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Radio na Gaeltachta: The Irish-Language Network

Peter B. Orlik

Millions of words have been expended over the last quarter century in listing and embellishing the potential applications of broadcasting to the meeting of national educational, social or cultural needs. Feasibility studies paint glowing pictures of the ways in which radio and television can mitigate this or that societal deficit. Yet, when it comes to the actual allocation of scarce monetary and spectrum resources, how many such plans are quietly interred or dissipated in futureless, short-term, "pilot" projects?

Fortunately, the Republic of Ireland, a country of modest means and population, is demonstrating that even within tight fiscal and technical constraints it is possible to successfully utilize radio broadcasting to serve immediate regional needs while, at the same time, paving the way for the realization of long-term, national social and cultural goals.

The vehicle employed in this task is Radio na Gaeltachta, an AM/FM sound network centered in the primarily Irish-speaking, or *Gaeltacht*, localities of western Ireland. By virtue of its location, Radio na Gaeltachta is

meeting a localized demand for vernacular service which, via broadcast extension, simultaneously is able to "assist the national aim of restoring the position of the Irish language from its bases in existing *Gaeltacht* areas."¹

The network's history is long in planning if short in actual operation. For, from the very introduction of medium-wave (AM) broadcasting to the Republic in 1926, the Government viewed radio as a vital tool for the revival and preservation of the Irish language. Since the great majority of the population used English as their everyday means of communication, however, most broadcasting was done in that tongue. Thus, the national objective of Irish-language promotion, and the regional needs of those citizens whose primary language was Irish, remained unmet for many years. The question of an Irish-language service was again raised in 1935, with a governmental committee report on the subject in 1939; but the Second World War deferred serious consideration until 1943, when Radio Eireann, the state-owned broadcast monopoly, itself began exploring the merits of the proposed "second system." Other national and broadcasting priorities intervened, unfortunately, including an abortive plan for a short-wave station intended to reach the Irish-descendant residents of North America. Finally, with an

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improvement in the national economic picture as well as heightened demands by Irish cultural and civil rights organizations, a 1969 Government "white paper" was issued which decreed that an Irish-language service must be initiated.

Determined that this document would at last bear tangible fruit, a group of students from University College, Cork, spent their 1970 Easter holiday in the Conamara district, near Galway, on Ireland's west central coast. There they quickly built and operated "Free Radio Conamara," an unauthorized 10-watt FM station dedicated to the radiation of Irish-language programming for the citizens of this overwhelmingly *Gaeltacht* area. The station was heard again later in the year as part of a local festival and aroused sufficient public interest to support the submission of a formal license request to the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs. Predictably, this unprecedented request was denied, but had attracted enough attention that the district's Irish-speaking civil rights candidate made its attainment a major plank in his political platform. Though he lost the election, the thousand votes he obtained were far more than an independent or splinter-party candidate could normally expect and were taken as further evidence of voter support for a *Gaeltacht* station.

"A 'broadcast Irish' needed to be evolved."

Consequently, on November 26, 1970, the Government instructed its broadcasting monopoly, Radio Telefis Eireann, to make the technical preparations needed to initiate an Irish-language station to serve the three prime locales where the approximately 100,000 people for whom Irish is the vernacular reside. In July, 1971, RTE was given the authority to run the operation, now

dubbed Radio na Gaeltachta, through direct Government financing and a new Radio na Gaeltachta Advisory Council which was responsible to RTE's own Authority.

In keeping with its mission of serving the three main non-contiguous Irish vernacular areas, construction was begun on a main studio at Casla (Costelloe) in the Conamara district and at two sub-stations -- one at Donegal in the north and another at Kerry in the south. Since each sub-station is approximately 200 miles from the main studio, definitive arrangements had to be worked out for the interconnections required for a working regional network. At the same time, a "broadcast Irish" needed to be evolved, vernacular in character, but which would be equally attuned to the three major dialects spoken in the three mutually isolated *Gaeltacht* districts. On Easter Sunday, April 2, 1972, the second anniversary of Free Radio Conamara, the Casla station first took to the air and both the technical and linguistic experimentation began.

By June, 1972, final work on the Casla facility had been completed and in the following December the sub-stations at Kerry and Donegal also were operational. Finally, on January 20, 1973, regular live interconnection between all three facilities became a reality. Radio na Gaeltachta used and uses the second VHF/FM channel allocated to Ireland by the International Telecommunications Union and, though FM is the preferred medium from the standpoints of signal quality and national coverage capability, it was recognized early that the service also must be transmitted over medium-wave (AM) facilities. According to Aindreas O'Gallchoir, Radio na Gaeltachta's general manager, "The economic conditions in the *Gaeltacht* areas do not often support luxury expenditures. Many of the listening homes still have the old tube-type medium-wave set which, in many cases, might be the original radio the family purchased." Consequently, a small, medium-wave

transmitter operates in close proximity to each of the three station sites: a 1-kilowatt transmitter in conjunction with the Kerry sub-station and, due to the larger geographic area to be covered, a 10-kilowatt installation in County Donegal. Medium-wave reception of Radio na Gaeltachta is thus provided to all of the *Gaeltacht* areas with little signal wasted on those other sections of the country for which the Irish-language network is a secondary service made available on the simulcasted FM band.

The FM portion of Radio na Gaeltachta's transmission capability was constructed in two stages. Initially, the service was carried on transmitters located at existing Radio Telefis Eireann transmission centers at Truskmore, Maghera and Mullaghanish. Together, these facilities radiated the Irish-language FM programs over most of the western half of the country thus covering all the *Gaeltacht* regions. As a second step, FM transmitters for Radio na Gaeltachta were, during 1973, also placed at RTE's Kippure and Mount Leinster installations to bring the Irish-language service to FM listeners in the rest of the Irish Republic by the early part of 1974.

The interconnections between the studios and FM transmitter sites are geared to provide significant flexibility and maximum signal coverage while keeping critical personnel and facility costs within RTE's and Radio na Gaeltachta's governmentally granted means. With all the FM transmitters co-located at RTE's national radio-television radiation sites, existing engineering personnel can be utilized to provide inspection and maintenance. Though lacking their own engineers, Radio na Gaeltachta's two sub-studios are close enough to the main transmitter sites in their districts that technical personnel from these propagation centers can periodically visit for whatever maintenance the studios and small medium-wave transmitters might require. Truskmore therefore fulfills this function for the Donegal sub-station, while Mullaghanish provides service to Kerry.

UHF links are utilized to connect Radio na

Gaeltachta's three studios with the nearest transmitter site and to provide the network's program content to the transmitters. Unlike the two sub-stations, the Casla facility has a down-link as well as an up-link with its FM transmitter at Maghera in order to increase its potential flexibility of operation and is, in addition, master feeder of the entire FM network. A supplementary sub-carrier utilizing the Subsidiary Communications Authorization System developed in the United States is activated from the transmitter sites in order to provide Casla with program circuits from its two sub-stations. When used together with direct telephone patches between Casla and either or both the Kerry and Donegal facilities, this lash-up enables program contributions from all three *Gaeltacht* areas to be received, contributed, and mixed by Casla. Since Radio na Gaeltachta only broadcasts between 7:00 and 9:15 each evening, the SCA links can be used for recording program segments throughout the day without fear of breakthrough from other material on the network's FM transmitters which, of course, operate on the main frequencies to which the SCA sub-channels are adjoined. National contributions from RTE headquarters near Dublin also are possible via a two-way microwave circuit between Dublin and Maghera which can then feed, directly or indirectly, all eight of the Irish-language network's AM and FM transmitters.

Linguistic Considerations

Providentially, the technical innovations cited above helped to mitigate a linguistic problem which had figured prominently in all previous proposals for a regional service in the *Gaeltacht*. For though once contiguous, the three main Irish-speaking regions had become separated from each other in the 18th century when English-speaking groups were settled

between them. For over two centuries, therefore, each *Gaeltacht* district was cut off from the others causing three separate idiomatic evolutions. While a single regional network was the only feasible answer to the needs of all three districts, there was concern that a common dialect could not be found.

In March, 1973, a special experiment was therefore conducted; an experiment made possible by the technical interconnections which can simultaneously link all three of Radio na Gaeltachta's studio locations. Two men, aged 40 or over, were recruited from the respective local populaces and brought into each of the system's three studios. Irish was the primary language of all six though each pair obviously represented a different regional dialect. None had more than a grammar school education in order to prevent vestiges of "literary" or "educated" Irish from distorting the experiment and its outcome. A skilled Irish-speaking broadcast interviewer joined each pair and, for an hour, with unaccustomed headsets firmly in place, the six men carried on a conversation over the aural link-up which Radio na Gaeltachta had provided. In 60 minutes, it was found that each pair could decipher all but five or six of the words and expressions used by the other duos. From this initial attempt, and from subsequent experiences with children during the preparation of participation programming for the young, the station's staff has learned, according to its general manager, "that there is a reasonably common vernacular for those not educated in proper literary Irish or in another language." "This means," he told the author, "that you must keep radio communication *simple*, not only to be appealing to our audience here, but to avoid falling into confusing dialectic traps and communication breakdowns." The popularity of Radio na Gaeltachta's programming in all three *Gaeltacht* districts seems to indicate that this admonition has been respected.

As a small, regional part of a small broadcasting system in a small and

economically fragile country, Radio na Gaeltachta could only be born, and can only exist, through maximum utilization of a minimum number of staff. As has been discussed previously, most engineering work for the Irish-language network is accomplished by placing its transmitters either directly within or close enough to main RTE radiation facilities to permit technical staffers there to service the equipment. Radio na Gaeltachta *per se* employs but two engineers who work alternating shifts at Casla and are responsible for most of the system's recording and interconnection functions as well as for maintenance of the Casla facility itself. Staffing at the Kerry and Donegal sub-stations is limited to two presenter/producers per facility and therefore requires that all lash-up instructions between the studios are conveyed over the phone by the Casla engineer to, as one of them puts it, "the non-technical types at the other end who have to try to carry them out." As witnessed by the writer, such an arrangement is occasionally frustrating for all concerned -- including the breaking of the interconnection by a producer calling Casla back over the patched-in line to see if he had patched it in properly!

The real question of employee rights and roles has not been officially settled.

In addition to the two engineers, the four sub-station presenter/producers, and General Manager O'Galchoir, the Radio na Gaeltachta staff includes five additional presenter/producers based in Casla, one administrative assistant for finance and personnel, four secretaries, one news

writer/editor, two security men, and a janitor. Thus, 21 people administer, operate, and maintain the entire network's program supply function. And since virtually all of Radio na Gaeltachta's programming is done live, or with recorded material gathered by its own staff, even the current two hours and fifteen minutes per evening is a major undertaking. Additional pressure is applied due to the long-standing Irish practice (enforced by union rules) that engineers rather than presenters must cue and run all records and tapes, leaving only the non-control-room announcing and writing chores to the presenter/producers. With but one Radio na Gaeltachta engineer on duty at any given time, this results in presenters almost waiting in line for his services.

Yet, according to Radio Telefis Eireann's plans for the Irish-language network, "the philosophy of studio operation is that the locally-based programme staff will themselves carry out most of the technical operations, and the equipment layout has been designed to facilitate operation in this manner."² Application of this policy, nevertheless, is another matter. One of the Casla studios does contain a new "desk" to enable the presenter to perform all of the standard engineering functions expected of most American disc jockeys. The desk, however, is not yet fully operational due to the work schedule of the engineers and most of the presenters express or exhibit a disinclination to attempt to fulfill all of these unaccustomed functions. For even though Radio na Gaeltachta is geographically far removed from the formalized union/management adversarial relationship so visible at Radio Telefis Eireann's Dublin headquarters, the real question of employee rights and roles has not been officially settled.

Currently, union difficulties are even affecting the type of actualities Radio na Gaeltachta is able to retrieve from Dublin. Until the new Radio Centre at Radio Telefis Eireann's Donnybrook complex is finished, the Irish-language network only has access to a small "automatic" studio in which the

person on-mike pushes a single button to activate the link to Casla. As a means of circumscribing even this non-union technical activity, however, regulations prohibit more than one speaker from being present in the studio at any given time. Thus, if the moderator back at Casla wishes to interview two individuals in Dublin, he must ask all his questions of the first, excuse him, and then proceed to the second interviewee. On a case-by-case basis, both persons may be permitted to wear earphones at the same time, but this is never a certainty. Such conditions are scheduled to change when Radio na Gaeltachta is given a now-under-construction, non-automatic studio at Donnybrook. This station will require the services of RTE union technicians to operate. What priority the Irish-language network will enjoy regarding the availability of these technicians remains to be seen.

Programming

Despite such limitations of personnel and of technical resources, Radio na Gaeltachta's programming has never waived from serving the main objectives for which it was created. The 1974 report by the Government's blue ribbon Broadcasting Review Committee, though highly critical of several aspects of RTE's operation, lauded the Irish-language network for bringing "a new and vivid element into the life of the Irish-speaking community on the western seaboard. The committee is satisfied that Radio na Gaeltachta has enhanced the sense of common identity between the *Gaeltacht* areas, which have suffered in the past from a certain degree of isolation."³ In line with this evaluation, and the goal it represents, RnG head, Aindreas O'Gallchoir, described his station to the author as "an educational/cultural enterprise, broadcasting in the vernacular." He believes it fortunate

that the whole nation is able to receive his station's programming on FM in order "to learn and remain in touch with the Irish language. But," he continues, "they are for the most part a secondary audience. Our prime focus is on the people for whom Irish is the ordinary means of communication."

In striving to keep this audience uppermost in mind, even the news bulletins on O'Gallchoir's facility are written differently than the Irish-language news reports broadcast on both radio and television by the parent Radio Telefis Eireann. "The national Irish-language news desk," says O'Gallchoir, "uses a journalese style of writing which betrays the fact that the people putting it together do know two languages." Radio na Gaeltachta's bulletins, conversely, are cast in vernacular Irish as spoken *in the Gaeltacht* and thus uninfluenced by the nuances of English syntax and usage. Over 20 per cent of Radio na Gaeltachta's program schedule is devoted to news with 10-minute reports at 7:00 p.m., three-minute headlines and fish-market reports at 8:00, and an expanded 15-minute newscast at 9:00 before sign-off at 9:15.

The length of the news reports and the overall on-air time remain largely the same seven days a week with, as previously mentioned, sign-on at 7:00 in the evening and sign-off two hours and fifteen minutes later. Occasionally the broadcast day does expand into the afternoon hours in order to permit live coverage of "football competitions" involving, particularly, *Gaeltacht* area teams or players. Other sports programming includes a 20-minute report at 7:10 on Saturdays and a half-hour sportscast on Sunday evening at 8:30.

Almost a quarter of Radio na Gaeltachta's time (225 minutes per week or 24 per cent) is devoted to current events and news magazine features. A seven-minute "press survey," which samples key newspaper editorials, is aired on Sunday with 57-minute magazine programs surrounding the 8:00 news

headlines on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. A 27-minute "This Week" news magazine follows the headlines on Thursday and is itself succeeded by "In Brussels," a 10-minute report on Common Market affairs by an economics professor from University College, Galway. On Friday, this 8:30-8:40 slot contains a review of the week's activities at the Irish parliament (Dail).

Most of the remainder of the program schedule is devoted to music. Here, as in the other program categories, it is material prepared especially for the Irish-language community and either gathered by Radio na Gaeltachta's own employees or utilized by them from commercial Irish-language recordings produced in Dublin. Using a Revox recorder, a mixer, and three-four microphones, several of the station's producer/presenters constantly scour local festivals, pubs, and observances to gather authentic, vernacular Irish music. A modest fee is negotiated with the amateur performer on the spot (no release forms are demanded) and the resulting tape is added to Radio na Gaeltachta's expanding collection of indigenous music. It is indicative of the popularity of this type of programming with the target audience that the only musical show not enjoying enthusiastic listener response is "The Gene Martin Show," a 20-minute segment done in Dublin by RTE's Light Music Department featuring international "pop" and big band music. The sole program presenting anything but Irish-language music in the entire Radio na Gaeltachta schedule, "The Gene Martin Show," is, according to station employees, "getting a terrible banging from the listeners and will probably be dropped."

There are, on the other hand, eight highly successful music shows, all of which are devoted to Irish music. Four of these stress audience participation: request programs on Saturday (30 minutes), as well as Sunday and Tuesday (50 minute each), plus a half-hour

phone in program on Thursday in which listeners are asked to identify the artists featured on various commercial Irish-language recordings. Whenever possible, these four programs utilize the link-up of all three studio locations in order to encourage listener interest and cross-district communication.

The only other program featuring commercial recordings is a 20-minute selection of Irish music and song heard every Friday evening before the nine o'clock news. The remaining three musical offerings all focus on material which Radio na Gaeltachta itself has collected. These include a half-hour show of pub music heard, appropriately enough, every Saturday evening; Tuesday's 30-minute "A Bagful," which presents the most recent additions to the Radio na Gaeltachta tape collection, and the 20-minute "Music from Kerry" heard on Wednesdays and encompassing songs and tunes gathered by the sub-station there.

The rest of the program schedule is a mixed, but calculated, potpourri of educational, cultural, and special-interest material. Half-hour dramatic features, often specially written for *Gaeltacht*-area thespians, are aired every Tuesday and Wednesday. A professorial lecture on the history of the Irish language is broadcast for 20 minutes on Sunday, while a live, in-studio quiz program is a very popular Saturday evening offering and rotates weekly among the three studio centers. Vocational programming includes a 10-minute veterinarian talk each Wednesday and Monday's "The Value of Your Work," a 30-minute description of *Gaeltacht*-area job openings and requirements.

Features for women and children deserve special attention. Produced and hosted by Aingeal Ni Chonchubhair, a life-long resident of the Casla area and a recent graduate of University College, Galway, these programs include a large amount of recorded material (songs, stories and discussions) which she has gathered in forays throughout the region. This technique has proven most appropriate to the two 20-minute children's programs heard

every Monday and Friday. As for the women's show which occupies that 7:10 - 7:30 time slot on Thursdays, Ms. Chonchubhair would like to see it dropped with relevant features from it placed in the various magazine programs. "Women here can understand news and current affairs, too," she maintains. "They should not be passed off with 20 minutes in a single segregated show."

Clearly, Radio na Gaeltachta seems to have the mechanisms and the personnel for reflecting modern social trends as well as catering to the traditional aims and thoughts of the *Gaeltacht*. This year (1975), it will serve as a pilot vehicle for Ireland's first planned experiment with in-school, instructional radio. A special "environmental studies" series is currently being prepared by Radio Telefis Eireann's Education Department and will be beamed, via Radio na Gaeltachta, to the approximately 300 primary schools in its main service area. Each of these schools will be given an FM receiver by the Ministry of Education. If successful, the plan will then be extended to cover the whole of the Republic with additional subject matter aimed at updating the primary school curriculum. Though not produced by the Irish-language network, the dissemination of this series does demonstrate the national as well as localized value of this unique broadcast facility. In this new function as in-school educator and in its parent objectives of preserving and promoting the Irish language on a regional and national basis, Radio na Gaeltachta is testimony to the power of even limited-resource broadcasting, when designed and operated with care and ingenuity.

Notes

1. Irish Language Service, *E.B.U. Review* No. 131 (February 1972), p. 26.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.
3. Broadcasting Review Committee, *Report 1974* (Dublin: Government Publications Sales Office, 1974), Sec. 14-19.