

Thesis Title: The rise and fall of the public sphere?

Public Service Broadcasting in Ireland, a wasted opportunity?

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Abstract: The following thesis has set itself the task of answering the following questions. Does RTE's news and current affairs constitute a public sphere? Does it provide the viewer or listener with a detailed, substantive analysis of the issues it covers, providing the viewer with an arsenal of political facts in the process? Do we emerge at the end of any given broadcast a better-informed electorate? Or is the station guilty of the charge levelled against it by many of its critics, namely, that in the search for ratings, it has jettisoned its public service remit to deal with the issues it covers in a detailed way, and instead embarked on a "dumbing down" or tabloidisation of this aspect of its output?

Introduction: My thesis topic involves an examination of one of the key themes within the Sociology of the mass media, namely the nature of the relationship between Public Service Broadcasting and the wider society, which it is designed to serve. In the Irish context this can take the form of an inquiry into one aspect of the relationship between RTE and the public which subsidises it, namely an analysis of RTE's representation or framing of politics on prime time television.

To this end I have decided to construct my research question around an examination (using Habermas's suggestion that the media can and should play a vital role in the maintenance and construction of a vibrant public sphere as a regulative ideal) of the hypothesis that RTE as the national broadcaster, the only Public Service Broadcaster in the country is failing to meet its legislative remit to keep the population at large politically informed as to the nature of the world they live in.

In more concrete terms I want to find an answer to the question of whether RTE's political coverage facilitates rational debate (à la Habermas and the public sphere) or

does it, by virtue of the way it covers the political issues it does, attempt, for whatever reasons, to naturalise political apathy/false consciousness among those of us who don't belong to the political class.

The theoretical perspective I will be working within is that of the neo-Marxist Frankfurt school, paying particular attention to the theories of the mass media developed by Horkheimer and Adorno i.e. the Culture Industry thesis, and that of the public sphere associated with Habermas.

Now while critical theory is a broad church, of the few things that all its practitioners agree upon is the important connection between knowledge and power. To critical theorists knowledge is power, and conversely, ignorance in relation to matters that "should" concern us as citizens of a democracy is to be equated with powerlessness. So with this in mind, I think that by using a critical perspective to examine one of our primary sources of political information, the finished thesis could potentially offer some insights into whether RTE as an information resource empowers or disempowers us politically.

My basic assumption in choosing the above topic is that any social institution that influences how people think is worthy of sociological investigation. I think the mass media matters because it does both of these things.

Applying this to the Irish context leads me to conclude that a study into the political coverage offered by RTE, and how its linked to wider social structures, could shine a light onto the changing nature of Irish society.

RTE is in my view one of our most important and influential institutions. And while it does not enjoy a monopoly on the production of political information, nevertheless its reputation as a source of objective and unbiased news and current affairs coverage, provides it with the capacity to construct the framework or discourse within which we approach political issues. Consequently its relevance for sociological study is to my mind self-evident.

Chapter1: Literature Review

The purpose of the following literature review is to give the reader an insight into how the topic of the mass media generally and public service broadcasting in particular is situated within a sociological perspective.

The review is divided up into three different sections. The first section will introduce us to the concept of political communication, and how it is framed by the two dominant theoretical perspectives in the mass media, namely that of the Marxist and Liberal approach.

The second section will discuss Habermas and his notion of the public sphere. It's from Habermas that I will get part of the criteria I will be using to answer my thesis question.

The third section will involve a look at the emergence of public service broadcasting in Britain and Ireland, with a specific focus on RTEs system of dual funding, which leaves it in a permanent position of trying to withstand the commercial pressures it is subject to on the one hand, while at the same time trying to meet its public service remit on the other hand.

Theories of the Media:

When it comes to examining the mass media there are two broad theoretical perspectives that sociologists call upon. These are the Liberal-pluralist (influenced by the ideas of John Stuart Mill and his "tyranny of the majority" thesis) and the Marxist and neo-Marxist schools of analysis.

Both of these approaches while disagreeing on the effects of media output on the audience in general (e.g. TV violence may or may not lead to copycat behaviour etc), agree that when it comes to being either politically ignorant or politically well informed, then the media, particularly that of TV news and current affairs, plays a key role in deciding the matter. Both perspectives believe that it is this institution above all others that shapes the issues we think about, and how we think about them.

It is in this role as a "gatekeeper" of political information that the media comes into its own as an institution, which can either reflect or distort reality. "It is through TV news that the state makes itself visible to most people on a regular basis. TV news has become the major source of news for a majority of the population, and the only source for many; moreover, it has become the medium most trusted by the public."

(Dahlgren:1980:201)

Liberal Theory:

The classical liberal approach (as opposed to a more neo-liberal approach) agrees with the Marxist view that an informed populace is a good thing in itself. One way of becoming more informed is to have access to objective unbiased political information. This is where the mass media come in. According to the liberal-pluralist perspective the mass media are an essential mechanism for ensuring an informed debate on the issues of the day.

The role they can, should, and do frequently play is that of a critical watchdog, working to "expose and criticise the activities of those who rule and the principles on which their decisions are based." (Thompson: 1995:238)

However, for the Liberals this democratic function cannot be adequately performed by public service broadcasting as its dependence on government will inevitably compromise its output, caused by direct government interference and/or a policy of self-censorship being adopted by those at the higher echelons of such an organization.

In relation to RTE, Farrell Corcoran outlines part of the liberal objection to state supported media. "Given that government can set limits to RTEs income, it is inevitable that there will sometimes be reluctance within some parts of RTE to allowing its output to offend politicians." (Corcoron: 2004:91) Thus, from the Liberal perspective a free media is one that is free from government influence.

For the liberal the more independent sources of political information there are the better for the citizen. And the way you create more of these sources is through a deregulation of the market place and the creation of a fair playing field for all.

Where public service broadcasting is concerned the logic of the Liberal position, is to either get rid of it completely, or alternatively, to give its commercial competitors a slice of the licence fee/government subsidy in order to enable them to beef up their own news and current affairs output.

The main obstacle preventing freedom of speech is government. Consequently the idea that a public service broadcasting institution (one whose budget is effectively in the hands of government) could facilitate free and reasoned debate is a contradiction in terms.

So for the liberal pluralists the problems with public service broadcasting are twofold. They fear that its current affairs coverage will be shaped by a reluctance to upset government. But also by the belief (harking back to Mill) that the real "threat to moral and intellectual authority as being posed less by the "masses", in the sense of a modern variant of the mob, than by the dull complacency of the self satisfied middle classes." (Gurevitch et al:1988:34)

The warning here is essentially one against allowing the ideology of a self-serving liberal elite from taking a stranglehold on the political culture, becoming the new common sense or conventional wisdom in the process. In this respect there is a convergence between the liberal approach and the Habermasian blueprint for the creation of an "ideal speech" situation. Both of which object to the notion that there are a set of self evident truths about any given substantive issue that all "right thinking people" by definition must assent to. In relation to public service broadcasting this is a Liberal warning to the public about being fooled (as they see it) by the sales pitch employed by many national broadcasters that they, unlike their commercial competitors provide news and current affairs coverage that's free from bias.

My own view on this issue is that I think that the media are very influential; I think they do to a large degree set the political agenda. They shape what we think about, and the way we think about it.

However for the thesis my interest is not so much in the effects on the audience, but more about looking at how bias (if it exists at all) is institutionalised via the way the political debate is framed, paying particular attention to the types of questions interviewers ask.

Marxism:

While the Marxist perspective is a broad church, one of the few things that all its practitioners agree upon, is the important connection between knowledge and power.

Where politics is concerned, they take the view that people who are politically ignorant are easier to manipulate than those who are not. The more knowledge we have of how the world works the more empowered we become.

Broadcasting is first and foremost a business, its primary objective is to make profits, and its loyalty is to its shareholders and not its audience. The free market left to its own devices will, and this is a process which has been exacerbated by globalisation, far from ensuring a plurality of media voices, inevitably lead to the monopolisation of the airwaves by a small number of private corporations. However, unlike their public service counterparts these monopolies are not accountable to the public at large.

The two schools of thought within Marxism that I want to examine are those of the Frankfurt school and the Political Economy approach. Both share the belief that the mass media as its currently constructed exists to reproduce the Capitalist system to perpetuate the status quo.

Given that the Marxist position is predicated on the belief that this system only benefits a minority of people, and that it continues in existence only because the vast majority of people are in a state of false consciousness, unaware as to where their true interests lie. Its criticism of the mass media centres on how the media perpetuates this state of political ignorance. They do this by leading their audience astray. As capitalist organizations one of their chief functions is to naturalise political apathy and political ignorance. This can be achieved in 2 ways. Those that own and control media

institutions either don't provide much coverage of news and current affairs, or if you are covering it, cover it in a biased way. To in effect run the television or radio station in the manner of a newspaper, identify your audience and then give them what you think they want.

Taking the latter approach (which argues that ownership and control determines the media's output) first. We see that from a political economy perspective a direct link is made between economic ownership and the dissemination of political messages which affirm the legitimacy and the value of a class society." (McQuail: 1994:76)

When media institutions are privately owned and controlled then it follows that the information they choose to disseminate will be that which benefits and /or reflects the views of the owner, who because of the way our society is structured will inevitably be a member of the ruling class. In a capitalist society members of the working class are by definition excluded from ownership of the means of production.

Consequently the Liberal claim that the quality of political information available to the audience is in direct relationship to the number of media outlets available is repudiated. The free market only gives the illusion of extra choice; in reality the situation is one where a handful of multi-national corporations owned by media moguls like Murdoch and Berlusconi own and control most of the largest and most powerful media corporations in both the United States and Western Europe.

In terms of the actual content of media output this can, but need not necessarily involve the propagation of specific right wing values or policies. Ideology works as much in what's not covered as in what is.

In terms of how television achieves this effect I think a good analogy to make is to compare to the newspaper industry as it pertains in both Britain and Ireland, which divides papers up into tabloids and broadsheets. From a Marxist perspective both are bearers of a capitalist ideology. The former does this by providing very little news and

current affairs, while the latter, although its full of this kind of content provides the reader with a partial and biased understanding of those same issues.

Where Public Service Broadcasting is concerned there is an overlap between the theoretical perspectives we are looking at. Thus, the argument that says that because RTE is “owned” by the population at large these issues of bias don’t arise, is of course rejected out of hand by the political economy approach. Instead they take the view that RTE is a public service broadcaster in name only.

Because RTE is dependent on the licence fee and the revenue it receives from advertisers it has two masters, the government of the day and the advertising industry. In a conflict of interest situation between these and what's in the public interest, the latter will always loose out.

Because RTE has to justify to the government that its budget is being well spent, and that it is still pulling in a majority of the potential audience. It's effectively market forces that determine what does and what doesn't get on the air.

So from a political-economy perspective political bias is largely a product of the co modification of media content. This is the process where the value of media content is determined by its market value. It has become a commodity, to be bought and sold in the marketplace. If something is in supply then it is of value if its not it is not. This state of affairs applies to both the commercial and the public service sector. Media content has become another product to be packaged, marketed and sold.

Thus, for many critics who work from within this perspective and who subscribe to the dumbing down thesis, it’s the co modification of public service broadcasting, rather than an ideological bias that determines what's covered and how its covered.

So for example the fact that in their view there is not enough news and current affairs on TV at the moment, and/or that the coverage that is provided does a pretty poor job

of explaining in detail the issues its covering. This is not to be explained by reference to proprietorial influence, a Murdoch or Berlusconi type figure interfering in the day to day running of one of their television stations and saying that issue A is either not to be covered, or if its covered to be covered in a partial and misleading way. Rather the kind of news and current affairs coverage it provides is to be explained by reference to what the programme makers think that the audience want, or to be more precise a certain section of the potential audience, the demographic that advertisers most want to reach. Thus it's the audience, or the programme maker's perception of what the audience wants, and not some ideological agenda on the part of the journalists themselves, or government, or those who own and control media institutions that determine its output. And the conventional wisdom on the part of those in the know is that most people want less news and current affairs, and to make that which is covered more "entertaining". Thus, the programming is largely determined by the audiences that advertisers most want to reach. At present the most sought after demographic is that of the 16-25 yr old. A group notoriously uninterested in news and current affairs. Consequently attempts to attract this audience inevitably leads to a dumbing down of news and current affairs coverage, as in the attempt to capture the largest possible audience the distinction between news and entertainment is frequently ignored.

The Frankfurt school meanwhile takes a different approach. It sees media institutions as being part of the culture industry, and as such they enjoy a degree of autonomy from the economic basis of society.

According to Marcuse the mass media "comprise an instrument for maintaining a form of totalitarianism which does not rely on terror, but works through the creation and manipulation of "false needs"-for entertainment, relaxation, information and

personal manipulation of "false needs", for entertainment, relaxation, information and personal consumption." (McQuail: 1998:15)

A basic assumption made by most critical theorists is that the mass media are ideological tools, which are used by dominant interests in society to perpetuate a dominant ideology. What this means is that the media perpetuates a set of beliefs that benefit those in power. It does this by attempting to naturalise a particular political orthodoxy.

Where political coverage is concerned, one way this is done is by presenting the audience with a very partial view of reality. The issues it covers, and the way it covers them lead the audience to conclude that politics is essentially a spectator sport.

So according to this line of thinking, when it comes to the traditional studio interview (either on the radio or on television) it will be a rare event when the interviewer does not introduce bias into the situation by asking leading questions.

I heard a recent example of this phenomenon in action on BBC's radio four flagship current affairs programme "Today" (the programme RTE's morning Ireland is based on).

What happened was that a five minute discussion on the proper use of language (the topic was a drop in standards among the public at large in the use of proper grammar, syntax etc (based on the notion that a sloppy use of language reflects an inability or a refusal to think properly) was followed by a piece on the changing nature of the relationship between Libya and the EU.

This involved the interviewer (who just previously had been effusive in agreeing with the importance of a careful use of language) asking the interviewee how he could explain the recent rapprochement between the EU and Libya as "everyone has Libya on or near the top of their most dangerous countries in the world list".

This in my view is a clear case of the interviewer overstepping his role which whatever about commercial broadcasters is when it comes to public service

broadcasting to act as an objective, unbiased mediator, a vehicle of information if you like, to become a participant in the debate.

So what's wrong with the question? Well to my mind the question he has asked is almost the paradigm case of a biased, ideologically motivated question. The political subtext being that the "international community" have the right and the power to label other countries, and that all "right thinking people" have to go along with such labels.

So because Libya has been declared a terrorist state it must indeed be a terrorist state.

At the risk of being pedantic, surely "most people" on the planet don't have an informed view on the matter either way, "most people" are not walking around with such lists in their heads. In relation to those people who are politically aware there is no guarantee that Libya would indeed come top of their list. For example I wonder how many Muslims would agree with such a claim? For that matter how many British people would even agree with such an assertion?

So why didn't the presenter put his ego to one side and ask a more balanced question? Why didn't he simply seek the view of Mr X as to what, in light of the fact that many countries have declared Libya to be a sponsor of terrorism, his view of the specific policy change was? It's impossible to know for sure of course, but to my mind two possible answers suggest themselves. First of all the phrasing of the question actually reflects the considered political view of the presenter in question. And he is using the public airwaves to express his own political opinions. Or secondly, that it's an attempt to both "liven" up the discussion and in the process perpetuate his reputation as a distinctive/provocative type of presenter. Either way the interested listener loses out and learns nothing substantive about the issue.

Habermas and the Public Sphere:

In the "structural transformation of the public sphere" Habermas tells the story of the rise and fall of the public sphere. The "public sphere is a concept which in the context of today's society points to the issues of how and to what extent the mass media, especially in their journalistic role, can help citizens learn about the world, debate their responses to it and reach informed decisions about what courses of action to adopt." (Dahlgren: 1993:1)

For Habermas the destruction of the public sphere is part of the wider process of the "colonisation of the life world" which involves the penetration of instrumental rationality into every aspect of our lives.

This process is one of the factors, which Habermas believes is responsible for what he considers to be a crisis in democracy, which many western countries are experiencing. This crisis is characterised by widespread apathy and disillusionment with the political process among the general public.

This is a situation where the "mass of the population is excluded from public discussion and decision making processes and is treated as a managed resource from which political leaders can elicit, with the aid of media techniques, sufficient assent to legitimate their political programmes." (Thompson: 1995: 72)

However Habermas is not completely pessimistic as to the possibility of the mass media regaining its role as a public sphere. Indeed its fair to say that the mass media particularly in its incarnation as public service broadcaster constitute (as in principle at any rate Public Service Broadcasters typically rail against the co modification of news, which is a process identified by Habermas as contributing to the decline of the

public sphere-for him (for the time being at least) the only coherent answer to the question of what conditions would "make possible rational discussion of public affairs and democratic decision-making." (Outhwaite: 1994:137)

There are two aspects to the public sphere as Habermas uses the concept. One is an historical description (which has been heavily criticised) of the emergence of the public sphere, in the form of coffeehouses, pubs etc. in the 17th century in England and Germany especially.

While the other definition is that of a normative ahistorical ideal, which can be used in the style of a Weberian ideal type, as a measure or standard against which empirical candidates for public sphere status can be measured. It is this latter use of the term, which I intend to focus on in my thesis.

Thus, part of my thesis will be an exercise in what McQuail calls "Media performance discourse". This involves "the evaluation of mass media content according to a number of normative criteria". (McQuail: 1994: 251)

"The public sphere is a concept which in the context of today's society points to the issues of how and to what extent the mass media, especially in their journalistic role, can help citizens learn about the world, debate their responses to it and reach informed decisions about what courses of action to adopt." (Dahlgren: 1993:1)

In ideal terms, Habermas conceptualises the public sphere as that realm of social life where the exchange of information and views on questions of common concern can take place so that public opinion can be formed". (Dahlgren: 1993:7)

The public sphere mediates between civic society and the state. It is a key mechanism, which facilitates the formation of an informed public opinion, which is designed with the purpose of holding government to account.

It is the "space" where the citizen goes both to learn about, via the exchange of factual and politically useful information, and participate in debates on the major political

issues of the day. It facilitates the participants involved to systematically think through the issues at hand.

Obviously when it comes to mass communication generally, and PSB in particular, our participation in the public sphere is a metaphorical one. While government policy/exercise of political power whether by govt or interest groups is made visible/public it is undoubtedly the case that when listening and viewing current affairs programmes, we are effectively eavesdropping in on someone else's conversation/debate. One, which we have no immediate power to affect or respond to. However, in spite of the seemingly asymmetrical relationship between the viewer and the TV, there is in reality nothing in this mediated interaction that necessarily renders the viewer passive. The fact is that any information gleaned from said programmes can be used as an intellectual resource with which the viewer in his role as citizen can use to hold the powerful to account. Of course whether this comes to pass or not is down to innumerable other variables, which have little or no connection to what, they didn't or didn't learn from the programme in question. The belief that knowledge and power are intimately linked isn't effected by the claim made by many commentators that a "public sphere" populated by atomistic individuals getting their information via technology is a contradiction in terms.

"Rather than sounding the death knell of public life, the development of mass communication has created a new kind of publicness and has transformed fundamentally the conditions under which most people are able to experience what is public and participate today in what would be called a public realm."

(Thompson:1995:247)

Communication in the public sphere is modelled on what Habermas calls the "ideal speech situation"; this is an open, uninhibited, and free conversation between equals involving everyone (or their representative) directly affected by the issue at hand.

It is characterised by a rational form of discourse, which is open and unconstrained, which privileges systematic argumentation where claims and counter claims are backed by evidence.

The rules of the game include making presuppositions explicit, an embargo on ad-hominum attacks, and a questioning of the morality behind pursuing the policies in question. At all times fidelity to the process of justification via arguments and evidence is to be maintained. All of this is done with a view to reaching a consensus via the use of rational argument on the issue at hand.

So what would rational debate on RTE according to Habermas, s criteria look like?

How would we recognise it if we saw it? To my mind a good concrete way of illustrating what Habermas means when he refers to rational communication is to compare it to what its not, namely the irrational and manipulative kind of communication that characterises much of the mass media's output.

This latter form of discourse is characterised by a number of features.

1-Time limitations-the discourse is ruled by the sound bite-if the point can't be made in less the thirty seconds then its excluded. Consequently conventional wisdom is privileged over the unconventional and original.

2-These include a focus on personality (either the interviewer or the interviewees- rather than on the substantive issues nominally under discussion.

3-An attempt to provoke controversy for the sake of it-because this is what the producers/editors deem to be good TV/Radio-rather than analysing the issues.

4-The assumption on the part of news and current affairs presenters and the experts they interview that the political terminology they use is transparent to the general audience.

5-And on a related point, the assumption that the fundamental political concepts they bandy about in an unthinking fashion like "democracy", "anti-American", "racist" etc are uncontested by all "right thinking people".

Now while the concept of the public sphere is a contested one (its not one that actually originates with Habermas) it is possible to identify in Habermas, s use of the term, three positive necessary and sufficient conditions for a public sphere being recognised as a public sphere.

According to this line of thinking a public sphere must provide equal access to all interested parties. It must not privilege a priori any one voice over any other; the public sphere is where you leave your "credentials" at the door.

Finally the debate that ensues has to be a rational debate. This means that you follow the argument wherever it leads, as opposed to letting your emotions and your prejudices pull you hither and thither. A corollary of this is that no subject is off bounds. When it comes to rational debate there to rational debate there are no taboo subjects, every issue can be raised and every concept and category can and should be questioned.

When it comes to analysing my data, the criteria I will be using to answer the question as to whether RTE's coverage of the specific case study in question meets the standards of a Habermasian public sphere, will be drawn from the above principles.

Public Service Broadcasting

Public service broadcasting is broadcasting which serves the "public interest".

The notion of the public interest is a contested concept, with different countries working with different conceptions of what it means, and what would therefore constitute public service broadcasting. It is possible however to identify a number of elements, a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that a public service should have if it is to be deemed a public service. "It should be available to all in a society, irrespective of wealth or location; it should provide citizens with the information and education that they need to contribute to enlightened public debate and for informed democratic participation." (McCullagh:2002:81)

Consequently the public service ethos is informed by a belief that such programmes are not simply another form of commodifiable good or service, which the free market can provide for. Rather it is characterised by the belief that the public interest is best served in the production of a range and quality of programming, which goes beyond that which the marketplace can provide.

Historical Overview:

The first public service broadcasting company, the BBC (the British broadcasting company) came into being on the 1st January 1927 (this was of course a radio service), as TV was yet to be invented (it didn't appear until 1952). It was established by royal charter, which gave it an autonomy, which shielded it from both political and economic pressures. In terms of funding the BBC derived its budget from a licence fee.

This left it free to meet its public service remit, which was to make programmes, which informed, entertained and educated the British public. According to Reith (the corporation's first director general) the BBC had been given a "responsibility to carry into the greatest possible number of homes everything that is best in every department of human endeavour and achievement." (Blumer et al: 11)

In effect, Reith saw public service broadcasting as an essential mechanism of social engineering; one, which he believed, could and should be harnessed to broaden the minds of the audience, to extend their understanding of themselves and the world around them. However, this paternalistic philosophy which underpinned the project of public service broadcasting was later invoked by many of its critics as anachronistic, a legacy of a class riven society which propagated the notion that a tiny band of elite's know better than people themselves what's best for them. And as such, was one of the primary reasons offered for its dismantlement.

Under Reith's leadership, this pedagogical role was embraced wholeheartedly and the BBC proceeded to set the standards which were to become the model for public service broadcasting for years to come.

Public Service Broadcasting in Ireland

In common with the establishment of the BBC the setting up of Public Service Broadcasting in Ireland has its roots in a paternalistic attitude that the newly founded Irish State had towards its citizens.

To understand why Irelands first public service broadcasting institution emerged when it did, its necessary to situate its origins in the wider cultural context of the Ireland of the day.

Having achieved its political independence in 1922, the fledgling Irish State went about trying to create, or perhaps more accurately formalise, a unique identity for itself and its population. This process revolved around a successful attempt to differentiate itself culturally from Britain, its old colonial master. A key weapon in this struggle was to be the new forms of media which where coming on stream at the time. The technology of the day favoured such an approach, the fact that the wavelengths necessary to broadcast at all where in scarce supply, allowed the government to step in and effectively monopolise the airwaves, a strategy which precluded the development of an anarchic system of broadcasting, which more then likely would have disseminated competing visions of what it was to be Irish, normal, moral etc.

Thus, the government duly took advantage of this new resource to create in 1926 the nations first public service broadcasting institution, Radio Eireann. Given the nature of its political agenda its no surprise to discover that it's programming was designed to bolster a nascent Irish identity. This was done in two ways, one negative and one positive. The former involved a deliberate attempt to differentiate Irish culture from

that of Britain's, while the latter involved a successful attempt to equate being Irish with being Catholic. Either way this attempt at cultural self-determination of necessity involved a large degree of cultural censorship. The criteria used to decide what influences the population at large would or would not be exposed to were largely those set by the Catholic Church who had effectively become the guardians of public taste and decency. "In the Irish version of public service broadcasting, the national radio station had to reflect the restricted political and sexual outlook of the peasant and petit bourgeois majority of Southern Ireland." (Barbrook:1992:205)

In effect Ireland's cultural development like that of its economic development involved keeping the rest of the world out.

What about its coverage of news and current affairs? Although the nature of RTE's current affairs output has been subjected to criticism from all colours of the political spectrum, it should be noted that the fact that it does current affairs at all is a relatively recent phenomenon. For example, while RTE radio has been up and running since 1926, according to Mary Kelly "there was no political discussion of controversial subjects on Radio Eireann until the 1950s." (Kelly: 1982: 89)

The Introduction of Public Service Broadcasting Television:

The question of creating an Irish homegrown television station was one that was broached at various times throughout the 1950s. Although there were financial constraints standing in the way of establishing a national television service, an equally important obstacle was the uncertainty on the part of the powerful as to the likely effects it would have on Irish society. In a rerun of the debates around the establishment of Radio Eireann the political/ cultural establishments of the day were split down the middle on the issue. While both sides agreed that TV was a powerful

medium which would inevitably influence the audiences that tuned in, (an influence that where the young were concerned could bypass parental control (the dispute, was over the nature of this influence.

President de Valera captured the fears shared by many when he depicted "television as the cultural equivalent of atomic energy in terms of the devastation it could wreak on traditional values: "It can be used for incalculable good", he pointed out, "but it can also do inseparable harm...it can lead to decadence and dissolution." (Gibbons: 1984)

Paradoxically, one of the chief reasons given (informed by a mixture of nationalist and catholic sensibilities) for its eventual go-ahead was that such a service would act as a barrier, or at the very least a counter weight to the widespread dissemination of "foreign ideas and foreign values", a process already underway courtesy of the B.B.C., which could already be received in the homes of many Irish people.

The influence of the old enemy had to be minimised, especially when the messages it was peddling were of a sexual and subversive nature.

This fear is in fact still alive today, Joe Lee writing in 1997 warns of the "infiltration of the silent value system about the nature of society that dominates the international media. That value system is essentially based on hedonistic, or no-fault, individualism." (Lee: 1997:12)

Although globalisation as a term had yet to be coined, with the Whitaker report in place, the policy of self-sufficiency, which had informed govt policy since the formation of the state, was in the process of being abandoned. As a result the outside world was going to become a player in shaping how Ireland would change.

This belief that economic modernisation would bring in its wake a new cultural openness proved prophetic. One of the main effects of these changes on RTE was that its monopoly position as the only television service the majority of the Irish population had access to. This meant that because an audience was no longer

guaranteed RTE was forced to compete for attention in an increasingly overcrowded marketplace.

However, it would be misleading to imply that the origins of RTE lay in wholly cynical motives. One of the things that delayed the establishment of RTE was simply a lack of money on the part of government. To set up such an institution would be an expensive investment, and none of the cash strapped governments of the 1950s were willing to make the necessary finances available.

Once the decision to set up a national television service was made, the next question to be answered was the structure such an organisation would take, would it be a commercial enterprise, modelled on the three big American networks, or would it be a public service along the lines of the BBC. Both approaches had powerful advocates, in the end a compromise was agreed on.

The 1960 broadcasting act is the piece of legislation that effectively gave birth to RTE Television. In terms of a specific public service ethos it too took the BBC as the model it wished to emulate. However, a key difference between the two is that RTE gets its money from two sources, the licence fee of course, but also from advertisements.

Thus, RTE Television began as, and remains a public service broadcasting company kept in check by a commercial imperative, consequently, it has to compete for ratings in the marketplace.

This means that the nature of its programming is determined by the twin, some would say contradictory, pressures of providing a comprehensive public service, while at the same time maximising its audience share. The posited contradiction lies in the suggestion that in order to get the size of audience that will attract enough advertisers, its in danger of "dumbing down", of trying to appeal to the lowest common denominator, to the audiences basest desires. That in effect the chase for ratings would inevitably have a negative effect on the public service quality of the output. A

state of affairs which if accurate is clearly the antithesis of the founding ideals behind the setting up of public service broadcasting in the first place.

And why should the population have to pay a tax, which allows RTE to produce the kind of programmes that its commercial rivals will produce anyway, and which we could watch for free? In an era where the penetration of British television into the Irish market extends into the smallest Irish town has reached saturation point, the need for RTE to earn its keep on the one hand, and to justify its actual existence on the other hand, has never been difficult.

This need to compete goes hand in hand with a number of public service obligations enshrined in law, which it has to meet. For the purposes of this thesis the one I want to focus my attention on is its obligation in relation to its news and current affairs output.

The broadcasting act gave the RTE authority a qualified freedom from government interference in its affairs. This relative autonomy was dependent on among other things providing coverage of news and current affairs that was both fair and balanced.

The salient section of the act is section 18 and section 31. The former states, "in news, current affairs and matters which were the subject of controversy, the station should present material objectively and impartially and without any expression of the authority's own views." (Horgan: 2001: 83) While section 31 enabled the government too, in special circumstances, to effectively act as political censor.

Thus, RTE has a remit enshrined in law to deliver news and current affairs service, which is fair, objective, balanced and impartial. This in effect means that RTE is to hold up a mirror to society, to allow a plurality of voices to speak, rather than to pursue a "progressive agenda" of its own.

In principle this is a very Habermasian idea-the media as facilitator rather than active agent employing rhetorical sleight of hand in order to naturalise an ideological position (no matter how well meaning its advocates may think it is).

This is an interesting insight as part of my thesis involves testing whether RTE are reneging on their statutory obligations to provide an objective unbiased coverage of news and current affairs.

Meanwhile Section 31 (of which more later) allowed the government (in lieu of writing in the form of a directive to the authority) to both prevent or insist certain material is or is not covered. RTE eventually came into existence on New Year's Eve of 1961.

Independence from Government

In the early years of its existence government influence on the nature of RTE's news and current affairs coverage was strong. Sean Lemass went so far as to announce in the Dail in 1966, that he viewed RTE as "an instrument of public policy" (Corcoran: 2004:43)

However, in recent years, and with the important exception of section 31, and the ability of the government to have RTE's authority removed, the relationship between government and RTE was (formally at any rate) a distant one.

RTE was essentially left with the business of running itself (nominally at any rate).

There has been extensive debate on the future nature of public service broadcasting (in the face of attacks by neo-liberals and competitors to RTE alike) on the very idea of a public service broadcaster, (especially one funded by a "mandatory tax") within Europe. Especially now that with EU enlargement going ahead, it looks like the number of European countries with public service broadcasting services will actually be in a minority.

However, the future of public service broadcasting in general and the future of RTE as a public service broadcasting company in particular is not something the thesis will directly concern itself with.

In light of the fact that one of the most common arguments that PSB-and RTE is no exception to this rule- use to justify their existence/public subsidy, is that in providing the public with objective-as opposed to the propaganda put out by their commercial/corporate counterparts- political information via their news and current affairs output they perform a vital democratic function/ constitute a resource which the citizen can use in order to inform himself as to the major political issues of the day, one of the issues I want to investigate in my thesis is the quality of political information that RTE gives the viewing public. More specifically I want to establish whether RTE displays an ideological bias in the breadth and content of its coverage of news and current affairs.

This will involve among other things a special focus on the ideological presuppositions that interviewers may or may not make when questioning interested parties.

Or to put that in a less political way, to try and establish whether interviewers have some "agenda" (it may not be political with a capital P) other than serving the public when they adopt the style of questioning they do.

While the focus of my study is contemporaneous it was interesting to note that similar concerns were raised almost from the beginning of RTE's existence by the Lemass government.

According to Horgan, influential figures in the government were afraid that other factors besides the search for journalistic truth were at work.

The relative youth and ambition of many of the journalists was invoked, the implication being that many of them were "bright young things" out to make a name for themselves, by being as provocative as possible.

He also mentions the issue of "journalistic conventions" and the fear that the detail of any given story might be glossed over in order to make it a sexier story.

Joe Lee raises a similar suspicion when he concludes “given the dearth of genuinely intellectual discourse in the public culture, there is an inevitable temptation for even public service journalists to search for the “scoop” as a substitute for systematic analysis.” (Lee: 1997:17)

Farrell Corcoran gives a more up to date example of this phenomenon at work. Recounting, in the aftermath of the "Tuffly affair" how as a member of the RTE Authority he "analysed in detail the weaknesses in the prime time programme itself and the preparations that preceded the broadcast, including the traditional journalistic pressure to beat the competitors by publishing a scoop at the earliest possible opportunity, perhaps even when background research hadn't been as complete as it ought to be." (Corcoran:2004: 65)

The detail of this issue is beyond the scope of this thesis, but I mention it in passing for a number of reasons. First of all because it involves the "prime time" programme, which I will be looking at for my research. Secondly because its arguably an example of the dumbing down process in action. This is because that in trying to be first to get the scoop in question the motivation of the programme team could be called into question. Its plausible to argue that the motivation to be first with the story was essentially a self interested one, i.e. it would ensure Primetime itself made the headlines in the following days newspapers and news broadcasts. It would be a journalistic coup for the Primetime team, the incestuous world of journalism would applaud, people's egos would get a boost, while their social status would increase.

But also because it raises the question as to whether public service coverage of news and current affairs is any different to that provided by its commercial. A question I intend to raise in my interview with one of the presenters of the aforementioned programme.

Freedom from Government

Of course RTE's freedom from direct government interference was not and is not absolute. One of the most glaring examples of the violation of what is essentially a nominal principle took the form of the ban known as Section 31, which was in place up to 1994. This rule made it illegal for any media organisation to give direct access "to a range of political groups associated with paramilitary organisations." (Corcoran: 2004:36)

In the Irish situation this primarily affected Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA. The main reason behind the ban was the belief taken by the government of the day that by giving Sinn Fein valuable airtime, by providing them with the "oxygen of publicity" RTE would be tacitly providing support for terrorism.

Given that this thesis is concerned with journalistic bias it is interesting to note that this official act of censorship had its own unofficial counterpart within the walls of RTE itself. Although the details are quite labyrinth, and again beyond the scope of this thesis, the end result was, that you had a situation, where a faction of ideologically inclined journalists (cadres of the workers party no less) many of whom were editors of news and current affairs programmes, practised their own form of self-censorship in relation to giving Sinn Fein valuable air time to spread what in their view was dangerous messages.

The Authority's independence was predicated on it ensuring that when "it broadcasts any information, news or feature which relates to matters of public controversy or is the subject of current public debate, the information, news or feature is presented objectively and impartially and without any expression of the Authority's own views." (Kelly: 1983:90)

When it comes to its news and current affairs output some of the criteria RTE uses to establish what can and cannot be broadcast is quite similar to the generic definition of the kinds of properties that should characterise news and current affairs programmes broadcast under the public service banner. To be specific RTE in its promotional material declares that the public interest tests that its current affairs output must pass include that of "fairness, accuracy, impartiality and objectivity."

Methodology

My thesis is concerned with the question of whether RTEs news and current affairs coverage constitutes a public sphere, i.e. does it provide the viewer with the range and quality of political information he or she would need in order to hold an informed view on whatever issue it chooses to cover, or has it succumbed to, or willingly embraced, for whatever reason or reasons, the "dumbing down" trend which characterises much of commercial televisions coverage of news and current affairs, and thereby trivialising the public sphere in the process?

Dumbing down refers to a move away from in-depth rational discussion/analysis of issues, to a more superficial approach, one that is predicated on collapsing, or at the very least narrowing, the distinction between news and entertainment. Manifestations of this process in action include a focus on personalities, especially that of the presenters. In a dumbed down news and current affairs environment, the presenter moves away from playing the role of an objective mediator, to a participant in the debate. In essence the dumbing down thesis posits a move away from debate as a means of political enlightenment, to debate as a form of entertainment.

I think Primetimes coverage of the two Nice treaties is a good case study in which to examine this question. One reason for this is that the subject matter constitutes almost the paradigm example of a "hard news story", or in less charitable terms, Nice represents a really boring issue, which will never pull in the size of the audience RTE schedulers dream about.

Why is this important? Because paradoxically once the decision to devote coverage to such an issue is given, it can be assumed, or arguably it can be assumed, that the expected audience for such a programme will be one actually interested in the subject at hand. I am not suggesting that necessarily the audience will consist entirely of that much-maligned minority, the "political anorak." But I am arguing that whoever is tuning in to such a programme is doing so to acquire certain factual information, they are active as opposed to passive, something that should be reflected in how the debates are handled. Unlike other issues that fall under the news and current affairs banner, there are no secret pleasures to be gained from a group of talking heads discussing the Nice treaty.

Consequently, Prime Times coverage of the Nice referendums are examples of an issue where what the viewer learns about the issue from watching the programme can actually make a difference to how he or she behaves. The information empowers the individual to act. Consequently, I am making the assumption that in such a case the pressures to make the news sexier, more entertaining etc would be temporarily lifted. In such a situation one might expect that the role of a public service broadcaster is to do all it can to supply the viewer with all the relevant information they would need in order to make an informed decision. In relation to Nice, this information would take the form of knowing the various pros and of voting yes or no to the treaty, and that this goal should be apparent in the types of questions the presenters choose to ask.

If it is not, if the questions, or at least some of the questions at any rate, are not geared towards eliciting factual information from the various experts, politicians etc that are interviewed. Then I think this fact can be used as evidence to suggest that RTE have indeed "dumbed down" their coverage of news and current affairs.

Thus, from an analysis of the programmes in question, I want to try and gauge what the interested listener could possibly learn about the issue by watching primetimes coverage of it. The question I am trying to answer is, to what extent can coverage of the Nice referendums by Prime Time be deemed to contribute to the public sphere? Now the content analysis on its own wont be sufficient to allow me to attribute motivation to the presenters. It will however give me a full account of the type of questions asked, which can then act as data from which a theoretical explanation can be constructed.

Research: While there are numerous different ways of analysing the workings of the media, the research technique I have chosen is that of a content analysis, and a structured interview with one of the main presenters of the programme I am looking at. The former allows me to give a systematic and descriptive account of the media content I am analysing, while the latter will I hope give me a real insight into the internal workings of the programme that makes up my case study.

The content I am analysing is garnered from a case study involving RTE's flagship current affairs programme, "Prime Time", and its coverage of the two Nice referendums held on June the 7th 2001 and October the 19th 2002 respectively. One qualification that I have to make is that I am not looking at all of Primetimes coverage of the two Nice treaties,

Thus, in relation to its coverage of the first Nice referendum that will involve analysing 3 programs in detail. Between these 3 programmes a total of 24 questions were asked by the presenters in question, that's an average of 8 questions per programme.

The Prime Time programme runs for approximately forty-five minutes. The format it adopts is to typically cover two different issues for each programme it does. The coverage typically consists of a short report, followed by an interview or studio debate. This formula remained in place for both Nice referendums. Consequently, neither of the primetime programmes which covered Nice, dealt exclusively with the issue, rather half of the time available, typically twenty minutes, was devoted to a consideration of the issues raised by the referendum. The aspects of the debates I focused my attention on were the questions asked or the comments made by the presenters. Consequently these became my basic units of analysis, the parts of the content which were subjected to a content analysis. As an analytic aid, a way of categorising and then analysing my data, I created the following question typology.

Type A-denotes a non-adversarial question, which elicits factual information on the pros and cons of voting yes or no in the referendum e.g. Brian Farrells question to John Gormley after Jim O Keefe explained why he thought people should vote yes-"John, Jim is saying that this is a good treaty, why do you think we should vote no?"

Type B-denotes an emotionally loaded question or assertion that ascribes an ambiguous set of beliefs to the interviewee in question e.g. Miriam O Callaghans question to Anthony Coughlan-"Anthony Coughlan you are against the Nice treaty, but since you have been against Europe from the beginning, why should people listen to you, and take you seriously?"

Type C-denotes a question or comment where the presenter becomes a participant in the debate e.g. Brian Farrells assertion to John Gormley that the "Amsterdam treaty only allows 5 countries to join". A claim that Gormley disputes.

Type D-denotes an interrogative question, one that is designed to elicit information, which justifies a statement or claim made by the interviewee in question. In other words it's a "what do you mean" or "how do you know" type of question.

Using Habermas, s conception of the public sphere as my guide, I want to argue that the presence of type A or D questions is indicative of a vibrant public sphere. Conversely, the prevalence of type B and C questions is a reflection of a dumbing down process in action.

Extracts and analysis of debates

The criteria I am using for the following evaluation is that taken by Habermas that pertain in an “ideal speech situation” and which are outlined in the literature review.

The following extract is taken from a debate chaired by Miriam O Callaghan on the twenty fourth of May 2001.

Q 4-*"What people will say Anthony is that Ireland has benefited economically and financially from Europe, and now that there are smaller states like Estonia-perhaps it's a feeble argument-but they will say that its only fair we don't stand in their way"*.

A-We are not standing in their way. The treaty of Nice is not primarily an enlargement treaty.

Q5-*"Well the Taoiseach says it is"*

A-Coughlan-The advice of the attorney general to government makes no mention of enlargement, neither does the referendum commission-the booklet sent to every house- detailing why the Nice referendum is deemed necessary-the treaty of Amsterdam which we ratified three years ago was an enlargement treaty.

O' Rossa-We need to clarify this pt, the Amsterdam treaty doesn't allow for the enlargement of Europe without further changes.

Coughlan-It does, I have the protocol of the treaty here. It was sold as an enlargement treaty by the Taoiseach three years ago.

O' Rossa-No your wrong the protocol requires that a new treaty is required for enlargement to take place.

Content Analysis-of primetimes coverage of the first Nice referendum.

1st Debate-5/6/2001

2 Guests

6 Questions asked

Content Analysis-Categorisation of the questions asked by the presenters.

Of the 6 questions asked 4 fall into the first category, while 2 are type C questions.

2nd Debate-17/5/2001

4 Guests

7 Questions asked.

Content Analysis-Categorisation of the questions asked by the presenter.

Of the 7 questions asked 5 fall into the first category, while 2 fall into the second category.

Final debate on the first Nice referendum.

Primetime-5/6/2001

Chaired by Brian Farrell

2 Guests-John Gormley and Jim O Keefe

6 Questions asked

Content Analysis-Categorisation of the questions asked by the presenter.

Of the 6 questions asked by the presenter 4 fall into the first category. They are Type A questions, designed to simply elicit information from the interviewee.

2 of the presenter's questions are Type C questions, i.e. they take the form of a contentious "factual" assertion by the presenter.

Chapter 3

Extracts and analysis of debates

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O' Rossa-We need to clarify this pt, the Amsterdam treaty doesn't allow for the enlargement of Europe without further changes.

Coughlan-It does, I have the protocol of the treaty here. It was sold as an enlargement treaty by the Taoiseach three years ago.

Analysis-This pointless line of questioning was further propounded by the failure to challenge or seek explanations of the fact that in relation to whether the ratification of the treaty was or was not a necessary step on the road to EU enlargement, both parties were saying completely contradictory things. Perhaps the answer to the question of what a treaty really means when it says that policy A either does or does not follow from its ratification is really impossible to decide, but I doubt that's the case. So why wasn't the issue of what does or does not follow from the ratification of the nice treaty pursued in detail? A possible answer, one that's informed by what Mark Little said in his interview, is that the presenter and Primetimes editorial team decided that to adopt such a forensic approach risked alienating some of the audience. Whatever the answer, the end result in this debate, is the same as the end result in all the debates we have looked at so far. Namely, that while providing an excellent forum for experts and politicians to exchange prejudices, they have failed to enlighten the viewer as to what is really at stake in voting either yes or no to the nice referendum. To quote Miriam O Callaghan herself "I don't think we have informed the public at all, they are probably more confused then when we began".

The next extract comes from the final Prime-Time debate on the 1st referendum

5.6.2001-Final debate (12 mins on primetime-2 days before polling day.

Debate chaired by Brian Farrell

2 guests- John Gormley from the Green Party, the spokesman for Foreign Affairs-and Jim O Keefe, govts spokesman for Foreign Affairs-who according to presenter are leading campaigners for each side of the debate,

The format of the discussion-2 guests where each given a minute to present their case.

Content-A key part of Gormleys argument is that the Nice agreement would usher in a new 2 tier Europe.

He advised the audience that they should consult the information booklet produced by the referendum commission-which listed the costs and benefits of passing the Nice agreement.

For O Keefe they're where a number of factors the audience had to take account of.

The Nice referendum-would give us a larger Europe-the entrance of ten new countries would constitute a huge new market for Irish business.

It would put an end to the historic divisions between east and Western Europe caused by WW2 and the cold war.

By voting yes we would be supporting the people of these new democracies emerging from the tyranny of communism-we could free them of that legacy.

We could create a more organised Europe, one better equipped to fight international crime, one better able to combat environmental destruction etc.

Farrell's first question is addressed to Gormly-Q1 "*John, Jim is saying that this is a good treaty*"

Gormley-the fact is that this treaty isn't about enlargement. Enlargement can take place under the Amsterdam Treaty. Check the referendum commission, it's not about enlargement but closer integration.

There is a democratic deficit at work here; there are consequences for voting yes that we are not being told about.

He brings up a tax on fuel, which he says he only heard about in a Dail debate-and that the general public isn't aware of.

Q2- O Keefe-Farrell paraphrases what Gormley has said-*that it's not really about enlargement but closer integration, which in turn will mean less democracy.*

A-O Keefe-Says that he fundamentally disagrees, the treaty is patently about enlargement, and that we cant have enlargement without the treaty being rectified.

The Amsterdam treaty only allows for three more countries to join-the problem is that ten want to. The nice treaty is necessary for this to happen.

The next question Farrell asks is on a different issue.

Analysis:

When we ask the question as to whether this exchange of views constitutes the type of political discourse Habermas advocates, the only reasonable answer is to conclude that it falls far short. Why is this the case? Well first of all, because there is no real attempt to resolve the two substantive questions, namely is it necessary to ratify the nice treaty in order for EU enlargement to go ahead, and secondly the issue as to whether ratification of the treaty will make the bigger countries more powerful and the smaller countries less so.

Both of the politicians involved simply state their opposing views, it's a "debate/discussion" that seems to be devoid of argument and counterargument. The presenter doesn't ask them to explain this discrepancy. For example John Gormley invokes the booklet prepared by the referendum commission, an objective body given the task of explaining the pros and cons of voting yes, as the last word on whether ratification of nice is necessary for enlargement, yet this point is not pursued or challenged, consequently the audience is left none the wiser as to the truth of the matter. A similar state of affairs characterises the question of whether the big countries will become more powerful at the expense of the weaker ones. One side simply says this will be the case, while the other side says the "situation is quite the reverse". Again, there is no effort on the part of the presenter to resolve the issue one way or another, and again there is no request for either participant to give basic definitions of the terms they are using. So for example, there are no requests to define what government power at a European level consists of, and no examples asked to be given to enlighten the viewer as to how this power will either increase or decrease in the wake of the nice treaty being either ratified or not ratified.

The big Debate on the second referendum: 15-10-2002

Presenter-Brian Farrell

Introduction-Tonight we hope to shed some light on the three big questions posed by the Nice Treaty.

Q Does Nice have anything to do with our Neutrality?

Q Is it good news or bad news for our economy?

Q Will it give small countries like Ireland more or less power in the newly enlarged EU?

Q1-Brigid Laffin-*"Isint the essential truth, that the bigger the club the less influence that smaller countries will have?"*

A-"Well we need to ask how influence is actually exercised in the system that is the EU. In this system small states go to the table with three things, good arguments, good negotiation skills, and good will. The latter is particularly important, it's very important to be a good team player. So yes in an enlarged EU there will be more voices, but to assume that more means less influence is taking it to far".

Q2-John Rogers-*"You know your way around a legal text, isn't it true to say, the same question asked to Brigid asked in a slightly different way, if your in favour of enlargement then you must be prepared to accept a loss of influence?"*

A-Yes, but everybody wants enlargement, it's effectively the policy of the state and the people. The rules of the game are going to fundamentally change. The balance of power in the council of ministers is fundamentally shifting; Nice will transform how decisions are made.

Q3-*"I have to interrupt and move on to Mary Harney. You-addressing his question to Miss Harney- warned two years ago of the danger of developing towards a United States of Europe in which the big states dominate, isn't that what Nice is a recipe for?"*

A-No I don't think so. It's not the number of votes in the council of ministers that counts; it's the arguments that make the difference. So it's not the case that enlargement will undermine sovereignty, the reality is quite the opposite. The larger the EU becomes the less federal it will be, so the more smaller countries that come in the better it will be for Ireland.

Q4-John Gormley-*"The more smaller countries that come in the better our chances are to fight for a better deal for the smaller states, isn't this logical as well?"*

A-In the United States, each state has 2 votes in the senate, so it's not a good comparison. To vote yes is to vote for less not more democracy.

Q5-*"Can I bring in Anthony Coughlan at this point to deal with a specific issue raised in our report, that of qualified majority voting. This will result in the loss of the veto in around thirty areas. Where is the evidence that this is a bad thing for Ireland?"*

A-Because we loose power, for example the Taoiseach will no longer have the final say as to who the EU commissioner will be. At present this decision is a unanimous one, but if Nice is passed then it will go to a qualified majority vote. The most fundamental veto that will go is that related to enhanced co-operation, which allows for the creation of a club within a club.

Q6-To Des Gerathy-"As a trade unionist does it not worry you that areas of social and economic policy are now virtually out of our control?"

A-That's not actually true. Small and large countries can be reactionary and progressive on different issues. I often find myself voting with the Greeks and the Germans in the European parliament against positions put forward by Fianna Fail delegates. It's a mistake to think that Ireland is a homogenous entity that speaks with one voice; I don't always support the view of the Irish government. So in my view there is no loss of sovereignty if we vote yes.

Analysis: Before we go on and look at some of the other exchanges that took place, I just want to stop here a while and briefly analyse the above, to see, given the variety of contradictory answers given, if the viewer could possibly be any the wiser as to answer to the question, namely whether if he or she votes yes and ratifies the treaty, that this would result in a loss of power for Ireland.

In her reply Laffin makes the claim that essentially power in the EU is exercised in an informal way, consequently its not the number of votes you have that determine whether you get your way, rather it's down to the goodwill you have built up and the arguments you have at your disposal to support your case.

Mary Harney adopts a similar line, restating the point that its not votes i.e. formal power that counts, it's the strength of your arguments that make the difference.

Meanwhile, both John Gormley and Anthony Coughlan take the opposite view. To vote yes we inevitably result in a loss of power to smaller countries like Ireland. The latter even goes so far as to give an example of how this process would work itself out, citing the fact that the Taoiseach would no longer have a veto over who the EU commissioner would be.

At no stage of the proceedings are any of the participants asked to deal with a point made by one of their fellow debaters, which on the face of it contradicts the claim that they themselves have just made. The yes side say don't worry we won't lose any power or sovereignty, the no side say the exact opposite, and the poor viewer is left floundering. The so-called debate, designed to answer the three questions flagged at the outset of the programme, has failed at its first hurdle. No one is asked to justify his or her position with evidence or argument. As no one's position is challenged by the presenter. In terms of the question typography we are working with, this part of the programme is notable by the absence of interrogative questions on the behalf of the presenter.

The next of the three questions to be "grappled with" is that of the effects, if any, of voting yes.

P-*"Let's go to address another worry for people intending to vote no, and that's the question of whether the treaty affects our neutrality"*

Q7-"John Gormley can I ask you about the broader principles. Is it not time we stepped up and defended our principles with military capability, so that we do our bit to ensure that there is no more Sarajevo's, no more Rwanda's?"

A-That's an honest argument, but it's not one made by the Yes side. What they are saying is that you can vote yes and still be neutral, and that's surely not the case. Your report got it wrong, we are not putting neutrality into the constitution by voting yes,

again that is not the case. There is no mention of neutrality or a UN mandate, and in fact it does leave the door open to joining Nato without a referendum. For example the government said we could join the partnership for peace only with a referendum, but they in fact joined without one. So lets deal with what the treaty actually does, lets deal with the facts. For example Article 25 creates a new political and security committee, which will effectively act as the EUs version of the pentagon.

Q8-"Well lets ask the government then. Mary Harney you understand why some people don't trust the government with these incremental shifts, from a single European act to the Amsterdam treaty and now this. Small steps but definite steps to what they feel is a military alliance in Europe and they don't feel comfortable with that."

A-Its not a question of trusting the government but of people trusting themselves. Because Neutrality has been raised again as a red herring as it always is, the government has decided on a form of words, to quote "that Ireland will not and cannot join a common defence force unless another referendum of the people takes place" and I can say to you that...

John Gormley interrupts-It's a decision of the EU council, lets be clear about it

Harney restates her point.

Gormley-It's a fact that we can join Nato without a specific referendum.

Harney-That's rubbish

Gormley-It's the truth

Harney-Your always saying that. The fact is that the Irish government and the Oireachtas will always keep control over the Irish Defence Forces.

Q9-*"Can I put that point to Anthony Coughlan. There is a lot of accusations against the no campaign like your making red herrings out of for example the rapid reactionary force, which doesn't look like a army or at least not yet?"*

A-Its not a standing army but it can be called into being to take part in military operations.

Q10-*"Buts it's not an army now and it wont be after Nice."*

A-It is part of a tendency towards the militarisation of Europe, towards pushing the EU to become a kind of superpower.

Harney-Show me where it says that in the Nice treaty?

P-Q11-Des Gerathy-*"A lot of trade unionists share the fear that Nice will lead to a dilution of our neutrality?"*

A-Well I am no advocate of militarisation.

Q12-*"So why aren't you voting no?"*

A-I believe that it's a total misrepresentation of what the Nice treaty actually says. It doesn't threaten our neutrality.

Q13-*"John Rogers on a broader level is there anything in this treaty which infringes our independent foreign policy, not just military and defence issues, but anything that brings us closer to some sort of European military alliance?"*

A-I take the view that Ireland can't have an independent foreign policy. Because of the way decisions are made to retain our independence in this area we would have to wreck the system in place.

Q14-*"Brigid Laffin can I just ask you to reply to that-that we are going to loose our independent foreign policy."*

A-Well that's not what Patrick Keating is saying in today's Irish Times. Now can I go back to the issue at stake, namely the rapid reactionary force and our proud tradition of peacekeeping? Can I also say to John Gormley that his assertion...

Q15-*"Sorry but we are running out of time and we have to move on to the next topic."*

Analysis: The above section essentially speaks for itself, so I will be very brief. The pattern should now be clear for all to see. Again we have two sides giving incompatible answers to the same question. But to be fair to some of the protagonists both Gormley and Gerrathy have invoked the treaty itself to support their mutually exclusive conclusions. But whether this was an invitation to begin a close reading of same, the presenter failed to take any of them up on it. Consequently, we get no

debate, no enlightenment, no facts, just an exchange of prejudices. The treaty says we can do X, oh no it doesn't, oh yes it does, etc.

The last section deals with the question of whether a Yes vote will be good or bad for our economy. Farrell addresses his first question on this topic to Des Gerrathy.

Q-"Des Gerathy we have ten new countries coming in with lower wages, lower production costs. Does this mean that we are going to see investment that would have otherwise come to Ireland go to these countries instead?"

A-"No quite the opposite. We need to be confident in our own abilities. A yes vote is a vote of confidence for our own communities. A yes vote is necessary to create the level playing field that we need, because a rise in living standards is the best guarantee against cheap labour. If we can get social, environmental and economic conditions right in these countries, as it happened in Ireland then we will get less immigration.

Q16-"In the short term we have anecdotal evidence that employers here in Ireland are going for example to Poland to hire cheap workers."

A-Well that's an abuse of the current situation. I have been raising this issue. It's about our work permit system, which we full control over. The best thing we can do to solve this problem is to export 80% of everything we produce. We have a vested interest in increasing both the size of our market, and the living standards in those

From the Presenters Perspective, an insiders view.

The Interview

The meeting with Mark Little was scheduled to last for approximately fifty minutes. I went into the interview situation with a set of prepared questions, ten in all. The questions were designed with a twofold purpose in mind, to get a sense of the interviewee's conception of public service broadcasting, and to get some insight into how he conceives of his role as an interviewer on one of the country's most influential current affairs programmes.

However, I had decided beforehand to adopt a flexible approach to the encounter. Consequently, I gave myself permission to depart from the script if I thought Mr Little's answers warranted it. As it turned out this was the option I actually opted for. As a result the ten questions turned into seventeen questions, while the interview itself overran by a good twenty minutes. The following section is an edited account of the interview.

So what light did the interview shed on my original research question as to whether RTE could act as a "public sphere" facilitating rational debate on the political issues it decides to cover? Well the question itself is predicated on the belief that Public Service Broadcasting is not simply one more component of the "Culture Industry", that it's not in effect merely another business whose sole function is to maximise profits for its owners or shareholders. This premise was one accepted and welcomed by Mr Little who made it clear in our discussion that he and his colleagues both recognise and acknowledge that RTE is a public service broadcaster, and that it consequently has a public service remit to meet, which means that the standards it sets itself have to be higher than the bar used by its commercial counterparts.

When asked to identify the main factors that set RTE apart the latter, he straight away made reference to RTE's public service status, stating that *while "people can laugh about it, it is a real factor every day in informing what we do and don't cover. For example at primetime meetings when we are trying to decide what issues to cover, we do ask ourselves what's in the public interest."*

When asked to define what constitutes the "public interest" his fluency temporarily deserted him. However, after some Pinteresque like pauses he finally found his voice again, suggesting *"that a number of conditions would have to be met in order for a news story to be deemed in the public interest. The first of these was that "it had to be interesting", but this condition while necessary was not sufficient, the story in question also had to be an example of something greater, something that represents something larger.*

So for example in the case of the blood dispute about haemophilia, one person who gets badly treated by the health service is a tragedy, but hundreds of people who are effected because of negligence, well that's in the public interest. So what I'm basically saying is that my personal judgement on "human issue" stories, if you want to call them that, is that it has to have human interest, but it has to be an issue that effects a large number of people, it has to involve an issue of public interest, for example, an issue that involves legislation or a change in culture, or some sort of decision to rectify the negligence".

Having giving this example, he then went on to make a self-deprecating remark to the effect that the definition in question was a pretty inadequate one, but then invoked St Augustines comment on the nature of time, to the effect that while he couldn't define what time was, he knew what it meant in practice.

I took this as my cue to move on to another subject, which I duly did. The next question I asked concerned another issue which is central to the question of whether Public service broadcasting can act as a public sphere, namely to what extent are such journalists autonomous, to what extent are they free from external pressures, be they government, commercial or institutional, pushing them to broadcast in favour of vested interests to the detriment of the public good.

In the particular case of Primetime I wanted to know the criteria the Primetime team used to formulate the questions he asked, and who had the final say on what questions actually got asked.

A-"In the first instance me, I will consult with the executive producer on the day. Generally we have a meeting maybe 2hrs before the programme, we begin our day with a discussion, we come in and we talk about a topic, out of that, there will be a line pursued, for example this morning we are talking about the idea of Al Queda as a security threat, what's going on in the US and Saudi Arabia at the moment. Trying to decide on which angle to pursue, now we don't always do that, deal with such a general subject, but that in part is determined by how the discussion goes at the meeting. The debate can get very lively at these encounters. I suppose the assumption we make is that a discussion between a group of interested, well educated, and culturally aware people can come up with a subject.

At the moment we have a subject, Al Queda in Saudi Arabia, and at that point its up to me. So I will then go off and do some research. I will do goggle searches, I will use my own personal knowledge, I will make phone calls, and then as I go I will be cutting and pasting material that I find. When I know I'm going to be interviewing a politician I will do research on their previous statements, to check for inconsistencies with their current position. If things arise, I will cut and paste and put it n a file. Later on in the day I will download the file and start drawing up, on that basis, a list of questions. And then finally I will go to the executive producer at about 7 o clock, we will then work through it together, but very rarely would that person say to me "you can't ask that question". In fact I think it's only happened once that I have been told to rephrase a question, as it didn't sound as interesting as it could have.

To my mind this arbitrary criterion that a question cant be "boring" is as pernicious a form of censorship-albeit self-censorship-as having either a government or a media magnet telling a journalist what issues can or cannot be covered. Consequently I pushed him to define what he meant by such terms, by asking him

why he felt the necessity to rephrase a question, to make it more “interesting”? I wondered what definition of "interesting" he was working with?

A-Well for example, if your talking about tax evasion and I'm asking a question which contains an assertion e.g. “the government has been associated with people who have been ...what will I say next? “Have been implicated in tax evasion?” well in that case I could be libelling people. So my question to Mary Harney had to be extremely well worded. I could turn around and ask a more convoluted question and say, “people involved in your government have in some way been associated with tax evasion if not accused of it”, now at this stage I'm losing the audience.

Q 5Why?

A-Because effectively what they want to know is, theirs a heart to that question, what is the heart of the question? The heart is “your complicit with tax evasion and your government effectively has been implicated in tax evasion”, now that’s probably the best way of asking that question, I have got to get to the heart of the question. It has to be short; it can’t interrupt the flow of Harney had to be extremely well worded. I could turn around and ask a more convoluted question and I could turn around and ask a more convoluted question and say, “people in your government have in some way been associated with tax evasion if not actually accused of it”, now at this stage I am losing the audience.

I found these answers confusing; I felt that he was essentially projecting his own personal view on the type of questions he didn’t actually want to ask onto "the audience". We didn’t have time to explore this issue in any great detail, so we didn’t get to explore the specific research studies into audience likes and dislikes he was referring to. But I personally couldn't see how, in relation to the examples he used, one was more "exiting" then the other. However, given the fact that this criterion was essential to the formulation of his questions, and since part of the thesis question is about finding out why Primetime presenters ask the type of questions they do, I continued to push for a more explicit definition of the criteria in question. Consequently I asked him why he thought he would "loose the audience" if he asked a different type of question.

He repeated the same point about getting to the heart of the matter, getting straight to the essence of the question. He then offered the following example to illustrate his point.

A-Okay, well lets put it this way. I have got eight minutes, an interview can take eight to fifty minutes, the same amount of discussion might happen. Now I know that politicians tend to be a bit more longwinded then people generally, and that people generally can be longwinded when there is no deadline to a conversation, so in a pub no one says, "okay we've got ten minutes to talk about it".

In my situation, in the eight minutes I have, I have to raise every possible issue I can. Now I can do it in several ways, I can interrupt, but that's rude, it stops the flow of the conversation, and it doesn't allow the interviewee to talk in fully formed ideas. Now if they can't do that then that's a problem. However, at the same time I do have to move the conversation on, to fit into the eight minutes what I have been given.

This answer surprised me slightly, first of all I thought that the questions the presenter asked would be more the product of the official editorial team, with the presenter, who may not necessarily have even trained as a journalist, effectively acting as a vehicle for their questions. Secondly, such autonomy in the hands of one individual could lead to its abuse, in stories where conflict of interests may arise. However, where this thesis is concerned what I found most striking was his insistence that his questions had to grab the attention of the audience was I felt a capitulation of sorts to a commercial agenda he had previously distanced himself from. When I put this to him, he apologised for misleading me, and made the point that while RTE is indeed a public service broadcaster, its also, unlike the BBC for example, also dependent for its survival on commercial revenue. Consequently Primetime had an obligation to deliver a relatively large audience, one whose loyalty could not simply be taken for granted.

He then repeated the point that one of the biggest constraints preventing the programme from adopting a more forensic approach to the stories it covers is the lack of time the programme has at its disposal. Repeating the point that the average length of time he has to interview a guest or chair a debate is approximately eight to ten minutes.

The fact that there are time constraints is undoubtedly true, although I think he slightly exaggerated how little time he actually has, although most of the coverage I looked at in relation to the two Nice referendums, consisted of one of two stories-the other one having nothing to do with Nice at all- the Primetime

programme in question was covering that night, the interviews generally went on for longer than eight minutes. The average length of an interview or debate was more likely to be twelve to fifteen minutes. In any case there is no natural law of broadcasting that stipulates that Primetime has to cover two separate issues per programme, it could just as easily concentrate on one story per programme, and cover it in as much detail as possible.

The decision not to simply do one story in depth seems, again according to Mr Little, to be based on the perception of the Prime Time team that they would lose some of their audience if they adopted this approach, as forty minutes devoted to one issue would challenge the stamina of the average viewer. Whether this creature is fictional or not, the viewing habits, and conversely the limited attention span of the "average viewer" were continually invoked by Mr Little, who seemed to imply that, à la Eamonn De Valera, he just by looking into his heart "knew" intuitively knew what they were thinking, and that he consequently knew what they wanted to see etc. And that it was his judgement that they can't take too much detail, that they will switch off in droves if his questions aren't "snappy" and sufficiently "attention grabbing.

My own view would be to add the tentative suggestion that perhaps another factor to throw into the mix is that of the fact that Prime Time as its currently constituted has two star presenters to keep busy. Two programmes per week devoted to two stories would inevitably mean less time on screen for both of the presenters concerned. However, this is complete conjecture on my part, which if there is any truth to it, we, the general public won't know about until a disgruntled member of the programmes team breaks ranks and spills the beans, if in fact there are any to tell.

Picking up on this reoccurring theme-the nature of the audience that watch Prime Time I then went on to ask him whether he agreed with the criticism that RTE's news and current affairs programming are failing to provide the detailed analysis that political issues need for the viewer or listener to become a more informed citizen. And if he did where would he lay the blame. However, I extended the candidates for blame beyond

that of the audience to include the medium of television itself, and then last but not least the journalists themselves.

A-"Good question. If it was yes or no I would say no, on the basis that I think we give sufficient detail to help the responsible citizen to help make their mind up about the issue of the day. Do we give as much as I would like to? The answer is probably no. Is this a serious problem? Is it a major failing of RTE news and current affairs, well if I had to say yes or no would be no. But could RTE provide more coverage? This is where I would differ with many people in the current affairs department; I would leave us with what we have, because it serves the majority, it serves the most people in the best possible way. However I would create niche programming, I have for example a foreign affairs programme which does not give a shit about where it was in the schedules but people would know that if it was half 11-they could tune in to see a serious half hour discussion programme about foreign affairs-you would have the same for business, you would have much bigger focus on Leinster House, and on top of that you would probably have some programme, say, devoted to investigation, the fact that we don't is down to one thing and one thing alone, and that's money.

Q So you think that in principle, RTE executives have no problem with current affairs programming, they are valued, and if the station had more money they would make more of them?

A-Absolutely, no one in this organisation is turning around and saying I hate current affairs, the way I describe it is its like-being personal here-say personal fitness, exercise. Everyone says they do it, but they don't do it as much as they think they should do it, in the same way everyone says they love current affairs and watch it a lot, but basically they don't watch it as much as they say they do, that's one thing. Second thing is, it's very important to realise that theirs no conflict, there is not necessarily a conflict between being popular and profound. Theirs definitely ways in which you can undermine the seriousness, the connection with your audience, and your obligation to serve them properly, by being too populist. But there are ways in which you can make things much more manageable, in fact you can do it more slickly, and I don't think that that necessarily undermines the value of what your saying.

Summary of the interview:

From the above we learn that while Mr Little believes that RTE does have a public service remit to meet, he like many people involved in this debate has some difficulty when it comes to providing a definite definition of what this exactly amounts to. However, the phrase he uses more than once to describe RTE's agenda, is that of finding the balance between "profundity and popularity". Effectively he is saying that its Prime Time job is to cover the serious issues of the day, but in a way that appeals to a large mainstream audience. Why the constant talk of attracting and maintaining a large audience? The answer to this question, according to Mr Little was RTE's dual mandate. The fact that RTE is not a pure public broadcaster in the way that the BBC is, the fact that its serving both Mammon and the "public good" at the same time hovered over the interview with a vengeance. Consequently, maximising audience share was characterised by Mr Little as a fact of life, which had to be lived with. However, while he recognised the constraints that commercialism imposes, he was relatively ambivalent as to whether this had any discernible effect on the formula Prime Time adopted.

When it comes to how he conceives of his own function he says his role is that of a mediator, it's not his job to become a participant in the debate. In relation to the questions he asks, the interview reveals that Little, regardless of the topic the programme is dealing with, effectively has carte blanche to formulate them as he sees fit. Part of the criteria that informs this process is to make the questions as interesting as possible. When pushed to unpack the definition of interesting he operates with he outlines criteria that privileges conciseness and "memorability" over any other possible characteristic.

To ask the questions he thinks the audience would like to ask. Another self-imposed constraint on the type of questions he feels he can ask stems from his conception of the interview as a proxy conversation, which just like the real thing has to obey certain conventions. Rules which effectively prevent him from asking the type of questions I suggested might enlighten the viewer, and which form a key component of Habermas, s ideal speech situation, namely questions which challenge the interviewee/interlocutor to justify what he or she has just said. The form this justification would take would differ depending on the category of statement i.e. empirical/analytic/moral etc. In

effect I would argue that the criteria that informs the "proxy conversation" Mr Little and co want to have with their audience is directly at odds with some of the conditions that should characterise a fully functioning public sphere.

From watching Prime Time over the years, and particularly during this summer during its coverage of the crisis in Darfur and the ongoing war in Iraq to take just two examples, I must admit I didn't really recognise Mr Little's characterisation of the types of questions he tended to ask.

From my experience of watching him do interviews, I would have characterised his style as one of making assertions that something is the case, or alternatively attributing a belief to the individual he was interviewing, as opposed to trying to elicit the view of the individual they are interviewing as to whether they agree with the claim made by X that Y is happening, or alternatively to ask whether he holds the belief that X claims he holds. In other words to not become a participant in the debate.

It's a generalisation but the Prime Time presenters seem to specialise in editorialising by stealth, either for ideological reasons, or more likely to provoke the interviewee, in the name of entertaining the audience, into giving an emotional rather than a rational response. Rather than adopting the role of the impartial seeker after truth, which he implied informed his journalistic practices.

To conclude this section I will just say that while Habermas, s conception of the public sphere is one that of necessity embraces complexity, the commercial pressures outlined by Mr Little which face Prime Time, coupled with the journalistic criterion he-and I have no doubt that this kind of tabloid mentality, one that privileges the headline over the detail, is widely shared among his peers-it seems on the face of it at any rate, that Prime Time is not in the best possible position of making a really positive contribution to the healthy functioning of a public sphere in Ireland

Chapter 4: Conclusion

So from the analysis of Prime Times coverage of the two Nice referendums, which way does the evidence point as to whether that same coverage made a contribution to the public sphere? To my mind the answer to this question depends on whether you are using a wide definition of the public sphere, or whether you are using a more minimalist definition, concentrating on a particular component of Habermas, s use of the concept. As stated at the outset of this thesis I have opted for the latter approach. This was to concentrate on the political information gleaned from the various debates which where looked at. Essentially the central question guiding this analysis, which was undertaken using a criteria informed by Habermas, s conception of the "ideal-speech" situation, was, did the information in question empower the viewer. Did it in effect equip him or her with the facts and the arguments they would need in order to cast a well informed vote, whether yes or no, to the two referendums.

However, before I interpret the evidence from that perspective, I want to backtrack slightly, and very briefly evaluate the evidence using the wider definition of the public sphere alluded to above. This would involve looking at the type of people contributed to the various debates using more traditional sociological measures, particularly those of class, gender, and ideology. Looking at the gender balance of the talking heads that featured in the programmes I looked at first, I would conclude that although the amount of men did indeed outnumber that of women, they did so only by a relatively small percentage. In class terms however things where much more homogeneous. All of the above, whatever their origins, where all card carrying members of "the political class". I have already touched on it in an analysis of one of the debates so I wont repeat myself here, but the absence of genuine working class people was particularly notable when the issue of a possible tension between the new member states pricing Irish workers out of business in relation to selling our exports, and the danger that increased immigration would exert a downward pressure on the wages of Irish service workers, effectively creating an employers market in the process. In ideological terms things where more interesting, and much more indicative of how one definition of a proper working sphere. While not every ideological position was represented, there was in my view a good

cross spectrum of views on offer. Consequently, you had regular appearances from the likes of Mary Harney, Joe Higgins, Patricia Mc Kenna etc.

To return to the relatively narrow focus of my thesis question, in terms of the information gleaned from the various debates it held, to what extent can Prime Times coverage of the two Nice referendums be deemed to have made a contribution to the public sphere?

My general conclusion is that Primetime is not a very good candidate for a public sphere in Ireland, while it doesn't shy away from covering "hard news" stories from my viewing of its coverage of the Nice referendums, I want to argue that it displays a bias against complexity.

Why is this the case? Well there are clearly structural constraints in place; foremost among these is RTE's dual mandate. This is the fact that a large percentage of its revenue has to come from the commercial sector, which essentially means that a lot of RTE's output has to attract large audiences if it is to justify its existence. In his interview Mr Little made a number of references to this commercial imperative hanging over the news and current affairs department like a modern day sword of Damocles.

This external pressure is I would argue further compounded by the fact that Little and his peers in Prime Time seem to be working with a criteria of what constitutes an interesting and a boring question, which seems to privilege the entertaining over the serious. This journalistic conventional wisdom is the antithesis of the kind of debate, the kinds of questions and answers that should characterise a fully functioning public sphere, in the Habermasian sense of that term.

Another factor, which perpetuates this bias against complexity, is the simple fact that presenters on TV or radio in Ireland are, whether they acknowledge it or not celebrities, they are the proverbial big fish in a small pond.

I want to argue that their self-image as such, is a factor that prevents them from asking the type of questions that might illuminate the debates they nominally chair. The simple question, the one that would best help the audience to understand the issues, is also the type of question that renders the presenter relatively anonymous. To get the reputation as a presenter who asks "dull questions" could spell the death knell for his career. A formalised/mechanical approach to eliciting information from their interviewees would clash with

their self-image as autonomous, creative professionals doing a difficult job in a unique way. It would also undermine the "star status" of the presenter in question, leaving him or her little room to express a question in their own "unique way" and thereby differentiate themselves from their competition.

So is there any hope for the future? Can RTE contribute to the public sphere? I think it can, one possible suggestion is to fight the widespread attempt to collapse the distinction between news and entertainment, and to actually embrace the increased fragmentation of media audiences, and accept the fact that although news and current affairs are becoming more and more a minority interest, part of their job as a public service broadcaster is to cater for such tastes. Their present strategy seems to me to be in the long term self-defeating, after all if the difference between RTE and Sky News is getting increasingly narrow, why are we all paying a "compulsory tax" for the former.

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