The Educational Character of Public Service Broadcasting: from cultural enrichment to knowledge society – Bernie Grummell (NUIM)

Abstract: A gradual erosion of the general principles of public service broadcasting has left a system increasingly susceptible to economic and political interests in the neoliberal marketplace. Education has a vital, but often overlooked, role to play in the maintenance of public communication as this casestudy of Irish broadcasting reveals. Education is located on the cusp of tensions between the social and political objectives of public service broadcasting and the economic reality in which it finds itself operating. Documentary and qualitative interviews reveals how education seeks to resolve these tensions, and the ambivalent consequences for public service broadcasting.

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Introduction: framing education's role in public service broadcasting

Although treasured as one of the core principles of public service broadcasting, education has been consistently marginalised in European broadcasting practice. This paper explores the historical and contemporary implications of education's contribution to public service broadcasting. Broadcasting is currently positioned as a core part of the global entertainment and communications industry; a key player in the development of a knowledge society (Meier, 2003). Education is often cast as the Cinderella of this world, part of an out-dated public service ethos of cultural enrichment and public responsibility. The ideology and practice of public service

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broadcasting has been vulnerable to a sustained attack from political and economic forces worldwide (Søndergaard, 2006; Avery, 2007). The media are vital components linking different spheres of life and facilitating the flow of communicative action necessary for democratic society (Habermas, 1987; Dahlgren, 1995). Media contribution to this democratic project have traditionally been framed within the public service model of broadcasting, where education was cited as a core principle alongside information and entertainment (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991).

This article explores the interaction between education and public service broadcasting in the Irish context, where it was mediated by a complex interplay of institutional, economic and cultural factors. Research is based on documentary analysis of Irish broadcasting archives, current policies and interviews with leading practitioners in the field (Grummell, 2004a). The Irish case study illustrates the multifaceted nature of the interaction between education and public service broadcasting, which has important implications for contemporary European broadcasting. Educational intentions were a vital force in public service broadcasting from the beginning as it sought to enrich and enlighten its audience. John Reith, founding Director General of BBC encapsulated public service broadcasting's role to develop

> all that was best in every department of human knowledge, endeavour, and achievement…a cultural, moral and educative force for the improvement of knowledge, taste and manners…broadcasting has a social and political function…[to] bring together all classes of the population…helping in the creation of an informed and enlightened democracy (Reith cited in Scannell and Cardiff, 1991:7).

While this model has been criticised for its paternalistic, elitist and conservative standpoint (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991), the public service ethos has had a formative

influence on the development of broadcasting across the world, including Ireland. Reith made a distinction between 'programmes specifically designed as "educational" and the educative influence, potential or actual, of the whole range of BBC activities' (Briggs, 1965:148). This article explores different understandings of education's role in broadcasting; distinguishing between the three positions of formal educational broadcasts (schools programmes such as *Telefis Scoile* series discussed later), the educative capacity of broadcasting to 'influence attitudes and mould consciousness' (Groombridge, 1983:4–5) and a market-driven rationale that Tunstall (1993) describes as 'edinfotainment' (*Scope* and *Families in Trouble* series described later). These three positions facilitate a changing and malleable understanding of education's role in broadcasting along this spectrum of formal education, educative and edinfotainment formats; although the latter position is becoming increasingly dominant in current struggle for financial, institutional and popular legitimacy (Grummell, 2004a). This spectrum-based approach facilitates analysis, as education is a term that has been defined extremely loosely in public discussion and legislation about broadcasting (Kunkel, 1998; EBU, 2005; Liikanen, 2001; Winter, 1998).

The Council of Europe (2004:1) define the remit of public service broadcasting to

> operate independently of those holding economic and political power. It provides the whole of society with information, culture, education and entertainment; it enhances social, political and cultural citizenship and promotes social cohesion. To that end, it is typically universal in terms of content and access; it guarantees editorial independence and impartiality; it provides a benchmark of quality; it offers a variety of programmes and services catering for the needs of all groups in society, and it is publicly accountable. These principles apply, whatever changes may have to be introduced to meet the requirements of the twenty-first century.

Public service broadcasting currently exhibits cultural and political vulnerability as deregulation, competition and new media technologies challenge its legitimacy in the European broadcasting field (EBU, 2005; Søndergaard, 2006). The gradual erosion of general principles of public service broadcasting has left a system increasingly susceptible to commercial and political interests. This study of education's vital, but often overlooked, contribution to the maintenance of public communication and active citizenship reveals insights that are relevant for contemporary public service broadcasting in a knowledge society.

The educational history of public service broadcasting: from cultural protectionism to modernisation

The multiplicity of public ambitions surrounding broadcasting when it was first introduced across Europe was clearly evident in the Irish case, where broadcasting played a key role in securing the social and cultural hegemony of the newly established Irish nation in the 1920s.

> Radio Éireann [Irish Radio] was expected not merely to reflect every aspect of national activity but to create activities that did not yet exist. It was expected to revive the speaking of Irish; to foster a taste for classical music…to keep people on farms; to sell goods and services of all kinds…to reunite the Irish people at home with those overseas; to end Partition. All this in addition to broadcasting's normal duty to inform, educate, and entertain. (Gorham, 1967:221)

While policy makers and broadcasters positioned education within the enrichment and civilising ethos of early public service models across Europe, it has to be contextualised within the specific character of its national development. In Ireland, this was located within the general project of cultural protectionism that sought to

create a 'Catholic Gaelic nation' (Bell, 1995). Although this Catholic ethos was specific to Ireland (but also influential in other countries such as Spain and Italy), the positioning of education as a cultural protector was similar to other public service broadcasters across Europe (Edin, 2006).

Despite the protectionist stance given to education in Irish public service broadcasting during the 1930s and 1940s, economic and political factors often took precedence in practice. The weak economic situation of the Irish state resulted in the adoption of a mixed broadcasting model which was public service in ethos, but expected to be commercially viable (Gorham, 1967; Fisher, 1978). The complex funding and organisational structures of Irish broadcasting further exacerbated the position of education; with three state departments of communications, finance and education all potentially responsible for educational broadcasting. These departments offered support for education but were reluctant to proffer their scarce financial support for educational broadcasting when other departments were also potential funding sources (Grummell, 2004a). Bell (1984:40) argued that 'State's traditional reluctance to provide adequate finance for broadcasting, coupled with its perpetual desire to control it' has been a consistent feature of Irish broadcasting. How these competing demands fit into the overall democratic project of public service broadcasting remains contested to this day.

By late 1950s, the project of cultural and national protectionism was waning as a new spirit of economic and cultural modernisation progressed across Europe. This change had a dramatic impact on Irish society where the traditional Church-State alliance was weakening, and the Irish State gradually adopted more responsibility for public

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services, including education, health and social welfare, that the Catholic Church previously controlled (Bell, 1995). The discourse of modernisation facilitated profound economic, cultural and social transformation across Ireland (Clancy et al., 1995; Inglis, 1998). It offered a more secure basis to legitimate the role of education in Irish public service broadcasting, especially in the light of State investment in education over the following years. Its impact was immediately evident in the growing number of educative productions made by Radio Éireann and supported by the Department of Education (such as Irish language plays for schools, *Tales Out of School* series). This relationship with the Department of Education gave educational broadcasting an operational basis for later work on Irish radio and television during the 1960s and 1970s, but also set it on a path that was to have devastating implications when the immediacy of modernisation declined.

A national television service was introduced in 1961 as part of the 'progressive nationalism' project of modernisation (Bell, 1995) and continued the public service emphasis that radio had developed. While cultural and educational programmes were cited as exemplars of the new public service, they were not seen as viable for capturing popular interest or commercial feasibility as Edward Roth, Director-General of RTÉ [Radio Telefís Éireann] highlighted.

> [T]he dilemma of Irish television is that it combines two objectives; one to establish and maintain a service which will further national culture and aims and have regard to the prestige of the nation, and secondly, that the service must be a paying commercial enterprise (Roth cited in Gorham, 1967:327).

These public service and commercial values underpinning broadcasting were very different – democratic and cultural objectives as opposed to economic viability and

profit. Education was caught in this bind, located within the cultural arena with little chance of commercial success, and so denied control over its development. It found a temporary solution by retaining a general educative ethos in public service statements, while developing a strategic alliance with state departments as they modernised. Department of Education agreed to fund *Telefís Scoile [School Television]* series in response to the urgent need for teacher and student training in the new science and maths curricula between 1964 and 1975, marking of the beginning of schools programmes in Ireland. The *Telefís Feirme [Farm Television]* series followed in 1965, funded by the Department of Agriculture as part of the effort to modernise farming methods prior to EU accession.

Both series reflected the capricious nature of the Irish State's attitude towards broadcasting. Despite strong policy backing, sustained support for specific broadcasting services (such as education) was lacking, until an immediate and strategic need became apparent. However, this changeability can also be viewed in a less cynical light, as individual state departments struggled to justify funding for broadcasting when more immediate demands were being made from within their own department. The modernisation of Irish society provided a coherent legitimation and funding structure for formal educational broadcasting during this decade – a rationale that was also evident internationally in schools broadcasting (UNESCO, 2005).

These funding mechanisms enabled the Department of Education to shape educational programming in Ireland for many decades; with public memory summarising *Telefís Scoile* as 'talk and chalk' programmes based on school curricula and classroom methods. The series was popular with teachers and students (viewed in 52% of

second level schools) as an alternative learning medium; albeit driven by the enthusiasm of individual teachers. School visit reports indicated that viewing became more selective and critical over the years as media literacy and learning expectations increased (RTÉ archives, 1966). However, the pressing economic and political goals negated in-depth pedagogical reflection or wider policy-making about educational broadcasting's role in a modernising Ireland. Formal committees and policy discussions achieved little – for example, Advisory Committee on Educational Broadcasting established in 1964 had no fixed terms of reference and remained in an advisory capacity until 1976, with no regulatory power (RTÉ, 1979). This was allied with the lack of audience research (aside from school visits completed by the Education Department) that left RTÉ without public defences; unlike schools broadcasting in UK that had greater public visibility (Crook, 2007).

The dangers of this dependency on the immediate logic of modernisation became apparent in the mid-1970s when the Department of Education suddenly withdrew funding for *Telefís Scoile*. The school curriculum had been modernised and the economic rationale for educational programming could not longer be justified. This was allied with changes in the wider educational field as the demographic and curricular impact of the introduction of free second level education in 1967 eased (Clancy, 1995). The educational services that *Telefís Scoile* had provided were no longer seen as necessary. This marked the near-oblivion of the educational genre for the next decade in Ireland, with programming consisting of repeat *Telefís Scoile* broadcasts and alternative funding for educational broadcasting difficult to find (Grummell, 2004b).

Reframing educational broadcasting in a lifelong learning and knowledge society

New demands for educational broadcasting emerged during the 1980s as community education began to provide learning locally, especially through groups organised by women to tackle social exclusion in their communities (Inglis, 1984). Radio programmes like *Monday at Five*, *Access*, *New Wave* and *Readin' and Writin'* series focused on enabling learner participation, experiential knowledge and community empowerment. Adult educators and broadcasters were adapting concepts of lifelong learning and community education for radio (with experimentation rarely featured on the more expensive medium of television). Television was served instead by the screening of BBC/Open University *Adults Learning* series in 1985. This marked the public emergence of adult education on Irish television with certification provided by National University of Ireland, Maynooth. National Institute of Higher Education (now Dublin City University) also initiated plans for distance education that incorporated broadcasting. However, RTÉ's contribution of transmission services was rendered unnecessary when the broadcast aspect of this service was dropped to concentrate on printed materials (Irish students accessed distance education through British-based Open University and other providers instead).

These innovations in adult education were to provide the lifeline that education would take in Irish broadcasting over the following decades, building alliances with adult and higher education providers that gave an operational logic in an era of economic recession. Funding for educational series was sporadic, but could be rationalised within the lifelong learning and knowledge society discourse that the European Union was promoting (Liikanen, 2001; EBU, 2005). RTÉ moved away from the direct

association with the Department of Education and schools programming, and by the end of the 1980s had reverted to the older public service strategy of defining all broadcasting as educative 'since it conveys experience of various kinds' (1989:21). The approach of integrating education into general programming rather than targeting specific educational groups had been successfully adopted across Europe and was very different to the former framework of cultural enrichment. It was now positioned within the lifelong learning logic of knowledge and information society promulgated by the European Union. 'Public service broadcasters are a key asset in bridging the digital divide, i.e. bringing the benefits of the information society to all…contribut[ing] to lifelong learning and the acquisition of new media skills.' (EBU, 2005:25).

The linking of education with the knowledge society project was indicative of a wider ideological shift in the positioning of public services within the European Commission (Winter 1998; Harrison and Woods, 2001). Services like education and broadcasting were increasingly located within an economic and marketplace frame. The knowledge society discourse can be positioned within the wider rise of globalisation and neoliberalism, with its impact evident in the spread of privatisation and deregulation across European broadcasting (UNESCO, 2005; Søndergaard, 2006).

These broad ambitions of a knowledge society had to be set aside as Irish broadcasters faced more immediate difficulties – the seemingly intractable barrier of securing consistent funding throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Meier, 2003). RTÉ faced particular challenges with the ending of its monopoly position in Ireland and the

capping of its income to allow market space for emerging commercial broadcasters (Horgan, 2001). Similar occurrences were apparent across European broadcasting, as politicians were 'under pressure to define the public service mandate narrowly enough to allow the commercial media sector to grow, and there is a real risk that such considerations may weigh heavier than thoughts about the developmental potential of public service media.' (Søndergaard, 2006:58).

Deregulation was rationalised in an economic frame to ensure that 'broadcasting becomes a growth industry, bringing new investment and higher productivity into Irish broadcasting, creating new secure employment in the sector, providing choice to the consumer' (Minister for Justice and Communications cited in Truetzschler, 1991:33). This discourse of commercial development was to have profound ramifications for all public sectors of Irish society (Coleman and Coulter, 2003). It was particularly significant for RTÉ as their licence fee had been unchanged for five years, resulting in public funds accounting for only 35% of RTÉ's income by 2001. Commercial income from advertising revenue and other capital sales accounted for the majority of their income – an ironic financial position for a public service broadcaster (Collins, 2003).

This backdrop of financial constraint coincided with the espousal of a pluralist and minority rights orientation that was used to re-legitimate the distinctive contribution of public broadcasting (Harrison and Woods, 2001). RTÉ's adoption of a minority rights discourse corresponded with European Union's policy of cultural pluralism, whilst also enabling the targeting of specific audience groups for advertisers. The blending of commercial and public values was evident in the discourse of consumer

choice, branding and niche programming that became dominant across European

public service broadcasting during this time (Ytreberg, 2002; Edin, 2006). How

cultural and educational aspects of the public good could be retained when

commercial logics were increasingly normalised into public service systems remained

unaddressed. Collins contended that 'against that [commercial] background and in a

time of accelerating technological and social change…we rarely hear a discourse that

is tuned to a social and cultural reality of broadcasting as a mainstay of healthy

democracy, of citizenship and of personal development' (2003:5).

The Green Paper on Broadcasting (1995:131) described Ireland's contribution to

public service broadcasting as the

> motor of modernisation, cultural innovation, social transformation, even
> democratisation. It can cultivate a healthy public sphere in which national self-
> confidence flourishes...[and] critically interrogate a nation's history, culture and
> identity.

This seemed indicative of an era of cultural legitimation when public service – and

educational – broadcasting could be rationalised by its democratic and transformative

role in the public sphere. However, this contribution was set within a specific

economic and political context, as broadcast policy-making across Europe moved to a

neoliberal basis (UNESCO, 2005; Bardoel and d'Haenens, 2008). The hierarchical

structures of broadcasters like RTÉ found it difficult to legitimate their public service

stance in an era dominated by demands for profitability, performativity and

rationalisation (Horgan, 2001; Corcoran, 2004). Public service broadcasters 'had a

reputation for being overstaffed, costly and bureaucratic' and faced organisational

reform (Ytreberg, 2002:292). This caused in a seismic shift in the cultural and

economic positioning of RTÉ. While the values of lifelong learning and pluralism

offered cultural legitimation for public service broadcasters (as Irish Green Paper on Broadcasting and European Union policies demonstrated), these discourses could not be defended on economic grounds. As a consequently, RTÉ instituted a major overhaul of its organisational structures, shedding numerous personnel and adopting new working practices (Bell, 1995; Horgan, 2001).

Educative programming, changing production practices and public values in a neoliberal era

These organisational reforms were indicative of a wider paradigm shift to global commercialism and neoliberalism, as evidenced by

> the unequivocal acceptance by the European Union that while EU member-states 'value highly public service broadcasting as a main guardian of freedom of information, pluralism and cultural diversity […] public broadcasting must respect the basic ground rules of a market economy that ensure a healthy development of the dual system' (Ungerer, 2003 cited in UNESCO, 2005).

European broadcasters responded with a growing commercial rationale in their scheduling, marketing and advertising (if allowed by national regulation); and by creating commercial products and divisions (Ytreberg, 2002; Søndergaard, 2006). Education was one of the first areas of public service broadcasting to adopt these changes to ensure its continued survival, such as Channel 4's commercialisation of educational broadcasting through *4 Ventures* in UK. RTÉ developed *Ollscoil* and *Opening Learning* schedules in the early 1990s, targeting specific timeslots for pre-school, school and adult education programmes.

A 'schedule-oriented culture' prevailed across European broadcasting 'where the schedules are no longer made to fit the programme contents but programmes are made to fit the schedule' (Meier, 2003:344). Despite its public service role, education was positioned as a minority interest scheduled in off-peak times – RTÉ's morning schedule or BBC's *Learning Zone* late night schedule (Sargant, 1996). This marginalisation of educational programmes resulted in lower visibility and audience ratings for educational broadcasting, thereby decreasing its potential advertising revenue and capacity to gain valuable political legitimacy. This raises the broader issue of how we assess the impact and reach of television (Bardoel and d'Haenens, 2008). Typically, educational broadcasting achieves lower ratings in generalist measurement systems such as AGB Nielsen, although they may fulfil other public service goals (Grummell 2004a).

The populist and ratings-friendly strand of 'edinfotainment' programmes became more apparent in the establishment of thematically distinct channels on satellite and cable technology, including Learning Channel, Discovery Channel and National Geographic (Meyer, 1997). It was facilitated the ending of narrow-cast transmission limitations as digital and other platforms emerged (EBU, 2005). Programming on these channels had to abide by scheduling-driven requirements of attaining high viewership. Consequently, educational producers adopted new programme styles and strategies to attract viewers, blending educational material with entertainment and information strategies from mainstream broadcasting. Whether these programmes constitute education in any pedagogical sense or a repackaged 'edinfotainment' blend remains a contentious issue (Tunstall, 1993).

Changes in the working practices of educational media producers were illustrative of wider transformations across public service broadcasting during this time (UNESCO, 2005; Edin, 2006; Ytreberg, 2002). The in-house production strategies that had formerly dominated public service broadcasting were being abandoned by educational broadcasters; impelled by economic necessity. They adopted more competitive and flexible forms of production, including greater acquisition of pre-existing series (packager model) and independent commissioning of new programming (publisher model). Changes in production practices included the use of accessible digital recording and editing technologies, and greater multi-skilling of personnel (Tunstall, 1993; Corcoran, 2004). The tendering process of the broadcast market induced demands for even lower budgets, and thereby continued the competitive cycle of increased efficiency, production work and multi-skilling. RTÉ established partnerships and commissions with independent production companies like *AV Edge* and *stop.watch television* and built alliances with national educational groups such as NALA (National Adult Literacy Agency) and AONTAS (National Association of Adult Education). This strategy enabled the production of 'high volume/low cost independent productions funded through a combination of acquisition fees and access to production studios provided by RTÉ' (MacMahon, 1997:6).

Educational producers were at the forefront of Irish efforts to develop interactive and participative models of production, including *EDCAST* and *DOMITEL* projects in interactive educational broadcasting and *Right to Learn* and *LearnNet* television series in the 1990s. These series entailed experimentation in Internet and broadcast technology, and the integration of adult education pedagogies into broadcasting. For example, *Right to Learn* series produced in 1994 by RTÉ was a participative adult

education series on the rights of the unemployed, integrating learners from these marginalised groups into the production of this multi-media series and enabling them to gain a voice on a national stage (Kelly, 1996). Its institutional funding by the European Union allowed this long and experimental production process to be undertaken, facilitating a participative learning process that was unusual for educational production and unique in the Irish context.

These projects were indicative of the impact of new media technologies on broadcasting practices, especially Internet and digital platforms (also evident in BBC and Channel 4's on-line educational services in the UK). New media technologies were often framed within commercial discourses, as evident in telecommunications and information technology alliances such as the European Education Partnership (Winter, 1998). Educational broadcasting in the United Kingdom and other European countries was now rationalised as part of the State's development of a learning and knowledge society (UNESCO, 2005). Exceptions to this trend did exist; for example in French broadcasting where 'audio-visual communication is [perceived] as an obstacle for thought. The notion that television could service education has scarcely gained a foothold.' (Emanuel, 1999:88-89).

Public service broadcasters were still required to preserve their educational ideals and offer programming that was complementary to commercial providers. Basically, they were to be commercially viable, but not a commercial entity. This was particularly problematic for public service broadcasters as they tried to move existing analogue services onto digital platforms. This was apparent in Channel 4's re-integration of *4 Ventures* commercialised learning services into the main Channel 4 structures

(Tryhorn, 2005) and their subsequent move from broadcast to on-line educational projects (Kiss, 2007). The BBC *Digital Curriculum* case reveals the difficulties of this situation as BBC were hamstrung by European Commission criterion of considering competitors' expectations which restricted public service broadcasters from transferring their educational services directly onto digital platforms (UNESCO, 2005). Public service broadcasters now had to consider the marketplace impact of their services, ensuring that they are 'clearly distinguishable' and 'complementary' to commercial services (EBU, 2005:67). This restricted public service broadcasters to niche areas not provided by commercial servers (Bardoel and d'Haenens, 2008). It marked an explicit rejection of 'the argument that educational services had been part of the BBC's core broadcasting remit for decades, and that Internet services simply constituted a logical evolution of these traditional educational services.' (EBU, 2005:64). The results of this strategy became evident in the narrowing of vision evident in UK educational provision, with BBC focused on schools and language programming and Channel 4 concentrated on youth provision and on-line services.

The European Union principle of ensuring a common trading market seemed to take supremacy above social and cultural objectives of public service (Harrison and Woods, 2001). It created an inherent contradiction with the general philosophy of public service broadcasting and restricted its democratic scope. Public service broadcasters were constrained by their positioning within the public service model as a 'public value'.

> the company's [BBC's] purpose cannot consist of filling the gaps in the market-based menu on offer, but is instead to maintain vital functions in society that commercial media cannot, or can do but a limited degree, fulfil. These functions, which include helping to maintain a well-informed, well-educated

and tolerant society, are expressed in the concept of "public value".
(Søndergaard 2006:55).

Rearticulating the democratic role of public service broadcasting through this concept
of 'public value' attempted to legitimate its contribution to European society in a
digital age. Ironically, this public contribution was increasingly challenged by
commercial operators under EU competition law, with Søndergaard contending that
'public service media have contracted a new form of political vulnerability that,
paradoxically, arises out of the market dominance they have achieved.' (2006:50)

Broadcasters' initially positive focus on the potential of knowledge society blissfully
ignored these concerns, seemingly acting on the assumption that existing educational
and broadcasting services were 'neutral' platforms that could unproblematically
integrate the new technologies into existing services and ideologies. RTÉ adopted
this logic in the late 1990s with their digital television plans. The Head Editor of
Educational Programmes was moved from analogue television services to develop
plans for an interactive digital educational channel. Ironically the *Open Learning*
schedule of formal educational programming that he had initiated on pre-existing
service was dropped during this transition. However, one strand was retained; adult
literacy through *Read Write Now* series (1999-2005), *Really Useful Guide to Words
and Numbers* (2006-7) and the current *Written Off* series. While this sleight of hands
removed most educational programming from Irish screens, these remaining analogue
productions were symptomatic of the changing production and policy landscape for
educational broadcasters, especially as Irish plans for digital broadcasting floundered.
This was also reflected in the declining rates of indigenous educational productions in

Irish broadcasting from 5% of RTÉ's home production output in 1977 (RTÉ Annual Report 1977) to 0.5% in 2005 (EBU, 2006).

While these literacy series followed a similar pattern of independent production and the adoption of new media technology, they were funded through the combined sources of Department of Education and Science, European Social Fund and Broadcast Commission of Ireland (BCI). This recurrence of state funding for educational broadcasting was once again legitimated on modernisation grounds; now as part of the national drive to improve literacy standards in Ireland (OECD, 2000). As well as their regulatory functions, BCI have a dedicated funding scheme (derived as a percentage of the main public service licence fee) to encourage innovative productions in specified areas including adult literacy (Collins, 2003). In line with this strategic logic, the literacy series were given repeated primetime slots in television and radio schedules and have been the main educational output on RTÉ in recent years (as reflected in the high audience ratings achieved by the series). While a modernisation drive was still evident (similar to the school and agricultural reforms of earlier decades), its production demonstrated the changes in public service broadcasting, with the ascendancy of commercialism, independent production and knowledge society rationale.

These changes were apparent in the *Scope* series on RTÉ from 2005, developing awareness of science, engineering and technology amongst young people – an ethos in line with EU knowledge society policies and illustrative of the market-driven rationale of 'edinfotainment' programming. This series was developed and funded by an amalgamation of statutory and expert bodies including Department of Education

and Science, Forfás (on behalf of Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment), FÁS (Training and Employment Authority) and Institution of Engineers of Ireland. It reflected the economic and educational strategy that promoted science, engineering and technology as future industries of Europe. This can be contextualised as part of a wider discourse that normalised a neoliberal view of scientific and technological development as crucial for employment, competitiveness and the enhancement of society (in line with National Development Plan, 2007-2013 and Lisbon European Council, 2000). The *Investigators* series took a similar approach of popularising science amongst the adult population, by blending investigative science with popular entertainment about contentious themes, including climate change, embryonic research and computer tracking.

In line with the schedule-led approach, RTÉ focused on popular themes to attract viewers to its educational programmes. RTÉ developed series like *Meet the Family* and *Families in Trouble* to explore family relationships, and are currently producing a series on child development that will track the experiences of families over a six-year period from birth. These series represented greater mainstreaming of educational programming, adopting a reality television format fronted by a popular television personality (a family psychologist offering guidance to the participating families). What these latter strands of popular programmes seemed to represent was the gradual elimination of education as a formal production method or genre as it was diluted across the broadcasting spectrum to play an 'edinfotainment' role (similar to the current literacy series *Written Off* in its mix of literacy and reality television formats). This debilitation of education's vanguard role in public service broadcasting was also evident in the merging of education into the broader scope of *Diversity, Irish*

Language and Education Programmes Department in RTÉ. Education was no longer

a distinct department or theme in its own right, but diffused through the system as an

educative or edinfotainment style.

**Conclusion: the future of educational broadcasting in a neoliberal and digitally-
driven age**

This gradual shift to mainstreaming education through commercial rationales and

edinfotainment formats raises important questions for the future legitimation of public

service broadcasting. The dominance of a schedule-led model and the drive to

increased commercial efficiency is indicative of the rise of a neoliberal logic across

European public services (Meier, 2003; Lund 2007). It highlights important issues

about the status of public service broadcasting as it integrates traditional legitimation

on socio-cultural grounds within a neoliberal framework. Van Cuilenburg and

McQuail (2003:200) identify changing priorities in European broadcasting policy as

> older values are losing their force. The main area where this is occurring is in
> respect of social responsibility requirements, public service and altruism (non-
> profit goals). The 'public interest' is being significantly redefined to encompass
> economic and consumerist values.

As the BBC's *Digital Curriculum* case indicates, economic objectives of open trading

and competitiveness takes supremacy above public and cultural goals, despite Council

of Europe's (2007) recommendation that public service broadcasters maintain a

strong presence in information society and the digital environment. Public service

broadcasters now have to ensure that their work is commercially viable but

complementary to commercial servers (EBU, 2005). This creates an inherent

contradiction with the general philosophy of public service broadcasting and restricts

its democratic scope. The growing commercial drive in broadcasting is driven by neoliberal pressures, which promotes greater efficiency, accountability and performativity across public services (Karppinen, 2006). Its impact is evident in the schedule and ratings-led culture of contemporary production, the emergence of regulatory bodies (such as the new Broadcasting Authority of Ireland) and public service charters.

These charters have moved public service mandates from the broader brushstrokes of a general ethos to a more binding character (Søndergaard 2006:51). They are a legally bound 'statement of principles that clarifies what is expected of RTÉ as the national public service broadcaster, including RTÉ's accountability to its audience' (RTÉ, 2006:23). However, their blending of traditional public values with neoliberal performativity and commercialised measures is highly problematic. Edin describes the 'chameleon-like' nature of the public service concept as new mandates and layers of meanings are continuously added (2006:69). Consequently, the public service concept remains vaguely formulated with contradictory objectives. As Avery contends in the US context, 'the criterion measures of success in a commercial system force public broadcasters into the performance trap that makes them vulnerable to critics' (2007:360). The pressure of the neoliberal market leaves public service broadcasters increasingly vulnerable. Karppinen reminds us that 'the remit of public service broadcasting is especially intangible and normative, embedded in the ideas of public sphere, citizenship, pluralism, creativity, national culture, all values that are notoriously difficult to define in an unambiguous way, let alone measure empirically' (2006:58). The same point is applicable to the contribution of education to public

service broadcasting where the balance between learning in a pedagogical sense and entertaining information is increasingly precarious.

It is worth returning to the ideas introduced in the opening of this article as early public service broadcasters articulated their public contribution. We are in danger of losing sight of the core public service ethos of broadcasting in the continuous negotiations over commercialism and performativity. Murdock brings us back to the relevance of broadcasting for 'vitality of democracy'.

> Full and effective citizenship requires access to the range of information, insights, arguments, and explanations that enable people to make sense of the changes affecting their lives, and to evaluate the range of actions open to them both as individuals and as members of a political community. Without these resources, they are excluded from effective participation [in the public sphere]. They become the victims not the subjects of change, unable to pursue their rights and press for their extension. Precisely because of its centrality the television system has become a key site on which the struggle to secure and develop resources for citizenship takes place. (Murdock, 1990:78)

The educational character and learning processes inherent in public service broadcasting have a central role in the development of knowledge and participation in citizenship that is vital for a mature democratic society.

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