

IRELAND:

WHERE ITV PAVED THE WAY FOR INSTRUCTIONAL RADIO

by

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ABSTRACT

In the United States, instructional radio was largely a prelude to instructional television and suffered rejection and outright abandonment when the newer delivery system came on the scene. In the Republic of Ireland, however, a near reversal of this process is taking place. This is not to say that ITV will be terminated in favor of instructional radio but, rather, that the new sound project, developed after ten years' experience with television, will serve a market, the primary school, which television cannot economically reach. Radio, potentially, will also assume some of television's current secondary school functions in order to conserve ITV's resources for programmed material in which the visual is truly essential. Plans call for the instructional radio project to begin a pilot phase over the Irish-language regional network, Radio na Gaeltachta, in early 1975. If the pilot program proves successful, it will then be extended over the whole of the Republic, making radio a spouse, rather than a step-child, of ITV.

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For over a decade in the United States, operators of noncommercial radio stations, particularly those involved in instructional broadcasting, have complained that their stations and status were being reduced as the attention of administrators was captured by the more "modern" medium of television. While movements at the national level by government and professional associations now are helping to mitigate that situation, at least as far as public radio in general is concerned,¹ there remains a strong bias against the "ineffectual and outmoded" educational tool known as instructional radio.

Those American educators still committed to (or not prejudiced against) instructional radio may find the situation in the Republic of Ireland worth watching. There, radio has been turned to after a decade of nationally televised instructional television and in a way that strives to avoid the pitfalls and misassumptions previously encountered in the operation of the open-circuit ITV system. To understand the conditions which motivated this unusual progression, and the plan for the coexistence of instructional radio and television, it is necessary to examine the history of instructional broadcasts by Radio Telefis Eireann, Ireland's state-owned broadcasting monopoly.

As pointed out in the 1974 Report of the Government's special Broadcasting Review Committee, "radio was used for schools programmes before the advent of television but this was discon-

¹ See Tania Simkins, "Public Radio: Coming out of Hiding", Educational Broadcasting, May/June, 1974.

tinued because, the Committee understands, of lack of finance and resources and also because schools programmes on radio were little utilised". Personnel within RTE add that these early efforts were not systematic and lacked the administrative structure to provide proper guidance and coordination. (This same statement could be applied to many American instructional radio efforts in pre-ITV days.)

Thus, in Ireland, unlike the United States, there was no instructional radio to challenge television's primacy when the latter medium moved into the field in 1964. This movement was swift, coming only two years after the introduction to the Republic of television itself, but it was a swiftness that ignored careful planning and preparation. As Mrs. Maev Conway Piskorski, Head of RTE's Education Department recalled in an interview with the author, the first schedule of ITV programs went on the air in 1964 with only 6-8 weeks prior notice, no pre-testing of shows, and with a total production budget for the 1964/65 school year of \$84,000. This translated into a per half-hour program budget of approximately \$170, "a ludicrously low figure," according to Mrs. Piskorski, since that sum had to cover "all elements of the program that can be seen on the screen". Mrs. Piskorski makes it clear that the rush into television with the associated lack of substantive planning and financing (elements which plagued many American ITV ventures) caused the instructional operation to "start on the wrong foot and put us in a situation from which we have been forever trying to recover."

Still, she marvels, real instructional broadcasting in Ireland was thereby started and with it, the simultaneous opening of access to the Ministry of Education. Being disposed to the concept of schools broadcasts, RTE's own Authority had agreed to the concomitant extension of national television broadcast hours into the previously dark mid-day. The Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, to whom the Authority is responsible, insisted that the additional costs this would entail however, should be the burden of the Ministry of Education. Once that Ministry agreed to the scheme, it became an integral force in the instructional branch of Radio Telefis Eireann's operations.

This seeming duality of control did not exist without some redundancy of advisory boards. Once the ITV system was activated, the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs appointed an Educational Advisory Committee of RTE, ostensibly to oversee and make recommendations for the operation of the ITV matrix. As the recent report of the Broadcasting Review Committee indicates, however, "that Advisory Committee had not been given any specific terms of reference and had never been invited to meet the (RTE) Authority." In fact, since the Ministry of Education pays the bills, it is the Ministry of Education that really shapes policy. This realization somehow escaped the members of the Educational Advisory Committee until quite recently when frustration set in capped by the Review Committee's recommendation that the Educational Advisory Committee "as at present constituted . . . had probably outlived its usefulness."

Such lessons will not be lost on those planning for instruc-

tional radio. No new advisory committee is planned to watch-dog radio, which will have the same fiscal relationship with the Ministry of Education as instructional television possesses and possessed. Radio will, however, come within the scope of an already-established RTE body, the Radio na Gaeltachta Advisory Committee, which supervises the country's regional Irish-language network over which the pilot instructional radio programs will be transmitted. Originating from a main studio in Costelloe on the west coast, and with subsidiary studios in Kerry and Donegal, Radio na Gaeltachta has been operational since March, 1972, to serve the needs of those people for whom the Irish language is the prime means of communication. As Ireland's only regional radio or television network, Radio na Gaeltachta offers the cleanly delimited service area needed for careful program testing. At the same time, the high proportion of one and two teacher schools within its coverage pattern make this area the most needful of the supplementary teaching matter which instructional radio can provide.

Thus, the requisite of careful program testing, so lacking in RTE's instructional television system, will be a vital component in the initiation of instructional radio. In fact, time and money have been budgeted by Mrs. Piskorski for program Pre-test in advance of broadcast dissemination. This is in line with her stand that the radio broadcasts will not be rushed into production without proper care and construction, a condition into which the ITV programs were born and from which they have never

been able to mature. "This time," she maintains, "the budget will not be stretched beyond feasibility. We will do what we can do properly and not in a tin-pot way." The instructional radio programs will start "early in 1975," Mrs. Piskorski says, but the specific date will depend on when the programs are ready, not on an arbitrary target date such as television was forced to meet.

Like the nationally-broadcast Telefis Scoile (television school) programs, instructional radio programs will be transmitted through expansion of the broadcast day into previously unused mid-day hours. In television, this has provided for approximately four hours of late morning and early afternoon secondary-level transmissions on an almost-daily basis throughout the school year in such subjects as Senior and Junior Biology, Junior History, Senior Geography, English Literature, Irish-language classes, Junior Mathematics and Experimental Physics. Instructional radio will utilize a similar transmission time over Radio na Gaeltachta (which now transmits only during the evening) but will be aimed at primary school children and will initially be limited to curricular offerings in environmental studies, an area where the material is newest and many teachers are consequently, the least informed.

There is no question that radio has been selected as the primary schools' counterpart to the secondary institutions' televised instruction due to cost factors even more than to lack of available hours in the television broadcast day. It would cost the Ministry of Education at least \$600,000 even to supply the

primary schools with television sets and that, says Mrs. Piskorski, it won't pay. She does not feel this to be a tragedy since, "what you can't do on radio for young children is randomly available on television here anyway," in the form of imported shows such as Sesame Street which are broadcast by RTE television during regular programming hours. The Ministry is, on the other hand, quite willing to supply FM receivers to the approximately 300 schools in the pilot study (Radio na Gaeltachta) area, with the long-range plan to similarly service the rest of the primary schools in the Republic if instructional radio proves itself. Because VHF/FM transmitters can cover the entire country and cover it with an obviously superior signal to what could be attained on medium-wave (AM), it is FM which is the vehicle for the pilot project as well. There are also plans, still to be finalized, which would insure that at least some of the schools receive radio cassette players to enable recording and playing back at a time appropriate to the individual teacher's schedule. This has been another lesson learned from the problems which the ITV programs have encountered in which transmission time and optimum classroom use time have seldom meshed.

The pilot radio environmental studies series will be broadcast in Irish simply because that is the prime language of children in the Radio na Gaeltachta area and because Radio na Gaeltachta is the only regional network in the country. Mrs. Piskorski is not opposed to the project being viewed as language "enrichment" as long as it is made clear that such enrichment is a secondary byproduct. She points out that, in Ireland, a battery of stan-

teachers, for example, will parallel the highly workable arrangements developed for television in which on-air teachers are paid the same original and residual ^{fees} as any artistic talent.

Equity, the Irish performers and entertainers union, has accepted the position that the Equity member should get the job where there is a choice with all other things being equal. Obviously, the preponderant number of on-air jobs in schools broadcasts involves knowledge competencies not possessed by any Equity member. Thus, media teachers command what amounts to union scale without facing a closed shop arrangement within RTE. Additionally, the practice of hiring University professors as consultants for those programs entailing very recent or very complex subject matter will also be carried over from television to radio. When the Physics syllabus was recently updated by the Ministry of Education, the resulting ITV programs, which made substantial use of such consultants, were aimed as much at the teachers as they were at the students.

While Irish instructional radio will thus benefit from both the successes and failures of the instructional television experience, it is also hoped that the process will work inversely as well. "Radio will change the way we reach secondary students," predicts Mrs. Piskorski, "It may show us ways we can serve them by radio and save our limited TV resources to more richly endow those subject areas that really need the visual." Since the yearly instructional television budget is now only \$240,000, such a mechanism for conserving and apportioning its resources is

keenly needed.

Mrs. Piskorski and her colleagues in Radio Telefis Eireann's Education Department hope that radio will succeed in its own right and, in the long run, free resources to help rectify the decade-old inadequacies of instructional television. Radio will not be used as video's sacrificial lamb however, but will be treated as a unique and important vehicle in its own right, attuned to the needs of Irish education and its own inherent characteristics. From the hard lessons learned during Ireland's frequently unpleasant ITV experience, Mrs. Piskorski hopes that a realistic program of audio instruction may be created. If anything has been learned, she summarizes, it is that "the broadcast programs must flow directly out of the school curriculum with material that is in line with: (1) what teachers say are their needs; (2) what is right for radio; (3) what will appeal to the students of that age group."