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Irish Language Broadcast Media: The Interaction of State Language Policy, Broadcasters and their Audiences.

Tadhg Ó hIfearnáin, Department of Languages and Cultural Studies, University of Limerick, Ireland.

Abstract:

The position of Irish on the airwaves now and through recent history has always been closely linked to the strength of the language in society, its position in public opinion and national language policy, and the place of the state-owned broadcaster, RTÉ, and its subsidiary channels within the broadcasting domain. Government legislation regulates the private and voluntary sectors, which may also receive indirect state subsidies for Irish language programming. It is therefore impossible to separate the status and development of Irish in the broadcast media from the shifting nature of the State's relationship with the language and the people who speak it. The article below discusses the development of Irish broadcast media since the foundation of the State in the context of language policy. It argues that the Irish government has moved from a leading role in the early part of the 20th century in which Irish was central to all social, educational and economic policies, through a series of transformations that reflected the socio-economic development and Europeanisation of the State, to the present. At present, the government increasingly manages Irish as a minority and heritage issue, a marginalisation which provides great dangers and yet many new opportunities for Irish language broadcasters.

Introduction: Government and Media

The broadcast media in Ireland and the use of the Irish language within those media can be set in a much wider context than that of Ireland itself, and in a political, economic and cultural context that reaches far beyond broadcasting. It is possible to discern a common pattern in the relationship between European governments and radio and television broadcasting companies during the course of the 20th Century. Broadly the century can be divided into two major periods, corresponding to the first half, a period of state control and involvement, followed by the complex and rapid evolution and diversification thereafter. Both periods reflect the changing nature of state activities and responsibilities and the shifting socio-economic and political climate of the times.

In the beginning of that first period it was states themselves that set up broadcasting companies not simply as media of entertainment for their citizens, but also as educational tools. The dissemination or censorship of information was seen as a centre of power and so it was quite natural that those who held power should seek to ensure that everything from local to international news through to children's programmes and other entertainment should reflect the core values of the State, whether on a political or cultural level. As these media were able to reach into every home they were also perceived in many countries to be valuable tools in nation building, particularly, but not exclusively, by states that came into being during this period. Well established 'nation-states' seeking to reinforce their educational, political and economic projects were among the first to establish national broadcasting services. Additionally, broadcasting was an emergent technology in the early 20th Century and required major investment in setting up broadcasting companies, building transmitters, training

technical and production personnel, and even equipping the population with radio sets. Governments were among the few organisations in Europe with sufficient resources to undertake such an enterprise. As a result until half way through the century the majority of broadcasting was directly controlled by governments, and that which was not owned directly was subject to legislation and instruments designed by those governments.

While the attribution of broadcasting licences and content monitoring of radio and television programmes are still subject to government and international legislation across Europe, the direct control of broadcasters by governments is no longer general practice. Many 'national broadcasters' are however still owned by their respective states and the complex legal and financial arrangements imposed upon them can limit their editorial independence and have frequently laid them open to accusations of various kinds of bias. In comparison with other European countries, Ireland has a large 'semi-state sector' consisting of companies and organisations owned by the state and whose boards may be appointed by government ministers, but which carry out their work in the commercial world. The major broadcasters belong to this sector but are now only one kind of operator in an increasingly diverse field that reflects a larger, hugely diverse listener- and viewership, a more open liberal legal framework for broadcasting, aided by a significant reduction in the costs of making and broadcasting material.

In the early stages of this diversification the challenge came from small local and 'pirate' radio stations that both essentially sought to modify or subvert the national discourse, providing an alternative understanding of events and a different centre of interest, or simply turning the radio waves over to entertainment. In the face of public approval for these developments, governments gradually moved to regulate these stations, while the national broadcasters adopted some of their key values. From the 1960s previously staid state organisations gradually introduced pop music services, local opt-outs and regional radio. Occasionally even decentralised television stations were created with a more sympathetic view of local cultures and languages, if initially stopping well short of actually using them in their broadcasts. The key element is that the national broadcasting authorities were beginning to react to market pressure rather than being solely organs of state discourse.

The first challenges to state monopolies in television came in most European countries through the emergence of new commercial channels. As commercial television requires audience share to attract advertisers, smaller nations with relatively low numbers of potential viewers and limited consumer spending were not always appealing in themselves and were generally affected later. Cross-border markets could, however, be penetrated by expanding from big states into neighbouring countries as legislation allowed. Some of the very smallest countries, for example Luxembourg and Monaco, saw commercial television as the only way for them to build national television companies and aggressively cultivated commercial exploitation of neighbouring markets. The response of major state broadcasters, particularly those in pursuit of commercial revenue, was to move into similar programming areas. Governments generally reacted by allowing this movement while also imposing a 'public service broadcasting' requirement on state-owned channels. Where publicly owned broadcasting companies are dependent on commercial revenue they must compete with a more dynamic private sector, while retaining their public service quality content. Where the State is particularly concerned about quality issues or indeed about providing services in a less widely spoken language, this equation is clearly critical, for as Bourdieu pointed out in his criticism of French television news content, especially TF1; 'Television enjoys a de facto monopoly on what goes into the heads of a significant part of the population and what they

think.’ (Bourdieu 1998:18). If a major part of the population never hears nor sees a minority culture on their television it ceases to be part of their reality. The perception by non-speakers of the status of a minority language has a consequent effect on the actual status of that language.

In Ireland as across Europe, the national broadcaster’s services are a few among many in radio and television. Most of the population has a wide choice of local, national, foreign and international television services on cable, MMDS (‘multichannel multipoint distribution systems’, a terrestrial wireless system common in Ireland), satellite and digital networks, as well as a broad spectrum of local, community and specialist radio stations. As I discuss below, the position of Irish on the airwaves now and through recent history has always been closely linked to the strength of the language in society, its position in national language policy and the place of the state broadcaster, RTÉ (Radio Telefís Éireann), within the broadcasting domain.

The background to Irish language policy

The politics and sociolinguistics of Irish differ in many ways from the situations pertaining to other European languages which have been marginalized to the extent of becoming minority languages within their homelands. There are four specific characteristics which form the background to the Irish state’s language policies, which highlight these particularities and are immediately relevant to media provision.

The first is that Irish language policies have been in place since the 1920s, meaning that they have been operating for considerably longer than many comparable language planning practices in Europe. Although this does not mean that Irish has a better position or even one of strength compared to other European situations, it does mean that there is a considerable body of language jurisprudence, politics, sociology and practice that can inform debate on the issues.

Secondly, and crucially, Irish is a minority language within the State yet the State has until recently denied it any kind of minority status, interpreting it instead as the real native language of all Irish citizens, waiting to be liberated through the will of the people expressed through state policies. Although three hundred years ago very few people in the country could speak any English at all, a rapid language shift occurred during recent centuries until only 18% of the population claimed to speak Irish at the beginning of the 20th Century. Thus although Irish is the only ‘native’ language spoken in Ireland, by the time the Irish Free State gained its independence from the United Kingdom, the majority of the ‘native’ people no longer spoke it. The 1996 Census tells us that some 53.4% of the country still have little or no knowledge of the language. As Ireland is a democracy, this means that Irish language policy is and has always effectively been determined by, or at least with the acquiescence of, those who do not actively speak it.

The third characteristic is that unlike recent state-assisted attempts to revive minorized languages in other European countries, in Ireland it was state strategy to resolve the question by seeking to establish Irish as the “national language”. Other states through history have also established a minority language or a particular dialectal variety as that State’s official language, as in the definition and promotion of standard Italian in Italy for example, or in recently de-colonised parts of Africa, Asia and Oceania which have chosen one local language, for example a form of Swahili or a pidgin to become the State language. However,

in all of these circumstances the chosen language or dialectal variety was that of a culturally or economically dominant minority, most frequently both. Apart from a small group of intellectuals, in 1920s Ireland as a result of two and a half centuries of social, economic and political marginalization, speakers of Irish were almost exclusively restricted to the lowest socio-economic sector in society, the rural poor. Indeed, it was not really the small number of speakers of Irish which was the major issue for early language planners in Ireland, but the fact that there were so few Irish speakers in any influential roles within social, political, economic, educational, administrative or broadcasting fields.

The fourth salient point relates to the nature of Irish language policy, from a legal perspective. The majority of European countries use a legal system based on a civil code. In such a system a government can create a law from scratch, define parameters for its operation and penalties for transgressions. Ireland continued to use Common Law after separation from Britain, and consequently there is, for example, no legal apparatus that a citizen or indeed Government can invoke to oblige broadcasters to use Irish, no matter what the perceived national status of the language. There is no general Language Law in Ireland at all, although a *Language Equality Bill* which will define the responsibilities of the State and the rights of Irish speakers is currently being prepared and may become law before the end of 2001. There is, however, a history of constitutional declarations on the status of Irish. Article 4 of the Constitution of the Irish Free State (1922) declares Irish to be the “National Language”, also recognising English as co-official, a position reinforced by the Article 8 of the current *Constitution of Ireland* (1937), which states that Irish is the primary official language *because* it is the national language. As Ireland continues to use Common Law, although subordinating it to the written Constitution, the real legal position of Irish has been determined over the last 80 or so years by jurisprudence. Outside a limited number of areas, the State’s language policies have thus been as much implicit as explicit, reflecting an ‘ethos’ across all fields of state activity rather than being a result of pro-active intervention. It is within this context that Irish language broadcasting on the state-owned channels must be seen, waxing and waning with the changing interpretation of the national position.

Whereas many years of language policies have not resulted in the restoration of Irish as the majority language, they have moulded the way in which Irish people regard the language and modified their view of the nature of bilingualism. They have also fundamentally changed the linguistic division of labour. Irish speakers are now to be found in all levels of society and in all parts of the country. While the Irish-speaking communities in the Gaeltacht may still contain a number of the rural poor, the 1996 *Census of Ireland* reveals the profile of Irish speakers in wider society to be strongest in the urban educated middle-income bracket. This is important information for broadcasting companies and advertisers.

It is clear that from a sociolinguistic perspective it is the ethos reflected in the national policy, and the broadly supportive attitude of the majority who are not Irish speakers, that slowed if not entirely stopped decline in the Irish-speaking parts of the national territory, the *Gaeltacht*, and makes it acceptable to spend large sums of money on a language which is only habitually spoken by around 150,000 individuals. Significant majorities of the population in all three national surveys on language attitudes over the last thirty years (Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin 1994) seem relatively comfortable with the current situation, and so in a country where populism and consensus frequently determine government policy, there is little pressure for change in this respect, despite obvious shortcomings from the point of view of those interested in reversing language shift.

Since the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922 official policy towards Irish has gone through a number of definable phases. After initially attempting to re-impose Irish as the only medium of instruction in schools as part of a general move to replace English in society, from the 1960s the State has gradually withdrawn from this pro-active role in language revival. The movement towards surveying popular opinion on the language issue while simultaneously setting up semi-state bodies outside Government to deal with policy direction is evidence not just of current disengagement in revival policies, but is also in agreement with a general European trend away from compulsion in language policies to one loosely based on *reaction* to the perceived needs of a minority. This could be interpreted as a process of democratisation in that it is the State's perception of popular attitudes and minority rights which now drives the language policy in Ireland, such that it exists. Nelde, Strubell and Williams (1996) have characterised contemporary western European policies towards autochthonous minority languages as being of 'benign neglect', a term which has been used in relation to state-minority relations from as early as the 1980s. Pádraig Ó Riagáin (1997:23) proposes that this is the appropriate way to describe Irish policy in the 1970s and 1980s. There is of course a certain inconsistency inherent in the term 'benign neglect' in the Irish case which may not be true for the practice of continental European states. Whereas in the 1970s continental states such as France, Spain and Italy began to evolve away from oppression of indigenous ethnolinguistic groups towards tolerance and even support for the actions of language activists from those communities, since the 1920s Ireland had taken most action in favour of Irish out of the hands of the campaigners and enthusiasts and embedded it in the actions of the State. Having assumed near total responsibility for all aspects of both status and corpus language planning, the State had effectively silenced the language movement born in the late 19th Century by integrating its aims into government policy, and then funding all initiatives through the national purse. This action has effectively removed the ability of language activists to exert pressure on the authorities in coherent ways while simultaneously creating a culture of dependence in the Gaeltacht regions. Having created such a structure, distancing itself from good husbandry of policy can only really be described as negligence. The policies pursued from the 1970s through the early 1990s can only be described as benign in that the State did not articulate a conscious withdrawal from policies to support and promote Irish and did continue to respond favourably to calls to action from those sections of the community that were able to get its attention. Essentially this means that the State reacts supportively to the minority who actively set up Irish-language schools and seek services and media in Irish rather than actually leading the way itself, as it would have done in the 1930s. It responded to pressure from a challenge in 1969-70 by the Conamara-based Gaeltacht Civil Rights Movement by setting up Raidió na Gaeltachta as an RTÉ service in 1970, which started broadcasting in 1972. One can see how the State receives little challenge to this kind of stance from survey data on language attitudes. The National Survey on Languages (1993), the national survey conducted by ITÉ (1983) and the Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research survey (1973) have shown that the average citizen wants Irish revival to happen but may not want to participate on a personal basis. For example, a steady 70% of the population think that the Government should provide all-Irish schools wherever the public wants them, but only one third would send their own children to them (Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin 1994).

The current policies towards the Irish language are therefore quite ill-defined as the State, through its laws and actions, maintains a notional co-officiality and generally responds favourably, if slowly, to pressure from Irish speakers for action if it is applied. Although current policy is in keeping with much of European practice, there are many signs that the state apparatus is coming to the realisation that in a modern democracy, a *laissez faire* approach to a minority issue is not acceptable to a majority of its citizens as when dealing

with a threatened language reactive measures are not enough to enable the linguistic community to thrive. A new phase in the State's language policies has clearly begun, in which the State has to an extent moved the Irish language off the national stage and marginalized it in the national discourse, still favouring its promotion but compartmentalized as a minority issue. In this new reality Irish should thus have its own radio and television stations rather than be allotted time on national English-dominated stations; Irish should not be necessary to enter the state sector services unless dealing with Irish-speakers; there should be Irish-medium schools rather than Irish being a core element in all education; the Gaeltacht as an entity must be re-assessed in its own context rather than as part of a national policy, and so on. This is a quiet yet radical departure born of some three quarters of a century of experience in language policy and thirty years of exposure to continental European practice. This may come about as a result of the opinion of the majority of the population, only 41.1% of whom according to the 1996 Census (Central St Statistics Office 1998) actually have any knowledge of Irish, and presents serious dangers and challenges but also opportunities for the Irish-speaking population, not least in regard to the media.

Four Periods of Language Policy and Irish Language Media

Irish economy and society have developed in ways that would not have been possible to imagine back in the lean days of the 1920s. The socio-economic and political changes in the structures of society are linked to and have affected the position of Irish within society and the nature of Irish language policy throughout the century. The underlying reality remains that Irish was and is still the language of a minority. This minority is almost totally bilingual, while the stability and safeguard of the Irish-dominant geographically defined language community in the Gaeltacht areas depends on the benevolent policies of the Government, which ultimately rely on the support of the people, the majority of whom despite three or even four generations of learning Irish in school still claim no knowledge of the language.

Language policy has neither always been explicit nor developed in isolation from other policies. The role of Irish in the media should equally be seen as part of, not distinct from the general ethos and thrust of those policies. Whether Irish programming was designed as part of nation-building or as a service to Irish speakers depends on the period of policy in question. In truth it has never really been one or the other, but an unequal mixture of the two. Up until very recently, the State had a very dominant role in shaping the socio-economic development of the country, particularly through its control of the education system and industrial development. I argue that it is these socio-economic policies and general political ethos of the State which created the social framework for popular language attitudes and the development of language policies, including those related to broadcasting. However, in this period of legal harmonisation with the European Union and economic globalisation, the State now has less direct influence than ever before in determining broad aspects of economic and social policy. Accordingly, whereas it has in the past been difficult to differentiate the State's Irish policy from its general position on a broad range of issues, precisely because the State has less room to manoeuvre its language policies have started to become more explicit, and will continue to do so. Cultural policy and regulation of the broadcast media are still areas where European states have some direct control.

It is possible to divide the Irish language policies of the State into four periods, which reflect the evolving socio-economic and political situation in Ireland, and the evolving relationship

of the English-speaking majority to the Irish language. The first stage is clearly that of 'language policy development' from the foundation of *Saorstát Éireann*, the Irish Free State, in 1922 until 1948, during which the foundations for all subsequent periods were laid. An important arm of this was the establishment of Radio Éireann. Economic and political stagnation followed, and during the second period of c.1948 until 1973 when Ireland joined the European Union (then the Common Market), this stagnation and withdrawal from dynamic policies led to much disenchantment with linguistic policy, as reflected in the report of the Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research in 1975. It was during this period that RTÉ was founded, and Irish television was introduced. The third period, from the 1970s to the early 1990s, is the one of 'benign neglect', in which the State neither changed nor developed policy, taking no definable position on the language issue. Instead it referred to established practice, moved to consult the public through opinion surveys, and generally supported initiatives taken by private groups. The final period, begun as Ireland embraced full European integration with the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, is a concerted push to redefine Irish as a minority issue. The State now seeks to define Irish as a *heritage language* on the model used for ancestral immigrant languages in Europe and the US, while simultaneously moving to ensure services and support for a living linguistic minority among its citizens. These two positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but in this context the State has definitively abandoned any national revivalist policy.

Language Ideology 1922-1948

Although there were more Irish speakers in the mid 19th century than at any time in the past, they only represented about quarter of the population. The rapid decline in the number of monolingual Irish speakers in the later half of that century is also a clear indication that even the relatively socio-economically autonomous peripheral Irish-speaking communities soon found it necessary to also speak English. We must note, above all, the bad sociolinguistic profile of this Irish-speaking population, and its uneven distribution throughout the territory at the dawn of Irish independence. In 1891 some 19.2 % of what would become the Free State was Irish speaking according to the Census of Population. Only 2% of these, however, lived in the eastern province of Leinster, which includes the capital city of Dublin and other major urban and wealthy market-economy orientated agricultural centres. 80% of all Irish speakers lived in only six counties on the economically peripheral western coast. Furthermore, in a time when the hearth was the only domain of intergenerational language reproduction, analysis of the number of speakers in the pre-school age groups reveals that only in areas where about 80% or more of the population was Irish speaking was there any intergenerational transmission of the language. Another indicator of rapid language shift was that even in these homes a majority of girls and young women in some districts were returned as English-speakers.

Bilingualism in Ireland, particularly in the 19th Century, can be characterised as a rapid process of language replacement as Irish-speaking communities became absorbed into the major market economy, moving in one or two generations from monolingual Irish to monolingual English. The average Irish person's experience of bilingualism was thus that it was inherently unstable and that linguistic coexistence was probably not possible, and possibly not even desirable; facts which coloured both state policies on language and the attitude towards Irish of substantial parts of the population. It was with these sociolinguistic realities that the State set about language policies, yet with the enthusiasm inherent in a new

state born out of a cultural nationalism that had been strong enough to break the British Empire's hold on power.

The establishment of the 'native' state created a new reality. A new political orthodoxy or 'establishment view' came into existence, in which Irish was indelibly linked to political independence, national self-esteem and rebirth along with socio-economic freedom and development. This first period of Irish language policy clearly had four aspects:

1. Maintenance of Irish where it was still the community language. This was seen in the context of economic development of the periphery. To engage with this aim, the Government defined the Irish-speaking communities geographically, creating the *Gaeltacht* in 1926.
2. Revival of Irish as a spoken language and ultimately as the language of the national community. This was principally to be achieved through the education system. Clearly a socio-economic measure, this embedded Irish as a fundamental part of national development.
3. Public Service usage of the language.
4. Linguistic Standardisation and "modernisation" of the Language.

In the early education policy (for general context see Ó Buachalla 1988), the State wished Irish to gradually replace English as the language of instruction. However, neither the majority of the pupils, nor the teachers, were initially able to comply. To remedy this situation Irish gradually became the medium of instruction in the State's four primary teacher training schools. The number of subjects taught at primary school was reduced to allow for teachers' competence, and the new teachers from the Irish-medium colleges were gradually brought in to educate the younger children. The policy had noticeable effects by the mid 1930s, when 25-30% of schools were effectively Irish-medium immersion schools for children whose home-language was English. A further 25% taught more than two subjects through the medium of Irish.

The State was only directly responsible for the compulsory primary education sector, and so could not directly determine the ethos for secondary schools. However, a 'carrot' rather than 'stick' policy to encourage Irish at the secondary level was instigated, entry to the National University and even lower grades in the Public Service requiring candidates to pass exams in Irish.

State and semi-state bodies were set up in the peripheral rural areas which had been declared *Gaeltacht* in 1926. Teaching in schools and public administration was officially to become monolingual Irish, but above all it was state investment in the local economy which was seen as the most important part of the policy, the assumption being that to strengthen the position of Irish in society all that was needed was to keep the *Gaeltacht* people in their home areas. This ideology was famously summed up by a government Minister in 1975 while describing the work of *Gaeltarra Éireann*, the predecessor of *Údararás na Gaeltachta* : "no jobs, no people; no people, no *Gaeltacht*; no *Gaeltacht*, no language" (Commins 1988:15). There was a subtext to the *Gaeltacht* policy too, in that the Government viewed the *Gaeltacht* and its people as a living resource for the rest of the country to use in its language revival efforts.

Huge efforts were needed in the areas of administration and commerce, but they were never fully successful. In 1926 Ireland was still a rural economy with 60% of the labour force employed in agriculture or in related industries. 50% of the work force was also either self-

employed or in a family business. In these circumstances it was very difficult indeed for the State to influence language usage through policy. It could, however, set an example by requiring its own employees in the state service to use Irish in their work (Ó Riain 1994, Ó Riagáin 1997). There was a dual purpose in this aspect of policy. Not only did the State require its public servants to be able to provide Irish-medium services for the Irish-speaking population, which it was trying to increase, but it also urgently needed to establish professional middle-class occupations in which Irish would be the norm.

Unfortunately, there were few changes within the civil service after independence, and the hierarchies which the State inherited remained in place. This meant not only that the higher civil servants generally did not adapt to the new policies, but also that in the Service's hierarchical structure new recruits, although competent in Irish, rarely found that the language was used at the higher levels. The further they progressed through the hierarchy, the less and less Irish they used.

The fourth element of language policy, the linguistic standardisation, was more successful than other aspects. It was intended to provide terminology and advice on standard language usage for media, law, and education. A common written form was gradually perfected, based on contemporary and historical Irish usage and yet understood across all dialect boundaries. Translation and terminology services were set up. There is no doubt that establishing such a standard, *An Caighdeán Oifigiúil*, was absolutely necessary for national planning. The psychological effect on the Gaeltacht population of using only the standard in school books and on official business to the exclusion of local dialect forms was arguably less positive, and has been a continuous problem with which national Irish language broadcasters have had to grapple as they balance the need for local and national relevance.

That broadcasting was seen as an essential element in language revival and state building is clear from the fact that the first White Paper on Broadcasting was published at the end of 1923, as soon as the Civil War had died down and nearly two years before the establishment of a body as fundamental as the first *Coimisiún na Gaeltachta* in 1925. The decision to set up a national broadcasting company, under the direction of the Postmaster-General, then responsible for both post and telegraphs, was taken in March 1924. The Post-Master General, J.J. Walsh, clearly believed that as an independent state Ireland should have a national broadcasting station as a tool to develop the country as 'an independent, self-thinking, self-supporting nation in every respect' (Gorham 1967:12), although he does say in response to the three month debate as to whether or not a private company should run it that any kind of Irish station would be better than no Irish station at all. Given the thrust of Irish revival policy at the time and the principle that to keep people thinking about Irish it must be heard regularly and talked about, the effect on a population of listening only to the BBC was unpalatable. Clearly the Irish state was keen to use radio as a way to show Ireland's difference from Britain and establish the parameters of cultural policy at the heart of the revived nation, yet while 2RN, or Radio Éireann, did come on air in Dublin in 1926, it was another seven years before it became a truly national radio station. When in June 1932 the Athlone transmitter came on line and the radio went national, it was to broadcast the Eucharistic Congress, a spectacular event when the Irish Catholic Church hosted an international gathering of thousands of clergy and laity. As Gorham (1967) has shown, broadcasting in the period which corresponds to our first stage of language policy, the 1930s and 1940s, reflected very much the national myth. Ethnic distinctiveness was broadcast in a diet of Irish music and songs, Catholic religious programming, Gaelic Athletics Association matches, Irish politics, Irish language programmes and programmes for Irish-learners. This was comparable to the content

of any national broadcaster in Europe at the time, and there is nothing to say that the population did not enjoy these productions. Although Irish language programming was central to the ethos of the new station, it did suffer at a number of levels. It seems to have been underfunded in relation to English-language productions (Watson 1997:214), and was thinner on material and audience feed-back. This is, of course, understandable given the professional and marginal economic status of Irish-speakers in this early period.

Watson believes that there was for a while a possibility that an Irish-medium channel could have been established in this period, as early as 1935, although this came to nothing: In 1935 T.J. Kiernan was appointed Director of the radio station. He encouraged the formation of a committee in each county to which he would offer broadcasting access. The first committee formed was in Galway, where they hoped access would result in the establishment of some kind of Irish language station. When this was not forthcoming the committee lapsed. Watson (1997: 228)

As was typical for the time, the local initiative did not win out. Indeed, it was probably quashed as it would have meant decentralisation of power away from the State to the local level.

1948-71 Language Policy Stagnation and the emergence of R.T.É.

With hindsight, this second period saw a wavering in the State's commitment to language revival, and evidence that the politicians and civil service were moving to formulate policies which reflected their understanding of what public opinion, the opinion of the majority, wanted as a role for Irish in society. Once again this subtle change in language policy was not in isolation, but part of a broader change in emphasis in socio-economic policy that showed a movement away from the promotion of a rural, agricultural society to a more open market and selective industrial development to bring jobs to an increasingly urbanised population.

For the population outside the Gaeltacht it is very difficult to show that the undeniable growth in the population actually able to speak Irish was having any major effect on community language behaviour in the country. There is some evidence that public opinion in the English-speaking majority was changing, and that the immersion programmes were less popular than an approach which would concentrate on Irish being taught as a subject. In the 1960s, for instance, there was a noticeable decline in the number of Irish-medium and bilingual schools across the country, in a period when these were direct products of the State. There is a chicken and egg paradox here of course. Was state reluctance to support these schools causing parents to doubt them and not send their children, thus precipitating a decline, or was the reluctance of parents to participate in language revival leading the State to consider their closure?

Until the 1970s, language shift to English continued in the Gaeltacht areas despite government policies, although the rate of shift did slow down as the population of these areas began to show signs of stabilising. The popular perception is that the decline in Irish use in the Gaeltacht has continued until the present, although from a sociolinguistic angle this point of view is misleading. Recent research in the Munster Gaeltacht areas of Múscaí (Ó hÍfearnáin 1999-2001), Corca Dhuibhne (Ó Riagáin 1992) and elsewhere has shown that even in the weakest Irish-speaking areas the sociolinguistics situation is considerably more complex than simply a dwindling number of habitual native Irish speakers as presented by the much cited human geographer Hindley (1990). In a dramatic re-definition of Gaeltacht policy,

the whole area was re-classified and reduced in 1956 to reflect those areas which actually continued to use Irish as their majority language, rather than those areas where Irish was still the native language and where government influence could have changed the process of language shift, as per 1926. In a period of economic stagnation, when Irish exporters were still dependent on British markets, the Gaeltacht economy was still very peripheral and very susceptible to damage and emigration. As part of this sea change in policy away from expansion of the Gaeltacht to concentration on a reduced area, the Government set up *Gaeltarra Éireann* in 1958 to oversee industrial development of traditional craft industries, with the ultimate goal of attracting foreign industry to these areas in order to employ a semi-skilled local workforce.

The 1960s saw the Government withdraw from its very pro-active role in language policy and the setting up of government agencies to advise it on policy in particular fields. The Government certainly wanted to move away from Irish language revival to favour an 'English plus Irish' approach, though far short of functional bilingualism. In an admission that it was not at all sure what to do next, the Government set up a commission to try to establish the linguistic state of affairs and make recommendations. *Coimisiún um Athbheochan na Gaeilge* ('Commission on the Restoration of Irish') sat from 1958-63 and sought to ascertain from individuals and interest groups the direction government policy should take. The *Report* (*Coimisiún um Athbheochan na Gaeilge* 1963) examines the notion of 'Gaeltacht' in quite some detail, and is the official document of the period that most clearly outlines government thinking. Here we see the first signs of the State's withdrawal from direct action, albeit with a bad conscience, and an adoption of a reactive policy responding to public attitudes and demands, principally from the English-speaking majority. *Coimisiún um Athbheochan na Gaeilge* also published a lesser known eight-page *Interim Report* in 1959 (Savage 1996: 193-8) to coincide with the ministerial decision to set up a new broadcasting authority that would oversee the creation of an Irish television station. The *Coimisiún* advocated that the new channel should be used to redress what it believed was the State's reluctance to fully embrace the language revival, to create a dynamic service that would revitalize the national language. While stopping short of asking that the new service be an Irish-medium one, it concluded that if the State failed to act in the interest of the revival in setting up the new channel 'We fear that the effort to save the language is doomed to failure.' (Savage 1996: 194). As soon as the State had decided to set up a television station the question of Irish language television was put on the table, where it stayed throughout the period, thanks to the efforts of tireless pressure groups such as Gael-Linn under the leadership of Dónall Ó Móráin and the work of the Joint Committee of Gaelic Bodies.

It was in this world of self-doubt and ambivalent direction that Radio Éireann started to seriously consider setting up a television station, although the idea had been mooted as far back as 1926. By the time that the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs announced in 1959 that television and radio would be operated by one company under a semi-state board, it had already been decided that this television would seek revenue not simply through a licence fee and state subsidy but also through commercial sponsorship and advertising. In the economic climate of the time there may have been little choice. The fact that this broadcasting authority was to be a semi-state board is important as this marks the beginning of a rift between direct state control and the broadcasting company. Once the RTÉ Board (the name given to this semi-state body) had been established, as long as they functioned within the parameters of the establishing Act the Government could no longer interfere with regard to Irish language programming or in any other broadcasting area. The Act itself, in the image of the times, simply says that Irish should be used, but without any defining parameters with regard to

programming. Under the margin note ‘General duty with respect to national aims’, the Broadcasting Authority Act (1960), Article 17 states:

In performing its functions, the Authority shall bear constantly in mind the national aims of restoring the Irish language and preserving and developing the national culture, and shall endeavour to promote the attainment of these aims.

(*Achtanna an Oireachtais* 1960: Iml. 3)

In the years before the creation of the RTÉ Board there had been an outside chance that a language organisation could have been contracted to make Irish language programmes for the new television service, if not in fact to be central to the establishment of the service itself. Gael-Linn, an organisation founded in 1953 to promote and develop Irish through teaching, publishing and making records of Irish song and music, made a detailed submission on the case for Irish language broadcasting in 1958. The Posts and Telegraphs committee examining such submissions rejected their proposal on two grounds. Firstly they thought the financial aspects to be naïve. Secondly, they feared that Gael-Linn would use the television exclusively in pursuit of their own political aims in favour of language revival whereas the committee assumed that the Irish public wanted light entertainment. Nevertheless, Gael-Linn re-submitted their proposal with a renewed financial plan in 1959. The submission was taken seriously and considered at cabinet level before being rejected on the grounds, given by Leon Ó Broin, Secretary for Posts and Telegraphs, that Gael-Linn did not have the expertise. Dónall Ó Móráin, Founding Chairman and Chief Executive of Gael-Linn, argued that in fact politicians were afraid of granting a television franchise to Gael-Linn or any other non-state Irish language organisation because of their concern over the possible political opposition such a body might offer. In an interview with Savage (1996), Ó Móráin maintained that there were “fears that awarding the franchise to Gael-Linn would have given us a special position in the community which could provide a political threat sooner or later. Many politicians cannot see that for some of us there are more things in heaven and earth than seats in parliament.” (Savage 1996:198)

Although from the beginning RTÉ Television has always produced quality Irish-language and bilingual programmes, it is the semi-commercial nature of the organisation which has always been a challenge to devoting major resources to Irish and to giving such programming peak time audiences. For although RTÉ had no competition in the greater part of the country well into the 1980s where it was the only television channel that one could receive, the majority of the potential audience was and is in Dublin and along the east coast, where viewers could receive the growing number of British channels, including the new commercial ones, from across the Irish Sea or from transmitters in the eastern part of Northern Ireland. Competition was thus for both revenue and audience share, the two being intimately linked. Inevitably this led to a marginalization of Irish-language programming, while general financial constraints meant that Irish-made programmes were also in the minority. Making programmes is more expensive than buying American ones. Audience ratings have been the fetters of all Irish television companies. While being superficially democratic they even have a levelling effect on indigenous cultural production in both Irish and English, as the directors and producers strive to appeal to the widest audience possible. While television can open avenues to science, archaeology, history and so on through popular democratic presentation, it also runs the risk of over-simplifying and appealing to the lowest common denominator in the pursuit of ratings.

Mallarmé, for example – the very symbol of the esoteric, a pure writer, writing for a few people in language unintelligible to ordinary mortals – was concerned throughout his whole life with giving back what he had mastered through his work

as a poet. If the media today had existed in full force at the time [in the nineteenth century] he would have wondered: “shall I appear on TV? How can I reconcile the exigency of ‘purity’ inherent in scientific and intellectual work, which necessarily leads to esotericism, with the democratic interest in making these achievements available to the greatest number?”... What I find difficult to justify is the fact that the extension of the audience is used to legitimise the standards of entry to the field.

Bourdieu (1998:64-65)

Such sentiment is not elitist in that it seeks to say that television in itself can have an effect on cultural production, and the smaller the culture or the language the more the effect. In its appeal to mass audience the marginalization by RTÉ Television of its Irish language production, coupled with the style and linguistic level of its programming has been something unavoidable given its circumstances. The problems that RTÉ has experienced from its birth in relation to balancing audience share with a public service requirement to show programmes in Irish is even more acute in respect of the new Irish-medium television channel. TG4, the Irish language channel which started broadcasting in 1996, is a dedicated minority Irish channel and faces the hourly challenge of attracting the biggest audience possible while not falling into the trap elucidated by Bourdieu in his text above.

From 1971 to 1992: The rise of local media and neglect in language policy.

In 1971 Ireland officially changed from £sd to a decimal currency system, a convenient outward sign of the dawning of a new era. In 1973 the country joined the Common Market, later to become the European Union, as part of its first expansion from six to nine member states. There have been substantial changes in Irish socio-economic life since those momentous years. Ireland has joined the wealthier economies of the world. There have been consequent changes in popular attitudes to the Irish language and so in the Government's essentially reactive policy decisions. The influence of European legislation and thinking on the laws of Ireland has been all pervasive, and generally received in a positive way by Government and citizens.

As a small European economy, Ireland is also a particularly open one. As in other parts of Europe there has been a decline in the public sector, meaning that the State's potential linguistic influence on a large percentage of the workforce has also declined. In some respects Ireland was ahead of the posse in respect to privatisation, having few directly controlled state companies but many autonomous semi-state bodies in a similar relation to the Government as was RTÉ. The 1970s saw an expansion of higher education, including the foundation of universities in Limerick and north Dublin, Institutes of Technology and Regional Technical Colleges around the country. Participation rates in secondary and tertiary education grew rapidly, areas where the State has always *influenced* rather than *dictated* language policies.

Irish language policy moved to a maintenance position, avoiding any new initiatives while pulling back from the obligations of earlier years. Indeed, the two institutes in Limerick and Dublin were the first universities created by the State not to require Leaving Certificate Irish as an entry requirement. Government policy during this twenty year span has in fact been characterised by the total withdrawal of Government from the initiative in Irish language affairs until the 1990s when the Government re-entered this field but on a completely different basis. Because of the consensus and partnership style of successive Irish governments it matters little which political party or combinations of parties were in power. The Government did not stifle developments, it just did not encourage them. Although only

3% of the State's schools are now Irish medium, recent decades have seen a massive rise in new Irish-medium education, more than 100 Irish medium schools having been founded since the 1970s outside the Gaeltacht (Gaelscoileanna 2001). In this current atmosphere, Irish language policy is clearly dictated by the will of predominantly middle-class educated layers of society who can successfully lobby a broadly sympathetic government. Those who were not in such a position were unlikely to be able to gain from the State's benevolence. The urban and rural low income groups who may well have liked their children to be educated in Irish but whose local schools were closed, and the small populations of the isolated areas including the off-shore islands are two such communities.

It is in the field of media that one lobby group was very successful during this period, and undoubtedly their accomplishment spurred them and other members of their community to make further gains, including the inclusion of elected representatives onto the board of *Údarás na Gaeltachta*, the 'Gaeltacht Authority', the development agency that replaced *Gaeltarra Éireann* in 1979.

In March 1969 a group in the Galway Gaeltacht formed *Gluaiseacht Chearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta* ('The Gaeltacht Civil Rights Movement').

A group of articulate young radicals suddenly found its voice and began demanding policies to arrest the dissolution and disappearance of its own community. These Gaeltacht radicals were generally well-educated, and like similar groups in Northern Ireland, were part of the global dynamics of youth politics and civil rights movements of the late 1960s [and early 1970s]

Ó Tuathaigh (1979: 113), cited in Ó Glaisne (1982)

They had many aims to improve their communities and the position of Irish, but it was the eighth one in their constitution which became the most important battle and forced the Government, through the RTÉ Board into action: 'To create in the Gaeltacht a radio station for all the Irish speakers in the country'. [translation] (Ó Glaisne 1982:10)

These activists had recognised Irish-speakers as a minority and the Irish language as a minority issue. As citizens of the State they also believed that proper media presence was their right. This was indeed a radical departure for the time, and substantially different from the traditional state discourse on the nature of Irish speakers in society. *Gluaiseacht Chearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta* proceeded to set up a pirate radio station, *Saor-Raidió Chonamara* which broadcast from 28 March until 5 April 1970. Although the authorities quickly closed it down, the pressure from the Gaeltacht population and the proof that even a group of amateurs could set it up and run it made the case against an Irish medium station untenable. There is no doubt that it was in response to this initiative that *Raidió na Gaeltachta* was established in 1971, by the RTÉ authority on recommendation of the Government. As RnaG was set up as a division of RTÉ, no legislation was required. RnaG went on air in April 1972, and gradually expanded to a national service with its headquarters in Conamara and two regional studios in the north-west and the south-west. Smaller studios have been and are being developed in some of the smaller Gaeltacht areas, and RnaG has access to RTÉ studios in Dublin, Cork and Belfast. English is not permitted on the radio in either conversation or songs, nor does the station carry commercial advertising. This can be seen as a foil against the easy dominance of mass-audience English programming as outlined above, as well as a principled stand on the language issue. Banning English, not other languages, as Ó Drisceoil (1996) has discussed, is also an example of how *Raidió na Gaeltachta* can present a heady and often confusing mix of linguistic radicalism and comfortable conservatism. In recent surveys in several Gaeltacht

areas it has been shown that the number of teenagers who listen to the station is very small, and that they tend to listen to the bigger national music stations. RnaG does however have a very loyal audience throughout Gaeltacht, the survey in Múscaí (Ó hÍfearnáin 1999-2001) for example, revealing that about 85% of all Irish-speaking adults listen to the station regularly. Raidió na Gaeltachta has also achieved considerable audiences nationally, and claims a regular core audience of between 105,000 and 120,000 listeners, according to various editions of *Soundbite*, RTÉ's internal magazine. Half of the listeners reside outside the official Gaeltacht areas. In the 1993 National Survey on Languages, 4% of the population said that they listened to RnaG daily or a few times a week, while a further 11% tuned in less often. This is remarkable for a minority language radio which is often accused of being a local station broadcast nationally. A similar national survey conducted in 1983 also showed that 15% listened in to RnaG at least occasionally, while the numbers that listened to other Irish language media had dropped.

Audiences for Irish programmes on *other radio stations* have declined steadily to half their 1973 level. These figures, of course, reflect the availability of Irish language programmes on television and radio stations as well as the respondents-interest in them. It is worth noting that in 1983, when viewership was highest, the main television channel, RTÉ 1, carried a number of Irish language or bilingual programmes. These were fairly popular with 14-26% of respondents watching them 'nearly every week'. However, in 1993, all regular Irish language programmes were on the less popular Network 2. [N2, previously RTÉ 2, is the second RTÉ television channel.]

Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin (1994:13)

In keeping with the practice of the time, in 1977 the RTÉ Authority established an Advisory Committee on Irish Language Broadcasting, and also in keeping with the times its report(s) were never published. The recommendations of this group are contained in the 1987 report of the Working Group on Irish Language Broadcasting set up in 1986 by the Minister for the Gaeltacht and Communication (Watson 1997:13). The Working Group quite clearly still believed in earlier language restoration strategies and in the resolve of Government to implement them. Given the benign yet negligent period its recommendations to gradually introduce a wide range of Irish and bilingual programming evidently fell on deaf ears, as there was no increase in Irish language output on RTÉ television between 1986 and 1995, when the Government published a new Green Paper on Broadcasting.

1992 until Present: Heritage Language and Minority Rights

Since the pace of European integration accelerated Ireland has undergone many changes. This rapid socio-economic and cultural development, particularly in the last six or seven years has profoundly changed many aspects of public and private life. This will surely be reflected in future developments in socio-economic and educational planning of which language and media issues are only a part. These developments did not happen out of the blue, but are evidence of the gradual change in socio-economic policy, the influence of European structures on physical and philosophical levels, and the internationalisation of the island's economy. In short, they are the results of actions taken over the previous twenty years. Whether or not it was planned to be so, the present state of language policy in the country is also the result of twenty years of a *laissez faire* approach tempered by the realisation that it could not go on indefinitely in that vein. It would seem from national survey data (Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin 1994) that the increasing openness of Irish society within the European and international contexts has led to definitions of 'Irishness', ourselves and the other, being more prominent in

the public mind, highlighting questions of language maintenance and revival, in turn leading to a higher profile for Irish than at any time since the early 1970s. This has also led to a numerically stable, yet fragile structure of Irish usage within the community, itself ultimately dependent on the positive opinion of the influential minority within the English-speaking majority, who influence policy.

Although there has been no public announcement, it is clear that during the 1990s the State moved on from its passive role in Irish-language affairs and re-entered the field of language policy. Language planning operates on two levels; corpus planning and status planning. Corpus planning, the linguistic manipulation of the national language by imposing standard forms and the coining of new vocabulary, is classically the remit of the State. While the State has always had terminology committees and published general and specialised dictionaries, it no longer leads the way. In the last six years both Collins (1995) and Oxford (1998) have published generalist bilingual dictionaries, whereas the State publishers, An Gúm, have only continued to reprint their old dictionaries, the most recent of which was first published in 1986. An Gúm's only major English-Irish dictionary was published in 1959 and although still in print, has never been revised. There is an obvious need for an updated, reliable volume, and once again Collins have commissioned one. Foras na Gaeilge, the semi-state all-Ireland agency for promoting Irish will also commission new lexicographic work. While Irish remains a core school subject there will be a constant demand for such books, yet the State has handed the market to the private sector, effectively relinquishing its control over corpus planning. In the specialist vocabulary field the State's terminology commission continues to publish new specialist dictionaries, but too slowly to influence expanding vocabulary areas. Fiontar, a division of Dublin City University which teaches both an undergraduate programme in finance, computing and entrepreneurship and a master's programme in business and information technology through Irish has now started to publish its own specialist dictionaries for faculty, students and the general public. Corpus planning has thus been efficiently turned over to the open market, where those with either a need for the product or a commercial incentive to create it actually do the lexicographic work.

The State has however become active once again in status planning. In the absence of legislation with regard to Irish, it is practice which determines acceptable usage. While not touching the constitutional position of Irish, in the last years the State has moved Irish off the centre stage. Irish is no longer required to join the state service (this is the official name of the civil service here: choices are to say 'State Service', or to change to 'civil service'. Perhaps the latter is more widely understood?) except in the Department of Foreign Affairs. It is no longer required even to join the Government Department responsible for the Gaeltacht as this is now only one section of the Department of Arts, Culture, Gaeltacht and the Islands. A certificate in Irish proficiency is no longer required from newly qualified secondary school teachers except if they intend to work in an Irish-medium school. When Eircom, the state telecommunications company, was privatised in 2000 the legislation contained no obligation to provide services in Irish. The company's telephone directories now contain virtually no Irish at all and bills are no longer issued in Irish. Other utilities will undoubtedly follow suit. The 1990s have also seen the arrival of private commercial television and an expansion of private local and community radio. The Radio and Television Act of 1988 which governs the terms for applications for a licence to the Independent Radio and Television Commission (IRTC) does little more to emphasise the obligation to provide Irish language programming than earlier Broadcasting Acts.

(2) In the consideration of applications received by it and in determining the most suitable applicant to be awarded a sound broadcasting contract, the Commission shall have regard to –

...

(d) The quantity, quality, range and type of programmes in the Irish language and the extent of programmes relating to Irish culture proposed to be provided.

Radio and Television Act, 1988: Part III, Section 2(d)

Under Part IV, Section 18(1) of the same act these conditions also apply to television broadcasting licences, while Part IV, Section 18(3)(a) reinforces this stating that any new television service must ‘have special regard for the elements which distinguish that [Irish] culture and in particular the Irish language.’ So, although the legislation governing the attribution of licences does require the private TV3 and local radio stations to contribute to Irish culture, there is no enforceable definition of this nor a quota for Irish language broadcasting. Indeed closer reading of the Act reveals that actually all potential broadcasters are required to do is demonstrate their ability or intention to produce programmes with an Irish content, *at the time of the application*. It is unlikely in the present climate that the State or the courts would attempt to revoke an operator’s licence over non-compliance with the pro-Irish ‘spirit of the legislation’. It is on this understanding that licences were attributed to many new radio stations and one new television station through the 1990s.

The IRTC established an Advisory Committee on Irish language programming in May 1999 to examine the types and level of Irish language usage in the independent sector, identify the factors which inhibit and support the production of Irish language programming and make recommendations to encourage more Irish usage. This last point tells us that the IRTC already knew that although it ‘encourages the use of Irish language programming as part of normal programming’ (IRTC 2000:2), the private sector was not using much Irish, with the notable exception of Raidió na Life, an Irish-medium station for Dublin founded in 1993. The survey which the Advisory Committee carried out in July 1999 actually revealed results lower than expected. Local radio has a high audience share in Ireland and the advisory Committee pointed out that a Foras na Gaeilge/Irish Marketing Surveys Limited poll carried out in January 2000 revealed that 20% of the population liked listening to Irish programmes. In their report (IRTC 2000) they make a series of recommendations, but identified resources rather than lack of motivation as being the main inhibiting factor. They asked that INN, the independent news service produce a new bulletin in Irish and they sought state money to redress the general problem, notably in training. It is obvious that in the private sector money cannot be easily found to fund minority language productions, and that if government, through the semi-state agency for language promotion, does not shoulder some responsibility the effect will be a further decline in quality and quantity. It is unlikely the State will take a stand on this issue, leaving it to the ‘independent’ remit of that prototypical semi-state body, Foras na Gaeilge.

The above argument demonstrates the State has been following a policy of disengaging with direct sponsorship not simply of language restoration policies, but delegation of responsibility for those areas where language support structures do exist to the voluntary, private and semi-state sector. This represents a transformation in the way the State regards the language. Until this period it was regarded as the language of everybody, and the fact that the majority did not speak it was seen as an anachronism and paradox that has to be redressed. After twenty years of incubation the State has now hatched a new understanding that Irish speakers are a cultural and linguistic minority, while the majority must still be able to learn the language as it is part

of their heritage and carries sentimental and ceremonial value. This view coincides with that expressed by some language activists themselves. Since the new Coimisiún na Gaeltachta was established in 2000 some of the debate about removing weaker Irish speaking areas from the official Gaeltacht in order to concentrate on protecting the stronger areas from attrition highlights this. The setting up of a new, separate television channel is one of the most substantial proofs of the new policy of compartmentalising Irish as a minority issue, and it is difficult to deny that when *Teilifís na Gaeilge* was launched on the festival of Samhain 1996 it was perceived by the press and probably a greater part of the population as embodying the State's commitment to the language, while simultaneously absolving the Government from making any further major commitment to language issues. And so a cash-starved youth-rich channel came on the air to provide a service for Irish-speakers yet found itself saddled with the additional responsibility of catching the fading torch of language revival from the tired arthritic hand of the State. It was definitely perceived by many media commentators and a substantial part of the general public to have this role. TG4, as it is now called, is primarily a television company, but is often expected to be the answer to the national linguistic psychosis, just as Raidió na Gaeltachta has been judged, as Browne (1992) has demonstrated. The young television station is frequently and unfairly judged according to such criteria.

TG4: The dedicated Irish language television channel

That the channel came on air in the mid-nineties is indicative of the shift in the official language ideology at the time. Indeed, it is very difficult to pinpoint at what moment the decision was taken to set it up. Sporadic attempts to persuade the authorities to build an Irish service had occurred from as early as 1926 and Irish language pressure groups, long dissatisfied with RTÉ's offerings, had been particularly active in the late 1980s. Between 1986 and 1987 one group actually broadcast some programmes from a 'pirate' television at Cnoc Mordáin in Conamara, which as Ó Ciosáin (1998:21) has highlighted, presented not only a bold challenge to the authorities but also showed that the Department of Finance's arguments that the costs of setting up any such service and training technicians would be prohibitive were themselves spurious. Arguing that an Irish language television service could be run cheaply may not have been a wise strategy, but the group's main idea was to demand the service as a right and to physically challenge the government to do something about it by taking the law into their own hands. The various campaign groups combined to form *An Feachtas Náisiúnta Teilifíse* ('The National Television Campaign') in 1989. With the change in the newly emerging state view by the early 1990s the campaigners were pushing at open doors. This was reinforced by two key ministers, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn (Minister for Communications 1991-3) and Michael D. Higgins (Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht from 1993-7, with a brief inter-regnum during a change in government) being Irish-speaking elected representatives from the constituency which contains the major Conamara Gaeltacht, itself home to *Feachtas Náisiúnta Teilifíse* and where the headquarters of the new service was later built. There was no major opposition to the establishment of this channel except from the small but vocal minority who have access to newspaper columns and always equate new Irish initiatives as a ridiculous waste of time and money. As noted earlier, the majority of the Irish population favour the promotion of Irish. In addition this was not a revolutionary development on the European stage. Wales had already established S4C, which in a bizarre twist had even been coming into homes in parts of Ireland on multi-channel services. Scottish Gaelic had a television commissioning service. People were aware of Catalan and Basque television services in the Iberian peninsula, and even resolutely ideologically monolingual France appeared to be developing services in some of its 'regional' languages. The only critical opposition really seems to have come from RTÉ. In its reply to

the 1995 Green Paper on Broadcasting, which effectively set up *Teilifís na Gaeilge* (TnaG) as a subsidiary of RTÉ, it welcomes the station because ‘the Irish-speaking population requires for the health of its own public sphere a dedicated television channel of its own.’ (RTÉ 1995: 29). The company was, however, clearly resentful of the fact that it would be losing authority in programming decisions while still being required to provide one hour a day of programming and share news and current affairs with the new channel. Whereas RTÉ saw its Irish language radio subsidiary Raidió na Gaeltachta as complimentary, it obviously saw TG4 as potential competition and favoured a ‘separate and independent status and management for Teilifís na Gaeilge’ (RTÉ 1995: 28-29). While TG4 does still operate as an autonomous company within RTÉ, it is probable that it will leave the RTÉ fold in the near future. This might restrict TG4 access to RTÉ archives and other resources. Without additional finance from the tax payer, the possible benefits of fuller independence would result in further marginalization of Irish and Irish broadcasting within the semi-state sector. Since 1995 there have been changes in key management at RTÉ. The Director General, Bob Collins, has a very positive attitude to the Irish language and broadcasting, while the current Director of Television, Cathal Goan, was previously *Ceannasaí* (Director) of TG4. It is unfortunate that in the absence of structures and statutory obligations, the future of Irish language broadcasting and relations between broadcasting companies, as with all other domains of Irish language life, depends on the good will or lack of good will of a few individuals.

The television channel has now been on the air for four years and four months, and has been gradually building its market share in a very competitive environment. Changing the name of the channel from *Teilifís na Gaeilge* or ‘TnaG’, was part of this strategy. There are four national terrestrial channels in Ireland. TnaG was the third on air in 1996 and was followed by TV3 in Autumn 1998. Only 25% of houses in the State receive only these four channels. A further 25%, mainly on the east coast and in the area surrounding the Northern Ireland border receive between four and eight additional channels originating in the North and Britain. The remaining half of the population are linked to multi-channel services receiving Irish and foreign channels. Although TnaG was the third Irish channel to come on air, three quarters of the population already had a spectrum of choice. As a new and minority channel TnaG was relegated well down the list, and off the much prized first nine buttons of the TV zapper, a situation which still persists with some service providers. Once TG4 had adopted its new name and when TV3 came on air home viewers, at least, found it logical to put all four Irish channels together on the first four buttons: RTÉ1, Network 2, TV3 and TG4. The new channel suffered in its first years from a number of other visibility problems. Whereas the government obliged all cable and MMDS operators to carry the new private channel, TV3, TG4 was lumped together with RTÉ, meaning that it had to await upgrades on terrestrial transmitters to broadcast into many parts of the State. At the time of writing TG4 is still not available in all Gaeltacht areas. Prominent listing of its schedule in national newspapers and even in the weekly *RTÉ Guide* were also a predicament.

Nevertheless, the station has been building its share of the peak time market, registering 2.2% of the total of viewers between 18.00 and 23.30 in autumn 2000:

	Sept. 2000 – Nov. 2000	Sept. 1999 – Nov. 1999
TG4	2.2%	1.4%
RTÉ 1	37.1%	37.4%
Network 2 (N2)	12.8%	14.8%
TV3	9.0%	7.0%
Ulster Television	12.7%	11.3%

Channel 4	4.3%	4.0%
Sky 1	2.3%	4.8%
Sky News	0.3%	1.1%
BBC 1	7.0%	7.9%
BBC 2	3.2%	3.3%
Others	9.2%	7.1%

Source: (TG4 2000)

It is necessary to draw a distinction between the market penetration of TG4 as a broadcaster, and the success of its Irish language television programmes. Market share is important even if much of that share is achieved in the early years by showing classic films and sport in English, foreign films and other programmes that would not easily find a place in the schedules of the major broadcasters that seek to please the mass market. The population has a loyalty to television channels, and this loyalty may often determine what they watch. TG4 needs to cultivate its audience as an *alternative* channel in which Irish has a central role. Viewing figures for Irish language programmes shown on RTÉ 1 and Network 2 are consistently higher than for programmes of similar quality and subject matter on TG4. When a topical current affairs programme is on an RTÉ channel its audience can be as much as ten times that of the same programme shown on TG4. Programmes on RTÉ benefit from ‘piggy-backing’. This phenomenon was crucial to the early success of Scottish Gaelic television, where for example broadcasts made during peak times within the schedules of two of the Scottish television channels frequently attained audiences of above 200,000 in some regions, which is more than twice the Gaelic-speaking population of the whole country (Comataidh Telebhisein Gàidhlig 1995: 23). Equally, now that much of Scottish Gaelic television is broadcast well off-peak, in the early morning or late at night, its ratings have dropped enormously. RTÉ produces approximately one hour a day for TG4, some of which is shared between the two stations. Where a programme is to be shown on both channels TG4 rarely gets the ‘first view’, except in the case of some sports broadcasts. Another factor is that RTÉ consistently subtitles its Irish programmes. A loyal audience with a low tendency to zap is more likely to watch an interesting programme through the haze of rusty Irish, aided by English subtitles than to tune in to watch the live cut and thrust of debate in idiomatic native Irish on TG4. These are overlapping yet different audiences using different media, the second inevitably smaller. TG4’s pre-recorded Irish language programmes are generally subtitled in English, either on screen or on teletext. This is controversial among viewers. Whereas the company believes that this policy may attract viewers, subtitles are a distraction for those who understand the content without them. They actually create a parallel narrative, constantly attracting the eye of the bilingual viewer and interfering with the visual presentation of the programme.

TG4 is caught between fluent speakers and semi-speakers. The top five Irish-language programmes on TG4 at the end of 2000 were sports and original drama, attracting audiences of 46-70,000. The soap opera *Ros na Rúin*, broadcast twice a week with an omnibus edition on Sundays attracts around 30,000 viewers on each airing. Although these are small numbers in the national arena, they are growing and are already significant when seen in the context of the potential audience. They even compare well to the classic English-language films which were the most popular programmes shown on TG4 in autumn 2000, pulling 97-115,000. In the 1996 Census 1,430,205 individuals claimed to speak Irish, or 41.5% of the population of the State. Only around 75,000 adults state that they spoke it on a daily basis, allowing us to extrapolate that allowing for children who use the language outside school, approximately

100-150,000 people use Irish on a daily basis or have a high level of fluency in it. If this is the core potential audience for TG4's home programming, it could be argued that the station is making as much as a 50% penetration at its peak. If we compare TG4 and RTÉ ratings, there is clearly some way to go to create station loyalty. According to the RTÉ Audience Research Department (based on *A.C. Nielsen of Ireland Ltd.* data) RTÉ1's Irish language news bulletin *Nuacht* for example averaged 94,000 viewers between 4 September and 1 December 2000 (TV Rating 2.6, 16% share), while the current affairs programme *Léargas* attracted an average of 296,000 viewers between 19 September and 28 November 2000 (TV Rating 8.3, 26% share). The potential audience for all types of programme is of course vary variable. Political debate and current affairs may only appeal to a small number of adults in any language, whereas children's programming in Irish has the potential to attract not just the few thousands who use Irish at home, but the entire school-age population of the State who all learn Irish at school.

TG4 has shown in its first years that it has the potential to become a central part of the life of Irish-speaking Ireland. Its budget is tiny, less than a quarter of the Welsh channel S4C, and even smaller compared to minority language television broadcasters elsewhere in Europe. On a tiny budget of £14 million a year, plus c.£6 million in kind from RTÉ, it provides a broad range of Irish language programmes for a varied yet small market, while constructing an image as a national alternative station.

Conclusion

In this contribution I have sought to place Irish-language broadcast media in the context of language ideology and action in Irish society. Inevitably the State has had a central role throughout the period. Even when Government has subcontracted services and delegated power to semi-state bodies, it is still the State's own activity or lack of activity which determines the status of the language in society. Public opinion in its majority has been in favour of restoring Irish since the foundation of the State, but similarly a majority have not wanted to engage personally with the revival. With the exception of the earliest period of language policy the State has not taken a dynamic approach to the issues raised by Irish. In the present day the State has moved to a position of management and containment through compartmentalising the official functions of the language to arts and heritage on the one hand, and rights of the minority on the other. The majority of the population have been comfortable with state policy from 1922 until the present and as a result have never exerted pressure for change, leaving Government with a free hand. As Irish-speakers are a minority it is never they who have been in the driving seat, but as we move into the 21st Century some power and responsibility are being put in their hands, albeit within tight parameters defined by the State. The broadcast media have always been central to these issues in Irish language and society. They have been part of the problem, and may yet contribute to part of the solution.

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Audience Ratings: Nielsen. Source: D. Moore, P. Ó Ciardha (TG4) and A. Kealy (RTÉ).