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Teilifís na Gaeilge as a Public Sphere

Iarfhlaith Watson

Introduction

This paper employs the Irish language media to argue for a normative ideal of public access using the concept 'public sphere'. Public sphere as an ideal type contains a democratic potential which allows for universal participation in the formation of public opinion. Two problems exist with the public sphere as a concept in so far as the ideal does not correspond to the reality. On the one hand, it can be argued that the market dominates the public sphere and hampers the democratic, spontaneous and autonomous formation of public opinion. On the other, it can also be argued that the individual is a consumer, resulting in a citizenry which fails to engage in rational-critical discourse which is central to democracy.

The Public Sphere

The concept of the public sphere originates in Habermas's *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962), a postdoctoral thesis which was not published in English until 1989 (as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*). For Habermas the public sphere is not a space (social or physical), it is dialogue (but, the public sphere can involve space - dialogue often occurs in the same or similar space). 'By "the public sphere" we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body.' (Habermas 1974: 49). Peter Hohendahl added (as a footnote) that the public sphere is not the crowd or the public but the institution which comes into existence through participation.¹

Habermas's concept of the public sphere has its origins in early capitalism. His critique showed the emancipatory potential of bourgeois society as well as the tensions which led to its structural transformation. The attempt *here* is to show that although the public sphere is structurally transformed the emancipatory potential remains. This normative goal was explained by Dahlgren (1987: 35):

While the knowledge which critique generates points to conditions which set limits, it also points to conditions of possibility, namely of human intervention in a social world whose human origins are often not recognizable. Critique strives to scramble existing demarcations between the manifest and latent, the taken for granted and the problematic, appearance and reality, in such a way that these lines might be redrawn in a way that will take us closer to the good society.

Relatedly, McCarthy (1989: xii) asked: 'can the public sphere be effectively reconstituted under radically different socio-economic, political and cultural conditions? In short, is democracy possible?'

In the bourgeois public sphere the independent construction of public opinion was possible. The bourgeoisie were propertied, educated and independent of the upper

classes. They met at coffee houses, discussed issues of interest to them and these discussions were further extended by the newspapers of the day. The opinions which resulted from such discussions were a dynamic in the democratization of the state. From the bourgeois public sphere came the supposition of the universal 'man' - that all 'men' are equal.

As the bourgeois ideal became institutionalized in the state, the expanded public sphere (expanded as a result of universal suffrage) began to include demands for state intervention to establish the egalitarian ideal. The principle of the state had been laissez-faire, however, public demands for economic redistribution led to a Welfare State which intervened in the economy. This intervention of the state, while attempting a requisite redistribution, resulted in a state-dominated public sphere - the state became involved in the negotiation between capital and labour as well as in the provision of public services. Habermas argued that a dialectic has emerged in which freedom (of speech, of association, of assembly, private property etc.) depends on a *Gestaltungsgarantie* of active promotion and intervention by the state. 'For under the conditions of an industrial society constituted as a social-welfare state the securing of these legal provisions cannot be accomplished by defensive and exemptive measures, or rather can be attained only if these in turn are supported by participatory rights, by guaranteed claims to benefit' (Habermas 1989: 229).

The problem with this state-domination is that the public sphere is no longer a sphere between civil society and the state. The state introduces competition, negotiation and power to this sphere and ousts Habermas's ideal of universal and equal discussion. The public sphere becomes 'inhabited by politicians, reporters, pollsters, and the occasional academic' (Peters and Cmiel 1991: 211). The sphere where public opinion was formed becomes a sphere where public opinion is either considered to pre-exist without the need for it to be formed through discussion or the state attempts to create public opinion through public relations experts. Either way, the social relations between the individual and the state is reified in so far as the individual has no power to alter that relationship or to play an active role. The result is a feeling of alienation for the individual. The only activity left for the individual in the public sphere is consumption - to consume the PR-produced 'opinions' of the state.

Habermas (1976, 36-7) argued that the structural alteration of the bourgeois public realm [*Öffentlichkeit*] provides for application of institutions and procedures that are democratic in form, while the citizenry, in the midst of an objectively [*an sich*] political society, enjoy the status of passive citizens with only the right to withhold acclamation.

The individual has a choice of products in the shop, of programmes and channels on television and of candidates in elections, but this is the extent of democratic 'participation'. The acceptance of the individual as actor in the political sphere is perceived to contain a risk for the state. 'Habermas interprets the depoliticization of the population as the inner logic of a system in which a politically active citizenry is no longer desirable.' (Hohendahl 1979: 112).

Although state intervention is perceived as a moment in the disintegration of the public sphere, there is an earlier moment: the presupposition that we are all equal and that we are, therefore, all the same. Originally the *bourgeois* public sphere included educated, propertied men who had very much the same interests. They wanted to participate in the ruling of the state. They postulated that all men are equal and therefore that the ruling class had no justification for excluding the bourgeoisie. However, once the wheel of democracy was set in motion there was no further justification for excluding unpropertied men and later women. As the public sphere expanded people with different interests entered the public sphere resulting in conflicts of interest and demands for state intervention.²

Briefly, the ideal of the public sphere is that the public opinion which it forms has the task of criticism and control of the state. This is an important democratic role.

However, Habermas (1989: 201) argued that '[t]oday... the public sphere has to be "made," it is not "there" anymore.'

The historical moment on which the ideal is founded (the bourgeois public sphere) was exclusive, its universal man was exactly that - a man - and was property-owning and educated. Moreover, it *also* involved questions of interest, prestige and power

(see Eley 1993: 307 and Habermas 1974: 54). None the less, the ideal remains even if its historical moment does not.

Today because of the size of the public sphere its media are the so-called mass-media (see Habermas 1974: 49). It is usually accepted without question that the mass media today *are* the public sphere. None the less the mass media are blamed for the deterioration of the public sphere (Carpignano et al. 1990: 33). Today the public sphere theoretically includes the whole society. The mass media are essential for expanding public space beyond the physical to potentially enable universal participation. However, Habermas (1989: 169 and 164) argued that the public sphere of the mass media has become a sphere of consumerism 'by serving up the material as a ready-made convenience, patterned and pre-digested', and that even 'the conversation about what you had read, heard, and seen... is administered.' Moreover, Habermas (1989: 170-1) argued that there is

a tendency to present a substitute more palatable for consumption and more likely to give rise to an impersonal indulgence in stimulating relaxation than to a public use of reason. Radio, film, and television by degrees reduce to a minimum the distance that a reader is forced to maintain toward the printed letter... the new media curtail the reactions of their recipients in a peculiar way. They draw the eyes and ears of the public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance, place it under 'tutelage', which is to say they deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree. The critical discussion of a reading public tends to give way to 'exchanges about taste and preferences' between consumers - even the talk about what is consumed, 'the examination of tastes', becomes a part of consumption itself. The world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only.

The ideal public sphere does not involve competition or negotiation among the 'powerful', it involves universal and equal participation in dialogue. Dahlgren (1987: 27) outlines an ideally functioning public sphere in which the use of the mass media is implicit:

The marketplace would make available politically relevant information in the form of news, ideas, discussion, policy debates, and so on. The output would originate from among the citizens themselves, since access was seen as integral to the liberal ideal... The public, on encountering the output, would reflect on it through discussions. This would give rise to opinion and the formation of political will. Finally, the arrived-at views would become articulated throughout the public sphere, preparatory to political action through the official mechanisms, and the next phase of the societal dialogue.

Habermas's normative proposition is that the whole society united in one single public sphere is more democratic. However, in the Irish context the Green Paper on Broadcasting asked:

Should there be a single, generalised public sphere in any state or is it more useful, in countries incorporating ethnic and/or linguistic communities, rather than the single language nation state, to think of a minority public sphere existing inside or alongside the dominant one? (Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht 1995: 203).

Fraser (1993: 122), a prominent critic of the concept of public sphere, also supported multiple public spheres, considering a single public sphere to be unjust as it functions to the advantage of dominant groups, she contended that 'arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public'. Also, Habermas (1993) was not averse to competing publics, and considered that perhaps it is a more democratic alternative, as long as these 'publics' are internally democratic.

The Gaeltacht/Gaeilgeoir Public Sphere

Irish speakers do not exist as a public in the 'national' public sphere. A public sphere demands a certain homogeneity. Although, it includes a diversity of private individuals, they ideally engage in rational-critical discourse as individuals to form an

endogenous public opinion and the issues discussed are expected to be of interest to the whole public. Irish speakers, however, form a minority, they speak a language which is not universally understood and their particular issues are marginal. They can exist only as private individuals in the 'national' public sphere if they conform by speaking English and only discussing issues which are on the 'agenda'. Irish language media allow Irish speakers to 'exist', by mediating them to one another through Irish.

The Gaeltacht and Gaeilgeoir (Irish speaking) community's own public sphere, mediated by newspaper, radio and television provides it with the opportunity for dialogue on issues that are relevant to itself. It is democratic to have a separate public sphere because Gaeltacht and Gaeilgeoir issues are rarely relevant to the 'national' public sphere and their voices are drowned in the cacophony. However, for some there is the fear of ghettoizing the Irish language.

From the description of the public sphere above it is expected that if individual Irish speakers gather together to form a public body, a public sphere of Irish speakers comes into existence. This happens regularly, especially considering the number of Irish language organizations that exist. Both the meetings of these organizations as well as the conversations that take place in the clubs and pubs their members frequent and the discussions in Gaeltacht pubs become the public sphere. Also, Raidió na Gaeltachta has contributed to this public sphere, particularly within the Gaeltacht, as has Raidió na Life, in Dublin, and *Foinse*, however, television has more widespread and frequent use. TnaG has the potential to increase the number of 'participants' in the public sphere.

An examination of the narrative of efforts to improve the situation of the Irish language on television provides an illuminating insight into the functioning of the Gaeilgeoir/Gaeltacht public sphere. Demands for a separate Irish language television channel were made regularly and range back as far as the late 1950s, when Gael Linn proposed to establish and operate Ireland's television channel. By the end of the 1960s Doolan, Dowling and Quinn (1969), who had been working in RTÉ, suggested having a Gaeltacht television channel. In the early 1980s Bord na Gaeilge published a plan for improving the situation of Irish in which they recommended that an Irish language television service for the Gaeltacht be established (Bord na Gaeilge 1983: 5).

The strength of the demands for a separate Irish language channel continued to increase throughout the 1980s. In 1980 'Coiste ar son Teilifís Gaeltas' was instituted by Irish language activists such as Ciarán Ó Finneadha, Seosamh Ó Cuaig, Seán Ó Drisceoil and Donncha Ó hÉallaithe. They started by setting up a pirate station, but unfortunately a technician died suddenly and the project ended. Subsequently, in 1986, Ó hÉallaithe and others who had been involved in the Gaeltacht civil rights movement felt that there were not enough programmes in Irish on RTÉ and

chonaic muid an dream a bhí faoi mhí-bhuntaíste, seo iad pobal na Gaeltachta a raibh an cultúr áitiúil cineál préamhaithe go huile agus go hiomlán i nGaeilge go leanúnach leis na céadta bliain agus go raibh sé ag teacht ag an bpointe nach raibh ag éirí leis an bpobal sin an teanga a chur [chun cinn] mar bhí paistí ag diúltú. Bhí reaction (sic) uafásach ó pháistí sna hochtóidí in aghaidh na Gaeilge, just bhíodar ag diúltú, chomh luath agus a d'fhoghlaimidís Béarla dhiúltóidís Gaeilge a labhairt (Ó hÉallaithe 1997).

They felt that campaigning for an increase in Irish language programmes on RTÉ would be fruitless, because, as Ó hÉallaithe (1997) said, 'níl ansin ach seafóid,... ní bhfaighidh muid sin go deo, tá sé triallta sách minic'. They decided to attempt a trial broadcast as a Gaeltacht channel. Donncha Ó hÉallaithe, Ruairí Ó Tuairisc and Pádraig de Bhaldráithe went to visit a station in the Faroe Islands which broadcasts at low cost and from what they learned they were able to broadcast eighteen hours of pre-recorded and live material illegally from Ros Muc, County Galway on 2-5 November 1987. Ó hÉallaithe (1997) tells the story thus:

Ar an mbealach ar ais (...) dhúinn chas an triúr againn le Bob Quinn ar an traen anuas ó Bhleá Cliath (...) agus chuir sé ceist simplí orm 'an gceapann sibh gur féidir é a dhéanamh i gConamara?' agus dúirt mise is cinnte gur féidir 'OK', dúirt sé, 'déanfaidh muid é'. So (...) chuaigh mé ar ais abhaile

agus rinne mé dearmad air agus an chéad rud eile (...), thart ar (...) mí Lúnasa, fuair mé glaoch gutháin ó Bob Quinn ag rá go raibh duine aimsithe aige a bhí sásta transmitters a thógáil agus go gcosnódh sé ceithre mhíle punt agus dúirt sé 'an féidir leat ceithre mhíle punt a bhailiú taobh istigh de choicís?' (...) What do you do with a challenge like that? You can't say I can't collect the money. So (...) bhailíomar cúig mhíle, 's tógadh na transmitters, agus Mí Dheireadh Fómhair ansin chuireamar an stáisiún bradach seo ar an aer thar deireadh seachtaine i Ros Muc le linn Oireachtas na nGael agus i ndáiríre is craoladh beo den chuid is mó a bhí ann mar gheall ar go raibh imeachtaí ar siúl agus bhí...bhí dhá cheamara againn agus bhíomar ag craoladh beo ag switcháil ó cheamara amháin go dti camera eile agus bhí sé sin ag dul amach ar radius thart ar cúig mhíle dhéag amach ó Ros Muc agus bhí signal iontach le fáil ag daoine chomh maith le RTÉ a haon nó a dó. So ar ndóigh thug sé sin an-dóchas ar fad dúinn (...), mar roimhe seo (...) bhí daoine ag rá look (...) tá sé ró-chostasach, ní féidir é a dhéanamh agus mar sin de, d'athraigh (...) an deireadh seachtaine sin (...) an bonn argóna

They called themselves Meitheal Oibre Theilifís na Gaeltachta and made more broadcasts in December 1988, when there was a pirate broadcasting amnesty. The following year Meitheal Oibre Theilifís na Gaeltachta got together with other individuals and organizations to form FNT (Feachtas Náisiunta Teilifíse).

FNT was a national campaign and they occasionally gained access to the national media; however, their interventions failed to produce a dialogue. While there were a number of public meetings to discuss TnaG after the publication of the Green Paper on Broadcasting (1995) there were numerous complaints that there was a lack of public debate in the media. On the other hand, the shift from a Gaeltacht to a national campaign, while it seemed to bring more tangible results, shifted the goal from a Gaeltacht television channel to a national Irish language channel.³

In Government, the Minister for the Gaeltacht and Taoiseach Charles Haughey, in late 1987, promised IR£500,000 from the National Lottery to go towards a separate Irish language channel, even though a report which he had commissioned (Working Group on Irish Language Broadcasting 1987) concluded that the establishment of a separate channel for Irish was inadvisable at that time. However, the money was never assigned to this project and four years later the Minister for Finance Albert Reynolds claimed that due to cut-backs this money still could not be assigned (even though it was not to originate in Government funds). Late in 1988 Haughey commissioned Udarás na Gaeltachta to undertake a feasibility study and in July 1989 he said that the establishment of an Irish language service was one of the top priorities of the new Government. At the Fianna Fáil Party Ard Fheis (convention), on 9 March 1991 Haughey said in his Presidential Address that the television service would be established the following year. However, the National Lottery funds which Haughey had vaguely 'earmarked' for the Irish language television service were directed to the state coffers. Later that year (1991) Haughey said on Raidió na Gaeltachta that due to financial constraints he was uncertain as to whether or not the television station would be established. Soon afterwards Haughey 'fell from power'. Haughey's successor as Minister for Communications, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn (1992-3), put TnaG 'on the agenda' for the Department of Communications, met with FNT and hired Pádhraic Ó Ciardha (from RTÉ - currently Information Editor for TnaG) as her adviser on the matter. Roughly a year later a new coalition emerged and the Programme for Partnership Government negotiated between the Labour Party and the Fianna Fáil Party contained a promise to undertake the establishment of Teilifís na Gaeilge.

Responsibility for the establishment of TnaG then rested with the Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, Michael D. Higgins (1993-7). He appointed the Coiste Bunaithe (Establishing Committee) during the summer of 1993. Membership of the committee consisted of independent producers from various Gaeltacht areas and representatives of the social partners, under the chairmanship of Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh from UCG (University College Galway). The Coiste Bunaithe was replaced by Comhairle Theilifís na Gaeilge (a temporary authority) on 11 March 1994 and the reappointment of Comhairle Theilifís na Gaeilge was announced on TnaG news on

22 April 1997. Legally TnaG is part of RTÉ, however, currently the relationship between RTÉ and TnaG is tentative in anticipation of a restructuring of broadcasting in the Broadcasting Act anticipated by the Green Paper on Broadcasting (1995). The link between the activities in the Gaeltacht/Gaeilgoir public sphere and the actions taken by Government Ministers is the subject of this research. So far it is unclear to what degree the establishment of TnaG was the result of a healthy and vigorous Gaeltacht/Gaeilgoir public sphere, initiative from individual ministers or a combination.

Individual in the Public Sphere

Habermas does not focus on the ontological level of agency in his discussion of the public sphere and yet the individual is central. It is individuals coming together that forms a public sphere. Habermas (1989: 161) argued that the public sphere has been fragmented 'into acts of individuated reception' and while this fragmentation and consumerization restricts rational-critical discourse, Habermas seems to imply that the individual no longer possesses rational-critical thought. However, because the individual does not have access to the media and therefore cannot participate through rational-critical debate the individual's freedom rests in rational-critical thought. In this section, the two concepts of 'polysemy' and 'mythic domain' are employed. These can, to some extent, illustrate a limited freedom within the transformed public sphere.

Many authors have discussed the issue of rational-critical thought, and the emancipatory potential is often seen to exist at the level of decoding or making sense of media texts. For example, Jensen (1990) argued that the power of the audience is in the polysemy of *reception*. 'The argument is that several interpretations coexist as potentials in any one text, and may be actualized or decoded differently by different audiences, depending on their interpretive conventions and cultural backgrounds.' (Jensen 1990: 57-8). This may be so, however, Streeter (1989) argued that ideology can be polysemous as well. Consequently, polysemy would not always contain an emancipatory potential, because it is possible that sometimes the complete range of meanings can be ideological. None the less, Streeter (1989: 97) points out 'that forms of social resistance and change can emerge from the centre of the very consumerist social system that Horkheimer and Adorno saw as so hopelessly closed.'

While Jensen regarded the power of the audience as coming from the polysemy of reception, both Jensen and Streeter seem to limit the range of meanings to the meanings within the text. Although most people, most of the time take a meaning from within the text both because these are the predominant meanings in society and because the text influences the meanings people make of it, none the less, people have the capacity to take a meaning which is contrary to the apparent meanings in the text or to reject a text completely (see Hall 1980). Polysemy exists in both the text and the audience interpretation of the text.

The concept of polysemy is also central in the Green Paper on Broadcasting and TnaG's structure. In the case of the Green Paper, polysemy is reflected in the suggestion that moving the production base of one of the two RTÉ channels outside Dublin would maximize 'the opportunity for developing diversity in programming styles' (Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht 1995: 171). Within TnaG itself, polysemy is reflected in its commissioner/broadcaster role which it is hoped will produce a polysemy of texts.

However, where topics are non-issues in the public sphere (e.g. Irish language issues) and are excluded, resistance is precluded. None the less, the individual can resist because dialogue exists where people associate (e.g. within the family, the community etc.). Although this dialogue does not always form a 'public' body it is instrumental in the formation of opinion.

On the other hand, it is often presumed that the individual is informed through factual information from news and current affairs. Nevertheless, firstly, viewers remember very few facts from news and current affairs, which makes it hard to use such programmes as an information resource for individuals, therefore, perhaps it would make more sense to speak of the mythic domain of meaning production (Dahlgren 1987: 41). The *mythic domain* primarily involves emotions and the collective

messages rather than cognition and specific facts. Secondly, citizens can make no social use of the news, beyond being informed, because there is no 'point of access' (Jensen 1990: 67). Thirdly, the division between news-type programmes and entertainment-type programmes is becoming blurred (Carpignano et al 1990). All television viewers, therefore, seem to be more consumer than citizen, even when it comes to factual programmes. Nevertheless, according to Jensen, television can also be 'a source of social identity or self-legitimation, providing a sense of belonging to a community, (sub)culture or political order.' (1990: 60). (See Calhoun 1993: 6; Dahlgren 1987: 41; Jensen 1990: 68; Peters 1993: 566). Also, Habermas (1989: 162) argued that

The deprivitized 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.

A sense of belongingness is important for Irish speakers. Although individual Irish speakers already feel that, to an extent, they are part of a wider Irish speaking community, there is a feeling of being alienated within this fragmented community and that this community has little relevance for their lives. The strength of this feeling varies according to individual circumstances. However, to have a common experience, to be informed through a common language and to have common interests discussed on television can strengthen the feeling of being part of a wider community and form the basis of a sense of common identity. However, without participating in the public sphere the common experiences presented on television remain beyond the control of the individual.

While the public sphere, as the normative ideal suggested by Habermas, does not exist, none the less, TnaG provides the Gaeilgeoir/Gaeltacht community with a 'superfamilial zone' in which Irish speakers can consume Irish language television. Although TnaG does not provide Irish speakers with the opportunity to engage in rational-critical discourse in the formation of a Gaeilgeoir/Gaeltacht public opinion, it does provide an important sociolinguistic dynamic as a mythic domain. Moreover, perhaps Heller et al (1994: 169-70) are correct when they claim that a public sphere is necessary for identity construction, they argue that

identities are not supplied by immediate experience or feelings, and the themes are not present in the experience and memories of the participants as an immediate reflection of events and encounters. They need to be elaborated, transformed, and legitimated through public communication, taking into account existing themes and identities and working upon them with resources available to the participants. More importantly, all this must happen publicly, the 'grammar' of public communication having characteristics significantly different from those of private communication.

If this statement is correct TnaG, in expanding the public sphere for the Gaeilgeoir/Gaeltacht community, plays a vital role in the construction of identity. Without identity, who are we?

Access: the Crux of the Normative Ideal

According to Hohendahl (1993: 102) 'the difference between the empirically existing public sphere(s) and the idea of a just and equitable democratic society cannot easily be bridged by Habermas's theory'. Moreover, while Habermas points to the transformed public sphere as being a sphere of consumption and consensus management, this at least is a positive step for the Gaeltacht/Gaeilgeoir community. It allows Irish speakers to exist as consumers, if not as citizens, to consume in Irish, to establish a mythic domain and construct identity.

Habermas's definition of the public sphere, quoted at the beginning of this paper, claims that in a public sphere 'access is guaranteed to all citizens'. Access is a crucial precondition for the democratic function of a public sphere and Habermas, in his more recent work, has built his theory of emancipation on a model of communication (not production).

With the publication of the Green Paper on Broadcasting (1995) and during the establishment of TnaG it seemed that perhaps efforts would be made to construct a normatively functioning public sphere. Chapter three of the Green Paper (actually

entitled 'Media and the Public Sphere') argued that

The ultimate goal of a healthy production sector in Ireland, particularly in broadcasting... is the cultivation of a healthy democratic public sphere. By this is meant that domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed, access to which is in principle open to all citizens. (Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht 1995: 143)

In their unpublished response to the Green Paper, TnaG argued that one of the main points on which their philosophy is based is 'tuisceant nua ar fhéiniúlacht tré ghuth a thabhairt don phobal' and 'is cuid dhílis de bhunfhealsúnacht an Pháipéir Ghlais gurb é an saoránach féin, an gnáththomhaltóir craolacháin an té is mó a bhfuil gá lena chearta a chosaint go láidir más fúinn ról gníomhach a thabhairt dó sa toadhcháí chraolacháin' and that although they oppose the idea of a 'Super Authority' (Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht 1995: 50, 92, 166 and 207) there should be representatives from the general public on such an Authority. Before TnaG began broadcasting they organized a series of public meetings throughout the country. These meetings were open to the public to discuss any issues relevant to TnaG and represented an interesting development in public access to public broadcasting. Moreover, the structure of TnaG, as a commissioning body, was expected to provide the public with programmes produced by a variety of independent producers with different perspectives. Although this does not constitute public access, the philosophy behind it is that by offering a range of different producers access to broadcasting, the public is presented with a variety of viewpoints, thus taking a step in the direction of averting consensus management. Access is at the centre of the normative function of the public sphere. However, since TnaG began broadcasting on 31 October 1996 there has been no serious attempt to realize this. Access to the public sphere of public broadcasting appears to be confined mainly to media professionals rather than 'all citizens'. The democratization of Irish public broadcasting appears to be founded on polysemy rather than the democratic structure of the public sphere.

Conclusion

Theoretically, the function of the public sphere is to produce public opinion autogenously. This public opinion then acts as critique to balance the function of government and to democratize the relationship between citizen and state. The mass media have succeeded in expanding the public sphere and appear to support the ideal public sphere. However, Habermas (1989) argued that the commercial nature of the mass media has led to a transformation of the public sphere. The mass media became a sphere of consumption in which the public was no longer free to participate in the formation of public opinion but, rather, was fragmented into individuated acts of consumption.

None the less, Habermas (1993: 438) later admitted that his diagnosis of a unilinear development from a politically active public to one withdrawn into a bad privacy, from a 'culture-debating to a culture-consuming public', is too simplistic. At the time, I was too pessimistic about the resisting power and above all the critical potential of a pluralistic, internally much differentiated mass public whose cultural usages have begun to shake off the constraints of class.

Moreover, the vitality of the movement to establish an Irish language television channel, both in terms of the Gaeltacht action-based approach and the Gaeilgeoir interest group approach, augurs well for the existence of a number of activists who form a vigorous Gaeltacht/Gaeilgeoir public sphere.

Finally, the concepts of polysemy and mythic domain point to a certain resistance within the transformed public sphere. The mere existence of TnaG adds to the polysemy of media texts — the public has another channel to choose from. The role of TnaG as commissioner rather than producer adds to the polysemy of production within TnaG. Also, the 'resisting power' which Habermas finally admitted to and the 'polysemy of reception' Jensen discussed suggest that rational-critical thought exists to some extent. Therefore, employing the old Shannon-Weaver (1949) model, the sender, the message and the receiver are polysemous, resulting in a certain amount

of freedom for the individual as consumer, limited by the constraints of a public sphere structured by the market. On the other hand, the mass media, according to Dahlgren, produce a mythic domain, and, according to Habermas (1989: 162), 'a sort of superfamilial zone of familiarity' in which, according to many authors (e.g. Dahlgren, Jensen, Heller et al, Calhoun etc.), a 'myth' is formed, which is shared by a group of people and produces a sense of belongingness and identity. The role TnaG from this perspective is to produce a myth, a sense of belongingness and identity. Although it has been argued here that there is a vitality in the Gaeltacht/Gaeilgeoir public sphere, that there is a certain element of resistance within the consumerized public sphere and that TnaG plays a critical role providing consumer products in Irish, a consumer is not a citizen. Active participation in the public sphere cannot be equated with the 'right to withhold acclamation' or with a polysemy of consumer products. The democratization of the public sphere depends on a normative restructuring of the relationship between the individual and the mass media based on the principle of equal access.

Notes

One can imagine the relationship between individuals and the public sphere to be similar to the relationship between individuals and society. The public sphere is no more the sum of the individuals than society is. This concept, in which the public sphere is seen to emerge from conversation can be regarded as influenced by the 'linguistic turn' which was first encountered, by many sociologists, in ethnomethodology and now influences not only the work of Habermas but also Giddens's structuration theory and post-modernism in general.

The achievements of the Welfare State should be remembered. Also that interests, negotiation, conflict etc. are endogenous to the social structure (they emerge from social conflict between apparently incompatible group interests) rather than being exogenously imposed by state intervention, i.e. they exist prior to and initiated state intervention.

This is 'research in progress'. A more detailed account of the shift from Teilifis na Gaeltachta to Teilifis na Gaeilge will be forthcoming. However, see Watson 1996 and 1997 for a discussion of TnaG and national ideology and for a history of Irish language broadcasting.

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