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After the Green Paper: What Next for Broadcasting in Ireland? : Discussion

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After the Green Paper: what next for broadcasting in Ireland?

Editorial note[1]

On 27 April 1995, the long-awaited Green Paper on Broadcasting, drafted by the Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, Michael D. Higgins, and entitled *Active or Passive? Broadcasting in the future tense* was published. Its publication came one week after the publication of the Interim Report of the Competition Authority on the newspaper industry in Ireland, and preceded the publication of an examination of the skills requirements of the independent film and television production sector in Ireland, entitled, *Training Needs to 2000* (June 1995). It is remarkable that within a very short space of time, three very substantial studies of the media industry were published by the government.[2]

A public discussion on the Green Paper was held in the Dublin Institute of Technology, Aungier Street, 18 May 1995, and sponsored by *Irish Communication Review*. It brought together a wide-ranging group of broadcasting practitioners and commentators to discuss and exchange ideas on the future of broadcasting in Ireland. Over one hundred people attended. This is the edited proceedings of that discussion. I have sought to preserve, as much as possible, the actual words spoken by our guests, though some trimming has been necessary because of length. Any unevenness is a result of the inevitable differences between the spoken and the written word.

1. The editing of the discussion was done by Ellen Hazelkorn, Lecturer in Politics, Department of Communications, Dublin Institute of Technology.

2. Two other indepth studies were also published during 1995: *The Employment and Economic Significance of the Cultural Industries in Ireland* for Temple Bar Properties (Coopers and Lybrand, 1995), and *Telecommunications Developments and Ireland. Maximising the Opportunity* (Irish Business and Employers Confederation, 1995).

Joe Mulholland is Director of News, RTE.

Joe Mullholland

My discourse will be a defence of the national broadcasting service, being both a programme maker for twenty-five years and currently a manager in that organization. The Green Paper is very welcome and indeed not before time. The Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht is to be congratulated for taking this initiative and for publishing such a fine treatise on the dilemmas facing Irish policy makers on broadcasting in the context of the global multimedia village or world. For too long, the debate has revolved around RTE, its so-called monopoly position, and the need or not for another commercial television or radio channel. The sterility of this debate, with its lack of ideas, has been well illustrated by plenty of knocking stories in some sections of our press media, which hardly bothers to concede at this stage their own self interest.

With the publication of this Green Paper, we now have a chance to have a real debate. It is difficult for the national broadcaster to have a debate because it always seems it has a motive and self-interest. It is better, therefore, for the discussion to take place outside of RTE, outside of broadcasting, and throughout the country.

The minister is obviously motivated, as one might expect from Michael D. Higgins, by the highest values; he has asked the basic and fundamental questions about how to promote pluralism, creativity, diversity and dynamism in the audio-visual sector in this small country whilst withstanding the forces of media imperialism. How does our identity, as part of the Anglo-world, survive the worst aspects of globalization, deregulation and the unimpeded play of market forces? These are key questions, and for the sake of future generations of Irish men and women, we had better come up with the right answers, because it is clear that we are only at the beginning of this communications revolution and that within a few years all will change utterly. It is difficult to predict the final scenario but already technology is in the hands of the powerful and globalization is serving the economic interests of a few rather than the public good. Consumerism is taking priority over educational culture, and communications is more and more at the service of a global class system.

It is neither popular nor profitable these days to be critical of deregulation. We are supposed to say it is wonderful that market forces reign and that it will lead to a better world. It would be naive to say that all the results are negative, as we see in some member states of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). Public broadcasting had become complacent, its development slowed by unnecessary restrictive practices, and in some cases, by bureaucratic and un-innovative management. Many of the commercial channels which have emerged in countries such as Norway and Denmark (e.g. TV2) – countries with a long tradition of public service broadcasting – have created a more vigorous and robust broadcasting environment. RTE has met some of these people through the EBU. However, other more malignant consequences are also in evidence, affecting, for example, indigenous production in many countries. Even wealthy economies are facing an economic and cultural crisis; globalization has created a large market with more and more programmes produced in the USA. They are available world-wide at relatively low rates. Poorer countries and smaller economies, such as Ireland, with little and few resources, have little option but to acquire material from external sources.

The implications for national identities, and for cultural uniqueness and diversity are obvious. The European Commission and countries such as France are right to be concerned about these developments, although it [the imposed quota of European programmes – eds.] has turned out to be a dilemma for ourselves because we require a high level of imported material. As far as I am aware, the Green Paper is the first expression of concern at government level in this country about our national identity and cultural values. It is to Minister Higgin's credit that the debate has been raised to this level, however he has set himself a most difficult task. There are no easy answers such as privatizing RTE or part of it, or creating more commercial channels.

Let us look at a few economic realities. We do not live in an oil rich Arab state nor can we put channels up on satellite as they can to spread their culture more widely. We inhabit a small island on the periphery of Europe, English speaking in the main, with a huge number of dependants in the population. There is a high tax rate and many demands on the public purse. Our national broadcasting service operates alongside the best broadcasting organization in the world; the BBC's charter has just been renewed much to the pleasure of public broadcasters everywhere because it has been a beacon to which we, particularly in this country, have looked. In spite of these disadvantages, RTE is one of the best broadcasting services of our size in the world. You need only journey to the European continent to compare our standards of excellence; whether you agree or disagree with the Eurovision song contest, these standards of excellence were on show at the Point last Saturday and before this at Mill Street.[3]

All this has happened despite the fact that RTE has never in its history been provided with adequate resources to enable it to play the role for which it was set up in the first place: to foster and promote our national culture and identity. National television was set up in this country on the basis that it could only exist with funding coming particularly from commercial activity. Because of our population size and economy, the BBC model based on the licence fee only was out of the question. Today, the larger part of our funding comes from commercial activity, e.g. advertising, which is not a healthy situation, while the licence fee is now the lowest in Europe. Without the increase in revenue from advertising over the last few years, RTE would not have been able to increase the home produced elements of our schedule. This was far too low, and RTE was too dependent on imported material. Nor would we have the level of technology which was in full view across Europe during the Eurovision Song Contest.

Inevitably, there are tensions between broadcasting and politicians everywhere, e.g. in the UK, France and Germany, but there was nobody here watching to say we have a national broadcasting service, we must support it, we must make it strong enough to resist the pressures which are there. Instead, for far too long and too frequently, we have been listening to simplistic arguments about RTE's monopoly, its power, its arrogance and what is perceived to be its political biases. There have been too few

3. The 1994 Eurovision Song Contest was held in Millstreet, Cork, and the 1995 Eurovision Song Contest was held at the Point Depot, Dublin.

occasions, and in fact I don't remember any, when RTE's role in Irish society in defence of pluralism and minorities, in forming public opinion in a fair, balanced, objective and editorially independent way, in promoting our national language and games, in fostering Irish music and culture, or in providing a radio and television signal to every home in the country, has been recognised and acknowledged publicly and generously.

RTE is a public service broadcasting organization that is not a charge on the exchequer and that at the end of the day belongs to the community. It employs over 1900 Irish men and women from all parts of this island and with all kind of ideas and philosophies. It provides the Irish public with five channels of programming, two orchestras, and broadcasting outlets and a complex transmitter network throughout the country. Its output and staffing levels compare favourably, and indeed more than favourably, with any other broadcasting organization of the EBU. It is governed by an autonomous authority, acting as custodians of the public trust, appointed by the government of the day. Its management is paid a fraction of what colleagues elsewhere are paid, and if we are to believe the figures we hear nowadays, a fraction of what management in the Irish private sector is paid. This is because RTE operates not from profit-making motives but from a desire to provide the Irish public with the most comprehensive, relevant and interesting service possible within the resources at its disposal.

RTE is also contributing to the growth of an industrial sector of production from which RTE commissions a wide range of programming. Unfortunately this independent sector relies too heavily, almost exclusively, on RTE for its funding. Not surprisingly, it finds itself often frustrated and discouraged. I agree that this problem needs to be addressed, but at the end of the day, it comes down to the amount of resources available to broadcasting and what the public is prepared to pay for this service.

What then of the future? Should we dismantle or fragment what we have in favour of a free market? The Minister obviously sees the danger in such an approach and rightly is opposed to it. Do we get competition, diversity and a better service for the Irish public by setting up national radio and television channels? There is no doubt that competition can be healthy and invigorating. Nobody in RTE is opposed to competition but where are the resources to provide two services? Even with a licence fee increase, RTE needs commercial revenue to enable it to survive and compete with a myriad of well-funded channels now available from abroad throughout the country and which are multiplying. To divide up and fragment the scarce resources currently available to broadcasting might provide choice but what kind of choice? And at what price to broadcasting standards? RTE could buy programmes in the international market at one tenth of the cost of marketing our own but that is not the kind of broadcasting service we want or need. In any case, that kind of service is readily available on our external markets.

To turn for a moment to another aspect of the Green Paper: the desirability of an alternative news and current affairs service to that provided by RTE. As a former Head of RTE Current Affairs and currently Director of News, I believe our information programming to be of the highest standard and, in general, to be beyond reproach. I can understand members of the public and particularly politicians wishing for another voice, another approach to news stories. If there is to be competition, so be it; it holds no threat for us because, I believe, RTE's news service is as good as anywhere in the democratic world. Polls and surveys, including one conducted by RTE, have consistently shown that eighty per cent of the Irish public believe RTE news is fair, accurate and interesting, while only five and one per cent disagree and strongly disagree, respectively. Our news service costs in the region of IR£14m.

However, this is not the area where we need competition, duplicating a news service and running the risk of having that service driven downward for ratings. We have examples of this elsewhere in Europe, and of course we are witnessing what is happening in the newspaper world. *The Sun* is the fastest growing newspaper in Ireland; in a country of 3.5m people, we know what the consequences are. It is not through fear

and from distaste for competition but rather from apprehension that the national broadcasting service might be weakened with disastrous consequences for the ideas presented so eloquently and intelligently by Minister Higgin's Green Paper.

Multiplicity does not necessarily mean choice or quality. There is enough evidence in Europe to suggest it more often means worse, particularly in the context of administering resources for broadcasting. Increasing competition from outside keeps RTE aware of the need to serve its audience and its needs, but the national broadcasting service must also be nurtured and supported morally and financially. It is accountable already to its public and to those who make policy. It must be given every means to enable it to survive and prosper so that it can play its full part in providing a vast range of programmes to the entire island. At the end of the day, RTE is the most powerful, influential and important cultural institution of the nation. This fact should be recognized and welcomed by all who believe in this debate. I feel that the Irish public has already recognized this fact.

Muiris MacConghail

Muiris MacConghail is Lecturer in Communications, Dublin Institute of Technology and former Controller, RTE Television.

The response of the RTÉ Authority and of RTÉ to the Green Paper has been nothing short of a disgrace. The Authority has to a considerable degree muzzled, through their statement on the Green Paper, the response that might have come from the producers and programme makers in the national broadcasting organization which might have been critical of the Authority and management. This is a great pity as RTÉ and its programme makers are the only hope for the survival of public service broadcasting as we know it on this island.

In the face of a threat the door to real change was bolted. The RTÉ statement was in fact a 'joint' statement issued by the RTÉ Authority and staff: it is basically opposed to change and defensive of the Authority's record. One of the basic runners in the Green Paper is that of separating out production activity – a core one – from that of transmission. The engineering interests within RTÉ maintained its hold on the organization and is opposed to change which would dislodge transmission and engineering from its hierarchy of position. The statement is no more or no less than a classic semi-state body reaction to change. The Authority must have been well aware of the likely contents of the Green Paper for some considerable time. Even the shaggy dog in the street was barking it. To have allowed the opportunity pass without making an important substantive contribution to the debate about the future of broadcasting was irresponsible. Within the RTÉ programme making group is to be found a survival of the tradition of broadcasting which goes back to those who first broadcast in Ireland from the roof of the General Post Office in Easter 1916. On that Easter Monday a short wave signal was transmitted from the GPO declaring Ireland to be a republic. The signal was picked up off the coast of Newfoundland and eventually carried in the Boston newspapers. In a sense broadcasting in Ireland was created in sin by that illegal transmission. It was the first 'national' transmission. Given that history and the subsequent history of Irish broadcasting, RTÉ staff, who are at the core of broadcasting activity in this country, should not have been frustrated from responding to the Minister's Green Paper, by an ill-judged and badly drafted statement issued by the outgoing Authority.

If you take Jürgen Habermas seriously, as the Green Paper does, then it is necessary for the debate on the future of broadcasting in Ireland, to be conducted in a public place, in the public sphere. The manner by which we hold public discourse in Ireland leaves a lot to be desired. We need to be part of a 'civil society'. This term which goes back to Hegel and Ferguson, regained its significance during the final years of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe in which, for instance, Civic Forum in Czechoslovakia sought the re-establishment of a 'public sphere' which would allow the formulation of public policy to be constructed on the needs of contemporary society. The views of the permanent core of the people who have supported and supplied the

broadcasting service in this country should have been incorporated into the RTÉ statement. RTÉ has failed to provide the kind of service that we in Ireland need, and indeed which many of the broadcasting core within RTÉ want: hence the Green Paper.

The Green Paper is very important but it is subject to a considerable difficulty: the next general election must occur not later than December 1997. The Minister has virtually opened up the bowels of the broadcasting institutions in this country to such a degree that were he to leave office before delivering a new structure by statute or ministerial order, then the surgeon's patient might die by misadventure. This is why there is urgency to the debate.

Fundamental to the debate is the need to cultivate a redefinition of Irish broadcasting within the European context. Michael D. Higgins has described, in a provocative phrase, his image of Europe in the broadcasting context as a vexed continent 'flooded with virtually instantaneous information, circulated by ever more sophisticated technologies.' Colum McCaffery has summarized this debate recently[4]: McCaffery sees that questions concerning a re-evaluation of public service broadcasting, necessary because of competition and extraterritorial broadcasting, are political not in one but in two senses:

> It is apparent that they are political in the sense that governments will decide. It is not quite so apparent that the questions bear on political fundamentals like citizenship, participation and nationality. These are issues which concern small peripheral nations like Ireland more than most...

4. Mc Caffery, Colum 'Citizenship, participation & nationality – towards a redefinition of Irish broadcasting ' in *Intermedia* December/January 1994/5. pp. 14-17.

One of the most interesting and intriguing comments on the crisis facing that vexed continent of European broadcasting is in chapter three 'Media and the Public Sphere'. Is the Habermas crisis of the public sphere?

> 3.7...deepening, with the global streamlining of cultural production by giant transnational entertainment conglomerates which control vast segments of the communications industries? Is the role of public debate on the formation of public opinion and policy being eroded by the consolidation of one-way vertical communication patterns directed at alienated citizens of the late 20th century? Can any media space be regarded as a public sphere if there is a problem of literacy or if the tabloid press is able to exert extreme commercial pressure on the quality press?
>
> 3.8 It is clear that the primary functions of constituting the public sphere are now played by both the quality press and by public service broadcasting...

The references to Habermas, the German philosopher, and his notions of the public sphere are fundamental to the Minister's concerns. As I understand it, the public sphere describes a process in which groups and ideas compete freely in the formation of public opinion autonomously from the state but where competition for access to public opinion is crucially under the protection of the state. To accept this state protection but to separate the process out from the government of the day is a major task of legislators and broadcasters.

Twenty years ago, the Broadcasting Authority (Amendment) Act, 1976, introduced by Conor Cruise O'Brien in 1975 to Seanad Éireann was confronted, in legislative and broadcasting terms, by considerable difficulty as to how to provide for the public sphere on the one hand and to deal with the activities of subversives who had ambitions to dominate the public sphere on the other hand. The subversives saw themselves as the public sphere. In the matter of promotion or incitement to crime or disorder the then Minister said that

> Normally the Authority will be left to apply this new provision (3:1A) independently in accordance with its own judgement. However because the Government responsible to parliament must retain the final say in the particularly difficult and sensitive area of the security of the State, I propose to retain... the power to issue directions.

There were other matters in that Cruise O'Brien legislation dealing in particular with the notion of national culture. Cruise O'Brien saw the original 1960 broadcasting legislation, in so far as the general duties of the Authority were defined in relation to Irish culture, as being ambiguous in a particular way. The statute required of the RTÉ Authority to 'bear constantly in mind the national aims of restoring the Irish language and preserving and developing the national culture...'. These two concepts, Dr O'Brien saw as assuming 'certain concepts which are not in fact clear and which, if understood in a narrow sense, are not acceptable to many people in Ireland.' His legislation he argued was intended

> to reflect a considerably wider consensus, based on the growing recognition of the diverse interests and concerns of the people of Ireland, the paramount need for peace and understanding and the variety and richness of our culture. The Authority are required to have regard to this broad spectrum in their programming...

I give these as examples of legislative attempts to define public policy in the broadcasting arena in the public interest by someone who was and is no stranger to culture and broadcasting. While the Section 31 orders were repressive they were also a public expression that those who demanded liberal rights should accept liberal responsibility.

Of equal importance to us here is the question of the cultural 'directions' contained in Dr Cruise O'Brien's legislation. The RTÉ Authority has gradually withdrawn from any major cultural realization in its programming schedules. One wonders whether ministerial directions under this heading might not be in order! As O'Brien has written 'legislation is static; broadcasting fluid and volatile.'

Broadcasting in Ireland has hardly been ingenious in either dealing with the terrorist issue or with cultural pluralism or even culture itself. Little if anything has emerged by way of innovative thinking about structures from within RTÉ. The Minister for Arts Culture and the Gaeltacht decided out of his own head to establish Teilifis na Gaeilge – probably ignoring the public sphere in this case, but certainly not the electorate of Galway West. The late George Colley decided to establish Raidió na Gaeltachta after the strength of the performance of the Gaeltacht civil rights candidate in Galway West in the General Election of 1969.

The Green Paper is a question of cultural directions. Michael D. Higgins is perhaps the only minister to have ever asked why we cannot have better programming from RTÉ. I think this is one of the most fundamental questions about broadcasting policy which we are likely to ask of ourselves as we enter the twenty-first century. I do not worry about new technology. It is a means of delivery and reception, the grammar of production remains the same. I am talking about increasing quality programming within the national service. I wish for my culture, whether in Irish or English, to be reflected on the screen. Whether Michael D Higgins' paper and legislation will heighten broadcasting standards and re-establish RTÉ as an expression of Irish culture will be the test and the problem to be addressed.

Martha O'Neill is an Independent Film Production Manager.

Martha O'Neill

I am concerned with feature film production primarily, therefore, I decided to begin my contribution by showing that much of our nightly television schedule is not made in this country. From 6:00pm this evening, the time most people come home from work and have their tea, the news is followed by *Murphy Brown*, a gardening show (which is low cost programming), *Dr Quinn's Medicine Woman*, the news, current affairs, a focus on the centenary of cinema, and finally, *The Movie Show*. That is all very low cost programming. There is no point in looking at Network 2 because it is mostly American programming. Some American programming is very good, but I think it should be balanced with our own productions, our own stories and our own faces being reflected.

I realize RTE is bored with claims about its monopoly status but just because it is boring does not mean it is not true. How can potential abuse by RTE of its dominant position in broadcasting be guarded against? Diversity is the only answer. Since its inception, RTE has occupied a unique and privileged position in Irish society. It has also enjoyed a deep loyalty from its audience. In homes and cars, up and down the country, televisions and radios are traditionally almost dedicated to the national channels. Many of us have been brought up almost exclusively on the sounds and pictures of RTE: *The Riordains, The Late Late Show, Tolka Row, Glenroe, Seven Days, the Angelus, the Sixty Minute Quiz, Wanderly Wagon, Today Tonight, Bracken, An Nuacht*, the *Nine O Clock News, Music for Middlebrows*, the *Eurovision Song Contest* and many more programmes which have shaped broadcasting. They have provided a shared memory and a common reference point in which to tell stories and events.

This is not to say all this programming was without fault. RTE has been the only provider of programming in Ireland. The answer to the question of whether RTE's monopoly is a good or a bad thing misses the boat in the context of the advent of multi-channel broadcasting. The audience has an ever increasing range of leisure activities from which to choose; not only RTE but all film and television producers must take account of this in their projects. The problem with a monopoly is that it necessarily narrows the vision to protect and defend against outside influences or from change within and without; it presents a narrow view of the world. It is marked by the absence of diversity. Given the present speed of changes, RTE cannot hope to maintain its position.

A small number of people have been making decisions for the nation. It cannot be right that the fate of a film or programme lies in the hands of so few and that the possibility of production relies on the likes or dislikes of individual people. This may not be the fault of the individuals concerned but rather the system that maintains this practice.

To turn to drama production: in its day, RTE had an admirable record albeit within financial limits: Tom Murphy, Eugene McCabe, films like *A Day in the Life of Martin Cluxton*. All these were great, but that is going back a long way. This is simply not good enough from our public broadcasting service. I understand there are many pressures that bear on the production of drama, one of the most obvious being cost. This, of course, is a reality but not a simple reality; there is, however, a danger of knowing the cost of everything but the value of nothing. It is not enough to say that drama costs too much and do nothing about it. There are ways in which the public service ethos can be preserved within commercial pressures. Look at the film production sector: recent initiatives have helped production without lowering standards, although it has increased the possibility of stories being told in many ways, both documentaries and drama.

The openness of our broadcasting system, within the wide spectrum of choice, is crucial to this cultural debate. There are now generations who do not have a history or even a sentimental attachment to single channel viewing. With the multiplicity of choice for viewers, the standards of production have risen considerably. This is a challenge to production personnel both within and outside broadcasting, but a welcome challenge – one that should be seen as an opportunity. For Irish production to compete on an equal footing in the international arena, RTE will need to preserve its public service role while operating within a more pluralist and diverse environment. This means change.

This change brings into focus the role of the independent film and television production sector. I believe that there is both the desire and the need for a public broadcasting service in Ireland, a service that reflects the lives and aspirations of the whole island of Ireland. If broadcasting is the mantle of culture then that mantle must cover and explain our differences as well as our similarities. On the technical side we must work to ensure transmission of our own national service throughout the whole island of Ireland; Northern Ireland's services should be fully available in the Republic. RTE is the appropriate vehicle for a public broadcasting service. In the past, it has been responsible for bringing crucial social matters to the public. It has effected discussion and change in the radio sphere also; 2FM probably did a great service to youth by bringing pop music out of Dublin.

The Green Paper asks if RTE is guilty of Dublin-centrism in its programming. I see Dublin as the melting pot of the many counties of Ireland. RTE is more appropriately guilty of local-centrism, broadcasting to itself much of the time. On the issue of whether Dublin should be considered a region, some recent reports claim that Dublin has developed an infrastructure for film and television production. It may be more developed than the rest of the country, with the limited resources being centred here, but it has a long way to go. There is also much talk of Ireland's diaspora but this is not reflected in television programming.

RTE could strengthen its position by acting more favourably to independent producers. Recent initiatives in the film production sector have served to stimulate production activity and opportunity. It is the experience of most independent producers that RTE involvement in their production is often too little, too late or too tough to be helpful. RTE could put itself in a stronger position by involving itself earlier and with greater investment. It would then have some real creative participation in projects rather than riding on the co-production coat-tails of other broadcasters.

In almost every chapter, the Green Paper raises the question of a super authority. It would be a change for the better if programming capacity were and commissioning was performed by the people best suited to the job rather than by an individual organization claiming all rights. RTE should direct some of its annual revenue to the independent sector. This creativity and diversity of opinion can contribute to a more exciting schedule that can compete in the market place as well as fulfil its role to the public. For those of us involved in the production of feature films in Ireland, the active participation of RTE would further stimulate production and address the heartfelt need of keeping our cultural heads above water. RTE's involvement at an early stage would also help attract money from outside the national borders. This relationship does not need to be an antagonistic one, but one based on need and ability to deliver.

It is my contention that the production of drama and its subsequent transmission across our airwaves would engage our own citizens in story-telling. These stories would have the ability to travel outside our borders as a profile of our cultural identity. RTE has the potential to be a first class ally to the independent film production sector but it is currently restricted by its own structures. The establishment of an independent authority could provide RTE with the space in which to develop with their partners and the independents, a range of diverse possibilities that would protect the public service ethos and maintain responsibility within commercial parameters.

Jack Byrne

Jack Byrne is Co-ordinator, National Association of Community Broadcasting (NACB).

I want to present the perspective of community radio people on the current media scene and outline our aspirations for the future. Community radio's interest in electronic media is not from a narrow professional or profit viewpoint but from the media's impact on life and culture. I welcome the Green Paper's strong emphasis on the links between sound and culture. In fact, community radio came into existence because of this dynamic. Community radio communications policy must be both micro and

macro; to protect local culture against the impact of global media, we need an overall strategy. Community radio people are involved, as volunteers, in this testing and time consuming field because of our unease about present media trends: a shrinking number of producers and media conglomerates have an unprecedented degree of control over the direction of cultural development.

We stand at a complex cross-roads of choices. Cultural conditioning determines which road we take; it impacts on political, economic and social decisions, and as culture is increasingly coloured by information media, we need to ask who really decides this road and in whose interest. In selecting material for broadcasting, decisions obviously have to be made and commercial persons are little interested in non-commercial issues. If we permit these media concentrations to continue unchallenged, what the entire species thinks and decides will be in the hands of the most successful marketers. Just one way of looking at the world is a dangerous position; it does not foster alternative cultures; it offers one vision of the future. The current media power struggle is potentially of more importance than the privatization of transport, water power and other natural resources. Control of the media agenda-setting process will do much more over time to shape the direction of global human society. The growth of privatized media and a growing culture of rampant consumerism will eventually decimate the planet.

The Green Paper asks which policies promote citizenship rather than passive consumerism. I welcome these issues being raised and take the view that commercial media and its accompanying advertising is an ideology. People are encouraged to think of themselves as consumers rather than as citizens. Such media activity on a large scale strongly works against any kind of participative democracy. It supports individual consumerism as an answer to social problems. It says if you are concerned about an issue, buy something. Market activity has played a significant part in puncturing a hole in the ozone layer. Does the market cease these activities? No, rather UVA and UVB clothing are now a fashion item. Commercial media does not encourage citizens to organise, to discuss serious issues; it suggests further consumption as a solution. This approach creates a fundamental tension between the economic rationale of the consumer system and the ideas of a participative democracy based on collective solutions to public problems.

In a democracy every citizen should be involved in public debates, therefore I welcome the minister's emphasis on the wider issues involved. However, I deplore the media response so far. RTE correctly began the debate last night but I hope there will be further discussions perhaps with a different format. The national broadcaster allows us to debate these issues in contrast to the print media which has done a disservice to the people of this state by ignoring the long term strategic implications of new legislation and concentrated on the popular but superficial idea of taxes on Walkmans, etc.

The National Association for Community Broadcasting (NACB) is regrouping after five difficult years under the previous Independent Radio and Television Commission (IRTC) regime. I am co-ordinator for the NACB in Dublin and around the country which is preparing a considered response to the Green Paper; it will put forward ideas for a non-commercial democratic media agenda. Indeed, a fundamental feature of the Green Paper is the recognition that the continued existence of programming relevant to Irish people is the main justification for the maintenance of an indigenous broadcasting service. The ordinary decentralization of this service, not the breaking up of RTE, but other developments such as the encouragement of urban neighbourhood and rural town community radio, will make the electronic media even more relevant to local communities. Legislative recognition of the difference between public service, commercial and community radio, and the nature of each medium, is important.

Community radio, as an accessible local cultural resource, will have significant impact on the general locality and the local world-view. It tends to have a different perspective on all aspects of programming; for example, Liz Howell of Sky News recently

said, presumably about England, that people love their news because it is tremendously marketable. Contrast this with a story from a community radio station in the Dominican Republic after the coup and overthrow of President Aristide of Haiti. The radio station began broadcasting into Haiti to inform people of what was happening and help them in their struggle. After about six months, the Haitian military government put pressure on the Dominican government to have this stopped. The community radio people in the Dominican Republic were told that the National Broadcasting Act did not permit them to broadcast news into Haiti. That night they read the legislation and discovered a loop hole. The following morning, they brought guitars into the studio and sang the news. This went on until President Aristide was returned to power. This is an indication of different attitudes to the news, one which highlights the cross-roads facing us into the twenty-first century.

Information will either be seen as a commodity or as a means of communications. Both public service and commercial media allow people a variety of channels from which to receive information. Community radio does something different; it makes available the opportunity for each person to communicate themselves. Legislation must recognize and foster these ideas; community radio is not banished to the outer fringes of the media landscape; rather it chooses to be there. That is its role; it does not strive for the highest possible ratings but to be a medium of communication for local citizens. Neither is community radio public service broadcasting in a different guise; rather it strives to be a small, accessible, social and cultural tool used by the community. A dynamic network of small-scale media will only emerge and survive in the present market environment with legal recognition of its role and with legal and organizational strategies that will protect it from the commercial media battlefield.

It would not be appropriate to subsidize private commercial radio where market forces have failed to deliver profit. Such stations should be freed from the cost requirements of providing twenty per cent news and current affairs if that is what they wish. Furthermore, it would be logical to allow market forces facilitate mergers and rationalizations of the independent commercial stations. Some people may make the case that public funding could be made available, although I am not. However, some public funding could be made available to local commercial stations which voluntarily provide a public service element in their programming. Such rationalization would make it easier for rural and urban neighbourhood community radio. The public interest can best be served by the protection of public service broadcasting but perhaps in new forms. The values of this medium need to restated not dumped.

RTE should not be obliged to adapt their policy and programmes to suit unfettered commercial criteria. The national service needs to be supported as part of a long term strategic plan sharing the licence fee or other public funding with the non-profit community stations that are due to emerge shortly. This will largely remove their need for commercial activity. Public sector funding and modest ongoing subventions from central and local agencies should be sufficient for these low cost community services to survive. In this way, I believe a great deal of energetic and novel broadcasting could be created at very little cost to the state. Community radio, a relatively weak sector being small and autonomous, should be protected from commercial predators. Legislation should ensure that community radio remains in democratic ownership and control.

If there is to be a new national radio service, it should not be Century Radio Mark Two. Rather, it should offer a range of public service programming as an option for the various community radio and community of interest stations. Special interest groups could share the frequency offering specific programming under contract to those stations willing and able to pay for them. News and current affairs could be offered to both community and commercial stations across the state on a fee-paying basis. The service might require state subvention but it would offer an alternative range of programming to RTE. Through links with community radio and community of interest stations, this new national service could act as a channel for emerging local talents introducing them to the national stage.

Community radio could also become involved with satellite broadcasting although RTE may be horrified at this prospect. RTE should be required to become a common carrier of programming from a variety of sources, some at least from specific community radio productions. This would allow Irish people to become global citizens as part of an overall strategy. It would allow Irish people to reach other citizens with a variety of messages. This state should ask first for an EU policy to encourage this through legislative and financial inducements; the larger commercial satellites should also become common carriers creating a broader, more diverse cultural impact. We should take this opportunity to develop in the state and through international agreements a common communications policy designed to create greater media democracy at local, national and international levels.

In view of the acceleration of global media developments, the publication of this Green Paper is indeed timely. We must do more than squabble over short term personal ambitions; we must use this opportunity to develop a broad based long term strategic communications policy, which takes into account more than programming and profit. Our communications policy needs an underlying, philosophical and conceptual framework on which to build information exchange networks. The public service ethos should be developed for the twenty-first century, making it the nerve centre which extends beyond the confines of the media itself and becomes intertwined with the vibrant life of each person and each community.

Andrew Hanlon is Director of News, Classic Hits 98FM.

Andrew Hanlon

This is an important debate on Irish broadcasting. The Green Paper poses many fundamental questions about the future of the industry, its foundation and direction, how it will grow and flourish – all of which we have lacked since 1988. Since its launch, many questions have been raised, some of which I would like to touch on.

The first issue is the proposed diversion of licence fee funding to the independent radio sector. Should public money be poured into private enterprise? Those who obtained sound broadcasting licences in 1988 knew they had an obligation to provide twenty per cent news and current affairs, and to have regard to Irish culture and language without financial assistance. All sound broadcasters were keenly aware when they applied for the licences that there was no subvention for any type of programming whether of a public service nature or otherwise. They knew that they and their shareholders would have to fund all their output by way of cash injection, sponsorship or advertising. I find it rather amusing that some radio operators in the independent radio sector are now awaiting a handout from Minister Higgins, believing that this will give them a lifeline to perhaps bail them out of trading difficulties or cash flow problems.

The larger radio stations in Dublin or Cork are predominantly music based broadcasters, playing pop music most of the day, with minimalist speech content except for the mandatory news and current affairs quota. These stations do not pretend to be something they are not. They are in the business of winning audience and market share, making a profit and paying a dividend to their shareholders – they would not deny this. I listened with interest to Niall Stokes, Chairperson of the IRTC on RTE television yesterday, when he said that 'broadcasting is about communication. It is not primarily a business.' Whatever you might think, I do not believe for one moment that the larger commercial radio operators in this country are in business primarily to communicate. They would say they are in the business primarily to make money.

So who should get subvention from the licence fee, if anyone at all?

I believe that anyone producing in excess of the news and current affairs quota should receive some grant aid. This should not be cheaply produced, talking heads programming common to both the independent sector and RTE; all that takes is a producer and a presenter. The most expensive programmes to produce are documentaries and dramas. There should be a subvention for quality programmes, radio

documentaries, local drama and, very importantly, educational programmes which are expensive to produce. These programmes would merit financial assistance. This element of public service output should be monitored by the relevant broadcasting authority station chief executives who would submit their proposals for financial approval to the relevant authority in advance of production. This could be done once a year for budgetary and planning purposes; it would be easy to administer.

There is much talk as to how to manage funding from the licence fee. How should it be administered? Should money be given to independent broadcasters? How much money should be set aside for independent radio broadcasters? How can we ensure that RTE programming does not suffer as a result? Let's use the 1995 RTE budget of £6.5m for independent productions as a bench mark. Twenty per cent of that budget, equivalent to £1.3m, would suffice as an initial funding pool for local radio. This is a small sum in the overall context and would not damage RTE in any shape or form. It would be a wise use of public funding and the public would not begrudge it. However, this type of expenditure should be transparent so that listeners can see and hear for themselves how the money has been used. In other words, do not let radio operators con the public once they get the licence fee money; the public should be told how the money is spent. A standard announcement could be played before each publicly funded programme is broadcast, stating that what you are about to hear is being funded by the licence fee or whatever source, similar to road building around the country which carries a notice that per centage has come from the EU. Such a pilot programme, no matter how successful, should be reviewed again in subsequent years.

Classic Hits 98FM would not benefit from this proposal, neither would it avail of it because it is primarily a music radio station. That is its remit. Nevertheless, I believe that this kind of funding should be made available to benefit local stations and improve the overall public service output of broadcasters around the country. Indeed, a Dublin broadcaster may wish to provide this service.

The Green Paper also raised the issue of a centralized source of news and current affairs for independent radio and television broadcasters. I would urge the minister not to follow the British precedent which established a news house to produce news for both radio and television. This system will not work; these are entirely different media with different modus operandi. In the UK, ITN has recently taken over Independent Radio News (IRN), which supplies news bulletins to over 120 independent local radio stations. IRN operates from a basement bunker in the Grays End Road headquarters of ITN. IRN depends on reports from ITN television correspondents whose primary function is to file first and foremost to the viewing rather than the listening audience.

What the radio industry here needs is an independent, dedicated news house, producing material for radio only. It is reasonably simple and inexpensive, but how should it be funded? Many radio people are anticipating a big handout from the minister. Indeed, there is much talk about this, although it is unlikely to happen as easily as people think. Where should the money come from for a centralized news house? It should not come from the licence fee or any other kind of government subvention but from the radio operators themselves. They took out contracts in 1988; they knew the rules of the games at the time. There was no subvention available then and there should not be any available now.

News and current affairs is a basic product which all broadcasters are obliged to provide. Since the collapse of Century Radio, local radio stations get their news for little or nothing. News is very expensive to produce, it involves experienced and well trained manual labour which is not cheap and easy to come by. A news house along the lines I am proposing – complete with correspondents, editors, sub-editors, proper methods of distribution and transmission – would cost approximately £1m a year to produce and that is cheap. If broadcasters are serious about providing a news service, then they must pay for it. This can be done but there must be a willingness to accept this. I believe this will eventually happen and that Michael D. Higgins believes likewise.

Another issue is RTE's position in the market. RTE should be either a commercial service or a public service but it cannot be both. RTE currently acts as a commercial monopolistic operation, with two television channels, three national radio channels, one local radio channel in Cork, a share of Ireland's long wave frequency on which it unashamedly broadcasts to the UK using the only long wave frequency allocation, a share in the largest cable operation in the country, and the *RTE Guide*. While Bob Collins, RTE Assistant Director General, claims that RTE is not a monopoly, that type of domination is a monopoly in anybody's language. If RTE wishes to compete on commercial grounds it should play fairly; there should be no cross subsidization of its businesses or cross promotion of its radio or television services. For example, RTE Radio will advertize free of charge on RTE television. If 98FM or Cork's 96FM or Clare FM wish to advertize on RTE television they will pay substantially. 2FM gets its advertising free. That is unfair and that should be stopped. There should also be transparency in the accounting systems for RTE and particularly for 2FM. For example, independent broadcasters do not know how much 2FM costs to run each year; does it cost £5m, £6m, £7m or whatever a year? That figure could then be used as a bench mark by independent broadcasters. We do not know how much it costs because RTE and 2FM have so many areas in common; 2FM should be a stand alone operation competing on a commercial basis.

I also do not believe that Network 2 should remain part of RTE. Simply by moving it out of Donnybrook and relocating it in Cork or Galway is not going to make much difference. The existing Network 2 transmission system should be sold to a competitor who would be guaranteed instant national coverage for a fair price. This would bring about a plurality of news and current affairs, drama and various other types of programmes on both private and public service television. I am not trying to be unfair to RTE; it serves this country very well and will hopefully continue to do so. But in a society exposed to hundreds of television channels from every corner of the globe – dominated by, for example, Rupert Murdoch who has recently bought a stg£2b stake in one of the world's largest fibre cable networks – shouldn't we let our own business and media people have a chance to provide something new and fresh that will augment RTE's fine service?

The proposed new super authority will take an overview and balance the needs and demands of RTE and the independent sector, combining the functions of the RTE Authority and IRTC. This would be detrimental to independent broadcasters because the requirements for commercial radio stations or TV3 cannot be aligned or compared to RTE. This would create a situation where RTE's dominance as the major broadcaster with its many TV and radio outlets would be compared to the fledgling independent sector which is only five or six years old. If everything was run by one authority, it is likely that RTE would be the centre of attention. It cannot be forgotten that the independents are trying to carve out a niche. The competitive edge and the fight for audience between RTE and the independents would become blurred.

The Green Paper asks how a replacement for Century Radio should be programmed. In particular, the minister looks to the UK experience where several new radio stations have come on the air specializing in news and current affairs, non-stop 24 hour talk. It is great if you want to dip in and out of it; I would love to see such a station here. Also, there are stations specializing in jazz and classical music; listeners benefit by a greater choice, e.g. BBC 4 and BBC 5. However, to suggest that this country could support a national station offering one or other of those minority programme formats would be naive without a big chunk of licence fee money to support it. That is public money. From a commercial perspective, that kind of operation would not survive because there is not sufficient money, audience or advertising.

Optimistically, a national audience of only eight or ten per cent could be hoped for, hardly enough to sustain even a tightly run operation. Even the IRTC's own internal market research shows that these markets are not commercially viable. It did, however, identify a gap in the 15-24 year old and 25-44 year old market; the Dublin market, in

particular, has a massive gap in the teenage radio sector. 98FM, 104FM and Atlantic 252 are all providing a similar service, while 2FM is a mixture. This is why we have a re-emergence of the pirate radio stations in Dublin; currently, there are about fifteen of them.

The Green Paper refers to research showing that two thirds of people in this country believe that without Irish language programming, Ireland would lose its identity as a separate culture. Chapter ten, 'Irish language and culture in broadcasting,' proposes investigating how public issues through the Irish language might be further promoted. To do this, the precise service offered by each station should be carefully measured against an individual station's format. The station best equipped to provide the level of service referred to is Raidió na Gaeltachta, which broadcasts eighty hours nationwide each week under the auspices of the RTE Authority. It does a fine job but what market and audience share does it have? Combine this with the forthcoming Teilifis na Gaeilge and Irish language programming provided by the independent radio stations, including Dublin's Raidió na Life, which gets its news from 98FM: do we not have sufficient Irish language programming?

I welcome and encourage support for the Irish language from the EU, especially through the BABEL and SCALE programmes which hopefully will divert funding into the latest technology for television dubbing and subtitling. This is both a practical and attractive way of promoting the Irish language which in turn will lead to job creation in the audio-visual sector. Perhaps people in the Gaeltacht may like to watch *Glenroe* or *Eastenders* or any of the big BBC or ITV dramas with subtitles. There are jobs to be created in this area, and European funding can ensure that these programmes can be subtitled for the Irish language.

I welcome the Green Paper's questioning of the continuation of the twenty per cent news and current affairs quota. While the quota ensures I have a job, 2FM does not operate this quota. It could be argued that it is filled by Gerry Ryan's three hour morning talk show, but 2FM does not have to produce news and current affairs at the top of the hour which independent broadcasters are required to do. 2FM is not subject to the same statutory requirements. The quota system, as the Green Paper points out, is a blunt and inflexible instrument which means quantity rather than quality. There has also been much debate on music quotas, the amount of Irish music played on radio. The Jobs in Music campaign (JIM) have lobbied all broadcasters, independents and RTE, to increase the airplay for Irish musicians and bands. I support the promotion of Irish music but not at the expense of the audience's tastes. At 98FM, one in every ten records played before 10:00pm is either recorded, produced or performed by an Irish artist; from 11:00pm to 1:00am every record played is Irish. In total 98FM devotes fourteen per cent of air time to Irish music, yet there is talk of forcing us to do more. Are we not doing enough?

Finally, Michael D. Higgins has done the right thing by bringing out this Green Paper; he has asked the fundamental questions. This is the time for debate. It is going to be a very interesting time for Irish broadcasting.

Wolfgang Truetzschler

Wolfgang Truetzschler is Lecturer in Communications, Dublin Institute of Technology.

The Green Paper is a good means to stimulate cultural debate. It is the first of its kind in Europe, and the minister should be congratulated. However, in another sense, the Green Paper is an epitaph on a system that will probably be gone or be radically different in maybe ten to fifteen years. The Green Paper does not mention the computer industry, the telecommunications industry, the cable operators or the developments that have made these industries the most significant today or in the future. In short, it does not really directly discuss the buzz word, the 'information super highway': developments which are likely to completely change the broadcasting scene as we know it. Let me illustrate this point. I recently bought a computer with a CD ROM and soundcard; it is

connected to the Internet. I can download files and send them to other places; I can download articles, magazines, pictures, images, etc. Had I bought a television card, I would be able to watch television. This is the beginning stage of what is likely to become extremely prevalent and interactive due to the interconvergence of media technologies, a point that is not mentioned after the first chapter of the Green Paper.

The crucial elements of convergence bring together television, telephone, computer, and broadcasting into one machine, which is currently called a multimedia station or teleputer or some other name. This is not fiction. A company has already started PC television; this is television aimed at PCs, relayed for want of a better term through the local cable TV operator. In this way, you receive your movie, etc. via a cable connection. With what developments is Cablelink involved? What future plans has it? Cablelink is owned by Telecom Eireann and RTE. At the moment, a broadband cable comes into every house connected to Cablelink; from this, one can in principle download movies cheaply, fast and interactively. Ultimately viewers will be able to choose their own programmes from anywhere in the world; the programmes may be Irish but they may be from the UK, Asia or South America. Viewers will choose their own programmes, download them and watch them on their PC or teleputer or whatever it will be called. One could say this is democracy in action because the viewer decides exactly what he or she wishes to view. It is not the public service broadcaster deciding what is on offer. It is democracy in action because you, the viewer, decide the programming schedule.

The traditional divisions between the computing and broadcasting industries are being fudged. Computers, for example, are being developed with intelligent agents. These computers can scan through the programmes which you watched last year, and store your programme preferences. The computer then selects programmes for viewing based upon previous choices; you are not dependent on determining choices from the fifty plus channels you will be receiving nor do you have to switch a button other than to turn it on.

In Germany, the electricity utilities have so much money earned from profits over the years that they are buying cable TV operators and investing in broadcasting. They are going to be major players in broadcasting. The US computer giant Microsoft is forming alliances with news agencies and film companies. It has started an on-line news service, and *this* is a computer company. It is co-operating with NBC and has rights to the National Gallery of London to use images of its paintings in future software. Rupert Murdoch owns Delphi, one of the largest US on-line service providers; he also owns Twentieth Century Fox, Fox TV, film titles, and the publishers Harper and Collins. Thus, the books and the films can be developed into interactive CDs which can then be transmitted on his satellites. These satellites use encryption technology developed by a company owned by Murdoch. Newspapers are also going on-line; there is a mad scramble in the US to produce on-line versions of newspapers. They are considering whether and how to charge for this service. The imagination knows no bounds. Unfortunately the Green Paper does not mention any of these developments facing us over the next few years.

It is a strange phenomenon that there are two separate departments which are involved with broadcasting: the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht looking at cultural matters, and the Department of Communications regulating cable, cable operators, licensing, etc. To what extent do they communicate with one another? It is extremely important that they do.

While new technological developments are changing broadcasting very rapidly, particularly in the US, none of these issues are even mentioned in the Green Paper. They are hinted at in the first chapter only. When I first read the Green Paper, I thought it was a very important contribution, full of cultural debate. However, it actually says nothing about developments happening at the moment. It is really a debate on issues relevant to the 1960s and 1970s: the preservation of public service broadcasting. But this is not the issue today. People will be able to shoot their own films, and download it

from anywhere in the world onto the information super highway. You can by-pass the distributor, who is probably American, the local broadcaster and your government who may not want you to have access to certain films and/or information.

So what will happen to Irish broadcasting if all these developments that I have mentioned take place? I do not have an answer to this question, but neither does the Green Paper.