were finally recorded. Generally, actors were no sooner finished one scene than they were into the next. The intensity of this production line drama meant that cast members were effectively de-skilled. While most had considerable acting abilities to draw upon, Fair City would rarely present an opportunity for them to do so. Fair City, particularly, since it jumped to four episodes per week, was being ‘churned out’. The cultural capital that actors did possess was being under-utilised.
This effectively barred the cast from improving their skills, gaining cultural capital or building a reputation, amassing symbolic capital, through their work. The cast occupied a dominated position in *Fair City* as a field. They were also held down in that position by the structure and functioning of the field.

Acting demands varied, as some actors explained, you could spend months of your time 'ordering coffee and moving chairs' or asking ‘do you want more chips with that?’ However, even these mundane typical soap opera scenes could be demanding. Most cast, and crew, disliked scenes based in the Galley bar, McCoy's or the Bistro. These involved more actors, more extras, more movement and so a greater degree of complexity. There was a complex choreography of cameras, microphones and cast. Actors had to fit into this. A simple movement like walking across a room was more complicated than it seemed. An actor had to be conscious of boom positions and camera positions while looking at the camera was strictly forbidden. At the same time they had to deliver their lines effectively.

In any soap opera there are times when a certain character will become central to a storyline as with the Malachy and Kay abortion storyline. This, as one actor put it, is when 'you really earn your money'. During the research one character, Billy Meehan, was involved in a very emotional and occasionally violent storyline. The actor playing him found this extremely draining. He was disturbed that he had to bring up such dark and violent emotions, and over a fortnight this became mentally exhausting. Other actors expressed the same sentiments. *Fair City*'s abortion storyline stood out as a particularly draining period for the actors involved. However, actors gained no additional concessions here. They performed this additional demanding work within the usual schedule. Again they stood to gain no cultural or symbolic dividend from this. While, for example, the actress playing Kay gained the
respect of her colleagues during the very demanding shooting of the abortion storyline she gained no acting plaudits beyond this. In fact audiences had been quite critical of the level of acting for this particular storyline (Hatherell 2001: 27).

Isolated Actors and Limited Social Capital

In some respects the Fair City cast were quite atomised. While actors got on very well with their colleagues, the cast did not exist as a cohesive group. This was evident in the way actors treated their scripts. The cast had so little time to learn lines and prepare for their work they tended to read only the scenes they were directly involved in. The actors that I spoke to said that 'you read your own script and that's it'. Most actors had no idea what was happening in other people's scripts and storylines. For example one actor was discussing Fair City's 'Ashti' storyline, which addressed the plight of refugees in Dublin. In the climax of this storyline the character called Ashti was stabbed. The actor discussing this thought that he had been killed, when in the episode he had been saved by another Carigstown character. Actors appeared not to know anything about what went on beyond their immediate involvement in the production. In the studio, actors generally stayed together in pairs or small groups. They tended to spend the day with the actors who shared their scenes. The onscreen couple from a flat, for example, might remain together as a couple throughout the day, the people from an office would be an identifiable group off set and so on. This was largely inevitable because the actors who shared one's scenes were the people most likely to be free at the same time.

Despite the fact that Fair City's production process separated crew and actors from writers, and separated actors from each other, there was nonetheless a good atmosphere on set and a sense of camaraderie between cast and crew. There was a
sense of fun between the actors, floor and stage managers, and the crew. No one
hesitated to recognise a job well done and cast and crew regularly praised each other
for good work. One stage manager described Fair City as a sort of ‘family’. Although
it was a family that constantly changed its members, with actors and crew on short-
term contracts. An actress, who had been written out of the show for some months,
returned one day to the set. She had been a popular character with cast and crew. She
became the centre of attention over lunch and was warmly welcomed back by both the
cast and directors. Actors were friendly to each other but did not appear to be friends.
In as far as I could gather actors did not form informal groupings outside of work.
The floor manager who described Fair City as a family said that there was no real
external social life. She thought that people were so close together in their work that
if they saw each other outside of work too it would probably become very pressurised
and unpleasant. Although this workplace camaraderie and ‘craic’ among the cast and
crew appeared genuine it was also necessary for the production of the show and
continued employment. There seemed to be a sense that actors needed to say ‘relax,
sure it’s only soap’, enjoy it and get on with it. Again, resistance was largely
restricted to piece-meal symbolic defiance in the form of humour. In this respect, the
cast habitus was compatible with the practical demands of production. It suggested
an internalisation of the necessities of the production system, which they were not
inclined to oppose.

Pay and Conditions

I did not question actors directly on their pay. I felt that the entire crew and cast had
been extremely generous and open in allowing me to join them in all aspects of their
work. To ask people how much they earned and so on risked being seen to pry and
would probably have led to a loss of trust and participation. It was well known that most *Fair City* cast members do not earn major salaries (SIPTU; *The Sunday Times* 18 February 2001). Core cast would earn approximately €45,000 per annum (SIPTU). This is by no means a poor salary but it compares unfavourably with actors in a show like *EastEnders* who receive over £120,000 (STG) per annum (www.news.bbc.co.uk). This is a clear reflection of RTÉ’s dominated position in the global media field. None of the cast members I met displayed any of the trappings of a wealthy lifestyle. One cast member, who had been in the show since it began, explained that she had left school at a young age. She had ambitions to pursue further education but could not afford to. Many of the cast were from traditionally working-class areas of Dublin. Regardless of their incomes they could not be labelled as any part of a ‘middle class’ or ‘Dublin 4’ culture. In conversation one actor described how he took the bus to work every day. He also discussed how he had recently got a good bargain in a fridge from the Saint Vincent de Paul. Obviously using public transport and buying white goods from charity shops are not indicators of poverty. At the same time they are not behaviours typical of the stereotypical ‘middle class’ or ‘Dublin 4’ culture that many commentators attribute to RTÉ. As mentioned above, there were frequent jokes among the cast and crew about their poor pay and conditions. Some joked that I had been sent by United Nations to report on the terrible food, pay and conditions that they were enduring in RTÉ. Again, while this could be interpreted as a form of symbolic resistance, it amounted to good-humoured acceptance of unsatisfactory conditions.

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99 ‘Core cast’ was a recent addition to the language of *Fair City*’s production. It came up in Hatherell’s qualitative research carried out for the show. It refers to the actors who play the central long-term character with whom the audience relate to most closely.  
100 Dublin 4 is the postal region in which RTÉ is based. It is one of Dublin’s wealthiest areas. A peculiar form of affluent liberalism has popularly been attributed to the area and to RTÉ.
As cast members said themselves they're not working in a coal mine. At the same time poor physical conditions in the workplace, and relatively poor pay were far from the popular image of the television star. Most importantly, the cast’s lack of job security decreased their professional autonomy. It damaged their ability to contest how the show was produced. As we have seen the cast lacked sufficient cultural and symbolic capital to use as leverage in programme making decisions. With rationalisation, as a response to the pressures of the global field of media, came job insecurity and the ‘demystification’ of the creative process. As Garnham suggested, cultural and symbolic capital, the weapons used by the ‘dominated fraction of the dominant class’ in their struggle against the dominant fraction, have been taken from the cast of *Fair City* (see Garnham 1993: 188—189). With no room for dissent or alternative points of view on the production floor, the resulting lack of discussion and debate in production detracted from possibilities for diversity in the social issues addressed by the show. In this respect, rationalisation could be argued to have reduced the potential diversity of ways of imagining society through soap opera.

**Cast Strategies**

The fact that soap opera is ongoing on a weekly basis means that it demands stamina from the cast. Most actors had developed, what Bourdieu would describe as, strategies to maintain this (see Wacquant 1992: 19). There were few major transformations in the cast's behaviour as they got into character. Jean Alexander, the actress who played Hilda Ogden in *Coronation Street*, spoke with a soft-toned Received Pronunciation accent while her character had a shrill working class Manchester accent. There were no such transformations on the set of *Fair City*. The
cast looked and sounded very much the same in character as they did out of character.

A script editor commented on this:

   The characters actually end up being very close to themselves [the actors]. So the two run very closely together. Because they don't have a whole lot of time to be doing the separating and dividing and sitting around in a wheelchair, method acting. Nobody has time for that. So if they feel uncomfortable with a line as a person sometimes they will want to change it for their character and that is something that we have to watch out for (Editor B)

A lack of personal investment in the show appeared to result from the low level of prestige or symbolic capital attached to the show. It also appeared, however, that a low level of investment in the show could serve as a coping strategy among actors. One actor told me that given the nature of soap opera work and the nature of his part in *Fair City* he did not make any great emotional investment in his work on the show. He explained that he had changed his character somewhat. The character was initially supposed to be more formal and strait-laced than he had subsequently made him. He said that he needed to bring the character nearer to his own personality because this required less emotional energy. In soap opera, he claimed, you need to conserve energy to maintain a performance over a long time.

   Again pay and conditions on *Fair City* reflect the fact that its cast, rather than being stars are workers, and casual workers at that. There was very little job security for actors who played the show’s more peripheral characters. Over coffee one morning an actress complained that she had been dropped from the show for six months. If a cast member did not have other work to turn to during such periods they were simply left unemployed and dependent on social welfare. Even for core cast members work consisted of periods of frenetic activity followed by weeks of doing nothing. Core cast members might welcome these respites particularly if they were at the centre of an intense storyline. Outside of core cast, actors could develop coping
strategies to mitigate their insecurity. For example, the actress who complained about having been dropped for six months was counselled by another cast member to change the way she played her character. The actress complained that her character had changed from being a bitch to being a victim. Her colleague explained to her that to increase the length of her employment with *Fair City* she needed to act in a manner that made her character broader and more versatile. A one-dimensional character, he claimed, could only be fitted into a limited number of story lines. A broader more ambiguous character, on the other hand, could give writers more scope and versatility in how they used the character. Such strategies, of course, would have to successfully pass the surveillance of the production run.

Many cast members mitigated the effects of their job insecurity by holding a number of jobs in different areas. Actors were keenly aware of their conditions and some unwritten ‘rules of the game’ within *Fair City*. They adopted strategies to improve their situation as best they could. The cast were also able to express their arguments within a rhetoric that might appeal to management. They were critical of short-term contracts. Apart from concerns about pay and conditions they felt that short-term contracts negatively affected the show and its viewing figures. As we saw earlier, soap opera audiences derive pleasure from the feeling that they are looking into other people's lives. They may even use soap opera as a form of vicarious living. The feeling that the communities of *Coronation Street* or Albert Square go on living their everyday lives after the programme has ended enhance these pleasures. As Hobson noted soap operas provide the ‘the illusion that the characters and the location exist and continue to whether the viewers are there or not’ (1982: 33). In shows like *Coronation Street* this illusion is enhanced by core characters appearing in

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101 This is the fictional setting for *EastEnders.*
a bar, for example, although they have nothing to do with the current story-line. This
enhances the illusion that viewers are looking at a real community. *Fair City*,
however, operated on a skeleton crew of actors. Only the characters that were
essential to a story line appeared. This argument obviously supported actors in their
aspirations for better pay and conditions. It was also plausible, however, that
detracting from the illusion of an alternative reality took from a key soap opera
audience pleasure and could be reflected in reduced viewing figures. Here the cast
had clearly employed their knowledge of management logic to create rhetorical
strategies to support their position. Such rhetorical strategies appeared more likely to
effect change than the self-deprecating humour that was common among cast and
crew.

**Actor Power**

There were conflicting views on the power that actors had to refuse scripts. One crew
member said that while actors could debate some aspects of a script they could not
afford to go around saying ‘I’m never going to say that’.¹⁰² I inquired of the cast if
they had much creative input in the show. One of them explained that there had been
consultative meetings between the cast, writers and producer where the previous and
upcoming seasons would be discussed. This had given actors some creative input
allowing them to suggest story lines and so on. The actor in this case had brought in
story suggestions that evolved into full story lines. These consultations had, however,
been abolished to save time.

¹⁰² One scriptwriter thought that ultimately actors did not have to say anything if they did not want to
say it. He gave an example of an actor who refused to say the word ‘period’. This became a running
joke with scriptwriters who tried to include the word in any context they possibly could. They wrote
lines like ‘the radio is staying off and that is it period’. The actor in question delivered this line as ‘the
radio is staying off and that is it full stop’. 
Actors did possess some power to shape their characters and the show. As we will see, however, this power was extremely limited due to the pressures of the production process. A key element of power for dramatists in the past has been the level of cultural or symbolic capital they possessed (see Chapter Five). As we have seen, however, no aura of cultural capital emanated from the *Fair City* cast. They were aware of snobbery against soap opera. Unlike purist artists who may be little recognised but who tenaciously invest all their energies in their work, *Fair City's* cast did not identify themselves with their work. They displayed a degree of distance from their roles as soap opera actors. It was treated very much as if it is just a job, not an identity or a way of life. This was visible in numerous examples. One actor, half jokingly, described *Fair City* and television soap opera in general as being the 'Siberia of the entertainment world'.

During rehearsals the cast did not disguise the dim view they took of some of the scripts. They commented on the frequent use of repetitive language. One actor asked if a dialogue writer had written ‘the first thing that came into his head’. In a later rehearsal two actresses laughed as they read through an entire scene because they thought the dialogue was so bad. The realism of *Fair City* was also the butt of a couple of jokes. Some make-up girls joked about the fact that the same packet of Pot Noodle had been on a shelf in an apartment for three months.

There was a general lack of personal investment in the show. Again, an attitude of ‘Ah sure it's only soap’ predominated. The reluctance of cast members to invest their selves in, and identify their selves with, *Fair City* suggested that the show did not present them with an opportunity to accumulate legitimate cultural or symbolic capital. This undermined possibilities for cast opposition to managerial decisions on *Fair City's* form and content. With little creativity and autonomy this
lack of personal investment in their work left the cast more open to a Fordist style of top-down control.

Despite this actors were not entirely powerless. They did possess some power to make changes to the script and their performances. This was apparent in rehearsals where actors raised a number of objections to the script and the stage directions. Most objections were made on the basis of realism, repetition and characterisation. One actor was required to deliver a line talking about ‘drugs’. He insisted that his character was more likely to use the word ‘dope’. After a brief discussion of what exactly ‘dope’ meant the actors and the director decided to make the change. The actor involved apologised for the delay and said that he was jealously guarding his characterisation. It was hard to know at the time if he was being serious or sarcastic in saying this. The same actor made a number of objections to his character using expressions that had already been used in the immediately preceding episodes.

Actors suggested other changes on the basis of realism. In a scene, Billy, a gangster character, took drugs, probably cocaine, from his pocket to give it to Tracey his drug-addicted mistress. The actor playing Billy insisted with the agreement of a number of cast members that it was unrealistic for a drug dealer to keep drugs on his person. They decided that Billy should take the drugs from a drawer on the far side of the apartment. This was not possible however because the director decided that the time it took to walk to the drawer disrupted the flow of the scene; Billy needed to be close to Tracy because it was an intimate dialogue. The actors suggested that it was more likely that a drug dealer would take the drugs from his sock and the cast and director agreed on this. Many actors felt that there was no potential for creative input among the cast at all. Some said that it was simply a case of ‘there's your script, do it!’ A director even went as far as saying that sometimes ‘creativity’ can be seen as a
dirty word. In any case the abolition of consultation with the cast meant that any changes they could make were mostly cosmetic. It was practically impossible for radical changes to take place on the studio floor at the behest of a cast member. There was simply no time.

**Specialised Cultural Capital: Knowing the Characters**

One remaining source of power for cast members lay in the fact that, even at the admission of producers and writers, they were probably the people who knew their characters best. Therefore if a cast member complained that their current storyline was out of character this tended to be taken seriously by the producer or writers. The show’s producer explained that the individual cast member is the only person who would know his or her character better than anyone else. Actors sometimes approached the writers or directors asking ‘what's happening’. He normally took this as a sign that there was something wrong with the story. If the character’s motivations were not clear to the actor this was a problem.

If they're being asked to do things that aren't clear then you know there's something wrong. And that is happening a little bit at the moment with Yvonne.\(^\text{103}\) We are tending to make her do things that aren't organic, that aren’t coming from herself. Things haven't happened to her to make her do things. We're making her do things like be a bitch and have this irrational hatred of Jasmine. You know and she’s saying ‘why? It’s never been here before. Why are we doing it now’? And if it hasn't been there you find yourself sort of post rationalising, well maybe it’s because you were away or because you were the rejected one in the middle [of her family]’ and of that sort of thing. That is a flaw, that shouldn't happen (Producer).

This knowledge of their character, as a specialised form of cultural capital, could provide some small amount of leverage for actors in any attempt to change the form or content of the programme. It also appeared, however, that actor power was

\(^{103}\) Yvonne is a character who owns the Bistro restaurant with her husband Mike. At the time of my research she had been locked in a family argument between her grandmother Hannah and her cousin Jasmine.
linked to the length of their service on the show and also the centrality of their role. Core characters built a rapport with the audience and could not be dropped easily without losing viewers. Therefore the actors playing these characters had more leverage than those playing more peripheral characters. Core characters also tended to have been in the show for quite some time. Therefore length of service in the show and centrality of role tended to coincide. An example of this could be found in the initial reaction of the actress, who played Kay McCoy, to Fair City's abortion storyline. She heard that the character would terminate her pregnancy because she thought that the resulting baby would have Down's syndrome. She found this unconscionable and said that if this was the case she would refuse to play it. In the event, following a conversation with the producer, where Trisomy 13\textsuperscript{1} was explained, she said that she found that the storyline did in fact present a real dilemma for her character. Finding the story satisfactory she continued with it. If she had refused it is possible that the storyline would have been changed to elicit her cooperation. However, even core characters can be replaced, so cast members would only take this type of action as a last resort. An actor playing a more incidental character could never wield power of this kind.

The concern here is with the diversity of representations that Fair City could present. Devereux’s research on Glenroe suggested that cast members could play a role in reshaping scripts and thus helping to shape how social issues were presented (Devereux 1998: 105-6). As we have seen, in Fair City the cast held very little power in affecting what was portrayed or how it was portrayed. While they could make cosmetic changes they did not possess the power to transform the form or content of the show. Here a top-down system of control decreased cast autonomy and the

\textsuperscript{1}Trisomy 13, also known as Patau’s syndrome, is a catastrophic genetic disorder causing multiple \textit{in utero} deformities. Generally, such a pregnancy will often result in stillbirth or spontaneous abortion.
potential for them to broaden the social representations offered by *Fair City*. As resource and time pressures increase the potential for cast members to make creative contributions has decreased over time in step with transformations in the global media field.

**Cost cutting**

As we have seen recent transformations in the global field of media have given rise to the dominance of soap opera among RTÉ television drama productions. This is chiefly because of cost pressures. Almost every aspect of *Fair City* could be understood within the two key constraints of time and money. Time constraints exist largely because of financial constraints. *Fair City* had a very shaky beginning in 1989. It was initially unpopular with Irish audiences but it also cost RTÉ too much to make. An actor who had been in the show from the beginning described this. The show had originally been shot in Drumcondra on Dublin's Northside. This ceased because it was too expensive. To begin with the cast and crew had to be paid travel expenses because they were working over four miles from the Montrose home base.

Expenses were also increased by the fact that cast and crew ate in a hotel everyday. The show's current producer had pioneered the cost-cutting move from Drumcondra to RTÉ’s studios. One actor felt that the confinement of most of the show to Montrose required a lot of ingenuity but occasionally made the show feel quite claustrophobic. He explained, as many others have claimed, that in his view, whenever money became tight in RTÉ, drama was always the first department to face cost cutting.

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Children born with this condition generally have a life expectancy of less than six months.
RTÉ has faced financial difficulty from its earliest days. This problem has been exacerbated by the emergence of a harsh new broadcasting environment. Crew members on *Fair City* were keenly aware of this. One cameraman felt that money and fiscal management were the key problems in RTÉ. He thought that financial control had become the dominant logic in the station. Increasingly, he claimed, in discussions with department heads for example, one had to argue in terms of lost time and wasted resources, rather than trying to appeal to any sort of cultural or artistic logic. Again it was apparent that knowledge of a growing economic logic was employed in rhetorical strategies.

Cast members were very conscious of the financial constraints attached to *Fair City*. One recounted how a wedding scene had been shot with about 20 guests. It was shot over two days. The church ceremony contained one half of the cast involved, while the reception, shot in a marquee on the grass outside the RTÉ canteen, featured the other half. The actress who recounted the story saw it as unwillingness on RTÉ's part to invest in the show. Splitting the wedding guests into two groups created the illusion of a large mixed group but was cheaper than hiring all 20 actors for both days. A crew member commented on how he had seen a community party on *Coronation Street*. He remarked that this was the one kind of scene that would never appear on *Fair City* because the show would be unwilling to spend the money on hiring all the cast at once. This clearly had implications for the show's ability to portray events like community protests, strikes or festivals.

Sometimes apparently insignificant anecdotes can capture a lot of what it is to live or work in a particular social setting. In one such case an actor harked back to some of *Fair City*'s earlier episodes featuring a dog called Snaffles. The dog that ‘played’ Snaffles was specially trained. An off-camera dog handler would give hand
signals for the dog to perform the appropriate actions. The dog cost £IR100 (€127) per day. This he remarked was almost more money than some actors had been getting at the time. The dog was brought in for a day but was not recorded due to a production delay. It was decided that the dog cost too much for the show to pay for a second day in a row. This resulted in a scene the next day where Snaffles’ owner entered his kitchen with his dog on a lead. The dog remained out of camera shot. The character held on to the dog lead and decided that Snaffles looked as though he did not want to come in. The character led Snaffles out into the backyard and closed the door on him. According to this actor, a crew member who tugged on the lead, crawling to keep out of shot had replaced the dog. Whether this is true or not is irrelevant. Stories like these express people's experience and perceptions of what is typical in an organisation (Fincham and Rhodes 1994: 410). Snaffles’ low-cost replacement reflects, albeit somewhat comically, RTÉ's historical need to constantly improvise to overcome economic restrictions. It could be pointed out here that this constant need for improvisation necessitates reflection, discussion and innovation. This is confined, however, to the mechanics of production and, as mentioned earlier, allows no intervention by the crew into the form or content of the show.

Soap opera is a commercial vehicle. It was developed primarily to entertain and retain large audiences. At the time of the research Fair City had moved from producing three episodes a week to shooting four episodes per week. This made the programme more cost effective. Cast members had negotiated a pay rise because of the increased workload. Contract staff, however, such as floor managers, lighting, sound and camera operators did not receive any such increase. As one floor manager put it they simply ended up doing ‘more work for the same pay’. Many of the costs associated with production were sunken in production equipment. Fair City increased
its output by one third while incurring a very modest increase in costs. I discussed this move with a director, who felt that, in his experience on a number of soap operas, cost cutting was a major issue in contemporary drama. He explained that generally upper management wanted to get more from drama without increasing the resources allocated to it. He felt that this was the case on *Fair City* where output had jumped without any great increase in resources. Television drama, in the form of soap opera, is now a mass-produced commodity. This type of cost cutting is typical of the rationalised mass production necessitated by recent changes in the global media field. As we have seen this implies constraint on what a show like *Fair City* can and cannot say. The penetration of economic logic into the field of cultural production has led to a decrease in cultural capital, social capital and autonomy. It has removed potential sources of diversity from the production process.

**Time is Expensive!**

The production and writing of *Fair City* were all about speed work. The speed at which dialogue could be turned out was surprising. During a script meeting an episode was reported to be coming in a minute under time. This was resolved instantly because a writer had some ‘spare dialogue’ on a disc, which was pasted in. In the same meeting it was decided that some extra dialogue was needed to foreshadow an upcoming storyline. Although this was only a few lines long it was written there and then in the meeting. The need for speed in production and writing reduced the potential level of debate and reflection that could take place over what the programme represented and how it represented it.

In rehearsals, spending a lot of time on one scene simply meant that there was less time to be spent discussing and reshaping other scenes. Rehearsals for the violent
scenes involving Billy were quite time intensive. Many alterations were made and there was a degree of discussion about how these scenes should be handled. These scenes left the production team well behind time. Most subsequent scenes were rehearsed swiftly as simple ‘read-throughs’. They were far less precious and involved with very little discussion. Time pressures then simply reduced the production team's ability to stand back from what they were doing and reflect upon how it might be done differently. As Bourdieu has noted the creation of new or challenging ideas is unlikely when people are forced to think at speed. For him television’s reliance on ‘fast-thinkers’ implies a reliance on received ideas (Bourdieu 1998: 29). Similarly, *Fair City*’s time pressures were another factor that reduced the diversity of representations the show was likely to present.

Time and money are linked of course. The financially prudent move to four episodes had greatly increased time pressures on the production team. One floor manager remarked that since they had moved up to four episodes ‘the word subtlety had gone out the window’. Scenes were now ‘lashed together’. The same floor manager noted that since *Fair City* went up to four episodes a week there wasn't even ‘time for a chat or a laugh’ with colleagues on the set. He said that if he turned around to chat to somebody he was straight into another scene. This imperative for speed combined with the necessary quiet of the studio meant that the production context of the programme did not present much opportunity for informal communication. It also meant that most of the cast and crew's best opportunities for discussion with each other were over coffee and lunch in the canteen. This, incidentally, was when I got to have my most rewarding conversations with them.105 When I noted that *Fair City* had a standard structure and that it appeared quite rigid an
actor agreed and said that this was more likely to be the case now that they had gone on to producing four episodes per week. Another actor joined in here and said that this would remain the case because if you broke from formula and tried something different, a special event for example, if it went wrong ‘you were fucked’. These actors provided a very interesting example of how unconventional innovation in form could take place within a show like *Fair City*. One of them described an episode in which his character ran in the Dublin City Marathon. The close ups were shot in advance but a wide shot of the start of the race was taken by an outside broadcast unit on the day of the actual marathon. This also happened to be the transmission date for that episode. Despite this, the outside broadcast material was brought back to RTÉ and edited into the episode in time for transmission that evening. This was an extremely risky approach but it gave much greater immediacy and a greater sense of localisation to the episode. The actor involved thought that this would never happen again because of increased time pressure and an associated unwillingness to take risks.

Cast members also felt that the potential for creative input had decreased with the move to four episodes. The consultation process, which previously existed, between cast and writers had been abolished because it slowed production considerably. Again, here financial scarcity and resulting time pressures have reduced the programme's potential for ‘unconventional innovation’ in its form and content, particularly in its representation of public issues. Increased time pressures then have further decreased the power and autonomy of the cast. In losing these consultation meetings the cast lost a key means of shaping the field of *Fair City*.

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105 The ESRI 1999 noted that the canteen/grapevine served as one of most important sources of information for RTÉ employees on management decisions. This was not, however, a preferred means of gaining information (ESRI 1999: 6).
One afternoon a director took a chance in recording the dress rehearsal that took place before each recording. This was done because one of the actors involved had to leave the studio at three o’clock to work on the lot. Time pressures could be exacerbated when cast had to be shared between studio and EFP shooting. In this instance the floor manager summed up the role of time in *Fair City* production when he remarked ‘tape is cheap, time is expensive!’

**Segregated Hierarchies in a Divided Field**

Although *Fair City* was a single programme numerous separate worlds existed in its production. As a social field it was divided into distinct groups with varying levels of power. One reason for this was that the production did not have a free flow of communication between cast, crew, writers and producers. Some cast members claimed that senior personnel discouraged communication between actors and members of the story team. Some actors complained about the absence of formal channels of communication between cast members and more senior personnel. One actor complained that when he tried to talk to senior members of staff they were likely to be ‘out of the office, or out playing golf’. While discussing this, an actor and script editor entered the canteen in conversation together. Clearly some cast members had little difficulty in communicating with the story team. However, communications between the cast and the story team were not proactive. They were left open but informal. As such, cast members had very different experiences of communication between themselves and the story team. Some might succeed in getting their point across while others felt excluded. In this respect *Fair City*’s organisation remained somewhat ‘fuzzy’ with limited room for individual strategies (see Chapter Seven).

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*Fair City* has now in fact imitated many British soap opera by producing a number of one-hour specials. The first of these was broadcast on 1 September 2002.
It became clear that cast, crew and writers occupied very separate professional and social worlds. I made a point of introducing myself to everybody I met on the set and explaining the aims of my research. One day between takes, I spoke to a carpenter and a make-up girl on the set. Having explained that I was addressing social issues in soap opera they said that I would need to speak to the writers. Neither of them had any idea who the writers were or where they were to be found. A number of cameramen that I spoke to had no idea who the writers were and claimed to have never seen them.

Cast members were separated, to a large degree, from the writers who created their character’s storylines. In conversation with three actors I again explained that I was addressing the coverage of social issues in soap opera. They replied that there was an awful lot going on at that time in Fair City covering drugs, prostitution and so on. They did not, however, have any knowledge as to how the script was put together. One suspected that producers and scriptwriters got together and decided on which social issues they should include. Another suggested that it was probably based more on the characters. None of them had any clear picture of how their scripts were put together. Again this exclusion of workers from strategic organisational decisions is typical of Fordist production.

As noted earlier, one of the stage managers had described Fair City's cast and crew as being a family. I asked her if the writers were part of this family. She replied that the writers had ‘a family of their own’. A director on the set reported that it is increasingly becoming standard practice in soap opera production to have production and writing existing as two separate entities. Soaps like Emmerdale used to have meetings between directors, producers and writers. This did not happen on Fair City and he claimed it was becoming a thing of the past elsewhere. One director said that
the producers and writers thought things could be better produced and better
controlled by breaking them up into separate boxes. In his experience a rationalised
bureaucratic approach was adopted to decrease autonomy but also maximise control
of resources and productivity. There was a strong division in the production of *Fair
City* between the studio floor and the production office.

It is clear here that only negligible creative contributions to *Fair City*’s
representations of society could come from the studio floor. Thus, a source of
alternative perspectives on how society can be represented through soap opera was
effectively closed. It must be stressed here, however, that making television is never
a democratic process. It requires a division of labour, set procedures and so on.
There is no intention here to imply that *Fair City* would provide better representations
of society if the cast and crew debated every scene during production. This would be
extremely naïve. In such a case, more probably, the show would not get made at all.
The key point here is that even within *Fair City*, regardless of single plays with ‘stars’
and artistic producers, the creative capacity of cast and crew has been reduced in
recent years. In high capacity soap opera productions like *Fair City* the
rationalisation of television reaches its zenith. Even the small opportunities for cast
and crew to lend alternative perspective to the production, which existed in the past,
have disappeared. This is a result of the ‘slimming down’ and ‘speeding up’ of
production (Tunstall 1993: 13). Inherent in this is a ‘demystification’ of cultural
production that strips many cultural producers of prestige. Cultural and social capital
the chief weapons of the cultural producers in opposition to the dominant fraction of
the dominant class are dissolved. Rationalisation thus is conducive to the
‘proletarianisation’ of cultural production (Garnham 1993: 189; see also Bourdieu
1993: 131). These are direct products of the exigencies of a transformed global media
field. It appears that an invasion of the sphere of cultural production by the fields of economics and politics may be reducing the diversity of representations available through television drama dominated by soap opera. One might begin to ask if Habermas’ vision of a lifeworld colonised by the ‘system’ was indeed so pessimistic. To answer this we need to further understand the production of *Fair City* and, particularly, how its storylines are assembled.
Chapter Nine

A Story Factory

As the last chapter showed the studio production of *Fair City* was subject to numerous pressures which limited the show’s potential to create diverse and innovative representations of Irish society. Stringent time and resource pressures have increased with the show’s recent jump to four episodes per week. The potential for worker autonomy and innovation has decreased with the increasing rationalisation of production. Here I will examine the work of the show’s writers, editors and producer. Segregated to a large extent from the production floor, this work was equally rationalised and weighted against opportunities to break with convention. There was an identifiable *Fair City* habitus, a sense of what was and what was not a good soap opera story. As I will reveal here, however, the boundaries of what could be said through the programme’s storylines were determined more by practical limitations than by the culture or politics of the show’s creators.

Creating Standard Stories

Those who worked on the studio floor saw *Fair City* as a production line. The creation of storylines was equally rationalised with an accompanying lack of power, autonomy and investment among the show’s writers. Storyline writers created *Fair City*’s plots. These initial ideas were moulded in a series of meetings with the show’s producer and script editors. Script scenarios were finalised at a storyline meeting with the producer, script editors and all storyline writers. A storyline writer described this process:
You write up your storylines and in a sense you try to protect them and guide them through all the processes through which they must go. They go down the production line and they are commented upon and sometimes attacked perhaps. And people are desirous of changing them. And you are in a sense trying to protect them. So essentially it is putting the points to the producer and all those people are who are involved as to why you feel story should go this way. Both within meetings, maybe privately sometimes, in informal meetings these things come up (Writer E).

Storylines were the emergent products of such struggles. Finalised storylines were then passed onto scene breakdown writers who had the task of breaking the storylines into episodes and scenes, allocating each scene to a particular location. This was a largely logistical task that depended on the availability of sets and resources. Scene breakdowns were then discussed and agreed upon in a scene breakdown meeting. This was attended by all writers and dialogue writers involved. The dialogue writers then applied dialogue to the standard 17 scenes that were broken down for each episode. As we have seen only minor changes could be made to scripts during rehearsals. Scripts were continually refined by the intervention of the script editors and the producer. Scripts were finally vetted and refined in the script meetings that took place after the Monday morning production run. Contrary to expectations writers, in Fair City as a social field, exercised relatively little control over a story’s final production.

**Task-Dedicated Labour**

*Fair City* resembled Fordist factory production in that workers were assigned to a single repetitive task. The show’s producer saw that there was no significant communication between the cast and story team members regarding the creation of stories. This was because ‘the cast have a particular job to do. They have to realise on screen the script. Storyline [writers] have a particular job to do which is to come
up with stories from whatever source'. A writer explained that everybody in the production at all levels contributed to the show. As he put it ‘people doing costumes have input, props people have input, but it varies greatly as to the amount of input they would have. It is not equal. People have their areas of expertise. And their input should come from that’ (Writer E). In *Fair City* everybody from the story team, down through the cast and crew had a particular task to fulfil. People beneath the most senior members of the production team lacked the power to deviate from their assigned duties. Thus their ability to reshape *Fair City* as a social field was minimal.

I asked one writer to describe the debate surrounding Kay’s use of the word ‘monster’ referring to her pregnancy. He replied that he did not remember a great deal about it because that story had passed, at that stage from his hands to a dialogue writer. He remarked that ‘dialogue writing for the script was not under the jurisdiction of the job that I was then doing’ (Writer E). One writer explained that she had sometimes been embarrassed to see her name on the credits because the end product bore no relation to the material she had written. Another said that she would often think ‘oh shit that wasn’t the story I had written at all, you know, what comes out the other end of the mill’ (Writer A). The story, like a car on a Fordist production line, rolls on out of the sight and control of the storyline writers to be upholstered by the dialogue writers. Rather than being autonomous authors, within *Fair City*’s production system, writers acted as task-dedicated ‘technicians’. As we shall see they reflected the contradiction between habitus and field identified by Bourdieu in bourgeois art (Bourdieu 1993: 131).

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107 This could vary slightly but predominantly episodes consisted of 17 scenes.
Hierarchies

Again, despite the Fordist nature of production, the *Fair City* production office did not have a typical, top-down hierarchy. There was a clear hierarchy as one moved from producer down to the writers, cast and crew. As we saw in the case of floor management, however, raw power was concealed to provide a space for creative and emotional work. This equally applied to the story team consisting of the producer, editors and writers. The show’s producer and series editor were at the top of this hierarchy and were full time RTÉ employees. *Fair City’s* writers worked outside of RTÉ. Most worked at home and many had jobs besides soap opera writing. When the writers occasionally met with the producers and editors there was camaraderie between the entire team regardless of their professional positions. Decisions were made on how storylines should proceed, which characters should be included and excluded and so on. Disagreements at meetings were generally dealt with quickly and amicably. A writer summed up this atmosphere.

One of the nice things about working in this particular situation with these particular people is that you can disagree sometimes very forcefully but it is always with a sense of camaraderie and it is always polite and considerate. Because the other thing is there is, in my particular experience of this team, there is never any reflexive\(^\text{108}\) “no, no, no”. It is always “well let me think about that, okay this is why I don't think this works, this is what we can do to improve it” (Writer B).

With this sense of cordiality and collaboration teamwork had its advantages. However, the use of a team, rather than an author, also decreased writers’ need for, and investment in, cultural and symbolic capital. *Fair City’s* storyline writers did not, for example, consider their work to be a vocation. It was in no way a source of

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\(^\text{108}\) By reflexive the respondent meant a reactionary or knee-jerk reaction.
identity for them. This contrasted with the purist drama producers who began their careers in the 1960s. Thus, in this respect, the writers’ *habitus* was pre-adapted to the practical exigencies of *Fair City* as a social field.

None of the storyline writers saw soap opera writing as a long-term career option. Many of them regarded their other work to be as important as, if not more important than, *Fair City*. It was implicit among them that if you were going to fit into *Fair City* there were a number of things that you simply could not do. In short, it was inappropriate to be tenacious or egotistical. Above all, one could not regard oneself as an author. One’s task was to generate ideas, which would then be remoulded and used as circumstances dictated. As one senior storyline writer put it, ‘generally you try not to be too attached to a particular line. It is not your baby totally. It is to some degree everybody's baby. You put the ideas on the table but you have to detach yourself from it to a large degree’ (Writer E).

None of the *Fair City* writers considered themselves to be pursuing a career in soap opera writing. This was, in part, due to the lack of personal creativity attached to the show. While everybody I spoke to found *Fair City* writing to be fun, few of them found that it provided the financial, professional or psychological rewards necessary for a viable lifelong career. Soap opera work is ‘not a forever thing’. As one team member said ‘it is great fun and a good challenge for a limited amount of time only because you don't get a real, deeper feedback from it’. Some respondents said that they found their work on *Fair City* to be a learning experience and that they would probably leave the programme when they stopped learning new skills. There was a general view that moving on was healthy. Without a steady turnover of staff, many felt that the show and its writers would become stale. Writers thought that bringing new blood and experience in to the show was necessary if it was to continue to
flourish. One editor described how she felt it ‘was great at a time we get a new
person on the show… because it brings something. They will have a view of Fair
City, not having been in it, that we wouldn't have’. The need to constantly churn out
‘story’, as the writers referred to it, could be exhausting and left some writers feeling
dry of ideas before long. It appeared that this system required a turnover of labour to
maintain creativity in storylines. This suggested an affinity between this model of fast
burning creativity and the insecure flexible work provided by soap opera.

Writers’ lack of investment in Fair City was allied to the lack of symbolic
capital or prestige they attached to soap opera writing. For most of them soap opera
writing was a means to a greater end or else it was something that they had just found
to themselves doing as a second choice. One writer described the low esteem that soap
opera writing was held in when she compared it to acting in advertisements.

I came into writing kind of sideways, but I'm sure a lot of people that go in
and choose writing for a career up front would very rarely sit down and say I
want to be a soap writer for ever. You know it is like when you're an actress
you end up doing a lot of ad work. But you never make a conscious decision
to, you never say 'oh God I hope I get that ad for such and such a toothpaste!'
you just end up there (Writer C).

Writers displayed a pronounced creative fatalism. On the one hand they could
not afford to be precious about their ‘babies’ because they would be inevitably taken
from them. On the other hand they felt that their creations were not that important in
the first place. All were very quick to cede their personal positions to the team. Once
more, this belief in the wisdom of the team was a ‘choice of the necessary’ as no
writer had the power to persistently disrupt the team and keep their job. In his
ethnographic work, Dawson found that some writers saw 'getting the next contract’ as
their chief criterion of success. He found that sanctions existed against writers, from
having your work rewritten by another writer to the ultimate sanction of being refused
further employment (Dawson 1998: 34). One writer described how if a more senior
member of the story team was against your approach to a story then there was very little one could do about it.

And that is the frustrating thing with belonging to a team, when you are writing by committee in a way. You know we are all a cog in a wheel; the ultimate thing is the final result, which is the script, whether you agree with that or not in the end. You just sort of fight… You have to try and do it so that you bear in mind that you are working with these people all the time. And at the end of the day, and as they say in Cork “it's only a play”. You know we're all here tomorrow, you know. And just because you might want to get your way doesn't necessarily mean it is the best way either (Writer C).

One editor held that the producer and the series editor were the final arbiters of what was appropriate and inappropriate in *Fair City*. She said she would counsel less experienced writers to heed this rather than waste their time; their work would be changed despite them. She conceded that if one of her ideas was not strong enough to convince senior staff then maybe her story ‘was not strong enough in the first place’ (Editor B). This was typical of the less powerful members of the creative team. They felt that soap opera was not important enough to fight over. It was certainly not worth losing one’s job over. Even if they were to argue tenaciously over a storyline they knew they were unlikely to win. Creative fatalism and a lack of investment were adjustments to the practical reality of the field of *Fair City*. While meetings were characterised by camaraderie and the building of consensus where possible, there was no doubt that the producer and the series editor were the ultimate decision-makers.

**Fair City: Still a Producer's Medium**

*Fair City* operated on the basis of consensus where possible and executive decisions where necessary. The producer explained that most decisions were made on the basis of consensus. Where there is intractable disagreement, he said, the story team would agree that a call needed to be made. For example, he said that, scene breakdown meetings are normally based in consensus but ‘there are occasions when it comes to a
call, you know, and it will be agreed around the table that it is a call, and then it is the producer's call’.

If consensus building failed the show could be managed in a manner similar to traditional Fordist industry. Orders were made which simply had to be followed. One writer described the producer as ‘the captain of the ship’. If he said ‘it goes to the left then it goes to the left. If he says it goes to the right then it goes to the right’. Arguments could be made but ultimately ‘you go with him, you accept it or you would have to leave’ (Writer E). The show’s producer gave an example of where this type of management might be employed.

One is that I can always say that's the way I want it because I'm the boss, and they will do it. I mean they will argue but they will do it. But I mean sometimes story [storyline writers] does get queer thoughts, they get funny notions. There might be a feeling that they don't like a particular pairing, they don't like someone and they want to get rid of them. And I have to say “well hold on a minute we've invested X number of years in these people, and we are holding on to them”, you know, that sort of thing (Producer).

The *Fair City* story team had an apparently flat hierarchy with few formal divisions of status. However, behind the camaraderie and consensus building necessary for efficient cultural production there was a steep hierarchical management structure that could be mobilised when necessary. *Fair City* contradicts Cantor and Pingree's (1983: 58) findings that soap opera is a genre controlled by writers rather than producers. *Fair City* was very much a producer led programme. This will become apparent when addressing the decisions that gave rise to the Kay McCoy abortion storyline.

**Women’s Work**

As with most flexible, part-time work, soap opera writing tends to be predominantly female work. The flexible labour structure of soap opera writing allows it to
accommodate women who choose to pair a career with domestic labour and/or caring for dependents. One female writer said that she would never describe herself as being a vocational writer ‘because I think vocational is precious…I am not vocational because I happen to think that bringing up my son is more important than any job I could do’. Dawson also found gender to be an issue in his 1998 ethnographic study of *Fair City* writers. One of his respondents felt that soap opera writing was seen to be a quaint pastime for a woman.

People say things like, “it must be a nice little hobby for you.” But I think some of that has to do with being a woman and because I work at home. I’m in my own home! I don’t actually go out to an office every day…because writing is a “nice thing” for a woman to do…a nice, “polite” sort of thing… it goes with painting watercolours and a bit of raffia work, that sort of thing (‘Teresa’ in Dawson 1998: 26).

It was notable that *Fair City* was, at the time, vertically segregated with the most powerful positions occupied by men, as producers and editors, while women predominated as writers.¹⁰⁹

This supports Fowler’s contention that Bourdieu overlooks the role of the domination of women in the field of cultural production where they are relegated to the least autonomous forms of cultural production (Fowler 1997: 134). It also mirrors MacMurraugh-Kavanagh’s findings from the BBC that female authors were present in studio drama but were excluded from more prestigious single plays (1999: 416). Soap opera then may not only exploit women as viewers but also as workers. The former celebration of soap opera ‘pleasure’ overlooks the unequal gendered production regime that underlies it. Fowler and MacMurraugh-Kavanagh, however, offer cultural explanations, overlooking the practical pressures that underpin this form of domination. Soap opera has evolved as a productive regime that maximises

¹⁰⁹ Gender has been a persistent source of division in RTÉ. Just over half of female personnel perceived the organisation to be ‘quite’ or ‘very sexist’ while only 17.5 per cent of male staff share this perception (ESRI 1999: B: 8).
production while minimising costs. It makes economic sense that such work should be feminised with female workers predominating in employment that is casual, insecure and low paid (O’Hearn 1998: 145). While such employment practices do not offer gender equality they do, paradoxically, create employment opportunities for women who need to balance work with the care of dependents. While soap opera offers low creative autonomy it also provides an income and a creative outlet to women who need to balance paid work and domestic work or who simply wish to earn a living while pursuing another long term career goal.

**Dedicated Tools**

As mentioned earlier, writers tended to talk about generating 'story' as a generic material in the same way that journalists talk about copy or bakers talk about bread. Writers also used standardised tools in their creation of ‘story’. This further contributed to the creation of *Fair City* as a highly standardised programme. It became evident in the discussion of storylines that the story team employed soap opera-dedicated tools akin to the dedicated factory tools of Fordism (see Lash and Urry 1994: 114). These were formulae and rules of thumb that could be used to translate loose scenarios into soap opera stories. They converted loose situations between characters into emotional storylines. Two examples of this are the use of ‘confidants’ and the triangular arrangement of characters.

Soap opera deals primarily with relationships, emotions and character psychology. All these, largely, internal processes, however, must be made visible and audible for the television audience. For this purpose the *Fair City* writing team made regular use of what they referred to as ‘confidants’. These were characters that lent an ear to the
difficulties of another. In this way internal difficulties were externalised and made explicit. An editor explained this.

You always need a confidant with a character so that they can explain what they are feeling, that would be the use of Pauline and Deloris with Kay. Malachy had Barry to confide in. And the use of the counsellor\(^\text{110}\) to explore the differences between them (Editor B)

One story team member described confidants as being ‘functionaries’ or ‘stock people’ who let us into the character. The term confidant was widely used among the story team. Typically characters’ difficulties in soap opera involve a relationship with a lover or friend. The addition of a confidant creates a story triangle. The triangle was another rule of thumb employed by the story team. Discussing a proposed storyline, a senior member of the production team commented.

That is a viable soap storyline because it is about Tara and McCann, and you could probably get somebody else across that because you would need, to a large extent, have a triangle. Their triangle would invariably be created by McCann talking to the confidant or Tara talking to a confidant. That is a viable story.

Rules of thumb of this kind served as a means of shaping and selecting storylines. Such dedicated tools are typical of Fordist production. In \textit{Fair City}, of course, they also contributed to the standardised form and content of the programme. The use of formulae was also symptomatic of the deskilling that is inherent in soap opera. Rather than needing to create new stories from scratch every time, writers could merely insert scenarios into pre-established story templates. The use of formulae facilitated the speed work which soap opera demands. It also, however, contributed to the demystification of cultural production and the proletarianisation of television drama writers (Garnham 1993: 189; Bourdieu 1993: 131).

\(^{110}\) Malachy and Kay attended a marriage counsellor in an attempt to rebuild their relationship after Kay’s abortion.
Making Good Soap Opera

As a soap opera, the form and content of Fair City was determined by what its creators understand ‘good soap’ to be. In the eyes of Fair City’s creative team good soap opera was, above all, entertaining. The need to entertain the audience came before any other consideration. As one writer said some soap operas go for ‘social issues’ head on, such as Brookside, but noted that ‘we do not actually do that, dramatic conflict is what we're looking for, and to entertain the audience, quite honestly’. This, however, was a complex task with many methods and ingredients attached to the creation of an entertaining programme.

A predominant feature of ‘good soap’ in the eyes of the Fair City team was that it should be emotionally engaging. A key task in holding and entertaining the audience was to create ‘emotional hooks’, to maintain audience loyalty. As one of the writers described it, a good soap opera should:

Have the audience watching with bated breath, or else laughing, or maybe with a tear in their eye but emotionally involved. Wanting to know what happens next and trying to figure out what is going on in the characters' heads, and when they will figure out what the audience has already figured out. But basically it is emotional involvement (Writer B).

The creation of emotional involvement could take a number of forms. Many of Fair City’s creative team saw that a good soap opera could create emotional engagement in the audience by allowing them to empathise with the characters and to understand what made them tick.

I think it should give you more insight into the characters. You know you come away with a bigger or deeper empathy with the people you are watching. People who talk about soap I mean the audience out there who talk about soap I include my own mother in this… People have to be able to engage with this even though my mother has never been in that situation, she felt for the woman (Kay) who had this awful trauma and could not communicate with her own husband about it. I think that is, for me, what it has to achieve an emotional engagement and to give you a bigger insight into the characters (Editor B).
Conflict provided another source of emotional engagement. Soap opera thrives upon conflict. This conflict takes place between characters and also, when dramatic dilemmas crop up, within characters. Some writers saw that it was possible to create emotional engagement among the audience by posing moral dilemmas for them.

If you divide audience reaction… It does inspire conflict and controversy and if you inspire greater still an inner personal conflict within yourself, do I or do I not agree with abortion? That is good; it gets people thinking (Editor B).

Emotionally engaging storylines might get people thinking but this had to be limited to hold and entertain an audience. According to Writer B, British and Irish soap operas differed from their American counter-parts in that they intended to get people thinking to some extent:

But not too hard because you don't want to interrupt the real aim of the show which is their emotional attachment to the characters. And emotion can get in the way of rational thought. So the more argument and rational thought you have the further away audience members will be from the screen, because they are thinking rather than feeling (Writer B).

All of the writers I spoke to felt that, above all, a soap opera could not afford to be didactic. One described it as the worst thing a writer could be. Writers held that it was not their place, or the job of soap opera, to educate people. They thought that if audience members felt that they were being lectured they would simply switch off. In this sense, many felt that any attempt to inform and educate in addition to entertaining would fail if ‘issues’ were included at the expense of dramatic conflict and emotional engagement.

But I don't think that it is a public service at the same time either, if you're doing an issue purely for those reasons you're going to lose out because then the characters' motivations become secondary. And I think you are going to start losing out then in terms of viewership. And in terms of entertaining people. People want to be entertained and not lectured (Writer C).
Every member of *Fair City*’s creative team claimed that they did not do ‘issues’, in the sense that they never set out to address a particular issue. The common refrain was that ‘issues’ when they were included grew organically from the characters, their history and their relations with others. An editor described this succinctly: ‘first of all you go for the character, you don't go outside at all. You look at the character and say what might happen. And you try to get inside them, and you say what might happen to this particular character in this year given where he or she is in his or her life, that is the way we do it’. She added that she didn't think that members of the team were likely to say ‘we need an abortion storyline or a rape storyline. We need another rape it has been three years since the last one, come on, let's put one in’. *Fair City*, she insisted, had a 'very organic way’ of telling stories (Editor B). As we shall see, however, this was the ‘official’ account of how storylines were created. Informal and unofficial processes equally shaped storylines. Members of the story team often used whatever type of capital they had at their disposal to attempt to remould the functioning of *Fair City* as a field.

**Character Led Drama**

One example given to me about how an issue might come about organically was the case of the Ashti storyline. This was the story of a Kurdish refugee from Turkey who found employment in Phelans’ shop in Carigstown. This storyline highlighted prejudice against asylum-seekers, refugees and recent immigrants as well as the hardship that many people suffer in trying to illegally enter Ireland. The character of Christy Phelan served as a vehicle for prejudice, constantly expressing distrust and dislike for Ashti. He suspected that Ashti was trying to inveigle his way into his mother’s money. The storyline finally saw a showdown between Ashti and Steve.
Walsh, a truck driver who was responsible, through negligence, for the death of Ashti’s brother. Ashti was stabbed by Walsh only to be saved by Christy Phelan, who, ultimately, saw Ashti as a person in danger who needed his help. Editor B explained her view of how this story had come about.

It is not sort of saying “let's bring in a one-legged sailor; let's bring in a refugee”. It is all around, the same application goes to any character coming in. It was almost incidental that this person was a refugee, in a way. I mean hand in hand with selecting a character is their background. At any point it was all up for discussion after we had written him and finished him, if he didn't feel like a refugee then he probably would no longer be a refugee (Editor B).

As we will see, however, Ashti’s status as an illegal immigrant was the *raison d’être* for this storyline. Social issues occupied an ambivalent position in *Fair City*. They could emerge organically from characters but they could also, despite the claims of most of the creative team, be imposed on a storyline for many reasons and employing various strategies.

**Issues as Emotional Context**

All British and Irish soap operas include public issues, to some extent, because they play an important role in making entertaining and emotionally engaging soap opera. Social issues served a number of functions in *Fair City*. As many of the creative team saw it, audiences liked social issues in drama. But they cautioned that in soap opera social issues could not simply stand alone. Even when serious and divisive issues, such as abortion, are included they were only relevant because of how they affected the characters’ relationships. Public issues provided a framework for intimate relationship stories, soap opera’s central concern. *Fair City’s* producer provided some examples of this.

And invariably it's not a social issue story it's a relationship story, it's a love story… You know, we have an animal rights issue, but it's not about animal
rights it's about the relationship between Tara and Shelley. You know, how she gets back at her and how Suzanne breaks away from Damien and takes off with the lecturer guy, Fiachra. So that's what that is about.

Issues of public concern stoked the dilemmas and conflicts that *Fair City* depended on. They could put ‘characters in a dilemma because there were very black and white responses [by characters] to certain issues. And you can pit characters against characters as well by touching on something like that’ (Writer C).

As noted earlier, *Fair City* voraciously consumed story ideas. Social issues assisted in the Sisyphean task of creating new storylines involving the same small set of characters in the same location. They were necessary because ‘when you're generating four stories per episode, four episodes per week, you know there is just so much story in the world. So you need things to hang stories off of. Social issues can be very fruitful for that’ (Writer B).

**Social Issues as Reflection of Society**

One senior member of the story team explained that British and Irish soap opera are about a continuum. They are about the day to day. As such they demand continuity in characters and their lives. In his view the ‘biggest continuity for most people is their social life, where they live, how they live, where they earn their money. So all that has got to be reflected in a soap’. This was part of making engaging and entertaining soap opera. It was seen to be necessary to reflect contemporary society simply to maintain audience attention. Many other members of *Fair City*’s creative team saw that part of their job was to reflect contemporary Irish society. Again Editor A saw that it was necessary that a story have some resonance for the audience. Well if I could describe it as a family story, an emotional story or a relationship story. I dip it [the story] into the contemporary society so that it resonates today in Ireland. Rather than closing it off indoors and letting it happen within itself. I like to take it out and put it into society, so that it has
an effect. And we can see how people behave in contemporary Ireland (Editor A)

Storyline writers saw that *Fair City* had to entertain the audience and keep them emotionally ‘hooked’ into the programme. They also appreciated, however, that soap opera could have a more serious social role. When asked if he looked to other programmes as a source of inspiration for his work, Editor A replied that he preferred to see *Fair City* ‘reflect life rather than art and other people's ideas’. He felt that *Fair City* had to have some fidelity to reality and that this was part of their public service remit within RTÉ.

I think if we can put a reality check in to our stories that prevents us from just telling stories. It is important as well in this debate that's happening about public service broadcasting that we reflect Ireland, we reflect contemporary Ireland and the values it has. And if we were to take a, if I could say a *Coronation Street* view of the world, I think that would be false. It might be more popular but it would be false.

Writer B took a high-minded approach to the role of drama within public service broadcasting. He felt that if Ireland wanted to be a nation, albeit within the European Union, that it ‘is going to express its own thoughts and feelings and ideas through the stories that are produced in drama whether it is in the Abbey Theatre or RTÉ television or radio’. He felt that if these were diminished or farmed out to commercial entities, that it would ultimately diminish the nation.

**Cast and Character Availability**

One storyline writer felt that the Malachy and Kay abortion storyline had lacked emotion. One problem, she noted, in writing this story was that the story team could only make limited use of the characters because the necessary cast would only be hired for a limited number of weeks. As an example of this Kay made use of a
‘confidant’ through Dolores and Pauline, with news leaking to Pauline’s husband Leo.

Ideally according to Writer C there should have only been one character in whom Kay confided but three had to be used due to cast availability.

That was down to cast weeks and who was available. And she had one confidant which had a kind of cathartic effect and then it became three different people. So that effect kind of filtered out, and again that sort of brought the drama down a bit more (Writer C).

The availability of cast and characters was a fundamental step in creating and selecting stories. Sometimes it will be decided that a character’s time in the show has come to an end. Writers then had to abandon any stories they had lined up for that character. Rather than offering artistic freedom, *Fair City* obliged writers to accommodate the pressures of cast contracts and scheduling in their creative work.

**A Time Lag Between Writing and Production**

There was a lag of about six months between a story being created and its eventual broadcast. This affected the public issues that the show could address and the way in which it could address them. Thus, *Fair City* could not, for example, address current affairs. Although public discussion might be preoccupied for a short period with a particular political or social issue, the show could only publicise issues that were long lived and that did not deal with specific instances.

From a story point of view, because you’re generating stories six months in advance of the air date you have to pick a social issue that will be relevant six months from now. And those have probably already been dealt with by the competitors, who may have a shorter lag time. If you do something, those six months could make your choice a nonsense (Writer B).

As part of my research I investigated how storyline writers select stories appropriate for *Fair City* by presenting them with four brief hypothetical story outlines. One of

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111 Here Editor A was referring to the humorous and occasionally whimsical tone of *Coronation Street.*
these involved a by-election contested by *Fair City*'s political character McCann. This posed major problems for the story team. *Fair City* tries to maintain a certain fidelity to reality. It was felt that people would complain 'wait there is no real by-election happening'. Therefore the inclusion of something like a by-election would necessitate foreknowledge of a real by-election. As one writer put it the by-election was not feasible 'unless the election is set in stone, more than six months in advance. You would actually need to know that the election is coming up in nine months’ (Writer B). Editor A said that if you pick an issue of public concern this lag time often made it impossible to address. He cited Eircom shares112 as an example. One could try to comment on the shares issue but ‘to do that story you would have had to know beforehand that they [the shares] were going to go down, and one of your characters would invest in them, and lose his money’. Even incidental aspects of everyday life were difficult to include. One of the cast complained about the lack of reality in the show. Characters, for example, never assembled in McCoy’s to watch a soccer match. There were, however, logistical difficulties in including these apparently trivial aspects of reality.

You know, the All-Ireland, [for example] because you don't know the result. So you can't tell those stories. Because you're not even close enough to production to say who is in the final. And if you say who is in the final how should we tell the outcome of the final. (Editor A).

This lag between writing and production made it virtually impossible for the show to reflect current affairs. It might occasionally happen that characters in the show mentioned current affairs. In a bar scene, two characters discussed a pirate radio station. One cautioned the other that he could wind up in jail and that he would not be

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112 Shares in Eircom, formerly the state telecoms monopoly Telecom Éireann, were sold by the state at a price that later failed to be supported by the market. This has been the subject of much heated political debate.
treated like Liam Lawlor. A script editor mentioned that the show had made allusions to Fine Gael’s promise to return their corporate donations. Dialogue writers, nearer to transmission time, could insert these minor mentions of current events. An entire storyline, however, reflecting a short-lived political or social affair was impossible within *Fair City*’s production system.

**Time slot**

The time slot that a programme occupies is seen to shape the composition of its audience (Burrows 1977: 21; see Ellis 2000). Accordingly, it shaped writers’ and producers’ perceptions of what was appropriate. Here *Fair City*’s creators resembled Bourdieu’s description of ‘middle-brow’ artists whose ‘technical and aesthetic choices’ were shaped by an ambiguous vision of the ‘average public’ or the ‘average viewer’ (Bourdieu 1993: 125). One writer cited an example of a gay character in *Fair City*. She felt that it was almost as if this character was nominally gay. It was ‘the usual thing of gay people on soaps… they are allowed to be gay at one level. But you never witness their sexuality because there is a sense that that wouldn't be great at eight o'clock in the evening’ (Writer A).

In addition to considering the time of evening when a programme was broadcast the time of year also had a bearing on what was considered to be appropriate. Kay McCoy had a very late abortion. She was over five months pregnant at the time. In addition to her and Malachy agonising over the dilemma, her decision was further delayed by Christmas. Malachy put the slow return of the amniocentesis results down to the festive ‘silly season’. This, however, was not the case, as one writer explained.

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113 Liam Lawlor was, at the time, a member of Fianna Fáil who served a week in Mountjoy prison for
It was the producer's decision to run with the plot and as it happened it was around Christmas time. Would Kay go for her abortion just before Christmas? And there was the whole resonance of the Christ child and all of those things. It was decided to leave it until after Christmas. Now at this stage she was 21 or 24 weeks pregnant (Writer E).

**Hypothetical Storylines**

The use of hypothetical storylines was informed by past experiences of interviewing drama producers. If one enquired about ‘social issues’ one was likely to receive one of two stock replies. One would be told that drama was assembled organically from the characters. Or, one might be provided with a catalogue of the social issues that a programme had addressed. All drama, and particularly soap opera, addresses social issues. Here, however, I intended to focus on the issues that *Fair City* could not publicise. Based on literary research and observation, four types of issues that appeared to be unlikely to be aired on *Fair City* were identified.

1. Politically Contentious Issues
2. Examples of mundane misery
3. Taboo Issues
4. Labour Relations

The hypothetical storylines set out below reveal many of the criteria writers used in judging stories. They also reveal many of the constraints faced by writers in putting stories together. Additional issues, which were difficult to publicise, emerged as a result of this enquiry.
Storyline One: Tara and the Legalisation of Cannabis

Returning from Kosovo, Tara gets involved in a campaign for the legalisation of cannabis. With an upcoming by-election this forces a wedge between herself and McCann's political career.114

I proposed the hypothetical storyline synopsis above. The story received a mixed reception among the writers. One task to overcome in creating a story was to create a reason for a character to follow a particular course of action. Writer B thought the story was a 'fine idea', and it was in character. However, he had a problem explaining 'Tara's motivations’. He found this unclear and that 'that would be a major reason not to do the story, unless you could come up with a reason [for her]' (Writer B).

Within a story meeting, storywriters had to be able to explain the historical and psychological reasons for a character to go down the road they had chosen for them. The following statement came from a writer who objected to the story because it was issue led and went against character.

My instant reaction to the first one is, Tara gets involved in cannabis, why? Is that coming from character? I would ask that question because although Tara is very eco-minded, I wouldn't have necessarily thought she was someone who was into recreational drugs. Maybe I am wrong. It strikes me as being very issue led but on the other hand I think there could be good dramatic conflict between herself and McCann (Writer A).

When faced with this type of objection the ability to enter into a character’s life and mind to explain their motivations was a key skill for storywriters. The characters’ ‘personalities’ and histories served as a set of rules for their use. There was, however, latitude in how these rules were interpreted. The renegotiation of these

114 Tara was the wayward daughter of the rather conservative McCann. She travelled to Kosovo to participate in an aid operation. She had also been involved in an attempted rent strike and animal rights. As it turned out the Kosovo trip was to serve as a means of writing Tara out of the series.
rules through knowledge of the ‘psychology’ of the character was one potential strategy in pushing through one’s ideas in the struggle over storylines.

Some writers felt that the ‘issue’ in this story overshadowed its emotional impact. One responded that campaigns, like the one to legalise cannabis are ‘dry, they are empty of emotion’. Others felt that while the ‘issue’ appeared to be controversial it might not arouse much interest in the country.

There is a huge tranche of people in this country probably 300 of the 350,000 [sic] people who watch the show wouldn't care about this, even if you educate them or inform them, which you would probably have to do. They still wouldn't be that interested maybe just because it has no bearing on their own lives (Editor B).

Editor A described it as ‘an example of something, which looks as if it is important, but when you push it into the public arena of normal acceptance it vanishes’. On the other hand, another editor felt that it was a bit controversial and very political. To her mind, Irish audiences liked ‘watching politics on Today Tonight or Questions and Answers, we're not mad about having it dramatised’. Editor A also added that the political nature of the story was problematic but not because it was controversial. The problem was that it was a public story, which went beyond Carigstown and into the Dáil. Thus it became a very difficult story to tell. How could political debates and meetings be represented given the shortage of sets? The community had to be divided on the issue but which characters could be fitted into which camp?

Cannabis, for example, who would you put in as pro-cannabis, and on the other side? And how definite would they be about it? And how strident could they be about it? How dramatic could they be about it? And if that, does it not resonate that they should have a whole lot of other issues related to cannabis that they should be on the same side as. And you will find contradictions with that. Malachy could not be for it, or could he? I do not know. Then you have to reconcile the contradictions. It is a sort of a messy way to tell a story (Editor A).
Any story featuring a conflict had to be given two sides. As the example above shows it could sometimes be difficult to fill these two camps. Writer E suggested that the storyline might be viable if a more emotional element was built into it.

You could for instance have an emotional aspect to it; say McCann found that he had multiple sclerosis. You would be looking for the emotional reasons for her to do it. And she feels that cannabis as some people say can help the multiple sclerosis symptoms. Then you can play the arguments out in an emotional way. So I would see no problem in doing that plot (Writer E).

Exploring this storyline revealed that any *Fair City* story depended on the availability of characters who could believably carry them. It also demonstrated that the story team were by no means agreed on what they found to be controversial or taboo. There was no uniform view among the story team about the political role of drama. Some saw that it could legitimately reflect political issues while others, albeit a minority, thought that this should be left to current affairs programmes. It was also important to note that a story on a topic like the legalisation of cannabis could be carried if characters and circumstances could be strategically renegotiated to incorporate the ‘issue’ into a practical, credible and emotionally engaging story.

**Storyline Two: Cancer**

Hannah develops cancer. As Hannah fights her illness, Yvonne grows increasingly jealous of Jasmine's relationship with Hannah. She tries to sully Jasmine in Hannah's eyes to have her excluded from her will.115

Again story team members were asked to critically appraise the storyline synopsis above. The producer was quite positive about this story. He said that it was good because it was a relationship story, and that ‘even in the way I had written it wasn’t

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115 Hannah was one of *Fair City*’s matriarchal characters. Jasmine was her niece, who was co-owner of the Rainbow coffee shop. Yvonne was Hannah’s granddaughter, who had begun to resent Jasmine’s relationship with her grandmother.
about cancer’, ‘it's about what happens as a result of her getting cancer’. He felt they
should have done some stories involving something like prostate cancer\textsuperscript{116}:

Someone like Charlie getting prostate cancer, it is a good way to develop his
character at a particular age. Or breast cancer, and they're both, you can
recover from them. It's not terminal. If you want it to be terminal like
Alma’s\textsuperscript{117} cancer you can do that but then you don't see her again.

Overall he thought that this story was fine because it was more about the feud
between Yvonne and Jasmine than Hannah’s fight against cancer. Writer C felt that
this was a good viable story because it was ‘a very strongly emotive story’ and she
thought that ‘people would be very concerned for her anyway’. She also liked the
conflict between Yvonne and Jasmine. There were, however, a number of editors and
writers who had reservations about the story.

One objection was that the relationship story here was untenable. The
ongoing feud between Jasmine and Yvonne was repetitive and inexplicable. Many
felt that the jealousy between the two characters could not be explained by anything in
their personalities or their past. A greater concern was that the storyline could
damage Hannah as a character. Hannah was seen as a core character, she was one of
the characters that audience members generally cared about and related to. One team
member was worried that cancer would reduce Hannah as a character. Hannah would
have to become ill and this would reduce her characters’ dramatic capabilities. There
was also a question over whether or not she would survive.

We would have to decide whether she would survive or not. Given the age of
the person in real life and the statistics that are there, would she really survive?
You have to be sort of sensitive to people who know that with someone in
their sixties or seventies, she might not, and how difficult that could be. And
so if you give somebody, something like this, people are expecting that they
would not survive maybe (Editor B).

\textsuperscript{116} Bella Doyle, a central character, later developed prostate cancer but made a full recovery.
\textsuperscript{117} Alma was a character who had just died from cancer in Corronation Street.
The story then raised issues of audience sensitivity. The show could not protect the character of Hannah, portraying cancer as a protracted head cold, when audience members had first hand experience of its effects. One of the major problems with portraying cancer in a soap opera is that it is a form of mundane misery. Most people will not encounter tragic love triangles on a regular basis but everyone has some experience, personally or through family and friends, of the effects of cancer. Soap opera is mostly about escapism. Many writers saw that audiences wanted to have their emotions stimulated but they did not want to be depressed.

It throws up the old thing; it is a very gloomy storyline. We like to go for conflict we like to get the emotions going but this is a very very gloomy, tough story-line you know. And she is also one of the most popular characters. So we would be very careful about reducing her role in the show in any way (Editor B).

One writer said that if cancer ever were to be used in something like *Fair City* it would have to form ‘the background to a plot and not the plot itself’. The worry that this writer saw in RTÉ was that:

Depending on how you do it can actually make people switch off, they say. That, to some degree, this is escapist, and there may be a documentary about cancer or whatever but it depends on how it is treated in terms of the story. People are nervous that it could reduce your audience numbers (Writer E).

It is apparent here that the social issues, which *Fair City* could and could not address, were informed in large part by a vision of what the audience would and would not accept. Clearly Burrowes’s ‘tic’ had not gone away. The risk of alienating the audience, however, took on a different significance on *Fair City*. The show’s financially difficult beginnings had left a residual self-consciousness about cost-effectiveness. The demise of *Glenroe* had shown what happened to a soap opera when it ceased to deliver an adequate audience. The fear of losing audience figures was of course exacerbated by new national and international competition. This
coyness over the coverage of certain issues reflected the practical necessities of the field.

Many writers felt that soap opera was an inappropriate forum in which to broach the topic of cancer. Some felt that the genre could not give a sufficient portrayal of someone suffering with cancer and its broader effects on their family, friends and so on. One writer said that he would not tend to go for cancer in a story ‘unless you were going to go for it in a big way’. When I asked what he meant by that he replied that the illness should be shown with all its potential effects rather than ‘pulling out of the illness’. He expanded upon this phenomenon referring to media representations of wheelchair users.

I mean somebody in a wheelchair described it where they were always looking for people in wheelchairs in films when she was a child. And she'd see it and say “there is somebody, how do they deal with the issues I have to deal with?” And what happened? They were always bouncing out of the wheelchair by the end of the film. So it wasn't particularly uplifting for the people who had to deal with the thing, it was saying your only answer is escape. But for many people they cannot escape. So they have to go through with this, so what are you telling them? “Unless you can escape from it, give up!” sort of thing. It can be a negative message for many people but that is my own personal point of view (Writer E)

So as with the previous respondent, many of Fair City’s writers felt a duty when they approached such subjects to give a realistic and fair representation of them.

**Storyline Three: Paedophilia**

Malachy gives refuge to an ex-Christian brother who was convicted for abusing pupils in his school. Malachy finds that he must defend his sense of Christian forgiveness before the anger of many in the Carigstown community.

This story was included to see how the story team would react to one of the few remaining topics touched by taboo for the media. This story received a very mixed reception. Some more senior members of the story team thought that with work and
consideration it could be developed into a viable storyline. The producer felt that it was a very good story because as he put it *Fair City* ‘hadn’t done abuse’. He liked the fact that it introduced the issue through a character. He pointed out that if a story like this were attempted they would need to approach it with caution. As he said ‘the research shows that there are areas that if you’re going to do them you have to be very very sure, and you have to take the consequences’. As we will see, research and particularly Hatherell’s qualitative evaluation of *Fair City* was an important influence on perceptions of admissible and inadmissible storylines (see Chapter Six).

Writer E felt the story was viable and revealed that the programme had considered a plot addressing child abuse in the past. There was, he reported, a proposed story where a character, Rita, began a relationship with a man who was later suspected of being a paedophile ‘who related to single women in order to get at the children eventually’. He had seen a documentary about such a case. It was to turn out after a fight with Rita’s ex-husband that the accusations had been malicious and false. In this the programme ‘would avoid the nasty bits of it by finding out that he was accused in the wrong, but at the same time get across the message’. He considered this a ‘socially responsible thing at the time’ because he felt that a lot of children were unaware of such dangers. It would have been ‘like part of your stay safe video’.

Some writers held opposite views and thought that this type of story had no place before a child audience.

You're talking now about child sex abuse at eight o'clock in the evening and without sounding like, you know, a right-wing fundamentalist. I have never been stopped from doing any story put forward on the basis that it wasn't suitable. I never have but that is because I have operated self-censorship. And I would have to say that I would have a problem with child sex abuse at 8 o'clock in the evening when kids are watching it (Writer G).
This writer did not object to the topic but felt that it should not be dealt with at that hour of the evening. She mentioned what she considered to be a good drama dealing with sexual abuse in a residential centre. This, however, went out ‘at half ten at night on BBC’. She felt that to approach such a topic through *Fair City* would necessitate an approach that was ‘less than frank really, that wasn't true’. It would have to be done in an ‘artificial way’ which would reek of untruth. Some writers felt that this was a potentially interesting storyline but that it simply was not a *Fair City* story.

It is juicy and it is a good story in another format or another kind of series, not a soap opera series, because there are some really fun issues to play with. You know, what is your Christian duty when you have got somebody who is committed, for what can be argued to be a great evil while cloaking themselves in Christianity. So I think the fact that I react very strongly to that is a good indication that there is a lot there, it is just not right for *Fair City* (Writer B).

Most importantly many writers felt that this particular story could not be done because it would be out of character for Malachy. Many felt that Malachy’s character was so clear-cut that this story posed no dramatic dilemma for him.

Oh God! Well I think it is out of character for Malachy to give refuge to an ex-Christian Brother who was convicted for abusing pupils in his school because Malachy wouldn't do that. Does he know that this brother has done this? If he doesn't know he might give some sort of refuge if the guy was fooling him. But this is Malachy, you know, the kind of up-right liberation theologian. He wouldn't do it, so it wouldn't be true. To him, now I'm not saying that it wouldn't be true to other priests to do that, but it wouldn't be true to him… (Writer A).

Some writers saw that soap opera was perhaps not an appropriate forum ‘in which to expose the subtleties and the pros and cons of complex social issues’. They felt that most social issues were complex and that soap only allowed an ‘almost... tabloid type of outlook on it’ with simplistic broad strokes. For many of them the nature of the genre complicated any attempt to cover social issues. Throughout the
interviews many writers referred to Hatherell’s qualitative audience research. This research identified ‘non-normative’ behaviour as something that was to be treated with extreme caution. It identified topics that were best left alone, chiefly paedophilia and incest. This research clearly informed writers’ views of what should be admitted into the show.

I mean I wouldn't have a problem with that but we have learned recently from some research that we had done that this kind of plot, and it's specifically mentioned the paedophile plot, can be alienating to an audience. So if you want to so play safe, so to speak, you wouldn't do this plot, in that particular way (Writer E).

The research served as a key form of ‘audience feedback’ for writers and editors (Elliott 1972: 159; Pekurny 1982: 136-137; Alvarado and Buscombe 1978: 251). The research also acted as a means of control and standardisation. By revealing audience perceptions of the programme and the type of themes that were likely to alienate, the research resembled a template for what writers could and could not say through Fair City. This revealed a further significant step towards the proletarianisation of cultural production. Gitlin notes that a professional’s deepest claim to privileged status is ‘prowess, or wisdom, or “feel,”’ a personal quality gained from experience and grafted onto the principles and practices of the profession’. It is ‘a mystery that permits him or her to make right judgments under difficult practical circumstances’ (Gitlin 1983: 22). The role of research in Fair City, however, suggested that soap opera knowledge was codifiable and had been demystified. This reflects Bourdieu’s description of bourgeois art (Bourdieu 1993: 131). A writer with no experience at all could quickly learn the key items to omit from or include in a Fair City story. This reliance on research decreased the need for writers to depend on their own judgement of what constituted a Fair City story. This simultaneously represented a process of deskilling,
standardisation and control. Research rendered cultural capital, a potential source of autonomy, less important to the production process.

**Storyline Four: Labour Relations**

Niamh and Paul attempt to unionise Blue Dolphin because they are unhappy with their treatment by Transglobal. This causes a bitter row with Maher and Nicola who see that they’re being petty and are risking all their livelihoods.

This was the fourth hypothetical storyline that I offered to the writers for appraisal. This story ran into problems. It turned out that all the Blue Dolphin staff were partners, this made the notion of unionisation something of a nonsense. Writer A said the idea of unionisation in an Information Technology (IT) company was unrealistic. Despite this the writers did offer their thoughts on the problems of portraying work and labour disputes through soap opera. Writer E explained that there were major problems in addressing unionisation in any soap opera setting due to the lack of workplace sets. He described the difficulties of portraying something like a strike in the following terms.

The actual constraints of the settings impinge upon how we tell stories. If you have a big factory floor and you have a whole lot of people on it as part of your soap opera, and you can see all the people being mistreated in some way. And you can see the beginnings of the union movement, and there are those who are against it, and those who are for it, and somebody who is a traitor to it, you know all of those things. That is fine, but it doesn't fit into the sets that are generally available for soap opera. So it usually comes down to two or three people in a supermarket or a shop or something.

He said the Blue Dolphin storyline looked as though it was ‘forced in into an unnatural setting’, thus he did not see it as a viable storyline. He explained that there had been an intention to address some kind of industrial issues through Hannah’s former cleaning business. He explained that this was because for ‘people who clean there is a real issue about the amount of money they're paid. I know now there is minimum-wage but even at that’. This story, however, was unworkable due to
physical constraints. These physical constraints were not just the result of low-funding. As discussed in Chapter Three, soap opera originated in the sentimental novel and commercial programmes aimed at women. It has always concentrated on the private sphere. The general absence of the work place settings is part of a soap opera tradition. In this respect, RTÉ’s use of a largely unmodified soap opera model is a symptom of historical dependency in the global media field.

Other writers also felt that Blue Dolphin story was quite unrealistic. One said that if employees were as unhappy as Niamh and Paul are in a real IT company they would simply leave.

But the problem I have with this is a purely practical one in that as far as I'm aware computer companies, and I do know people who work in them, are not unionised. So any attempt to unionise it is just not real. You know this is the free market we're talking about, it is the free market economy. It is like the US-based style of operation. And I just don't think it would occur to them to do that (Writer A).

Another problem with work or business stories in soap opera is that they lack the emotional impact of stories about intimate relationships. As Editor B explained ‘it can be a bit hard in Blue Dolphin and Transglobal things to make things that personal. You know people don't talk the way they do in a pub or in the bistro, or in their own homes, the way they do in the office with each other’.

**Poverty in *Fair City***

Despite the show’s ambition to maintain a degree of fidelity to reality many writers criticised the unrealistically low level of poverty in *Fair City*. Most of them were keenly aware of this and some of them had challenged it. One writer complained that many characters had won or inherited money and that this was highly unlikely in such a small locality. This was particularly salient given the story teams’ aspirations to be realistic and the fact that the fictional Carigstown is set in a working class area in Northside Dublin. One writer accepted criticism of *Fair City* for a lack of stories
about poverty, saying that all the characters were doing ‘pretty well’. Despite this she did note that *Fair City* had dealt with poverty through its stories and characters. There was, for example, ‘a story… about Bella… he was on hard times and he got involved with a money lender and basically in the end Leo had to come and help him and rescue him’. This was plainly dealing with an aspect of poverty where people might feel less stigmatised as a result of seeing characters they identify with going through the same thing. A number of characters had ongoing money problems. During my research, three characters, Carole, Gina and Tracey had clear financial problems. Despite the presence of such characters and stories there was a structural constraint on the coverage of poverty. Writer F explained this. Again, like cancer, poverty was a type of mundane misery that the writers feared could quickly bore and alienate audiences.

Actually we had that discussion a number of times about poverty and one of the reasons given was that in a sense poverty is a state not a story, it's kind of a state of being. And that people might find it really boring or depressing if someone is just sort of sitting around in their bed-sit all day. However, I think it is something that is important and that should be reflected and what you have to do is try to find a story around it… I suppose the general feeling about poverty would be that if it is on an ongoing basis, of its essence poverty kind of creates stagnation, so that there is no movement in it. So it is finding the way to tell a story about poverty that actually just doesn't have somebody sitting there watching telly all day because that is all they can afford to do… Can you tell that story but still keep some movement in it? (Writer F).

There are limits, then, to the ways a soap opera like *Fair City* can tell stories about poverty. Poverty for the purposes of soap opera is generally transient and dramatic. It is a short-term problem to be solved rather than a socially reproduced and on-going state. There is little possibility, then, of soap opera dealing with the long-term experience of poverty as something that affects people's everyday relationships and emotions. In this respect, despite the intentions of its producers, soap opera lends tacit support to individualistic accounts of poverty. It is unlikely to provoke reflection
upon the broader causes and consequences of ongoing poverty as an aspect of market-led society.

**Paramilitaries in *Fair City***

Considering the reality of Dublin’s north inner city, paramilitary activity is also conspicuous by its absence from *Fair City*. I put this to a senior story team member who gave the following reply.

> Well that was avoided deliberately I think because of the nature of the activity itself. It might have been read as inflammatory, giving a voice to people, we would demand that they had their own voice. It might be considered politically wrong, it is as simple as that. It is irresponsible (Editor A).

One writer said that paramilitary activity was unlikely to feature in *Fair City*. She felt that it was difficult to work it into the story given the constraints of soap opera sets and a limited set of characters. There might, she said, be some mention of paramilitary activity linked to an upcoming murder story. Paramilitary activity would, however, require characters to be drafted in to avoid serious damage to core characters. This attitude towards the coverage of paramilitary activity is understandable when one considers RTÉ’s history. In 1972 the RTÉ Authority was sacked over an interview with a member of Sinn Fein (Kelly and Rolston 1995: 578). Many in RTÉ also attributed the pulling of *The Spike* to its coverage of paramilitary activity (see Chapter Five). RTÉ’s history was embodied in the *Fair City* habitus, through which these issues were perceived to be unsafe. Perhaps more importantly the story team felt that audiences were uncomfortable with this kind of material in escapist drama. As the producer put it in conversation paramilitary activity could be added to *Fair City*’s list of taboos alongside paedophilia and incest.

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118 There were indeed some small references to paramilitarism and organised crime following the murder of Billy Meehan.
The Ambivalent role of Issues in *Fair City*

Social issues occupied an ambivalent position in *Fair City*. The programme’s producer, editors and writers claimed that stories always grew from characters and not from social issues. Many of them saw that soap opera, even if they intended to deliberately use it to raise social issues, was not capable of giving adequate representation to complex social issues. Despite this, *Fair City* had been used to deliberately convey messages on public issues. The Ashti storyline mentioned earlier was one example. As Writer C put it sometimes you get ‘a message from upstairs’. One such message ‘from upstairs’ suggested that *Fair City* should address the issue of racism in Ireland. Writer E expanded upon this

> Now in the only instance that I know of a directive was sent to the producer of this programme from higher up, to say that we should highlight the issue of race in Ireland, which resulted in what you might call the Ashti plot. I was never aware of a directive, ever before, coming from on high, so to speak.

Many writers considered this story to have arrived too late. Writer C explained that three years before that the show’s producer and editor had rejected a refugee story put forward by the story team. She explained that ‘we were told no because “there isn't really a problem here”. We were thinking “well yes there is actually and can we do it now”’. She said that when the problem had become apparent or obvious and other soaps had done it they were directed to cover it. The order had come from ‘upstairs’. Like most writers Writer C claimed that she did ‘not know who was upstairs. I don't know who was saying this’. The creative team were just as separated from RTÉ senior management as they were from the cast and crew.
System Colonisation?

*Fair City*’s production system is characterised by resource constraints, hectic time pressures and standardisation. The fact that RTÉ’s dramatic output is dominated by such a system is a direct result of the commercial transformation of the global media field. In Bourdieuan terms, it is a product of the domination and penetration of the field of cultural production by the fields of politics and economics. Here despite the refinement of Bourdieu’s model, it seems that the reality of *Fair City* production is steering us back towards Habermas’ pessimistic model of a lifeworld colonised by a system based in the logic of power and money. It appears that, in its contributions to public life and potential to rationalise the lifeworld, *Fair City* itself may be colonised by system logic.

But then there is the case of the Kay and Malachy abortion storyline to be considered. This was an eminent break with the conventions of Irish soap opera production. Rather than reflecting the traditional pressures of the Irish television system this storyline upset, alienated and provoked many viewers. It created debate and discussion on a politically contentious subject. As argued earlier, *Fair City*’s contribution to the public sphere is circumscribed by the diversity of representations of Irish society it can present. This diversity depends essentially on the programme’s ability to break with conventions rather than dole out permutations of the same themes. The controversial abortion storyline marks a key break with convention. Exploring the origins of this story will permit an understanding of how *Fair City* may break with conventions and thus expand the diversity of its representations of Irish society.
Chapter Ten

The Malachy and Kay Abortion Storyline: Writers versus Producer Power

_Fair City’s_ abortion storyline, which ran between December 2000 and January 2001, was probably the show’s most daring and controversial. As noted from the beginning this story was a major break with the conventions of Irish soap opera. As I have demonstrated, so far, _Fair City’s_ production process was weighted against such breaks with convention. Here I will reveal some conflicting accounts of how this exceptional storyline emerged. The creation of the story provides a clear example of a struggle within _Fair City_ over how the programme should be produced. By examining the abortion storyline we can also understand the conditions that may allow occasional breaks with convention in such a highly rationalised and standardised production. The examination of this story also clearly establishes the producer as the centre of power in the field of _Fair City_. This was due, not only to the formal power of the producer as manager, but also the peculiar cultural capital that he possessed. On _Fair City_, it was the producer who had the greatest knowledge of the soap opera business. He was set apart from other members of the story team, not by a cultural or artistic aura but rather by an understanding of fiscal management, broadcasting trends and target audiences. The producer’s power was built, not in the cultural capital of a drama ‘purist’ but in a more ‘generalist’ knowledge of the _realpolitik_ of new conditions in the global media field.

The Evolution of the Abortion Controversy

According to the show’s producer, the ‘abortion’ story had its origins in the decision that Kay was to become pregnant. No decision had been made initially about an abortion. The abortion storyline grew from a writer’s decision to include an
amniocentesis test in the storyline. The inclusion of an amniocentesis appeared to be inspired, to some extent, by a desire to raise public awareness of this, still somewhat mystified, medical procedure.

It is a practice that is not really widely discussed in this country, that women go for, that they do in England and they do in the north [Northern Ireland]. Women from Dublin go to the north for it. And again you are pointing up a problem that happens here. People don't have information when they are pregnant because it can lead to abortions. We found out about that. And doctors were reticent to discuss it because they don't offer it; you have to ask for it. So it is not great if people are not really aware that it is there, or when they can ask for it, to get information about it. So we picked up on that (Producer).

Given that the information provided by the test could prompt a decision to have an abortion it proved a source of dramatic tension between Kay and Malachy, an ex-priest. Although it provided good drama, it appeared that the amniocentesis test was also included also to raise public awareness of the procedure.

Initially this storyline saw tension between Kay and Malachy over whether she should have the test or not. The original decision was that after a long debate Malachy would reluctantly accompany Kay to have the test performed. Kay would then turn on her heel at the clinic door deciding not to have the test after all. This initial approach, according to the producer, provoked some debate in the production office.

When she went for the amniocentesis and this is when there was some discussion and debate about it. The story had her waiting at the threshold. Malachy was late but he arrived just in time and she turned around and didn't get it [the test]. My question was why are we making her do this, why are we making her not go and have the amniocentesis. And nobody could really come up with a good answer for that. From there it went on, and she did go and have the amniocentesis, and then we said it wasn't, it wasn't all right (Producer).
It was decided that the amniocentesis would bring bad news. This added further dramatic tension to the story. As the producer saw it, this was the only possible dramatic option. A debate began among the story team as to what to do with this bad news. Many storyline writers wanted to explore how Kay and Malachy would deal with having a physically or mentally disadvantaged child. This was to become the core of the struggle, between dominated writers and a dominant producer and editor, over the formation of the storyline.

One writer claimed that the writers never thought of this story as an abortion story in the beginning. She said that somewhere along the way it came to be taken as a story that was dealing with where people stood on abortion. This mixing of a story dealing with a potentially handicapped child and an abortion story sparked off most of the debate and objections among the story team.

The story team never saw it as an abortion story and that is kind of why we wanted to investigate the idea of perhaps if she did have a handicapped child. And they didn't want to go with that because they felt there would be more drama got out of it if the two had opposing views. Now we said that they could oppose [each other] up to the last minute and still have [the child]… and that we were opposed to the idea of it because we saw it as a story about a handicapped baby, or potentially handicapped baby first. So it might look like, if you make that decision, that you are saying if you have a baby with a handicap that is a real problem. And the best solution to that problem is abortion (Writer C).

Most of the writers I spoke to objected to the story, fundamentally, on the grounds that as Writer B put it the writers thought ‘this is not an abortion story, this is a eugenics story’. Opposition to the abortion story line was particularly strong when it appeared that the foetus would turn out to be suffering from a common abnormality like Down’s Syndrome or Spina Bifida. Writer B explained the thrust of the writers’ argument.
Wait a minute, not only is the child perfectly viable, think of people who are watching who have Down's Syndrome children, or have Down's Syndrome themselves, or know someone. Are you going to seriously be pumping the message into their living rooms that these children should have been aborted? That was the underlying issue, not that a woman should be allowed to choose, but that these foetuses should be aborted. That is a very big difference (Writer B)

Without mentioning names, he saw that ‘certain people who tend to drive decision-making’ decided that they wanted to pursue this story and they were trying to find a way of implementing it. Considering the objection to eugenics among the writers he felt that ‘apparently that message didn't get through', but 'apparently enough of it got through for them to realise that they had to make this deformity as extreme as possible’. They then went looking, he thought, for the ‘worst possible, in their eyes, deformity’. Writer C said that initially ‘it was supposed to be a Down's syndrome child. But they then had to up the degree of severity of the deformity that the child was in to make it work’. They settled on Trisomy 13, which is a rare but catastrophic genetic condition. The producer described some of the reasons why this condition was selected. He said that it had to be a condition where there was some viability otherwise ‘there would be no debate’. It also had to be a condition that:

Hopefully would cause pain to the child so that people could have sympathy with Kay and it had to be a condition that didn't break up Kay and Malachy… it had to be a condition for which we had sympathy for both cases throughout. Another condition was rejected because it seemed that someone could live quite long, you know, could live a normal life (Producer).
The Use of the Word Monster

Undoubtedly the most controversial aspect of the storyline was Kay’s use of the word monster in describing her pregnancy. As the producer explained:

This almost caused as much debate as the whole storyline itself because I sort of think it struck an awful lot of people who were against the abortion storyline, it encapsulated the essence of why they were against it. By using that word monster… the programme saw children who were in any way deformed as monsters (Producer).

Despite this, the word appeared to pass by many of the writers unnoticed until its transmission. Writer C claimed that there was no debate among the storyline writers about the use of the word monster ‘because we didn't know it was going to be used’. Since the story had rolled on to dialogue it was now out of the sight of the storyline writers. As a result, the first time the story team and many of the dialogue writers ‘heard the word monster was when it came on screen. So that is how it went unobjected, you know because we were just taken aback at that when we did hear it’ (Writer C). Similarly, Writer E remembered seeing the word in the script and thinking that it was an ‘unfortunate word in that it had connotations for many people’. He understood that there ‘is a medical categorisation of people as a monster or they’re used to be’. He was given to understand that there was a justification for Kay’s use of the word. He went on to say ‘I think it is unfortunate, you know if you don't need to use that word for a very strong reason, I would tend to avoid using it. But I was not in charge of writing that script, dialogue was’.

The producer argued, as he had done on national radio and in letters to viewers, that this was ‘an emotional response from Kay’. He felt that it probably described ‘to a very accurate degree exactly what she thought of that foetus at that minute’ and what a lot of ‘women must have thought when they find out that their
foetus is deformed’. He went on to explain the motivations behind the word in greater detail.

Obviously now I have no experience of this, but I mean, I think I could argue the case that as soon as women find out their foetus is different they do not have good thoughts, positive thoughts. They have to think ‘oh my Jesus!’ because they have built up during the period before the pregnancy and during pregnancy the idea that their child is going to be this beautiful child and then they find out that it is going to have six fingers or what ever. It must be like a huge kick in the stomach and the word monster is an articulation of that kick in the stomach. And I think that it was valid for her to use it (Producer).

**Bad Soap Opera**

Many writers criticised the abortion story because in their view it was ‘bad soap opera’. Writer C explained that normally a majority would decide on stories. In the case of this story, however, ‘there was almost a definite minority decision to go ahead with this, for whatever reason’. She felt that the story ultimately did not work because, having made the decision to go ahead with the abortion storyline, they were not allowed to get the emotional impact right through the characters. She explained that the writers had tried to run a line where Malachy attempts to stop Kay from leaving the country by telling a doctor that he thinks she is mentally unstable. This she felt would have ‘upped’ the story and created stronger dilemmas. Instead of that there was a situation where there was ‘a stalemate with nobody talking to each other’. She also felt that Kay’s emotional turmoil could have been dealt with more effectively. Kay, in her view, was too stoic about her trauma, she seemed to be saying “well that is done, OK, next!” The character, for her, seemed to deal with the physical and emotional trauma of the abortion with little difficulty. Most importantly, ‘this was a woman that would have died to have a baby’. And ‘in terms of the true line of her psychology’, she could have lived with the hope ‘that a lot of people have when they are in that position’ that this was her only chance to have a baby and maybe the prognosis was not so bad. Instead of this, ‘she never even asked for a
second opinion. You know those kind of things weren’t fully explored. And that would have given good story, and that was never dealt with’. She stressed that she didn’t necessarily mean to make Kay ‘feel guilty’ but she wanted to see the character wrestle with this trauma to be fair to ‘people who had gone down this line’. One of the main missing emotions, as she saw it, was the absence of a sense of loss. Kay ‘never really mourned, we never saw her mourning for the baby that she had lost because it was a relief. She made this decision but still within that she lost her baby’. The invocation of ‘bad soap opera’ here was clearly a rhetorical strategy used by writers to remould the storyline. Writer C’s appeal to the ‘true line’ of Kay’s psychology exemplifies how dominated writers could muster their knowledge of the characters as a form of capital in their struggle against more dominant views of the story.

Many writers felt that the story broke one of the shows central rules in that it planted an issue into the plot to the detriment of the characters. Writer B went as far as to call it a ‘puppet show rather than a story driven by character’. He saw that Kay became uncharacteristically selfish while Malachy became a ‘prig’ and a ‘proxy for the Catholic Church’. Writer C felt that ‘your total sympathy went with Kay rather than the dilemma they were both in because Malachy was so rabid’. She also noted that Malachy was the only character to express any reservations about Kay having an abortion. She felt that one of Kay’s confidants should have had some ‘dilemma’ about the abortion ‘because it made Malachy look like “he would say those things, he was an ex-priest”’. She complained that nobody else in the community had anything to say except ‘you poor dear, whatever you want, and do what you want’. Nobody suggested that it might be better to have the child because it was probably ‘going to die in six months anyway’. Nobody suggested that Kay should not go through ‘the
horrendous type of abortion she had to go through, which was she had to give birth to a stillborn baby. You see when an abortion is that late; she was over five months’.

She stressed that she was ‘not a pro-lifer’ in case she sounded like one. The series editor defended against these criticisms pointing out some of the emotional moments Malachy had had during the course of this storyline.

There was lots of stuff in it like that' I could have held that child'. There was a lot of stuff that was emotional. I don't accept that as a criticism, Malachy was very emotional, he did cry on a number of occasions he did say ‘I would have loved that child' to Kay. It would have been something that was of me. I would have loved it. I think people who are doing that are editing for a particular reason, I don't know what it is. Maybe they're just anti-abortion and they feel that he was too Catholic, but no he was very human about it.  

The show’s producer on the other hand admitted that the show had emphasised Malachy’s principles more than his emotions.

You could argue, I know, this isn't about principles; he is a father as well. He must have an emotional response to this as well. I think maybe we erred in it too much in going down the principled line of argument rather than the emotional line of argument. So that as a result whenever they got together we never saw tears, it was like a debate. And I think that we've learned ourselves from the research and we wouldn't make that mistake now… We would probably have given Malachy a more humane line on it (Producer).

A Management Decision

Most writers saw that Fair City’s producer and the series editor pushed through the ‘abortion’ storyline. One described how almost the entire creative team had geared up for a storyline that saw Kay give birth to a handicapped child.

It was maybe two people, you know, out of a team of nearly 15. Is it 15 dialogue writers we have and three senior story writers that would have wanted to turn the tables on that and go down this route? And we had a lot of story worked up. Even from the point of view of the logistics thing, we had a lot of story worked up and written, because we work six months in advance, as to what would happen when that baby was born et cetera. That did give a lot of really good drama. That had to be drawn out as well, and that was that one

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119 Malachy did not cry prior to the abortion. He was tense and anxious but not tearful prior to Kay’s trip to the UK.
120 Hatherell’s research revealed audience members to be critical of the abortion storyline because of its lack of emotion (2001: 27).
point of view. And we did feel strongly that maybe two people could change what we felt was a very strong storyline as it existed previously to the way it was handled. That is being very blunt about it (Writer C).

Writer E described how there had been a great deal of disagreement over whether Kay should have had the abortion or not. He said that ‘finally it was the executive producer's decision… that was the only way out of the situation’. According to him, there was no final agreement between the writers, the producer and the script editor. The producer on the other hand held that the story-line team had come to him and asked ‘are we sure we're going to do this’? He said they debated it and eventually said ‘yes this a good story let's do it. It's the right time to do it, it’s between referendums [sic]’. He reported that he had to check if there was a date for a referendum because the show could have been in danger if ‘even in the five months following that the date for the referendum had been announced’. There was a danger that the show could be seen to be getting politically involved and interfering with strict legislation on the coverage of referenda. The mention of the referendum strongly suggested that the producer had an intention, at some level and for some reason, to encourage the audience to discuss and reflect upon the abortion issue. This, however, was not open to investigation. Nor is it the place of this research to attribute motivations to any of *Fair City’s* creators other than those they expressed themselves.

**Abortion for a Public Reaction?**

In addition to the eugenics issue writers objected to this storyline for other reasons. One writer mentioned that the ‘abortion’ story line might have been motivated by an intention to create a broader public controversy, which failed to materialise. The abortion story was also repetitive in her view since the character Niamh had already had an abortion in an affair with Leo Dowling.
Sometimes I think there is an opinion that in Ireland, that people are almost going to burn us at the stake if we come up with this, which is not true. And it is kind of condescending. People can reason for themselves whether people want to go around and follow this line or not. And in one way it was almost a sensationalist way, in the hope of creating a sensation that didn't happen, with Niamh’s abortion either. So that was another reason we were arguing against it. Another writer thought that an attempt to create a broad public reaction could have reflected ratings pressure from TV3’s acquisition of *Coronation Street* (see *The Irish Times* 12 September 2000; *The Irish Times* 16 September 2000). The climax of the abortion story coincided with TV3’s first broadcasts of *Coronation Street* in January 2001. He explained that there ‘there was another factor involved… which was that *Coronation Street* was lost to RTÉ at that time. He thought that it was possible that ‘it was felt that *Fair City* should have some kind of dramatic moment which would hit the public in a big way and would gain public attention I mean I think that would have been a factor’. This suggests an interesting motivation for the storyline. Turow observed that innovative programmes were ‘most likely to be generated and accepted by organisations experiencing unusual changes or competitive pressures’ (1982: 124). The abortion storyline would fit into this explanation. More importantly, however, this is one of only two mentions of the broader media field to be made by *Fair City*’s writers or editors. Writer B also mentioned how social issues covered by ‘competitors’ could affect the issues covered by *Fair City*. Such commentary on the field was, for the most part, absent. The programme team never emphasised a link between their work, the stories they told and the exigencies of competition against the world’s most experienced and well-funded broadcasting organisations.

121 Despite Writer A’s claims the story did create considerable controversy, discussion and debate in the national press, national radio and in letters to the programme (see Chapter One and Appendix II).
The Gap between Field and Habitus

I earlier argued that the form, content and dominant position of RTÉ soap opera were the product of the organisation’s long-term, dominated position within the global field of media. Further, I have suggested that the ongoing economic invasion of the cultural field may constitute a colonisation of the lifeworld by the system. Soap opera writers have the capacity to be key contributors to the rationalisation of the lifeworld. This is evident in the discussion and debate created by *Fair City*’s coverage of abortion and other difficult and taboo social issues. Writers’ work required that they reflect upon private life and the way in which it is shaped by everyday attitudes and behaviour. Despite this, they did not appear to consider the way their work had been shaped by recent political and economic transformations to be important. A *Fair City* habitus shaped their reading, understanding and creation of soap opera storylines. They did not, however, betray any conscious concern with, or awareness of, the conditions that had given rise to the context in which they worked. Increased financial and time pressures, for example, were seen to be endemic to RTÉ by most people rather than being a product of rationalisation brought about by international processes.

*Fair City* writers’ relationship to the global media field existed at the level of doxa. They were aware of global media TNC’s, digital television, the commercialisation of broadcasting and so forth. Importantly, however, they did not refer to these in their attempts to explain their work and its relationship with society. The processes within the broadcasting field, which had created their working conditions, existed outside their working discourse. This, pessimistically, brings us back to Habermas’s suggestion of an invisible colonisation of the lifeworld by the system (Habermas 1992: 187). *Fair City*’s writers lacked the formal power to push
their own points of view on the coverage of social issues and the formation of
storylines. They were also unlikely to begin to resent or resist the exigencies of the
broadcasting field because they did not discursively link them with their own working
conditions. As explained earlier, if social practices, norms and values cannot be
announced and thus seen and understood they cannot be consciously changed
(Bourdieu and Haacke 1995: 54). The fact that most writers did not reflect upon the
broadcasting field and the way it shaped stories reflected their objective conditions of
possibility. Such forms of knowledge and reflection were unhelpful in soap opera
writing. As we will see, for practical reasons, it is virtually impossible to resist the
workings of the global media field through soap opera.

Added to this, Bourdieu notes that there is a ‘demystification of intellectual
and artistic activity consequent on the transformation of the social conditions of
production’ that is particularly pronounced in large units of mass cultural production
such as television. To Bourdieu, such cultural workers represent a ‘proletaroid
intelligentsia’. Moreover, they are forced to ‘experience the contradiction between
aesthetic and political position-takings stemming from their inferior position in the
field of production and the objectively conservative functions of the products of their
activity’ (Bourdieu 1993: 131). That is to say their dominated position will most
likely provoke attitudes and perceptions that are opposed to the culture and practices
of the dominant fraction of the dominant class. Despite this, their weakened position
forces them to serve conservative interests in the creation of market-led culture. This
suggests that the practical necessities of Fair City as a field are more important in
shaping the show than the habitus of those who produce it. It also indicates that there
is a mismatch between the habitus of those who work on Fair City and the field in
which they work. That means that the show is shaped largely, not by what its creators
want to do, but by what they must do. This is at odds with Devereux’s predominantly ideological account of Irish soap opera production (Devereux 1998: 124).

**Possibilities for Breaking with Convention**

Kay McCoy’s abortion marked a major break with the conventions of Irish soap opera. Most recently *Fair City* pushed the envelope on one of its own taboos with a storyline featuring incest. As with previous first-time coverage of taboo issues this was brought in softly with an affair between a half-brother and sister who did not initially know that they were related. Both of these storylines broke with the conventions of Irish soap opera that, heretofore, have been marked by Catholic inhibitions. They both, however, remained steadfastly within the conventions of soap opera in general and British soap opera in particular. This research has explored and revealed the conditions under which breaks with convention can occur. To discuss this further it is useful to return briefly to Bourdieu and Turow’s hypotheses on creativity.

Both Bourdieu and Turow suggested that creative risk taking was likely to be linked to power outside an organisation (Bourdieu 1981: 314; Turow 1982: 125). This research has shown that creative risk taking was also linked to the level of power one held within an organisation. Contrary to the findings of Cantor and Cantor, *Fair City*’s writers were not the locus of power within the show’s production (1983: 71). Their lack of power was reflected in the fatalistic stance they took towards their work. This prevented them from tenaciously pushing for breaks with convention. Writers’ main source of capital lay in their knowledge of the characters and their ability to re-interpret a storyline to make it fit a character’s psychology. This, however, was rooted in soap opera convention and had limited potential to serve as a means of breaking those conventions.
It also appeared likely that the use of non-standard or flexible strategies in production would increase the likelihood of breaks with convention (Turow 1982: 126; see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 22–23). As this research has revealed, however, the increased rationalisation and time pressures in *Fair City*’s production have decreased the scope for such strategies. The cultural and symbolic capital which cultural producers employ, and can amass, through their work has been diminished. Financial necessity is causing the former ‘fuzzy logic’ of RTÉ to become more clearly delineated and bureaucratic. The new broadcasting environment has further limited the expressive possibilities of *Fair City*. It has done this, in part, by reducing the possibility for ‘flexible strategies’ and the breaks with convention that they can encourage.

**Breaking with Convention and the Interconnection of Social Fields**

It was anticipated that a high level of interconnection and communication between different occupational levels within *Fair City*’s production system would encourage breaks with convention and a greater level of diversity in the show’s representation of social issues. As I have shown here, however, *Fair City* operated as a highly rationalised and compartmentalised production system. The cast and crew effectively inhabited a different world to the programme’s writers, editors and producer. There was very little opportunity for the cast and crew to contribute to the form and content of *Fair City* storylines. Where such possibilities did exist they were generally cosmetic. Even the more powerful members of the cast – those who played core characters – lacked the capacity to persistently object to storylines. While there had formerly been consultative meetings with cast and crew these were abandoned in the face of increasing time pressures which resulted from the programme’s jump to four
episodes per week. The rationalisation necessitated by new production pressures again reduced the programme’s capacity to break with convention in this manner. It is ironic that EastEnders, which serves as something of an example to Fair City, has recently placed suggestion boxes around its set to allow cast and crew to propose storylines. This according to an EastEnders spokesperson is to give all staff ‘a chance… to really feel part of the programme’ with a desire that everyone should feel that ‘they have ownership of the show’ (www.bbc.news.co.uk 9 July 2003). While the BBC deny that this is an attempt to boost ratings it is likely to increase the diversity of the show’s storylines. It is also certain that it would not be employed if it were considered likely to damage viewing figures. The greatest confluence of intersecting fields in Fair City was expressed through a single individual, the producer.

The Role and Power of Fair City’s Producer

It was the producer rather than the writers who controlled Fair City. The producer, as Writer E said, was the ‘captain of the ship’. It was his position of power and the decision-making it supported which created Fair City’s break with Irish soap opera convention through the Malachy and Kay abortion storyline. The producer worked at the intersection of Fair City and RTÉ as a broader organisation. He also negotiated the relationship between Fair City and the broader media field. It was the producer and not the writers who held the centre of power in the programme’s production. This power was, obviously, formalised through his organisational position. He was the manager for the entire programme. The producer’s power, however, lay not only in his formal position but also in his possession of a peculiar body of cultural capital. While the producer saw that Fair City’s centrality in RTÉ was a product of financial
necessity he did not overtly reflect upon the relationship between the global media and the dominance of the soap opera genre. Despite this he stood out among the production team by displaying a deep knowledge of the soap opera business in terms of competition, promotion, target audiences, scheduling and so on. He was the only member of the production team recognised to have the necessary knowledge to steer *Fair City* through the complexities of the international soap opera business. He had overseen the creation of groundbreaking stories on homophobia, euthanasia, abortion and so on. He had equally managed important cost-cutting, increased programme output and the rationalisation that this entailed.

The producer reflected a generalist rather than a purist view of television drama. His approach to the programme balanced a mixture of the requirements of good drama, a public service remit and business acumen. In his organisational position the producer was a nexus between the exigencies of commerce and public service broadcasting. This was reflected in his view of ‘good soap opera’ which he saw to be informative, provocative and, above all, popular. In Bourdieuan terms, the producer’s *habitus* was perfectly adapted to *Fair City*’s practical requirements and reflected his position at the intersection of social fields. In Bourdieu’s conceptual model, however, popularity and purism exist as two separate games within the same field. *Fair City*’s producer was adept, as he had to be, in playing a ‘double game’ that mixed a public service remit, to impart information and create discussion, with commercial concerns of cost effectiveness and popularity.

**Change in *Fair City*: Playing the Double Game**

Despite the highly rationalised nature of *Fair City* it was possible for the programme to break with existing conventions to some degree. Such innovation, as we have seen,
however, was unlikely to emerge in a bottom-up fashion from *Fair City* crew, cast or writers. Any future change in the programme is likely to be steered by the programme’s producer backed by funding from senior management. By necessity any future changes will be compatible with the building or maintenance of audience figures and advertising revenue.

One very recent innovation was the creation of special episodes, which are screened occasionally on Sundays. These exemplify the ‘double game’ that *Fair City* must play. They are initially an imitation of the practices of British soap operas such as *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*. They normally focus on one or two central plot lines and will usually orbit around an unusual locale outside of Carigstown. These shows create interest in the show by presenting an hour of intensive drama to audience members who may not be in the habit of viewing during the week. They are also more dramatic and employ higher production values than standard episodes. Thus they serve as a promotional tool for the programme.

They also, however, overcome some of the limitations of the soap opera form. In one respect they resemble a single play. They can focus on a particular issue to the exclusion of sub-plots for light relief. One recent example featured an accident and emergency service. Another hard-hitting episode addressed problems surrounding homelessness, social welfare and mental illness. These topics could not be given the same treatment through the programme’s normal four weekly episode structure. Since special episodes exist outside the programme’s normal structure they can present slightly risky stories without serious danger of alienating regular viewers. In this respect, they exemplify the ‘double game’ imposed upon RTÉ by its position in the global media field. Bourdieu wrote that the field of cultural production was characterised by a double hierarchy where popularity was inversely proportional to
kudos (1993: 29). Today, as outlined in Chapter Five, the autonomous pole of the field has become aligned with the heteronomous pole through economic necessity. RTÉ must now produce drama that is simultaneously reputable, prestigious and popular. Soap opera, which was formerly anathema for many, is now seen as a valuable means of dramatically representing Irish society. *Fair City* has become a source not only of ratings and advertising revenue but also considerable prestige in RTÉ (see Kearney in *The Irish Times* 15 December 2001; RTÉ 2001: 6). The double hierarchy has been replaced by a double game where RTÉ drama producers can no longer follow either a public service logic or a commercial logic. They must now try to follow both at once.
Chapter Eleven

*Fair City and the Rationalisation of the Lifeworld*

**From Church to Media Domination?**

The degree of controversy generated by *Fair City*’s abortion story reflected the pronounced break that the programme had made with the conventions of Irish soap opera. Although it took almost forty years for an RTÉ soap opera to air such a story, it marked a further departure from Ireland’s former silence on matters of sexuality and reproduction. Today, it is clear that the Catholic Church’s control – through a Catholic *habitus* – over thought, word and deed in Irish civil society has waned. Inglis argues that the Catholic Church had symbolically dominated Irish society but that it is the media that now exercise this form of domination (Inglis 2000).

The inception of RTÉ television coincided with a new state policy of economic development through FDI and the creation of a consumer society. This project was intrinsically linked to television through advertising. Thus, Inglis argues, ‘the arrival of television brought a new symbolic structure, *habitus* and practice to Irish homes’ (2000: 58). This new *habitus* propagated by the media differed greatly from that of the Church. The Church advocated self-denial and the acceptance of the ‘truth’ of Catholic teaching. The media, on the other hand, ‘promoted debate and discussion, the representation of alternative lifestyles and opinions and, most of all, the promotion, expression and fulfilment of the self’ (Inglis 2000: 57). The media usurped the Church’s position of symbolic dominance.

What was happening was that the symbolic domination of the Church in the public sphere and civil society in general was being replaced by the symbolic domination of the media. The knowledge produced about social life and the way of reading and interpreting the world and debating issues in the public sphere shifted from bishops, priests and theologians to journalists, commentators, producers and spin-doctors (Inglis 2000: 59).
This was not just a macro-level or a surface transformation but something that, publicly and privately, penetrated everyday language, culture and behaviour (Inglis 2000: 66).

In concluding, Inglis highlights many of the ways in which the media protect civil society from abuses of power. He argues that the media now act as ‘moral policemen’ making ‘power give an account of itself, through investigating and questioning it and engendering debate and discussion in the public sphere’. Thus ‘the media have become the mechanism through which civil society and the lifeworld are protected from increasing interference by the state, and colonisation by other political and economic forces’ (2000: 67). In sum:

It is the media in Ireland who have instituted a moral crusade to keep politics and politicians clean and honest. They have become the police who investigate and denounce immorality, not just in the Church, but in industry, science, banks and in the media themselves. The media have displaced the Church as the conscience of Irish society (Inglis 2000: 63).

This is, to some extent, true. RTÉ programmes like Dear Daughter and States of Fear revealed child abuse in Church and State run institutions. Vincent Browne’s ongoing radio programme has provided an insight into, and understanding of, the bizarre and arcane world of Ireland’s tribunals. Charlie Bird and George Lee’s celebrated revelation of deception and overcharging by National Irish Bank demonstrated that the media could take on big business as well as the Church and the State (see Keena in The Irish Times 20 November 1998). As we have seen, Fair City, and other Irish soap operas, have empowered people and facilitated change by announcing and exploring sensitive and taboo issues. It is undeniable that the media have contributed to a more open and transparent society and a democratisation of knowledge (Mulholland in The Irish Times 7 January 2000). They have, in Habermas’ terms, contributed to a rationalisation of the lifeworld.
The Abortion Storyline and the Rationalisation of the Lifeworld

Explaining the rationale behind the abortion storyline to a viewer, *Fair City’s* producer wrote that ‘in the last few years over 100,000 Irish women have undergone abortions in England alone’. The storyline was ‘attempting to explore and to understand through drama the dilemma of one such story’ (Producer’s response to viewer’s letter 20 February 2001). He rejected any charge that the abortion storyline had been in any way ‘pro-abortion’ or ‘pro-choice’, taking issue with the ‘idea that by featuring abortion as a storyline we would be seen to encourage it’. He added that if this were the case then the show could also be ‘accused of encouraging forgery, gambling, drug-peddling, adultery, rape and many other vices’ (Producer’s response to viewers letter 20 February 2001).

*Fair City* writers, editors and producer claimed to avoid overt didacticism. Ostensibly, issues were never included for their own sake. Stories had to grow ‘organically’ from the characters. As we have seen, however, this was ambivalent. Issues, in which a writer had an interest, could be woven into a story if they could be married with a suitable set of characters. On at least one occasion, the Ashti story, upper management intervention created a storyline that was expressly didactic. As we have seen the abortion storyline appears to have been aired largely through the will of the show’s producer rather than a consensus among the production team. This research, however, cannot support any allegation that *Fair City’s* presentation of the abortion story was biased for or against either side of the abortion debate. The storyline did not explicitly push one view of abortion over another. Despite this its treatment of abortion was nonetheless political and, in a sense, didactic.

The choice between publicly announcing an issue, such as abortion, and quietly denying its existence is inherently political. To make public stories that have
been kept silent is to subtly alter how an audience perceives the social world. The significance of publicising such issues is not that they tell people how to think. It is, rather, that such representations cause latent issues to become a conscious part of people’s social reality. They are lifted above the level of discourse where they can be debated, discussed and potentially changed. With the abortion storyline, this was recognised by conservative groups who wished to keep the issue out of everyday conversation, thereby, ensuring the persistence of a *status quo*. These sentiments were summarised by the pro-life newspaper *Mother and Child* in its response to Kay McCoy’s abortion.

Two things happen, abortion becomes debatable (that is that human life becomes debatable), and then abortion becomes legal. Our national broadcaster makes the slaughter of little children the subject of their entertainment. Why you may ask? Some will mistakenly think that they are fair, and that they are showing both sides of the argument. The moment you debate human life is the moment you make it disposable. RTÉ has again shown its true colours, blood red (February 2001).

This echoes the paternalistic tradition of the Catholic Church and the Irish State which mistrusted people with information on uncomfortable issues and deterred them from making their own decisions on moral matters (Kelly and Rolston 1995: 570–91).

The complaints from individuals and organisations examined in Chapter One demonstrated that the storyline did indeed provoke discussion. The controversy that surrounded the abortion storyline shows that soap opera can encourage public and private discussion and debate. Soap opera, then, plays an important part in the rationalisation of the lifeworld (Habermas 1992: 186). That is, a movement from a culture where norms and values are accepted on the basis of authority and tradition to one where they become amenable to rational discussion and potential change. Formerly, with such issues being held out of public discourse, they went largely unmentioned and unchanged. The development of a soap opera like *Fair City* marks
an important part of Ireland’s modernisation where difficult stories can be told, recognised and rationally discussed. In this respect, as part of RTÉ’s public service broadcasting remit, *Fair City* makes a valuable contribution to discussion and debate in the public sphere. The media, however, do not always act as an open forum or as ‘moral policemen’. They frequently serve as a means of abusing power. Inglis overlooks this fact and treats the media’s ‘colonisation’ of the lifeworld as a wholly positive development in the face of former symbolic domination by the Catholic Church.

**The Negative Consequences of Media Colonisation of the Lifeworld**

As I argued in Chapter Six, today’s mass media are for the most part owned, shaped and controlled by a small number of very powerful companies (see Herman and McChesney 1997; *The Economist* 19 November 1998). It is unsurprising then that mass media frequently do the bidding of the powerful. To take a single example, media magnate and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has employed mass media to further his own political and economic ends. As owner of the massive Mediaset company he controls most of Italy’s private broadcasting. As head of government he selects the controllers of its public broadcasting (*The Economist* 28 February 2002). Thus he controls 90% of what Italians see on television (*The Economist* 3 July 2003).

Predictably, opponents of the Prime Minister such as trade unionists, anti-globalisation activists and so forth get short shrift in Italian media (Herman and McChesney 1997: 173). One of Italy’s largest post-war demonstrations took place after Berlusconi’s 1994 election victory. Over 1.5 million people took to the streets of Rome in protest against the government’s budget. RAI, the public channel, despite
the fact that Berlusconi had recently dismissed its board of directors, broadcast three hours of live coverage. Emilio Fede, anchorman on Berlusconi’s TG4 nightly news provided the following account of the event: ‘A protest parade was held today while other people in the country were trying to work’ (Fede quoted in Herman and McChesney 1997: 173). Sophie Arie reports that such ‘cases of "improving" the news’ in Italian media ‘range from editing out "gaffes" made by the Prime Minister to airbrushing over his bald patch on the cover of Panorama, a weekly magazine’ (The Irish Times 5 July 2003). This is just one example of an almost feudal form of publicity. Owners and controllers of media organisations regularly intervene to protect their political and commercial interests from negative publicity (for further examples see Klein 2000: 168–81; Pilger 1998: 445–84; Herman and McChesney 1997: 58–64). Clearly, following Herman and McChesney, mass media often support economic and political power on national and international levels by acting as ‘ideological missionaries’ (1997: 37–8).

Initially, it appears improbable that Fair City, a programme produced by a public service broadcaster, would provide ideological support for political or corporate power. Fair City’s contribution to debate and discussion in Irish society, however, cannot be accepted uncritically. As I have argued, the form, content and current dominance of Fair City in indigenous drama is the product of RTÉ’s dominated position in a global media field transformed by a neo-liberal agenda of commercialisation and deregulation (see Chapter Six). This new broadcasting environment is the source of many of Fair City’s expressive limitations. While Fair City does deal with difficult social issues there are aspects of Irish society that the soap opera genre and its production system are singularly ill-equipped to publicise.
No to War in Carigstown

On 15 February 2003 over 100,000 people marched on the streets of Dublin. They were protesting against the then imminent invasion of Iraq by US-led forces and the Irish government’s support for that invasion. This was a seismic event in Irish civil society. Initially, it was noteworthy because Irish people have not historically been easily mobilised into mass public protest. More importantly in its scale and composition this march was a true reflection of Irish public opinion at large, including people of all ages with various religious and political persuasions (de Bréadún in The Irish Times 17 February 2003). It was unprecedented for an issue of global/national politics to mobilise Irish people to such a degree. Regardless of the protests, however, the Irish government continued to provide rhetorical and material support for the invasion.122

Most importantly for this study, this major event in Irish civil society provides the perfect example of the type of story that Fair City simply cannot tell. Despite the aims of the show’s creators to accurately reflect all aspects of Irish society, the marches that took place on February 15 2003 were not represented by any Fair City storyline. Moreover, based on the findings of this research, they could not be represented. This is due to the practical reasons discussed in the three preceding chapters. The coverage of such a story would present insurmountable obstacles for Fair City in production logistics and budgeting. In this it resembles the logistical requirements of the proposed storyline on the legalisation of cannabis (see Chapter

122 This questions many assumptions about the role of civil society in Western democracies. Curran described the public sphere as a space where private individuals exercise formal and informal control over the state’ (1991: 29). Peters reminds us that the public sphere is a site for the generation of political legitimation (1993: 544). For Inglis the ‘public opinion that is formed through debate in the public sphere becomes a mechanism for supervising and controlling both the activities of the state, and of the interest groups within civil society’ (2000: 49). Yet here was a situation where an unprecedented mobilisation of public opinion, not only in Ireland but also across Europe and in the United States, was simply ignored by governments that were notionally legitimated and controlled through public opinion.
Nine). The marches had been planned for weeks in advance. *A Fair City* storyline, however, would have required them to be planned for at least six months. It was also unknown, for example, if the marches would be violent, if they would be well attended and so on. The inability to predict and pre-empt this would present an unacceptable production risk to any proposed storyline involving the protests.

Importantly, such an issue simply does not lend itself to the creation of a ‘*Fair City* story’. It is virtually impossible to create an emotionally divisive situation between two or three characters in Carigstown based on largely impersonal events happening across three continents. It would not be feasible to attempt to expand the ‘organic’ personal concerns of Carigstown characters in order to explore the motivations and dilemmas surrounding Ireland’s support for a foreign invasion. As writers had said in the case of some other social issues anything more than a mention or a ‘tabloid’ treatment would be impossible. *Fair City* is the flagship of RTÉ drama production. It aims to entertain but also to reflect Irish society. Yet as this research has shown its production system was simply incapable of representing this type of important public event.

**The Corporate Colonisation of the Lifeworld**

As Garnham and Williams observed ‘the dominant economic class now require the services of the producers of symbolic goods in the imposition and maintenance of orthodoxy’ (1986: 123). This is clearest in the rise of branding not just as a marketing strategy but also as a new economic regime. Increasingly, Western manufacturers engage in the ‘symbolic production’ of goods that are physically produced in the developing world (Klein 2000: 195–229). That is they generate value and consumer

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The event begs important questions about how we understand the relationship between public opinion, political legitimation and the State.
desire through design, public relations, advertising and so on. Consumers then do not buy physical goods so much as meanings, lifestyles and identities. The expansion and mutation of branding has seen corporate sponsorship and branding become ubiquitous in sport, charity, art and education (Bourdieu and Haacke 1995: 17–8; Klein 2000: 87–106). This is a colonisation of the lifeworld by the system. Indeed, as Habermas wrote the system’s colonisation of the lifeworld may now hide in ‘the pores of communicative action’ (1992: 187). Klein illustrates this by describing how hip-hop group Run DMC created a synergy between black American urban culture and corporate branding with their song *My Adidas*.

Since “My Adidas” nothing in inner-city branding has been left up to chance. Major record labels like BMG now hire “street crews” of urban black youth to talk up hip-hop albums in their communities and to go out on guerrilla-style postering and sticker missions. The L.A.-based Steven Rifkind Company bills itself as a marketing firm “specializing in building word-of-mouth in urban areas and inner cities.” Rifkind is CEO of the rap label Loud Records, and companies like Nike pay him hundreds of thousands of dollars to find out how to make their brands cool with trend setting black youths (Klein 2000: 75).

While this is an extreme case it is now possible that corporate money and power may directly warp face-to-face conversations among friends and peers. Regardless of such extremities, language, meanings and assumptions regularly flow into everyday communication from corporate dominated mass media. While the Catholic Church once infiltrated and controlled the Irish lifeworld, mass media now often serve as conduits to insinuate corporate power directly into communicative action. The sophistication and scope of this ‘colonisation’ represents a new and unprecedented form of symbolic domination.

*Fair City, RTÉ and the Future of the Global Media Field*

This research has demonstrated a problem inherent to the soap opera genre and its production system. Soap operas can play an important role in civil society. They can
provide information and stimulate debate and discussion in the public sphere. The genre, however, cannot translate broad institutional or structural issues into the personal/local environment to which it is confined due to practical and economic constraints. While, Irish soap opera contributed to the decline of an Irish Catholic *habitus* through the rationalisation of the Catholic lifeworld it appears unable to contribute to the rationalisation of a lifeworld colonised by the power and money of global corporations.

It remains true, nonetheless, that the primary task of soap opera is to entertain. While it cannot deal with macro-social issues other Irish television dramas have done so in the recent past. The detective series *Making the Cut* dealt with big business and fictional links to government corruption. *No Tears* exposed the behaviour of the Department of Health in the face of the Hepatitis C scandal. Again, this is evidence that there is not an ideological bias in RTÉ against the representation of such issues. However, *Making the Cut* and *No Tears* combined amounted to only 8 hours of television. This is equivalent to just one month’s worth of *Fair City*. In recent years a series of the nature and scale of *No Tears* or *Making the Cut* can only be expected on an annual basis.

RTÉ drama has had a checkered history. It has historically been underfunded and has been the first genre to suffer in times of financial difficulty. Since the mid-1990s, however, drama has experienced a reversal of fortune. RTÉ has recently embarked on a massive investment drive in drama. The Film Industry Strategic Review Group noted that ‘the hours of home produced and co-produced drama output have increased from 26 hours in 1989 (an admittedly low base) to 92 hours in 1998’ (1999: 63). Annual expenditure on drama jumped from £1m (€1.27m), in 1989, to about £12m (€15.25) in 1998. This amounts to about 7.5% of RTÉ’s total 1998
turnover or almost one fifth of the annual spend on television. This only paid for 100 hours of drama. The remaining four fifths of the 1998 television budget paid for more than 2,500 hours of indigenously produced material and over 7,000 hours of imported programming (The Film Industry Strategic Review Group 1999: 63). In February 2000, RTÉ began producing a new drama serial, *On Home Ground*, based in Dublin’s commuter belt, with an unprecedented budget of €6 million. There has since been a second series. How can this about turn in the treatment of drama be explained? In the 1960s, many RTÉ drama producers ignored ratings and the use of commercial genres in favour of making art (see Chapter Seven). Today, however, drama is big business and is strategically essential to the commercial development of the burgeoning Irish audio-visual sector. RTÉ, in an unpublished submission to the Strategic Review of the Irish Film Industry, stated that 'if production of high quality drama series can be established in this country it can deliver unprecedented growth and stability for the industry'. However, according to RTÉ 'from a commercial point of view single features are not in general as attractive as drama series or serials'. (RTÉ submission quoted FISRG 1999: 63–64). RTÉ proposed to the FISRG that it would increase its drama expenditure from £12.5m (€15.9m) in 1999 to £25m (€31.8) by 2003 with an increase in development expenditure from £200,000 to £500,000 (€254,000-635000) (FISRG 1999: 64). Most of this money will go into drama serials with soap opera being a key priority. Although the station has, in recent years, commissioned innovative drama through independent producers and co-production these have yet to challenge the sheer volume of drama production turned out by *Fair City*.\(^{123}\) RTÉ has

\(^{123}\) It is likely that most of the new television drama, other than soap opera, that results from RTÉ’s expansion will be steered by two main commercial imperatives. While new productions like *On Home Ground* have higher budgets and better production values than *Fair City* they are intended to produce overseas sales. This is currently managed by a RTÉ subsidiary company, RTÉ Commercial Enterprises Ltd (CEL). A number of new dramas are also likely to be co-productions with other larger international broadcasters, again with a view to international sales. In co-productions the specifically
made a public commitment for the year 2003 to increase drama output by 15 per cent from 112 hours to 129 hours (www.rte.ie). With 200 episodes per year *Fair City* will account for 100 of these hours.

Returning to the research of Gerbner and his colleagues, television affects society predominantly through constant reaffirmation of assumptions rather than through short, sharp shocks (Gerbner et al. 1994: 29). Mindful of these other dramatic representations of Irish society, *Fair City* remains the dominant dramatic portrayal of life in Ireland today. If there is a dominant assumption presented by RTÉ drama then it is that life is shaped at the personal/local level and not by institutional or structural pressures. *Fair City* makes a useful contribution to civil society but its dominance in indigenous drama on RTÉ television leads to an imbalance in dramatic representations of Irish life.

**Soap Opera’s One-Way Politics**

Most commentators have found the soap opera form to concentrate on the personal to the exclusion of institutional politics (see Chapter Two). As Feuer summed it up, soap opera must explain influences outside the soap opera ‘family’ or community from within the ‘family’. There is an impossible dilemma where ‘the economic and the socio-political cannot be thought of except in terms of “inside the family”’ (Feuer 1986: 495). Despite this, soap opera commentators have been incorrect in their assumption that soap opera is only significant in terms of personal politics. Soap

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Irish nature of a production may be watered down to avoid confusing or alienating an international audience with visions of Ireland that jar with preconceptions. Similarly, production partners who can provide more financial backing may simply outbid RTÉ in programme making decisions (This information was gained in conversation with this drama’s production accountant). Thus programmes may be shaped more to appeal to a foreign audience rather than to represent the reality of Irish society. Since most new drama will come in the form of serials, which are co-produced or intended for the international market, it is likely that productions dealing with institutional issues applied specifically to an Irish context will remain rare. RTÉ’s capacity to take financial risks under these circumstances is limited.
opera is relevant to institutional politics. This was clearly visible in the Kay and Malachy storyline, which preceded the 2002 constitutional referendum on abortion. Soap opera is not necessarily restricted in the scale of its politics. It can pose questions for the individual and for society as whole. It can provoke discussion and debate on individual problems, family crises and state policies. Put concisely, soap opera is limited by the direction of its politics. The genre can represent the personal. With issues like gay marriage, abortion or contraception such personal representations become a significant part of institutional politics. Soap opera cannot, however, as I have shown, take aspects of political or economic structures and translate them into personal stories. Thus it lacks the power to announce and demystify these aspects of social reality. It cannot inform people about how such unseen structures shape their everyday lives.

As this research has demonstrated, however, this is not the product of arbitrary and historically durable genre conventions. It is a product of the practical and economic exigencies that shape soap opera production. *Fair City* was not limited by the political views of those who created it. The programme’s producer and writers recognised the programme’s limitations but were resigned to them through practical necessity. The programme was limited by a lack of resources, a time-intensive rationalised production system and the need to attract large audiences without alienating advertisers. It was these factors that shaped what was and what was not a ‘*Fair City* story’. If a story was unsuitable it was generally because it was too expensive, too impersonal, failed to fit available characters or was inappropriate for an early evening slot. The coherence of *Fair City* storylines was maintained not by conscious adherence to soap opera convention but by the need to adapt to the practical constraints of the show and its working environment.
Again, these conditions were not inherent to *Fair City*. The show’s limitations and RTÉ’s concentration on it as the core of in-house drama production were products of the station’s dominated position within an increasingly commercialised global media field. The transformation of the global media field has been the conscious creation of powerful corporate and governmental interests (see Chapter Six). The form and content of *Fair City* has been indirectly affected by the results of this neo-liberal agenda. The show’s need for cost-effectiveness blocks expensive and risky storylines. Similarly the programme is in no position to overtly ‘bite the hand that feeds’ by attacking government policy or advertising campaigns. At the time of writing RTÉ still depended on the soap opera formula as its chief means of providing Irish audiences with a high volume of low-cost indigenous drama. One could posit then that there is an unintentional, but nonetheless effective, elective affinity between the corporate ideology of neo-liberal economics and politics and the soap opera genre.

The practical limitations of soap opera in a highly competitive commercial environment prevent it from representing or questioning political or economic structures. It is largely incapable of dealing, in any depth, with questions of institutional politics, consumption and production.

Inglis writes that the media have become moral policemen and the new conscience of Irish society. Despite this RTÉ’s core dramatic production is unable to question, for example, the effect of advertising and branding, Ireland’s foreign policy, or the effect of FDI-dependence on national politics and everyday life. Soap opera appears unable to assist in the rationalisation of a lifeworld colonised by a corporate system because soap opera itself has been shaped by, and is dependent upon, that system. Globalisation, free market ideology, deregulation and rationalised
employment practices have made soap opera what it is today. Ironically, these are precisely the issues that *Fair City* cannot represent or question.
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Fair City. 25 min Soap Opera. Produced by RTÉ. Transmitted 3 January 2001
*Fair City.* 25 min Soap Opera. Produced by RTÉ. Transmitted 4 January 2001

*Fair City.* 25 min Soap Opera. Produced by RTÉ. Transmitted 5 January 2001

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Appendix One

A Brief Note on Methods

*Fair City: Field and Habitus*

This study set out to understand the potential contribution that the RTÉ soap opera *Fair City* could make to discussion and debate in Irish civil society. To this end, I explored the expressive limitations of the programme by examining the organisation and culture that shaped its production. Habermas provided the underlying theoretical framework and impetus behind this study (see Chapter Three). His model, however, was unable to facilitate actual production research (see Chapter Four). For this reason, Bourdieu’s conceptual model served as a middle-range theory articulating everyday work on *Fair City* and broader structural concerns. Bourdieu’s model creates an understanding of *Fair City* production as a space of competition and struggle described in terms of field, habitus and capitals (see Chapter Five). However, to understand the production of *Fair City* as a field, it is necessary to comprehend the position of RTÉ within the global media field. This was achieved through documentary research (see Chapter Six).

**Exploring the *Fair City* Habitus**

This research began with a general concern with the expressive possibilities of television drama production. It was only after initial research that soap opera emerged as a specific focus. As part of my early research a number of long semi-structured interviews were conducted with RTÉ drama producers past and present. There were six respondents. Only one was female.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Period of entry into RTÉ</th>
<th>Retired</th>
<th>Upper managerial experience</th>
<th>Drama dedicated within RTÉ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Early 1960s</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producer C</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Early 1960s</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producer D</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Late 1970s</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producer E</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Late 1970s</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producer F</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mid 1980s</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producer G</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Late 1970s</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A flexible topic guide was used to guide the long, semi-structured interviews.

Questions were broken into the following sub-categories.

- Questions on career trajectory
- Perceptions of ‘good drama’
- Perceptions of past exemplary dramas
- Strategies employed in gaining commissions
- Perceptions of vocation and cultural hierarchy in drama

The topic guide was tested and refined using an initial pilot interview. The interviews, which were typically between 45 minutes and one hour in length, were tape recorded and immediately transcribed. The resulting transcripts were entered into NUD*IST qualitative analysis software. The transcripts were analysed employing Bourdieu’s concepts and the preceding documentary research as ‘sensitising concepts’. As with all qualitative analysis there remained an inevitable question of researcher bias. In an attempt to mitigate this, themes and quotations were verified by returning to the original recorded material. Interviews were initially read and analysed individually with data being coded thematically. Codes were then expanded, deleted or modified when the resulting coded data was analysed and integrated as a whole. This allowed themes and patterns to emerge rather than having interpretations imposed upon the data. Themes were only included when they were
present across interviews and could be considered typical of the perceptions and attitudes of the interviewees.

Ideally, this analysis should have been repeated until substantive theories were formalised by achieving a level of ‘theoretical saturation’ (Sarantakos 1993: 273). This was not possible, however, due to the small population of ‘drama producers’ available for interview. The resulting data gave rise to the hypothesis that there had been a cultural change in RTÉ in step with broader structural changes in the global broadcasting environment. This was corroborated by later research. Despite this, the hypothesis could not be brought to the level of a formal theory due to the difficulties attached to achieving theoretical saturation. Nonetheless, these initial interviews suggested a cultural shift away from ‘purist’ drama towards a greater acceptance of soap opera and popular entertainment in step with the commercialisation of the global media field. This set the stage for the subsequent in-depth investigation of soap opera production on the set of Fair City.

The Abortion Controversy

Information on the abortion controversy was gained through a number of sources. The primary source of information was Fair City itself. The entire set of abortion episodes were recorded and analysed. This took the form of very elementary content analysis. Of greater interest than the text was the public reaction to the story. This was monitored using a number of methods. An initial source of information came from the press. Articles and letters of complaint responding to the storyline were gathered from a number of national and provincial newspapers. Additional material was gathered by investigating newspaper archives through the national library collection. The viewer letters provided by the Fair City production office were
invaluable in gaining an insight into the type of people who complained and the sort of complaints they made. In addition to this a brief email questionnaire was used to elicit reaction to the programme from people working in areas of gender equality, reproductive rights and adult education. This elicited very few replies but did reveal that the storyline had had some interesting effects particularly in adult education (see Chapter One).

**Observation Research on the *Fair City* Set**

To gain a clear understanding what *Fair City* could and could not say it was necessary to understand the show’s production process. While interviews assisted in this task, the only way to gain a fuller understanding of the show was through direct and overt observation. The initial hurdle here lay in gaining access to the *Fair City* set. It is clear from the research presented here that television production depends on a tightly organised system where any disruption is intolerable. There are also sensitivities attached to work on a set like *Fair City*. For example, during my research the murder of gangster Billy Meehan was being plotted. This was intended to act as a television ‘event’ where viewers would tune in to see how the murder happened and who committed it. This depended on certain plot details being kept secret until just before transmission. The producer risked leaking plot information, particularly to the tabloid press, by permitting a researcher on to the set. In applying for access I made a commitment to create minimal disruption and to ensure anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research.

I gained access the *Fair City* set over a two-week period from 30 July 2001 to Saturday 14 June. Access to the set was limited by the demands of production but also by the programme’s summer break, which terminated my time on the set. During
this time, however, I had complete access to the production. I was allowed to roam freely within the studio, canteen and production office. I was also permitted to attend production runs, script meetings and story meetings. Through the production office, I gained access to important and sensitive documentation. This included scripts for upcoming shows, the next season’s storylines and most importantly viewers’ letters relating to the Malachy and Kay abortion storyline.

Observation was non-participatory and was carried out overtly. Participant observation was a practical impossibility since I did not possess any of the skills or qualifications necessary for a post in television production. *Fair City’s* cast and crew, however, were such a large, heterogeneous and constantly changing group that I might well have passed off unnoticed on the set. I was mistaken on a number of occasions for a cast member or a writer. With no intention of obscuring my research agenda, I made a point of introducing myself to people on the set and alerting them to the nature of my research. This prompted a number of interesting statements from cast and crew on the nature of the programme and the way in which it tackled social issues. ‘Coming clean’ about my research agenda also helped to create a certain sense of trust among people on the set. Many members of cast and crew were enthusiastic about recounting their experience on the show. They gave the impression that I was an outlet for stories that would otherwise go unheard. This was a particular irony among people who were the country’s foremost storytellers.

Detailed field notes were taken during the entire observation period. I was free to take notes on set and in meetings. This was not possible during conversations on set and in the canteen. In such cases notes were written up immediately afterwards. At the end of each day I recorded any overall impressions, hypotheses or emerging patterns. This served to focus subsequent observation.
**Fair City Interviews**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Production Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Producer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Executive Producer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editor A</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Chief story editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editor B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Assistant Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editor C</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Assistant Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writer A</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Storyline writer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writer B</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Storyline writer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writer C</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Storyline writer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writer E</td>
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<td>Storyline writer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writer F</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Storyline writer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writer G</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Scene breakdown writer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actress</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Actress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observation research was supplemented by the use of further interviews. This was also necessary to gain an account of the production of the abortion storyline. Here a topic guide similar to that employed in the initial drama producer interviews was employed. This was modified slightly to cater for the different employment categories within *Fair City*. Slight alterations were made to cater for the occupational differences between storyline writers, scene breakdown writers, editors and so on. These interviews were conducted for the most part on the RTÉ campus during the period of my observation research. One interview was conducted in a respondent’s home while another took place, unusually, in a DART\(^{124}\) station. Again, these

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\(^{124}\) DART is an acronym for Dublin Area Rapid Transit. It is a small urban rail system.
interviews were transcribed and analysed in the same fashion as the initial drama interviews.

Respondents Wary of Research

As mentioned in the research I had found that people in drama production tended to produce ‘canned answers’ when questioned about ‘issues’ in drama. There were two probable reasons for this. Firstly, people in RTÉ were accustomed to being regular subjects of research interviews. Some respondents made reference to previous research interviews they had given. A second reason for respondents resorting to canned answers lay in the critical accounts of RTÉ drama, and those who work in it, presented by published research. Devereux, as mentioned previously, found RTÉ drama producers to be complicit in the ideological perpetuation of social inequality (Devereux 1998: 124). Some respondents were critical of Helena Sheehan’s account of the relationship between RTÉ drama and Irish society (see Sheehan 1987).

There is also an unfortunate history attached to Irish postgraduate research. In an infamous case in 1990 a postgraduate researcher allowed research data to become embroiled in a political controversy. This caused Brian Lenihan to lose his position as Tánaiste and to fail in his candidacy for president (see Finlay 1998: 90, also Dáil Debates 31 October 1990). This is likely to have had a lasting negative effect on research involving public figures where researchers may be suspected of standing to gain capital by surrendering research to the media. There was then a slight apprehension among some respondents when researching a high-profile programme like Fair City. The exploration of a contentious issue like the representation of abortion amplified this. As stated from the outset, the abortion storyline was unprecedented, risky and controversial. A major risk was that Fair City, and RTÉ,
could not afford to be seen to propagandise on one side or the other of the abortion debate. This research did not unearth any overt political motivations behind the abortion storyline beyond the creation of reflection and debate on the issue. Despite this there was a noticeable caution in the production office surrounding the issue. When the initial controversy broke following the ‘monster’ episode on 3 January 2001 the *Fair City* office received a number of angry viewer complaints and press enquiries. The following quotation came from a note to the producer from within the *Fair City* office following the ‘monster’ controversy.

… will you contact [journalist] in *The Mirror*—she wanted to talk to Malachy [the character] but I feel you would need to brief the actors re what line you want to take before the press get to them. They are likely to be accosted over the next few weeks in some way or another so co-ordinating at this stage would be advisable don’t you think? (Note from Production Office 3 January 2001).

It appears that there was an intention that an agreed account of the storyline be disseminated and that all involved would remain ‘on message’. The programme’s producer was meticulously careful in his discussion of the issue. Having already discussed the issue repeatedly on radio and in the press much of his interview material was the reworking of a pre-prepared account. Again, it is not the place of this research to attribute motivations to the makers of *Fair City* other than those they announced themselves. This caution, however, does display a certain mistrust of researchers in what was, for RTÉ, a very high stakes issue legally, politically and economically.

**Breaking with Methodological Conventions with Hypothetical Storylines**

The second round of interviews necessitated a degree of methodological innovation with the use of hypothetical storylines. As mentioned above, producers tended to produce one of two stock answers when questioned about social issues in drama.
Issues, it was a standard claim, always grew from characters and were never included for their own sake. Former respondents also showed a tendency to catalogue the issues that had been tackled while largely overlooking those that had not, or could not, be addressed. It was necessary to alter interview techniques to get past these canned answers and elicit further data on Fair City’s expressive boundaries. To this end issues that were considered to be problematic for soap opera were incorporated into hypothetical character-based storylines. This approach required me to attempt to use the knowledge that I had gained of the Fair City field to deliberately subvert its perceived conventions.

Through literary research and observation on the set of Fair City, there appeared to be four key areas that Fair City was unlikely to cover. These were issues that were considered politically contentious, examples of mundane misery, deep social taboos and labour relations (Buckingham 1987: 16, Jordan 1981: 29, Feuer 1986: 495, Hobson 1982: 34). These issues were represented by the following storylines respectively.

1. **Tara and the Legalisation of Cannabis**
   Returning from Kosovo, Tara gets involved in a campaign for the legalisation of cannabis. With an upcoming by-election this forces a wedge between herself and McCann's political career\(^{125}\).

2. **Cancer**
   Hannah develops cancer. As Hannah fights her illness, Yvonne grows increasingly jealous of Jasmine's relationship with Hannah. She tries to sully Jasmine in Hannah's eyes to have her excluded from her will\(^{126}\).

\(^{125}\) Tara was the wayward daughter of the rather conservative McCann. She travelled to Kosovo to participate in an aid operation. She had also been involved in an attempted rent strike and animal rights. As it turned out the Kosovo trip was to serve as a means of writing Tara out of the series.

\(^{126}\) Hannah was one of Fair City’s matriarchal characters. Jasmine was her niece, who was co-owner of the Rainbow coffee. Yvonne was Hannah’s granddaughter, who had begun to resent Jasmine’s relationship with her grandmother.
3. Paedophilia
Malachy gives refuge to an ex-Christian brother who was convicted for abusing pupils in his school. Malachy finds that he must defend his sense of Christian forgiveness before the anger of many in the Carigstown community.

4. Labour Relations
Niamh and Paul attempt to unionise Blue Dolphin because they are unhappy with their treatment by Transglobal. This causes a bitter row with Maher and Nicola who see that they’re being petty and are risking all their livelihoods.

This approach successfully defeated the standard responses that I had received previously. Each storyline required the respondent to judge if in their view a story could be considered a ‘Fair City story’ and then provide a rationale behind their answer. This elicited unexpectedly diverse responses, from the story team, on which stories could or could not be admitted to the programme. It also provoked reflection on additional issues that story team members considered difficult to address through the programme. This gave rise to the discussion of poverty and paramilitaries in *Fair City*.

This type of hypothetical participation in the field of cultural production may be a useful means of uncovering some of the informal and taken-for-granted rules operating in various cultural industries. This approach allows the researcher to deliberately break some of the rules in order to work out what the rules are and how they are created. This approach might be usefully applied to other research in cultural production. It is possible for example that hypothetical film plots, pop lyrics, programme formats and so on may reveal where invisible boundaries lie and how they are maintained.
Research Limitations

This research has supported a hypothesis linking the increased commercialisation of cultural production to a diminished ability to rationalise the lifeworld. Despite this, there are some shortcomings in the research that need to be noted. An initial criticism of the research process might be that the non-participant observation only spanned a short period. This is particularly relevant given the long-running nature of *Fair City*. The significance of this shortcoming is, however, mitigated on two fronts. Firstly, observation is never an effective means of gaining information on an organisation’s past. This role is better served by interviews. The interviews performed did indeed elicit information on the changes that had taken place during the programme’s history. Secondly, *Fair City*’s repetitive production routine meant that the production process could be rapidly observed and comprehended. While storylines changed the structure of the production process remained the same. Production runs always took place on a Monday, rehearsals invariably took place on a Saturday and every scene had 25 minutes to be shot. Greater time on the set would have given rise to richer descriptive data. However, core issues such as working conditions, investment among cast and crew, working hierarchies and so on were quite readily apparent within the programme’s fixed production routine. While storylines, writers and actors came and went the structure of the production process remained the same.

The scope of the research might also have been usefully improved by a more thorough investigation of the production office. Here secretarial staff and administrative staff handled contacts between the producer, RTÉ and the general public. Staff in the production office included the programme researcher who often had to find the information to support storylines involving social issues. While I had full access to research notes for the Kay and Malachy abortion storyline it might have
been useful to investigate this aspect of production more thoroughly. This research concentrated on the ‘creative’ aspects of *Fair City*’s production. The production office, however, was an important part of the production process that, in hindsight, could usefully have been investigated in more detail.

Another potential point of weakness lies in the fact the creation of the abortion storyline was only investigated retrospectively. It would obviously have been more rewarding to have sat in on production meetings while the story was being constructed. Thus, the veracity of accounts of the struggle to shape the storyline would be less open to question. While the abortion storyline has been explored through interviews the use of direct observation would have been preferable. This shortcoming is, however, the result of a practical limitation. My only source of information on upcoming *Fair City* storylines came through the programme itself. The struggle to shape the story had ended six months before the first abortion episodes were transmitted. Unfortunately, then I had missed the opportunity to observe this firsthand due to a lack of advance information.

This research has concentrated on television production as a site of struggle between social actors with very different levels and types of power. In such a situation significant sources of power may reside outside an organisation. Mindful of this, the research presented here does not provide a detailed account of how actors within *Fair City* as a field may have imported forms of power from other aspects of their lives. Additional information such as social class of origin, class of destination, marital status, formal educational qualifications and so on would have provided greater resolution in understanding how power was used and reproduced through the programme. Again, this shortcoming was due, at least in part, to practical limitations. As mentioned above, there was a notable caution among respondents with regard to
the research. Questions exploring personal and family life risked causing alienation from the research process, particularly since their relevance to making soap opera is not readily apparent. An additional constraint lay in the fact that most respondents had quite hectic schedules. In negotiating access, I had made a commitment that interviews would take no more than one hour. A deeper exploration of power outside the organisation would have made interviews considerably longer.

A question burning at the centre of the abortion controversy is whether or not people working on *Fair City* intended to alter public attitudes towards abortion, before the referendum on abortion, through the programme’s storylines. This, however, was a very difficult area to investigate. With the general discussion of social issues there were canned answers and some guarded responses. It was clear that respondents would reply negatively if they were asked if they were using the programme to political ends. This question therefore was unanswerable. There is, thus, not enough information for informed speculation on this topic. In any event such speculation would have been beyond the remit of this research.
Appendix II

The following was directly transcribed from production notes provided by the Fair City production office.

Telephone Reaction to *Fair City*, 3 January 2001

Note from *Fair City* Production Office

10 callers complained and were shocked at Kay in *Fair City* referring to her unborn child as a “Monster” and a “Horror” just because the child will be handicapped. One caller, a teacher said the doctor’s diagnosis was false and disgusting, as she taught a child with this condition, and she was a slow learner, nothing more. She said “how is this girl and many other handicapped people going to feel, listening to *Fair City* tonight”. Another caller whose sister in law lost a baby 5 weeks ago from this complaint, said the family were going to their solicitor about this, as their whole family have been so offended and upset, and added “RTÉ had better apologise loud and clear very soon”.

Production Note from *Fair City* Office 4 January 2001

*Urgent....Urgent....Urgent....*

[Producer] I tried unsuccessfully to get you on… mobile this morning. Kay’s reference to her baby as ‘a monster’ has created a major controversy on the Gerry Ryan Show. (Press Office also got phone calls from people very distressed about Kay’s description of her baby as ‘a monster’. I didn’t hear the Gerry Ryan Show but there were lots of calls apparently—some positive, one family who had a handicapped
child had a discussion after seeing *Fair City* along the lines of what would they have done if their child had as severe a handicap etc. However, it caused a lot of upset in particular to one family—the uncle of a child with the same syndrome rang in to say that his niece (born in November ????) lived for 11 days—was blind, deaf and had deformities and while they admit there were major problems they took photos and the child was very much loved for its short life and they found the ‘monster’ remarks extremely hurtful.

[Radio Researcher] was on to [member of office staff] looking for [actress] to come in to the programme to discuss.

I spoke to [programme researcher]—confirming that the word monster was used but that we wouldn’t have a comment until tomorrow because you were away all day at meeting. I felt it would be unfair to [actress] to put her in the firing line—she is away at the moment anyway—but she rang in and I spoke to her explaining things. She is happy not to be contactable—but for your information only her reaction [sic] (had she been contactable) would have been that as an actor she has to deliver the lines in the script. The way she delivered them—with hurt, anger and rage would hopefully have got across the emotion Kay was feeling—it wasn’t Kay speaking logically or rationally. The use of the word ‘monster’ would be something that later she might be very ashamed of having said.

Have a think about and ring [programme researcher] on [number]

Attached the relevant page of script
Another man [name] [number] rang the office. He objected to the term used in the programme—and also felt it was hypocritical of RTÉ in view of the Joe Duffy Liveline on Mary Ellen Synon’s language in relation to disability/Paralympics. Is this part of the setting of RTÉ liberal agenda for an abortion referendum. Feels RTÉ as national broadcaster should be reflecting the wishes of the majority as shown in the previous abortion referendum. In omnibus edition will word ‘monster’ be replaced????? That’s putting it up to you [Producer]!!

Radio Kerry—[Name] [number] Why did we decide to do the story?

**Production Note from Fair City Office 4 January 2001**

[Name] [address] [number] called. He’s upset with storyline at the moment—he has buried 2 children in the last 3 years—one of them had trisomy 18—last Sept—if it had been the 13 [trisomy 13] the baby would have had some chance of living. The storyline is being dragged out too long—not considering all the parents who are going through such a trauma at the moment. Also for Kay to have referred to the baby as a monster. Sunday World did a story on 2 children last Sunday who survived [Member of office staff].