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TALK RADIO AND POPULAR CULTURE

"It used to be the parish pump, but in the Ireland of the 1990's, national radio seems to have taken over as the place where the nation meets".[2]

Talk radio affords Irish audiences the opportunity to participate in mass mediated debate and discussion. This was not always the case. Women in particular were excluded from many areas of public discourse. Reaching back into the 19th century, the distinction between public and private spheres was an ideological one. As men moved out of the home to work and acquired increasing power, the public world inhabited by men became identified with influence and control, the private with moral value and support. In bourgeois discourse, this split developed gendered attributes, with men thought "naturally" to occupy the public arena, women with the domestic and private. This conceptualization makes less sense now to the 21st century working women whose lives, of necessity, traverse, and continue to traverse, both spheres. However, women's influence and control within the domestic space has been regularly ignored by society, or curiously transformed into moral strength.. This move, according to feminist writer, Myra Macdonald "is a devious one, appearing to recognise worth while removing the threat that women might pose to patriarchy".[3] The private is at once valued as a peaceful sanctuary and yet devalued as that non-public space. Against this backdrop, those responsible for the development of the public media in the twentieth century felt little incentive to include women's voices. Where these did appear, the motive was often commercial: to appeal to advertisers through the assumed attraction to women of serial drama (the origin of soap opera), or beauty or fashion advice, or home-making tips.

The 19th century gave rise to a partisan communication model. Newspapers were owned by political parties and candidates. The stream of communication came from a clearly identifiable source and it was all either one side or the other. The late 20th century, according to media author Kathleen Hall Jamieson saw "a revival of that in the form of talk radio. Political talk radio may be doing the equivalent for political parties that the papers did in the 19th century, the partisan newspapers".[4] Yet, jumping to the present day in the 21st century, compared to film, television and the press, radio is a relatively under researched and under valued area of the media. It could be argued that as a form of cultural production, radio is marginalised. In one of the few books theorising UK radio[5] , the only reference to women or gender is mention of BBC's *Women's Hour* and its relation to magazine-format radio programmes, but there is no direct addressing of gender issues.

Fast forward to Ireland in the 1970's and alongside the beginnings of *The Gay Byrne Radio Show*, women had made inroads into broadcasting as RTE continuity announcers and were also highly visible in children's programming. Pioneering journalists such as Mary Kenny and Nell McCaferty, Nuala O' Faolain and others were writing the *Woman's Pages* of the national newspapers and women were also

very visible in the magazine sector. Charles Mitchell was the voice of RTE news as the belief prevailed that high-pitched female voices lacked authority. Clearly this attitude has changed and at present, RTE has a predominance of female news readers.

Radio, however, has always found it easier to give voice to women. It has been catering for segmented audiences long before television and is more intimate in its mode of address than the mass appeal media. In spite of the popularity of Marianne Finucane's *Women Today* programme which began in 1979 on RTE Radio One, its removal never received the avalanche of protest which greeted the transference of BBC Radio 4's *Women's Hour,(which had been broadcast since 1946)* to a different time slot.. A storm of opposition greeted its removal from early afternoon to a mid-morning slot in 1991, forcing BBC Management to revert back to its original time slot and acknowledge its influence as a women-orientated programme.

The historical impact of the traditional separation of public and private spheres has weakened considerably. Yet areas of broadcasting that might have loosened up access to women's voices in a redrafting of private/public boundaries have been slow to do so. In Ireland, both the television talk show and the DJ-led programmes on radio, in their straddling of public and private discourse, might have seemed fertile ground for female presenters. Instead, one glance at the programme schedules for RTE radio and television for Friday May 30, 2008, point to the fact that women are still very much on the margins. At the time of writing, no female hosts an RTE television talk show, while on RTE Radio I , apart from Maxi at the ungodly hour of 5.30am with *Risin Time,* and Aine Lawlor as co-host of *Morning Ireland,* there are no female presenters until *Drivetime* with Mary Wilson. From 7pm most evenings, apart from the odd documentary, women do not feature on RTE Radio One. In 2008 Marianne Finucane was moved to a weekend time slot to perhaps accommodate the working women who can only listen to radio while ferrying her children to and from weekend activities! This is in contrast to the music driven RTE 2FM, where women DJs are on the increase, a pattern which is reflected throughout all of the 21 commercial radio stations in Ireland. However, most of the major radio talk shows in Ireland are hosted by men. Newstalk 101 is an exception due to the fact that it hosts talk shows throughout the day and provides a mix between male and female presenters.

When the *Gay Byrne Show* began in 1973 women were very much in the home. Due to domestic constraints, the telephone and Gay Byrne became for many, their link to the outside world. In a way this was the beginning of the radio-phone- in talk show in Ireland. Research by Professor Francis Lee at the Department of Communication at Stanford University has more recently written of the significance of the radio phone-in as a forum for public deliberation and as a form of infotainment that displaces serious political journalism. Taking the highly politicized Hong-Kong as his case study, Lee argues that talk shows provide political information to listeners and also serve as a forum to criticise the government.[6] On the *GBS* Byrne endlessly criticized the government and its running of the country. His constant use of the word" banjxed" and "washed out" were used to refer to the abysmal state of the country. He accused the then Minister for Finance, Alan Dukes of having the country "by the short and curlies" , where money making was "a dirty word". Byrne, whose frank interview to *Hot Press* Magazine in 1986 caused quite a media stir, in particular due to his trenchant criticism of Ireland at that time. He was particularly critical of "the union attitude" and the general "social attitude towards people who motivate themselves and

get up and do well and make money is all wrong, and partly responsible for the present morass".[7] In the interview, Byrne spoke of his personal financial position and revealed how his former accountant and close personal friend, Russell Murphy, left him with considerable debts by using his name to borrow money and by forfeiting every penny he had saved "through all those years of hard work". Byrne also spoke of "a dreadful, dreadful realisation to wake up one morning and to realise that his person whom you've trusted so totally has swindled you in the most calculated and deliberate way."[8] Some years later, in 1989, Cork Fine Gael Deputy, Bernard Allen took issue with Byrne in his handling of a letter which was critical of politicians, their work-load, their salary and the length of holidays for politicians. Deputy Allen, who raised the matter in the Dail, issued a challenge to Mr Byrne to accompany him for one day to witness the work-load of a politician. In the Dail Mr Allen claimed that "Mr Byrne had grossly insulted members of the house" and had written to Mr Jim Culiton, then chairman of the RTE Authority, to make a formal complaint and had referred the issue to the Dail Committee on procedure and Privileges. Deputy Allen, who later in a statement invited Mr Byrne to spend time with him in his Cork north-central constituency in which he added that "Gay Byrne has undoubtedly opened up for national debate many issues which need to be confronted. Unfortunately, he has also contributed to a growing sense of cynicism- particularly about politicians."[9]

In America, these personal revelations by the host on both political and personal matters are what make Talk Radio such a cultural and political phenomenon. Radio hosts such as Rush Limbaugh and G. Gordon Liddy are woven into the very fabric of popular culture. Americans consider Talk Radio as a potent political tool. This acknowledgement of its political influence began more transparently when the Federal Communications Commission repealed the Radio Fairness Doctrine in 1987. Under the doctrine, all sides of controversial and political questions had to be given equal representation on the airwaves. The result up to that was that radio talk programmes consisted primarily of general non-political talk and advice. With the doctrine's repeal, radio shows could become more one-sided, more free-wheeling, more ideological and more political. One of the first to gain popularity under the new rules was a new voice out of California named Rush Limbaugh. Within a year or two Limbaugh's provocative denunciations of the Democrats became a phenomenon. Other radio stations quickly began to pick up his syndicated show and others began to follow his lead. His most notable and more controversial imitators included G. Gordon Liddy, who was convicted in the Watergate Scandal, and Ollie North, who was implicated in the Iran Contra affair. The popularity of the talk radio show in America is evidenced by its phenomenal growth in 1990 from 400 nationwide to 1,400 in 2007.[10]

In spite of the popularity of radio generally, it has, according to some commentators, been very much neglected as a field of study:

> Compared to film and television, radio is hardly noticed in academic literature and as a practice is mostly taught in a vocational context as a preparation for journalism. As a result, radio practice and policy lacks a language for critical reflection and analysis.[11]
>
> Radio, as a medium, has been ignored by cultural and communication studies. Research has been dominated by analyses of the visual media-film, video and

> television- and to a lesser extent by a focus on newspapers and magazines. In contrast, radio has received hardly any attention, since the pioneering studies by Lazarsfeld and his co-workers in the 1940's (Lazarsfeld and Stanton, 1944).[12]

In Ireland, the notion of radio as a public confessional stems back to 1963, with *dear Frankie*, and has continued right up to the present day with programmes such as the *Gerry Ryan Show* and RTE I's *Liveline* programme with Joe Duffy. It was with radio "Agony Aunt", Frankie Byrne, that the notion of radio as a public confessional really began to take off. *Dear Frankie* was broadcast from 1963 to 1985. The programme initially started off as a domestic science question and answer format but soon turned into a 15 minute programme on relationships that was to run for over twenty years. In many interviews Frankie claimed she knew nothing about domestic science but that she did know about love and so for twenty years Frankie solved the relationship problems of a nation, while living a life of turmoil in her own life.
"Frankie became a household name in Ireland as the woman with the distinctive, husky voice, who found solutions to problems in a witty yet warm way."[13] The letters received by Frankie showed Ireland in a more innocent time. These letters, mainly from women, discussed issues such as how to prod a reluctant boyfriend into popping the question, and how to get husbands to help out in the home. One such letter, which is certainly reflective of Ireland in a more innocent era, was sent by a woman asking if "she could get pregnant sitting on her boyfriend's knee"[14]. Frankie Byrne advised her to have a chat with her mother.

"I am interested in people's problems. I am interested in people, you see. I always treat the letters with compassion and understanding." [15] These were the words of Frankie Byrne almost three decades ago. When Frankie gave advice it was according to the RTE guidelines of the time. The establishment thinking of the 1950's and the 1960's came up with the view that single mothers, abortion, rape, marital infidelity and condoms were unfit for discussion on air even though they might have taken up a huge part of people's lives. Those whose questions touched on such matters did not have their problems answered on air.

When Frankie Byrne started, Ireland was so locked into pretending that it could cope, that people felt ashamed to admit to things being less than fine. A front had to be put up about loveless marriages, a despairing dance or deception about a single pregnancy, and matters such as mental illness, alcoholism, instability or tuberculosis in a family, had to be hidden at all costs. In a rare interview with the *Irish Times*, Frankie spoke of how heartening it was to see "the thick fog of hypocrisy lessen"[16] but was sad to note that a lot of the problems remained the same even though they could now be spoken of by people who suffered them. She spoke of "the amazingly revealing interviews on the G*ay Byrne Show*" , where women would ring in and tell the innermost secrets of their lives. Frankie would listen to these and marvel how things had changed. Many who wrote to Frankie Byrne, wrote to her in despair and would print their letters for fear of recognition and would even travel to different parts of the country to post these letters in order to deepen the disguise.
Frankie, herself a victim of the times, was to give up her child for adoption in the 1950's. She was, according to an RTE I television documentary, *Dear Frankie*, to suffer severe post-natal depression and became heavily reliant on alcohol and the prescription drug, valium.

Frankie Byrne died in 1993 at the age of 71. Tributes were led by Gay Byrne who said that for over "Twenty years Frankie Byrne was a national institution who had been loved by everyone."[17] At its peak the radio show was receiving one hundred letters from listeners. In more than 1000 programmes, in which she never missed a week[18], Frankie, who dealt with almost 5,000 letters in a wise and witty manner, was often quoted as saying that what her listeners wanted was not so much an agony aunt, but a witch doctor with a potion that said "How to make him love you and stay with you" on the bottle.[19].

This notion of radio as a confessional was also evident, albeit in a much lighter vein, with the emergence of Terence, the agony uncle, on the *Gerry Ryan Show*. Described, tongue –in –cheek by *The Irish Times* as a cross between "Woody Allen, Liberace, Max Headroom and Frank Spenser of *Some Mothers Do Have Em*, a flamboyant but tragic Chaplinesque figure on the broadcasting landscape"[20] Terence, who rose to prominence while still working as a hairdresser in Cork, would ring up Ryan on 2FM and would simultaneously regale and entertain listeners with advice and absurd opinions. Terence, alias veteran broadcaster, John Creedon, was the audio version of Dame Edna, but more lovable and endearing, with his catchphrase "We're all God's children". For Ireland in the late 1980's, Terence was the champion of the under-dog, as he meted out questionable advice to his chosen target audience, the housewives and the unemployed. He was an entertaining interlude in an Ireland not yet gripped by the sophistication that the Celtic Tiger would herald. When the 1990's did come into view, Terence and his simplistic and childlike philosophy would become redundant.

Today, satellite and digital transmission has turned "talk radio" into a vigorous and political force. Radio-phone-in shows on which listeners express their views, have become quick shapers of public opinion and can provoke controversy. In America, the political impact of talk radio is particularly apparent. In the 1990's, right-wing Christian groups exploited the power of the radio talk show to generate much of the opposition expressed on the then President Clinton's plan to lift the ban on the recruitment and retention of gays in the military forces. Studies show that in America, talk shows on black, Hispanic, and Asian radio stations have especially strong social impact,[21] surmounting language and cultural barriers to deliver important information to their audiences. For example, urban black radio stations conducted AIDS Awareness Days for their listeners when it was revealed, in 1994, that Earvin "Magic" Johnson, the Los Angeles Laker basketball star, disclosed that he had tested positive for the HIV virus.

In contemporary Ireland, the most visible representation of the radio- phone in show is *Liveline,* presented by Joe Duffy, a former *Gay Byrne Show* co-host and a protégée of the eponymous man. In 1999, now deceased journalist Jonathan Philbin Bowman wrote." Who is the most powerful man in the country…Bertie Ahern? Wrong. The new centre of power in our now whingocracy is in RTE's Radio building, from where Joe Duffy dispenses justice, favours and distils demands each weekday from 1.45."[22]

The Gerry Ryan show on 2FM, which began in 1988, is also a popular phone-in show. According to the RTE website "Gerry likes to talk and so do the

Irish…Gerry looked to his new audience for their thoughts and opinions on everything from unemployment to underpants. Nothing is too sacred. Not anymore. If you need to talk about it, you need to talk to Gerry"[23].

Hitherto *The Gay Byrne show* was new as a form of public confessional but for the *Gerry Ryan Show* the advent of the mobile phone precipitated the volume of callers phoning in to talk about intimacies which could perhaps be better discussed with family and friends. It seems that the radio, as a form of confessional, has somehow displaced friendships and even religion, as they confess all on the national airwaves.

In spite of its size, Ireland has quite a diverse culture. This was immediately apparent with the advent of local radio in 1988. Local radio tends to reflect the voice of the community. Listeners tune into their own local radio station to discuss problems and issues specific to their locality. Cork's 96fm and its Opinionline with Neil Prendeville is an example of how radio can reflect diversity. According to the 96FM website, "When Cork people talk, they talk to Neil Prendeville…sometimes controversial, sometimes touching, but always crucial listening."[24].Another example is Radio Kerry, winner of the best local/regional radio station of the year at the PPL Awards in 2007. *Kerry Today*, presented by Deirdre Walsh, "is the County's number one radio programme- it is passionate about Kerry and its people- Kerry today is the show to break the news and to deliver the stories that matter to our listeners."[25] Today Fm's Matt Cooper and Newstalk presenter George Hook, also host eclectic radio-phone in programmes and their programme ratings (see table) reflect the popularity of this genre of radio.

Today, Talk radio's moment- to- moment unpredictability has been somewhat diminished by the necessity to weed-out libellous, harassing or repeat callers albeit by an almost seamless live editing techniques which retains most of radio's rough spontaneity and realism. Most radio hosts now have the benefit of a call-screener or a digital delay system that delays the airing of the programme for four to five seconds so that, with the push of a "dump button" any operator may delete an profanity, personal attack, libel or copyright infringement. Finally twenty-four hour logged tapes, using very slow speed recording, give the station a record in case legal action or complaints arise. However, it is those very elements of chance, fostered by call-in participation, that has given the format its uniqueness, surprise, drama, and appeal. Unpredictability connotes a sense of credibility vital to the talk-show's effectiveness, as was witnessed on a 2007 edition of *Liveline* where host Joe Duffy received a surprise call from Mountjoy Prison from now deceased criminal Brian Daly. Talk radio also makes for a productive instability, a use of chaos, that lets talk radio stand out against the tight predictable formulas of current affairs programmes, music programmes- the whole formulaic array of popular culture.

Open-line talk radio shows are notorious for generating a high degree of controversial and confrontational talk between their hosts and the callers-ordinary citizens, for the most part-they encounter. In a similar way that the US television talk show differs characteristically from its Irish counterpart, so too the Irish radio talk show is far less confrontational than that hosted in the US. The popularity of talk radio in the US is

evidenced by the release of the 1980's movie, *Talk Radio*. The film centered around the daily life and work of a controversial talk radio host whose character, although fictional, was loosely based on a real- life US host, Alan Berg. He generated such controversy through his show that he ended up being shot by a vengeful listener.

Radio is of course a principal medium of mass communication and media analysts have shown some interest in studying talk radio as a mass communication phenomenon. The kinds of questions that have been asked, however, such as how effective is talk radio as a democratic forum, or how does it influence public opinion, are quite different from the questions which animate the next chapter on *The Gay Byrne radio Show*. What will be of interest here is the study of the unique relationship between Byrne and his listeners and the diversity of topics discussed on each programme, as well as the ability of the show to reflect and shape Irish popular at a particular time. .

The study of the radio talk show, or public access broadcasting more generally, has focused to date on how "democratic" talk radio is. Much analysis has come from a media studies perspective and has focused on the fact that talk radio (and its counterpart audience on the television talk show) can be seen as a means of providing ordinary citizens with access to the public sphere represented in large part, in modern society, by broadcasting. Many years ago the German playwright Bertolt Brecht suggested that "the radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network….That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him,"[26]
To some extent, these possibilities are realized in the radio talk show. This has led some media analysts to assess the extent to which talk radio functions as a democratic form. For instance, both Crittenden in one of the earliest studies in 1971 and Verwey in 1990 in a more extensive book-length treatment, explicitly address the democratic functions of talk radio, by examining the degree to which arguments put forward in talk radio discussions permeate the wider population of the overhearing audience, or by evaluating how different talk show hosts, for example in an Irish context, Gay Byrne or Gerry Ryan, facilitate open debate between themselves and members of the public.

From the standpoint of this book it must be reiterated that the G*ay Byrne Radio Show* was not openly confrontational. Unlike RTE's *Liveline*, which thrives on caller phone-in disagreements and confrontations. the *GBS* was not, in principle, talk radio, but rather a radio programme which facilitated talk. It also however, reflected contemporary Ireland in its choice of newspaper clippings, letters to the show, as well as the listener phone-ins and their comments. According to former producer John Caden, "In the period when the G*ay Byrne Show* was clocking up three quarters of a million listeners a day, the issues of the times were the way people were won over to it, and there's no doubt about that. I'm absolutely convinces that there's an insatiable desire in this country for serious, well-conducted, lively entertaining debate."[27]
Talk radio is a form of institutional interaction. The talk takes place within an organization, the broadcasting company. At the same time, however, the institutional space in which talk radio interactions take place is somewhat unique. It is a space created at the interface of private and public spheres of modern society. In calls to talk radio shows, for example, *The Gerry Ryan show*, a specialized form of talk- talk about

personal opinions of public issues-is produced by two individuals respectively occupying what Scannell described as the "completely separate… places from which broadcasting speaks and in which it is heard."[28]. For the most part, in broadcasting, the studio represents the primary location from which broadcast talk emerges: it is "the institutional discursive space of radio and television". [29] Listening and viewing, on the other hand, "take place in the sphere of domesticity, within the spaces of the household and normatively in the small family living room."[30]

There are many similarities between television and radio talk shows. As discussed in a previous chapter, the topics under discussion on the television talk show are often "women issues" and are frequently scheduled for housewives in the daytime and are "concerned with gossip and story-telling[31]. Radio talk shows which invite audience participation via phone-ins are very similar to the audience discussion talk show. According to Livingstone "talk radio is one of the few public media which allows for spontaneous interaction between two or more people"[32].

On talk radio, the voices of ordinary people are carried from that domestic sphere into the institutional space of the studio, and then projected back again, via the radio, to the domestic sphere of the audience. It is the uniqueness of this discursive space of talk radio which makes it such an interesting topic of study. With regard to the *GBS*, it is the way in which Gay Byrne demystified the institutional space of his studio to accommodate intimate and often times disturbing interaction, which is of interest to us in the next chapter. This ability to encourage personal revelations, rather than, in the "shock radio" mode of Gerry Ryan, to incite sensation, will be under scrutiny in my next chapter.
After Marianne Finucane, whose show is the highest rated of the weekend RTE schedules and the fifth most popular radio show in the country- Joe Duffy's salary for *Liveline, at 368,000* comes in at number four[33]. This sizeable figure reflects the phenomenal success of his radio phone-in show, Liveline . The popularity of Liveline reflects the fact that talk radio is still a phenomenally popular choice of public discourse in Ireland. However, in 1973, when the GBS first began, no one could have imagined that a one hour housewives radio programme would have metamorphosed into an oftentimes painful and revealing journey through popular Irish culture for over 26 years.

It is hard to imagine now the impact of the GBS. Today, with almost 2.9 million people in Ireland listening to radio on a daily basis[34], radio has become a cultural phenomenon within the Irish commercial media landscape. Radio has a tradition which extends right back to the foundations of the state. During those earlier years of sponsored programming, as a young Gay Byrne perfected his craft, radio did not reflect popular culture but rather adhered to the Reithian Principle of giving the people, not what they wanted, but rather what the state felt they needed. And so there were Army bands, traditional musicians, programmes in Irish and to teach Irish. There was some news and current affairs, radio drama and an excellent Thomas Davis lecture series. There was Frankie Byrne, Irish radio's first agony aunt, with her Jacobs sponsored 15 minute programme *Dear Frankie,* and then , in 1973, came, what was

essentially a housewives programme-.the GBS, which was to become the heart beat of popular culture in Ireland. The programme, not unlike the LLS, flourished without any opposing indigenous programming, (RTE Radio 2 , now 2FM did not come on stream until 1978) . A lot began to change when, in 1989, the first wave of national and local independent radio stations began broadcasting to an expectant and largely young audience in 1989. For many years, up until then, the Irish authorities had tolerated the existence of countless pirate stations, which thrived in the music vacuum left by RTE radio 1 and its younger sibling, RTE 2 (Now 2FM).

The reluctant establishment of the Independent radio and television Commission (now the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, or BCI), by the then Minister for Communications, Ray Burke, held out the prospect of some 20 or more local FM stations covering every town, city and country, as well as a national competitor to RTE.

Today there are 24 local independent stations, one "pan-regional" station (Beat FM), 17 special- interest/ community stations and two national Independent operators (Newstalk and Today FM). In 2007, new licences were awarded to youth stations in the south-west , Northwest and the North-est/midlands area. This is in addition to RTE's three national commercial channels, Radio 1, 2FM and Lyric FM. With this range of stations now available, it is interesting to analyse the nation's top 10 radio programmes (See table) .

In spite of the proliferation of local radio stations, according to the Joint National Listenership Research survey (JNLR) figures taken from April 2007- March 2008, *Morning* Ireland, on RTE Radio 1 with 437,000 listeners is the most popular programme on Irish radio[35]. The results of the survey not only highlight the consistent popularity of radio generally, with 84% of adults listening daily to a mix of national, regional and local radio throughout Ireland, but also point to the persistent popularity of talk radio. This is evidenced in the *Gerry Ryan Show* which recorded some of the most impressive gains with his morning programme on 2FM, adding 14,000 listeners, to give a total audience of 342,000 . George Hook on the commercial national station *Newstalk* also highlighted the popularity of talk radio with his teatime show increasing its figures to 97,000. Listenership to any regional/local radio was at 52%, unchanged from the previous survey period. The survey also showed that RTE Lyric FM is growing its audience on Sunday evening with Gay Byrne's *Sunday Serenade* making gains.

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