

# Audience identification and Raidió na Gaeltachta

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## Introduction

Issues of audience identification<sup>1</sup> have always been crucial for radio and television stations broadcasting in lesser used languages. The imminent arrival of Teilifis na Gaeilge and increased interest in the radio station itself have re-opened the debate concerning Raidió na Gaeltachta and its target audience. This paper argues that approaches to audience identification for Raidió na Gaeltachta have been characterized by a lack of clarity and a failure to recognize the diversity within the Irish-speaking community. The expansive and ill-defined nature of their target audience has not been addressed in a structured manner. Consequently the station's position is becoming increasingly incongruous with the developing radio environment.

This question will be discussed at a number of levels. Firstly, the campaign for the establishment of Raidió na Gaeltachta (hereafter RNG) will be outlined in terms of envisaged target audiences. Secondly, the increasing diversity and change within RNG's target audience will be examined in terms of developments within the station. Finally, sustained criticisms of Raidió na Gaeltachta and possible responses to these criticisms will be discussed.

## Campaign and establishment

The ambiguity concerning RNG's target audience, the lack of clarity concerning its national vs local framework, and the issue of overall audience identification can be traced back to the campaign for Raidió na Gaeltachta itself. Organized in 1969, calls for the station were initially part of a broader list of demands made by the Gaeltacht Civil Rights Movement. Along with requests for the return of fishing rights, comprehensive education, etc. campaigners sought 'a radio station for all Irish speakers located in the Gaeltacht' (Ó Glaisne, 1982, 10). While this statement is unclear as to whether a national or a local station was demanded, some activists were in no doubt that 'it was local radio we wanted. It was local before it was in Irish' (Ó Tuairisc, 1995). Tactics employed during the campaign, particularly the establishment of a pirate local radio service, Saor Raidió Connemara, re-affirmed the expectation of a local radio for the Gaeltacht.

RTÉ's obligation under Article 17 of the 1960 Broadcasting Authority Act referred simply to the national aims of restoring and reviving the language. However, statements from RTÉ management at the time clearly indicate that they also envisaged the station in terms of local radio. Pdraig Ó Raghallaigh, who was subsequently appointed head of RNG, stated in *The Connaught Tribune*:

Local radio stations are becoming more popular all over the world and in Ireland where there are two languages a local radio service for the Gaeltacht should be the first step (3 September 1971).

Conradh na Gaeilge, the most powerful language organization, had always been critical of the media's treatment of the Irish language. However, while most language groups supported the idea of a station located in the Gaeltacht, they maintained that local radio for the area was not sufficient. They made it clear that Irish speakers outside

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1. This paper was researched as part of a broader project on the campaigns for Raidió na Gaeltachta and Teilifis na Gaeilge. In the course of this work, I conducted over thirty interviews with members of each campaign. RTE management, relevant politicians and Irish language activists both in the Republic and Northern Ireland. All interviewees were questioned on their views concerning Raidió na Gaeltachta. I also made substantial use of *Innitú*, *Amarach*, *The Connaught Tribune*, *The Irish Times*, *Anois* and *Lá*, and relevant Irish language and communications journals.

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the Gaeltacht also had needs and expected national radio services geared to their requirements (Ó Gadhra, 1969, 11).

Politicians attempted to respond to both groups. The *White Paper on the Restoration of the Irish Language* (Government Publications, 1969) stated that the committee requested RTÉ to prepare a report on establishing a station in the west, to serve primarily the Gaeltacht but also Irish speakers in general. In his statement to the Dáil, George Colley TD, Minister for Finance, asserted:

As well as catering for the Gaeltacht areas, the new service is expected to attract a substantial audience among Irish speakers generally (Ó Glaisne, 1982, 57).

In addition, he stated that it would not be a station for one Gaeltacht but would embrace all Gaeltacht areas and give them a sense of cohesion. Gerry Collins TD (1970), Minister for Post and Telegraphs, re-iterated this view at the first formal meeting in the Gaeltacht to plan the new station. However, none of the statements indicated the structural manner in which this task was to be achieved.

This definition of RNG's role without reference to age, environment, class or sex and impervious to the contradictions and difficulties of attempting to provide both a national and local service at the same time has remained in place. In Raidió na Gaeltachta's press package, it states:

The main purpose of Raidió na Gaeltachta is to provide the Gaeltacht areas and indeed the Irish public with a full broadcasting service through the medium of the Irish language (RNG, 1992, 3).

Browne has commented on the problems posed by these contradictions arguing that the station's dual objectives have created substantial tensions for the staff of Raidió na Gaeltachta (1992, 89)<sup>2</sup>.

### Audience and Raidió na Gaeltachta, 1972-1995

Within this context, attempts by RNG to function as both a local and national service, to both country and city dwellers of all ages, seems highly ambitious. To fully understand the difficulty of their task, it is necessary to understand the diversity within their target audience. In 1972, despite increasing educational opportunities in the Gaeltacht, this audience continued to be characterized by an aging rural population. Unemployment was high and basic services such as running water, roads and transport were poor (Akutagawa, 1991, 40). The population of the Connemara Gaeltacht declined by 18.7 per cent between 1946 and 1966 (Ó Brúdaire, 1971, 6). What remained after emigration, was an aging disadvantaged community reliant on farming, fishing and craft industries to supplement their social welfare payments and emigrant remittances<sup>3</sup>. The provision of free education and Gaeltacht scholarships was already having an effect, the most obvious being the establishment of the Gaeltacht Civil Rights movement itself (Mac an Iomaire, 1995). However, the social effects of decline were still in evidence (Ó Tuathail, 1969: 9-10).

The other half of Raidió na Gaeltachta's intended audience were Irish language speakers (Gaeilgóiri) outside the Gaeltacht. Statistically this group has been middle-class, urban and frequently in state employment. Their interest in the Irish language was often manifested in a more intellectual manner and was frequently part of a larger view of Irish culture (Hindley, 1990: 137-160). These differences have created divisions between Gaeltacht people and Irish language speakers or 'Gaeltacht chauvinism' as Hindley refers to it (1990: 207-216). It would also seem to be rooted in a history of class tension which can be traced throughout the Gaeltacht/Gaeilgóir relationship. Gaeilgóiri in Northern Ireland also constitute a young vibrant community and a substantial potential audience for RNG.

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2. Clause 1 of the station's aims highlights 'providing a service to the Gaelic speaking public but especially to the Gaeltacht'. However Clause 2 asserts the need 'to introduce the Gaeltacht to itself, to make it's people more aware of their surrounding' (RNG, 1992).

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3. Ó Brúdaire estimates that between 1960-1965, 13-15 per cent of overall income in co. Galway was provided by emigrant remittances and current government transfers (1971, 4:5-73).

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In the intervening period, largely as a result of the operations of *Údáras na Gaeltachta*, the tide of emigration from the Gaeltacht has reversed. A large number of the Gaeltacht workforce are now employed in industrial, traditionally urban jobs. In addition, the number of young people living, working and remaining in the Gaeltacht has increased substantially (Bórd na Gaeilge, 1983: 46-47). Irish language speakers outside the Gaeltacht have also changed as a group. There has been an increase in the number of families attempting to raise their children in Irish-speaking households (Matsouka, 1982, 5; Betts, 1976: 226). As a result, the numbers of all-Irish kindergartens, primary and secondary schools have grown (Bórd na Gaeilge, 1994: 27). Despite these changes, the social and cultural differences between the Gaeltacht community and *Gaeilgóirí* remain pronounced. This is significant given the important role which the rural/urban divide already plays in audience identification.<sup>4</sup>

While the differences between Gaeltacht communities and language groups were pronounced in 1972, the intervening period has seen increasing diversity develop. While the Gaeltacht has become more urban in outlook, both groups now contain significant numbers of young people with their own demands and needs. Moreover, a substantial Irish language presence now exists in Northern Ireland which has to be catered for. *Raidió na Gaeltachta's* objective task of serving the Gaeltacht and language speakers of all ages has become even more difficult.

The development of *Raidió na Gaeltachta* during the last twenty-four years needs to be examined within this context. It has grown from initial broadcast of two-and-a-half hours per day to a day-long service broadcasting from 8.00am to 7.30pm. It has established three main stations in Donegal, Kerry and Connemara, and substations in Dublin and Castlebar. The station's most significant achievement has been the creation of a link between the three major and linguistically diverse Gaeltachtaí who hitherto had problems understanding each other's dialects (Mac an Iomaire 1995; Ó Tuathaigh, 1995). In 1979, a delegation from the Council of Europe stated:

*Raidió na Gaeltachta* serves a community that is not geographically local. It rather links together the Irish-speaking community of the country. That is those Irish-speaking communities of the country, communities where Irish is the first vernacular which are collectively known as the Gaeltacht (RNG, 1992).

Browne has commended *Raidió na Gaeltachta* on its contribution to the development of Irish vocabulary which has occurred largely as a result of the demands of its daily news service (1992: 424).

With a large station in Donegal and a considerable available audience in Northern Ireland, *Raidió na Gaeltachta* has developed distinct coverage of Northern Ireland. While its achievements have been substantial, it has failed to address the specific needs of its target audience in many areas. Radio One and 2FM have segmented and specifically targeted key groups among the available audience while RNG has remained tied to a catchall approach. The audience is, however, faced with increasing choice on the airwaves.

## Criticisms

Literature from *Raidió na Gaeltachta* would seem to indicate that staff and management are aware of the diversity in their identified audience. Nevertheless two substantial and sustainable criticisms of their service have emerged in the last twenty-four years. Firstly, both media and language critics have argued that RNG does not adequately address the needs of young people (Ó Murchú, 1978: 15; Rosenstock, 1984: 17; *Anois*, 24 May 1985: 3 and 19 July 1987: 1; Mac Dubhghail, 1995: 13; O'Neil, 1995: 11). Research within RTÉ also indicates that over seventy-five per cent of the station's listenership remains in the 35plus category<sup>5</sup>. Browne states

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4. IRTC audience research indicates that the most salient division is the rural/urban divide. They found that country dwellers wanted speech-oriented radio and preferred country and western or traditional music. In contrast, city dwellers, even substantial segments of the adult audience, preferred continuous pop or rock music with less talk (Barbrook, 1992, 217).

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5. Tony Fahy, Head of Audience Research, RTE. Interview, 11 January 1996.

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Some staff are concerned about the 'no English lyrics' policy feeling that it has cost the station their best opportunity to reach the teenage audience. The disc jockeys could speak in Irish and thus preserve the essence of the policy (1992: 42).

A number of Gaeltacht activists who originally campaigned for the station state that their children rarely if ever listen to it (Ui Conghaile, 1995; Ó Raine, 1995).

The needs of younger Irish language speakers outside the Gaeltacht are served to some extent by small community stations such as Raidió na Life (Dublin) and Raidió Failte (Belfast) which are lighter in content. Young people in the Gaeltacht areas have no similar service and therefore have to avail of the local English language commercial station or 2FM. However, the young, particularly in the Connemara Gaeltacht have manifested a demand for a Gaeltacht based station oriented towards their needs. Twice during the 1980s, pirate pop stations were established in Connemara. Radio Happy, the first in 1984, contained speech links in English, while the second, in 1987, contained links in Irish and prompted considerable worry among staff in RNG (*Inniu* 20 July 1984: 11; *Anois*, 19 July 1987: 1). People within RTE and Irish language organizations argue, with some justice, that the 'no English lyrics' policy has contributed significantly to the renewal of interest in traditional music, giving it a guaranteed place in the radio diet of the country (Collins, 1995; Ó Tuathaigh, 1995).

Secondly, sustained criticism has developed around the geographical focus of RNG. Audiences have become accustomed to a clear division between national and local stations. Raidió na Gaeltachta's attempt to accommodate both elements has come under fire from both Gaeltacht people and language speakers outside the Gaeltacht (*Inniu*, 26 January 1973: 1; *Inniu*, 26 March 1976: 10; Ó Murchú, 1978: 15; *Anois*, 29 September 1985: 1; Rosenstock, 1988: 10; Delap, 1995: 22; O'Neil, 1995: 12). Gaeltacht people feel that RNG is not local enough and seem to have little interest in local news from other Gaeltachtaí. Hindley claims

my own enquiries showed that it was widely listened to for local news – it broadcast births, marriages and deaths and reports of all local events – but not for much else – and even teachers confessed to switching off when programmes were in other than their dialect (1990: 173).

In contrast, many Irish-speakers outside the Gaeltacht find elements of the broadcasts too parochial and local to be of interest. They feel that this type of material is unsuited to a national service.

This is a crucial issue as many of the most successful local radio stations such as Highland Radio, Northwest Radio and Radio Kerry cover RNG's catchment area (JNLR, 1995). Some of these stations, particularly those which have some Irish language programmes in their schedules report an enthusiastic response from Gaeltacht areas<sup>6</sup>.

## Responses and solutions

Raidió na Gaeltachta now faces a substantial challenge. Obviously it would be wasteful to destroy what has already been achieved in terms of linkages between the Gaeltachtaí, traditional music and coverage of Northern Ireland. Additionally, education, public administration, television and information technology are all experiencing a significant upsurge in interest in the Irish language at the moment. Nevertheless, Raidió na Gaeltachta's audience has remained stable at one per cent of the total national listenership since the 1970s (Ó Drisceoil, 1993, 1985; Fahy, 1996). The station's attempt to function both as a national and as a local station, to serve both young and old, country and city dweller are meeting with a lukewarm response even in the current buoyant environment.

6. Charlie Collins (station manager for Highland Radio) estimates that 30-40 per cent of their listenership comes from the Donegal Gaeltacht (measured through responses to phone-ins and write-in competitions). They feature one all-Irish programme a week and up to four others which can and often do contain significant Irish language content (Personal communication 8 January 1996).



One method of dealing with these criticisms would be to define the target audience in more precise and narrow terms. Traditionally staff and management at the station have resisted attempts to limit or restrict their focus. Browne says that

Brendan Feiritear, one of the original RNG staff members, felt strongly that the service had to move beyond the Gaeltacht because to do otherwise would have confined RNG to the role of perpetuating a sort of pastoral dream, irrelevant to the late 20th century (1992: 419).

Conversely proposals by the then Minister for Communications, Jim Mitchell, in the mid-1980s, to re-structure RNG as Raidió na Gaeilge met with firm opposition from staff and language groups (*Anois*, 7 April 1985:2 and 29 September 1985:1).

The problems involved in servicing both listenerships have been addressed by Raidió nan Gaidhael in Scotland. They have adopted a three-tier opt-out system which has national, regional and local segments (Cormack, 1993: 108). Bristow and Bovill state

What is likely to satisfy Raidió nan Gaidhael's core audience of elderly islanders may be of little interest to the more outward looking young or to those Gaels on the mainland who, as a linguistic minority – are not likely to use Gaelic in most of their social contacts. This is a challenge which Raidió nan Gaedhael has begun to address (1982: 128).

This system would seem to have much to offer Raidió na Gaeltachta. It would allow it to offer a national service, to retain linkages between the three Gaeltachtaí and to offer a local service to each specific Gaeltacht.

Suggestions for targeting a younger audience have come from within the ranks of young language activists themselves. Their favoured solution is the establishment of a new service using RNG facilities, broadcasting at night outside RNG hours, under a different name. The service would play a relatively low amount (five to ten per cent) of Irish language music, however all speech links would be in Irish (Ó Drisceoil, 1993: 85). This suggestion has the advantage of allowing RNG to retain its lyrics policy and emphasis on traditional music. Given RNG's current staff and facilities it would be feasible. Finally even if the service were only available in Gaeltacht areas, it would represent a substantial concession to a younger audience.

Finance for these initiatives is of course the key factor. It is unlikely that RNG will receive any substantial increase in their budget in the near future (Ó Duibhir, 1996). The question of advertising also needs to be re-examined. RNG already offers a type of advertising through their community announcements; reaction in the Gaeltacht to local commercial radio stations would seem to indicate that the community does not find advertising intrusive or offensive<sup>7</sup>. Teilifís na Gaeilge management have stated that they are very open to advertising (Ó Ciardha 1995). Finally through their news coverage RNG has shown that the language can cope with modern terms, modern markets and a modern world-view. Revenue accrued from accepting advertising would substantially improve the station's ability to address problems and criticisms.

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7. Research by RNG management into the question of advertising, conducted in the early 1980s, indicated that it was 'out of keeping' with the image of the station (Duibhir, 1996).

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## Conclusion

Since its inception, audience identification has caused problems for Raidió na Gaeltachta. In 1972, its target audience was very broad and ambitious. However, RTÉ Radio One, then the only other legal radio station had a similar view of its audience. In the intervening period, the advent of pirate radio has radically changed radio broadcasting. It has created new distinctions between local and national services, targeted at specific age-groups. As a result both new commercial radio stations and RTÉ have had to adopt a more focused and targeted approach to identifying and segmenting

their audience. Raidió na Gaeltachta's target audience has developed and diversified also during this period. While the achievements of the station are substantial, it has failed to address these changes in a focused manner. Critics have argued that it does not address the needs of young people who speak Irish. They have also complained that it has failed to reconcile the difficulties in providing both a national and local service simultaneously. In 1997, Raidió na Gaeltachta will celebrate its 25th anniversary. In examining its future prospects, it faces a number of options. It could narrow its target audience or undertake a programme of re-structuring. Whichever option is chosen, it would seem that change is crucial, not only in ensuring the future of Raidió na Gaeltachta but in aiding the survival of the language itself.

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