

Gavan Titley is a doctoral student in the School of Applied Languages and Intercultural Studies, DCU, and currently a visiting researcher at the Renvall Institute of the University of Helsinki.

# Cultivating Habitats of Meaning - Broadcasting, Participation and Interculturalism

Gavan Titley

## Shifting Scapes: Relating Media and Social Change

At the time of writing, *buenas vistas* of the digital landscape are far fewer than when this publication was first conceived. The last year (2002) has witnessed high profile European digital failures, a fraught domestic franchising process and a serious financial crisis at RTE. These factors, combined with the as yet ambiguous direction of post-election policy, conspire to make the future of digital terrestrial television very uncertain. More broadly, reports from Ireland<sup>1</sup> and abroad suggest that there is still a significant battle for the 'hearts and minds' of potential digital converts. At least partially this involves convincing people that proposed analogue switch-offs are somehow in their best interests, and not heavy-handed (and failing) attempts at technological determinism. Nevertheless, the uncertain appeal and future of a service that may not be able to offer anything more than a diet of re-runs and interactive shopping for ab-crunchers creates at least a usable vacuum. It provides a space to focus and regroup energies around the key values and debates on the philosophy and practice of public service, at a time when the concept of public in Ireland contains recurrent and emergent complexities.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example "Digital woes delay start of Irish service" in *The Irish Times* (8.4.02) for a list of factors, including a lack of confidence in the pay television market, the success of Sky in Ireland and the probable inability of RTE to contribute new channels and initiatives, indicating minimal demand for a new television service.

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Changes in the media landscape must be considered in relation to the larger social terrain and the contemporary processes that media are imbricated in. In recent years, what has been termed the 'Irish ethnic landscape' (Lentin, 2001:2) has become hugely significant, and contested. This landscape, previously homogenous only in certain national imaginings (Kiberd & Longley 2001), is nevertheless both shifting and being perceived to shift. Despite the multi-streamed nature of immigration over the past ten years, it can be argued that it is what Piaras Mac Einri has described as the *awkward visibility* of non-EU migrants that dominates public debate on this shifting landscape (2002:7). This visibility has resulted in a public focus on the status of immigrants and the larger question of belonging, what constitutes Irish obligations as well as 'fair play', the natures, causes and perceptions of racism in the country, and the complexities of multiculturalism as a descriptive, ethical and policy-oriented entity.

Yet changes in the ethnic landscape of Ireland and the polyphonic and confused responses to it have also opened up questions about understandings of Irish society and Irish identities. As is increasingly pointed out, the limited yet unprecedented arrival of foreign nationals is part of the chaotic globalisation of Ireland, inseparable from the much-celebrated embrace of the global economy and debates about the character of (post?) Celtic Tiger Ireland. As well as this focus on contemporary Irish globality, the diasporic nature of Irish historical experience is being constantly re-asserted as a basis for anti-racism and transnational solidarity. Approaching the 'immigration question' increasingly demands considerations of globalisations, past and present, and 'multiculturalism' the consideration of that centred culture that names those arriving into it.

The public mediation of such debates is clearly crucial, and the media is faced not with exploring issues of *them* in relation to *us*, but of representing and influencing social change with an *us* that is questioned and unstable. Allied to this, as Farrel Corcoran has pointed out, media in Ireland is becoming increasingly globalised: in ownership and



competition, in the spectrum of viewing possibilities, in the economic realities of technological innovation, and in the implications of these factors for Irish public service broadcasting (2002). This situation suggests the aptness of Arjun Appadurai's celebrated notion of interconnecting and disjunctive scapes to characterise elements of contemporary Irish experience, where individuals, communities and societies experience nodes and intersections in the flow of de-territorialised and often decontextualised ideas, practices, images, discourses, and fundamentally, people (1991). Debating the shape and character of national media increasingly embedded in the *global mediascape* means framing these developments in relation to the needs of a society experiencing high profile change along the *ethnoscape*. Debate in Ireland on the future shape and direction of broadcasting is ongoing, with many outlining the serious challenges to be faced in consolidating and reinventing public service possibilities in a digitalised and globalised environment<sup>2</sup>. This disjuncture looks more like a rupture when we consider that this is at a time when the diversity and needs of the Irish public is in need of creative investigation and address. It is also worth mentioning that market-oriented, institutional notions of diversity, measured in degrees of lifestyle choice and based on the supposedly unifying experience of consumption, are not the models that allow us to address the social change under discussion.

This article argues that the (distant) prospect of digital terrestrial television may provide reinventive options for public service broadcasting in the contemporary context by examining the viability of complementary participative media channels. While some programming has engaged with socio-cultural change in recent years, particular examples foreground once more the limitations of representivity in relation to the complexities of emergent identities and processes. Despite the willingness to document and imagine this shifting landscape, it is far from likely that institutional discourses of multiculturalism can surmount the fundamental critiques of this enterprise in other national contexts (Humphreys 1996, Husband 1993, Keane 1991). New orientations require new forms, and the core argument here is that participative media possibilities, within the framework of public service, could have a formative role in documenting, imagining and shaping the contours of globalised, intercultural Ireland. This can be argued for a number of reasons that will be developed during the article:

- 1: Providing national media access to local communities, evolving communities currently defined by ethnicity, communities of interest, civil society and non-traditionally organised groups secures a basis for developing a diverse spectrum of representations. It is not the aim that these representations be correct or *authentic*, or assumed that they are easily convertible to cultural knowledge, but that they facilitate encounters between a host of identities, interests and positions.
- 2: A nationally available digital service may harness the output and expertise of particularistic media, while including micro public spheres in the macro. This aims, idealistically, to engage with commonalities as well as diversity, and guards against the sealing off of supposedly bounded entities inherent in some examples of multiculturalist praxis (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992).
- 3: Framed tentatively as a cultural right, it recognises the social participatory nature of citizenship at a time when the concept is in need of renewal, and offers access to the means of producing the images and stories that are at least partially mobilised in self-definition<sup>3</sup>. Relatedly, it may prove instrumental in disturbing the prevailing notion that Irish diversity is primarily constituted of diverse *groups*, devoid of crucial internal differences.
- 4: In common with current community media practice, it provides access to, demystification of and competence in the production

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<sup>2</sup> See some of the submissions to the recent Forum on Broadcasting, in particular that of Farrel Corcoran and the Dublin Institute of Technology's School of Media.

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<sup>3</sup> See Daniel Dayan's essay 'Media and Diasporas' for a consideration of questions relating to diasporic media usage and the negotiation of self and group identity. In Gripsrud, J. (ed.) 1999.

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process, facilitating new forms and forums of communication. It also provides a new space for the currently skilled and independent sector.

- 5: It provides a space in the Irish public sphere for emergent *global television* networks, which seek to link local programming within a rubric of what Douglas Kellner has called 'globalization from below' (2000:31).

The problems with such a proposal are glaring: finance, meaningfully constructing access, the relative power relations of different groups, communities and individuals, the level of training and skilling involved, the realities and reception of divergent production standards, and so forth. Nevertheless, there is much that an Irish model could learn not just from current, ongoing projects, but also from projects in other contexts that have attempted to re-centre participation and stimulate interculturalism (Downum 1993, Husband 1994, Riggins 1992). This article does not pretend to be more than a discussion document, aiming to bring together some of the issues and approaches that need to be considered in relation to each other. As Graham Murdock has argued, the task is to:

..begin by thinking about the kinds of programmes that would provide pleasure and promote the core capacities of citizenship, and then work backwards to the organisational, financial and political conditions that would be required to support and develop them (1999:16).

This article works backwards by looking at the current critique of multiculturalism in Irish society, and argues that a theory of interculturality, where the emphasis is on interrogation, coheres with the argument for cultural rights as applied to media in globalising and polyvocal societies. It then considers some of the issues surrounding recent attempts by Irish broadcasting to represent new social experiences, before discussing the issues raised by suggesting this kind of putative project.

## What's in a prefix? Multiculturalism, Interculturalism and Cultural Rights.

Multiculturalism is a term that has been spread so thinly across incommensurable contexts that it is now a discursive impossibility, its multi-accentuality hoarding bulky histories and ideological associations. Yet it has become a staple term in Irish attempts to describe a new ethnoscape, its apparent neutrality and/or positivity masking its problematic descriptiveness, variant social visions, and wide-ranging history of policy-oriented praxis. While its application to Northern Irish society has been vigorously critiqued (Rolston 1998), its general lack of precision in the Irish public sphere can be evidenced by recent uses such as that of Patricia Redlich, who dismissed critics of Operation Hyphen with the banal and unspecified juxtaposition of 'the sane serious and knowledgeable' rightly taking control from 'intellectually lazy liberals' peddling 'a happy clappy notion of multiculturalism'<sup>4</sup>. While there may be validity in specific criticisms, it is indicative that the term is assumed to stand for a self-evident set of positions.

Ronit Lentin (2001) argues that the easy acceptance of multiculturalism in Ireland involves a replication of the politics of recognition and realities of segregation critiqued in, among other contexts, the United Kingdom (Malik, 2001). A constant emphasis on difference in the cultural realm implies a recognition of differences validated by the empowered, collapsing power relations and the political-economic into a world of relativism and international food evenings. This indicates a lack of awareness that denoting multiculturalism involves an ideological intervention in how *it* is to be defined and managed. Emphasising cultural difference as the single most pressing element of a

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<sup>4</sup> Redlich, Patricia, 'Caught Offside on Immigration Pitch', *Sunday Independent* 28.7.02. It could also be argued that this is representative of a pervasive trend in Irish public debate, where hastily constructed groups and 'consensuses' are deployed as shorthand for positions, individuals and arguments that the author wishes to set up and knock down, rather than engaging with specifically and in debate.

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social program results not only in essentialising different experiences into perceived cultural/group identities, but may also depoliticise exclusion and elide the crucial discourse of social justice. The dynamic of recognition interpolates a relatively stable Irish identity, bounded from cultural interaction, and crucially, sustained by a disavowal of historical experiences (2001:11)

Lentin argues that current multicultural initiatives replicate social power relations<sup>5</sup> and that, specifically, the substitution of intercultural for multicultural in fora such as the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) does not represent a significant shift (2001: 9). I am not in a position to comment on this, however a key argument here is that elaborating a theory of interculturalism in our contemporary context should represent something of a shift, not least in evolving the debate on the values, implications and limits of multiculturalist approaches<sup>6</sup>. The main task of such theory would be to identify approaches to the analysis of socio-cultural existence that can respond to the weaknesses identified, in this instance, by Lentin, while recognising the limits of applicability long before suffering the opacity of multiculturalism. I would argue that interculturalism (while also a multi-accentual concept) is not merely a re-branding of multiculturalism, but an interrogation of the cultural knowledge and processes it leaves unchallenged. Far from celebrating difference, it disconcerts the perspectives that construct it. Rather than encouraging one bounded group to *recognise* others, it interrogates the supposed boundedness and normality of situated groups, entailing, in this context, the interrogation of Irishness<sup>7</sup>.

The importance of this to the argument for a diversifying, participative media is fundamental. The aim is not to create a representational space that mirrors an image of 'diversity'<sup>8</sup>, but to create a space where the act and circulation of representations involves a move:

..from trying to assess the 'accuracy' of images and stereotypes by testing them against traits deemed to inhere in the group being represented, to examining the world of the representer itself, in which the constructs of 'others' or 'them' are conceptually, morally and politically intertwined with constructs of self or 'us'. (Corcoran, 1998:5).

This implies a learning process, facilitated by formal and informal educational strategies offered by social actors (Cullen 2000:59), and by the educational paradigm used to shape media output. A battery of opinions maintains that such learning is crucial in contemporary Ireland. But how should we understand social learning processes within these shifting scapes? Constructing responses to change depends on the resources and capitals at your disposal. Ulf Hannerz conceptualises this as *habitats of meaning*: the interrelation of physical-cognitive exposure with competencies and interpretative possibilities (1996:22). Like natural habitats, our habitat of meaning can expand or contract, depending on the range or type of elements that we are exposed to and required to interpret and evaluate. Various bounded interpretative communities are formed by the degree of overlap between habitats, producing discursive formations (Morley, 1992:90) according to context, network, and phenomena. Engagement with the cultural space inhabited clearly depends on the interpretative capital at the individual's disposal, or as Hannerz observes:

Our habitats of meaning will of course depend not only on what in some physical sense we are exposed to, but also on the capabilities we have built up for coping with it knowledgeably: the languages we understand..our levels of literacy with respect to other symbolic forms, and so on (1996:23)

As a theoretical framework, the idea of habitat suggests the need for strategies of orientation and the development of intercultural literacy in relation to the challenges posed by a globalising environment. As this is the subject of a considerable multi-

<sup>5</sup> More work may need to be done on the actuality of organisational life in this context, as to dismiss, as the article under discussion does, a range of initiatives because of their structural replication of power relations and supposed ethnocentricity does not allow for the lived relations, interactions and negotiations within these groups – in short, their micro-cultures.

<sup>6</sup> Closer examination would probably find that different organisations or initiatives employ theoretical models, educational resources and training pedagogies that are drawn from different multiculturalist and interculturalist approaches without firm distinctions and categories.

<sup>7</sup> Which is the central conclusion of Ronit Lentin's piece – that disavowed multiculturalism has shied away from interrogating the Irish 'we', a process fatal to assumptions about ethnic diversity in Ireland that underpin current racist discourses.

<sup>8</sup> Gary Younge, in a recent Guardian article, argued that a significant degree of diversification in public roles and images in the UK still constituted 'virtual evolution rather than actual change', and risked the triumph of re-branding over ongoing questions of equality and fairness (5.8.02). Nevertheless, in the context developing in Ireland, a programme such as *Mono*, aside from its content, could be argued to have an important symbolic role.



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<sup>9</sup> See Lauritzen, Peter (1998) for an overview of the development of intercultural education in Europe.

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disciplinary literature as well as a broad range of formal and informal education, anything approaching a comprehensive overview is beyond the scope of this article<sup>9</sup>. It is possible only to offer some key points in this context. Intercultural literacy involves a critical and reflexive engagement with identity, values and interaction in pluralised contexts. It is not about learning to 'read' cultures, but learning to navigate the multiplicity of socio-cultural relationships that people, including oneself, inhabit, and to auto-critique the processes that naturalise and centre the self. This, and other learnt processes, could be argued to constitute intercultural competences critical to cultivating habitats of meaning. Key notions include the following:

- *De-centring the Self* - if enculturation centres our perceptual, interpretative and evaluative frameworks as normal, natural and stabilising, then a pluralised environment brings into contact many such systems of certainty. De-centring the self involves interrogating personal identities, normatives and roles in terms of those qualities that ascribe difference to the other. This centrally involves a consideration of values and ethics, an engagement abjectly absent from cultural relativist discourses.

- *To be acquainted with other realities* - the increasingly diffuse flows that enter habitats of meaning necessitates the ability to place phenomena within suitable discourses and contexts, or to at least recognise that necessity. Acquaintance with other realities is not a play of recognitions, but an interrogation of discourses of otherness and an awareness of the potential incommensurability of conceptual and ethical schemes in interaction<sup>10</sup>. Crucially, it also means locating interaction within larger frameworks of power.

- *Tolerating ambiguity* - experience of multicultural realities involves the possibility that norms, assumptions and patterns of communication that we take for granted may not be recognised, shared or accepted. Yet social interaction requires constant involvement in cognitive, emotional and communicative processes. Tolerating resultant ambiguities is a prerequisite for ridding oneself of a reassuring vision of the world without immediately providing the security of an alternative vision (Otten 1997: 35). Given that insecurity is often a basis for defensive positions, this form of active tolerance is central to developing sustainable responses to increased interconnections and interdependencies.

- *Empathy* - Theories of modernisation deployed the concept of empathy as a basic condition of living together (Lerner 1958, Schramm 1960). As increasingly complex modern existences evolved, an active appreciation of common humanity needed to replace the supposed certainties of traditional relationships. While this analysis drastically underplayed questions of power and culture, the concept still has a contemporary validity. Encounters that we may have no prior experience of require empathy as a way of actively and creatively working with divergent value schemes and systems of interpretation and communication. However, this act of imagination needs to recognise the limits of its purchase, empathy is not 'putting oneself in the shoes of others', as this multiculturalist transgression recalls Lacan's question: "If I put myself in the other person's place, where is the other person?" (quoted in Restoueix, 2002:13).

Advocating learnt competences in relation to change implies learning processes that are hugely problematic in terms of media sociology. While the ethos of public service has always emphasised an educational dimension (Humphreys, 1996:116-9), the realities of media audiences and reception resists incorporation into any stable notion of how learning takes place. At the level of the offer nothing is knowable, and as Jostein Gripsrud illustrates, what constitutes knowledge in reception is a subject of overwhelming speculation (1999). Yet the diffuse nature of reception processes does not delegitimize educational objectives, indeed many perspectives on the increasing fragmentation of audiences position public service as providers of 'quality' programming and countervailing approaches within the blizzard of options (for example Curran

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<sup>10</sup> There is deep division concerning degrees of understanding cultural incommensurability. Chandran Kukathas' dialogue with the work of Alasdair McIntyre provides a valuable critique of arguments relevant to this point of the article (1994).

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1991). This argument develops that position by arguing that a combination of representational and participatory approaches serves to broaden interpretative resources.

Recent discourses of cultural rights in relation to representation and the public sphere have emphasised useful strategies for creating programmatic conditions that may stimulate intercultural literacy. Graham Murdock has argued that a key right must not only be access to a broad spectrum of representations of personal and social experience, but that this must be accompanied by access to relevant frameworks of knowledge (as well as knowledge of their existence). Public communication must:

..demolish the accepted divisions and develop forms of representation and participation and scheduling that promote encounters and debates between the widest possible range of identities and positions. It must..bring 'dialogic, contesting voices' into the centre of the common domain (1999:16).

At the same time, diversity must not be fetishized at the expense of complementary, contextualising material:

It must balance the promotion of diversity of information and experience against citizen's rights of access to frameworks of knowledge, and to the principles that allow them to be evaluated and challenged (ibid).

Framing this advocacy in the language of rights is tricky for a number of reasons, not least the universality of the concept and the inherent problems of codification. In the argument outlined above, cultural rights are seen as historically guaranteeing access to 'relevant symbolic resources' (ibid:11), and clearly, those resources and how they are accessed changes over time. If habitats of meaning are now characterised by diffuseness, then public communication has a role to play in cultivating relevant interpretative and evaluative resources. To meaningfully instigate this, a 'permeable interface' (Husband, 1994:14) between media forms must be established. To suggest what this could look like in an Irish context, we need to consider briefly the scope of public service broadcasting as it stands today.

## The Spectrum of Representation

In April 2001, the RTÉ soap opera *Fair City* welcomed a Kurdish refugee, Ashti, to the sometimes mean streets of Carrickstown. In an interview in *The Irish Times*, the actor playing the character suggested that his introduction to the series was more than just recognition of the presence of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants in urban Dublin. His hope was that the long-term introduction of such a storyline might contribute to broadening Irish perspectives on 'foreigners living in their midst (21.04.01 Magazine: 12). In another RTÉ programme, *Mono*, the author Roddy Doyle was asked about the relevance of the film *The Commitments* ten years on. He commented that if writing it or a similar story today, issues such as Nigerian experiences of Dublin, explored through characterisation, would need to be addressed<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Broadcast 6.5.01

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These new acts of representing the Dublin ethnic landscape suggest not just solidarity and a commitment to exploring new experiences that are the focus of public attention, but they also demand an engagement with the fraught politics of representing complex social realities and marginalised identities in mainstream formats. Both actor and writer indicate elsewhere in their interviews that they are aware that there is much at stake in speaking for the Other, to use that depersonalising concept, but that it is a necessary project in a society where countervailing representations are pressing. Again, the issues here are anything but new. In other contexts, similar attempts to represent



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12 Central strands of British cultural studies, a significant body of postcolonial theory, and increasingly the cultural analysis of globalisation have significantly interrogated the inter-relations of signifying practices, cultural perceptions and discourses of power in predominantly western representational material.

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marginalised experiences have generated heated debate on the right to represent and speak, as well as considerations of what the authentic voices implied in these arguments may actually sound like<sup>12</sup>.

In reacting to the controversy surrounding Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*, Margery Fee summarises some of the contentions raised also in the Irish context:

...can majority group members speak as minority members, whites as people of colour, men as women, intellectuals as working class people? If so, how do we distinguish biased and oppressive tracts, exploitative popularisations, stereotyping romanticisations, sympathetic identifications and resistant, transformative visions? (1989:242)

After decades of preoccupation with the ways Irish-ness has been represented and of wrestling with the dominant grammar of Hollywood images (McLoone, 2000:33-85), contemporary social change places Irish people in the delicate position of developing ways of representing minority experiences of Irish society. A film such as *A Black Day at Blackrock* takes the approach of focusing exclusively on ethnic Irish reactions to the arrival of asylum seekers in a small town, but the examples quoted above imply a desire to contribute to what Fee terms 'resistant, transformative visions': the cultural circulation of representations which by their existence, content and the mode of their deployment critique and challenge preconceptions and aim to contribute to a dynamic of interculturalism. Therefore Ashti is a

..positive portrayal of refugees. Ashti is a quiet dignified person, with great humanity and a strong work ethic - not at all the 'shifty Arab type'. (*Irish Times op.cit*)

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a textual analysis of the programmes in which the character appeared, but it can be argued that the positive intent of the inclusion is coherent in the contemporary context. Delegitimising any representations of marginalised experience because they do not originate from that experience is as problematic as accepting them unquestioningly. As well as privileging the deeply problematic and counter-productive concept of authenticity, such a response fails to acknowledge that representations of this kind may be less an attempt at an essential record of the refugee's experience and more a process of imagining a symbolic experience in relation to processes and attitudes in Irish society. Arguably, it is only from this difficult and ambiguous starting point that what Fee terms 'radical writing..that is struggling..to produce a different version of reality' may emerge (1995:244). And crucially, grappling with these issues and cultivating a representational grammar that addresses socio-cultural change in Ireland is a public service requirement. Recent reconsiderations of public service broadcasting have not only critiqued institutional discourses of diversity in multicultural societies, but foregrounded entertainment as a site where media

..can also provide a means of obtaining a better understanding of others in a way that fosters empathetic insights between different sections of society and strengthens bonds of social association. (Curran, 1991:33)

Ashti's quasi-didactic appearance can be viewed within this paradigm. If, however, entertainment and programming in general are to be anyway instrumental in fostering new ways of interpreting society and social relationships, then the spectrum of representations available needs to represent a hugely complex landscape of socio-cultural values, identities and visions. A range of factors, from the epistemology of representation to the market mechanisms by which they are generated, mean that this is quite obviously an aspirational notion. Yet the examples under discussion signify not just that such aspirations exist, but also that the spectrum we can aspire to is structurally limited. While representations of multicultural Ireland are solely produced



within a representative framework, the spectrum we have access to may become essentialised and conceivably counter-productive. While public service broadcasting is committed to engaging with diversity, the processes by which that diversity is meaningfully engendered need to be considered.

To return to the instructive example, the Ashti character is intended to be a 'positive portrayal of refugees', and the article continues to detail how the actor took steps to make the character 'as authentic as possible' (*Irish Times*, op.cit). There are implicit tensions in the objectives of the character. It is intended as a countervailing representation, a motivated corrective to stereotypes, although the 'strong work ethic' is coded in neon with the sign 'socially useful'. As a positive portrayal, he also functions as a representative cipher for the refugee experience. Allied to this, he is a potentially authentic image of the Kurdish refugee. The overburdening of one emergent fictional image hints at familiar territory; the limitations of representative media when faced with the diversity and multiplicity of socio-cultural identities and groupings.

Beyond the primary foray of offering an overtly countervailing character, the tactic soon becomes transparent and limiting if the full spectrum of possible identities, including the more controversial, are not explored. Similarly, a character may be contingently representative in that the situations and attitudes they encounter in Irish society may signify something of the experience of marginality. Yet this becomes equally reductive and homogenising outside of a broad spectrum of complementary and contradictory representations. And while criteria of authenticity should not debar Irish productions and texts from exploring socio-cultural diversity, neither should authenticity be seen as a desirable appellation. As Gareth Griffiths comments:

These claims may be a form of overwriting the complex actuality of difference equal but opposite to the more overt writing out of the voice in earlier oppressive discourses. (Griffiths, 1994: 70)

This is a fundamental point. Ashti represents the recognition of social change and a fictional attempt to negotiate overt multiculturalism. Without inclusion in a broad spectrum of such representations, such an image becomes reductive as its symbolic power elides the complexity of what is fixed as 'ethnic identity'. Ashti signifies ethnic difference, yet ethnicity, like other components of identification, is situational and meaningful only in relation to those other components. As Lentin puts it, the new "ethnic landscapes are not univocal, they are gendered, sexualised, politicised in diverse ways" (2001:14), and groups are often context-dependent and arbitrary. Thus, the limitations of a 'positive portrayal' may be imposed by an essentialising solidarity that collapses difference within ethnic groups and that fails to engage with the mutability of culture itself.

While these are the consequences of over-loaded representivity, there is also research that suggests that images of marginalised identities in Irish programmes are uncritically framed within regressive discourses. Dirikka Griesshaber has documented the pervasive discourses of dependency and limited explicatory perspectives that permeate news reporting of the Majority World (1997), while Eoin Devereaux has pointed to the elision of social analysis in *Glenroe's* treatment of poverty and the Travelling community (1997: 239-45). The main point here is not a criticism of these practices, but a realisation that a purely representative system can never adequately engage with identities in such deeply politicised contexts.

The contention here is not that participative forms of communication can, but that the involvement of people in the representation of their own realities and experiences can begin to stimulate new conversations. Participation in telecommunication as a socio-cultural right is a familiar argument (Enzenberger 1972, Keane 1991), allowing people and collectivities to formulate their priorities and experiences and to represent them in a way they have chosen. In a globalising polyvocal society this would appear to be fundamental.





## Participation, Global Television and the Digital Landscape

A national service is a prerogative not just to fulfil requirements of universal accessibility, but also to promote the broadest spectrum of encounters and conversations. An established criticism of ethnic minority media and community media in other contexts has been the tendency towards ghettoization and secessionism; that while these services may perform intra-group functions, their inter-group communicative possibilities are limited by broadcast range or constituency (Riggins 1992: 280). While this article has challenged the validity of a rigidly group based approach, it has argued for the interpenetration of micro public spheres with the macro. This not just about maximising encounters, but also about engaging with Irishness itself in a national, symbolic arena. A common landscape implies not just a need to interrogate a shifting national culture, but the need for a space where commonality can also emerge within the multiplicity. Despite the problematics of top-down assimilation and integration, it is important, as Stuart Hall bluntly expresses it, to create “enough of a shared culture to mean that we can exist in the same space without eating each other” (in Murdock op.cit.).

Bringing that multiplicity to the public sphere in the first place is the most fundamental task. Yet making access meaningful, especially to marginalised experience, is a complex undertaking. While communicative entitlement is held to be doubly imperative for marginalised voices, it needs to be within a participative paradigm that avoids ‘zooifying’ experience. As has been frequently pointed out, the presumption of a universal need or desire to communicate is naïve (Jakubowicz 1998:24) and even leaving aside technical skills, does not factor in the influence of socio-cultural and educational capital. It has been pointed out that ‘content by the user’ needs to be accompanied by ‘content being made for the user and under their control’. This may be particularly important in the case of many new Irish experiences, where status and social insecurity would mitigate strongly against such participation. In this, the current accumulation of experience and emerging multi-group work in such community radio stations as Radio Corca Baiscinn, Near FM, Wired FM and Tallaght Community Radio could prove to be valuable starting points. The current work of community media groups all over Ireland provides organisational possibilities for such a scheme, while bearing in mind the need for a permeable notion of community that promotes participation without simplifying and homogenising identities and experiences.

I have maintained the need for a service that has a role to play in cultivating interculturalism and orienting within globality. While this may appear overly theoretical, channels that explicitly combine local production with globally sourced and globally themed programming have begun to appear. The Canadian co-operative WETV has proved to be an innovative example of this. WETV aims to incorporate community-based programming on a national level with the consideration of under-represented issues. While the provision of themed series about ‘the environment, human rights, living in peace and security, cultural expression and human development’ could be sneered at as ‘right-on TV’, this is only the case if one is satisfied that current arrangements provide adequate interpretative resources for exploring the processes and factors shaping socio-cultural change. Of interest to a potential Irish model is the way in which WETV has begun to develop a global network, currently distributing one hour a day to WETV affiliate countries North and South, and it has just launched an eighteen-hour a day digital service nationally in Canada. Networks of global television are emerging as programme providers side-step the mainstream distribution process, providing material that is almost impossible to source otherwise. In another Canadian example, Vision TV has just switched from satellite to digital, providing a national access channel to ‘ethnic, minority, regional and religious groups across Canada’. Despite the differences in scale and historical experience of alternative broadcast forms (Valaskakis, 1992) the Canadian situation does suggest that participative communication based on an inter-‘group’ philosophy can thrive on a national basis. Given this developing experience abroad, not to mention emerging networks of possibility, an Irish project could combine this with



domestic experience of community programming to construct socially relevant responses to contemporary change.

In functioning groups and networks in Ireland, there is a significant degree of expertise, archive material and social commitment to provide a foundation for envisioning. Open Channel Television company previously proposed a national access channel, to be funded by public capital start-up investment, financial and in-kind contributions from cable companies and local authorities, and a lifting of the ban on local advertising. Despite the dormant nature of this initiative, the idea has merit. Northern Visions Media Centre, who have resourced and trained for a range of access projects in Belfast, is campaigning for a digital community service for Belfast. Most significantly, a report on a plan for Dublin Community Television, currently with the Dublin City Development Board, outlines how a citywide access television service could provide democratic empowerment, integrated media understanding and an enhanced representational diversity to a city characterised by 'increasingly diverse, energetic yet dispersed community' with a 'vibrant civil society' (2002: i). The realities of access to training and resources are constantly problematic, but current activity in that area, such as the establishment of a community television-training unit by NEAR FM, is encouraging. As more local cable access networks in Europe switch to digital spectrums, the possibilities of exchange and expertise suggested by the global television paradigm are broadened. The local and regional digital channel projects of Channel 7 and Image Studios in the North of England, for example, illustrate the ways in which new technology can enhance large-scale community media work (Merry & Titley 2002:79). The expansion of services and concomitant fragmentation of the audience that will undoubtedly characterise digitalisation does not imply that an additional public service channel is an impossibility. There is no reason not to entertain innovative funding suggestions, such as a civic tax placed on commercial franchises in other tiers of a digital service. This paper does not pretend to offer a cohesive project plan, but rather to suggest that a variety of networks, energies and financial possibilities exist which merit closer attention.

## Conclusion

The argument proposed here is a relatively straightforward one. Changes in the media landscape offer us the opportunity to reconsider the socio-cultural role of that media, and in a society experiencing the changes discussed here, I would argue that engaging comprehensively with the possibilities and difficulties of participative media offers an option for the digital age. If digital appears to imply a future of increasingly limited programming, then providing the possibility for people to interpret their realities by representing them, and to developing the spectrum of perspectives necessary to imagine what a polyvocal, globalising island could actually be like seems like public service to me.

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