

**Free to Air:**  
**An examination of the role played by a radio phone-in  
programme, *Liveline*, in the democratic process**

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**Presented for  
Ph D**

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## Abstract

The radio phone-in, *Liveline*, attracts a daily listenership of over 400,000. The topics aired in the programme regularly feature in the newspapers on subsequent days or they become the subject of parliamentary questions in the Dáil or of reactions by government ministers. The programme is seen to offer a place for 'ordinary' voices and opinions in a mass media setting which is usually the preserve of broadcasting professionals, politicians, journalists and expert commentators.

In this thesis I examine how *Liveline* functions in Irish democracy - as a source of information, as a popular platform and as an agent for debate. While it may be shown to be successful in some or all of these areas, it is at the same time a media product where the immediate goals are to interest and entertain the audience and thereby to attract advertising revenue.

In order to address that tension between the civic and the commercial I firstly explore those fields of theory that shed light on the connections between communicative agency and democratic effectiveness. One such is the concept of a public sphere where citizens may assemble in public to discuss issues of common concern in a dispassionate and rational way with a view to arriving at a consensus and decisions for action.

In the light of criticisms that find this approach too idealistic, too restrictive or too exclusionary I consider a wider concept of deliberative democracy where the definition of the political is broader and the range of discursive means to address it is broader also. I pay particular attention to storytelling and emotional expression because of their prominence in the speech in *Liveline*.

Becoming a better citizen is more than attracting rights and membership of a defined community; it is also about the identity we construct for ourselves within a civic culture and the practices we engage in to reinforce and revise that role. I examine how *Liveline* functions as a resource for this purpose by analysing the discourses of the programme over the course of a month. I also examine how the work of the programme team, especially the host, shapes the discursive context. I suggest that generally, media research tends to disregard the production process as irreparably ideologically loaded or ratings driven. In this thesis, based on analysis of programme discourses and leaning, to some extent, on evidence from my own experience as a radio producer, I contest this. I suggest that *Liveline*, with its complex three-way set of communicative relations - a cross collaboration between the host, the callers and the listening public - affords, a model, a location, and the resources which contribute to enabling contemporary citizenship.

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## Glossary of Acronyms

2FM	Sometimes 'Radio2' - RTÉ's 'pop' music service
2RN	The original call sign assigned to the Irish Radio Service (1926 - 1937)
AIB	Allied Irish Banks
AM	Amplitude Modulation
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BCC	Broadcasting Complaints Commission
BCO	Broadcasting Coordinator
CA	Conversation Analysis
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DAA	Dublin Airport Authority
DCU	Dublin City University
DG	Director General
DIRT	Deposit Income Retention Tax
DPP	Director of Public Prosecutions
FF	Fianna Fáil (Irish Political Party)
FG	Fine Gael (Irish Political Party)
FM	Frequency Modulation
JNLR	Joint National Listenership Research
LOVE	Let Our Voices Emerge (Religious support group)
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children - later ISPCC
PD	Progressive Democrats (Irish Political Party - now defunct)
PMG	Postmaster General
PSB	Public Service Broadcasting
RÉ	Radio Éireann (1937 - 1960)
RTÉ	Radio Teilifís Éireann (1960 - )
SMS	Short Message Service (Phone texts)
TASC	Taskforce on Active Citizenship

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

It seemed that RTÉ Radio 1 had been around for ever, staid, dependable, avuncular, a close relation to the epitome of Public Service Broadcasting across at the BBC. Radio 2 was the new kid on the block - an upstart in more ways than one - cheeky, populist and designed by RTÉ as a response to the competition from pirate music radio and the demands for independent alternatives. Launched on 31st May 1979, the infant station was unsure of its parentage. Proclaiming it was 'Cominatcha!', its aim was to sound young, cool and slick yet it was located in the Radio Centre at the state's national broadcaster in Donnybrook. The whiff of the Department of Posts and Telegraphs was still in the air. The management and some of the presenters had served their time on Radio 1. The rest of the presenters and many of the new producers had been recruited from the pirate stations.

I trained as a producer with the fledgling station over the summer of 1980 and worked for much of the following decade on a freelance contract basis there.

The winter of 1980 had a particularly cold snap just after Christmas. Heavy snow blanketed much of Leinster on the last Friday of the year. I was scheduled to open the station at 6.30 on the following morning. As is customary during our infrequent snowstorms, no transport, public or private, stirred. With little choice, I set off walking at 4.30 the eight miles across the city, lugging a bundle of vinyl in case the record librarian did not make it to work. We cranked up the station and opened on time. Early programmes at the weekend were traditionally quiet affairs - inoffensive music and a sprinkling of requests. Requests did begin to trickle in but they took an odd turn. Truckers stuck on the Naas Road wanted a request to let their families in Ashbourne know they were safe. Teenagers on sleepovers warned parents not to expect them for a day or two. By mid-morning the station had become a clearinghouse for those stranded or astray in the snow or for those anxiously awaiting word in those days before the mobile phone.

We worked flat out for two days, high on the buzz of being central to this national emergency (in Leinster!). There was almost a sense of disappointment when the thaw arrived on Sunday night and by Monday we peopled the studio with articulate plumbers and drain experts offering advice on frozen pipes, leaks and blockages in an attempt to prolong our usefulness in the receding emergency.

When the excitement died down there was a sense of personal and professional satisfaction; this was what public service was all about. There was a feeling of having a responsibility and of having contributed in some measure to the common good. It may have been a naïve and exceptional feeling. Sure, the station reverted to playing one-hit-wonders and the 'just-a-minute-quiz' but the conviction remained that the potential persisted for even 'pop' radio to be worthwhile in a civic sense. That conviction informs the work that follows.

When, almost thirty years later, I came to interrogate this belief in the civic efficacy of radio, I found an impression among commentators (e.g. Barber, 1984, Dahlgren, 1995, Brants, 1998, Putnam, 2000, Gore, 2007, Ginsborg, 2008) that democratic politics was under threat. Not alone that but, as Jeffrey Jones (2006a, p. 366) points out, there is also a general perception that the media have contributed in some manner to that threat. This prompted me to inquire how one specific programme might be judged to impinge on the democratic process.

That programme is RTÉ's daily phone-in, *Liveline*, and I chose it for a number of reasons.

In the first place *Liveline* is a unique and powerful national institution<sup>1</sup> one that uses as its raw material the desire of callers to be heard airing their views on issues of importance to them. The programme derives something of its authority precisely because it is located in a regular and prominent slot on Radio 1, which, in spite of many changes in the radio broadcasting scene in recent decades, is still regarded by many as The National Station, the official 'voice' of the nation in the Public Service tradition.

*Liveline* is also powerful in terms of its listenership figures. By the most recent count it draws an audience of over 396,000 (JNLR / TNS mrbi survey, *Irish Times*, 29/10/10, p. 3) each day and is the third most listened-to programme in Ireland.

Joe Duffy, the programme host, once asked, "Is it not a matter of time before prisoners start ringing phone-in programmes?" (2002, P. 101). On Tuesday 1st May 2007 a prisoner, John Daly did ring. His call, described by one journalist as, "One of the most extraordinary pieces of radio in recent years" (*Evening Herald*, 02/05/2007, p. 4) was in reaction to an on-

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<sup>1</sup> There is a catalogue of issues where *Liveline* can be shown to have made an impact on the national consciousness. Amongst the more prominent were its coverage of the Omagh bombings in Aug. 1998; its offer of portacabins to alleviate overstretched A and E facilities at the Mater Hospital in April 2005; its revelations about the payments from the Residential Abuse Redress Board in Oct. 2005; its coverage of the death from cancer of public patient, Susie Long in Oct. 2007; and its impact on the banking crisis of Sep. 2008.

air conversation with a crime writer and it sparked a chain of events. There was an immediate clampdown on mobile phones within prisons and John Daly was transferred from Portlaoise to Cork prison, for his own safety. The Minister for Justice appeared on the programme on the following day to defend his policies and to question the propriety of allowing convicted prisoners airtime. The journalist was afforded additional police protection after his address and personal details appeared on a web site within minutes of the confrontation on the programme. By 22nd October 2007 John Daly was dead - one newspaper speculating that, "A mobile phone call lasting just two minutes may well have cost John Daly his life" (*The Star*, 23/10/2007, p.6). The same paper dubbed Daly the "slain Liveline Gangster" (p. 1) and "executed Liveline thug" (p. 4).

The episode reported above serves to illustrate a couple of aspects of the 'weight' of *Liveline*. It suggests that the programme has sufficient reach that both jailed criminals and a Government Minister feel impelled to contribute to the on-air debate. Furthermore, the fact that the press can refer to a murder victim (however glibly) as "Liveline thug" indicates that the programme title can be used as universal shorthand, in an Irish context, for one facet of the public arena.

I am not suggesting that such high drama is typical of the programme nor indeed that there is an established connection between the phone call and John Daly's death but these points and this episode lead us on to consider whether, in fact, the national airwaves are the appropriate arena for calling a minister to account and for instigating a reform of security policy. Is this not why we have a representative parliament? The episode raises the question of ethical implications for the media in general, and *Liveline* in particular, in terms of how they exercise their power and how they are policed.

I contend that the programme trades on its democratic features. It claims to encourage access and debate. It champions the weak and undertakes campaigns for civic justice. It sets its stall out as facilitating the voice of the ordinary citizen in the public arena. This arena is the space where public opinion coalesces, where attitudes are formed, changed or abandoned and where concerted action begins, and is encouraged or suppressed. The media enjoy a privileged place of power within this arena in terms of access, resources, spread and range. A programme such as *Liveline*, whose stock-in-trade is the expression of opinion in public, offers a clear-cut starting point for examining this dynamic.

There is also the fact that *Liveline* is a phone-in programme. As we shall see in more detail, the characteristics of the phone-in - its capacity to almost defy genre, make it a fertile field for exploring the links and tensions between the individual, the mass media and the society in which they interact.

So in its simplest terms my question then becomes, is democracy in Ireland richer because a lot of people listen to *Liveline* or would it be the poorer if it was replaced? Does *Liveline* make us - those who listen to it, those who take part in the programme and those who produce it - better citizens? As we shall see, the categories of listener, caller, presenter and production team are anything but discrete and watertight. In the event, this thesis will focus on the interaction and relationship between all three.

What the listeners hear on *Liveline* is talk; lots of talk involving the host - normally Joe Duffy - and a succession of callers. Sometimes the talk is serious and sounds important; other times it is frivolous and fun. Sometimes the talk is reasoned and pleasant; occasionally it is angry and confrontational. People are upset on air; some want to tell their stories, some want to testify; some to share their experiences; some just to complain and to get their money back; all want to make a point.

Because I wish to uncover the possibilities for enhanced citizenship that *Liveline* may offer, my explorations must focus on this world of talk. Who is talking and to whom? What are they talking about? How are they speaking? What are the circumstances surrounding the talk?

I cannot hope to investigate every angle but I can sharpen the focus and ask if what is being said adds to the knowledge necessary to make us better citizens. This knowledge is not alone an awareness of necessary facts and information; it is also a knowledge of procedures, of standards and norms and of emotional sensitivity. I also need to query if the topics being talked about reflect the concerns of citizens and how they can be linked to wider political issues. Do they add to awareness and debate or do they obscure inequalities or abuses of power? And by what process do they become 'political'? Some of the talk sounds significant and serious while more of it seems pointless, inconsequential or even counterproductive - mere chatter, gossip or moaning - and this prompts the question whether political debate takes place only when there is a balanced, rational and well-informed discussion.

I must also examine the context of this talk if I hope to appreciate its meaning. What is said changes depending on who says it; where it is said; when it is said; when and where it is heard and so on. All talk has multiple overlapping contextual envelopes. Frequently in media studies the contexts of production, transmission and reception are identified as sites, which shape the way in which the meaning of messages is constructed. In this thesis I will concentrate on aspects of the production process and seek to examine what is invested at that point. Is there a sense in which *Liveline* is perceived as contributing to a political process or to democracy at large?

I will look in particular at the power of the programme presenter. This power has most frequently been interrogated through a critical perspective, on the one hand, asking how it contributes to maintaining powerful social elites, and on the other hand, through the lens of political economics, asking how it seeks to maximize ratings in the service of potential advertising markets. I will acknowledge and take as a given the value and validity of both of these perspectives but will also suggest that there are other, sometimes neglected, aspects of the media production role. Programme makers may also be judged by other standards - aesthetic, ethical, professional, etc. - asking what in their work is creative, original, finely crafted and entertaining. I question whether a case can also be made for their work being judged by civic standards, for their being seen as citizens in their own right.

Uses and gratifications theory and reception studies have rehabilitated the listener/audience. They are no longer 'cultural dopes' or consumer dupes (Fiske, 1987). My contention is that, not alone are programme makers wittingly or unwittingly not simply agents in the fostering of dopes and dupes in their audiences, they should not be constructed as dopes and dupes themselves. They do inhabit a privileged point in the nexus of symbolic and economic power that is the media but that is not the whole story.

One of the factors, already noted, which prompts and colours these reflections is my own experience as a radio producer in RTÉ throughout the 1980s. At a basic level this experience afforded some insights into the programme making process - a familiarity with the technical possibilities and constraints (as they then were); an understanding of the institutional culture; and a sense (however justifiable) of what might 'work on air'. There was, as we have seen, the satisfaction of leaving the Radio Centre feeling that a day's production had been worthwhile, helpful and entertaining. Such personal reactions were not the subject of reflective analysis at the time but they do animate this impetus to revisit the production process - a 'reflexive self-ethnography', as Peter Lewis terms it (2009, p.2).

The media are frequently portrayed as an impersonal, monolithic force - not just impersonal but also un-peopled. It may be forgotten that those who work in radio have outside, lives, values, influences, and other dimensions and contradictions, all of which, spill into a wider world where they may volunteer, protest, conform or break the law. They relate to family, tennis partners, neighbours, tax inspectors and pets. They even have roles as listeners to the radio and as consumers of other media and all-in-all they defy any concept of being simply tidy, easily categorizable units.

There is a further complexity in *Liveline*. Callers are conceived of primarily as members of the audience but they also have a foot in the programme makers' camp. They belong to the audience in the sense that, right up to the time they ring they are members of that audience and as soon as their turn is over, they will resume their place amongst them. They are not necessarily the voice of the whole audience but they do represent the possibility for any listeners of their 'ordinary' voices being heard. They are programme makers in so far as they are authors of their own unscripted content; they are responsible for the quality of their own performance and production. They are received in the special context that is 'the media'. True, their choices are limited and, as shall be seen, callers have restricted control over their on-air contributions. They are not however powerless. Programme makers remain apprehensive about their unpredictability, their silence and even their compliance with the dictates of taste and the law of the land<sup>2</sup>.

So, while I query to what extent the interaction between callers and programme host is based on parity I also hope to demonstrate that it has a significant cooperative component, not simply in the realms of politeness and knowing the ground rules but also in the realm of the joint construction of meaning, which contributes to the formation of public opinion. My aim is to make a case for citizen/callers acting in concert with citizen/hosts.

Because our arguments are, that public talk contributes to the way that public opinion forms and secondly, that public opinion is the arena in which norms of action are suggested, tested and contested I will draw in this thesis on theories of The Public Sphere and of Deliberative Democracy. Put simply, both contend that democracy is sustained and advanced by the conversation and deliberation of citizens. Some strains of Public Sphere Theory would hold that such deliberation must take the form of rational critical debate, that citizens must talk with one another knowledgeably, considerately and purposefully if their talk is to contribute to the common good. Both theories have been contested and refined over time but they continue to offer an entrée, a language and structure, which will allow us to address the civic nature of the talk in *Liveline*. One objective of this thesis, then, will be to examine the interaction that takes place on *Liveline* and to attempt to establish to what extent it lives up to the criteria for rational critical debate.

Following on from that, where the conversation is deemed to fall short of the rational critical ideal, my intention is to examine how it might contribute to the democratic process where different conceptions of citizenship or

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<sup>2</sup> In 2007 in a high profile libel case, Government consultant, Monica Leech extracted €250,000 and an apology from RTÉ because of remarks made by a caller to a *Liveline* programme about her relationship with then Minister Martin Cullen (*Munster Express*, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2007).

deliberation are applied. I ask if there is a cultural dimension to citizenship and how *Liveline* might contribute to such an expanded understanding.

## Objectives

The overall objective of this thesis is to explore how one manifestation of the mass media - talk radio - impinges on the democratic process. In particular, it asks if a specific phone-in<sup>3</sup> programme can contribute to making us better citizens. To do that, it will interrogate aspects of the discourses in *Liveline* to ask if the discussions that take place there are reasoned and persuasive; to ask if the emotion and the stories we hear have a persuasive quality also; to ask if they contribute to our civic identities in other ways; to ask if the process of production helps or hinders democratic potential; and to ask if the show facilitates a cultural construction of citizenship. For practical purposes it is necessary to break down this overall objective and to reformulate it under thematic headings.

1. The Political. Deeming talk to be political is more than a semantic exercise. It places areas of talk on an agenda, which brings that talk towards the realms of action and policy. It will therefore be important to consider the nature of the political, to ask how the political relates to that area of endeavour we understand as formal 'politics'. Beyond that we inquire if some topics or issues are more or less political than others. This gives rise to a number of considerations in relation to *Liveline*. We ask what topics are covered and what connection they might have to the political or indeed to politics. We also ask if there is a political function for talk that is considered predominantly entertaining or merely trivial.
2. Rational Deliberation. According to classic Public Sphere Theory, how the talk is conducted also has implications for its value in our civic processes. It holds that unless the talk is conducted rationally; unless it is based on adequate information; unless the talkers are free from delusions and external pressures; and unless claims are supported by evidence and tested by debate then such talk is deficient and unsuitable for arriving at decisions geared towards the common good. We usually apply such standards to journalists and ask if they are fair, balanced, well-informed and transparent in their motives but we need to ask to what extent these standards can be applied to *Liveline*. Do

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'phone-in' is the term most frequently employed in Ireland and in the United Kingdom and is the term normally used throughout this work in reference to this radio format. In the literature there are also references to 'talk radio', to 'talk-back radio' and even 'talk show', although this latter term is usually reserved for the television genre involving a studio audience who partake in a discussion with a host and a variety of guests. The terms 'programme host' and 'programme presenter' are used interchangeably.

contributors converse rationally? What sort of evidence do they produce? Do they speak from a base of knowledge? And what are we to make of the elements of performance, entertainment, emotion and sociability that attaches to some of the exchanges in the programme? We ask if broadcast talk can have any civic significance if it is entirely detached from the rational critical.

3. Alternative Deliberation. Even the most casual acquaintance with radio phone-ins, reveals that we are not listening to a university debate or to a courtroom cross-examination. On the contrary, we note that much of the conversation may be phatic, emotional, repetitious, undisciplined and occasionally illogical. The question emerging for this thesis is, can argument, couched in such a mishmash of styles and modes and targeted at a range of sometimes contradictory objectives, be effective in promoting the public good? I address the question in two ways. In the first instance I explore how the elements mentioned above - performance, entertainment and emotion - impact on deliberation. I suggest that, far from obscuring or impeding the political, these elements enhance and animate the political process. Indeed, without them there is no engagement and there is no impulsion to act. In the second instance, I suggest that there are alternative ways of 'doing' argument; that the structure of arguments may be bigger than single contributions or even single programmes; that the building of a case need not be sequential; and that there are functions within argumentation for questions, stories, silences and complaints.
4. Collaboration. Except in very rare instances, the one constant in all of the talk and deliberation is the participation of the host, Joe Duffy. As we shall see later, he has a myriad of roles to fulfil. He is expected to be entertaining, erudite, sympathetic, and fair. His position in the deliberation is a powerful one. He can control the opening and closings of discussions; he can steer the course of the conversation; he can distribute turns; and he can set the tone of the exchanges. That said, the fact is that he is lost without the callers and ultimately the nature of his engagement with them is broadly cooperative. Host and callers make sense together. In spite of his stirring up controversy or playing the devil's advocate, there is fundamental agreement on procedures and parameters. Much is made in media studies about the asymmetric power of the host and its propensity to sustain the values of social elites. Much is also made of the demands of the market on the host - the pressure to be entertaining, to deliver ratings and not to offend advertisers. That there is a truth behind these perspectives is acknowledged but it is not an unambiguous truth. If these are the only foci they obscure at least one other dimension to the job of the host - that of citizen. My thesis is that not alone does Joe Duffy cooperate with callers on social and linguistic levels he also works with them in their on-air exchanges to make sense of their world at a civic level. One



commentator refers to this as 'co-citizenship' (Brants, 1998, p. 176) and my objective is to show that the host and callers engage in 'para-civic' practices, which parallel their parasocial collaboration. If we consider citizenship, not so much as a fixed role adopted or assigned within society but more as a constantly revised symbolic construction of a social facet of our identity, then we can view the caller / host partnership as such a co-construction in a rich symbolic environment.

5. Programme Making as a Civic Activity. I suggest that, in addition to this 'para-civic' side of the job of the host that there is also a further civic dimension to his role and to the roles of the entire programme team. I contend that this aspect of programme maker as citizen is generally overlooked. The programme production area is a significant and singular location in understanding the context of broadcast talk. There is, as Paddy Scannell (1991, p.1) says, an 'intentionality' and a 'listenability' built in. *Liveline* sets out a civic stall. It invites discussion, participation and it encourages campaigns of action. As well as that, producers, technicians and researchers all want the programme to sound sensible, attractive and professional. The ostensible aim of the team is good radio in a good cause, but this implies a tension. Which set of values predominates when mumbling callers or boring issues are excluded? I propose to investigate how programme makers negotiate the balance arrived at between the professional demands for good radio and the civic demands of the good cause. I question what congruence might exist between citizenship and professionalism.
6. Civic Culture. Finally, based on an acceptance that *Liveline* is a cultural artefact and a further acceptance that we depend to a large extent on such mediated artefacts as a resource to construct our identities as citizens, I propose examining how the programme relates to various aspects of cultural citizenship – that is in this case, the way we understand ourselves to be members of this democracy. In addition to the quality of the information and argumentation, I ask if the programme reinforces civic values, such as free speech and equality; I ask if all the talk results in any civic action ; and I ask how it facilitates the way we see ourselves as citizens..

## Structure

In **Chapter Two** the process of establishing a theoretical base and of reviewing the relevant literature will begin. The chapter will explore the concepts of democracy, citizenship and the public sphere and the relationships between them. It will also consider the nature of communication and how talk is necessary if citizenship is to be effective and democracy is to be sustained. The media are, of course, dominant players in the communicative ethos of contemporary democracy.

Democracy itself, especially in 21st Century Western discourse, seems to be one of those taken-for-granted notions whose qualities are assumed to be positive and self-evident. However I aim to demonstrate that democracy is a construct, a useful and enduring one but nonetheless a contrivance we adopt to enable us to conduct our social coexistence purposefully. There are variants and divergent schools of thought about the concept. A distinction is made, for example, between liberal and radical strands, the first talking about individual freedom and rights and the other about transformation and advancing the welfare of all. It seems in Ireland and elsewhere there is also widespread consensus that democracy is under threat; that the democratic process is in decline in our contemporary world. This concern is illustrated by the Report of the Democracy Commission, "Engaging Citizens: The Case for Democratic Renewal in Ireland" (TASC, 2005) and frequently the solution is couched in terms of enhanced communication for and between citizens.

If we understand citizenship to mean the commitment of an individual or a group to the public interest then it becomes the basis for a functioning democratic system. I agree with Joke Hermes (2006, pp. 158 - 160) that we can understand citizenship in two ways. In the first instance it offers a role for individuals based on the sets of practices which make them compliant members of the overlapping communities to which they belong. The national culture is a prominent and important example. Citizens drive safely, respect each other's property, watch out for their neighbours, they don't litter, they pay their taxes and they obey the law. But as well as a citizenship of agency there is also a citizenship of identity where it relates not only to the directly political and social but also to the constant revision of personal identification in response to all of the social forces around us. Just as democracy can be viewed as a construct, so also the way that citizens experience themselves as members of a grouping depends on a largely imagined bond.

Under either heading - agency or identity - the public interest or the common good comes into focus. Theories of the public sphere offer a framework within which I propose to explore how public opinion is formed and how it finds expression in normative behaviour and political action. The public sphere is where citizens communicate and are communicated with, and this ranges from simple interpersonal talk to the flow of symbolic material that is the contemporary mass media. Clearly there are variations in the purposes and quality of the communications on offer in the public sphere. There are rumours, sports commentaries, propaganda, religious tracts, flat-pack assembly instructions, gossip, and news bulletins. The case has been made that for communication to contribute to uncovering the public good it should take the form of rational critical deliberation, where argument is moved forward by informed and respectful reasoning. In our interrogation of the civic potential of *Liveline*, it is necessary to investigate what opportunities it holds for such rational critical debate, to

ask what other forms of talk can be deemed civic and to question the role of more prosaic conversation.

In **Chapter Three** I look at how *Liveline* may be considered as an ‘actually existing public sphere’ and I adopt a structure suggested by Peter Dahlgren (1995) in order to do that. He recommends interrogating such a public sphere under four separate but interrelated headings – media institutions, media representation, sociocultural interaction, and social structures. I recognise that *Liveline* is indeed produced in a media institution and that has implications for any investigation of civic potential. There are commercial, professional, cultural and administrative pressures at play. It is intended that this research will draw substantially on the spoken text of *Liveline* and this guides us to consider the aspect of ‘media representation’. In order to comprehend what we hear, we organize the spoken information into discursive structures. Consequently, when we engage with how arguments, or entertainment, or stories, or emotions contribute to how we make sense of a broadcast, we need to analyse the discursive patterns and contexts. It is close to a truism to suggest that talk radio and the phone-in are sociocultural interactions. The third of Dahlgren’s dimensions draws our attention to the fact that a complicated set of communicative relationships are occurring. The principal one is that between the studio and the listeners, wherever they might be, and in that relationship we seek to identify the process whereby listeners come to act as and to see themselves as citizens. The fourth dimension, ‘social structure’, reminds us that the programme and its discourses are located in a wider world of politics and power.

**Chapter Four** will be devoted to establishing a context for *Liveline*. It will address the phone-in as a radio format, identifying and exploring its defining characteristics and those generic traits, which might justify its consideration in a public sphere debate. There will be a brief overview of the development of the phone-in internationally followed by a more detailed look at its evolution in Ireland. It would be difficult to locate and appreciate *Liveline* without understanding its setting within the Irish variant of Public Service Broadcasting (PSB). This chapter will introduce some of the institutional and sociocultural contexts of the programme. It will conclude with a brief overview of the place of the phone-in in both independent radio and in RTÉ’s schedules

**Chapter Five** is devoted to outlining the methodology for research into the areas outlined above. At the outset and for ease of convenient reference in our case study, I offer a brief outline of the *Liveline* format.

I adapt variant of a discourse analysis approach to examine the nature and content of the deliberation, which occurs on the programme over a given four week period in May 2009. The focus is on six sample conversational threads from within these programmes. This analysis also yields pointers

to a variety of cooperative discursive strategies, which occur at the both the linguistic and at the civic level. It illustrates the workings of narrative and emotion and it offers clues about the effects of the production process. These discourses are also where we seek pointers to cultural citizenship.

That analysis is supplemented with qualitative interviews with the two regular *Liveline* presenters over the course of its existence – Joe Duffy and Marian Finucane. There is also an interview with Julian Vignoles, a one-time series producer on the programme. The aim here will be to flesh out and update my own observations and experience and also to attempt to uncover the programme presenters' perceptions of what, for them, makes a 'good' programme. To what degree does the 'civic' feature among their aims and objectives? The interviews will also attempt to discover what, if any, of their outside, personal citizenship they bring to the programme; what, for them, constitutes job satisfaction and to what degree are listenership figures important.

Chapters Six and Seven are commentaries on the research data. **Chapter Six** focuses on forms of discourse in the programme. Callers ring the programme to make a point. This implies making a claim or disputing a claim that someone else has made. The discursive modes of *Liveline* are not fixed or uniform but ultimately all are deployed to offer evidence pro or con the argument in question. In this chapter examples of deliberation, of storytelling, of journalistic questioning and of emotional persuasion are examined, especially with a view to their potential to effect political decisions. Particular attention is paid in the latter half of the chapter to the different ways that narrative and emotion work to create a 'feel' for citizenship.

**Chapter Seven** focuses on the discursive context of the programme, particularly on how the production process impacts on what the listener hears. Because it offers access to 'ordinary' voices and opinions there is sometimes an assumption that any production – selection, planning, screening – renders the programme somehow inauthentic and vaguely deceitful. This proposition is examined in the light of the challenges which the programme team faces to fill 75 minutes a day, five days a week with interesting material. We expect good radio which means we expect to be entertained. This quality of entertainment leads to the realisation that *Liveline* is a cultural resource, a reservoir of shared meanings. In this chapter I question how these meanings can be interpreted as contribution to civic actions, values, beliefs; in other words, how it might shape our collective identities as citizens.

**Chapter Eight** summarises the discussion. It draws together the trends, patterns and conclusions that are warranted by the analysis and relates them, where possible, to the theories explored in the literature. Ultimately I return to the speculation which underpins this thesis. I seek to discover

what case can be made for a radio programme contributing to the common good. From the outset I am aware that the response to this question is laden with tensions, dialectics, provisos and cautions. Much must depend on particularities and interpretations and these should be interrogated extensively, but they need not paralyse us. Part of the case I make is that, within a democracy, there is a need to arrive at informed and reasonable conclusions in the interest of public welfare. That is as much as we can aspire to here.

## Chapter Two

### Literature Review 1

### Democracy, Talk and the Media

#### Introduction

The supposition, which underlies the central question of this thesis, makes a couple of assumptions. In the first instance, it appears to infer that democracy is a good, taken-for-granted condition, which should be maintained or advanced. Secondly, it seems to suggest that it is possible for a particular radio programme, and by extension for other mass media formulations, to play a role in buttressing the democratic condition. The purpose of this chapter and the next is to construct a theoretical framework, which will allow us to interrogate and evaluate whatever connection there might be between *Liveline* and the democratic process in contemporary Ireland. It was shown in the previous chapter that the programme can parade an array of ostensibly democratic trappings. It invites access and participation; it offers a forum and a platform for the voices least heard and the issues least aired elsewhere in the media; it can galvanise public opinion and can occasionally boast of significant impact on political institutions and public policy. If we could take these claims at face value then our conclusions would be simple: *Liveline* is performing a valuable public service and the country is the better for it.

Indeed, radio as a medium was trumpeted from the outset as the great hope for democracy (in a manner that is reminiscent of the optimism about participatory new media today). Bertolt Brecht expressed the need to, “make radio into something really democratic” (1979/80, p. 24) and chided contemporary broadcasters for being too timid. He saw radio as an unprecedented opportunity for citizen participation in public life. Martin Spinelli also describes the euphoria in the 1930s which, “led to the suggestion that buying a radio was like buying a seat in political chambers, in that it afforded a greater feeling in national democracy as well as a sense of access to that democracy not dependent on class” (2000, p. 270).

While much has changed in the world since the early Twentieth Century – not least in the world of radio – John Hartley can still offer us the neologism, ‘Radiocracy’ in an attempt to capture how he considers professional broadcasters to be poised still between democracy and the need to entertain the market; between public and private life (2000, p. 154). Shingler and Wieringa underline the tension between agreeing with the radio professionals, on the one hand, who dub radio, ‘the most democratic medium’ (1998, p. 118) in that its output is being increasingly shaped by listeners, and on the other, with critical theorists who

characterize it as the least democratic of media, in the light of the concentration of power in the hands of producers and the capacity of radio to purvey a certain mediated version of the world filtered through a dominant capitalist ideology (ibid., p. 119). If anything, the original euphoria seems to have been replaced of late by a loss of faith in the civic potential of radio. Spinelli fears, for instance, that new participative media will end up like radio, “a literal ‘no place’ in which the word ‘democracy’ becomes a consumption-based parody of what might have been the medium’s democratic potential”. Akin to the phone-in, Joshua Gamson remarks on talk shows:

the damage these shows do to democracy by posing as democratic public fora but gutting themselves of almost everything but ratings-driven exhibitions, and on the symptoms they expose of a liberal public sphere seriously eroded and impoverished....., where quick emotion replaces rational deliberation.

(1999, p. 191)

## Democracy

It is clear from the foregoing that views on how radio can impact on democracy are mixed. In order to reach some more discriminating conclusions it is worth considering briefly what understandings might fall under this heading of democracy. This is not necessarily a simple task. As Luke Goode assures us, “the very meanings we attach to the words ‘politics’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘democracy’ are (and must be) up for grabs even as we seek to defend them” (2005, p. 121).

According to Held (1987), democracy is traced back to a fundamental discussion in ancient philosophy of the ideas of equality, liberty, citizenship and the law and is presented in two broad modern forms; protective democracy and developmental democracy (cited in P. W. Preston, 1997, p. 23). John B. Thompson also acknowledges its ancient roots and concludes that since the eighteenth century and in spite of its shortcomings, it is “the only show in town – the one idea and seemingly the only idea” (1995, p. 249). In this, he is suggesting that for a large number of people living in a swathe of more powerful developed countries, a range of variations on liberal representative democracy has become both a norm and an ideal. This applies here in Ireland. We count our country among the stable democracies; it is how we frame our politics; being democratic is our vision for ourselves and our aspiration for the rest of the world. Democracy, we believe is right and natural and, it can be argued, has served us well since the inception of the state.

But all is not necessarily perfect. In fact, there is among commentators, an almost universal agreement that democracy is in decline or under threat or failing to perform. Kees Brants calls it a “sort of mid-life crisis” and lists the causes as globalisation, individualisation, fragmentation and depoliticisation (1998, p. 175). James Bohman points to the stumbling

blocks of pluralism, complexity and sheer scale. The cause is not helped, he says, by the aggregative, episodic and inflexible decision making mechanisms and the outcome is evident in empty government chambers and in administrations which are dogged by the mischief of factions and the manoeuvrings of market strategists (1996, p. 2). The politics of self-interest are in the ascendant and Bohman agrees with Robert Putnam's observations on contemporary social alienation and fragmentation. Peter Dahlgren sees Putnam's metaphor of "Bowling Alone" (2000) as capturing both an increased lack of communicative interaction and a decreased access to social capital.

Paul Ginsborg makes a similar diagnosis. In spite of the fact that representative democracy has had a clear field since 1989 and of the fact that it has been adopted by more countries worldwide, he can suggest that, "at the moment of its global victory, many of its basic practices have been found wanting and many of its proudest boasts proved unfounded. Today liberal democracy is highly vulnerable" (2008, p. 12). Citizens have, he says, withdrawn into private spheres; democracy itself has become hollowed out and the practice of politics has become the province of the elite, the privileged and the remote. In this regard, Elizabeth Jacka remarks, citizens are increasingly isolated and find themselves sidelined as cynical spectators (2003, p. 181).

Possibly the most telling reservation has been directed at democracy's failure to improve the position of the powerless or the poor. Tarmo Malmberg observes the resurgence of economic inequality within democracies. He attributes this to a decline in the Welfare State in the face of neoliberalism and to the growing disconnection between unskilled labour and economic reproduction to the extent where marginalisation and poverty – surplus population outside of productive labour – are returning as issues (2009, p. 2).

Our investigations should also offer an insight into the specifically Irish context. Democracy here is no less vulnerable. The Working Paper of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship confirms that we are also experiencing declining levels of electoral participation, particularly amongst young people in disadvantaged areas<sup>1</sup>. The paper points to other local trends:

Rapid economic and social change coupled with changes in expectations and values have also provided a context in which people may be less inclined to know or trust others – whether at the local or neighbourhood level or at the level of national politics and governance. Moreover growing ethnic diversity alongside relatively high levels of socio-economic deprivation in some areas present a challenge to all sectors of society. (2007, p. 4)

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<sup>1</sup> CSO (2003) found that over 55% of those aged under 26 had not voted in any election since they became eligible to do so.



On top of wider trends, Neil Collins (2004) is concerned about specifically Irish democratic shortcomings. Amongst others, he cites corporatism, which can offer consensus and stable policies but which challenges the vitality of parliament; clientelism, which may encourage high levels of constituency service but which undermines the legislative function; and corruption, which has impacted on the political system and the judicial means of dealing with it.

### **Liberal and Republican Democracy**

The predominantly liberal strain of democracy in which we live falls broadly under Held's notion of 'protective democracy' (1987). Commentators (Barber, 1984, Dahlgren, 1995, Habermas, 1992, Stein, 1998, as examples) distinguish it from the developmental or republican strand. This distinction, in so far as we accept it, informs much of the discussion that follows.

P. W. Preston charts the liberal tradition back to Hobbes and his concern, after the English Civil War, with protecting the person. The stress was on, "a commitment to individualism....., the autonomy of the self, the expectation of competition and the rational necessity of establishing contractually a minimal state to order social relationships" (1997, p. 24). This thread was developed by Locke and refined further by the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill. It finds one contemporary expression in the New Right. Peter Dahlgren also believes that the neoliberal hegemony, in which we find ourselves, in its focus on individual rights and its drive to minimal state involvement, seeks to remove the obstacles to market dynamics. There is within it, he says, an absence of any sociological perspective – no experience is needed for the role of citizens and little activity is expected on their part (2006a, p. 269).

Benjamin Barber associates this liberal form with, what he calls, 'thin' democracy – the hands-off, conduct of public affairs for private advantage (1984, p. 4). He acknowledges that it does work and that it has acted as a bulwark against the threats of military dictatorship and fascism but he is quite disparaging about this 'best of a bad lot'; this strategy in the jungle where freedom equals selfishness and where we live in peace 'for many bad reasons' (ibid., p. 20). The state, he infers, instils fear and then offers protection from it. Democracy becomes a contradiction – an exercise in bargaining and an appeal to the lowest common denominator (ibid., pp. 20 – 24). Chantal Mouffe contends that there is a fundamental tension between the logic of democracy and the logic of liberalism (2000, p. 9).

Against this 'thin' version Barber sets 'strong' democracy. Here the emphasis is on transformation – actively attempting to make things better for the good of all. As opposed to passivity, 'strong' democracy is based on action on the part of a public and not on the compliance of individuals.

Jürgen Habermas characterises republican democracy as stressing “the political participation of active citizens” and as where “the cooperative search of deliberative citizens takes the place of the preference-aggregation of private citizens” (2006b, p. 4). Dahlgren credits republicanism with connecting people through civic virtues which see them turning into better people via its ethical dimension. It builds on the formal, legal dimensions of liberalism and the importance it ascribes to individual rights. According to him we find ‘radical’ democracy at the outer edges of republicanism. This is where notions about the contextual nature of identity and subject positions are combined with a view to political struggle. There is no end point for political conflict or for democracy.

The boundaries are redrawn continuously as new issues and new conflicts arise... Even one individual can encompass several (even contradictory) political positions at a particular point in time by virtue of multiple group identities or memberships.... Radical democracy retains a republican quality precisely in its emphasis on agency, its view of the common good and its commitment to democratic values and procedures, while at the same time highlighting the tensions between them. (2006a, p. 270)

It helps to keep in mind Michael Schudson’s assertion ‘that democracy is a contrivance’, indeed it is a contrivance based on necessary contrivances (1997, p.298). It is a cultural construction and hence highly symbolic and consequently linked to practices of communication. That does not mean that we are blind to its concrete manifestations. Dahlgren summarises some of the contested space:

Democracy is very much alive. It remains an historical accomplishment, continuously needing to be regenerated . We cannot take it for granted or assume that it will live its own life, yet rumours of its death are premature.... For better or worse. Democracy is one of our more pervasive and all-purpose hurrah words. The powerful publicly extol it, the vast majority support it; few will publicly admit to being against it. The invocation of democracy can serve as a ritual of collective belonging, joining people from virtually all social sectors in common cause. It would seem that this allegiance to democracy creates such an all-encompassing ‘us’ that one is hard put to point to a ‘them’ – an ‘other’ who stands opposed to it. The only catch, of course, is that democracy can mean different things to different people; the vision is far from unitary. (1995, p. 2)

With Dahlgren, we opt to locate this investigation ‘carefully and flexibly’ between the utopian and the identity logics of democracy and between liberal and republican viewpoints. These, or any divisions of democratic philosophies, serve mainly heuristic purposes. In practice no such polarisations obtain. This is about differences of emphasis and dialectic tensions. Such a productive interplay between the strands will allow us to frame notions of citizenship and, beyond that, to anchor our questions about the civic potential of *Liveline*. Civic information, fairness and objectivity, questioning our politicians; these programme components are important in supporting a liberal take on democracy. Access, engagement,

and the possibility to refine one's identity as a member of a democracy; these support a republican stance. Together they offer yardsticks with which we can investigate the programme's potential. Should there be a flow of high quality political information and analysis of the issues of the day? Is the job of the programme to initiate social crusades? Should access to the airwaves be unfettered and minimally produced? And just how can constant carping about prices or about antisocial behaviour (apart from making us feel better) advance the cause of Irish democracy?

## **Civic Agency, Communication and Talk**

Implicit in this thesis and in the questions above is the idea that something can be done about democracy or it can be changed, improved or transformed and that this may be achieved through the impact of a social institution – a radio programme. To that extent we have begged the question of civic agency. We share the belief in society, that to a degree, at least, we can activate the common good, that we can make things better or simply prevent them from getting worse. The question then becomes where this potential for civic agency resides. We have contended that democracy, both in its ideal senses and in its practice, has been socially constructed. It then follows that the dynamic for civic agency will occur in meaningful interaction among citizens. Such interaction must, of necessity, be communicative in nature. At the very base is the imperative, as Hernando Rojas observes, to establish “a common understanding (as) the prevalent form of social integration” within democracy, which itself is the political expression of a social organization (2008, p. 453) or as Nicholas Garnham puts it, “I take it as axiomatic that some version of communication lies at the heart of both the theory and practice of democracy” (1992, p. 363). John Thompson, introducing the work of Pierre Bourdieu notes that the field of politics is closely related to language and symbolic power. It is, he says, our way of constructing and imposing a vision (1991, p. 25).

Often it is assumed that the ‘version of communication’ at the heart of democracy is talk and because talk is the raw material of *Liveline*, our attention will focus there too but it should be kept in mind that other communicative modes can also effect civic agency. Even a cursory reflection on the impact of national anthems or protest songs; of street poster images at election time or of the body in a salute or genuflection, will suggest that there is remarkable potential in nonspoken communication. Malmberg offers a provocative twist. “What”, he asks, “if democracy does not ‘reside ultimately with people who engage in talk with each other’ or if democracy resides in communication though not primarily in speaking but in listening?” (2009, p. 13) – a notion we would do well to keep in mind as we consider the potential civic agency of radio audiences.

Building on the premise that talk is an essential instrument of civic agency, it is noted that there are differences of emphasis on how such talk operates. There are differences based on the degree of purpose and intentionality. Commentators distinguish between conversation, discussion and deliberation. At the basic level, Samuel Jones asserts conversation, “is more than simply a mechanism for managing society: it is the very material of which it is built” (2006, p. 22). It is, he claims, our species’ social feedback and control mechanism. Without conversation, “there will be nothing to keep misunderstanding, incivility and dishonesty from creeping into our daily life at unprecedented levels” (ibid., pp. 20 – 21). Further, he sees conversation as the basis of morality.

Conversations are the means by which we connect our individual will to collective action. This is not to say that all public conversations lead directly to action. Democracy works by the concept of possibility... Public conversations are essential in building confidence in our ownership of the world around us. It is in conversations that the individual becomes the public citizen that it is in our nature to be. (ibid., p. 42)

Dahlgren agrees that a healthy democracy needs ‘a robust domain of associational interaction’. Civic agency, according to him, requires a ‘cultural turn’ in order to shed light on meanings, practices, communications and identity (2006a, p. 267). For civic agency he maintains we must see ourselves as citizens; we create our social world through talk with others. This social world, this civil society will, “help individuals to develop socially and to shape their identities, to foster values suitable for democracy and to learn to deal with conflict in productive ways – in short, a realm of self creation and meaning-making (ibid., p. 272).

Michael Schudson (1997) ostensibly questions whether conversation can be deemed to be the soul of democracy but his argument is not that there is no link between communication and democracy: it is more that he has reservations about a certain brand of idealised talk.

So from the outset we contend that the conversation of citizens is essential for promoting civic agency. There are only four codes on radio – music, sound (whether as effects or in actuality), silence and speech. *Liveline* eschews the first two of these and it is predominantly engaged in dispelling silence. We are left with a lot of talk and with the task of examining how this talk in this particular mediated form might be judged as affording civic agency either under the liberal or the participatory headings or within the ‘cultural turn’.

### **Talk in the Media**

It is stating the obvious that the talk in *Liveline* is mediated talk – specifically mass mediated talk. To be sure, it has similarities to face-to-face talk between citizens; many of the same characteristics obtain. It is a

sense-making communicative joint venture with implications for the personal and social worlds of the participants. But clearly there is a dimensional difference between the chat of two friends at the hairdressers or of two neighbours after a residents' association meeting and the broadcast talk between host and caller, which is transmitted in a regular slot by a national station to a listenership of hundreds of thousands. The mass media context transforms the conversation in many respects, not least for its implications for the democratic process in which it occurs.

As Schudson points out, "much thinking about mass media today assumes that face to face conversation is a superior form of human interaction for which mass communication is forever a flawed substitute" (1997, p. 305). Such thinking, I would venture, misses that fact that media have evolved as a human artefact and resource (not entirely unlike speech and language). They are the result of creativity and ingenuity and a response to our need to survive and develop. As with any such, there are inherent flaws and dangers which may threaten the common good but these should not be allowed to overshadow the potential for enjoyment, for insight, for bonding and, yes, for civic agency. Paddy Scannell advocates a celebration and appreciation of the media. He argues for broadcasting, "as a public good, that has unobtrusively contributed to the democratisation of everyday life, in public and in private contexts, from its beginning through to today (1989, p. 136). He goes on to outline how broadcasting has, for example, "given voices to the voiceless and faces to the faceless, creating new communicative entitlements for excluded social groups" (ibid., p. 142). It has discovered the pleasure of ordinariness and has, "enormously extended what can be talked about in the public domain" (ibid., p. 144). He confirms that:

The public life of broadcasting does not stand in a secondary and supplementary relationship to a prior and privileged public life based on presence. It has rather created new contexts, realities and meanings.  
(ibid., p. 154)

It would be, as Luke Goode suggests, simplistic to visualise the media 'simply as a deterritorial *agora writ large*' (2005, p. 98). The fact is that, given the sheer scale and complexity of contemporary democracies, there must be correspondingly large and complex communicative mechanisms. It makes sense to Dahlgren who notes that mass democracy emerged alongside mass media (1991, p. 1). He notes concern about the supersaturation of media; the disorientation entailed in the hyperabundance and speed of information, which is competing for attention and which leaves little room for consideration or reflection (2005, p. 415). Nonetheless he posits:

The health of democracy in the course of the twentieth century has more or less been linked to the health of systems of communication, though the course of democracy can not be reduced to issues of the media. However, the dynamics of democracy are intimately linked to the practices of

communication, and social communication increasingly takes place within the mass media. (1992, p. 2)

The foregoing is not a manifesto for unfounded optimism; it is more a plea for balance and to counteract the predominantly pessimistic and determinist readings from theorists both on the left and the right. It is intended to support Jacka's suggestion to develop, "a much more nuanced account of the connection between (various forms of) citizenship and the media" (2003, p. 183). Such a nuanced account will be no simple task.

For now we will note, with Craig Calhoun that:

Large-scale communications media are crucial for establishing shared interpretive frameworks (including stereotypes), for condensing and for filtering information, and for granting citizens a degree of access to communities with which they are otherwise connected only via abstract systems, enabling them to make informed choices within the system of representative democracy. (cited in Goode, 2005, p. 105)

It is also important not to adopt a monolithic view of the media in the contemporary world. Alongside globalisation and consolidation, the mediascape also shows tendencies towards fragmentation, dispersal and individualisation. These tendencies have implications for how the 'public' (and from there 'public opinion') is constructed. Party political broadcasts, for example, have less of a captive audience in a world where the norm is a raft of TV channels in every household, not to mention multiple TV sets and those being commandeered by games, DVDs, recorded programmes, and Wii. The internet and online social networks have become the emerging terrain for students of the media and its connection to democracy and it may also help to remember that, even today, not all democratic communication happens via the media.

I propose subjecting the conversations and other discourses of *Liveline* to critical scrutiny. Butsch credits Dahlgren with suggesting four dimensions or headings under which to interrogate today's mass media – media institutions, media representations, general social structure, and face-to-face interaction. I propose to employ those dimensions as interrelated lenses to scrutinise the particularities of the programme with the aim of illustrating wider aspects of the civic role of the mass media. Butsch tells us that, "Dahlgren frames these four dimensions in terms of a civic culture, a set of values, public trust, identity, knowledge and practices that form the political substratum for this citizen participation" (2009, p. 9). It is with this civic culture that Dahlgren believes we create our social world – principally through talk with others (1995, p. 133). It is here we find, "the myriad of sites where the social world is interactively produced and reproduced .....and it is in that social world, often where it interacts with the media, that we find the public sphere" (ibid., p. 134). We shall return shortly to examine further this concept of 'public sphere' and the manner in which

Dahlgren locates civic culture within it. Both concepts will be central to our research.

### **Institutional Talk**

The focus of this thesis is to see what way the hours of talk that make up the annual output of *Liveline* can be effective in making better citizens of its listeners. Thompson reminds us that communication is a form of action and therefore merits analysis as such. All communication (including in this case, talk) is a social phenomenon, in other words purposeful actions carried out in structured social settings and resulting in 'fields of interaction' (1995, p. 12).

We have remarked already (and will illustrate further anon) that there is a range of similarities between *Liveline's* mixture of comment, complaint, assertion and argument and that day-to-day unmediated chat, referred to as 'ordinary' talk. Hutchby points to the unscripted, live and nonprofessional characteristics of talk in the phone-in. Like in 'ordinary' talk the style is informal, the delivery spontaneous and the niceties of grammar, syntax and vocabulary sometimes take a back seat. Topics, in spite of the best efforts of the host can meander, get diverted or fizzle out. Over all we hear a mix-and-match of mood, of discourse, of articulation and of accent.

That said, it would be misguided to conflate the talk on *Liveline* with 'ordinary' talk. Crisell insists, because of the absence of feedback, it is ultimately mass communication and not interpersonal communication (1994, p. 3). As Hutchby observes, the phone-in draws on the conventions of day-to-day, face-to-face talk but he concludes that it is ultimately institutional in nature (2006, p. 14). He bases this on the facts that the talk is task related and that the participants represent a formal institution (1996, p. 7). The institutional nature is also apparent to Paddy Scannell: broadcasting is an institution, therefore talk on radio is institutional (1991, p.13). At the very least, the talk is generating meaning in a different context. In a later work, Scannell points to some of the salient institutional features: the talk in a phone-in is intended to make sense – it has what he refers to as intentionality; it is generated for absent listeners and the institutional context impacts on the distribution of communicative entitlements, the roles and status of the speakers and the power to control the talk (1996, p. 18). John Thompson elucidates broad headings, which offer insight into the multiple intertwined ways that the institutional apparatus impacts on the communication. He notes that the institution involves rules, resources and various relationships so, for example, the talk on *Liveline* is constricted by the law of the land, by the constraints of the schedule and by codes of professional practice. The institution also, he says, entails hierarchical relations of power between individuals. Here again the station management, the series producer, the programme host,

and the broadcasting coordinator – each depending on their status – shape what is heard on air. Thompson suggests that there can be a chain or network of institutions involved. In the case of *Liveline*, for instance, the Broadcast Complaints Commission, the RTÉ Group of Unions or the national political parties, can reach into the programme's communicative process. Institutionalisation also entails commodification. So advertising slots, listenership ratings and more recently the sponsorship of the programme, all contribute to the discursive context. Lastly, Thompson suggests that institutional talk operates in conditions of selected and restricted diffusion. *Liveline* is limited by broadcast reach, demographics and technical restrictions (1990, pp. 166 & ff.). Scannell (1991) summarises the implications; because radio talk is institutional it takes on attendant political, social, cultural and moral concerns.

When we later analyse programme texts, aspects of institutional influence will become more apparent. For now it will suffice to note the observations of commentators like Hutchby who offers a detailed study of this 'performance in an institutional context', which is the phone-in (2006, p. 12). He explores how the mechanisms of speech are modified – the greetings, the closings, the turn taking, summarising and so on. He also explores the asymmetry of discursive power – the host patently holds the reins in guiding the conversation. Atkinson and Moores (2003) apply Goffman's (1974) and Brown and Levinson's (1987) thinking on 'face' and Face Threatening Acts to broadcast talk and they demonstrate how a number of institutional politeness techniques are applied. Crisell points to a range of signposting cues and to the need for framing conventions and rituals in the absence of the visual (1994, p. 5). Thompson draws on Horton and Wohl's notion of 'parasocial interaction' and he describes the communicative relationship with listeners as 'mediated quasi-interaction' – where there are connecting bonds of loyalty, affection etc. in spite of the predominantly monologic nature of the communication (1995, p. 84). He refers to these bonds as 'non-reciprocal intimacy at a distance' (*ibid.*, p. 219).

There is, as Sonia Livingstone remarks, an implicit tendency to oppose this mediated, institutional communication with face-to-face communication, judging the former as inferior by comparison – mapping on to this opposition,

our cultural norms of reliability, authenticity, equality, trust, accountability – all of which are associated with face-to-face communication and all of which are routinely questioned in relation to the media. Hence, popular and academic discourses worry – undoubtedly often with good reason – about the extent to which 'media culture generally, with its emphasis on consumption and entertainment, has undercut the kind of public culture needed for a healthy democracy' (Dahlgren, 2003, p. 151). (Livingstone, 2005, p. 18)



Frequently, forms of the word 'institution' have negative connotations. There is an instinct to avoid 'institutions' or being described as 'institutional' or becoming 'institutionalised'. So, lurking behind our proposition that the talk in *Liveline* is institutional is the attendant inference that it is somehow suspect and inferior to 'real' conversation, especially for our purposes of defining and motivating citizens. The shades of power – political, commercial, and cultural – are already haunting the outskirts.

On the contrary, I agree, with Paddy Scannell, that,

The public life of broadcasting does not stand in a secondary and supplementary relationship to a prior and privileged public life based on presence. It has rather created new contexts realities and meanings.

(1998, p. 154)

I read this to suggest that civic agency via mass mediated communication may well, like all communication, be the better for ongoing vigilance, but it also possibly offers a more appropriate and useful tool to engage with a democratic process, which itself is complex, substantially media interdependent and perceived as significantly institutionalised. As Thompson concludes, the institutional media conditions afford expanded opportunities for a deliberative process; they find ways of feeding into decision-making and they therefore increase the democratic stake (1995, p. 257).

### **Trialogic Communication / Double Articulation**

Shaun Moores describes the British phone-in, *Live and Direct*, "where a mediated quasi-interaction with overhearing audiences, is supplemented by two-way 'mediated interpersonal communication' between the host and her callers" (2000, p. 138). In this he alludes to a feature of the institutional location of the phone-in which is worth foregrounding in order to define the terrain of our investigation and analysis.

In the phone-in there are two communicative actions taking place simultaneously. They are not entirely distinct but they are certainly discrete enough to merit separate consideration. There is, in the first instance, the interpersonal conversation between callers and the host. The second is this same conversation as part of the programme package, broadcast to a wider listenership. This distinction has been remarked on variously by commentators but they have not, in the main, explored the inherent civic implications. Higgins and Moss observe the dual role of the host, having to maintain an interpersonal relationship while at the same time keeping in mind the need to entertain the wider audience. In their reading, the caller is just an enabling factor in the programme flow (1982, pp. 19 – 22). It is Scannell (1991) who describes it as 'double articulation' and who refers to the two discursive spaces, the studio being the prime location for the interpersonal chat and also the source of the transmission which is directed towards 'out there' – the myriad reception contexts of the absent listeners. Ron Scollon suggests that sender/receiver or

reader/writer analogies are false in this instance – the phone-in is not simply an overheard phone call. Two sets of social interactions are going on; one between producers and callers at the transmission end and the other amongst listeners making their various uses at the reception end (1998, p. viii). Atkinson and Moores (2003) borrow the term ‘trialogic’ from Charlotte Jørgensen and Christian Kock’s work on the rhetoric of debate, where participants ‘do not argue in order to persuade each other but to win the adherence of a third party: the audience’ (1998, p.1). In the phone-in there are also twin intentionalities and, I would add, twin meaning-making processes.

The dilemma posed for us is this: if *Liveline* can be deemed to make civic sense to the extent that it helps to inform, support or construct more effective citizens, then we are talking about the impact on the wider audience. There will be little concern about whether or not individual callers (or indeed the host) emerge from their talk as better citizens. Yet in examining (as I propose to do) the norms and values and sense-making in the programme talk, we are thrown back on the talk between individuals. We could, it is true, undertake a reception studies research element but that is beyond the intended scope of the present work.

My contention is, that while there are two identifiable communicative processes going on in tandem, they are not ultimately distinct. The broadcast, as a phone-in, makes little or no sense without the conversation: the conversation, as it happens, makes little sense outside of the programme. Neither has primacy. Indeed, I can agree with Higgins and Moss (1982), that we are listening to the ‘radio’ – to packages of communication in a planned flow – but we are also listening to *Liveline* and, further, to two people talking.

We proceed in the belief that the interpersonal talk is an integral part of the communicative process and that the institutional context transforms the interpersonal talk. The talk is the raw material of the listeners’ sense-making package and as such merits our attention. We are also mindful of Wessler and Schultz’s claim that, “mediated public deliberation is essentially delegated deliberation” (2009, p.16). In a corollary to politics – not all can participate but all can observe and entertain the possibility of engaging directly – ‘a type of proxy participation’, as Shingler and Wieringa (1998) put it. According to them the contribution of callers also, helps to create a notion of an active participatory and empowered listenership.... Listeners are likely to identify with the callers collectively, simply because they appear to be active and participatory members of the radio community. (ibid., p. 125)

Callers then act both as representatives and as a possibility for the listening public.

So, in choosing to identify the on-air talk in *Liveline* as a focus for our investigation as a communicative channel for civic agency, it is important to keep in mind that this talk is always a fusion of the institutional and the interpersonal. It is an intermediate form of talk that falls between the mundane - when heard by co-participants - and of the institutional - when heard by the public (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998, p. 35). This hybridity adds to, rather than diminishes, the civic potential of this talk. It offers linked perspectives into cultural, political and economic dimensions. In addition, when we appreciate the dual nature of the communicative action, which is *Liveline*, we can exploit its position balanced between formulations of the public and the private; the professional and the informal; the informational and the entertaining.

### **Civic and 'Political' Talk**

As we have put a particular mediated example of talk at the centre of our concern with civic agency, it then becomes incumbent to ask how this agency operates. Does all talk on the programme matter? Should the talk take a particular form, have specific content or possess certain qualities? Is it important who speaks, or for that matter, who listens? To answer these questions we have to depend to some extent on the version of democracy we adopt and the theoretical frameworks we employ.

There is according to Peter Dahlgren, a kind of common sense that holds that "talk is a good thing". Historically it has, he says, been associated with the formation of public opinion. "By talking to each other, citizens shape their opinions and this generates a collective will, that then has some sort of impact on policy" (2002, p. 10). He recognises, however, that when we seek to interrogate this 'common sense' a little deeper, the dynamic becomes more elusive. There are problems of competence and knowledge and problems with what kinds of talk contribute to the collective will. He observes that contemporary views about citizen talk introduce, 'a distinction between 'political' and 'non-political' talk, raising the question of definitions' (ibid., p. 11) but his own adoption of a distinction between political discussion and social conversation does not entirely solve the problem.

Formal political talk is talk about politics from the exchanges of pundits to grumblings in a welfare line. It is also the talk in politics – the debates in the chamber, ministerial press statements and local planning consultations. It also encompasses talk as political procedure – the skill to chair a meeting, to organize a protest or to lobby Union headquarters. "Lobbying, bargaining, negotiating, mobilizing, initiating legal action, networking, and other activities can all be part of a repertoire of civic practices" (Dahlgren 2006b, p. 27). Such formal political talk is an essential lubricant for the workings of the whole democratic machine, a point reinforced by Michael Schudson, who characterises it as, "essentially

rule governed, essentially civil and..... essentially oriented to *problem-solving*" (1997, p. 298). We detect from this that it is not just in the content of the talk that the communicative virtue of problem solving resides; it is also in the interaction of the individuals – the good will, the cooperation and the norms that govern the talk. These norms are, Schudson continues, all the more potent when the talk is heterogeneous – between those whose positions differ – as opposed to when it is homogeneous – where people agree on the fundamentals (ibid., p. 302).

In that it is essentially functional and purposive and not necessarily comfortable, entertaining, or attractive talk (Warren, 1995), such civic talk leans heavily on a tradition of instrumental rationality and it is seen to work. Hernando Rojas notes, in his review of the field, that these more formal discursive modes yield results in the form of clarifying attitudes, generating a more equal distribution of resources, stimulating consensus and peaceful conflict resolution, encouraging tolerance and active citizenry and, generally, "enhancing schema integration" (2008, p.453).

Both Dahlgren (2002, p. 11) and Laura Stein (1998, p. 24) offer Benjamin Barber's (1984) theory on 'strong' democracy and his taxonomy of the various functions of civic talk within it, as a useful framework. Barber lists these functions as:

1. *The Articulation of Interests* among competitive individuals.
2. *Persuasion* aimed at convincing others of the legitimacy of their interests.
3. *Agenda setting* as the grassroots formulation of issues and concerns.
4. *Exploring mutuality* in feeling, experience or thought.
5. *Affiliation and affection* through the development of empathy for others.
6. *Maintaining autonomy* by repeatedly re-examining one's beliefs and convictions.
7. *Witness and self-expression* through the expression of opinions, dissent and opposition.
8. *Reformulation and reconceptualisation* or the reshaping of political definitions and values.
9. *Community building* through the creation of public citizens who recognise common interests and common goods. (cited in Stein, 1998)

Stein remarks that the first two, the 'articulation of interests' and 'persuasion' lean towards a neo-liberal take on democracy, a take which, she says, tends to play down the remaining more participatory functions.

Schudson (1997) and Richard Butsch (2009) both draw distinct connections between this political talk and the media especially in its news and journalistic formulations. It is in these realms that we take on board, for example, the reportage of events, the opinions of experts, the statistics,

the poll results and the myriad other parcels of information that form the backdrop to our talk. It is suggested that when citizens deliberate they seldom employ new, fresh concepts and arguments; they simply recycle packages of opinions they have gathered in large measure from the news media. The classic liberal construction of the media as the fourth estate retains considerable potency. Our democracy continues to be better for the reporting, the investigating, the oversight and the commentary of a vigilant and responsible press.

*Liveline* is not a news programme. Joe Duffy is not a journalist but I suggest with some conviction that the programme has significant news and journalistic traits. Further, I also suggest that it may be interrogated as a source of this civic or formal political conversation. News and journalism may not be the dominant discourses by which to judge the programme and institutionally, it is not housed within the newsroom or Current Affairs at RTÉ but news and current affairs do constitute essential undercurrents. Looking at the context of the programme, we see it is bracketed between the main bulletin of the day, *News at 1.30* and the 3.00 headlines. Issues initiated on *Liveline* frequently feature in subsequent news bulletins or in the press the following day. For its part, the programme team scours the newspapers during its preparations. Sara O'Sullivan can say of the programme,

*Liveline* covers many of the political and news stories of the day. The show relies heavily on audience members, with some official spokespeople who provide balance. *Liveline* comes closest to the traditional debate model.

(2000a, p. 49)

The more 'broadsheet' talk radio shows on Radio 1 are seen to compliment RTÉ's news and current affairs output and so to contribute to RTÉ's public service brief.

(*ibid.*, p. 173)<sup>2</sup>

To the extent that the talk in *Liveline* is formal political talk, the we are justified in asking to what degree it measures up to Barber's descriptors of 'strong' democratic talk or to O'Sullivan's suggestion of balance or to

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<sup>2</sup> Following recent criticism of the programme by a High Court Judge, Richard Oakley, in a Focus article asked the question, "Is he (Duffy) a serious journalist or a showman?" (*Sunday Times*, 21/10/2007, p. 11). Much of the piece airs gripes by public figures who had suffered at the hands of the programme but Oakley cites Bernice Harrison who affirms her conviction, "Duffy is a journalist: he is not some late-night DJ turned talkshow host. His programme is transparent. ... If someone is being treated unfairly the listener will realise this and make up their own mind" (*ibid.*) Oakley continues,

For Duffy the fact that *Liveline* makes the news is proof enough of its value. "Every newsroom listens to the programme. If it's not what some people say it is, why do they bother?" he wonders. Listeners have the final say. As long as they 'talk to Joe', the programme stays on air.

"If the show loses the plot, it will suffer. It's that simple", he said. (*ibid.*, p. 11)

Harrison supports Duffy's impression. "It's also the programme played in newspaper and TV newsrooms and it's in the rare position that its content regularly spills out into other media and even the Dáil" (*Radio Review*, 29/12/2007, p. 16).

Schudson's expectations that it is not merely spontaneous but that it is indeed rule governed, civil and orientated to problem-solving.

### **Social Conversation**

Commentators (Hutchby, 2006, Higgins and Moss, 1982, O'Sullivan, 2000a, Verwey, 1990, as examples) offer broadly similar typologies of callers to phone-ins. They list callers seeking or offering help; callers, whose main goal appears to be performative; callers in search of therapeutic release; callers who want to share their stories and experiences. Within these categories of contribution (and, I would contend, to a greater extent than in casual one-to-one interpersonal conversation) there is an element of purpose, a point to be made. Given the institutional framing of calls, the on-air talk corresponds to Schudson's precept that democratic talk be orientated to problem solving. Callers wishing simply to 'shoot the breeze' or not tacitly agreeing to stay 'on topic' are very unlikely to get past the initial filtering of the broadcast coordinator.

Having established that there is this capacity for the political, we must also concede that a lot of the talk heard on-air does not fit easily under the heading of formal 'political talk'. We have seen that much of the style and content of the phone-in is similar to social conversation and to that extent they seem removed from the world of politics. Callers tell their stories, share their jokes, describe their experiences and bemoan their misfortunes. Few persuade others to change their minds, issues are seldom resolved and arguments seldom closed. Greg Myers describes the phone-in process as sociable argument with anonymous strangers where speakers disagree, compete and fail to persuade each other (2004, p. 180). He suggests further that even when they do talk about politics, politics is not the point.

(Critics) assume that a phone-in with political topics will be experienced as political. People talk about politics, not to change the world but to pass the time with other people just as they talk about sport, celebrities ..... and they may listen to such talk, not to participate in the ideal agora, but to experience the pleasure and frustration in sociability, pleasure and frustration made more intimate, not less, by its coming over then phone and the radio. (ibid., p. 202)

Myers, it seems, does not hold much hope for this particular brand of civic agency. We may accept his point but will differ with his conclusion especially if we consider the limits of the term 'political'.

One avenue towards locating the political in ordinary talk leads back to Peter Dahlgren who cites Barber's (1984) opinion:

He asserts that even if citizens' interaction may be wanting in terms of deep knowledge and well thought out opinions, it is crucial for maintaining a sense of collective civic identity and for generating a collective will. Citizen engagement is fundamental for democracy and it begins with talk. The looseness, open-endedness of everyday talk, its creativity, potential for

empathy and affective elements are indispensable for the vitality of democratic politics. (2002, p. 11)

He again draws on Barber who, along with Walzer (1992) and others, emphasises:

the permeability of contexts, the messiness and unpredictability of everyday talk in order to put forth their view that “the political”, and thus the individual’s role as citizen, is never *a priori* given, but can emerge in various ways within informal everyday speech. It is via meandering and, in part, never fully predictable talk that the political can be generated, that the links between the personal and the political can be established. (2002, p. 12)

In his more recent work Dahlgren (2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2009) refers to the environment for this continuous revision of our identities as citizens via mundane talk – particularly mundane mediated talk – as civic culture. He acknowledges the importance of formal political talk and deliberation but he would have us look beyond these, “better to understand the processes by which the political emerges into talk” (2006b, p. 29)

Sonia Livingstone agrees with him that, in considering the radio audience as a public, it is important to see further than the recognised political system. She suggests that we enquire, “into many phenomena that, at first glance, are of only ambiguous or borderline relevance to politics”. She also suggests, “a wider conception of citizenship.... As it is recognised that participation is increasingly a matter of identity, of belonging and of lifestyle”. She concludes that, “even the media have proved only partially effective in informing citizens about political issues, they have proved far more effective in shaping identities and lifestyles” (2005, p. 19). In establishing her support for the idea of this civic culture facilitating the citizen-viewer (or the citizen-listener in our case), she posits that:

Audiences are, generally neither so passive and accepting as traditionally supposed by those who denigrate them nor generally so organised and as effective to meet the high standards of those defining public participation. Rather they sustain a modest and often ambivalent level of critical interpretation, drawing upon – and thereby reproducing – a somewhat ill-specified, at times inchoate or even contradictory sense of identity or belonging which motivates them towards but does not wholly enable the kinds of collective and direct action expected of a public. (2005, p. 31)

and she cites Dahlgren (2003, p. 155) to the effect that:

‘civic’ should ...be understood as a prerequisite for the (democratically) political, a reservoir of the pre- or non-political that becomes actualised at particular moments when politics arises ... The key here is to underscore the processual and contextual dimension: the political and politics are not simply given, but are constructed via word and deed. (ibid., p. 32)

We find further and subtle insight into this ‘reservoir’ idea in Livingstone’s work with Peter Lunt, *Talk on Television* (1994, p. 23). They say that participatory programmes allow for discussion of unformed and not-yet-

packaged ideas. Callers do not express the certitude of academics or journalists. Uncertainty, contradiction and incompleteness have value.

I suggest that the conceptual precision and understanding of processes, which Dahlgren advocates, is advanced in the work of Todd Graham (2008). He recognises the broadening of our understanding of what constitutes the political. Principally because of complex economic, political and social changes, due in the main to new relationships and uncertainties between citizens and social structures, we are witnessing the emergence of a new domain of politics. He points to Giddens' (1991) postulation of 'life politics', to Bennett (1998), who proposes a notion of 'lifestyle politics' and to Beck (1997) and his case for sub-politics. Beck advises that we need to look to different places in the media for our politics. He reckons we are opening the wrong pages in our newspapers, watching the wrong television and listening to the wrong radio programmes if we wish to grasp the changes. And it is not just where we look; we need to consider what we are looking for in these unfamiliar spaces. Issues of political talk, according to Graham and Harju, "are rooted more in life styles-personal considerations of health, body sexuality, work and so forth" (2009, p. 3). They employ Nick Couldry's (2006) concept of achieving a 'feel' for citizenship to describe how informal mediated talk may allow people to include their everyday experiences and to be motivated by their interests and to strengthen their orientation to issues of shared concern.

This porous approach to politics, allowing for a politics of childcare, sexuality etc., is not unrelated to the drive behind the feminist slogan coined by Carol Hanish in 1969 when, in seeking to illuminate previously obscured power relationships, she could declare, "the personal is political".

Graham points out that a political discussion emerges, "when a participant draws attention to something that he or she thinks the public should discuss collectively" (2008, p. 22) – almost a definition of ringing *Liveline*.

Graham offers two criteria for identifying when a discussion turns political:

- (a) participants make a connection from a particular experience, interest, issue or topic in general to society, which,
  - (b) stimulates reflection and is responded to by at least one other participant.
- (ibid., p. 22)

The proximity of these criteria to the practices in *Liveline* is obvious. Callers call with their concerns; at the very least, the presenter responds and it is safe to assume that reflection is stimulated among, at least, some of the 400,000 listeners.

I agree with Dahlgren when, in referring to these 'weak', informal communication channels, he states that they, "allow, not only for the circulation of ideas and the development of political will and public opinions but also for the important development and emergence of collective identities" (2006a, p. 274). He is aware that such mediated conversation



has no formalised, institutionalised coupling to decision-making and he insists that, “the health of democracy rests on the successful mediation between the formal and informal tracks” (ibid., p. 274).

Where I do have one difficulty with the ‘cultural turn’ is in determining more precisely how this mediation, between the talk in, and about politics and this more broadly defined political talk, operates. It seems to infer that all mediated informal talk may be equally effective. It does not distinguish between radio drama, gardening advice programmes and school quiz shows. Issues may be identified and aired in each of these and each may contribute to a minimal sense of civic coherence. My expectation, however, is that because of the qualities we have already identified in this particular phone-in – the intentionality, the representativeness, the specific social and cultural contexts of its transmission – that we should exploit that ambivalence, which we have also noted previously, as a way of attaining insight into a unique juncture of the formally political and the pre-political; of debate and chat.

One of the attributes, which distinguishes *Liveline* from talk radio in general, and which supports the bid for a more specific and nuanced interrogation, is its perceived position in the formation of public opinion in Ireland and in being a player in a form of national debate<sup>3</sup>. Commentators in the press support this perception. Gerry McCarthy confirms that Duffy,

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<sup>3</sup> Fresh evidence of the perception of *Liveline* within the arena of national public opinion is afforded in a full-page article by Justine McCarthy in the *Sunday Times* of 2nd May 2010 entitled *Power to the People*. She credits the programme with two significant political victories in the previous fortnight. Some extracts illustrate the tone of her contention:

The first shoots of a shamrock revolution sprouted with a call to Joe. It was 1.45 on Friday, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, when RTÉ’s *Liveline* phones lit up with public outrage over the €100,000-plus Oireachtas pensions paid by the exchequer to Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, the €238,000-a-year EU commissioner.

“The pension genie is out of the bottle” said Joe Duffy, the presenter of *Liveline*.

Just a week earlier, *Liveline*’s callers had been vehemently denouncing a €1.5m pension top-up for Richie Boucher, Bank of Ireland chief executive.

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“It started on Thursday, September 18, 2008,” according to Duffy. “Brian Lenihan had been on the radio saying the banks had been stress-tested and there was no problem. The first call was from a postmaster saying he was inundated with people moving their money. For the next 75 minutes people phoned in saying they were moving their money because they didn’t trust the banks. That was the day people became extraordinary animated.”

It was also the day that caused Lenihan to phone Cathal Gohan, RTÉ’s director-general to complain about *Liveline*.

“The interesting thing isn’t necessarily the number of calls,” added Duffy. “The Friday of the Máire Geoghegan-Quinn programme, the calls were coming from middle Ireland”.

“They were women of the same age as her, saying their sons were emigrating because they could not get by in Ireland. The level of engagement with politics in Ireland at the moment is brilliant.”

“There’s a book out called *The Wisdom of Crowds* [by James Surowiecki]. I think we’re seeing some of that. (McCarthy, 2010, p. 11)

"can still claim to preside over a national conversation" and that particular programmes, "display the depth of Liveline's penetration into the national subconscious" (2006, p. 17). In a piece entitled, *The Pulse of the Nation*, Sara Burke describes,

Many people, too disillusioned to try any other route to justice are voting with their fingers by calling, texting and mailing Joe. Over 320,000 people tune into Joe each day. ...and he is still catching the pulse of the nation. It may not be everybody's pulse but it's certainly a significant one. News stories are broken, injustices are emphasised and some days he just lets listeners talk. (2006, pp. 38 & 39)

A thread of caution and qualification may be noted in Burke's assessment of the programme's status. Not all are comfortable with the quasi-referendum-like stature it is sometimes afforded as an organ in the formation of public opinion. Burke notes elsewhere in the piece above that *Liveline's* choice of "Goliaths to take on is not universal" (ibid., p. 39). It is true; it is not the only voice and not everybody hears it and not all who hear it are swayed equally by it.

## Public Opinion

Public opinion seems to be a tough concept for commentators to pin down. This may be, as Greg Myers points out in the first chapter of *Matters of Opinion* (2004), that the nature of opinion is bedevilled by paradoxes. On the one hand we cherish the opinions we hold and then dismiss the arguments of others as 'mere' opinion. We seem to have little difficulty holding contradictory opinions. Opinions can be ephemeral and as fleeting as the moment or the hunch. On the other hand, they can be central to the substructure of our society, whether we function as voters or jury members. We do not carry a store of opinions, ready to tell strangers; we use opinions in order to get along with people. Yet, for all its shifting nature and as Hermes points out, public opinion is intimately connected to citizenship. Public opinion in terms of a shared analysis or agenda for a common future, is ultimately the key ingredient of the type of bonding we call citizenship" (2006a, p. 300). Jürgen Habermas's seminal, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), may be read as his attempt to track the emergence and evolution of public opinion over recent centuries and to extract from it a concrete foundation for government, for law and for a structure of universal ethics. He claims that public opinion is the basis for sovereignty; that constitutional states depend on public opinion for legitimation. Public opinion, he says, encourages the enactment of general and abstract laws and these laws, in turn, find a degree of validation through a reflexive opinion (ibid., p. 55 & ff.).

Nonetheless, he shares the chariness about public opinion. He fears that it may be manipulated by governments or swayed by the mass media (ibid., pp 218 & 219). He cites Shäffle who asserts that public opinion, "in

the course of time has become a slogan by which the complacent and intellectually lazy mass is supplied with a pretext for avoiding the labour of thinking for themselves” (ibid., p. 240). It becomes, he fears, a formless, mood-susceptible reaction and an instrument for preserving the *status quo*.

Public opinion remains the object of domination even when it forces (the power elite) to make concessions or to reorientate itself. It is not bound by rules of public discussion or forms of verbalisation in general, nor need it be concerned with political problems or even be addressed to political authorities. (ibid., p. 243)

In this he is close to Marx, who held that public opinion constituted a false consciousness and acted as a mask for bourgeois class interest.

There are those, like Mill, de Tocqueville and more latterly Lippmann, who favour the rule of a responsible elite and who dismiss public opinion as a yoke of moral conformity and as resulting in the reign of the many and the mediocre (ibid., pp. 129 & ff.). Habermas’s own fear that public opinion is replaced by public relations at the hands of the mass media industries and the modern state lies at the foundation of his conclusion that the public sphere has become refeudalised. Nonetheless he is prepared to acknowledge, with Hegel:

Public opinion has the form of common sense. It was dispersed through a people in the form of prejudices, but even in this turbidity it reflected “the genuine needs and correct tendencies of common life”. (ibid., p. 120)

The struggle with public opinion persists in Habermas’s later work. Though, by 2006, he prefers to think of public opinion as the “prevailing one among many *public opinions*. .... – clusters of synthesized issues (that) exert a kind of soft pressure on the malleable shape of minds” (2006, p. 15). Habermas’s prescription becomes a plea for ‘considered public opinions’ and to this end he pins his hopes firstly on the reflexive character of public opinion which allows citizens to revisit and revise previously held positions, secondly on a responsible press and thirdly, on a process of deliberation which will filter out distortions and irrationalities.

In common with previous commentators (Godkin, 1896, Park, 1955), Butsch considers that newsrooms and journalists are central both to the formation and to the expression of public opinion. He cites Park, “[Public opinion] emerges from the discussion of individuals attempting to formulate and to rationalize their individual interpretations of the news. Public opinion in this limited sense is political opinion” (ibid., p. 14). Carpignano et al. agree; the media, they say, “has come to coincide with the formulation of public opinion. The definition of what is newsworthy is tantamount to the definition of what is public” (1990, p.39).

I am prompted to offer two reflections at this point. The first is to note the reversion to looking once more only at news genres when considering the formation and promulgation of public opinion and to suggest that this limits

our view of what transpires when citizens test, reinforce, realign or discard opinions via other media genres - fiction, satire or lifestyle features. The second is to venture that the very concept of 'the public' only makes sense in that an opinion is held, at least temporarily, in common.

Even as Habermas appreciates the status afforded to national 'quality' newspapers as opinion leaders, he observes a hierarchy of external influences impacting on their agenda-setting and their commentary. Iyengar and Curran suggest that the commercialisation of the media (which varies from country to country) has implications for informed opinion, which depends on the interplay between attentiveness to news, on the one hand, and the supply and quality of the news, on the other (2009, p. 1). Carpignano and his colleagues fear that the media has abandoned its 'watchdog' role and is now reduced to the function of mouthpiece for officialdom – "public opinion and general interest are now a total attribute of the state" (1990, p. 40)<sup>4</sup>. They also remark that media-constructed public opinion is less amenable to the 'big picture' as opposed to individual stories, to processes as opposed to events or to complex practices as opposed to linear, concrete explanations.

For the media more recently, the most convenient manifestation of public opinion is the opinion poll. Papers conduct them daily; television invites us to press the red button, now, and judgements on world events or local issues are reduced to statistical summaries of individualised opinion without the element of discussion (Butsch, 2008, p. 18). Joke Hermes, writing on polling and its fall from the early utopian promise of Gallup, deduces from her work that, in fact, "opinion polls have little political meaning or impact. They may inform citizens about each others' views and ideas but only in the most cursory of manners, and with few visible results" (2006, p. 298). In spite of the fact that the results of polls themselves become independent news items, she says that scepticism about polling is rife. Since the beginning of 2010 *Liveline* has on five occasions employed text polling alongside the normal programme discussion. This fusion of different opinion discourses is a new departure and will, I suggest, provide an intriguing vehicle to examine how these twin avenues for opinion may evolve. That, however, will remain for another project.

Opinion polls apart, public opinion is made manifest in other ways which vary in effectiveness along Barber's 'weak' to 'strong' democratic range. Butsch reminds us that, in general, public opinion is not necessarily public action but one instance where opinion and action coincide is at election or

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<sup>4</sup> They illustrate this by showing how the "we" of the media is now the official voice of the state. They point to the embedding of journalists in the military during the invasion of Panama and the two Gulf Wars and the repeated references to "our troops".

referendum time. Here periodically a slice or instant of public opinion becomes the base for effective political power. Notwithstanding (and not discounting) the campaigning and the hype, at this single point the representative mechanisms of democracy, briefly places this particular expression of public opinion at centre stage.<sup>5</sup>

Public opinion can show itself in other relatively 'strong' ways – protests, demonstrations, boycotts, petitions – but more often than not these tend to be episodic political events in tune with the manner in which Stewart (2000) suggests democratic participation occasionally 'breaks out' among citizens (cited in Dahlgren, 2006a, p. 273).

When we seek to link considerations of public opinion to *Liveline*, to connect the talk in the programme to civic agency, we explore a number of useful avenues. Tarmo Malmberg is conscious that for day-to-day communication to influence society at large it must be transformed into a voice heard elsewhere too. Not alone that, he agrees with Habermas's view that the function of mass communication, "is not only to make the communicatively limited talk of everyday life be heard more widely, but also to compress it into considered (*reflektierte*) public opinions, which approximate the will of the people...." (2009, p. 12). Habermas, of course, expects that the very publicity will contribute to the necessary 'filtering'. "

It is only by filtering, that is, sorting out opinions representing universally acceptable interests from those giving expression to particular ones only, or making the rational outcome of everyday talk possible, that the two levels of civic communication, interpersonal and mass, can be combined in a late-modern complex society. (ibid., p. 12)

Malmberg also reminds us that the media offer an essential organising and explanatory focus for public opinion. He says:

It is exactly because mass communication and interpersonal communication are not conflated, that the former can bring some coherence to the immense amount of talk and communicative interaction at the level of everyday life – that is, serve as a social space for formulating publicly relevant opinions. (ibid., p. 13)

Whether the media do this in practice, he continues, is an empirical question, one we aspire to address when we ask to what extent *Liveline* problematises issues, to what extent it offers a platform for individual opinions to coalesce or offers an opportunity for callers and listeners to test their specific version of 'common sense'. The programme patently injects an element of 'public' into opinion. In this regard it is instructive to look to the work of Butsch (2008), Livingstone (2005) and Surowiecki (2005), which explores the related concepts of 'mob', 'crowd', 'mass' and 'public' and how each relates to the mediated collective of 'audience'.

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<sup>5</sup> The aftermath of the 2010 U.K. elections, which resulted in a hung parliament, offered an intriguing variety of partisan interpretations of the will of the electorate, not to mention speculations on how this might differ in the event of electoral reform

Malmberg is uneasy with Dahlgren's dismissal of Habermas's filtering as being too rationalist and restrictive and he suggests that the cultural approach needs to clarify the cognitive aspect of everyday talk and deliberation within popular culture. In a sense, that corresponds to the broad aim of this thesis – to attempt to chart the dialectic relationship between the need to derive a universal, reflexive and rational ethic, on the one hand, and to accommodate the cultural strands that combine to create a multifaceted conception of citizenship, on the other. It is implicit in the work of the 'Cultural School' – Dahlgren, van Zoonen, Hermes, Graham and others – that soap opera, reality TV, popular song lyrics and sports fandom contribute in multiple subtle ways to the construction of public opinions<sup>6</sup>. In effect this cultural perspective does not conflict with Habermas's condition that, "(p)ublic opinions make manifest what large but conflicting sectors of the population consider, in the light of available information, to be the most plausible interpretations of each of the controversial issues at hand" (2006, p. 16). Daily conversation and modes of popular culture, I suggest, simply expand 'the available information' and the range of 'plausible interpretations'.

Habermas points to another significant avenue of thought when he says, "From the viewpoints of representative governments and political elites, considered public opinion sets the frame for the range of what the public of citizens would accept as legitimated decisions in a given case" (ibid., p. 16). I suggest, that at the 'strong' end of the range, public opinion galvanises citizens to react concertedly (or not) in the face of unpopular policies, tax increases, job losses and the like. At the other 'weaker' end of the range, public opinion enables a climate of essential, minimal and vaguely-defined compliance. This allows individuals to accede to the multiple, minute arrangements and agreements that allow them to function as a society. Even if we do not always adhere to speed limits and bus lanes or to 'minding our manners', we agree they have their uses and that they should be policed. There is a seldom-articulated acceptance that underpins common standards of politeness, consideration and non-interference that forestalls conflict and modifies self-interest. It's the done thing. This civil agreement on what is 'good' is illustrated, for example, in the phone-in where politeness and co-operative practices of meaning-making akin to Goffman's (1974) face-saving acts obtain.

Greg Myers indicates ways in which this opinion is employed socially in phone-ins. He suggests that, "phone-in hosts.... animate specific stances to show that usable opinions are personal, they represent different voices and personalities and they are opposed to some other opinion, of an

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<sup>6</sup> From sports, for example, we import a language of procedure, of equity and of transgression. We talk of 'fair play', of 'a level playing field' of 'shifting the goal posts' and of 'the three strikes rule'.

imaginary caller or the host” (2004, p. 187). Even the stirring of controversy for effect, remarked on by Hutchby (1996) has a part to play in clarifying and distilling public opinion. Conflicting opinions aired in a phone-in mirror, to a degree, the fact that each individual can hold conflicting opinions virtually simultaneously. We can, according to Butsch belong to a variety of publics. He makes a virtue of this and cites Tarde’s contention that, “one can simultaneously participate in several publics, thus acting as a counterweight to each other so that participating in each, we are likely to be more tolerant of all” (2008, p. 12). Opinions in the phone-in, according to Myers, provide the implicit openings and fodder for the parasocial interaction. Callers call because they have an opinion and they ultimately have either to agree or disagree with the position of another.

I suggest that the purposive nature of callers’ contributions; their desire to add to, to contradict or to modify public opinion; and their implicit agreement to stay on-topic is best encapsulated by the phrase, ‘making a point’. The discursive nature of calls may vary from the rational to the emotional, from the entertaining to the bland, from the argumentative to the supportive, from the profound to the trivial but each seeks to make a point. Adversaries are accused of ‘missing the point’. Those who waffle are encouraged to ‘come to the point’ but most frequently in the interest of clarity or by way of summary we hear, ‘my point is.....’.

We began this section with the working assumption that at least one aspect of *Liveline’s* potential as a civic agent derives from its impact on public opinion. With Habermas we believe that for this public opinion to become normative and transformative, it must be informed and considered. Alongside this idealised public opinion, we noted a public opinion in practice that was impermanent, that was open to manipulation and distortion but that also offered a broad coherence and cohesion. The phone-in poses specific questions in relation to civic agency. With its mixture of discourses, its unresolved arguments, its often pre-political issues and where the audience is treated to a succession of callers, each with their points to make, it seems appropriate to measure its potential effectiveness against a theoretic framework which has attained currency of late – Deliberative Democracy.

## **‘Soft’ Deliberative Democracy**

Both Chantal Mouffe (2000, p. 1) and Peter Dahlgren acknowledge that deliberative democracy as a paradigm (and as a buzzword) has experienced something of a revival in recent decades and that the basic idea stretches back to the birth of democracy itself in fifth century Athens. Within this concept, “talk is seen as constitutive of publics and is thus morally and functionally vital for democracy” (Dahlgren, 2006a, p. 267).

According to James Bohman (1996, p. 1) deliberative democracy offers an antidote for the paradoxes inherent in democracy and the shortcomings of democratic institutions. It is hoped that effective deliberation can counteract the effects of social fragmentation, the politics of self-interest, the inequalities that handicap the poor and the powerless, and the aggregative, episodic and inflexible forms of decision-making. John B. Thompson also hopes that deliberative democracy will contribute to democratic renewal in the face of cynicism, disillusionment and inequality. He acknowledges that there is no putting the clock back to some idealised participatory model – questions of scale, location, complexity and the distribution of resources render such regression impractical. His aspiration is that all individuals can become agents, forming reasoned judgements based on the assimilation of information and of a variety of points of view and that these judgements can be institutionalised into collective decision making (1995, p. 254).

Nicholas Garnham believes that the deliberative act is at the heart of democracy and that it is constituent of that cluster of fundamental principles that include the right of assembly, freedom of speech and freedom of information (1992, p. 364). Further, he also believes that it is deliberation, which elevates ‘mere’ opinion into public opinion (1990, p. 108).

Dryzek and Braithwaite offer a comprehensive description:

Deliberative democrats pin their hopes on the transformative power of deliberation. They argue that if it proceeds in suitably unconstrained and egalitarian circumstances, deliberation induces individuals to think through their interests and reflect upon their preferences, becoming amenable to changing the latter in light of persuasion from other participants. Thus whether a decision rule of consensus, unanimity or majority rule ultimately prevails, deliberative democrats believe that to the extent that deliberation occurs, political outcomes will secure broader support, respond more effectively to the reflectively held interests of participants and generally prove more rational. (2000, p.242)

The umbrella of deliberative democracy accommodates, it appears, the gamut of conceptualisations of democracy. As Dahlgren points out, “some theorists claim that deliberative democracy is only relevant within the framework of actual decision-making, by representatives of the citizens – i.e. within ‘strong’ public spheres” (2006b, p. 28) but with him and others, I would argue, “that broader, more popular forms of communication modes are needed and should be spread out as far as possible within representative democracy, beyond the formal decision-making centres” (ibid., p. 28). Graham also notes the focus on ‘political’ discussion and advocates a more porous approach to both politics and discussion. He is conscious that the notion of deliberative democracy covers a variety of theoretical attitudes, “from the more liberal approach of Habermas (1996)



to the more critical approaches of Dryzek (2000) and Barber (1984)” (2008, p. 19). With Graham and with Dahlgren, I consider the latter, more critical and more overtly republican approaches, to be important because they look to contrast the deliberative model with real-life practices and to revive and reclaim a critical voice.

However, we must return to Habermas to apprehend the central purpose of deliberative democracy, namely to establish a basis for morality via intersubjective communication. From that basis flow communicative ethics, norms of behaviour and decision-making and ultimately the legitimacy of rules, laws and sovereignty.

On the face of it, applying Habermas’s norms to *Liveline* appears to be a daunting challenge. Habermas warns that deliberation is demanding but stresses that it grows out of the daily routines of asking for reasons (2006, p. 5). He sets out the conditions for deliberation: that it be conducted in public and with transparency; that it aspires to inclusion and equal opportunity; and that there be a justified presumption of reasonable outcomes. Broadly speaking he stipulates that deliberation in this paradigm should:

- Be inclusive of everyone affected by the decision;
- Offer an equal opportunity to participate;
- Display equality in choosing the agenda;
- Display equality too in mechanisms for decision-making;
- Be based on a free and open exchange of information;
- And on a sufficient understanding of the issues and of the opinions of others.

In sum, the dynamics of deliberative democracy are to be characterised by the principles of equality and symmetry. The agenda and rules of discussion remain open to challenge and the discussion should not alone be public but comprehensible. The aim is to result in decisions which, though binding, remain reversible. Dialogue is never ultimately closed off and this process, Dahlgren suggests, lays the foundation for reciprocity – a cornerstone of ethical awareness and behaviour.

It would be stretching credulity to suggest that *Liveline* ticks these boxes in any complete sense. The programme appears to be more about social argument than any decisions: - access is, of necessity, limited and the agenda is often managed; opinions aired may be trivial or simplistic. For all that, I contend there is a purpose to be served by holding the programme’s deliberations up to scrutiny against the requirements of deliberative democracy. Firstly it is important to recognise that the standards set are set as ideals to be applied to one-to-one, non-mediated argumentation. Taken in their pristine rigour, it is doubtful if even the most measured debate would comply fully with these expectations – there will always be a modicum of imbalance in terms of knowledge, rhetoric,

discursive power, etc. Mediated exchanges demand a refined enquiry. The questions must allow for contexts and contingencies. We need to ask to what extent is participation limited? How are the rules of discussion applied? Who sets the agenda? Just as *Liveline* may be said to fall short of the deliberative ideal it could be said to be, at least, partly successful under each heading. There is a degree of access; the public contributes significantly to setting the agenda; a wide range of facts and opinions are aired.

There appears a clear conviction amongst liberal deliberative democrats that true deliberation only occurs in face-to-face situations. Benhabib makes the case forcibly in an interview with Karin Wahl-Jorgensen: “The media can never be the primary vehicles for deliberation..... I think that deliberations *need* to take place in face to face settings” (2008, p. 966). She does concede that the media assist in that deliberation needs a great deal of information<sup>7</sup>.

Habermas also holds firm in his faith in face-to-face deliberation and consequently sees its absence as a shortcoming in the media as a deliberative platform. He also lists, “the lack of *reciprocity between the roles of speakers and addressees* in an egalitarian exchange of claims and opinions....; the *power of the media* to select, and shape the presentation of messages; and by the strategic use of political and social power to influence the agendas as well as the triggering and framing of public issues” (2006, p. 9). Greg Myers also concludes that the phone-in is frustrating for those looking for deliberative democracy. Minds are not changed and there is little sign of rational argument, though he does admit that his observations are influenced by some of the more extreme American examples of the genre (2004, p. 195).

John Thompson takes a contrary view. He sees no compelling reason why deliberation should be dialogic and offers the telling example of the comparison between reflections on issues raised by reading a book as compared to those raised in a public row. Nor, he continues, does deliberation require assembly, which may even be inhibitive. His contention is that institutional conditions offer expanded opportunities for the deliberative process – institutional cohesion and clout can find ways of feeding into the decision-making process and can increase the democratic stake. The media, he believes, play an important role in furnishing information and points of view; they afford increased potential for marginalized voices and provide the backdrop for the pluralism and

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<sup>7</sup> Asked about participatory media like letters to the editor (and I might assume phone-ins) she replied, “I don’t think that these are forms of deliberation because there are no binding outcomes that result from this type of exchange but I think that they’re crucial aspects of the formation of public opinion” (ibid., p. 967)

diversity which he holds to be essential for the development of ethical decision-making (1995, pp. 256 & 257).

In a similar respect, Bohman looks in particular to Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) to provide a broader spectrum of opinion (1996, p. 141) and he finds a somewhat unexpected ally in Habermas who, in spite of his general reservations about the media industry, fears that current threats to PSB and to political journalism are unwelcome. "It's loss would rob us of the centrepiece of deliberative politics (2006, p. 27).

Dahlgren points to a way of engaging with the diverse perspectives on deliberation, a way which will form a template for this thesis.

...at the very least, the media are decidedly not an unequivocally positive contribution to ...deliberative democracy. Research on this theme will have to be very focused and context specific, since sweeping generalisations will not be of much help at this point. (2002, p. 19)

What Dahlgren himself postulates is that, in order to achieve an expanded grasp of deliberative democracy, research when examining an actual example should look at its discourse modes in both its spatial and contextual sites (2003, p. 159).

According to Malmberg, Dahlgren believes the foundations of civic culture, are to be found in everyday life and its routines – that is common sense – the forms of communication it requires must also be down to earth, or popular.... In order to operate untarnished, democracy needs an adequate civic culture, which needs citizens communicating with each other in the popular mode. (2009, p. 6)

On this account and because Dahlgren does not insist on a connection between discussion and political decision-making, Malmberg notes that he allows "a much wider repertoire of discussion modes for democratically relevant talk" (ibid., p. 7). This returns us to his exhortation, noted earlier, not to cling too rigidly to formal deliberation and to look beyond it, "to better understand the process by which the political emerges into talk" (2006b, p. 29). Dahlgren is fully aware that he is stretching the usefulness of the term 'deliberation'.

...it would seem that the notion of deliberation, while normatively central to democracy and suitable for depicting forms of discussion in certain settings, is actually too narrow to capture the broader kind of civil discussion that I have referred to.. it pertains to a specialised, formal mode of discourse and thus we would do better to think about "discussion" or "talk", which can encompass many different kinds of communicative interaction. (2002, p. 14)

I would venture that in this, Dahlgren is relatively restrained. For him all of those meaning-making pixels, which constitute our cultural and symbolic environment, become civic when they are brought into the realm of deliberation. Our political sense is shaped by multiple experiences and reactions, by events, by reports of events, by rumours of events, by non-events, by images of events, by fictional events and by the opinions of

others about events. We do not leave this sense outside when we deliberate, no matter how formally. I am reminded again of Bohman's elegant example of a book as deliberation.

Hence I argue with commentators who deny the phone-in a central place in the deliberative process. I agree, the links to consensus-based decision-making are tenuous but I contend they are worth pursuing. I do not ignore the need to 'filter' opinion or to maximise rational consideration of sufficient information when these contribute to the formation of political will. I simply advocate a dialectic approach when setting the broadest range of deliberative modes against the narrow constrictions of rationality, evidence, logic and so on. The aim is to appreciate with Malmberg, "the beauty of 'soft' versions of deliberative democracy, giving leeway for moving from communicative interaction with others to that with texts. (We can embrace) the dialectic of two functions of communication: to open ourselves via speech to others, and to discover the world via cultural texts to ourselves" (2009, p. 14).

Dahlgren is clear that Habermas's notions about communicative rationality are amongst the foundations of deliberative democracy but there are other contributors. Perspectives on passion, participation and practices, allow for, "a robust and assertive analytic portrait of civic agency" (2006b, p, 27). Such an amalgamated take on deliberative democracy, he says, not alone supports the legitimacy of democratic institutions; it fosters public-spirited perspectives and a generalised sense of the collective good.

...it further develops civic skills. (It) strives for mutual respect: in the give and take of argumentation it is assumed that opponents will learn from each other and expand each others' horizons. Such civic interaction is seen to be especially significant in situations where difference exists, where consensus is not likely and compromise is the best that one can hope for – where partners can arrive at acceptable solutions via dialogue without having to give up on core moral values. (2006a, p. 278)

Echoing our earlier observation on minimal compliance, as James Bohman puts it, the central task for a deliberative theory of democracy is to establish reasons for a political decision which are convincing enough for each citizen to continue cooperating in deliberation even if they dissent or disagree after the decision (1996, p. 35).

The intention then is to maintain this twin focus on the dialectic tension as we apply deliberative democracy theory to *Liveline*. At each stage it will be important to preserve the rational and formal questioning as a backdrop to civic cultural considerations. At the same time we must be mindful of what other reservoirs of sense-making come into play as we tease out the rational qualities of an actually existing public sphere.

## Public Sphere

Livingstone and Lunt have noted that empirical studies of talk shows and audiences take Habermas's (1989) conception of the bourgeois public sphere as their starting point. From there, discussion focuses on such issues as whether talk shows are sufficiently free of institutional control; provide freedom of access and voice; and constitute a viable framework for the formation of public opinion as an emerging consensus concerning issues of the moment (2005, pp. 60 & 61). Irish radio phone-ins have elements in common with the talk show and on this account a case is made that here again the public sphere affords an appropriate framework with which to interrogate their democratic potential (Breen, 1997, McCarron, 1997, O'Sullivan, 2000a & 2001). In our case we are asked to judge *Liveline* as a public sphere or as a constituent in the public sphere. Public sphere theory has certainly provided one major environment for locating the civic qualities of media output and is, I suggest, especially helpful when we exercise that arm of our twin focus which is directed at how the normative is represented and formulated rationally in mediated deliberation.

There are those who would query the usefulness of public sphere theory. We can identify some merit in Thompson's suspicions that, given the unworkable complexity of the notion of participatory opinion formation and given in addition questions of scale and the number of contemporary channels of diffusion and control, that public sphere can be of little help. He concedes that it is useful as a yardstick for measuring that space between the state and the economy but there, he believes, its usefulness ends (1990, p. 119).

It would be redundant here to rehearse at length the formative and philosophical origins of Jürgen Habermas's conceptualisation of the bourgeois public sphere, which found its initial public expression in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). The genesis of this work has been well traced by a number of scholars (Holub, 1991, Calhoun, 1992 and Goode, 2005, as useful examples). It is intended here simply to visit some of the more appropriate and salient defining characteristics and to apply them to researching *Liveline*.

Habermas draws on the one hand, from the Marxist, critical perspectives of the Frankfurt School and on the other, from a Kantian vision of procedural rationality, which is rooted in the Enlightenment. Calhoun describes "Habermas's lifelong effort to reground the Frankfurt School project of critical theory in order to get out of the pessimistic *cul-de-sac* in which Horkheimer and Adorno found themselves in the post-war era" (1992, p. 5). This persistent thread of possibility and as Peters terms it, "Habermas's refusal to wander in exile and his determination to establish

norms for an earthly city, gel with his faith in the dialectic process” (1993, p. 541). Paschal Preston believes that, “the bourgeois public sphere is conceived of as a sort of ideal type which represents the historically unique, progressive and potentially liberatory aspects of the democratic thrust of the ‘unfinished project of modernity’” (2001, p. 95). It identified an emerging space for public debate where participants were able to engage in the exchange of ideas and opinions. Preston continues:

.... The ‘political’ dimensions of the public sphere reflected a novel democratic role for public discussion of conflicting political ideas and a new legitimacy of public opinion in resolving political disputes and in shaping the paths of social and political developments. As an ‘ideal type’, the bourgeois sphere is an arena autonomous of government and partisan economic interest which is, in principle, dedicated to rational debate and argumentation. It is a space where public opinion is formed which provides clear, ready access and is open to inspection by all qualifying citizens”. (ibid., p. 95)

All of this may seem far removed from the mundane conversational exchanges on *Liveline* but the applicability becomes clearer when we realise that Habermas believes we can reason out solutions to our problems and that we can aim for a fairer society based on cooperation as opposed to conflict. As Pieter Boeder puts it; “At stake is a critical intellectual issue: are there certain basic standards underlying our behaviours, standards like reason and justice? Or is the world a swampy, relativistic place where we play our games and seek some power in the muck?” (2005, p. 3). According to Nicholas Garnham, Habermas argues, “that every time we speak we are making four validity claims, to comprehensibility, truth, appropriateness, and sincerity, which in their turn imply the possibility of justifying these claims” (1990, p. 108). It would seem entirely reasonable therefore to question the presence of these claims in the speech in *Liveline* – do callers make their points in as understandable and truthful a manner as possible or are issues being obfuscated and baseless opinions deployed to frustrate logic and reason? I would contend that, in the main, listeners experience the on-air exchanges in a way that approximates to the validity claims.

At its simplest, Habermas’s public theory entails citizens coming together without undue outside pressure to discuss rationally how they agree political agency will be exercised on their behalf. As Dahlgren observes however, one of the basic difficulties with the notion is, “that once one begins to unpack it and examines how the various theoretical and empirical components fit together, it becomes very convoluted. .... It becomes difficult to see, not only all the interfaces but also the boundaries which demarcate the phenomenon from its environment” (1995, p. ix).

Habermas’s own position, as he has revisited the concept over nearly five decades, is not without its convolutions. Having proposed the public sphere as a platform for optimism and transformation, he is less sanguine

about its prospects in this mass mediated world. A story in two parts, is how Lisa McLaughlin describes it; firstly the triumph of rationality and subsequently its dissolution at the hands of manipulation and spectacle (1993, p. 599).

*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* would not appear to be a promising starting point for research into talk radio.

Radio stations ... have turned the staging of panel discussions into a flourishing secondary business. Thus discussion seems to be carefully cultivated and there seems to be no barrier to its proliferation. ... But surreptitiously it has changed in a specific way: it assumes the form of a consumer item.....

Today the conversation itself is administered. Professional dialogues from the producer, panel discussions and round table shows – the rational debate of private people becomes one of the production numbers of the stars in radio and television, a saleable package, ready for the box office.... Discussion, now a “business” becomes formalised: the presentation of positions and counter positions is bound to certain rearranged rules of the game; consensus about the subject matter is made largely superfluous by that concerning form. (1989, p. 164)

On the face of it then, Habermas’s theory would seem to offer little to rescue the phone-in from the status of pseudo public sphere – a hollow arena, distorted by profit and performance. However, not alone would I caution against a too hasty dismissal of a productive interplay between the phone-in and the public sphere, I am convinced that properly ‘unpacked’, public sphere theory can illuminate at least one central facet of the format’s potential for deliberative civic agency – an inherent rationality. Indeed, the phone-in with all its contingency and hybridity makes for an inviting specimen to sample the relevance of public sphere theory in the contemporary world. Does the theory continue to offer, as Dahlgren suggests, “an inspirational vision of something better, yet to be attained” (1995, p. ix)? Lunt and Stenner can claim they “see an illuminating conceptual dependency between talk-show analysis and Habermas” (2005, p.61) and, counselling against taking the public sphere concept too literally, they stress the ongoing relevance of Habermas’s work in terms of rights, norms, public expression and deliberation.

Minna Aslama views public sphere theory as “intellectual scaffolding”, a useful analytical concept and normative ideal as we explore the boundaries of the public and the private, of information and entertainment and of consensus and compromise (2006 p. 4). Habermas has offered us symbolic framework for discussion and reflection. It can be contended, as was the case with the works of Freud, Marx and Darwin, that he has offered the social sciences a package of concepts and terms to interrogate the behaviour of citizens in a mediated late modern world. We do not necessarily have to agree with everything but we can talk about it.

Garnham observes that Habermas based his principles – the general accessibility to information; the elimination of traditional privilege; and the search for general norms and rational legitimation – in historically grounded theory which allowed for the conceptualisation of a civic discursive space between the market and the polity. He values in particular its foregrounding of both rationality and universality (1990, pp. 108 & 109). Hohendahl (1979, p. 92) points out that the public sphere has a dual function. “It provides a paradigm for analysing historical change while also serving as a normative category for political critique” (Cited in Eley, 1992, p. 292).

Public sphere theory is not the only route to an understanding of the potential for civic agency via deliberation but it is a significant one from our point of view. As we understand it, it allows us to participate in the wider debate connecting democracy and the media and to place emphasis on questions relating to *Liveline* – the quality of the deliberation and the access; the implications, both normatively and effectively, of that deliberation and access; and how, if at all, does it impact on the common good?

Peter Dahlgren has remarked that a mini publishing industry has grown around the Habermasian public sphere (2002, p. 8). One might safely add that an entire branch of that industry devotes itself to criticism and revision. I detect too a tendency to target Habermas as frozen in terms of his early thinking, outlined in 1962 in *Structural Transformation*, and to brand him as outdated, overly pessimistic and irrelevant. There seems to be a reluctance to acknowledge that he continues to grapple with the central aim of transforming public opinion into just and informed political will. As Karppinen et al point out, his later work (1992 and 2006, for example) is reflective and far from simplistic – embracing multiple models of discourse and overlapping spheres. (2008, p. 8). I will engage briefly with some of the salient criticisms, not alone to assess their validity but in an attempt to delineate an appropriate template for *Liveline*.

Habermas is criticised for being too ready to idealise the historical moment which was the bourgeois public sphere (Garnham, 1992, McLaughlin, 1993, Schudson, 1992). Schudson, in particular, questions whether good citizens ever sat around engaging in informed, disciplined argumentation with their eyes set on the common good.

The very notion of a bourgeois public sphere is condemned as exclusionary (Aslama, 2006, Garnham, 1992, Goode, 2005, O’Sullivan, 2000a, Thompson, 1995). It is suggested that Habermas’s ‘bracketing’ of status and gender, his exclusion of voices from the working class or from the domestic sphere, render his model less than complete, if not defective. Lisa McLaughlin (1993, 1995) regards the Habermasian public sphere as



masculinist and consequently blind and inimical to the counter discourses of feminism.

The idea that the model of communication espoused by Habermas is overly rationalistic is related to the masculinist charge (Aslama, 2006, Dahlgren, 2002, Garnham, 1992). Democratic interaction is not necessarily a philosophy seminar. The psychological and the psychoanalytic must be accommodated in discussions (Dahlgren 2002, p. 8). Habermas is also accused of being too logocentric, basing his original deductions on a literary public sphere and never really accounting for the image as communication. His idea of the rational critical appears to overlook the subtle domination which happens in all public exchanges (Goode, 2005, p. 31). His critics contend that deliberation may be less normative and more able to accommodate multiple and even contestatory discourses.

In spite of the emancipatory potential of his public sphere theory, Habermas is accused of subscribing to Adorno's melancholy thesis on mass culture (McLaughlin, 1993, p. 600). It is feared that he has an indiscriminate view of the media taking, as Preston puts it, a broad brush approach to pervasive media activities and paying remarkably little attention to technological and socio-technological developments (2001, p. 99). Garnham describes Habermas as being blind to the variations within mass media, instancing his relative lack of discrimination in the case of PSB. His belief that contemporary media conditions have resulted in a refeudalisation of the public sphere is considered pessimistic and exaggerated in some quarters (Aslama, 2006, p. 3, as an example).

Nancy Fraser offers a precise, four-part critique and this corresponds substantially to the perspective I wish to adopt (and which will be expanded upon below). Fraser contends that it is not possible to bracket differences and then to talk as equals; that a single public sphere is not necessarily preferable for the democratic process; that discourse in the public sphere need always be directed towards the common good and be exclusive interests; and finally, that a water-tight division can be maintained between civil society and the state (1992, pp. 117 & 118). It appears to me that Fraser's modifications create a context which allows for an expanded vision and application of what can be usefully embraced by public sphere theory.

However, I offer a caveat. In engaging with an expanded vision; in productively entertaining multiple public spheres; in widening our understanding of what constitutes the political; in acknowledging the intrinsic contribution of day-to-day talk in the deliberative process; in attempting to uncover the civic function of our cultural milieu; in all of these there is a danger of adopting an unjustified and anodyne balancing act and of losing sight of the power and centrality of formal, institutional politics and

the imperative for 'strong' democratic engagement. Benhabib warns that, "decision making bodies are becoming increasingly impervious to the democratic conversation". She worries that,

an over-reliance on disembodied public spheres and the public sphere as anonymous networks of interlocking conversations, overlooks the fact that a hierarchical model recognises the fact that this is the space of public decision – the public square of the people. The model returns ....because it is difficult to understand how to connect decentred anonymous networks of flowing and interconnecting conversations to a decisional public sphere.

(Wahl-Jorgensen, 2008, p. 964)

Without formal politics, formal debate, formal decision-making, the space for the broadly political and the broadly deliberative may be extremely restricted. We need laws and institutions so we may function collectively. We need formal decision-making and structures to effect the disposal of scarce resources for the common good. We need 'high' journalism to oversee the process. In our proper bid to establish popular cultural forms – say a TV chat show – in the public sphere firmament we must concurrently accept that without legislative and judicial frameworks and without economic and institutional buttressing, such a show simply would not happen. Nicholas Garnham, I believe, is right:

In terms of media fields, it is difficult, I think, to sustain the argument that structures of regulation and control have no influence on who is able to persuade whom of what. ....

There has been a tendency amongst postmodern thinkers in their concern with discourse and identity and their understandable dissatisfaction with the ways in which existing representative politics has handled these issues, to evacuate the central fields of political power, the exercise of monopoly, force and the distribution of resources. In the politics we all actually inhabit, we may want to agree philosophically that we cannot agree – indeed, that in the name of difference it is positively desirable not to agree about the common good – but in practice, either a version of the common good or the good of special interest groups will be imposed as a result of the practical decisions of our representatives. In short..., in the end and necessarily decisions will be taken that affect to a greater or lesser extent all citizens. (2003, p. 195)

The upshot, from our point of view, is that when we assess *Liveline* within the 'cultural' public sphere or again within the 'political' public sphere, we must constantly remind ourselves we are not engaged in trading one off against the other. Yes, it is important that we determine as best we can how the discourses of *Liveline* contribute to our identities as citizens but it would be unwise to underestimate the significance of the formally political as it affects or is affected by the programme. That is where power lies.

I do not intend to dwell at length on the arguments between those who hold out for a single public sphere and those in the opposite 'multiple' camp. Garnham advocates a unitary sphere because of an aspiration towards universality – norms, ethics, he believes, must have an application

beyond the purely local. He cautions that there are big economics, big politics and big problems: there had better be a big public sphere (1992, p. 368). Sarah O'Sullivan worries that "once you start to disassemble the public sphere in this way the concept evaporates and is no longer useful" (2000a, p. 34). We can appreciate elements of her concern. We are offered myriad formulations of the public sphere(s)<sup>8</sup> to the point where, with Minna Aslama, we ask what is left of Habermas's original concept and where we resist turning the public sphere framework into 'some poststructurally inflected version of hegemony theory' (2006, p. 27).

As Karppinen et al note, Habermas has developed his initial concept and his later work advocates, "a much more plural concept of public spheres than his critics would concede. ...., much of the contemporary democratic theory would seem to converge in accepting a model of multiple and overlapping networks of publicity, within which different types of communication can take place... The public sphere is best understood as an arena of circulating expression of both solidarity and difference" (2008, p. 8)

Once more we return to Dahlgren to outline an appropriate premise.

We have come to see also that the public sphere is far from unitary; empirically, it consists of vast numbers of communicative spaces, sprawling social fields of almost immense variety. At the same time, these multiple spheres are by no means equal in terms of access or political impact. Some are socially and politically more 'mainstream' and situated closer to the powers of decision-making. Others are geared more towards the interests and needs of specific groups, emphasizing, for example, either the need for collective group identity-formation or the ambition to offer alternative political orientations... (2006a. p. 274)<sup>9</sup>

In looking then at *Liveline* and the conditions of communication within it as contributing to democracy, we are advised by Dahlgren to position ourselves between 'dismally ideological' and 'blatantly utopian' views (2002, p.9). Habermas was prepared to concede that his early thesis on media driven refeudalisation was too simplistic and too pessimistic (1992, p. 438). It is possible that he found himself slipping into a Frankfurt School-style paralysis. Instead he turned to speech act theory to establish

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<sup>8</sup> Examples include; John Keane's (2000, pp. 61 – 65) postulation of micro- meso- and macro-public spheres; Karol Jakubowicz's (1991) identification of official, alternative and oppositional public spheres in his native Poland; and Livingstone and Lunt's (1994) location of local and institutional spheres within national public spheres.

<sup>9</sup> I would refer the reader seeking a structure or paradigm with which to engage with theories of multiple public spheres to the frameworks offered by Elizabeth Klaus (2008) and indeed to the not dissimilar structures proposed by Habermas (2006). Both seek to order the 'immense variety' of public spheres in a hierarchical / pyramidal fashion with formal, powerful political spheres at the centre / apex and the less formal, more temporary and casual associations at the base / periphery.

a notion of rationality that has normative implications. Rational critical debate emerges as the driver in this process. It is via such debate that validity claims can be supported or rejected in the public arena and that distorted communication is minimised.

One of our tasks therefore becomes to examine in some detail how the exchanges in *Liveline* may be experienced as rational critical debate by those partaking and by those listening. As with Lunt and Stenner's work, a rigid application will have its limitations but that need not deter us from exploring these limits. With Habermas we are entitled to look for evidence of truth, sincerity, and appropriateness.

Important as sifting the rational critical is, on a broader front we seek, as David Nolan outlines it, "to understand the material forces and practices that socially shape the 'actually existing' public sphere (the programme) constitutes: that is, the mediated range of information, representations and debate that provides an important site at which 'public knowledge' is defined" (2006, p. 227). He implies that a programme like *Liveline*, "is positioned both as a field of practice (operating alongside others) that works to 'performatively' define formations of citizenship in its own right, and as one that is simultaneously situated within, and governed by, a larger field of socio-political relations" (ibid., p. 228).

In a similar vein Livingstone and Lunt observe that the implications of Habermas's theory of Communicative Action may be clustered under five headings.

- i. The phenomenological meaning of social action – how the programme becomes meaningful for participants and listeners.
- ii. The structural staging of that social action – where it is located within the mass media.
- iii. The institutional contingencies of that social action – what its place is in contemporary society.
- iv. The social controls governing the action – how it is subject to authority and power.
- v. Questions of colonisation and resistance – where, within politics and practice, there is the possibility of resistance and contra-interpretations. (1994, p. 7).

Peter Dahlgren suggests a concrete structure of four dimensions, which will allow us to encompass the sweep of Nolan's fields of performance and practice and of Livingstone and Lunt's thematic clusters. It is a structure I intend to employ to interrogate *Liveline* as an actually existing public sphere. Dahlgren says we can conveniently sort the critical themes and questions into four areas:

Media institutions, media representation, social structure and sociocultural interaction. This in turn offers us a framework for conceptualising four analytic dimensions of the public sphere. Each dimension serves as an entry port to

sets of issues about the public sphere, both theoretical and conceptual questions as well as empirical and evaluative ones about its actual functioning. No one dimension stands on its own; all four interlock with each other and constitute reciprocal conditions for one another. (1995, p. 11)

Richard Butsch suggests that we consider Dahlgren's dimensions as stages in the process of the public sphere. He confirms the media are the institutional infra-structure for the modern public. They enable "citizens to assemble and engage in discussion about public issues. It is collective citizen participation that is the realization of the public sphere and of democracy" (2009, p. 9).

## **Rational Critical Debate**

Before moving on to a more detailed application of Dahlgren's four analytic dimensions to *Liveline* as public sphere, I believe it is important to tease out further the implications of Habermas's injunction for rational critical debate. We have seen previously that commentators believe that phone-ins and talk shows may fall far short of this ideal form. We have seen that critics of Habermas are chary of his logocentricism and hyper rationality but despite that I remain convinced that the broad thrust of the principles behind rational critical debate are not alone useful but are pivotal to our inquiry. Seeking out the element of rational critical debate will form an important strand of my research. If I can point to such elements, then a solid case can be made for attaching normative and universal qualities to civic agency. Consequently as Garnham points out, democratic practice need not be reduced to a clash of power or to questions of state administration alone (1990, p. 109).

Todd Graham says of rational critical debate, that along with reciprocity, reflexivity and empathy, it is essential for achieving that understanding which is at the core of deliberative democracy. I agree with his emphasis that, "political talk must *in part* take the form of rational-critical discussion. It requires that participants provide reasoned claims, which are critically reflected upon, and that an adequate level of coherence and continuity is maintained" (2008, p. 20). I hope to demonstrate that, for all the chatter digression, triviality and performance to be heard on *Liveline*, there is a considerable degree of 'reasoned claims' and of coherence and continuity. Graham confirms that he is following Dryzek's (2002) line of argument here. "Emotions and other communicative forms may play an important role in deliberation, however rational-critical discussion is a requirement, while other communicative forms are welcome but not compulsory" (2008, p. 34). Before all else, contributors to the programme have to make their points clearly and understandably and be prepared to stand over them.

Taking in turn each of the elements of rational critical debate, this 'demanding form of communication' will offer further insight into the

process, whereby as Habermas explains, “In the course of everyday practices, actors are always already exposed to a space of reasons. They cannot but mutually raise validity claims for their utterances and claim that what they say *should be assumed* – and, if necessary, *could be proved* – to be true or right or sincere, and at any rate rational” (2006, p. 5).

## **Rational**

Calhoun writes that Habermas steadfastly holds on to the Enlightenment precept of rationality. His thinking aligns with that of Kant and he agrees that reason has to be public and that practical reason can be institutionalised through the norms of reasoned discourse. He draws from Kant the idea of procedural rationality and he suggests that the bourgeois public sphere “was constructed around rational critical argument in which the merits of the arguments and not the identity of the arguers were crucial” (1992, p. 2).

In seeking a definition of reason, Stefan Szcelkhun suggests that, “The study of reason has traditionally belonged to philosophy (and that it) is difficult to define any more than saying that it is thinking codified in language. .... It now may be redefined as thinking that is ready to submit to criticism and systematic examination as an ongoing process. A broader definition is that rationality is a disposition expressed in behaviour for which there are good reasons” (1999, pp. 1 & 2). He demonstrates how Habermas constructs the notion of communicative rationality. It is based on “the implicit shared and imminent rationality of speech” (Habermas, 1989, p. 17). In this respect, Szcelkhun suggests, Habermas shifted the emphasis in our concept of rationality from the conceptual to the social; he moves it from the realm of philosophy to the realm of politics.

Thomas McCarthy, expanding on this perspective, characterises the process as, “our main alternative to violence, coercion and manipulation as a means of conflict resolution and social coordination (1992, p. 65).

James Bohman perceives rationality as a process that will result in an outcome and in that outcome being fairer (1996, p. 6). He maintains that reasoning only makes sense if it is oriented towards achieving a result. There must be reasons towards something. Reason, he says, is not the same as logic but is similar to it (*ibid.*, p. 25). He suggests that reasons become publicly convincing via dialogical mechanisms. The central task is to establish reasons for political decisions which are convincing enough for each citizen to continue cooperating in deliberation even if they dissent from the decision after it has been taken (*ibid.*, p. 35). Bohman feels that even deep dispute is amenable to rationality if, amongst other considerations, it is made less likely for irrational and untenable arguments to influence the outcome. This implies the elimination of the unreasonable and of appeals to fear and ignorance. At least, he says, this raises the

level of debate and even if agreement is not reached, it makes it more likely that communicative cooperation can continue (ibid., p. 100). While Habermas desires that citizens should agree for the same good reasons, Bohman accepts that they may agree, each for different reasons.

Habermas clings to the centrality of the rational in maintaining the public sphere project. It is a line he defends throughout his writings as if fearful that if he yields an inch in the effort to preserve a normative bulwark for the defence of a communicative ethic, that the massed hoards of the ignorant, the irrational, the distracted and the malevolent will prevail. There was sufficient basis for caution in his own life experiences and the modern world as it evolved around him and the history of his time. He saw that a world which discards reason and which ignores reasons, and which offers parity of agency to the unreasonable and the irrational can form no basis for justice, consensus or democracy. He explains it thus, “so on one level, through speech act theory, I just wanted to get hold independently of some sort of philosophy of history, of a notion of rationality that does have certain normative implications” (1992, p. 463).

The themes of ‘justifying’, ‘validating’, ‘testing’, ‘legitimising’ surface repeatedly. Reasons and reasoning must be publicly robust. The twin connotations of ‘reason’ cause minor confusion. The first is a quality of the human thought process – the codified thinking; the second applies to the offering of evidence to support an argument or to validate its outcome. This process of validating or testing claims depends on rational participants with access to undistorted information. Habermas would say that such participants should be ‘free from illusions’ and self-deceptions and he continues, “we call a person rational who interprets the nature of his desires and feelings in the light of culturally established standards of value, but especially if he can adopt a reflective attitude to the very standards through which desires and feelings are interpreted” (1989, p. 20).

Those who differ with Habermas do not necessarily dispute the essence of his point of view. They take issue with, what Peter Dahlgren describes as, a reasoning that is strangely abstract and formalistic where there is no room for contradictions, for taking into account the social setting or for the consideration of other cultural resources (Dahlgren and Sparks, 1991, p. 6). He cites Mark E. Warren’s (1995) overview:

.....the common critique that Habermas is somewhat locked into an excessively cognitive and rational view of the kind of communication that can – and even should – take place in the public sphere: talk among citizens does not resemble a philosophy seminar. Warren and others make the case that while Habermas’ emphasis on the development of the social subject is of merit, his perspective ignores, among other things, important aspects about how psychological and psychoanalytic processes actually work in the human subject. (2002, p. 8)

I intend to show, when at a later point we examine the discourses of *Liveline*, that 'other cultural resources' – our very bodies with their desires, emotions and passions; discourse of fun and entertainment; and the meaning-making potential of images, myth and folklore – can be harnessed in the service of the rational and that opinion and values as well as knowledge and facts can feed into the rationally critical, seeing, as Dahlgren observes that they, "tend to be discursively interrelated, socially constructed, context bound and potentially ideological" (ibid., p. 15).

The research position I adopt is to seek with Benjamin Barber for the quality of reasonableness – "citizens constructed as free choosers....(who) are nonimpulsive, thoughtful and fair" (1984, p. 127). This reasonableness, he claims, is not just the remark of political choices and actions, but politics itself is the search for reasonable choices.

(P)olitics seeks choices that are something less than arbitrary even though they cannot be perfectly Right or True or Scientific. Abstract rationality is not at stake for that concept suggests some prepolitical standard of truth, some agreement on at least formal norms, ..... Reasonableness as used here is a rather more commonsensical notion, whose color is practical rather than metaphysical. A reasonable choice or a reasonable settlement is not necessarily rational at all, but will be seen as deliberate, non-random, uncoercive, and in a practical sense, fair. (ibid., p. 127).

Paddy Scannell approaches this notion of reasonableness somewhat differently, agreeing with Habermas that communicative rationality is grounded in mutual understanding but disagreeing with his strategy for achieving this. Dismissing, what he terms, 'the peculiar communicative competence of philosophers and their peculiar discourses', he argues that mutual understanding is cooperative at its base. Sometimes, he says there is a need to lay aside "what may be the best argument (in terms of clarity, logic, force etc.) in consideration of the most appropriate decisions in relation to the particular circumstances and the particular persons involved" (1989, p. 159). He suggests that the skills needed include tact, thoughtfulness and consideration for others, knowing how and when to listen etc.

It is tempting to posit a continuum of the rational-critical ranging from well-informed, well-considered, consensus-driven debate of the high-minded citizen at one extreme, through to the thoughtless chatter of the ignorant and the misguided at the other and to suggest that the efficaciousness of the sphere is on a corresponding sliding scale. That, however would be to oversimplify and to reify complex discursive elements and relationships and to ignore the possibility of intersecting discursive axes (sincerity, expertise, narrative, for example) which can form the 'situated account' of rational discourse.



We can acknowledge Chantal Mouffe's (2000) reservations about the Habermasian tradition of deliberative democracy; her contention that the very idea of neutral or rational dialogue is untenable; and her belief that "rhetoric, persuasion and compromise – rather than rational consensus – will prevail" (Dahlgren, 2002, p.12). There is merit in remembering this 'performative emphasis' but I contend that it does not empty the prospects for democratic agency that Habermas's rational critical perspective holds out.

There is a need for caution also in bluntly oversimplifying Habermas's position in relation to discourse. It would be too easy and inaccurate to see him as blinkered in his determination to establish the ideal speech situation, to suggest some deficiency of awareness or subtlety. In reaching for a definition of rational discussion he stipulates only one prerequisite – reflexivity – to imagine it can be otherwise, to attain the expanded vision. Within this reflexivity, this having the capacity to adopt the view of the 'other', lies the seeds of ethics and of agency. What Habermas seeks is reasonable outcomes and to that extent he frames the question we ask of *Liveline*. Can it fulfil "the presumption of reasonable outcomes that rests ... on the assumption that institutionalised discourses mobilize relevant topics and claims, promotes the critical evaluation of contributions and leads to rationally motivated Yes-or-No-reactions" (2006, p. 5)?

### **Critical**

Critical, the second qualification in the nature of debate within the public sphere, indicates Habermas's concern that we should not lose sight of the powerful economic and political forces that shape the communicative arena. These both influence the debate and may be influenced by its outcomes.

Doug Kellner (2005, p. 29) describes the critical approach as one which considers the wider context of social life and which interrogates the structures, goals, values, messages and effects of the media. While it is conceivable to construct a critical approach in liberal/market terms, the bulk of the comment involved in such interrogation would seem to come from a socialist or neo-socialist perspective and it could be suggested that the very term 'critical' has been commandeered by the left.

Kellner (ibid., p. 29 & ff.) offers a useful summary of the developments in critical media research. Within the Frankfurt School he notes Horkheimer and Adorno's focus on the 'culture industry' and their movement towards a neo-Marxist and transdisciplinary approach aimed at examining the bigger picture and analysing the relationships which result in maintaining stability within capitalism.

Nicholas Garnham credits Habermas's approach with focusing "on the necessary material resource base for any public sphere ... (on) how are the material resources necessary for ... communication made available and to whom" (1992, p. 361) but he believes also that, especially in *Structural Transformation*, Habermas remains too dependent on Adorno's model of the cultural industries with its elitist cultural tendencies, its exaggeration of the manipulative power of the controllers of those industries" (ibid., p. 360). Thompson too believes that the Frankfurt School was over-influenced by the theme of rationalisation and that it had an inflated view of the cohesive character of modern society alongside an over-simplistic view of the fate of the individual (1990, p. 97). Habermas is credited with offering an escape route from the pessimistic cul-de-sac of his mentors but he himself arrives at the less-than-liberating scenario of refeudalisation – the belief that contemporary media have, via spin, handlers, hype and public relations, returned us to a pseudo public sphere where the public become consumers, where communication is commodified and where spectacle has displaced reason.

It would be foolish and remiss to overlook the interplay of power and its communicative corollary – ideology. I will return to a more detailed consideration of both later in the next chapter. For the moment, I simply stress that it would be pointless to address *Liveline* in a public sphere context without engaging with its political economic dimensions. I take on board Preston's recommendation for a holistic approach when interrogating the 'patterns of ownership, funding, control and regulation' (2001, p. 100) surrounding, not just the institutional environment but also the specific discourses within the programme – gender, class, ethnicity etc. We shall see, for example that one central balancing act sustained by the host – that of moderating callers' contributions fairly while at the same time keeping his audience interested and entertained – is driven by politico economic considerations.

Paddy Scannell faults the concept of refeudalisation as being a one-dimensional critique which collapses differences and contradictions. It treats broadcasting as if it had no history and no development and it offers little that is positive. It affords, he says, little scope to transform perceptions and on that account it cannot work to enhance the reasonable democratic character of life. As will be clear from my experiences outlined in the introductory chapter, I readily agree with Scannell and have little sympathy for a perspective that casts broadcasters as not knowing what they are doing: "unwittingly, unconsciously, [they serve] as a support for the reproduction of a dominant discursive field'.. they may have ideas about what they are doing but these (from the point of view of theory) are irrelevant" (1989, p. 157). In a later work (1996, Cp. 4) Scannell continues to dispute Habermas's version of the refeudalisation of the public sphere as being irrational and negative but particularly because it offers, an impoverished understanding of the communicative riches and scope of

social life. The media, he maintains, are not just an ideological veil, not merely a passive backdrop and not simply agents of social control; on the contrary they offer all the potential of a restructured publicness.

Debate within the public sphere must take reflexive account of the fact that it is taking place within, what Dahlgren describes as 'broadly hegemonic boundaries'. It can be intensely politicised; it can be a vehicle for ideology. But he goes on to point out :

Any critical approach to the ideological dimensions of (media) discourses in the late modern context must take into account an array of different trajectories that deal with, for example, not only class but gender, ethnicity, technology, environment – and that these articulate with each other in complex and at times contradictory ways in local, national, regional and global settings. We cannot posit one unified singular emancipatory path...

(2005, p. 418)

Qualifications and refinements, such as those offered by Scannell and Preston, in Dahlgren's view do "not undercut the possibility of critical analysis but it does suggest that it should retain a certain degree of modesty; it will always inevitably be partial, situated and contingent" (ibid., p. 418).

## **Debate**

'Discussion', 'debate', 'argumentation', 'deliberation'; the cluster of terms expressing the rational critical interaction occasionally appears to be used interchangeably. In general, each denotes an element of the discursive testing of validity claims. Within that, each denotes a difference of emphasis. 'Discussion', 'debate' and 'argumentation', these terms lean towards the dialogic while 'deliberation' may either be public or private, social or solitary. 'Debate' and 'argumentation' support the contestatory characteristics noted by Scannell (1989, p. 159) while 'discussion' and 'deliberation' carry gentler, more cooperative overtones. 'Argumentation' can veer towards controversy and quarrel while debate carries notions of procedure, formality, order and rules. The coupling of the terms 'rational' and 'debate' seems to suit the Habermasian position. In the section above, which sought to consider rationality as a quality of the public sphere, it becomes clear that it is almost impossible to address the topic of rationality without linking it to a discursive corollary - debate. The phrase 'rational debate' denotes more than two linked elements. The very concept of rationality is discursively created and maintained. The very exercise of debate establishes, *ipso facto*, rationality.

Wessler and Schultz ask the question: 'Can the mass media deliberate?' and conclude that they can.

One of the most important values of a democratic public sphere lies in its capacity to facilitate public deliberation. Public deliberation, broadly speaking, transforms social and political conflicts into argumentative debates in which claims are not just made but can be problematized and discussed. Such

debates are public to the extent that they are openly accessible to citizens. Public deliberation, then, is an open, collective process of argumentative exchange about issues of societal relevance. In modern societies such a process will necessarily rely mostly on the mass media (see Page 1996).

(2009, p. 15).

Wessler and Schultz argue that this conclusion gives rise to a number of theoretical and empirical questions which are of immediate relevance to *Liveline's* potential as a platform for public deliberation – what kind of normative claims should we make with respect to such deliberation? And which conditions are conducive to the flourishing of public deliberation? Different media genres contain public deliberation to varying degrees but amongst the more important they number, 'news and commentary, talk shows, discussion programs and interviews' (ibid., p. 16). They note that in these instances the deliberation is essentially delegated deliberation but that does not inhibit them from concluding, "For mediated public deliberation, a standard of 'openness or equal opportunity for topics, perspectives, interpretations, ideas and arguments' is most appropriate" (ibid., p. 16). This perspective will allow us to examine the range of topics and voices that are heard on air and to look at whatever constraints may be imposed on the ideal of 'equal opportunity'. They suggest that in a free society voices of criticism make a good sounding board against which to judge the standard of openness. They go on to say that once positions, opinions and claims have found their way into the public sphere they can then be problematized and discussed. This is achieved, they say, 'by weighing argument in a climate of mutual respect and civility' (ibid., p. 17). This aspect of civility is not just about good manners and orderly exchange; it is a manifestation of the 'enlarged vision' and the accommodation of dissent and it provides us with another research angle when we inquire if the communicative action in the programme is orientated towards understanding rather than success in debate.

Wessler and Schultz note that legitimate forms of public utterance – emotional protest and accusations, public testimony concerning grievances and demands – can clash with standards of civility in deliberation. However they point to a useful distinction between types of function in public communication. "One function", they say, "lies in the discovery of issues and problems, the building of the media agenda. ... In this stage attention-gaining techniques are legitimately used that may not adhere to the civility standard" (ibid., pp. 17 & 18). Callers may be less than controlled and measured attempting to articulate their frustrations. Outrage can be vital to ensure that problems are not forgotten or marginalized. But agenda building is not enough, they tell us,

Once a problem has reached the public agenda, claims-making activities ensue that advocate opposing positions. ... It is here that conflict is transformed into debate. Debate is essential in order to problematize claims even those of opposed groups, as well as their foundations and justifications. And in this context ... the deliberative qualities of debate hold the promise of particular epistemic and social gains. By focusing on justification and the

weighing of arguments public deliberation promises to foster deeper understanding as well as stronger recognition of and respect for the legitimate interests of opponents. Therefore, we contend that agenda building and public deliberation are two separate and legitimate components of public communication. (ibid., p. 18)

This contention based on diversity of function affords us a useful insight and link when we seek to reconcile the differences between those who champion purely formal, rational debate and those who would criticise them for seeking to exclude alternative discourses. Their formulation can accommodate Dahlgren's prescription, which allows formal deliberation to play a role in specific settings, but which would also have us look beyond this to alternative communicative strategies (2006b, p.30). It can accommodate Joke Hermes' concerns about the exclusion of many forms of debate, those which foreground commitment and engagement (1998, p.159). It can accommodate van Zoonen's suggestion that we stretch the ideas of the 'deliberationists' just a little (2005, p. 149).

Peter Collingwood approaches deliberative democracy via his interest in the ethics of talkback radio in Australia. His central question was whether particular phone-in presenters were gratuitously stirring up pseudo debate among polarized audience segments or were stimulating genuine debate which added significantly to public knowledge. He sets out the conditions for healthy public sphere debate. Citing Habermas (1984,1987), he enumerates:

- All those affected by a proposal should arrive at a 'rationally motivated' agreement to act on it;
- They must have 'effective equality' to participate in the dialogue, which must be public in terms of access;
- The dialogue must be unconstrained by political or economic force;
- Participants must be able to challenge traditional norms that are tacitly assumed and;
- Nothing should be taboo for rational discussion. (2006, p. 2)

Participants, he claims, should have a commitment to truth, appropriateness and sincerity and be willing to change their views, compromising to achieve a workable agreement. Clarity is helped, he says, by recognizing inimical speech forms - deceptive, manipulative and strategic communication. Other factors which contribute to healthy public sphere deliberation include "the vigour of debate across a variety of media and institutions; genuine social / cultural diversity of voices evident in the debate and avoiding or silencing of social and cultural minorities or debate sanitized through a form of majority tyranny" (ibid., p. 3). Collingwood's verdict on the quality of deliberation in the programmes he researches is less than flattering. He describes it as falling "short of discourse ethics norms on every measure" (2006, p. 13). On the other hand, we have seen that Lunt and Stenner, in their study of the TV talkshow are able to draw significant comparisons with the structure of orthodox debate.

Livingstone and Lunt visit the manner in which the media manage argument and rhetoric. They note, what they term a 'generic ambiguity' in the role of the radio host (1994, p. 56) – a generic ambiguity generated, to some degree by the overlapping nature of the genres. Alongside the Debate Genre (close to a classical debate formula and meeting some of the criteria of the public sphere) they also identify the Romance Genre (where the host is the star, where the discourse is the stories of individuals and the process is more important than the product) and thirdly, the Therapy Genre (this is radio as confessional but without significant analysis or adequate follow-up support; the genre most open, they say, to exploitation).<sup>10</sup>

They suggest that there are two ways of framing a study of argumentation. The first is a positivist view, a "view of progress through procedural rationality". The second is a discursive expression of diversity, opinion and local practice. The former underlies the bourgeois conception of the public sphere; the latter underlies an oppositional conception. They "argue that audience discussion programmes (and by inference, radio phone-ins) express not one or the other of these views but the oppositional tension

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<sup>10</sup> They reference the work of Toulmin (1958) on argumentation where the central concept is the staking of a claim. The social responsibility of the person making the claim is to state it clearly and unambiguously. Recipients of the claim have a responsibility to question and clarify it. The job of a media host is to prioritise claims. The grounds for a claim are established in different arenas by varying conventions of evidence. The conventions within a discussion programme include examples based on personal experience. In this view of argument, "there is an implicit narrative; starting with making, choosing, challenging and refining a claim, then seeking and criticizing its grounds through critical examination of the backing and scope of this warrant, qualifying the argument and anticipating possible rebuttals" (Livingstone and Lunt: 1994, p.134). They also discuss the work of Walton (1989, p. 226) who prefers to analyse argument in terms of social context. Walton says the basic unit of argument is dialogue - two people in a goal-oriented task. The dialogues differ depending on their social goals. He distinguishes between the quarrel, debate, critical discussion, inquiry and negotiation.

Quarrels are intense emotional expressions; personal attacks with a commitment to one's point of view at all costs and no real strategy. Significantly, in the light of upcoming discussion, he says, "Although emotions need not preclude a satisfactory argument, they tend to undermine it in practice" (Livingstone and Lunt: 1994, p.135).

The debate involves some judgement on the merits of argument and "a set of procedures on who can speak, for how long and in what order and the establishment of two sides to the issue" (ibid., p. 135).

The critical discussion approximates most closely to the Habermasian ideal and involves the reasonableness of points of view and a willingness to adapt.

The inquiry implies an accumulation of facts and evidence leading to a conclusion. This format is neutral and cooperative.

The negotiated dialogue is by nature, adversarial and is primarily designed to promote self interest. The aim is to finish up, as close to one's opening position as possible and the dynamic is one of trading.

Watson maintains that arguments go wrong when people switch from one form of argument to another. Livingstone and Lunt foresee that arguments may not result in one coherent conclusion but they expect that various separate aims can be partially achieved. These "plural and partial achievements still depend on the general avoidance of fallacies in reasoning" (ibid., p. 137).

between them" (1994, p. 133). This oppositional tension reflects Wessler and Schultz's diversity of function and together they provide a basis for research template, which is designed to analyse the text of *Liveline* seeking, firstly evidence of formal rational debate, secondly, seeking evidence of alternative deliberative modes and finally, seeking evidence of a productive tension or fusion between the two

The broad question is, can we usefully apply the concept of rational critical debate to the discourses of *Liveline* in order to demonstrate that it contributes to a healthy Irish public sphere? The case we have been building suggests that if we justifiably enlarge the 'rational' to embrace the reasonable; if by 'critical' we mean a posture of vigilance and awareness in respect of the crosscurrents of institutional and interpersonal power that surround the programme; and if by 'debate' we can entertain both formal, claim-testing argumentation and more informal, agenda-building alternative deliberative modes; then I suggest we can establish a 'reasonable' basis for research.

## Chapter Three

### Literature Review 2

### Dahlgren's Four Dimensions of the Public Sphere

I return to Peter Dahlgren's four<sup>1</sup> interlocking analytic dimensions, which will facilitate our interrogation of *Liveline* as an actually existing public sphere. Each dimension, he tells us, does not stand on its own; they are interdependent and cross-reference each other on multiple levels (1995, p. 11). I propose to note some of these intersections as they refer to the phone-in in particular. Indeed, my application of the analytic dimensions will, in the main, concentrate on exploring the particularities of the programme's contexts.

The dimensions are: (i) Media Institutions, (ii) Media Representation, (iii) Sociocultural Interaction and (iv) Social Structures.

#### Media Institutions

The contemporary cultural landscape is constructed of a web of institutional arrangements, some of which are durable and others transient; some of which are fixed and others shifting and loosely formed; some are massive and transnational while others are local and intimate. When we attempt to locate *Liveline* within such an institutional web we find that a radio programme in all its dimensions – the policies that inspired it, the procedures and practices behind its daily transmissions, the scope and limitations on its contents, and the ripples that flow from its transmission – all have garnered an institutional gloss. It is possible, for instance, to trace connections between *Liveline* and The European Broadcasting Union, the Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland, and the Cystic Fibrosis Association but some institutional connections will be more central to our focus on deliberation and the public sphere.

Dahlgren points out that under the heading of Media Institutions we find “the most tangible and immediate expression of political attention to the public sphere” (1995, p. 12). Under it we consider issues of organization, financing, regulation, ownership and control. These are the hard facts; this is the real world. They cannot be ignored or glossed over. The issue is whether citizens have a voice in the public sphere or has it, as Habermas fears, been refeudalised? Richard Butsch outlines some of the major questions to be addressed. He asks how media can “serve the public

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<sup>1</sup> In his 2005 article, *The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation*, Dahlgren has condensed the dimensions under three headings – structures, representation, and interaction. I find it more useful for the sake of clarity to stick with the four-part structure.



sphere when also powerfully pulled to serve the state or profit. ... How do we contend with corporate mass media's potential to dominate the public sphere with its own voice or that of the state, drowning out all others" (2009, p. 7). He contends that in today's world:

The problem is exacerbated by the growth in size and power of mass media, constituting a formidable political force in a public sphere. Today's giant media corporations now present similar dangers as the state in controlling the public sphere for their own interests. The sheer scale of modern media corporations overwhelms the relatively minute institutions of the public sphere, as a skyscraper enshadows a small public park. (ibid., p. 8)

Media institutions attract attention from another perspective; there is also a loosely defined movement for democratic communication which urges an alternative vision of the public sphere where a twofold concept of democratisation is urged, entailing both the democratisation of media institutions and democratisation through the media (Wasko, 1992, cited in Dahlgren, 1995, p. 13)

Such broad concerns form a deep background for our considerations. *Liveline*, as we have seen, can be subject to ministerial disapproval and pressure; it is certainly not immune from the hand of the market; and in advance of the second Lisbon referendum, its text poll was the most accurate media expression of the Irish public. For a background and a historical overview of the development of the institutional ecology of Irish radio I refer the reader to the work of Barbrook (1992), Farrell (1984), Gorham (1967), Horgan (2001), and Mulryan (1988), for a diverse range of perspectives. Rosemary Day (2003, 2007) offers a comprehensive overview of the theory and aspirations behind emancipatory radio broadcasting in Ireland.

From the point of view of this thesis, Dahlgren confirms that this institutional dimension, "directs our attention to such classic democratic issues as freedom of speech, access and the dynamics of inclusion / exclusion" (2005b, p. 149). We have suggested that *Liveline* is cast in the public mind as a programme with considerable power on the national stage where it affords a modicum of access and participation for citizens. Following from that, the institutional aspects I propose to highlight are those associated with the notion of access and those associated with the exercise of power but before that I return to the broader concept of Public Service Broadcasting, a concept that, I believe, still retains democratic potency in spite of the seemingly unstoppable encroachment of the market.

### **Public Service Broadcasting**

The introductory pages of this thesis made it clear, I think, that, in the light of my observations and experiences, I retain a faith in the public service

potential of radio. The research question I pose seeks to establish a basis for that faith. Broadly speaking it asks if a programme with democratic trappings such as *Liveline* can truly serve its listeners and the greater Irish public. Of necessity we must also entertain the obverse questions. To what extent is it a market product, driven by ratings to attract revenue? Is PSB itself an outmoded curiosity long past its theoretic usefulness? As we have remarked earlier, the questions become even more convoluted in the context of RTÉ given the hybrid nature of its financing.

There appears to be little agreement and an absence of concise definition when it comes to defining PSB. Paddy Scannell remarks on the difficulty the Peacock Committee experienced 'in obtaining an operational definition from broadcasters' (Peacock, 1986, p. 130), and he notes that practitioners were criticised for being either too vague or for claiming too much (1989, p. 135). Garnham is on more solid ground when he explains that PSB, "is not a universal ideal type but a set of historically concrete institutions and practices" (2003, p. 194), that require situated 'microanalyses'. PSB, he reminds us is not coterminous with the commercial/non commercial divide. While allowing that broadcasters who are funded (or presumably part-funded, as in the case of RTÉ) by advertising can justifiably lay claim to PSB credentials, he believes that, both in the perception of the audience and in fact, "that it is empirically demonstrable that the model of PSB in the UK has played a more positive role in relation to democracy than has the commercially driven system in the U.S." (ibid., p. 197). PSB is best understood, it seems, in the specifics of its history and practices.

The evolution of PSB under John Reith in the early years of the BBC has been well recorded and critiqued (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991, and Burns, 1977, offer complementary perspectives). According to Ursula Halligan, governments were prompted to regulate broadcasting and to supervise its output on two accounts, in a manner which was never applied to the newspaper or cinema industries: "broadcast wavelengths were scarce and considered to be public property *and* politicians believed that [radio] was an extremely powerful force with huge potential to inform *and* influence public opinion' (2002, p. 59). Applying related analysis, Michael Bailey remarks,

Needed was a cultural technology of government which could mediate the demands of a conservative cultural minority on the one hand and the demands of a newly created mass democracy in need of an educated and informed citizenry on the other, while maintaining an appearance of neutrality and universality. (2009, p. 96)

He suggests that a component of Reith's vision was to unite the nation and to manage regional differences within Britain. Reith's was a 'civilising mission and idealisation of cultural enlightenment', a bid to disseminate 'the right ideas and knowledge and other cultural practices, not the least of which was establishing BBC English' (ibid., p. 101).

In spite of being engaged in a nation building process which differed markedly from the British project, the early Radio Éireann (RÉ) assumed many of the Reithian values of its neighbour and technical mentor, the BBC. Programmes were to be worthy, formal, instructional and generally 'good' for the listener. This direction was strengthened in the early years by RÉ's positioning as a unit within a civil service department - Post & Telegraphs. The negative side of this location is illustrated by Gorham noting where politicians over the years felt it was their right to influence and impose on the station when they felt it did not reflect their partisan position and where the station's well being depended on the quality of its relationship with the minister of the day, as might be the case anywhere else in the civil service (1967, p. 274). A handful of sponsored programmes did exist prior to the establishment of an independent authority and the launch of RTÉ in 1961. Since that juncture there has been a gradual if persistent move away from the Reithian ideal to the point where in many respects RTÉ has been forced to question and redefine its PSB claims.

Accepting that there is no definitive version of the traits, which distinguish public service broadcasters from others, there is broad agreement among commentators about desirable qualities. Ursula Halligan speaks of 'a loose set of principles' traditionally epitomising the essence of PSB.

These include the ability to:

- Reach everyone. Like the postal system or any other state service, television was to serve the entire nation, including remote areas. Viewers were regarded more as citizens than consumers.
- Fortify democracy by informing and educating citizens and by providing programmes for minorities.
- Promote national identity and social stability by embodying national values.
- Be independent from vested interests, including the Government of the day.
- Make programmes that appealed to a wide range of tastes.
- Be funded either entirely or via some elements of public finance.
- Be accountable to the public and not to market forces. (2002, pp. 60 & 61)

John Keane endorses much of Halligan's list and goes on to cite a programme controller at the BBC:

Public service broadcasting is driven by higher aspirations than solely to provide entertainment. Public service broadcasting is the attempt to make quality popular programmes. It does justice to human experience. It deals in more than stereotypes. It adds to the quality of people's lives. Its programme genres reflect the complexity of human beings. (1991, p. 117)

Bob Collins, in his capacity of Assistant Director-General of RTÉ develops this elevated, aspirational perspective in a way that has echoes and implications for *Liveline*.

Most people would agree that there is an important role for the media in reflecting the community of which we all form a part, and in reflecting the complexity of that community. That role is not just to hand down established

truths. Public broadcasting has a role in reflecting the lives of individuals, in giving people a sense of identity, in exploring issues that concern people, and in investigating those things that need investigation. In fulfilling these functions it provides detached and objective sources of information to the audience and a window on the wider world. (1997, p. 23)

These opinions are those of practitioners. Their enthusiasm does not necessarily extend to everyone. Reservations about PSB include Thompson's belief that it smacks of paternalism and that it favours the taste of power elites in society (1990, p. 255). Keane considers that the whole idea of 'quality' is 'riddled with semantic ambiguity' (1991, p. 119). Bob Collins suggests that the Reithian model implies a passivity on the part of the audience (1997, p. 23). More than this, Michael Bailey is chary of the tension within PBS. "The formation of good and cultured citizens on the one hand, and the docile and useful subject on the other, amount to the same thing – there is an interdependence between citizenship rights and disciplinary power" (2009, p. 107). Buckley takes the caution a step further and reminds us of the potential for a dark side to PSB, pointing to its exploitation for propaganda and citing examples from Nazi Germany, Yugoslavia and Rwanda (2000, p. 181).

As the twenty first century unfolds, I suspect that concerns about paternalism, elitism and even propaganda are being diluted by the changing face of PSB. It may soon be obsolete anyway, according to Halligan who attributes the demise to changes in society, technology and the marketplace. Indeed, she says, "there is a convergence taking place between commercial and public service broadcasting to a point where soon they (sic) will be little or no difference" (2002, p. 59) and traditional stations are scrambling to re-invent themselves so that 'confused hybrids' are emerging trying to straddle both worlds. Van Zoonen also attributes the change to deregulation, digitalisation and convergence – the markets have been opened up to commercial competitors; the restriction on channels has all but disappeared; and audiences are spoiled for choice in terms of media platforms. She too sees the PSB organisations reinventing themselves and adopting strategies ranging from confronting the interlopers to embracing them – but inevitably entailing a shift in the direction of 'popular' programming (2004, pp. 275 & 276). Elizabeth Jacka adds to the elegy. PSB, she says, no longer has a role in a world that has moved from the 'welfare state' to the neoliberal (2003, p. 187).

Our focus here is on institutional dimensions of the public sphere. PSB is addressed under this heading on a number of grounds. Firstly, the discursive context of *Liveline* lies within a national radio station whose roots are distinctively PSB. Secondly, the production values espoused by the show correspond to aspects of those we have noted in relation to PSB – reflecting the lives of individuals, exploring the issues, informing and educating, and offering access to marginalized voices. Thirdly, the links

between PSB and the public sphere have been argued by a succession of commentators. Van Zoonen, for example, describes PSB as, 'one of the core institutions of the public sphere, (and) together with journalism and representative politics, is firmly rooted in the modernist tradition of the Enlightenment' (2004, p. 277). Bailey talks of scholars turning to Habermas's public sphere particularly in its 'communicative rationality' in an effort to defend and reinvigorate PSB (2009, p. 96). Karppinen et al, justifiably, I believe, describe the connection as uneasy and problematic, noting that, "Practices of public service broadcasting have historically never corresponded to the ideal public sphere" (2008, p. 12). Habermas has had his reservations about PBS and advocates of PBS have had their reservations about Habermas.

That said, Scannell draws from Habermas a historical approach and a concern with the "rational character of communication in everyday actual contexts" (1989, p. 136). In that lies part of its application for us. We continue to insist on a twin track interrogation of *Liveline*. We believe that it functions effectively in a modernist context where to abandon rationality, to sideline formal politics or to diminish journalistic values would be dangerous and shortsighted. This approach does not preclude the cultural perspective, which we argue is a complementary and necessary one where alternative meaning-making and identity-forming resources are deployed. The PSB concept better supports the modernist view but scholars like Jacka (2003), Craig (2000) and Nolan seek to establish the democratic potential of contemporary versions of PSB along non-Habermasian lines. Nolan, for example, argues "that public service broadcasters, alongside other media, do indeed perform this role of making available spaces where ideas of collective identity are articulated and in so doing contribute to a 'technology of citizenship'" (2006, p. 227). I would argue from this that PSB may draw from and may be supported by both modernist and postmodernist positions and that, in entertaining both, it offers a rounder and more complete 'service' to the public and as

Scannell observes, "If broadcasting today is defensible as a public service, it can only be as a service to the public" (1989, p. 135).

The diminishing differences between PSB and privately owned media have been referred to disparagingly as no more than a state of mind but then states of mind can have remarkable potency. Bailey sketches the outlines of that state of mind; "the media ought to be managed as a public good available to all and that the public be treated as social citizens with universal needs and wants" (2009, p. 96). And the state of mind is not simply in the minds of the broadcasters. The public at large and the listeners in particular will expect a different service from their PSB.

Sara O'Sullivan describes PSB at RTÉ as Reithian with the 'added extra' of national identity building. She questions how applicable the concept is

in 2FM, the popular music channel but confirms, "the more 'broadsheet' talk radio shows on Radio 1 are seen to complement RTÉ's news and current affairs output and so contribute to RTÉ's public service brief" (2000a, p. 173). It is reasonable then for us to question not alone how *Liveline* fits this traditional PSB bill but to employ those additional dimensions suggested by van Zoonen, those offering trust, centrality, competence and a space for the affective and new conversational modes to a listenership no longer passive.

John Keane summarises the case well:

The PS model has legitimised the presence of ordinary citizens in programmes dealing with controversial issues and problems; it has helped to make idiomatic, conversational styles respectable; and, significantly, it has published the pleasures of ordinariness, creating entertainment out of citizens playing games, talking about their experiences.... (1991, p. 118)

### **Access, Participation and Power**

One fact emerges from the consideration of the connection between the media and democracy; that is from both the liberal and deliberative perspectives, the media in their multiple configurations, are the sites of immense institutional and symbolic power. John Thompson (1995, p. 44 & ff) traces the evolving locus of symbolic power over time, noting the part played in history by the church, the impact of the Reformation, the blossoming of scientific knowledge and the transformation of symbolic exchange resulting from the development and proliferation of printed materials. Printing, he says, reworked the symbolic character of social life, manufacturing novel webs of significance. The arrival of electronic and new media has amplified, accelerated and transformed this process as it applies to the public sphere in general and to democracy in particular.

However the prominence of the media's function within the democratic process is neither simple nor uncontested.

The existence of citizens in contemporary societies is not merely documented by, but (is) also reliant upon, media of mass communication. The media are sites for struggles over political power, resources and interpretation. If, ..... the publics of representative democracy are performative, mass media are one of the main technologies of representation through which these publics are constructed and contested. (Wahl-Jorgensen: 2006, p. 200)

The struggles for symbolic power within the media become translated in practical terms into struggles around modes of access to and participation in media structures and productions. Laura Stein remarks, "the value of access to the media in a democratic society is at a fundamental level a question of political philosophy" (1998, p. 31). Neoliberals, she says, view media access policies as antithetical to democratic speech and as distorting both the rights of owners and market mechanisms. For them, citizenship is limited "to the passive activities of listening, thinking and

voting" (ibid., p. 23). Contrary to this position, she makes common cause with Barber in wishing to establish a platform for civic talk in pursuit of a 'strong' participatory democracy.

This aim is furthered by Splichal, who links this capacity to perform citizenship with the right to communicate, which, he says, is based on Kant's universal principle of publicity. He seeks to examine, what he describes as "Freedom of expression and publication as a natural and civil right" and from this, he can assert, "All democratic societies are facing the problem of how can the media, old and new, be made accessible to citizens and how can they be used for the benefit of citizens and not only as a vehicle to reach and persuade potential consumers and voters, and to generate profit and power" (2002, p. 85).

Steve Buckley, in referring specifically to the potential for radio, makes the case for 'communicative democracy', saying,

An inclusive, more equal and more democratic society requires an inclusive and more participative communications environment which, together we can call a communicative democracy. One element in the ecology of a communicative democracy must be popular and open access to the media of mass appeal, including radio. ....

The freedom of expression is a fundamental human right recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, reaffirmed in the United Nations Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and present in regional human rights law including The European Convention on Human Rights.

(2000, pp. 186 & 187).

Rosemary Day also comments on how firmly this right of communication is enshrined in international conventions, including the McBride Report (1980) but she regrets that for all the lofty aspiration, it is still a right not supported by law or resources. She also outlines a number of freedoms, which flow from the right to communicate:

1. To publish opinions in the mass media;
2. To participate in the management of the mass media;
3. To engage in free association;
4. To encounter no access barrier based on social status or resources;
5. The right of reply;
6. The right of inclusion for minorities;
7. The right of appropriate training and education (2003, pp. 58 & 59).

Habermas offers, as a component of the deliberative paradigm, "inclusion and equal opportunity for participation" (2006, p. 4). At a very basic level and as part of the reflexive character of the public sphere, he suggests that the,

political public sphere needs input from citizens who give voice to society's problems and respond to the issues articulated in elite discourse. There are two major causes for a systematic lack of this kind of feedback loop. Social deprivation and cultural exclusion of citizens explain the selective access to,

and uneven participation in, mediated communication (a), whereas the colonization of the public sphere by market imperatives leads to a peculiar paralysis of civil society (b). (ibid., p. 25)

Both Goode (2005, p. 73) and Collingwood (2006, p. 2) extrapolate from Habermas's preconditions for a 'universal pragmatic' of communication. They conclude that all those affected by a proposal should arrive at a 'rationally motivated' agreement to act on it; that nobody who wants to contribute may be excluded; that all participants have 'effective equality' to participate in the dialogue, which must be public in terms of access; that they must be free from economic or political coercion; and that nothing should be taboo for rational discussion.

That which distinguishes *Liveline* from most other radio programmes is the degree to which it is constructed and projected as a vehicle for access and participation by the citizenry - the ordinary Joes. Even the most sanguine of commentators will readily concede that the programme cannot live up to the preconditions outlined above except in a diluted sense, but then it is difficult to conceive of any institution that could.

The liberal perspective on the access and participation of citizens may be characterised by suggesting, that such practices should not be imposed by regulation on the media, nor should the media be supported to facilitate them except in so far as they align with the mechanisms of the market; that insofar as access or participation does not threaten the dominance of the prevailing elite, it may be tolerated; and that insofar as they may add to the discourses of pleasure, distraction, entertainment and consumerism, they may be encouraged.

### 1 Access

The concepts of media access and media participation are closely related, give rise to similar issues and are sometimes used interchangeably. A distinction is drawn between them here to allow scope to examine how they might separately illuminate the interaction between citizenship and a specific radio format.

In the first instance access refers more specifically to the right of entry, of admission to a medium under any of its three conceptual formulations - as an institution of production, as a presence in a programme text or as a member of the listenership. Access to the category of listener was not always as taken-for-granted or ubiquitous as we now assume. Spinelli observes that the early convergence of the citizen and the consumer had the effect of solidifying inequality and he cites Rudolf Arnheim, "it is the case that wireless, like every other necessity of life from butter to a car and a country house is accessible to anyone who can pay for it" (2000, p. 271). That physical access to the sites of production could be an issue was clear



from the presence of armed military and special branch personnel in the foyer of RTÉ's Radio Centre until recent years. Section 51 regulation, the banning of Republican paramilitary voices on air, was an instance of the exclusion of a group from programme content on the basis of their distance from the dominant political orthodoxy.

Another way to distinguish between access and participation is to examine the opposite sides of each. The opposite of participation is non-participation - inactivity, passivity and non-engagement. The responsibility for these states appears to a large extent to be the choice of the individual citizen. The opposite of access is exclusion - in this instance from production mechanisms and from textual content. Wahl-Jorgensen cautions that it is sometimes hard to detect and assess absences, to render what is invisible visible. "It means it is extremely difficult for us to access evidence of exclusion from mediated citizenship and why such exclusion occurs. .... Exclusions lie, not merely at the point of access to participation but also, in the concrete practices of communication that prevail in mediated forums" (2006, p. 201). It is this very presence/absence, inclusion/exclusion dichotomy that draws attention to what Michael Schudson describes as the, "fundamental problem of membership in democracy of insiders and outsiders" (1997, pp. 298 & 299).

Schudson also notes that the mechanisms of exclusion may be other than the financial, the security personnel or the regulatory, instanced above. Referring specifically to public conversation, he remarks on the necessity of appropriate 'cultural capital'. He notes that citizens will exclude themselves from deliberation for want of the courage to counteract the fear of embarrassment or of criticism or of being made to feel inferior. Citing the 'facework' of Irving Goffman, he suggests that, "Conversation can be and, without appropriate training, education and social equality, normally is, highly inegalitarian". The slow of speech, he says, "are disenfranchised by the articulate and by the glib" (ibid., p. 301). In setting out the conditions for democratic conversation (and by extension for access to democratic media conversation) he suggests that,

What makes conversation democratic is not free, equal and spontaneous expression but equal access to the floor, equal participation in setting the ground rules for discussion, and a set of ground rules designed to encourage pertinent speaking, attentive listening, appropriate simplification and widely apportioned speaking rights. (ibid., p. 307)

There is an element of irony when we remember that one of Nancy Fraser's principal reservations with Habermas's public sphere ideal was that it was based on exclusion. She can say that, "the discursive interaction within the bourgeois public sphere was governed by protocols of style and decorum that were themselves correlates and markers of status inequality" (1992, p. 119). She illustrates her contention by

demonstrating that discussion in the public sphere was based on men's talking habits; that deliberation could evolve into domination; that frequently the 'I' of conversation would be transformed into the 'we'; that the language employed was exclusively the language of reason and that the process assumed zero degree culture.

Clearly degrees and qualities of access vary across mass media constructions - sometimes depending on how large the 'mass' is. At one end of the spectrum are the community initiatives in television, radio, the press and on the internet where citizens have a significant say in the ownership or output of the medium. At the other end are the global media empires where the access and impact of the individual citizen is minimal.

Even in the case of large scale and ostensibly monolithic media institutions, there is a slight danger that by defining access in the terms we have - as citizens being kept out, barred or relegated to being outsiders - that this sets up a vision of the media as heavily fortified, hermetically sealed fortresses subject to only the most strictly controlled incursions by compliant civic raiders. It will form part of the contention of this work that, no matter what alternative constructions are applied to their roles - profiteers, artists, entertainers, purveyors of hegemony - those involved in working in the media, in producing media texts, are in some essential sense, also citizens. This may not be the most salient aspect of their role. They may not recognize this in themselves. It may not be what they are paid for or where they derive their job satisfaction from but they cannot shed their membership of the imagined community to which they belong nor dismantle this facet of their constructed identities merely by virtue of where they are employed. They live and work in a universe of other citizens and they cannot negate the complex web of cross-influences that flow from being uncles, church-goers, best friends, club members or political activists on a Sunday, when they enter their workplaces and professional roles as film editors, broadcast assistants, foreign correspondents or phone-in hosts on Monday.

Access is not simply a question of discrete citizens being facilitated or hampered at the threshold of the media. It also involves recognizing that there are multiple points of leakage, cross-fertilization, cooperation and resistance by citizens within the media and between citizens in the media and outside.

## 2 Participation

Before entering on a discussion on participation in the media, Peter Dahlgren considers the issues surrounding participation in democracy and announces, "Among democracy's many difficulties today is the declining level of participation. .... The internet and other new communication technologies offer new opportunities for citizens to participate in

democracy, especially in extra-parliamentary contexts. Increasingly, contemporary versions of democratic theory render participation as "deliberation" (2006b, p. 23). In making his case that there are other modes of communicative participation, Dahlgren is keen to draw a distinction between participation and engagement.

Participation, he says, follows on from, and is the embodiment of, engagement, giving it civic agency. It is connected "with practical, do-able situations, where citizens can feel empowered" (ibid., p. 24). Participation is more than a feeling and involves in some senses 'activity', if only at the minimum level of playing "one's civic role in a routine, non-reflexive way - as a dutiful rather than a self actualising citizen" (ibid., p. 24). For all of the dominant theories and rhetorics of democracy, "participation is the guiding vision" (ibid., p. 25).

Benhabib tells us, "Since *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas has analysed the development of modern societies in light of the extension of public participation" (1992 p. 104). If a broader sociological context is adopted which embraces the institutional realm, personality formation and the cultural tradition, the meaning of participation is altered away from an exclusive focus on the 'political',

towards a much more inclusively understood concept of "discursive will formation". Participation is not seen as an activity that is only and most truly possible in a narrowly defined political realm, but as an activity that can be realized in the social and cultural spheres as well. .... This conception of participation ... articulates a vision of the political true to the realities of complex modern societies. (ibid., pp. 104 & 105)

If, then, participation is the 'guiding vision' of democracy, it becomes important to explore where civic participation can be exercised in the contexts of the mass media.

The ordinary public, the 'lay' man and woman, have always had a presence in the media but hardly as participants. Their stories as casualties or bystanders, soldiers or sportsmen formed part of the fodder of the early printed press. They were seldom cast as experts, authorities or elites and their only semblance of authorship or input to production was on the letters page (Raemaekers: 2005, Splichal: 2002, Wahl-Jorgensen, 2006). The trajectory in early radio was similar. In both the commercial American model and the Reithian public service models the public had an audible presence as spectators at sports events, dancers during band music shows, congregations at religious services, and they were only named individually as winners of prizes, when dedicating a music request or having 'written in' seeking advice from experts. Here again, the lay voice was all but absent. Input as author, producer or presenter was negligible.

But by the middle of the twentieth century times and technologies had changed considerably. In many spheres the public was less prepared to be treated simply as a passive mass. The technologies of production became cheaper, smaller and more universal. The new technologies took this process to a higher plane. Non-professionals began manipulating recorded music; ham and citizen band transmissions fell in and out of popularity; desktop publishing was available to anyone with access to a personal computer and radio enthusiasts and political activists could readily transmit programmes from bedrooms and garages. Of prime interest to us was the convergence of an increasing trend towards popularisation and commercialisation in radio content and the expanding availability of the telephone. Rosalia Winocur believes that we began to learn more about the expression of public opinion, "when the telephone call-in on radio became popular during the sixties. Since that moment, the presence of citizens in the media has gradually increased, not only as a strategy for the visibility of their needs in the public sphere but also as a resource for legitimating the discourse of different programmes" (2003, p. 25).<sup>2</sup>

Livingstone and Lunt see the movement from paternalistic and elite programming towards a more open and responsive medium as challenging 'traditional oppositions' between producer and audience, text and reader, expert and laity. They show that scholarly opinion is divided on the civic potential of such participation with Scannell (1991), Livingstone (1990) and Corner (1991) enthusiastic about the space for the 'citizen viewer' while Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) speak of the public being more opinionated and less active and Habermas (1989, p. 164) fears "a tranquillizing substitute for action". Carpignano et al. (1990) find some middle ground when, as was noted earlier in this chapter, they suggest that the civic

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<sup>2</sup> Winocur (2003) offers four basic mechanisms for the inclusion of majorities and minorities in the new public space:

1. Opinion polls - ranging from the large-scale professional undertakings to the instant response to polarized issues on interactive TV.
2. Participation in different mediatic and virtual channels - via letters, faxes, texts, emails and telephone calls to radio and television stations.
3. Having a presence in newscasts or programmes of opinion when they can draw attention to their demands as strikers, protesters, demonstrators etc.
4. Participation in community stations or in 'pirate' forms of mediation.

Livingstone and Lunt borrow from Carpignano et al. (1990) to discuss how 'the genuine public' appears on television. Their model requires some tweaking for radio but is useful nonetheless for establishing a scale of passivity/activity. Beginning from the most passive end:

1. The audible public - the source of applause and laughter.
2. The articulate public - reacting to a sports event by chanting etc. or to tension by quietness.
3. The 'real people' - often incidental voices or fodder for games or ridicule.
4. The 'edited public' - as heard in a vox pop or interviews in news and documentaries.
5. The protagonist - in the talk show or phone-in, active, participating, conversing, debating.

(1994, p. 38)

potential of such programmes depends on the manner of citizenship one has in mind.

Luke Goode approaches the debate about participation from a different perspective. He maintains:

... in order to assess the democratic dimensions of the mediascape, we must in fact avoid an exclusive focus on either the wondrous potentials or the existent shortcomings of public access and interactivity, whether it is manifested in various DIY media sweeping the internet, the rise and rise of talk radio and reality TV in broadcasting, or the ersatz 'interactivities' of 'narrowcasting', media-on-demand, and the digital 'me' channel .... We continue to live with and to depend upon dizzyingly huge and opaque media complexes. .... The extent to which the media themselves could be organized in a participatory fashion remains strictly limited. (2005, p. 98)

On-air complaints about the health service; recruiting for a local clean-up or offering an account of empathetic personal experience to support a fellow listener, may all be deemed grist to a massive commercial media mill. They may be utilized to boost ratings; they may be sandwiched between commercial breaks; they may even obscure broader issues of power and commerce but this is not all they do.

There is a school (Higgins and Moss, 1982, Shingler and Wieringa, 1998, Day, 2003) that views such contributions as 'pseudo participation'.

Pseudo participation is tightly controlled, heavily mediated and is facilitated for reasons such as the provision of cheap and popular programming or the projection of an image of exclusivity and localness. ... Commercial media and public service broadcasters in general tend to work at the level of pseudo participation. (Day: 2003, p. 88)

This 'pseudo participation' is, it is assumed, as opposed to 'genuine' participation. This appears to presuppose that there is an ideal genuine participation that is undistorted by mediation and that is unsullied by the corruption of a large-scale media platform, but as Day concedes, participation, even within the community radio model, can become less than satisfactory. Even there, participation can become abused and distorted; it can lead to 'poorer' quality programming; it can attract the odd and the dangerous in the community; it can drift towards commercialisation or a 'star' system by imitating the commercial stations. Over time what was open can become closed and what was attractive can become rigid and exclusive (ibid., p. 102).

It would be facile to contend that the participation that occurs in the commercial or the public service phone-in is not governed by the needs and values of the broadcasting market or that it is not heavily controlled by the institution, but this is not to concede that no genuine participation takes place. For the caller, for the audience and for the programme makers,

such an activity, with all its limitations can be a valuable and productive way of 'doing' citizenship in the real, everyday, mediated world.

If the reservation of the purist is that the discourse of the phone-in is 'tightly controlled' one of the most readily identifiable instruments of that control is the asymmetry of power that exists between the programme host and the callers.

Pierre Bourdieu (1991) makes the case that all linguistic exchange is a power relationship. A hierarchy can be imposed employing, for example, accent, intonation or vocabulary and this can be expressed in a variety of fashions from coercion to politeness. The very recognition of the right to speak (as in the case of the phone-in host naming the next caller – “Katie from Tullamore, good afternoon”) has implications for power and authority positions. The right to speak is frequently framed in institutional settings with symbolic surroundings and in this context, Bourdieu introduces the notion of 'habitus' - "dispositions which incline agents to act in a certain way; a set of practices which evolve towards the regular but which may not be consciously coordinated" (ibid., p. 11).

From the perspective of this work it might be noted that the presenter of *Liveline*, in an article entitled, *Do the Poor only Come out at Christmas? The Media and Social Exclusion* (2002), bemoans the fact that his own programme is predominantly middle class. The question arises from this insight whether, in addition to appreciating how cultural capital might be an advantage on a macro basis between the media and the middle class, there is also a recognition that it might also be a factor on a micro level in the power relationship between Joe Duffy himself and his callers.

Ian Hutchby examines this asymmetry in some detail, noting that talk in talk radio is institutional talk and is structured to promote certain types of argument and confrontation (1996, pp. 6 & 7). The caller and the host occupy two very different spaces of production with the host being located in the studio, which Hutchby deems to be the primary programme location. The host has power not available to others, in verbal patterns, in resources and in social identity. Hutchby employs Conversation Analysis (CA) to examine the multiple linguistic devices available to the presenter - openings and introductions; summarizations and generalizations; closings and dismissals; defining the agenda and distributing the turn-taking. There are instances where a caller may momentarily turn the tables and gain the upper hand in what Hutchby terms, "the quasi-conversational nature of the phone-in" (ibid., p. 39) but in spite of some permeability and uncertainty, the asymmetry will be restored because of the distinctive institutional nature of phone-in talk.

Hutchby is at pains to point out that, just because presenters have power, it does not follow that they always abuse it.

The asymmetry I have noted is simply that hosts are in a position to do this whereas callers, by virtue of the organization of the call are not. ... (P)ower is not a monolithic feature of talk radio, with the corresponding simplistic claim that the host exercises power over the caller by virtue of his 'control of the mechanics of the radio program' (Moss and Higgins 1984:373). Rather, in a detailed way, the power dynamics at work within calls are varying and shifting, instantiated through the details of turn-taking. (ibid., p. 100)

Indeed, Moss and Higgins detect an element of threat to the host. "... the host, despite his ultimate authority, is in a situation of threat. He cannot anticipate the callers subject, the reason for calling, commitment to the topic, emotional state and so on" (1984, p. 373). An effort may be made to filter these imponderables out but this can never be airtight. Moss and Higgins return to the theme that all conversation is inherently imbalanced. There is an element of assertion in commandeering the time, the space and the attention required to speak to another.

Most communicative exchanges are asymmetrical so far as degrees of power or status are concerned. In other words, one party in the exchange has more authority than the other. Further, the type of exchange itself (in this case, studio interview or phone-in chat) is an important factor in determining the degree of competition for precedence or for negotiation for precedence and status. (ibid., p.364)

This is a topic we will return to when discussing production practices.

In his aspiration for deliberative democracy, Habermas stipulated the necessity for parity of participation. Goode is of the opinion that for Habermas,

... mediated communication presents particular challenges to the principal of universal access, which can only be addressed through redistributive measures. ... Habermas' analysis does acknowledge the materiality and not merely the ideology of the public sphere: unequal patterns of access to time, space, literary skills and the like underpin unequal opportunities to participate in the public sphere. But it is also true that, under conditions of increased technological mediation, these problems of material inequality are magnified. (2005. p. 38)

In this light, the host/caller asymmetric power relationship, non-monolithic as it may be, would appear to limit the potential of phone-in conversations to contribute to the public sphere. In order to salvage some of that potential, it is necessary to dwell briefly on the nature of power in practice, particularly in a media context.

### 3 Power

At the outset in this chapter I flagged the intention to examine *Liveline's* capacity to afford civic agency – the capacity to advance the democratic process. Within the framework of deliberative democracy I have suggested its potential for communicative action within the public sphere as one way of framing this capacity. At this point as we are in the process

of interrogating the institutional dimension of the public sphere, it becomes evident that a theoretical thread running through all of these considerations is the notion of power.

*Liveline* operates within bewildering crosscurrents of power. Habermas offers four structural headings (2006, pp. 17 & 18). He speaks of political power. RTÉ and *Liveline* are subject to European regulation, to the laws of the land and to ambient political pressures. In the second instance the programme is embedded in a web of social power. It is located within an RTÉ structural and social hierarchy; it is attuned to the mores of the day; and its business takes place against a background of interpersonal and quasi-interpersonal relationships. Thirdly, he lists economic power. *Liveline* functions in an economy, in a marketplace – a topic we shall return to briefly in the next section. Salaries, licence fees, advertising revenue, defamation damages, sponsorship, technical resources – each of these constructs impacts on the conduct of the programme. Finally Habermas cites media power – the propensity to influence society for good or ill which lies at the heart of this theoretical research. Talking of media power, he says,

Those who work in the politically relevant sectors of the media system (i.e. reporters, columnists, editors, directors, producers and publishers) cannot but exert power because they select and process politically relevant content, and thus intervene in both the formation of public opinions and the distribution of relevant interests. The use of media power manifests itself in the choice of information and format, in the shape and style of programs, and in the effects of its diffusion - in agenda setting, or in the priming and framing of issues.  
(ibid., p. 18)

Further support for the power of the media to frame issues is evident in the work of David Weaver (2007) and of Robert Entman (2007). James Bohman also visits framing and agenda setting themes and sets them in the context of an asymmetry of power. He claims that power works by 'fixing' the to and fro mechanisms of dialogue and results in "systemically distorted communication" (1996, p. 118). He offers examples from talk shows:

Claims to expertise based on accumulated cultural resources and capacities can be intimidating if accompanied by widespread social belief in their privileged epistemic position. They become acts of intimidation when their purpose is to bring discussion to a halt and to settle on one of many possible acceptable interpretations. Right wing talk show hosts in the United States use more direct intimidation as a double bind to poison public discourse: unpopular or liberal guests or callers are intimidated if they do not respond; if they do respond accusations made against them are given public credibility.  
(ibid., p. 115)

John Thompson would have us consider all communication as a form of action and, as such, must be analysed in its "socially contextualised character" (1995, p. 12). To this end, he draws upon Bourdieu's idea of



'fields of interaction' within which, individuals are situated differently, depending on their package of resources. Power, he says - the ability to act in pursuit of one's aims and interests - is related to the position an individual occupies. It is also, he says, 'a pervasive social phenomenon' operating in many different contexts. Like Habermas, he distinguishes four forms of power - economic, political, coercive and symbolic. Their categories are similar but not identical<sup>3</sup>. The differences between them, he assures us, are simply analytical because, in reality, these different forms of power commonly overlap in complex and shifting ways.

Peter Dahlgren is also concerned with asymmetry in the exercise of symbolic power in both its discursive and social guises. He reminds us that, "Deliberative democracy asserts that meaningful political discussion can only take place if all participants are on equal footing" (2006b, p. 31) and again, "the dynamics of deliberative democracy are characterized by norms of equality and symmetry; everyone is to have an equal chance of participation" (ibid., p. 28). From the point of view of this work, it might be asked what chance a first-time, nervous caller has in deliberation with a slick, experienced, professional broadcaster. Dahlgren will claim that, "Reciprocity and equality are ideals that must be fought for rather than assumed. Deliberation by itself cannot attain its own preconditions. .... this does not mean that we should dismiss normative concepts such as equality, citizenship or liberty as illusions, but rather understand in the real world that they are contingent and provisional" (ibid., p. 31). There are echoes here of Nancy Fraser's prescription that a necessary condition for participatory parity is that systemic social inequalities be eliminated. This does not mean that everyone must have exactly the same resources, "but it does require the sort of rough equality that is inconsistent with systemically generated relations of dominance and subordination" (1992, p. 121).

Asymmetry, especially as it applies to participation and access, becomes less problematic if we adopt a vision of power, which does not necessarily link it inevitably to domination and subordination. It is not exclusively about having the upper hand. Carpentier explores alternatives to this powerful /

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<sup>3</sup> Thompson (1995) elaborates:

1. Economic power - stems from human productive activity. In the modern world it finds significant shape in large, complex financial and industrial institutions.
2. Political power - the activity of co-ordinating individuals, generally characterized by the state with a complex system of rules and sanctions.
3. Coercive power - related to political power and involving the threat of force to encourage compliance.
4. Symbolic power - the resources of expression and interpretation via the channels of information and communication. Symbolic power can be exercised at the production, the textual or the reception points of communication and the paradigmatic institutions include the churches, schools and media industries.

powerless dichotomy. Giddens (1979, pp. 91 & 92), he notes, “refers to a ‘dialectics of control’ to describe the interplay of autonomy and dependence, which is at work in any social situation (2001, p. 212). It is these dialectics that allow us to distinguish, on the one hand, between the transformative capacity of power (allowing us to act as agents exercising free will and related to freedom and independence) and, on the other, to the exploitative and the coercive.

(Power) should be seen as a regular and routine phenomenon, instantiated in social action. .... Power relations are ‘relations of autonomy and dependence but even the most autonomous agent is in some degree dependent, and the most dependent actor or party in a relationship retains some autonomy.

(Giddens, 1979, p. 93)

Giddens goes so far as to say that even domination should not necessarily be used in a negative fashion as a noxious phenomenon. In practice, the slickest, most confident and well-informed phone-in host is dependent to an essential degree on the hesitant, rambling caller, who in turn retains a modicum of control.

Foucault (1994, p. 46) contends that the construction of the individual is one of the most important attributes of power and it fits with the connections we propose to examine later between cultural discourses and creating identities as citizens.

Thomas McCarthy shares Foucault's view. "Power is not an evil. Power is ... a sort of open strategic game, where things can be reversed. ... The problem is rather how to know and avoid ... the effects of domination" (1994, p. 264) and again, "power is indeed a productive network that runs through the whole social body. Giving this insight an ontological twist, one could say with Foucault, 'power produces reality, it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth'" (ibid., p. 253). He adds further, "There is no hope of arriving at an adequate account of social integration if the only model of social interaction is one of asymmetrical power relations" (ibid., p. 257). This would seem to imply that we have to employ our own understanding and reflexive array of cultural resources if we are not to see agents (such as phone-in callers or, indeed, hosts) as 'docile bodies' or 'cultural dopes'.

Sarah Mills in her work, *Discourse*, notes that, “power is a relation rather than a simple imposition” (1998, p. 38) and she adds that where there is power there is also resistance. She distinguishes between a discursive and an ideological view or power. The former would have us collaborating in our own subjugation, the latter would have us as simplistic dupes.

Ian Hutchby applies this insight to the phone-in, where observable plays of power and resistance may be observed (1996, p. 112). The asymmetrical nature of the discursive imbalance between the host and callers is often cited as an impediment to such programmes’ potential as a genuine public

sphere but Hutchby argues that power is brought into play by discourse and he too references Foucault, deeming power, 'a value laden vernacular concept', to consist of, "a set of potentials which, although always present, can be varyingly exercised, resisted, shifted around and struggled over by social agents" (ibid., p. 114). Power is not something the host possesses and a caller lacks but it is exercised as a structure of possibilities within a relational network.

Here again caution needs to be exercised. Talk of resistance, relational networks and the creative and emancipatory potential of power should not obscure the reality of the dark side of power as domination. Institutions do attract and seek to retain power for their own ends. Individuals may be exploited or abused in the name of entertainment. Access and participation may be limited to suit institutional needs. Nick Couldry contends that the media have spawned an array of rituals designed to mask conflict and social inequality (2003 p. 4). In trying to grasp how media relate to social order he is critical of the positive perspectives on the media offered by Scannell, Hartley and others.

Unless we rely on the jaded rhetoric of market liberalism, we can know nothing about the actual impacts, positive or negative, of the contemporary media without considering, for example, the uneven symbolic landscape in which popular talkshows address their viewers and also their participants.

(ibid., p. 18)

He observes that the private space of the day-to-day is criss-crossed by 'countless trajectories of power' – economic, political and media narratives – and he emphasises that we cannot hope to separate our hopes and myths from mediated social forms. "How can we doubt that the fundamental question about the media is the question of power, the uneven distribution of the power to influence representations of social reality?" (ibid., p. 119).

The conception of power I adopt does not imply a relativistic paralysis. The critical interrogation remains. The critical importance of emancipation also remains, as does an acknowledgement of the struggles, which aim to achieve inclusive democratisation. Dahlgren suggests, "The project of emancipation becomes one of continual striving to level and disperse power. What constitutes the emancipatory is not a final state but rather a direction; 'progressive' is fundamentally that which fosters the distribution of social power" (ibid., p. 118). Developing from this perspective on power, Chantal Mouffe asks, "if we accept that relations of power are constitutive of the social then the main question for democratic politics is not how to eliminate power but how to constitute forms of power more compatible with democratic values" (2000, p. 14).

Luke Goode also injects a note of pragmatism. He acknowledges that we "continue to live with and to depend upon dizzyingly huge and opaque media complexes" (2005, p. 98). The prospect that they will be

reorganized in a participatory fashion is unlikely, to say the least. Immense power accrues to the media and this power will not simply be dissolved. What is required, he says, is imaginative and realistic proposals to improve media accountability and diversity.

To pull the threads of this section together; callers and listeners to *Liveline* may be engaging with a powerful programme in a cultural context; the programme itself may be embedded in a powerful national medium in a political context; callers may be in conversation with a skilled and powerful host in a quasi-interpersonal context; the contention here is that this does not, per se, imply that callers are powerless either as individuals or as citizens. Foucault's constructive vision of power and its circulation in social networks allow for a reassessment of callers' participation and indeed listeners' interpretations, as being genuinely constitutive of cultural citizenship and not simply being dismissed as pseudo-participation.

### **The Market**

I conclude this section on the institutional dimensions that apply to the actual existing public sphere that is *Liveline* by a brief consideration of the place of the market. It forms an inescapable backdrop to the entire institutional and organisational fabric of the programme. From RTÉ's dependence on the health of the national economy, through the drive to sustain audience share and on to the exorbitant salaries designed to retain the biggest names in broadcasting, the hand of the market is widely discernible. At a programme level it affects the production context – the programme is now perceived as a sponsored product; it is peppered with ad breaks; many of the callers' concerns relate to prices, con artists and financial hardship (see Appendix 4); and the imperatives to keep the entertainment level high and to plug into popular culture are driven in no small measure by market considerations.

Just as power immediately attracts negative connotations, so the market emerges as something of a *bête noire* of citizenship. It is to be treated with caution. Not-being-the-market, as we have seen, was a defining characteristic of PSB. The virtue of the public sphere was its being situated between the market and the state. The market is commonly presented as being at the root of the ills that have befallen the media or those ills perpetrated by the media.

The market is there. It is a fact of contemporary life. It is a social organising system of structural symbolic exchange, which, of itself, is ethically neutral. Janoski (1998, p. 13) sees it as but one societal sphere alongside three others – the state sphere, the public sphere and the private sphere (cited in Aslama, 2006, p. 18). Preston urges us to adopt a holistic approach when we examine “the changing features of the role of the media and ... how these in turn are linked to broader patterns of

change in social, economic and political processes” (2001, p. 101). Trine Syvertsen’s exploration of audiences in the light of changes associated with competition, convergence and digitalisation illustrates such a holistic approach in practice. She queries the ‘unspoken doctrine’ that it is unquestionably better to be a citizen than a consumer and that serving the public as an audience is synonymous with producing bad programmes. She perceives the media as moving from dealing with the public mainly as citizens (as in PSB) and towards engaging with them latterly as audiences and more recently again as customers and players. She suggests that all four of Dahlgren’s categories of citizenship – civil, political, social and cultural – may be served effectively by, for example, the ‘current individual call-in / email-in formats’ where people can variously act in their capacities as audience, as players and as consumers (2004, p. 366).

Thompson notes that the democratic project developed hand in hand with the market economy (1995, p. 351). It is not difficult to see how such congruence might evolve from the protective/liberal strain of democracy with its emphasis on competition and property. He traces the emergence of the institutional dimensions of modern society - towns, trade, news, printing – to changes in the world of money and capitalism (ibid., pp. 47 – 64). Just as democracy has become linked with the institutions of the nation state, it has also found itself aligned with capitalism to the frustration of radical theorists but Phelan reminds us that the market place was central, even to classical constructs of democracy (1991, p. 76). The market allowed a physical space for public assembly and discussion of common interests, as was the case in Plato’s agora. In a similar vein, Richard Sennett discusses the implications for democratic discourses which followed from changes in the marketplace when, for example, after the introduction of the urban market and again when the department store replaced the retail emporium (1977, pp. 18 & 148). Joe Lee remarks that the forces of the market can and do act as a filter against antidemocratic encroachments (1997, p. 11). Peter Dahlgren suggests that capitalism sets the conditions of social reality but that capitalism itself is not a monolith but a disorganised interplay between the dynamic flows evident in production, in consumption in social relations, in knowledge, in information and in patterns of communication (1995, pp. 76 & 77). But, for all the linkage, the market and corporate capitalism in particular have not been seen to serve democracy well. Thompson observes,

A laissez-faire approach to economic activity is not necessarily the best guarantor of freedom of expression, since an unregulated market may develop in a way that effectively reduces diversity and limits the capacity of most individuals to make their voices heard. (1995, p. 239)

This jaundiced opinion of the effect of the market on civic communication would certainly have informed the Frankfurt School’s critical take on the ‘Culture Industries’ and further would have shaped Habermas’s refeudalisation thesis. Worries about the state being a player in the market

may result in manipulation according to Garnham (1990, p. 107) and similarly Ginsborg instances the usurpation of the media by oligarchs. “Not for nothing”, he says, “are Vladimir Putin and Silvio Berlusconi good friends” (2008, p. 29). In their findings about the phone-in, Higgins and Moss conclude that its principal function is to provide a sustained flow of packages of consciousness which conform to consumer ideology (1982, pp. 33 & 34). The commercial is the purpose, they say, and the content is about creating dissatisfaction with the present while the ads hold out a promise for the future (ibid., p. 47). Keane agrees. The very presence of advertising commercialises the structure and contents of programmes. As this point, he believes, the corporate voice has virtually taken over U.S. media but most insidiously, he points out, that advertising is no longer used to sell products – it is there to promote consumption as a way of life (1991, pp. 81 – 85). This marketisation of discourse – that everything must be considered in a market frame - corresponds to Giddens’ fear that the project of the self at the centre of modernity has been commodified. You are what you buy. As with Higgins and Moss, he accuses the market of feeding on the unhappiness it generates.

Mediated experience is centrally involved here. The mass media routinely present modes of life to which, it is implied, everyone should aspire; the lifestyles of the affluent are, in one form or another, made open to view and portrayed as worthy of emulation. More important however, and more subtle, is the impact of the narratives the media convey. (1991, p.199).

In the particular instance as we move forward to the next section where we will examine the representational discourses of *Liveline*, I do not accept that the programme is, in Higgins and Moss’s terms, principally about the commercials. That is a case I must make. But it would be foolhardy not to acknowledge that, as we proceed to analyse the tension between the emotional and the rational, the entertaining and the informative, the personal and the public, that such analysis must be cognisant of a market underlay. Ginsborg reminds us that programming is always dependent on maximising audience (2008, p. 28). Garnham observes that the relationship between psychology, politics and economics has ever been problematic and that the entertainment content of the media has been a primary tool in connecting them (1992, p. 374). Brants and de Haan note how media have taken to using the audience’s own stories as a strategic response to bind their audiences as customers (2008, p. 8). Resisting economic determinism or a fully blown ideological reading of media’s place in democracy does not entail developing a blind spot towards the market but it does entail maintaining a sensitivity and vigilance – Preston’s ‘holistic approach’ - in respect of what is undoubtedly one powerful institutional component of the public sphere.

## Media Representation

"The dimension of representation directs our attention to media output. It is concerned with what the media portray, how topics are presented, the modes of discourse at work and the character of debates and discussions" (Dahlgren, 1995, p. 15). That single quote from Peter Dahlgren, not alone sets the agenda for our consideration of this second dimension of *Liveline* as public sphere, it provides us with the template with which to outline and activate the core research of this thesis. Our intention becomes to investigate *Liveline's* output; to ask what it is portraying; how topics are presented; what modes of discourse are at work and to query the character of the debate and discussions heard on the programme. We remind ourselves that the other dimensions - the institutional, social structures and sociocultural interaction - not alone interplay with media content, but they shape the discursive context. Given that understanding, the focus of this research is distinctly on the contents of *Liveline*.

In 1995 Dahlgren suggested that in empirical terms, such research was concerned largely with journalism. I would surmise from his later work that he would broaden that palette considerably in the direction of popular culture. Even then he wrote, "Representation has to do with both the informational and extra informational aspects of media output, such as the symbolic and the rhetorical" (ibid., p.15). Butsch (2009, p. 8), referring to Dahlgren's dimensions, remarks that there are two senses of the term 'representation' - one connected with how opinions and meanings are shaped to enter the public sphere and the other, connected to how groups of citizens have a voice in that sphere.

What happens on *Liveline* is a great deal of talk - public talk with that 'communicative intentionality' aimed at the audience beyond the studio. This talk may be analysed in a variety of ways but Dahlgren is right; "fundamental issues of truth and accuracy can never become wholly irrelevant. ... From the standpoint of the public sphere, there is a need for continual monitoring of what goes on in the media, analysing specific cases and routine representations" (1995, pp. 15 & 16). He stakes out the territory we must explore in this section. He asks if a Habermasian public sphere model 'wedded to the notion of face-to-face interaction' and aimed at 'discursive logic and communicative authenticity' can be accommodated in a world where the mass media are not about to fade from the scene. He asks if there should be "one overarching mode of discursive reasoning, one key code of communicative logic which is to prevail above all others, or is a multiplicity of different but equal modes to be fostered?" (ibid., p. 16). Related to this, he questions the validity of the assumption, "whereby politics is analytically associated with rationality and entertainment as exclusively pertaining to emotionality. ... Would a few oases of rationality

make much difference in a media culture, the chief characteristics of which are arational?" (ibid., p. 17).

To address these questions and to establish a theoretic frame for analysing the output of *Liveline*, I propose initially to consider the 'modes of discourse' - how packages of communication become meaningful. I propose then to revisit the character of the talk that is heard on air referring to the tensions noted earlier between the formal and the informal; between the rational and the arational. This, in turn, leads us to engage with the rhetorical / performative / entertainment aspects of communication. Has the imperative to maximise listenership and to hold their interest resulted in a 'transmogrified' public sphere? Entertainment, especially as it is manifested in contemporary popular culture, finds its expression in human interest, in emotional connection and in personal stories. A cursory glance will confirm that these are significant components of the staple diet of *Liveline*. Finally, turning to how these discourses are packaged, I explore the production practices of the programme; how is access controlled; how are topics shaped; how is the deliberation managed; and what are the implications of such practices for the public sphere? The host is intimately involved in these processes and is a pivotal player in media representation in both senses of the term.

## **Discourse**

Dryzek and Braithwaite confirm that in our bid to understand, "a bit more precisely just what deliberative democrats mean by the generation of public opinion through deliberation, (that) this is made easier by thinking in terms of *discourses*". They then proceed to define discourse as "a shared set of understandings embedded in language that enables its adherents to put together pieces of information and other sensory inputs into coherent wholes, organized around common story lines" (2000, p. 243)<sup>4</sup>

Guy Cook emphasises different aspects of discourse. On the one hand he claims that the study of discourse, "examines the context of communication: who is communicating with whom and why, in what kind of society and situation, through what medium; how different types of communication evolved and their relationship to each other" (1992, p. 1). Elsewhere he notes that it, "...examines how stretches of language, considered in their full textual, social, and psychological context, become meaningful and unified for their users" (1989, p. ix). Sara Mills offers, "a discourse is ..... grouping of utterances or sentences, statements which are enacted within a social context, which are determined by that social

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<sup>4</sup> They also note that, "Habermas himself did not recognise discourse in this sense, because of his commitment to a Kantian rationalism in which individuals should really see through the unspoken assumptions that define discourses" (2000, p. 243).



context and which contribute to the way that social context continues in existence" (1997, p. 11).

### **Characteristics of Discourse**

I offer a list of characteristics, distilled from the literature, which guide towards grasping the concept of discourse, as it applies in practice to *Liveline*.

1. Discourse is context sensitive. Both Scannell (1998) and Fairclough (1998) note that the meaning of a discourse will vary at points along the communication process. The contexts of production and of reception can significantly effect how meaning is invested and received in any given discourse. The reception context may be altered by factors as diverse as the recipient's state of mind or body, their position in society or their position in the physical world (Cook, 1989)
2. Discourse has a social purpose. It is language in use for communication (Cook, 1989, p. 6). To this extent it is always dialogic or, at least, potentially so. It is, as Leech and Short argue, "a transaction between speaker and hearer, as an interpersonal activity whose form is determined by its social purpose" (cited in Hawthorn, 1992, p. 189). Because of its dialogic nature, Michel Pecheux contends that there is always a conflictual aspect to discourse because it is always in a contest of meanings with other positions. He stresses the ideological struggle as the essence of discourse (cited in Mills, 1997, p.14).
3. There is an inherent cohesion within discourse. Cook calls it the "quality of being meaningful and unified" (1989, p. 4). The coherence is deeper than the surface coherence of a sentence or the coherence of communication viewed simply as text. Coherence allows communication to become meaningful for its users. Cook notes that that a discourse is not determined by its length. That can vary from a grunt of acquiescence to the grand sweep of *War and Peace*. The cohesion within each does not depend on grammatical or syntactical rules but on its capacity to be recognized as coherent. This entails a degree of subjectivity but it is also clear that coherence is perceived socially. There is a degree of agreement. In this way we can recognize genres and modes of discourse and more broadly, for example, the coherence of meaning making narrative forms on a personal and on a societal level.
4. Discourse embodies beliefs, values and categories. In referring to genres and narrative forms, it is only possible to distinguish their characteristics against a shared social frame of reference. Cook

suggests that we organise these meaning clusters into schemata - what we assume others know (1989, p. 60). Presumably they make converse assumptions. He also notes that we recognize a range of discourse types from the universal (song, joke) to the more culturally specific (Christmas card, bank statement).

5. Discourse constructs beliefs, values and categories. It is not simply a matter of discourse being a carrier for shared, meaning-making mechanisms. Discourse is also a player in their construction. When Mills noted above that discourses, "contribute to the way social context continues in existence" (1997, p. 11), she was reinforcing Foucault's (1972) assertion that discourses are practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. Dryzek and Braithwaite can assert that, "Identities are tightly bound up with the discourses in which individuals move and which in large measure constitute identities and their associated points of view. Thus democratic politics is largely about contestation across different discourses" (2000, p. 243). Michael Warner argues that publics are formed by 'the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse'.  
A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than the discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists by virtue of being addressed.  
(2002, p. 50 cited in Hartley and Green 2006, p. 346)
6. Discourse has structure. It is not just a random array of communication symbols or the rules of grammar. There are both formal and informal precepts discernible within the realms of discourse. The formal rules are the rules of each mode of discourse - writing, style, body language, conversation, film etc. The informal rules are the unspoken ones - being "in the know", having social nous or having access to the appropriate cultural capital. Referring to phone-in programmes both Brand and Scannell (1991) and Sara O'Sullivan (2000b) illustrate how the most successful callers intuitively understand and play by the rules of the presenter.
7. Discourse can be omission or silence. Absence can be the expression of the non-reification of values, which have not been legitimised or formulated in a society, possibly because they are not deemed to be of importance. Absence of discourse may reflect areas of social taboo or private, interpersonal no-go areas. The imperative to nonarticulation may be as strong in discourse terms as a multitude of statements or emphatic utterance.
8. There are barriers to discourse. If we accept above that discourse is structured, if there are formal and informal rules, then it follows there

can also be discourse barriers, in Mills' terms (1997, p. 15), or a disparity of access, to borrow from Nancy Fraser (1992). For example, education, ethnicity, gender or physical resources, each can operate as a plus or a minus in affording access to discourse facility or to ensuring that particular forms of discourse are privileged over others. Van Dijk invites us to look at the polarization entailed in the "ideological square" - who is "in", the "we", and who remains outside, the "them" (1998, p. 25).

9. Discourse entails power. Given that there are the aforementioned discourse structures and barriers, then those who can place or overcome these barriers have a range of power. Given too that there are varying degrees of access to the modes and channels of discourse, then there is also power in the hands of those who can achieve ready, frequent or privileged access. Amongst the powers on offer are powers of persuasion; the power inherent in knowledge; the power emanating from the facility to construct a healthy self or social identity and the power to frame favourably the defining narratives within a society. How power is perceived depends on the perspective applied. A critical viewpoint (Fairclough, 1998, Pecheux, 1982, van Dijk, 1998), will interpret this power as, at best, hegemonic, rendering us all compliant in our own oppression, or more negatively, as ideological where we are seen as duped and subject to the dominance of the gatekeepers of discourse. A Social Semiotic approach seeks to examine the contexts of discourse creation in the light of a particular view of social reality and to observe, "the interaction of the different codes which are supposed to realize interdependently this construction". (Meinhof, 1994, p. 69) Meinhof's approach suggests the possibility of multiple, contested and polyphonic meanings emerging from the interfaces between the senders, the messages and the receivers of discourse.
10. Discourse works. Without understating the abuses and symbolic aggression, which may attach to discourse, it is also important to underline its uses and symbolic assertion. It is not unreasonable to consider and even to celebrate, the realness, the everydayness, the *dasein* (in Heidegger's terms) of discourse, as a vital formulation of all human communication. Scannell seems to rejoice in this "beingness" of discourse when he touches on the languages of poetry, song, love and magic (1998, p. 266). It is difficult not to be attracted by Meinhof's multiple, contested and polyphonic meanings emerging from the fuzzy boundaries of transmission and reception. The attraction may lie in contemplating for a moment the obverse - a world where discourse does not function. Scannell reminds us that the discourse axes of, on the one hand, power/knowledge and, on the other, of understanding/truth should not be thought of in an either/or fashion. There is a manifold reality here.

## The Structures of Discourse

In listening to even a handful of programmes one is confronted with a bewildering array of discursive formulations to set against the list of characteristics above. There are multiple contexts of production, transmission and reception; the programme can be construed as serving a raft of civic, cultural and commercial social purposes; a variety of cohesive structures may be deduced or imposed; and we may detect a range of beliefs, and values within the text of the programme.

Part of the challenge in grappling with a concept of discourse lies in the fact, that a variety of categories are employed throughout the literature. Put bluntly, there is little uniformity of discourse on discourse. It is also clear that, while everything is not a discourse, it appears that there can be a discourse of everything. Guy Cook notes that it is not an, "amorphous and undistinguished stream", rather, "it is part of a person's cultural competence to divide the discourse of a society into units, to give these units names and to assign them to categories." (1992, p. 4) It is therefore proposed to offer some categories that may act as a frame for considering the discourses at work in *Liveline*. It will help to distinguish between orders and modes of discourse and to consider why some rather than others of these attain greater recognition and domination.

Just as we organize our actions and social relations into institutions and domains so each of these is shaped and expressed by an order of discourse associated with it. Fairclough suggests:

An order of discourse is a structured configuration of genres and discourses (and maybe other elements such as voices, registers, styles) associated with a given social domain - for example, the order of discourse of a school. In describing such an order of discourse, one identifies its constituent discursive practices (e.g. various sorts of classroom talk and writing, playground talk, staffroom talk, centrally produced documentation etc.) and crucially the relationships and boundaries between them. (1998, p.145)<sup>5</sup>

Fairclough further implies that orders of discourse are not fixed. They can grow, fade, and exhibit trends. His particular concern is with two trends, which we have touched upon previously. - those towards marketisation and towards conversationalisation.

Orders of discourse can range from the broad stroke, symbolic expressions of the grand defining myths and narratives - those of origin, race, nation, and religion - through to the discursive schemata which help to define the individual - discourses of body image, age, gender, etc.

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<sup>5</sup> It is not difficult to transpose this example from the educational institution to the media institution and a suggested categorisation of the on-air discourses of *Liveline* over a two year period is offered in Appendix Four

Where there are readily identifiable social constructs then it is easier to identify the orders of discourse associated with them. Within the systems world, there is reasonable clarity, for example, about the discourses attached to military institutions, the legal world or a particular church. The same holds true in the lifeworld. We may identify discourses of intimacy, family or collegiality.

Modes of Discourse are the forms and shapes that discourses adopt in their expression. They may be spoken - conversations, lectures, gossip, jokes etc. They may be written - text message, script, brochure, love letter etc. They may be connected to neither talking nor writing - body language, warning symbols, music, and fashions. Spoken discourse may be whispered to one other, shouted to many, sung or beamed electronically to our radio sets.

As was noted earlier, dominance per se does not imply abuse of power but it does operate through practices of discursive exclusion. We have also noted that discourse is not fixed, immutable. Consequently we may also observe the emergence of contesting and alternative discourses<sup>6</sup>.

Like other social constructs such as hospitals, government departments etc., the media have their own dominant discursive forms and practices as well as contestations and alternatives. Just as there are discourses of a school staffroom or the officers' mess so there are discourses in a newsroom, a theatre or an advertising agency and like these other organisations, media are also embedded in the wider discourses of society.

But, that is considerably less than half the picture. It can be suggested that discourse is the business of the media - its raw material and its end product. The media contribute to discourse - its shape, its broadcast range, its amplification, its legitimacy, its choice, and its generic context and coherence. The media are indeed a special domain. They are amongst a few that can create meaning for other domains. Not alone do the media have their own specific modes and categories of discourse: not

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<sup>6</sup> Both McLoone (1991) and Coleman (1998) illustrate the implications for broadcasting in a divided society in Northern Ireland where there are two contesting discourses constantly vying for dominance. The most significant reflections and developments on contesting and alternative discourses have emerged from feminist theory. Writers like Lisa McLoughlin, Nancy Fraser and Seyla Benhabib have striven to elucidate a discursive standpoint, which challenges and, in some instances, displaces the discourses of patriarchal hegemony. Other dominant discourses have been subjected to scrutiny. On a broader level, for example, Edward Said has questioned the implications of colonial and postcolonial discourses. Closer to home, Corcoran queries the popular discourse which characterizes the condition of refugees and asylum seekers, "as helpless people leading joyless lives and passively depending on state institutions. Rarely are they seen as active agents who speak up for themselves and rarely are they referred to as potential contributors to Irish society, as professionals or as employment providers. (2000)

alone do they merely reflect and mediate the discourses of society but they are central to the project of discourse construction and maintenance for society. They become the greater engines of discourse dominance and the arenas of contestation. Media discourses shape our world.

It has been noted already that mass media discourse is predominately monologic. Despite limited instances to the contrary, the intentional flow of discourse is primarily one-way, from sender to receiver. We have seen too that it is frequently intertextual. Examples of crossover and leakage between media forms and genres are numerous. We have the book of the film and the film of the book: *Liveline* frequently draws on the news of the day and occasionally makes the news of the day. As Paddy Scannell (1996) points out, media discourses are constructed and have intentionality. The focus of the intentionality may range from time filling, through entertainment and on to persuasion or even coercion but they are nonetheless products - the work of producers. As such, they seek to privilege one version of reality over others. In this regard, John Durham Peters describes the media as profoundly ambiguous institutions where information may be set against advertising; pedagogy against manipulation; enlightenment against control and civic debate against bait to deliver consumers to advertisers (1993).

If indeed the media are such 'profoundly ambiguous institutions' then within the media, the phone-in presents as a further profoundly ambiguous sub-shell. The focus of this research is on the on-air discussion that takes place on a (week)daily basis on *Liveline*. When we attempt to engage with these exchanges as 'coherent wholes', as 'stretches of language considered in their full social and psychological context' and consider how they 'become meaningful and unified' for contributors and listeners, we begin to appreciate the transgeneric and category defying characteristics of the phone-in.

The point is well made by Greg Myers that the tone and composition of calls to a phone-in will vary widely and will be shaped by, amongst other factors, the way the host models the discourse and the public's perception of the communicative location of the programme (2004, pp. 182 & ff.). Some are positioned as slick, cheeky and lightweight; others are more serious, considered and formal. In fact, there is little to be gained by attempting to formulate discursive headings to cater for all examples of the format.

Livingstone and Lunt acknowledge the discursive untidiness of the phone-in – its 'generic ambiguity' (1994, p. 56) and they suggest three generic headings, which we can adapt to suit our purpose, keeping in mind at the same time that such headings can be neither watertight nor exhaustive.

The first one they name as the Debate Genre. This is where the overtly political is most overtly manifested and where the exchanges are close to classical argumentation. Some of the criteria of the public sphere are met and the outcomes in terms of education and information are apparent (ibid., pp 56 – 58). Their second category they name as the Romantic Genre. The host and the audience are constructed as problem solvers. In these instances, individual stories act as the backbone of the discussion. Conclusions are not important and wider political implications are seldom explored (ibid., pp. 58 – 62). Thirdly, they identify the Therapy Genre – a discourse they and others (Crisell, 1994, McCarron, 1997) refer to as ‘confessional radio’ - where the combination of visibility and anonymity offered by the medium seems to create a space that is conducive to venting and healing.

I propose drawing on these categories and will firstly explore the output of *Liveline* in terms of the Debate Genre. I question how this may interact and conflict with the imperative to keep the audience entertained and how it can accommodate arational and emotive argumentative discourses. I also propose drawing on the linked notions of individual stories and confessional radio to see how they may construct civic identities.

## **Debate**

When considering how *Liveline* might fit within public sphere theory we devoted some space to the concept of ‘debate’ or more specifically, to rational critical debate. We observed at that point that the concept carried with it notions of dialogue within a framework of procedural formality, order and rules; a framework where argument is weighed in a climate of mutual respect and civility. Debates are where claims are not just made, they are problematised and justified.

Traditionally it is in the arenas of news and journalism that the mediated form of political debate occurs – panel questions and answers, round table discussions and interviews with politicians. We noted earlier Schudson’s observation that such formal political talk acts as a lubricant for democracy and that it is essentially rule governed, civil and oriented to problem solving (1997, p. 298). We have made the case that while *Liveline* may not be considered as ‘news’ or high journalism, there are areas of cross-over and connection. It is reasonable to suggest that when and where the programme does enter this journalistic territory that we should pose questions about applicable standards of ethics and professional practice. How, for example does the programme handle issues of fairness, balance and objectivity? In a related sense we may ask how Barber’s (1984) prescriptions for ‘strong’ democratic talk – articulation, persuasion, agenda setting, etc. – can be applied to the on-air conversations.

Another aspect of the Debate Genre to which we have already referred is its quality of being rational or, at the very least, reasonable. As a baseline, claims made need to be judged as nonimpulsive, thoughtful and fair. In designing our research we fall back on Habermas's assumption that the programme discourse will, 'mobilize relevant topics and claims, promote the critical evaluation of contributions and lead to rationally motivated .. reactions. (2006, p. 5).

Keeping faith with Graham's observation that "political talk must in part take the form of rational-critical discussion" (2008, p. 20) and having guarded against the irrational, we are nonetheless convinced by the arguments of Dahlgren (2006a) and Hall (2005) that, not alone must debate find room for the arational, but such debate in the public sphere may be the better and more effective for the inclusion of emotion, fun, ritual, myth and so on. Without the elements linked to the body and the psyche there cannot be the enthusiasm, motivation and engagement necessary to animate citizenship to deliver on rational conclusions. Here again, the research must explore these relationships.

When researching *Liveline* within the Debate Genre, we should also examine what actual structures and formalities it entails. A convincing comparative model in this regard is the one afforded by Lunt and Stenner (2005), where they identify the orthodox elements of formal debate in *The Gerry Springer Show*. I would venture that such comparisons should not be as challenging in the case of *Liveline*.

Debates can be interesting, fun, provocative and downright entertaining. Debates attract audiences both live and in the media. As both Greg Myers and Francis Lee point out there is a pleasure in social argument. Referring specifically to phone-ins, Myers ponders the fascination inherent in the format, in the dramatic tensions, in the variety of voices and in the expression of multi-stranded chords of opinion (2004, p. 180). He believes there is more to the entertainment value than Hutchby's (1996) 'confrontation talk'. He suggests that people listen for the pleasures experiences in social interaction and he also suggests the phone-in may be frustrating for those seeking deliberative democracy, given that there is little evidence of minds being changed and rational argument prevailing.

But these criticisms assume that a phone-in with political topics will be experienced as political. People talk about politics, not to change the world but to pass the time with other people, just as they talk about work, sport, celebrities..... and they may listen to such talk, not to participate in the ideal agora, but to experience the pleasure and frustration in sociability, pleasure and frustration made more intimate, not less, by its coming over the phone and the radio. (2004., p. 202)



Lee (2002) agrees, noting that people enjoy debate, not alone because they are public-spirited but because debate is entertaining<sup>7</sup>. Entertainment should not be separated from information. Indeed entertainment forms an integral discursive cross-axis in each of Livingstone and Lunt's three genres – Debate, Romance and Therapy. In our consideration of debate and deliberative democracy in the programme, we become aware of a discursive tension, which is central to our evaluation – maintaining the appropriate balance between, on the one hand, the need to attract, retain and maximise audiences; to enthuse and engage them, and on the other, to filter out those elements which may result in distortion, vacuousness, distraction and depoliticisation - elements frequently attributed to the concept of entertainment.

### **Entertainment**

Livingstone and Lunt's genre descriptors – Debate, Romance and Therapy – refer, in the main, to the content of what is broadcast. Entertainment refers to the form. All speech, indeed all communication, has of necessity, performative elements and not merely as accidental add-ons but as essential features of the communicative function. Even the most deadpan, flat delivery conveys something of the meaning, intended or otherwise. Dahlgren observes that any emphasis on performance is at odds with the Habermasian ideal, which positions itself against the use of rhetoric and eloquence and pro universalist discursive criteria. He deems this reluctance, “not only unrealistic but undesirable, since it undermines the potential richness and vibrancy of political discussion for an illusory ideal” (2006a, p. 280). Habermas is contrasted with Bakhtin who asserts that, “living discourse is necessarily charged with polemical qualities, myriad evaluative and stylistic markers and populated by diverse intentions. To participate in dialogue is to immerse ourselves in a plethora of alien words and discourses” (cited in Gardiner, 2004, p. 36).

It is these ‘polemical qualities’ of the media which Altheide and Snow remind us are significant in our lives because they provide the form and content of cultural categories and experiences. Dominant and all-pervasive amongst these is entertainment. Audiences turn to the media to play; to be entertained (1991, p. 15). Apart from the obvious entertainment programmes, they note that entertainment has ‘invaded’ all media genres – news, sport, talkshows, religion etc. Programme makers may talk of ‘production values’, ‘visual appeal’, ‘flair’, ‘good radio’ and so on but, “it all reduces to the entertainment perspective and nobody in the business seriously attempts to deny this, much less attempts to change it. More

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<sup>7</sup> Lee points to Habermas's citation of Immanuel Kant's observation

If we attend to the course of conversation in mixed companies consisting not merely of scholars and subtle reasoners but also of business people or women, we notice that besides storytelling and jesting they have another *entertainment*, namely arguing (Habermas 1989:106, emphasis added). (2002, p. 73)

important (audiences) have come to expect and demand it" (ibid., p. 46). While I would question the determinist tone of their thesis, I believe they are correct when they assert that while traditionally media have been analysed as devices that facilitate information, at the same time entertainment features in the form of 'star' presenters, the construction of 'stories', and aping the attributes of fiction and drama, are on the increase. They, "have become a taken-for-granted interpretation scheme for audiences, important in the task of developing theory to explain such matters as personal identity and cultural change" (ibid., pp. 48 & 49).

Liesbeth van Zoonen queries whether citizenship can be pleasurable and she draws a distinction between the discourses of politics (which she deems to be in decline) and the discourses of entertainment (which suffuse popular culture). She also points out that the term 'entertainment' is something of a catchall, being variously applied to an industry, to media and to cultural genres, and to concrete products. She suggests it is most usefully regarded as an effect; one which is in the realm of the psychological and which results in gratification and enjoyment (2005, pp. 9 & 10). She notes also that it is generally the subject of jaundiced analysis when viewed in civic terms, carrying overtones of malaise, immediacy, superficiality, passivity and narcissism in the eyes of critical theorists. In this sense entertainment is often perceived to be the opposite of 'serious' journalism – this journalism being targeted at citizens while entertainment is more the province of consumers. In that regard, it should be borne in mind that the categories of journalist / entertainer and citizen / consumer are neither watertight nor discrete.

Brants and Neijens observe that entertainment in the media may be recognised both in content and in format. They list entertainment elements under both headings – sensationalism, personalisation, heightened dramatic conflict, quick tempo and fewer abstractions, host personality, informality etc., etc. They note that in talk shows entertainment is increased by aspects of the private sphere such as, "intimacy, spontaneity and personal feeling. Drama and the narrative centred around individual characters allow for audiences to identify with emotions" (1998, p. 152). The relevance in that for gauging the entertainment quotient of *Liveline* is obvious. When we set *Liveline* against the criteria tabulated by Brants and Neijens it emerges, broadly speaking, on the entertainment side but individual programmes or segments within programmes may shift significantly across categories. Ultimately there is a danger that such categorisation feeds into an artificial dichotomy. Disentangling the entertaining from the informative in *Liveline* will be no easier than with other acts of communication, be they interpersonal or mass mediated.

The concept of 'infotainment' has been posited to describe the raft of emerging media genres which blend and meld elements from both

discourses. Francis Lee finds the concept useful to establish the political significance of phone-in radio programmes.

Put simply, *infotainment* refers to the breakdown of the distinction between entertainment and information contents on the media. It is manifested in the development of program genres that do not fall squarely into the two traditional categories, and talk radio is a prime example here. Infotainment is also manifested when a larger and larger dose of entertainment elements is injected into traditionally information contents or vice versa. (2002, p. 59)

Lee enumerates a list of concerns. The fear is that infotainment is a form of 'dumbing down', lowering the entrance requirement for serious discussion and trivialising politics. It may displace important information and lead to a decline in rational critical discourse. However he concludes that such fears are based on the assumption that information and entertainment are seen as competing, mutually exclusive discourses. In fact, he says, they are complementary. Dramatising the news, for instance, has been shown to attract viewers who might otherwise ignore bulletins. "It increases their emotional involvement with significant issues and stimulates them to think and care about these issues" (ibid., p. 60)

When the assumption of conflict between information and entertainment is dropped, infotainment may even be regarded as having a democratising influence on the political order. It may provide alternative ways for people to access political information. It may expand the boundaries of the political agenda. And it may provide a way for people who are not used to logical-rational deliberations to connect themselves to politics. In the end, infotainment may help reduce the inequality in political participation among different groups of people. (ibid., p. 60)

Useful though it is, I am not totally comfortable with the concept of infotainment. It smacks a little of the mythical camelopard – a simplistic convenience which offers a handy reconciliation between two polar positions without challenging us to interrogate a complex and multilayered set of interrelationships. Delli Carpini is right. The opposite of news is not entertainment (2009, p. 2). There is no news without entertainment – without presentation, performance, drama, story and inherent human interest.<sup>8</sup>

Dahlgren remarks that in "the late modern media milieu where this blurring of traditional genre categories, increasingly challenges the 'unproductive polarisation', that various forms of popular culture play important political roles for democracy" (2006a, p. 276). He points to the body of work on popular culture of, for example, Corner and Pels (2003), Hermes (1998), and van Zoonen (2005) where, it is argued, people are helped to connect

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<sup>8</sup> Dry stock market reports depend on echoes of gambling, winners and losers, urgency, the exotic, distant disasters and so on. The opposite does not necessarily hold; slapstick, as an example, bears but the faintest connection to news as a genre.

the private and the public, the personal and the political. Apart from acknowledging that connection, it is not our purpose here to locate *Liveline*, in any detail, in the landscape of popular culture. It is a landscape where the elements of entertainment are prized.

When we examine the civic implications of entertainment we are reminded of Corner and Pels' dictum that politics is an art and not a science and that consequently understanding is more amenable to an aesthetic logic than a rationalist one (2003, p. 8). Habermas acknowledges that, "Issues of political discourse become assimilated into and absorbed by the modes and contents of entertainment", but fears that, "Besides personalization, the dramatization of events, the simplification of complex matters and the vivid polarization of conflicts promotes civic privatism and a mood of anti-politics" (2006, pp. 26 & 27). Against that, Dahlgren insists that because, "In our everyday lives we make sense of our experiences, ourselves and the world around us largely through an 'arational' mode, a combination of using our head and our heart. There is no reason why the public sphere should – or even could – be any different" (2006a, pp. 275 & 276). In building towards his case for cultural citizenship (a concept we will visit in greater depth at a later point), he employs John Ellis's (2000) phrase of 'working through' to explain how media output helps us to make sense of what we see and experience in our daily lives.

Van Zoonen concludes at the end of *Entertaining the Citizen*:

The conclusion to the original question .... must be that citizenship can be entertained through the popular vocabularies offered by personalization and dramatization. On the simplest level, these vocabularies are entertaining in the sense that they make citizenship simply more pleasurable for more people, but they also offer instruments to think about what citizenship should mean, and they invite a hospitable surrounding for the performance of citizenship. (2005, p. 147)

As we shall see the producers and the host of *Liveline* are sharply aware of entertainment – not necessarily in any cynical, frivolous or exploitative way – but in their desire to maximise audiences and deliver 'good' radio. Ultimately they are entertainment professionals. Their audience expects to be entertained – to pass time enjoyably, to be engaged sociably, to encounter the dramatic and to be diverted by the stories of others. If this was not their expectation they would be listening to something else or doing something else. They come to the radio for enjoyment. I have attempted to establish in this section that being entertaining is not at odds with the political or with citizenship. It has been necessary too to consider entertainment as a discursive effect in order to proceed to two further linked discursive modes - the emotional and the narrative – and to two linked discursive contexts – production practices and the role of the host.

## Emotion

The previous section houses the suggestion that emotion is in some way a quality or component of entertainment. It is difficult to conceive of entertainment genres, which do not depend heavily on their emotional content. Music, comedy, drama, poetry, football – each only makes full sense and invokes a rounded response in us when we recognise its affective dimensions, be they laughter, suspense, excitement etc. Altheide and Snow confirm that entertainment must be imbued with emotions, both positive and negative, and they refer specifically to radio, a medium which they note, “can be practical, playful, emotional and social”, for listeners as they go about the business of the day (1991, pp. 17 & 19).

Pantti and Husslage also observe that emotions generally signify entertainment but they, “are typically coupled with negative concepts such as sensationalism, popularisation, commercialisation and tabloidisation” (2009, p. 81). They note that a suspicion towards emotionalism is deeply rooted in journalism. I would suggest that this suspicion is more widespread than that. “Emotion is often seen as best for dealing with less relevant matters – matters of ‘human interest’- or even as an impediment to rational critical discussions” (ibid., p. 81). These ‘less relevant matters’ seem to translate into issues associated with the intimate and private sphere, what Munson refers to as “the domain of intimacy, personal loyalty and sentiment (where feeling counts)” (1993, p. 153). Benhabib links this association with the exclusion of women from the public sphere and condemns the neglect of moral emotions as an “epistemological deficit” (1992, p. 575).

In working to remedy such a deficit, we find little clarity in defining ‘emotion’. The dictionary refers to, ‘a moving of the feelings; an agitation of the mind; one of the three phenomena of the mind – feelings distinct from cognition and will’ (Collins, 1997, p. 346). Maybe it is best summed up as the affective aspect of consciousness. Luke Goode builds a case for including the body and its desires in the public sphere. He reminds us that this sphere is populated by the corporal “as well as by words, thoughts and ideas” (2005) and that we have to find a way to accommodate the resultant tensions and contradictions. This accords with Dahlgren’s critique of the Habermasian perspective which, “ignores amongst other things, important aspects about how the psychological and psychoanalytic processes actually work in the human subject” (2002, p. 8).

Emotion is central to the discourses of *Liveline*. It frequently manifests in the form of humour, anger, indignation, fellow-feeling and in stories of loneliness, triumph, betrayal, vulnerability and fear. Emotion is part of the drama of the programme; the attraction that binds listenership. As Sara O’Sullivan observes, we gauge the sincerity of a caller based on their perceived depth of emotion. This constitutes part of a successful radio

performance (2005, p. 725). Programme makers are aware of this. Munson talks of the call-in show making public spectacle of private passion (1993, p. 92) and O'Sullivan illustrates how the potential to have a caller cry on air is actively valued by the team<sup>9</sup>. Both Higgins and Moss (1982, p. 212) and Hutchby (1996, p. 59) refer to phone-in hosts 'mining' the calls for drama.

Such an institutional, artificial ratcheting up of the emotional is almost intuitively at odds with the naturalness and the very sincerity we expect from phone-in conversations. It is not that we demand the boring or that we fail to recognise that our own interpersonal talk has produced and performative features. The fear is that the artificial will dominate. In a situation where, as Hutchby (1996) explains, there is significant discursive asymmetry, the artifice can cross the line into exploitation on the part of the host and voyeurism on the part of the listeners. Lunt and Stenner name the danger that an excess of emotional expression can disrupt the communicative ideals (2005, p. 64). Livingstone and Lunt develop the theme. They talk of debate degenerating into quarrels, 'characterised by intensity, emotional expression and a commitment to assert one's point at all costs' (1994, p. 134). They say that, while emotions need not preclude a satisfactory argument, they are of the opinion that excessive emotion does tend to undermine it in practice (*ibid.*, p. 135). They acknowledge that the host has a difficult job, holding the line between encouraging emotional expression as a token of authenticity and placing boundaries so that other forms of argument may be sustained.<sup>10</sup>

Gamson says of the TV talkshow that, "it is emotions rather than cognition that are the talkshow stock in trade. Talkshows primarily pursue ratings through emotional moments" (1999, p. 193). This may not fit the phone-in

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<sup>9</sup> O'Sullivan cites one Broadcasting Assistant on the *Gerry Ryan Show* who protested that she was not trained to be a Samaritan. "One of the team explained that if you got a particularly sensational call you might run into the studio screaming 'I think she'll cry [on-air]". For a problem call, crying on-air would enhance the performance and increase the perceived sincerity of the call. This apparent callousness can be seen as a correct orientation on the part of the researcher; she is oriented to the listening audience and not the caller. The aim of any call is to entertain the audience and not to solve people's problems, although this is not to deny that many people are helped as a result of going on-air" (2005, p. 725)

<sup>10</sup> Radio critics in the press take a dimmer view. Gerry McCarthy writes, Questions still need to be asked, however about the ethics of Duffy's approach. ... *Liveline* seemed at times to be exploiting the issue (cystic fibrosis) whipping up emotionally charged ferment at the expense of vulnerable people. Any such critique needs to be carefully qualified. *Liveline* is not simply exploitative ...but the show is necessarily involved in the fight for ratings and this can lead into a kind of emotional pornography. (*Radio Waves*, 31/07/2008, p. 1)

Michael Ross is less temperate. Commenting on one programme hosted by a stand-in presenter, he writes of a choreography of anger and distress and the "exploitation of a vulnerable individual to service the appetites of the vultures who produce and feed upon *Liveline*" (*Radio Waves*, 31/07/2005, p. 13)

exactly but it points to two considerations. Firstly, we are reminded once more that we are engaging with 'institutional talk'. Secondly, to ignore the emotional discourse and its civic implications would be to miss a significant part of the picture.

We must then ask how emotions can feed into citizenship. Traditionally, as Hall (2005), van Zoonen (2005) and Dahlgren (2006b) point out, emotion has been linked to a failure of judgement and a lack of sound reasoning. Hall makes a convincing case for 'passion', the affective quality that inspires enthusiasm, loyalty and engagement. She asserts that such emotion is not irrational but 'intertwined with reason' and to attend to one and to exclude the other dooms any understanding of the complex interdependence between passion, reason and politics (2005, pp. 3 – 7). Without passion there is no motivation and righteousness; our civic agency flounders in apathy. Dahlgren enlists Hall to support his contention that emotion is far from blind; it involves a vision of the good; it is crucial for political choices, for creating political community, and for motivating political action (2006b, p. 25). Emotion, he argues, must be inserted into deliberation.

Deliberation must depart from Habermas' ideal which undermines the potential richness and vibrancy of political discussion and is likely to deflect engagement. I would add that passion, in the sense of intense enthusiasm ..., must also be an inexorable element in motivating citizens in deliberative democracy. (ibid., p. 30)

Mouffe also sees passion and emotions as securing allegiance to democratic values. She believes that, "the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public in order to render a rational consensus possible but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs" (2000, p. 16)

Apart from the motivational, what of the other emotions? Does experiencing and sharing on-air expressions of joy, or sadness, love or hatred help us to become better citizens? Pantti and van Zoonen believe that such emotions are fundamental to politics and decision-making. They propose that a case should be made for "reconceptualisation of emotions as providing an essential basis for political rationality and as necessary for collective action" (2006, p. 210).

Gamson suggests that 'emotional public spheres' like talkshows can help to counteract the exclusion of women from the public sphere and in so doing, celebrate the authority of the emotional experience by moving the personal into public view, "and putting forth an 'alternative epistemology' in which personal expressions and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process" (1999, p. 198). Pantti and Huslage insist that emotional talk's political relevance arises from the fact that, "mediated emotional expressions are central in building the emotional environment that shapes public discussion and participation. Moreover, citizens giving

expression to their uncertainties, fears and hopes, may provide openness and richness to public debate” (2009, p. 82). Pantti and van Zoonen suggest that mediated expressions of emotion establish and reinforce ‘feeling rules’ (2006, p. 211) – we learn the appropriate emotional behaviours and responses just as rational discussion may lead us to norms and rules. Small wonder then if Barber suggests that empathy lies at the heart of ethical development.

Empathy has a politically miraculous power to enlarge perspectives and expand consciousness in a fashion that, not so much accommodates as transcends private interests and the antagonisms they breed. A neighbour is a stranger transformed by empathy and shared interests into a friend.

(1984, p. 189)

When we come to apply the principles of deliberative democracy to *Liveline* we must resist judging the emotive discourses of the programme as being at odds with the elements of rational debate. We must not be lured either into seeing the emotive discourses as some sort of complementary add-ons that decorate otherwise rationally established arguments. Both the rational and the emotional are indistinguishably coupled in revealing the political. Cognition must be present in order for the reasonable to prevail and to lend structural normativity. However, as Hermes puts it,

Emotion is part of how we come to interpret the world around us and form opinions about it. Anger, hatred, grief and sorrow point to how we understand the relation between individuals and collectivities – and what standards we feel should prevail.

(2006b, p. 30).

Van Zoonen points to the theory of Affective Intelligence to show how “emotion and reason interact to produce a thoughtful and attentive citizenry” (2005, p. 66). Wessler and Schultz distinguish between different stages in deliberation. The first phase they see as, “the discovery of issues and problems, the building of the media agenda. ...to ensure that the particular problems and concerns are not completely forgotten or marginalized” (2009, pp. 17 & 18). They suggest that at this phase there is strategic room for emotional protest and accusation even if such attention-gaining techniques do not always adhere to civility standards. They seem to suggest that emotional input should step back once the problems have reached the public agenda and that debate should then focus on justification and weighing of arguments.

This conjunction of emotion and reason happens frequently in *Liveline* and occurs in the form of ‘witness’ – “the entitlement to tell an event both factually and emotionally” (Hutchby, 2006, p. 82). This personalised relating of experience to make a point is one of the principal argumentative devices employed by callers and facilitated by the host. These stories act as a vehicle for factual and emotional evidence; they offer support and testing of validity claims and they add significantly to the informative and entertainment values of *Liveline*.



## Stories (The Confessional Genre)

*Liveline* is a mosaic of stories as is evident from Appendices 1 and 4. Complaints and protests are grounded in tales of personal woe. Callers share their troubles (and less often, their triumphs) with the public sometimes as a warning, sometimes as a plea for help and sometimes just to share them. It could be argued that all of talk radio takes a storied form – news reports, interviews and documentaries – but the phone-in, according to Gamson, undercuts the specialist and professional voices of other genres in favour of the authority of the lay experience and individual testimony in an, “intersection that collapses personal experience, physical evidence and emotion” (1999, p. 195). Sara O’Sullivan could be writing about *Liveline*:

The major component of the show is callers’ stories about themselves and their everyday lives. Topics cover both mundane and extraordinary aspects of everyday experience. Routine activities like going to the supermarket or the dentist, driving and getting up in the morning are all packaged into entertaining stories by callers to the show. (2001, p.1)

Storytelling is the programme’s dominant discursive form. Stories, as Livingstone and Lunt remind us, afford an opportunity to provide evidences and to substantiate claims, at the same time they can interrupt critical discussion. They also note that there is pressure on contributors to keep their stories relevant, informative and entertaining but in spite of that, on-air stories to verify claims are not necessarily neat or sequential.

Rather, argument is built up in a haphazard manner by layering recursion and repetition, giving participants a chance to add their stories to current and earlier points. ... Storytelling locates a place in the programme for the expression of emotion – establishing authenticity and relieving tensions. ... The focus on diverse individual experiences distracts attention from any contradictions or oppositions between personal stories. Through their diversity and particularity, stories also resist dominant explanation, bringing together the public and private by asserting the private, the lived reality over public control and institutional inadequacies. (1994, p. 140)

Stories in *Liveline* can vary from the narrative inherent in brief question and answer exchanges up to extended reminiscences, which can on occasion last an entire programme or be revisited over a number of programmes<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Catherine Kohler Riessman locates such stories within the Western narrative tradition. She writes of stories having an “I”; of their chronicling events in the right order; of their being topic centred; and of their dependence on specifics – the ‘who’, ‘what’, and ‘where’. She characterises them as being composed for particular audiences and of fitting at particular moments in history where they draw upon taken-for-granted discourses. Like Aristotle’s Tragedy, they are a representation of events; they are structured into a beginning, a middle and an end; they are ordered into a plot line involving characters; and they are rooted in the consequences of an equilibrium being disturbed (2008, pp. 2 – 4). I would suggest that the epistemology embedded in the Western narrative tradition may illuminate links ranging from grand constructions, as in Bettelheim’s (1976) *Uses of Enchantment* to the more mundane phatic greetings on the streets of Dublin – “What’s the story?”

Stories can belong to a single teller or they may snowball co-operatively into a communal construction and, as O'Sullivan points out, these stories can feed on or play into the greater stories of an era. But, more often than not, we are not listening to the grand narratives, of which she is chary, but to the *petit récits* – those smaller, personal, particular stories.

Paddy Scannell points to the principles of communicative entitlement – “To have an experience is to be entitled to describe an event that happened to oneself and to say what one felt about it” (1989, p. 162) – and he credits participatory media with augmenting that entitlement by extending the universe of discourse and by entitling previously excluded voices which, “are there to authenticate, to embody the human consequences of events. Their testimony is particular” (ibid., p. 162). Ian Hutchby, in his observations on phone-ins, estimates that 80% of callers made witnessing claims - they claimed to be present at an event; to have had personal experience or access; or to be members of a relevant category (pensioners, unemployed, single parents, for example) (2006, p. 83).

We must also question whether the balance of effect falls on the side of this claim validation or if the impact of these stories predominantly fits with Livingstone and Lunt's 'Therapy Genre'. It could be inferred from Gamson that the storied voice of the caller is indebted to an ideology, “in which emotional experience is the most respected reality. Tell the truth; get it off your chest.... This is an ideology that borrows most heavily from psychotherapy, ... from religious traditions of confession, and from cultural traditions that value first-hand personal knowledge” (1999, p. 95). Gamson sees this ideology of 'truth-living-up-to-my-experience' (as opposed to deductive logic and reasoned persuasion) being exploited by the media as a ratings grabbing strategy.

O'Sullivan describes these 'troubles telling' stories where the talk is an end in itself. The focal object, she suggests, is the caller and the caller's experiences.

The caller is looking for emotional reciprocity rather than advice. Subsequent callers, who call to recount similar experiences, provide this reciprocity. (The host) also provides these callers with sympathy and support. These callers are found to have the least concern with issues of performance.

(2005, p. 722)

It would be incorrect to infer that because stories are inwardly focussed and related on occasions for therapeutic reasons, they are not therefore political or significant within the public sphere. We remember Graham's definition of the political as a personal concern raised in public as an issue for consideration. We remember also that the primary communicative act is not the caller talking to the host but rather the programme being broadcast to a large audience. The political potential of stories of personal

experience becomes heightened when such stories can bring the powerful to task and the legitimacy of powerful institutions is scrutinized. Phone-ins in RTÉ can point to a track record of political impact when it comes to what O'Sullivan describes as 'survivors stories'<sup>12</sup>

Talk radio has provided a space for these stories to be told and so has had a role to play in forcing the private experiences of Irish women and children into a very public arena. Rather than acting as a substitute for the sacrament of confession, these survivors have used talk shows to declare not that they are sinners but that they have been sinned against. (2000b, p. 158)

The storied nature of *Liveline* sits comfortably with Giddens' (1991, p. 54) construction of the reflexive project of the self in terms of modernity. As O'Sullivan explains it, "A person's identity is to be found ... in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going, that is to sort events into a coherent story about the self" (2000b, p. 156). All media forms may act as a resource for the building and the revision of our biographies but, "The radio facilitates the development of reflexive self identities by providing space for listeners to tell their stories. In addition, listening to debate and discussion on talk radio shows can provide the audience with information that enables their individual reflexive projects" (ibid., p. 156). Moores sees talk radio and its stories as an opportunity for the "inner speech – the stories we routinely tell ourselves in an effort to impose some sort of order on the fragments of modern cultural experience - to be supported by public representations to give them shape and meaning" (2000, p. 139).

Livingstone and Lunt deem the stories to be so familiar that we hardly avert to them. Stories like these very often, "emerge from the flow of informal conversation" (1994, p. 139). They are correct in suggesting that storytelling is valued in most societies as the repository of folk wisdom and as encoding moral positions. In this case I believe they mean the longer, publicly identifiable story forms as opposed to the more micro personal coherence narrative structures. Benhabib summarises the importance of telling both the micro and macro stories.

About storytelling, I think we are basically creatures who create narratives. We think of ourselves in terms of narratives; we live our narratives, our lives are based on the narratives we tell ourselves, others, our recollection of others' narratives and so on. If you have a temporal consciousness you also have a narrative consciousness. (Wahl Jorgensen, 2008, p. 969)

Further than that, she declares that storytelling can aid the formation of an enlarged mentality and in the ability to take the standpoint of the other in the deliberative process – a different perspective, perhaps on Moores' reference above to 'encoding moral positions'.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Gerry Ryan Show* in 1993 was described as 'classic radio' when Ryan gave rape victim, Lavinia Kerwick, time and space to quietly describe her ordeal after her rapist was leniently dealt with by the courts of the day. *Liveline* (as we will see) became a platform for the voices of Residential Institution child abuse.

Van Zoonen sees the focus on narrative and on individuals as “defining paradigmatic and syntagmatic features of pop culture” and claims it is justifiable to examine how ‘personalisation’ and ‘dramatisation’ change how we engage in politics. Andra Leurdijk credits contributors’ stories for bringing concrete experiences and examples, and commonsense arguments into counterpoint with the abstractions of experts but the consequence of this, she says, is to favour certain perspectives on social problems above others.

Causes of social problems are attributed to individual failure just as solutions are expected to come from individual achievement. Structural causes get less attention. ... In general, discussion remains on the level of personal experiences and anecdotes. ... all show a tendency to antiformalism and a preference for grounding evidence in personal experiences.

(1997, p. 159)

The fear persists that a diet of particular and personalised stories may actually stymie politicisation. Institutional power becomes obscured and policies and processes remain unchallenged in the bid to reach a happy ending for the individual protagonist. O’Sullivan cites Bourdieu who typified such ‘human interest’ as being “apt to arouse curiosity but require no analysis” (1997, p. 51).

Being mindful of their very ordinariness and of their potential as a discourse to offer coherences, which may point away from, rather than towards the political, we must remain sensitive to the hegemonic possibilities of callers’ stories. This mindfulness is heightened when we consider that we have been referring only to those stories, which make it through screening and get on-air. The culture and practices of the production team open up a whole other discursive context that we must take into account.

## **Production**

We have been concentrating on Dahlgren’s Representational Dimension as we interrogate this actual existing public sphere. To that extent we have been trying to establish how the content of *Liveline* can be credited with civic agency. In other words can it make better citizens of its audience? The discourses we have chosen to highlight – debate, entertainment, emotional expression and narrative – have led us to consider a series of tensions. We ask how audiences can be maximised while at the same time filtering out deliberative distortions; we ask how listening can be fun while at the same time helping us to make sense of the political; we ask how emotional expression can enhance and not overwhelm other forms of argumentation; and we ask how the personal stories selected for each show can point to the common good as well as to individual resolution.

These tensions in the content of the programme are inherent in the work of the production team. In fact, production is the point where these tensions are generated, made manifest and negotiated. The production process provides a significant discursive context for the talk that is transmitted, though Paddy Scannell points out that it is not the only one. The programme, he reminds us, is received in a different context from that in which it is produced and in clarifying, “the dynamics of the communicative process in broadcasting and its basic social relational features, the pivotal fact is ... that the broadcasters, while they control the discourse, do not control the communicative context” (1989, p. 149). Nonetheless it is my observation that the production process is frequently overlooked. It is certainly under-researched and where programme producers are featured they are generally regarded in a negative light. We see them chasing profit margins, purveying elitist ideology and diverting attention from the moral and the political. There is doubtless every reason to interrogate vigorously these aspects of their functions but this need not preclude a balanced recognition of the positive, the constructive and the aesthetic elements of their role. They furnish us with enlightened and undemanding companionship and provide a soundtrack to stretches of our lives. After all, we routinely invest a massive trust in their professionalism; in their capacity to deliver, not alone ‘good’ radio but radio that may accomplish some good.

The production team, in the case of *Liveline*, refers to the executive producer who carries overall responsibility for the show; there are also two or three other producers, one of whom is at the helm on any given day. The programme also has the services of a couple of programme coordinators and a programme researcher. The studio sound technician also contributes to the production process and of course, there is the presenter who is central to the team but whose role is pivotal enough to be treated separately in the next section. The format for the material they shape into *Liveline* will be outlined in Chapter Four.

In terms of output, the job of the team is to produce talk. For all its apparent informality and by virtue of the fact that it is produced, this talk is, as we have noted, institutional talk.

As business enterprises the media are organizations dedicated to the constant task of getting the daily work done. They are not just moneymaking machines. They are also organizations in which people work and are thus subject to organizational pressures common to all work.

(Tuchman, 1974, p. 4)

In other words, this is not spontaneous chat. Producing this talk is someone’s job. For them it is part of their routine. As Scannell points out in the first chapter of *Radio, Television and Modern Life* (1996), programme making is part of the ordinary world and the basic problems of the job have been long solved. The production process is largely unproblematic. In any given programme the team can call upon a wealth

of institutional experience, on familiar rules of thumb and on precedent. The whole business has become routinised. We are told that at its kernel the job entails filling a time slot with programme material (Scannell, 1996, O'Neill, 1993, Livingstone and Lunt, 1994) and doing it in such a way that competing commercial, social and cultural pressures are kept in check. O'Neill pithily characterises the production process as originating, executing, arranging and delivering for transmission (1993, p. 67).

Sara O'Sullivan notes that radio is less produced than TV (2000a, p. 58). Both the formats and the technology are simpler. In the case of programmes where the public participate, Ytreberg believes that the production team's routine, "largely consists of patrolling the format and seeing to it that input is understood in terms of it (2004, p. 680).

Livingstone and Lunt make the point that all debates and conversations are to some extent managed (1994, p. 40). Every conversation, even a soliloquy, is a production. There is a degree of selection, organisation, management and performance involved. True, the degree of management in a radio programme is on a different plane but the underlying fact that all communication is a production should not be ignored especially by those who would fault *Liveline's* production team for their shaping and packaging the programmes discourses.

The phone-in requires a specific set of production skills. Many of those revolve around handling the access aspects of the programme and its live and repetitious character. There is not the luxury of relaxed advance planning, as might be the case in a one-off documentary or, as Brian O'Neill outlines, in a weekly arts feature. Production for *Liveline* must be able to cope with the daily challenges of a blank running order and with the unpredictability of incoming calls, both in terms of their quantity and quality. There is a need to provide order - to link calls as they relate to one another and to know if they develop an argument or if a topic has run its course. Programmes must offer variety and freshness, not just on a daily basis but on a weekly basis too and all year round. There must be innovation and rotation of mood and pace and subject matter, adding what Shingler and Wieringa refer to as 'light and shade' to the mix (1998, p. 99). Every day cannot be about rip-off artists.

One of the primary instruments in the hands of the production team is the power they have to select the material that serves their programming purposes. At the planning stage the team must decide which of the previous day's unused callers might be worth picking up on; which topical items are worth packaging into the promo slot an hour before the programme with a view to encouraging callers; which issues in the day's newspapers might make it worthwhile contacting a previous caller? To work, selection at this point must be attuned to the public mood and have a sense of what worked well previously.

Each day's programme must launch with an engaging opening caller and once it is under way, a new set of 'live' selection skills comes into play. Programme coordinators must process, almost instinctively, incoming calls for relevance, articulation and entertainment value<sup>13</sup>. The team posts the list of suitable callers through to the host's screen in the studio with brief descriptors attached to each. Ytreberg observes that the team needs an ear not simply for relevance to the topic but also for performance. Some callers need to be warmed up and their nervousness allayed. They feel more secure when the waiting procedure is explained (2004, p. 683)<sup>14</sup>. Sara O'Sullivan also remarks on the 'sixth sense' required to filter callers at speed. Their name and location is noted and the main points they wish to make. In some instances it is safer to call back either for better sound quality or to authenticate identities. She too observed some coaching of callers during her research (2000a, pp. 40 & ff.).

Selection of material is also governed by other considerations. In keeping with the proximity we have noted between *Liveline* and the norms of journalism, there is an obligation to maintain fairness and balance. This may obtain during a programme or over a series of programmes. In some instances the balance may exist in the phone-in providing a counter public sphere to the otherwise dominant voices in society. Big business and powerful institutions have other platforms. Selection comes into play in knowing where to draw the line in those discursive tensions we have noted - between the entertaining and the motivating; between emotional expression and reasoned argument; between the logic of the story and the force of the facts. There is however a perception that any selection, any tinkering, is at odds with our ideal of civic agency.

The producers of *Liveline* are often criticized because they do produce the programme. The argument goes that the programme projects itself as a platform for the man or woman in the street and that any adulteration or embellishment of this is somehow not playing by the rules and diminishing the promise of access and the democratic potential of the show. There is a certain naïveté in this contention. Turned on its head it seems to expect that the slot be left vulnerable to repetition, irrelevance, incoherence, libel, or worst of all, silence. Verwey, in her Canadian research, notes the not very inspiring example where callers were taken on a first-come-first-served basis (1990, p. 314).

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<sup>13</sup> The qualities desirable for a caller to succeed in getting on air have a remarkable correspondence to those noted by Karin Raemaekers for successful letters to newspaper editors - relevance, entertainment, brevity and authority. (2005, p. 205)

<sup>14</sup> An executive producer of *Liveline* remarked how the particular skill of one researcher was invaluable. He had a particular facility for persuading those who had texted the programme to go on air - a not inconsiderable feat when we realise that such callers started out with both visual and vocal anonymity. (in conversation with author.)

Producers have a range of short-term priorities. They hope to attract the maximum audience. They do this by being interesting and entertaining - whether via controversy, sympathy, humour or coaxing callers to tell their stories - and finally they have to avoid the pitfalls - the offensive, the boring, the libellous, the incoherent and the inappropriate. As Starkey remarks about caller screening, "it would be dangerous not to" (2004, p. 85). Only after this can they reflect on any strategic civic potential as a platform, a forum or a worthy campaign rallying point.

So yes, they employ a raft of devices. I know from my own experience as a radio producer that having a blank running order two hours before airtime is a sobering prospect. There has to be the provocative opener; there has to be fallback material if calls are slow; decisions have to be made about the calls on offer. Seventy-five minutes of empty air is a daunting stretch especially if there is no expert or guest or music to fill. It would be akin to a lecturer walking into a lecture theatre five days a week with no idea who would turn up or what the title of the lecture was.

Yes, they seek to generate topics; yes, they look to previous callers and contacts; yes there is selecting and coaching as calls come in. Certainly they aim for variety, drama and balance. Always they wait for what they describe as the 'magic call', that call that will light up the switchboard and incite or enrage or engage callers and listeners. Whatever the balance between caller-originated topics and studio-originated topics, the fact remains that the programme is caller driven; unless callers respond and engage and develop topics they go nowhere. Ultimately, I believe it is reasonable to suggest that the programme content is shaped in the tension between the professional production priorities and the freer agenda of non-professional callers. I can endorse Shingler and Wieringa's conclusion:

Programming is contrived, processed, manipulated, 'nipped and tucked' to offer the listener an entertaining, informative, focused, topical product. ... To suggest that radio is contrived and perhaps a little delusive does not for one moment suggest malice or duplicity on the part of the producers.

(1998, pp. 106 & 107).

However it only becomes reasonable to allow for this contrivance, this nipping and tucking in circumstances where practice is subjected to reflexive examination and is regulated to some degree. Questions must continuously be asked if such contrivance is not to slide into distortion or exploitation. There is no doubting, as Shingler and Wieringa point out, that broadcasters still have all the power. Callers are selected and vetted; they may be faded out or brow beaten during exchanges; their vulnerability may be abused especially as they are less experienced and more nervous and disorientated than the host (*ibid.*, p. 118). Because they have this power and because of the influence they can exert, there is a particular responsibility on people in the media, more than others working in public



life, to cultivate communicative integrity, according to Bob Collins (1997, p. 27). To a large extent we are dependent on the professionalism of the production team to police that responsibility.

Brants and de Haan (2008, p. 15) suggest that professionalism operates within three related dimensions. In the first instance, they say, professionals operate with relative autonomy. They are independent of internal and external pressures. While this might be contestable in an absolute sense, we can accept Scannell's contention that broad policy may be made higher up the media hierarchy but the reason a programme gets done and the reason it succeeds is at the hands of professional programme makers (1996, p. 10).

Brants and de Haan talk secondly about professional norms - the shared distinct codes and practices that guide and shape the work. These norms regulate some, and resolve some more of the tensions we noted above. Programme makers seek a reasonable balance and fairness for callers; they will protect their identities and respect confidentiality; they will observe standards of taste and decency; and generally be respectful of their callers and listeners. They also operate within a web of broadcasting regulations ranging from in-house policies on advertising standards to the law of the land on defamation. Very often professional norms are not that clearly defined or articulated. They occur as part of, "an orientation shared by all radio producers. Sometimes openly discussed, it more often than not remains at the level of a background assumption of radio professionals" (O'Neill, 1993, p. 70). Tuchman suggests that self-censorship, for example, is a significant element in determining media output (1974, p. 31).

Brants and de Haan's third dimension of professionalism is an ethic of public service. Broadcasters, they suggest, accept a public trust, a belief that they will deliver what is good for the public and avoid what may be harmful. Bob Collins makes the point that media content does accomplish change. It would, he continues, be a pity if it didn't given the public and personal investment entailed in production. To an extent the nature of that change depends on the intent of the broadcaster. In the area of public deliberation, he says of RTÉ, "we have operated in the tradition ... that an inherent professionalism will enable people to allow open and honest debate notwithstanding their own personal views" (1997, p. 24). This faith in an ethic of service ties in with a concept floated by Ulrich Beck of profession as political action. He credits professionals with "a productive intelligence and the power to arrange things in society" and the capacity to "contribute to public welfare" (1997, pp. 156 & 157).

In the main we expect the production team to be good at its job, to broadcast seamless radio. 'Good radio' is an expression of the craft involved in making radio programmes, knowing what will work well. O'Neill

calls it 'a bundle of producer competences' (1993, p. 70). Exploring good radio, he says, "means looking at the common wisdom and culture of this broadcast environment and how members of this exclusive club make sense of their private world" (ibid., p. 66). The craft can comprise such elements as a sense of timing, a network of personal contacts, getting the best out of the presenter's personality, having an instinct for the audience's perspective, or applying the appropriate nip and tuck mentioned above.

Based on my own experience and observation, I would contend that, in the main, programme makers do deliver on broad professional norms and they justify the trust listeners routinely invest in them. Agreed, there certainly are some dramatic examples to the contrary and there are cases where production practices may sail too close to the wind ethically speaking. But day-in, day-out good radio is broadcast under a range of formats - news, drama, news, music, etc. - sometimes it is even very good radio.

### **The Host**

One particular member of the programme team is uniquely positioned in terms of how discourses are constructed and delivered and that is the host. Much of what has been written above about the production team can be applied to the role of the host. He<sup>16</sup> is party to the planning and preparation; he has a hand in suggesting and selecting material; he is instrumental in its ordering and packaging; and he too is routinely immersed in the professional culture of programme makers. But the host does not merely shape and influence the text of the programme, he becomes, in fact a component of the discourse. Ytreberg insists that the host is the format, its very incarnation (2004, p. 684). Brand and Scannell see him as part of the routinisation that goes into making the format. His job, as they see it, is to mediate the identity of the institution largely through talk (1991, p. 203). Shingler and Wieringa expand on this concept:

Across a broad spectrum of radio broadcasting, presenters form the link between, on the one hand, the station and its audience and, on the other, each individual listener and the rest of the listening community. As such they perform a vital role. They are the voice (and, in a sense, the face) of the radio station. Whilst forging links between the separate programme items ... , presenters speak to the audience on behalf of the radio station itself, not so much expressing as embodying the character of the station. ... Yet whilst representing the character and interests of the station, the presenter's role is equally to represent the listeners: their concerns, attitudes, interests and ideals. To achieve this, presenters must understand (and be seen to

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<sup>16</sup> Joe Duffy has hosted the current version of Liveline for the past ten years. Much of the research entailed interviews with him and analysis of programmes while he was in the chair. For that reason only and in order to facilitate simplicity of expression the host is referred to throughout in the masculine form.

understand) their audience. Their every utterance must convey an awareness of their listeners' needs, desires, experiences, opinions, manners ... and lifestyles. (1998, p. 125)

Brand and Scannell point out that the host's is a histrionic job – like that of a teacher, a preacher or a politician, he makes a living, “that is, to a greater or lesser extent, dependent on performing in public” (1991, p. 203). Not alone does he perform in public but in the phone-in he models how callers to the programme perform also (Myers, 2004, p. 184). “When callers phone in they routinely reproduce, not merely a particular discursive content but a communicative manner and style that embodies the show's ethos” (Brand and Scannell, 1991, p. 204). In other words, their contribution to a topic, their approach to it and the style of their delivery is very much dictated by the host's own framing and example. The host's talk, for all its informality and homeliness, betrays its institutional dimensions. It sounds like day-to-day talk but it is, of necessity, more condensed and fluent (Ytreberg, 2004, p. 685). He employs a raft of rituals and speech technicalities which are specific to the phone-in and which illustrate the notion of ‘mediated quasi-interaction’, noted earlier in this chapter. There are formulae for opening and closing exchanges, which would be meaningless or discourteous in other contexts<sup>17</sup>. There are devices also for mitigating disagreement and a general attention to not threatening the ‘face’ of contributors (Myers, 2004, pp. 187 – 194).

We are further justified in treating the host as discursively unique in that he is positioned between the production team, on the one hand, and callers and listeners on the other. He is complicit with callers in their unaccustomed role as producers of their own performances – he compliments and affirms points as they are made, he soothes the nervous and reassures the emotional. Tuchman writes of the host taking the role of the audience during programme preparation, offering the outside perspective on what will work for them and suggesting where the loss-of-interest threshold lies (1974, p. 57).

The most obvious distinction between the host and the rest of the team is his position as a personality, a star. Few in the country would not know who Joe Duffy is; fewer still could name his executive producer. Duffy's identity is part of the personality system. As Brand and Scannell put it, “what is on display is (the host) as public institution rather than (the host) as private individual” (1991, p. 204). It is this personality status that allows Livingstone and Lunt to identify the phone-in as a Romantic Genre where the host is positioned as hero and as the problem solver (1994, p. 58). Callers can, for a short while, achieve a measure of notoriety by

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<sup>17</sup> Brand and Scannell point to the oddity of exchanges where host and callers have never met each other and yet can instantly hail each other as familiars (1991, p. 219).

association. The host is in a very visible, high status, exceptionally well paid job. Oddly enough this seems to have little impact on his capacity to act as 'everyman' and as champion of the downtrodden.

In phone-ins like *Liveline* this ombudsman-like role is to the fore; indeed the programme courts this advocacy discourse and is seen to be active in its off-air representations on behalf of callers. There are frequent on-air tributes from callers praising the efficacy of the show and high profile campaigns are sustained over a number of programmes. Cancer screening, cystic fibrosis sufferers and services for the unsighted surface as recent examples. Anthony Wright, in his study of phone-ins on UK local radio, speaks of the host being clearly regarded as an unofficial ombudsman, citizens' advice bureau and public watchdog, a role reinforced by a regular column he writes in the local paper (1979/80. p. 85). There is a parallel here with Joe Duffy who also writes for one of the Sunday papers.

Set against this patently civic discourse are those discourses associated with performance. Higgins and Moss remark how the host, in creating order and meaning, will maximise the entertaining. They will inset moments of drama, comedy or controversy and will concentrate on these 'peaks' at the expense of the whole text (1982, p. 5). Livingstone and Lunt also judge that the prime driver is entertainment where the process is valued over the product and where there is a consequent danger of exploitation (1994, pp. 58 – 62).

But, as we have established, performance and entertainment do not necessarily equate with insincerity or a lack of seriousness of purpose. Germane to our concerns with deliberation, the host will also function as a facilitator and moderator of debate. The host introduces topics and speakers; he assigns turns and links arguments; he reserves the right to ask questions; he advocates for absent points of view; he educates evidence; he functions as chairperson and referee and he summarises argument and draws proceedings to a conclusion. To accomplish this role he must also be a sympathetic listener and a coxer of stories and it is expected that he has the ability, "to hold a conversation about almost any subject" (Tuchman, 1974, p. 87).

Alongside these interpersonal and interactional skills, this "mastering a set of performance roles that are given by the production context and by the requirements of the format" (Ytreberg, 2004, p. 678), the host must also be a consummate manager. Once the red transmission light is on, he must be on top of the processes of "timekeeping, script checking and collusive communication" (ibid., p. 685). He must attend to talkback voices from the production team, to the on-screen running order, to messages being ferried in and out of studio – all this while engaging with what callers are saying. He is involved in rapid and instant decision making. Has this topic

run out of steam? Should I squeeze in another caller? Should I explore that chance remark? Is it time to take the next ad break to cool tempers? I had better qualify that for legal reasons! Livingstone and Lunt call it, 'a controller of hectic activity' (1994, p. 56).

Brand and Scannell talk of the host's facility to maintain his on-air facility by "shuttling in and out of different roles" (1991, p. 212). It may appear natural and seamless but it demands dexterity and craft. According to Livingstone and Lunt:

This generic ambiguity is clearly seen in the role of the host; is he or she the chair of a debate, the adored hero of a talkshow, a referee, a conciliator, a judge, compere of a gameshow, therapist, the host of a dinner party conversation, manager or a spokesperson? (1994, p. 56)

Our task is to unravel the implications of the discursive complexities inherent in the role the presenter of *Liveline* and to ask how they can inform listeners' understanding of their roles as citizens. Wilby and Conroy remark that the "radio experience is only partly constructed by the presenter, the listeners contribute through making the transition from the idiosyncratic world of the individual to the constructed 'common sense' world of the consensus" (1994, p. 139). This idea of the civic being constructed in the discursive space between the host and the public, finds expression in an almost throw-away observation by Kees Brants, where he is concerned with the responsibility on presenters to act, as he terms it, as 'prudent co-citizens' alongside non-expert participants to revitalise and extend traditional notions of politics in formats that offer a platform for bottom-up investment in democracy (1998, p. 176). The host as citizen – this was one role not previously considered, in my experience.

## **Sociocultural Interaction: Social Bonds and Social Construction.**

Dahlgren names his third analytic dimension of the public sphere as Sociocultural Interaction and says it refers to, "non-mediated face to face encounters between citizens, to relevant aspects of subjectivity and identity processes and also to the interface of media and citizens that is the process of reception (1995, p. 12). Given the nature of the phone-in, I would also add for consideration the three-way interactive nexus involving the host, the callers and the listeners and each of their connections to wider networks. After all;

The space in which 'public sphereing' gets done ... must be larger than that of media representation. It must also include sociocultural interactions. This dimension takes us into the realm of people's encounters and discussions with each other, with their collective sense-making and their cultural practices. (ibid., p. 18)

It is worth keeping in mind our premise that democracy resides ultimately with citizens who engage in talk with each other and also that this talk is wider than simply the talk heard in the media. As Dahlgren points out, “interaction has to do not only with what gets said between people but also the processes of intersubjectivity and identity which arise in this interaction and which, in turn, shape a sense of belonging and a capacity for participation in society” (ibid., pp. 18 & 19). Aslama summarises the central question in this dimension as asking, “if and how people’s identities as citizens and / or consumers are constructed” (2006, p. 13). Richard Butsch relates this dimension to the democratic right of assembly – a consideration he believes to be of increasing importance as media audiences become dispersed and as the places for public assembly disappear from the social landscape (2009, p. 9).

### **Triangular Collaboration**

#### 1. ‘Meeting the broadcaster half way’

When we return to interrogate Brant’s concept of co-citizenship two questions present themselves. We ask who is cooperating with whom and what are they aiming to achieve?

In answer to the first part I suggest that, when we look at *Liveline* as a communicative speech text, we are faced with a triangular set of complementary relationships, which is essentially and intentionally constructed to make sense for those for those who speak and for those who listen. The three parties involved are the host, callers to the programme and the listening public<sup>18</sup>. It has been pointed out earlier in this chapter that the primary communicative event is the transmission of the programme content and its reception by the audience. As Verwey indicates, selectivity is a feature of this exchange – programme makers select what is sent; audience members select what is received and perceived (1990, p. 6). In simple terms this translates into listeners hearing Joe Duffy and his contributors conversing on a daily basis. This very routine of talking and listening is founded on a basic collaboration – a tacit agreement to share in this sense-making project. Scannell suggests, “an orientation to cooperation underpins the maintenance of a perspective of normality, the common grounds of intersubjective understanding and a communicative intentionality in talk that is grounded in considerations of clarity, sincerity, relevance and informativeness” (1989, p. 158). Shingler and Wieringa cite the work of Grice (1975) and they can assert that, “the experience of radio listening is one of collusion in which the listener is

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<sup>18</sup> Listeners to any given programme segment are immediately involved in the interaction but it is appreciated that a case can be made for an extended interaction with a public not listening on that particular day or indeed for those who never listen to the programme. Rejection and dislike are forms of interaction.

prepared to meet the broadcaster half way” (1998, p. 37). They go on to suggest that the listener colludes with the broadcaster in creating radio’s illusion of spontaneity and intimacy. The disguising of scripting, the artificial informality, the editing and packaging, are easily accomplished and accomplished because the listener is so willing to be ‘duped’. The credibility is driven by the audience’s desire to believe (ibid., p. 41).

Sonia Livingstone (2005) addresses a distinction between the listening audience and the public at large. These groupings may be composed of the same people and share some crucial commonalities but she points to differences of emphases and perceptions, which have a bearing on the way we locate the *Liveline* listenership in the ‘public’ sphere. She points out,

The ‘public’ implies a common understanding of the world, a shared identity, a claim to inclusiveness, and a consensus regarding the collective interest. It also implies a visible and open forum of some kind in which the population participates in order that such understandings, identities, values and interests are recognised or contexted. (2005, p. 9)

Audience, on the other hand, carries connotations that are more trivial, more passive, more individualist and less engaged.

Moss and Higgins refer to the skill needed by the audience for meaning-making and they suggest that a certain ‘coaching of attitude’ occurs which entails the audience reading the cues and clues over a period of time and their developing an appropriate response to the host which gears them to anticipate a certain style and language (1984, p. 364). “The finished product, the text emerges as more than the sum of its parts; it becomes a completion, a separate entity, liberated from belonging to either participant. It becomes public, transcends its creators and by the nature of its creation in language, is imprinted with cultural meaning” (ibid., p. 362).

Dahlgren recommends looking to the ‘third generation’ of reception research on the mass media, “where studies move beyond the actual sites of media reception and probe the circulation of meaning in broader micro contexts of everyday life” (2005, p. 149). In this, Livingstone suggests that he is laying the groundwork for ‘a broader conception of citizenship’, one that is grounded in civic culture – a concept we will revisit in the next section.

## 2. Listeners to Listeners

The interaction between listeners and callers also merits research. We have noted previously the representational relationship between listeners and callers. Even if a listener never rings in, each caller they hear confirms the possibility that they can ring if they choose. Shingler and Wieringa suggest that listeners identify with callers as a collective ‘us’.

The callers aired on radio phone-ins are there not only to have their say but also to represent the rest of the listening community. At the same time, they

help to create a notion of an active, participatory and empowered listenership, enabling individual members of the audience to ... identify themselves with something altogether more potent and interactive. Listeners are unlikely to identify with each and every caller or with everything that the callers say. Nevertheless, listeners *are* likely to identify with the callers collectively, simply because they appear to be active and participatory members of the radio community. Phone-ins are therefore rather unusual in that they provide listeners with other listeners (i.e., callers) to identify with. (1998, p. 125)<sup>19</sup>

Crissell makes the point that in general broadcasters are keen to project a sense of audience to create a community of listeners. They do this through their modes of address, through name-checking prizewinners and playing requests. However the phone-in verifies for the audience the existence of audience; here is audible proof that there are others out there who are listening, understanding and physically responding (1994, p. 190).

### 3. Presenter and Caller Co production

We identified earlier that in a phone-in callers contribute to the text of the programme. They literally add their voices, their opinions and their performative style. It is also the case that the interaction between caller and presenter, which is played out for the benefit of the wider audience, is a fundamentally collaborative one; this, in spite of the fact that they place different weights on the purposes of their conversation.

Conversation, whether mediated or not, had a co-operative character, as Schudson explains; “Even in argument there is mutual support – if only in the agreement to stay engaged, to keep focused on the other person and not to abandon the talk for either sticks and stones, on the one hand, or the ‘silent treatment’, on the other” (1997, p. 301).

Host and caller both have a common interest in sounding ‘good’ in public. Ytreberg refers to this as ‘Format Consonance’ and cautions that it is not to be confused with real confluence of interest (2004, p. 686). Myers describes the collaboration as geared towards producing a ‘smooth sequence’ (2004, p. 184). Both callers and presenter contribute to producing this smooth sequence, if not necessarily in equal measure. The presenter, as we have seen, models the tone. Myers talks of his offering the guest possible roles – storyteller, protagonist, straight man to his humour, etc. The host renders the interaction on air relatively safe for nervous and inexperienced callers and rewards them and bolsters their confidence, paying them compliments and positive attention (Ytreberg, 2004, p. 684). In a format like *Liveline* he will apologise and sympathise and offer matching experience; he will repeatedly employ back channels or

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<sup>19</sup> Because of the difficulties entailed in contacting callers to phone-ins, research is relatively scarce but O’Sullivan (2000a), Verwey (1990), Wright (1979/80) and Atkinson and Moores (2003), offer useful insights.



supportive minimal responses – “Hmmm”, “Sure, sure”, “Yeh” – to signal his attention and to encourage continued collaboration (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998, pp. 137 – 140).

Avery, Ellis and Glover found in their study of patterns of communication that hosts and callers support one another (1978, p.16). Both Moss and Higgins (1984) and Atkinson and Moores (2003) employ Goffman’s ‘facework’ concept to illustrate the politeness that obtains in the parasocial interaction of this type of phone-in. Part of this politeness uses mitigating linguistic devices especially when airing disagreements. Callers are heard to modify assertions, concede points, hedge their accusations, stress the personal and apologise (Myers, 2004, p. 193).

Such politeness would seem to run counter to Ian Hutchby’s assertion that confrontation lies at the heart of the phone-in. Controversy is indeed evident and sometimes encouraged to inject drama, variety and entertainment. It is a dominant discourse in some of the more extreme ‘shock jock’ formats aired elsewhere and while *Liveline* is not above periodic spats, in general what we hear is typically more along the lines of ‘tactfulness and cooperativity’ (Atkinson and Moores, 2003, p. 136) even in disagreements.

Hutchby (1996) also points to the significantly lob-sided discursive power of the host. Yes, the presenter of *Liveline* can run the discursive show. He can assign turns; he can exercise his superior fluency and experience; and he can command the last word. Ultimately it becomes a matter of trust and of that professional ethic. On a practical level, the host will know better than most that an unrelenting diet of put-downs, ill manners, arrogance or browbeating will be counterproductive and out of kilter with the format consonance the programme has cultivated.

Beyond the agreements to stay on topic, to produce a smooth sequence and to conduct debate with minimal offence, there is, I contend, a deeper collaboration. This is the joint venture of constructing civic meaning and a commonality of identity, which emerges from these production and reception processes.

### **Citizenship Revisited**

At the outset the central investigation of this thesis was flagged as asking how *Liveline* contributes to the democratic process. One framing of this question is to ask if the interactions between programme makers, host, callers, listeners and the greater public, which have been discussed above, result in any or all of these parties becoming better citizens – better in the sense of becoming more engaged as civic agents within this democracy. In the section above, I have attempted to establish that the interactions at play in this particular example of media representation are collaborative at

many levels and having examined who is talking to whom, I now ask if this joint venture can be shown to produce civic 'results'.

Engagement with the media is one of the principal ways we understand and make sense of our experiences but foremost among the phenomena we strive to understand is ourselves; ourselves as individuals and ourselves as social beings who belong to multiple, sometimes overlapping groupings – families, communities, workforces, clubs, nations. John Thompson talks of our dealing with an influx of media symbols, focusing them and filtering them in order to make sense. He refers to Giddens' (1991) theory on the formation of the self in modern society – a project that is both reflexive and open-ended, as we build and rebuild the narrative of our self-identity and as we become our own unofficial biographers (1995, pp. 207 – 210). Riessman writes of a 'contemporary preoccupation with identity' –

No longer viewed as given and "natural", individuals must now construct who they are and how they want to be known, just as groups, organisations and governments do. In post-modern times identity can be assembled, disassembled, accepted and contested and indeed performed for audiences. (2008, p. 7)

Acknowledging that we live in a saturated media environment, Jeffrey Jones believes that the contribution of the media to the construction of the self as a political being is not just about furnishing information. There is a central role also for, "symbols, myths, metaphors and other significations. Media provide schema or mental maps to chart the political reality" (2006a, p. 368). He asks, "From where do we obtain the reservoir of images and voices, heroes and villains, sayings and slogans that we draw upon in making sense of politics and how are they involved in the creation of a political reality?" (ibid., p. 369).

Luke Goode makes a largely similar observation on the media as a resource for citizenship

The configuration and dissemination of symbols and cultural forms through the media facilitate the development of identities that draw upon discourses of nationhood, ethnicity, class, gender, style or taste subcultures, opinion and political affiliation, interest groups, status groups..... The extent to which citizens experience themselves as *members* of a political community, depends on the depth of a largely imagined bond. (2005, pp. 95 & 96)

We began by looking for the roots of political agency and this, according to Dahlgren, leads us on to citizenship as a mode of individual and collective action. Citizenship, he tells us, is traditionally built on a set of rights and obligations; it is linked to the nation state; but it also has a subjective side, 'as a dimension of our identities' (2005a, p. 422). Dahlgren, in attempting to distinguish what constitutes the 'civic', suggests that the term carries implications of publicness as well as engagement and a sense of service – of doing good for others – and as such, he deems it to be a 'cornerstone of democracy' (2009, p. 58). He, along with other commentators (Hermes

and Stello, 2000, Jacka, 2003, Rosie et al. 2006, as examples), takes as a starting point T. H. Marshall's definition of citizenship as, "a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community" (1950, p. 87). Marshall traced the origins and evolution of citizenship and he conceptualised it in three dimensions, each of which points to a set of rights:

The civil, which aims to guarantee the basic legal integrity of society's members; the political, which serves to ensure the rights associated with democratic participation; and the social, which addresses the general life circumstances of individuals. (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 60)

However, in the light of contemporary realities – a general cynicism and disengagement from politics; a focusing on individuals and their lifestyles in a media environment where audiences are increasingly fragmented and the discourse leans heavily on entertainment – this formal republican definition of citizenship became increasingly viewed as restrictive and inadequate. Hermes observes, "The general distance that more and more people take from politics and the public sphere, defined in a restricted way, makes clear that the modern project of educating people to become good citizens<sup>20</sup> has come as far as it can" (2006a, p. 40).

In a bid to get beyond these limitations and, I believe, to draw rich segments of the lived experienced into the realm of the political, John Hartley (1999) posits the concept of 'Cultural Citizenship' as an addition to Marshall's original trio. He talks of patching together an identity as citizen from the many sources and choices available to us, not the least of which is the 'delightful demotic messiness' of the mass media (cited in Jacka, 2003, p. 186). Watson says it makes, "more and more sense to speak of the mythic domain of meaning production – a domain which involves emotions and collective messages rather than cognition and specific facts" (2002, p. 751). This cultural approach, according to Jeffrey Jones, "...foregrounds the intimate role that media play in our lives – the myriad ways in which media are used and integrated into our daily routines;... how this type of usage affects our understanding of and commitments to democracy;

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<sup>20</sup> Frank Ankersmit writes of "The Myth of the Good Citizen"

That is to say, by the widespread supposition that democracy is supported by 'peaceful citizens who by taste or interest sincerely desire the well being of their country' (Combs and Nimmo, 1996, p. 28). This myth of the good citizen seems to endow the classical political model with a solid and reliable foundation in the reasonable interests and desires of the citizens and presents democratic politics as a more or less complicated calculation machine that figures out the correct resultant of all these individual interests and desires – without adding anything of itself, if things go as they should. In short, there is a popular ideology of democratic politics – this myth of the good citizen – that seems to grant an immense plausibility to the 'classical' conception of democratic politics. (2003, p. 22)

In a similar vein, Butsch writes:

The image of 'publics' has been associated with news media and distinguished from entertainment audiences, which have been characterized as bad citizens for not using their time to inform themselves. Entertainment audiences have also been contrasted with arts audiences, and are chastised for not cultivating themselves, a pre-requisite to preparing oneself for citizenship, especially in older conceptions of the good citizen. (2008, p. 2)

how the variety of narratives that comprise different media address needs we have as citizens and consumers; how we understand and make sense of the world through this media plenitude; and how these opportunities for engagement shape out identities as citizens. (2006, p. 370)

This cultural citizenship opens the door for the civic credentials of popular culture where, as Hermes and Dahlgren reflect on Ellis's (2000) notion that, "we can 'work through' the ambiguities and ideological knots of our time and as a reflection on what binds us, what we expect from life and of what we are critical" (2006, p. 260).

Joke Hermes offers a structure for the study of cultural citizenship and the building of shared identities among media audiences.

It is how we use (popular) media texts and everyday culture generally to understand, take up, reflect on and reform identities that are imbedded in communities of different kinds. .... Implicitly, part of this ongoing activity of purposeful everyday meaning-making in relation to mediated culture is the production of distinctions, norms and rules. Cultural citizenship offers both the ground rules of interpretation an evaluation and the space to be excited, frightened, enthralled, committed or any of the huge range of states of mind and feelings that we connect with the use of popular media, rather than just be concerned or pleased as becomes the informed citizen. (2006, p. 303)

Hermes proceeds to offer examples of how popular culture can constitute 'publics' by offering frames of reference. It will be contended later that the popular culture elements of *Liveline* can also fulfil these functions. Hermes cites John Mephram (1990) and the provision of 'usable stories' in popular drama; she cites len Ang (1985) and the provision of 'emotional realism' in soap operas and she cites Stuart Hall (1982), who talks of 'fictional rehearsal' also in the soaps (ibid., p. 303).

The concept of cultural citizenship does not go uncontested. Nick Couldry contends that the mechanisms involved lack clarity and definition. On the whole he appears to dismiss its usefulness contending that it is, "difficult to know what the word 'cultural' adds to our understanding of 'citizenship'" (2006, p. 322).

Toby Miller (1993, 1998) does not view it in the same celebratory and liberating light as others of the European culturist school. He reads the impact of wraparound cultural products on the citizen as a process of seduction and civilization in the sense of its producing compliant and disciplined citizens. The construction of such 'well tempered citizens' serves to obscure issues of power and inequality – a perspective I propose to revisit shortly.

At this point the concept allows us to pull together and to integrate the three-fold aspects of citizenship – citizenship as rights based, as membership of a community, and as performed identity. As Hermes puts

it, cultural citizenship affords an avenue that gets around the modernist prejudices and exclusions and it generates as broad a debate as possible. It operationalises the political potential at the heart of culture and draws in the popular dimension of the everyday and its intrinsically mediated practices. It foregrounds commitment and engagement without disregarding reasoned argument and it makes space for the interpretive frameworks of non-dominant groups. It opens doors to new truths, venues for change, emotional evaluation and the development of a critical stance (1998, p159). Far from being a contradiction in terms, or as Couldry would have it, a redundancy, cultural citizenship facilitates an expanded normativity via a broader spectrum of the 'everyday meaning-making in relation to ... the production of distinctions, norms and rules' noted above by Hermes.

Looking back at the main threads of this review of theory I suggest that considerations of the public sphere, of deliberative democracy and of cultural citizenship converge and become amenable to empirical analysis within a framework, which Dahlgren labels 'civic culture'.

### **The Circuit of Civic Culture**

Tarmo Malmberg brands Dahlgren's proposal of civic culture as a 'major conceptual innovation' and credits him with searching for the roots that make popular sovereignty possible. He recognises Dahlgren's effort, 'as a dialectician of sorts', in, "trying to bridge the gap between political media research of the Habermasian type and politically influenced studies of popular culture" (2009, p. 4). Malmberg summarises Dahlgren's argument that democracy needs citizens communicating with each other in the popular mode and Dahlgren, he continues, "allows a much wider repertoire of discursive modes for democratically relevant talk" (ibid., pp. 6 & 7).

However he is critical of Dahlgren on the grounds (among others) that he excludes a strictly deliberative view of democracy and accords a central place to popular public culture. My reading is different. There is nothing in the wider repertoire of civic culture that excludes 'high' journalism or news discourses or formal debate – quite the contrary. It is true that arguments underpinning civic culture can be used to trumpet the civic credentials of almost any media format including, say, sales pitches on the Shopping Channel or pornography. However from the point of view of an interrogation of *Liveline*, where those democratic elements we have considered - access, discussion, the formation of public opinion – are intrinsic to its production and reception, civic culture offers a means of critiquing the whole range of discursive modes and of weighing the import of each against empirical observation. Civic culture does not exclude the formally rational; it attempts to counteract its biases. Dahlgren himself points out:

...it is not an ambitious 'theory; it does not anticipate being able to offer full explanations about citizens' democratic participation or lack of it. Hopefully it will enhance our understanding of human action and meaning-making in concrete settings.

Cultures consist of patterns of communication, practices and meaning; they provide taken for granted orientations – factual and normative – as well as other resources for collective life. (2003, p. 153)

He is conscious of avoiding both behaviourist and determinist ruts and he concludes that culture functions by providing “road markers for likely patterns of doing and thinking” (ibid., p. 153).

There is a mutual dependency between civic culture and the formal political culture; each can impact on the other. Traditionally the trajectories of civic agency with political culture have been transparent – citizens vote, lobby, agitate, protest and campaign – but Dahlgren aspires to connect civic culture with civic agency.

The idea of Civic Culture takes as its starting point the notion of citizens as social agents and it asks what are the *cultural* factors behind such agency (or its absence). Civic Culture points to both the conditions and the manifestations of such participation; they are anchored in the mind sets and symbolic milieu of everyday life. Civic Cultures are potentially both strong and vulnerable. They help us to promote the functioning of democracy; they can serve to empower or disempower citizens, yet like all domains of culture they can easily be affected by political and economic power.

(2005b, pp. 157 & 158)

So, where do we turn to understand these cultural factors – ‘the conditions and the manifestations’ of participation which are ‘anchored in the mind sets and symbolic milieu of everyday life’? How do we read the road markers?

Dahlgren proffers pointers. With relatively little preamble and no extended emphasis on the dynamics entailed, he offers us what he calls a circuit of civic culture with six dimensions<sup>21</sup> - knowledge and competence, values, affinity and trust, practices, identities, and space. He simply posits these dimensions as mutually reciprocal and insists that ‘identity’ is prime amongst them.<sup>22</sup> The virtue in his suggested framework, from the point of view of this research, is that it identifies pressure points and potential intersections for framing the questions we wish to address when we unpick *Liveline* as an actually existing public sphere. The discourses we identified

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<sup>21</sup> Once again Dahlgren retains the right to refine his thinking and his figures. When the dimensions are introduced in 2000 there are four of them – knowledge, loyalty to values, practices, and identity. By 2002 there are six – trust and discussion have been added. In 2005 five of those above are developed and by 2009 a sixth – space – is added. This latest formulation is the one I employ.

<sup>22</sup> For a diagrammatic representation of the 2005 version, the reader is referred to Minna Aslama (2006, p. 26).

in the previous section under the heading of 'Media Representation' can now be thematised within the circuits of civic culture.

Richard Butsch attempts to clarify the links:

Dahlgren frames these four dimensions (of the public sphere) in terms of civic culture, a set of values, public trust, identity, knowledge and practices that form the cultural substratum of this citizen participation... The four dimensions can sustain or undermine this culture, which in turn, sustains adherence to the rules of an egalitarian deliberative public sphere that itself feeds back upon the culture and the four dimensions. (2009, p. 9)

It will be helpful at this point to illustrate how these 'dimensions' may be applied to *Liveline* in a way that suggests avenues to operationalise questions for research analysis.

### 1. Knowledge and Competence

This dimension would appear to be the most obvious; as Dahlgren points out, "People must have access to reliable reports, portrayals, analyses, discussions, debates and so forth about current affairs" (2000, p. 337). Traditionally the provision of these facts and interpretations was seen as the province of newsrooms and journalists but, as I have suggested, *Liveline*, positioned as it is within PSB and at the 'broadsheet' end of the talk radio spectrum, is amenable to investigation as a source of civic information and commentary. Information of itself is not enough; that information must be translated into knowledge and the knowledge must begin to inform engagement. I have suggested throughout this chapter that elements of rational critical deliberation must survive if a common sense is to be constructed. We may seek to counteract anti rationalist bias but we cannot abandon the rational and the reasonable entirely.

Its occasional engagements with journalistic and current affairs discourses calls into play norms of professionalism associated with journalism. We expect a degree of fairness, accuracy, consideration and balance. Denis McQuail (1992) renders journalistic professionalism as three possible functions, each of which it could be argued finds a degree of expression in *Liveline*. Those functions are: acting as observer and informant; providing a channel and a forum for outside voices; and thirdly, playing a participant role in society. There is also a correlation between these functions and the tenets advocated by Jay Rosen (2001) of the Civic Journalism movement in the USA. They campaign for journalists to be more participants than spectators; that they should favour issues and events important to ordinary people; for public opinion to be engaged via debate; and that journalists should seek to enhance social capital. Here again there is a degree of convergence with the practices in *Liveline*.

In relation to social capital, Dahlgren makes the case that at the level of reception a modicum of social capital and media literacy is important. This

is the competence he speaks of. "People must be able to make sense of that which circulates in public spheres and to understand the world they live in. Education, in its many forms, will thus always retain its relevance for democracy and citizenship" (2009, p. 109).

## 2. Values: Substantive and Procedural

Dahlgren makes the case that alongside the substantive democratic values – equality, liberty, justice and so on – citizens must attend to the procedural values like openness, reciprocity, tolerance and so on. *Liveline* occurs in an environment where the substantive values are reasonably well established. Parties to the programme enjoy significant personal liberty, relative equality and legal protection within the bounds of their normal horizons. Those substantive values are subjected to the scrutiny of the programme from time to time. Callers complain about their dealings with the law or suggest the need for new legislation; they express fears for their personal safety or bemoan the inequities perpetrated by powerful elites.

The programme also has a role to play in imparting procedural values – the virtue of talking things out, of giving a fair hearing, of taking turns to contribute, to attending to the other 'half' of the conversation, and of tolerating differences in taste and conflicting points of view. The programme does not necessarily proceed like this on every occasion – there can be chaos, interruption, raised voices and unbridled hostility from time to time but I would suggest that these are experienced as deviations from an ideal template. The modelling of procedural values comes under greater strain where conflict is involved. Dahlgren declares, "To be able to thrash out such conflicts without violence, striving for some practical compromise in situations where consensus is elusive, is a key task for a democratic society" (2009, p. 111). He goes on to point out that such values and accommodations are not necessarily rational-cognitive choices. As we have indicated, procedural values must also be able to account for emotion, enthusiasm and passion.

When we come to refine areas for researching the discourses of the programme, these procedural values, this becoming familiar with the rules of the civic game and the deep collaboration with other citizens in negotiating conflict and co-constructing a foundation for civic agency, find their place alongside freedom of speech and the right of assembly.

## 3. Affinity and Trust

When Dahlgren refers to trust and affinity he says he has something less than 'community in mind,' – rather a minimal sense of commonality in heterogeneous late modern societies, a sense that they belong to the



same social and political entities as citizens” (2005, p. 427).<sup>23</sup> They have to make their social situations work, a concept which corresponds, I believe, to Giddens observations on our managing the ‘risk society’. He says we exercise a degree of trust – almost a leap of faith – in order to counteract paralysing anxiety and to reinforce successfully the protective cocoons we have constructed. We negotiate threats, rendering each day uneventful and, via habit and routines, we build our sense of trust (1991, p. 3). This trust comes down to an acceptance of the appearances and motives of others (ibid., p. 127). Daily editions of *Liveline*, the daily voice of Joe Duffy, the daily airing of the problems of others can only contribute to this process, a process, which Putnam (2000, p. 136) refers to as ‘thin’ trust, as opposed to the ‘thick’ trust, we invest in our personal relationships.

Brants and de Haan detect a trend, rooted in the media, towards increased trust in politics:

... a general shift has been observed from traditional party democracy.... To audience democracy – in which personalities are more important than the party, performance and polls more than the programme and authenticity more than authority. ... In such a democracy charisma, trust and empathy become preconditions for successful politics. (2008, p. 3)

Two reflections arise that relate to *Liveline*. As Wright (1979/80) and Verwey (1990) point out and as is illustrated in Appendix 4, Category B of this work, complaining about politicians and bureaucracy forms part of the staple diet for the phone-in. On occasions the anger is acute and concerted and reflects a mood in the public opinion of the day so, what does this say about trust? Dahlgren recognises these, “paradoxes at work. Politics involves conflicts of interests as well as identities in opposition, which inserts an element of mistrust into these social relationships from the start. Thus in the democratic tradition, excessive trust is unsuitable. .... Trust with a built-in antenna for scepticism seems prudent” (2009, pp. 113 & 114). I believe the paradox recedes if we appreciate that even if we have lost trust in a leader, a policy, an institution; even if we have become distrustful of politics itself, there remains within this ‘affinity’ a residual and necessary trust in the collective with which we identify, which allow us to aspire to improving our common lot.

The second reflection relates directly to the trust that audiences invest in the production team. Possibly this is where ‘thin’ trust meets ‘parasocial interaction’. On the face of it callers enter into a trusting understanding when they engage in the risky business of performing on air. They place the success of that performance in the care of the professionalism and integrity of the host and his team – not least in confessional and ‘troubles

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<sup>23</sup> These ‘imaginary bonds’ of citizenship have been well elucidated in the works of Benedict Anderson (1991) and of Michael Billig (1995).

telling' calls. I also suggest that while listeners may exercise 'prudent sceptical antennae', broadly speaking they too place their faith in the judgement and production decisions of the broadcasters. There is a routine belief in the integrity and sincerity of their motives and expressions. This echoes Scannell's earlier observations about the ordinariness of radio and how it routinises the lives of listeners who judge what they hear, "by the norms of social, sociable life" (1996, p. 175).

#### 4. Civic Practices

Dahlgren asserts, "democracy must be embodied in concrete recurring practices – individual, group and collective" (2009, p. 116). Such practices must, he continues, have elements of the routine and the taken for granted about them. As such they must approximate to the ordinariness and dailiness remarked upon by Scannell in relation to radio where the world is made accessible for anyone (1996, p. 167).

The defining practice of the phone-in is discussion – talk-back – and it is in relation to such discussion that Dahlgren furnishes what could be the charter for this thesis.

The most fundamental and the most ubiquitous practice is precisely civic interaction and discussion. Interaction is one of the dimensions of the public sphere, and ... one can empirically investigate civic discussion by examining, for instance, its various discursive modes, its spatial and contextual sites and setting and its social circumstances, both on- and off-(air).

(2005b, p. 159)

Discussion certainly predates *Liveline* and radio itself but I would urge the case that the phone-in is a significant contributor to that media cluster, which is the catalyst for talk within the particular ambit of our times. It is a significant stimulant for our social meaning-making project.

The discussions in *Liveline* as practices accommodate both Habermasian and alternative modes and they engage with both parliamentarian and nonparliamentarian formulations of politics. The practices also link to 'knowledge and competences' in that, not alone does the host model mechanisms for conducting debate and handling conflict but listeners learn from the practices of other engaged citizens. They are heard to articulate their positions, to promote their issues, to launch their campaigns and to garner support from other callers. Their experiences made public offer a menu of what we should get mad about and how we can start to do something about it.

Susan J. Douglas addresses listening as a practice. She attributes the success of call-in radio in part to "the public articulation of a different kind of truth" (2004, p. 19). She links, what she terms, 'The Zen of Listening' to how radio contributes to Anderson's imagined communities where listeners are "living the same moment of (their) lives together" (ibid., p. 24). She views the interaction entailed in listening as an active and collaborative

one – the listener’s creation and part of a collective vision. Less demanding than watching television, radio listening becomes interwoven with the ritualised routines of everyday life (ibid., p. 32), which brings us back to Dahlgren’s ‘practices’.

### 5. Civic Identities

As a foundation for civic agency, Dahlgren positions this dimension – identity – as the centrepiece of civic cultures, “with the other five dimensions contributing reciprocally to shaping the conditions of its existence” (2009, p. 119). Identity points to the subjective side of citizenship.

People must be able to see themselves as members and potential participants with efficacy in social and political entities: this must be part of people’s multidimensional identities. ... Identities of membership are not just subjectively produced by individuals but evolve in relation to social milieus and institutional mechanisms. (2005b, p. 159)

I simply advance the case that *Liveline* is such a social milieu and an institutional mechanism.

Dahlgren makes the case, justifiably I believe, that sites for constructing and supporting the sense of civic ‘we-ness’ are becoming scarcer and thinner in society in general and in the mass media. High journalism and PSB are both on the back foot and the media are increasingly positioning the public predominantly as consumers. We have noted already that consumption does not preclude citizenship but it tends to obscure and relegate it. Higgins and Moss’s (1982) pioneering study of the phone-in in Australia is unequivocal in identifying the consumerist discourses as prime in that particular format.

In spite of globalisation and the advent of transnational political institutions, civic identity as citizens of a nation state is still robust. The horizons of *Liveline* are national and at times distinctly parochial. Michael Billig’s (1995) thesis on the creation of ‘Banal Nationalism’ through the deixis of small words’ is well illustrated in the daily talk of the programme. There is little doubt the ‘the’ budget and ‘the’ minister are both our Irish versions. “We now have to put up with these women being trafficked here”. It is transparent to listeners who ‘we’ are and where ‘here’ is. The programme contributes to that nationhood which provides a continual backdrop for our political discourses. We are reminded too of Martin McLoone’s observation that talk on radio is ‘our’ talk with ‘our’ topics and ‘our’ slants (1991, p. 24). Radio is the only electronic mass medium where the bulk of the speech is home generated.

Dahlgren points out that “identities develop and evolve through experience and experience is emotionally based” (2009, p. 119). Our identities are more than a stacked set of building blocks. We find in ourselves contradictions, inconsistencies and anomalies. Our positions and

interpretations can change, not only from day to day but from one end of a sentence to the other. This does not mean that we experience ourselves as fragmented; it just means there are other building blocks besides the cognitive. The amalgam of discourses we identified in the representational output of *Liveline* provides resources to integrate and reconcile the unconscious dimensions of emotional life in a fashion that may contribute to a more vibrant democracy.

The most public identity connected to the programme is that of the host, Joe Duffy. He is the recognised party in the co-construction of civic meaning. His public identity is the format. Callers and listeners make sense of their engagement through their understanding, their interaction with him. I suggest that his performed persona and his lived biography combine to provide an integrated and coherent reference point and model, a proposition I propose to illustrate later.

## 6. Civic Spaces

I accept Richard Sennett's (1977) argument that the spaces in which the public can assemble to converse with each other have contracted – private modes of transport, personal ear-phoned entertainment and the design of our cities and their public precincts are among the contributory factors. I also take Samuel Jones' (2006) point that we have become more inclined to talk to those who are of like mind, those with whom we already agree. The mass media, as Thompson (1995) has argued, have contributed to the reconfiguration of private and public space and the interactive electronic media are adding their own transformation. (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 115).

*Liveline* has adapted to the new terrain of blogs, tweets, emails and texting<sup>25</sup>; its web page is assuming increasing prominence as a site for photographic evidence and for supplementary information about topics. But, it is as an institutional daily location, rooted in public view and offering the routine possibility and perception of civic participation that the usefulness of *Liveline*, as an actor in civic culture, lies. “Back here same time tomorrow”!

The spaces where ‘public sphereing’ happens have other boundaries beyond the interactional. They must, if they are to be effective, align to some extent with the political spaces in society. They must have some entrée to the social structures where policy is made and decisions are taken.

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<sup>25</sup> While source material may originate via a number of media there is a policy that the phone remains the only channel for on-air contributions to the programme. (Conversation with the Series Producer.)

## Social Structure

Dahlgren claims that this fourth dimension – social structure – is the most difficult to deal with because it is potentially so vast (1995, p. 12). It is the universal set within which the other overlapping dimensions are located.<sup>26</sup> Aslama describes it as the, “institutional arrangements of society including social stratification, power alignments and the state” (2006, p. 12) and says that it entails politics, economics, and legal aspects as well as education. She too deems it so broad that it is only possible to highlight relevant aspects.

I intend looking at two aspects of social structure, which impinge on the representational discourses we have identified. These have been flagged above by Aslama – ‘power alignments and the state’.

## Ideology

Earlier in the chapter we considered power and how it may be exercised. We concluded that the considerable power that exists in RTÉ, in *Liveline* as a programme and in the discursive prowess of the host should be acknowledged and interrogated but that did not necessarily imply that callers or listeners were, on that account, powerless. We adopted Foucault’s constructive vision of power and its circulation in social networks. Power, as long as it represents agency and not exploitative domination, is essential for democracy. But there persists, just below the surface of our deliberations, the suspicion that we are not asking the ‘critical’ question and that question is most often framed in terms of ideology.

Our primary investigation is into the discourses of *Liveline* and Ulrike Meinhof assures, “that for some, discourse has been conflated with ideology” (1994, p. 16). Thompson, in his introduction to the work of Claude Lefort, defines ideology as, “that kind of discourse on the social which seeks to conceal the social divisions inherent in modern societies and their historical indeterminate character” (1986, p. 16). Lefort traces the evolution of the concept through earlier stages – bourgeois ideology and later totalitarian ideology – and on to its contemporary manifestation, ‘invisible’ ideology which, he says:

...finds an excellent means of diffusion in the mass media, which reach a vast audience and draw everyone into a conversation apparently open to all. The most banal programmes on radio and television, the chat shows and question times become inner sanctums in a mass society, intimate worlds

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<sup>26</sup> Again, see Aslama’s diagrammatic representation of the relationship between Dahlgren’s dimensions of the public sphere (2006, p. 14).

where the sense of distance has been abolished. Therein lies the imaginary ideological dimension of mass communication. (ibid., p. 19)

Commentators like Altheide and Snow (1991), Justin Lewis (1991) and Thompson take ideology via the media for granted. Thompson refers to it as, “meaning in the service of power” and characterises it as both latent and misrepresentational (1990, p. 41).<sup>24</sup>

Garnham moves beyond a simplistic ‘stupidity’ and ‘manipulation’ reading of ideology but maintains that its absence of transparency makes interpretations of meanings difficult (1992, p. 365). He suggests that our day-to-day social relations and our identities are constructed via a complex process of mediations and they are acted out via “objects of consumption provided and in large part determined by the system of economic production and exchange” (ibid., p. 366). This latter observation gels with Higgins and Moss’s conclusions after their study of a Melbourne morning radio phone-in. They claim that the dominant ideology was overtly apparent in the news bulletins and covertly in the entertainment discourses (1982, p. 33). Consumption, they reckon, has become a substitute for democracy – the commercial is the purpose, the essence and the programme is the package. Within that package - the ‘flow’ of ads, chat, news and music – lies a ‘tacit ideology of consumption’ (ibid., p. 214).

In a discursive arena with some parallels to *Liveline*, Eoin Devereux in his 1988 study, *Devils and Angels*, contends that RTÉ ideologically constructs stories about Irish poverty across a variety of television programme formats. He identifies sets of dominant messages, shaped by the organisational environment, whereby the poor are portrayed as being either deserving or undeserving. This framing of poverty in telethons, soaps and documentaries via, what Gitlin terms, “consistent patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation” (1980, p. 7), deflects examination of the real causes of poverty

The individualisation and personalisation of poverty problems allow for the effective construction of television stories but it reduces the likelihood of poverty being viewed as a structural problem. .... Stories about poverty are largely mediated stories whereby the accent is placed on the agents of the poor. (1998, pp. 126/7)

Devereux references Thompson’s (1990, p. 53) distinctions between neutral and critical ideology. The neutral perception does not necessarily accept ideology as being inevitably misleading, illusory or aligned with power. The critical position, which Devereux champions, does.

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<sup>24</sup> In *Ideology and Modernity* (1990), Thompson sees ideology as a feature of the ‘mediaization’ of modern culture and offers a detailed overview of its modes of operation and the strategies it typically employs.

I am inclined to lean towards the neutral perspective and other commentators are more nuanced in their assessments. Dahlgren accepts that much of the 'working through' of media reception takes place within "largely hegemonic boundaries" (2005a, p. 417). He adds, however, that meaning is not fixed - it is anchored in a 'transitory present' and new issues and angles will present themselves to challenge dominant readings. "There will", he says, "always be a lot more cacophony than coherence". He allows that the media, especially in popular mode, tend not to encourage analytic engagement and hence do little to dispel unease. Personification and psychologism work against perspectives of collective well-being and responsibility, he notes, but ultimately he judges that any resultant hegemony is, "loose, leaky and always at risk" (ibid., p. 418).

Carpignano et al address how the production and packaging in a talk show may be linked to ideology. It is inevitably an objection that the coaching of contributors and the selection and editing along with the dominant discursive position of the host - all framed within a powerful institution - leads to the accusation of the conversation being as ideologically charged as any other programme. Worse still, they ask:

Isn't the sense of interactivity conveyed by the show an illusion of reciprocal response which increases the impotence of an atomized and silenced home audience, by transferring to a proxy, staged debate, the real need of response? (1990, p. 50)

They offer a twofold answer. In the first instance they insist that any selection and coaching is more about theatricality than ideology. Any opinion or position is acceptable as long as it performs well. The purpose of such shows is closer to the therapeutic than to the cognitive. Consequently the discussion does not lean towards balance and logic but more towards the inconsequential and the repetitious and towards an aura of ritual. They secondly suggest that the authority structure of the show, "is not different from that of any other informal group, as democratic and as non authoritarian as it may claim to be" (ibid., pp. 50 & 51). Someone will always lead the talk; be that little funnier, or better informed, or imposing.

I am inclined to align my position in approaching any ideological perspectives on *Liveline* with that espoused by Paddy Scannell (1996). This does not deny politics but sees it as just one of a number of key facets of media discourses. An over-concentration on power and ideology serves to blot out the ordinariness, the aesthetic, the professional, and other 'non-political' facets.

A construction of broadcasting primarily as an ideological apparatus automatically renders it as a non-authentic or pseudo-public sphere. Such a blanket reading does not distinguish between the discourses and practices of different genres nor does it study the output of broadcasting systematically as a totality.

The 'ideological effect' thesis is a one-dimensional critique that, in effect, only needs doing once from a predetermined political template. It collapses any difference or contradiction in the work of broadcasting. As such, broadcasting has no history, no development. There is very little positive to study, and nothing to learn from broadcasting. It cannot produce knowledge or understanding. It cannot transform perception. Any notion that the media might be instruments of enlightenment, ... must be delusory.

(Scannell, 1989, p. 157)

At the end of the day, it confirms the media as harmful and irreconcilable with, "a public sphere that works to enhance the reasonable democratic character of life in public and in private contexts" (ibid., p. 158).

Couldry, like Devereux, is critical of Scannell's take on broadcasting and insists that it never addresses issues of power and that it, itself is a victim of ideological opacity (2003, p. 17). Scannell counters by asserting that, "tearing aside the ideological veil had itself become stock phrases, discourse, dogma" (1989, p. 157). It is important to explore the political; to recognize the political; but not to become preoccupied or immobilised by it.

## **Politics**

Ideology is based on the idea of powerful elites imposing, however surreptitiously or unconsciously, a dominant reading of media texts so that the public will construct their preferred version of meaning. While we questioned its position as the only lens with which to view media representations, we also acknowledged that it would be short-sighted to dismiss or overlook the political. Politics, after all, is the universe in which those powerful elites orbit; it is the province of high finance, of the coercive arms of the state, of the bureaucrats, of powerful cultural and educational institutions, and of the executive organs of parliament.

Politics at its simplest is, "the authoritative allocation of goods, services and values" (Delli Carpini, 2009, p. 6). It is the social mechanism which forestalls violence in a world of scarcity, difference and competition. To that extent politics, for all its bad press, should first be celebrated as a product of human ingenuity. As Louw puts it, politics enables us to "organize and regulate social power relationships and make decisions governing the allocation and distribution of scarce social resources" (2005, p. 13). He breaks down politics into three spheres – the decision making process, the struggle over access to decision making positions, and the power of legitimating and enforcing decisions.

"The institutional understandings of politics locate it with in the apparatus of the state; the paraphernalia of making and administering legislating and spending the tax payers' money" (Miller, 1998, p. 250). Politics is bound with the social and therefore is essentially communicative but Garnham



reminds us, “Politics is not about discourse – it is about rules; about decisions for all (2003, p. 196).

Our question from the outset has concerned the connection between *Liveline* – a discursive construct – and democracy – another discursive construct. Considerable space has been devoted to examining the ways in which we understand democracy, not least because it is the prevailing shape governing political institutions and practices in large swathes of the Western World. Beck’s colourful mixture of metaphors contain a central truth:

Politics, to the extent that it behaves peacefully or can be kept peaceful, takes place within the nation state concept of democracy exclusively as a rule-directed wrestling match of parties over the feed troughs and levers of power with the goals of economic growth, full employment, social security and changing of governments in the sense of changing personnel and parties.

(1997, p. 135)

In that sense democracy is about politics and as Garnham stipulates, “In my view once you separate democracy from politics as the arena of common social decision making the term loses its pertinence and changes its meaning” (2003, p. 197). What this means in practice is that we cannot lose sight of the hard edged and messy political realities when we ask questions about *Liveline*.

In the first instance, as we locate politics within Dahlgren’s Social Structures, we recognise that the formal political configurations of the state provide the essential matrix for the programme’s existence. Its parent institution, RTÉ, is a political creation; it has a long and complex history of interaction with and dependence on the organs of the state and with individual politicians.<sup>25</sup> It operates in a bewildering legal framework ranging, for example, from labour law to codes of advertising standards; It is, on occasion, the voice of politicians or an instrument of state policy; and through its newsroom and current affairs journalists, it provides those ‘semi-insiders’ whom Habermas believes to be essential for the political public sphere to work (2006, p. 11).

As we have recorded, the programme has, from time to time, had significant political impact – for instance during the 2009 banking crisis, at the time of the Institutional Residential Redress Board and in overhauling prison security policy. However these spectacular results are exceptional, they do not happen every week. Their importance, in a sense, lies in the fact that they can happen. Daily editions of the programme are more likely to be effective at Barber’s ‘thin’ end of democracy as opposed to the ‘thicker’ decision and policy-making end. Individual tales of woe often remain just so – individual tales of woe. Brants recognises this. “The

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<sup>25</sup> Aspects of this relationship are well documented in Gorham (1967), Chubb (1984), and Horgan (2001).

problem with the talk show is that the issues raised rarely reach the decision-making sphere, let alone the political agenda” (1998, p. 117).

In spite of that I would argue that while the link to the decision-making agenda may, for the most part, be thin, “politics”, as Miller remarks, “is not just what governments do, it is also what populations do in their dealings with government” (1998, p. 250). Governments and their policies and their decisions need to be legitimised on an ongoing basis and it is in this, according to Louw, that the most obvious connection to the media lies (2005, p. 15). This legitimisation most often takes the form of minimal trustful compliance – an agreement to not disengage – and this in turn relies on the informed public opinion discussed earlier in this chapter. Any connection between *Liveline*’s influence on public opinion and the impact, in turn, of public opinion on political decision-making is far from being a ‘magic bullet’ but it is within these dynamics that the civic clout of the programme is to be identified.

There is a chorus of concern that democracy and the traditional political institutions are under threat or, at the very least, having to change to adapt to contemporary pressures – economic and social turbulence, globalisation, the scale and complexity of systems of representation, the declining authority of traditional institutions, increasingly pluralist populations, and apathy (see Jacka, 2003, Graham, 2008, and Dahlgren, 2009 for elucidations). We witness the emergence of new domains of politics – life politics (Giddens, 1991), sub-politics (Beck, 1994), postmodern politics (Inglehart, 1997), and lifestyle politics (Bennett, 1998). It has been helpful for us to engage with Graham’s (2008) and Hanish’s (1969) formulations where the personal is the political and where the political resides in private issues being presented for public airing, but in the end these conceptions of the political must find a way to link back to formal political structures to become effective. New corresponding institutional structures are slow to emerge.

Beck acknowledges this. “Where everything is somehow political then somehow nothing is political any more. Sub politics is fine just as long as it is supported by real politics. There is still the question of power at stake” (1997, p. 132). We have argued for the concept of Cultural Citizenship to enrich and enlarge to range of modes through which an individual may engage with the democratic process but that need not blind us to Luke Goode’s caution that we, “cannot justify a wholesale conflation of culture and politics” (2005, p. 135). “Narrow politics survives because the nation state is still strong – still the main administrator of rights and settling via the law” (Giddens, 1991, p. 226). This understanding needs to be factored in as a backdrop when we proceed in our assessment of *Liveline*.

## In Conclusion

The foregoing attempts to lay down a theoretic foundation upon which to commence the empirical research on *Liveline*. Theories of democracy allowed us to locate ourselves 'carefully and flexibly' between the utopian, on the one hand, and logics of identity, on the other and to appreciate that a productive interplay between the two held the greatest civic promise.

If *Liveline* is to be judged on the grounds of civic agency then we need to look to the talk that is the programme's stock in trade. Phone-in talk, we discovered, is similar in many respects to day-to-day chat between individuals but there are crucial differences. What we are dealing with here, for all its liveness and informality, is mediated institutional talk. This of itself does not make it inferior or suspect but it does need to be assessed against its own purposes and consequences. One of its institutional peculiarities is the trialogic nature of its transmission and reception. The prime target of this talk is the listening audience as opposed to the parties to the conversation.

In order to establish if this talk can have a civic impact I approached it from three theoretic angles. The Habermasian version of the public sphere insists that talk is simply so much hot air unless it has relevance in terms of rights and norms and political decision-making. Only talk, which has been filtered to a process of rational critical deliberation, can aspire to achieve this. I recognise a valid core in this argument. The rational cannot be left out of the process and the result must serve a civic purpose but there are drawbacks also on the grounds that formal rationality alone tends towards exclusion, impoverishment and restriction in deliberation.

One way of rectifying this is through recourse to 'soft' deliberative democracy. In this construction, formal deliberation is still prized as central to the democratic process but other discourses may be enlisted - emotion, stories based on personal experience, elements of performance and entertainment. In the first instance these arational modes can help to enthuse and motivate citizenship; secondly they add a more rounded impact to argumentation and; thirdly they facilitate different (sometimes excluded) voices and different ways of knowing.

I adopt Peter Dahlgren's proposed structure for exploring a mediated public sphere. He recommends that we consider it within four different but intersecting dimensions. Initially I look at the programme in its media institutional setting. This offers scope to consider how *Liveline* is shaped by its location within RTÉ, the national Public Service broadcaster. RTÉ is also a business open to the logics, pressures and practices of the market. *Liveline* is a product as well as being a production.

A second dimension invites us to see *Liveline* within a web of socio-cultural interactions. Considered in this light, I identify a triangular collaborative production of meaning at work encompassing the programme professionals, the callers and the listening public. My concern is with how they may construct identities as citizens, not alone in terms of their rights and their entitlements as members of a community but also in terms of Cultural Citizenship. I pull the threads of the public sphere, of deliberative democracy and of Cultural Citizenship together under the heading of civic culture.

Just as *Liveline* is located in a media institution, just as it is at the centre of a web of socio-cultural interaction, it is also on the periphery of the world of formal politics. We may forget that while civic identity is evolving or public opinion is taking shape, a government minister could withdraw funding or decide to privatise RTE over night – not very likely maybe but any consideration of the programme which does not take account of the primacy of formal politics is missing an inescapable element. There is the further argument to be countered, that politicians and other powerful players do not need to use blunt instruments. It is sufficient that they are well served by the ideological values below the surface of the programme.

Each of these three dimensions of *Liveline* as a public sphere would offer an almost limitless scope for investigation but for reasons outlined in the first chapter, I will focus my research on the dimension of media representation – in this case the discourses produced in the studio and heard by the public. My background and experience have been in the field of production; I have some understanding of the processes involved in creating a radio text and that should allow me to contribute a richer interpretation of what data I uncover.

Leaning on Habermas, I intend exploring what, if any, of rational debate and formal deliberation is in evidence and how such argumentation might result in establishing norms applicable to actionable decisions. Under the wider rubric of civic culture I intend to explore how other arational discourses – emotion, witnessing to personal experience, and the entertaining – can be shown to feed into the deliberative process in such a way as to contribute to the political in the broadest sense.

Finally, I propose examining the production practices of the show as a feature of the discursive context. I wish to interrogate the proposition that any editing, preparation of callers, selection of material and so on, somehow represents a degree of artifice that hollows out the show's potential as a public sphere. I wish to explore the apparent tension between producing radio directed towards the public good and 'good' radio.

## Chapter Four

### The Phone-in

If our goal is to ask how a particular radio programme contributes for better or worse to the common good, then it becomes incumbent to justify our choice. There is on offer a wide variety of radio formats - from sports commentaries to chart music, to shipping forecasts and so on - and beyond this there is an almost immeasurable array of other media configurations, each of which can stake some claim to be considered for the information and values it conveys, for the platform it offers and for the contribution it can make to constructing our identities and practices as citizens. The question becomes, "Why the radio phone-in?" and further, "Why this particular phone-in?" I intend initially, to explore the phone-in in general, this "subgenre of the medium where... community participation is invited" (Higgins and Moss, 1982, p. 32). My intention is to set the scene and to forestall unnecessary explanations, repetitions and references as we proceed. Firstly, I will look at its development as a radio format and move on to suggest why this particular type of programme, with its specific characteristics, is an attractive proposition for an examination of democratic practice. I then propose to focus on our case study, *Liveline*, to determine how it sits within the format and to locate it in both a national and a media context.

#### Historical Note

The telephone has been with us since the late nineteenth century and radio since the early decades of the twentieth. Convergence was to be expected. Writing of Australia, Liz Gould, citing Lesley Johnson (1988), "notes that 'talk-back' dates back to the very start of radio broadcasting. As early as 1925, Sydney station 2BL invited listeners to ring the studio and ask questions of the host. Both sides of the conversation were heard on air" (2004, p. 3). This appears to conflict somewhat with Wayne Munson's (1993) observation; he places the origins of the phone-in back in the 1930s in the USA. Here for the first time, he says, the phone was linked to radio technology and presenters relayed on-air the comments of listeners who had phoned the station. Callers' voices were heard for the first time on air in 1945 when one of the first two-way conversations was introduced by a late night New York DJ, Barry Gray, of WOR. KABC in Los Angeles claimed to be one of the first stations to introduce the dedicated talk format in 1961.

That new format as it evolved in the free market ethos of the USA was deemed to be a powerful and populist one. Diana Owen considers that,

"talk radio may be 'the last frontier' for mass political discourse" (1995, p. 60) and she speculates on how the 1992 presidential campaigns of Ross Perot, Pat Buchanan, George W. Bush, Jerry Brown and Bill Clinton were affected for better or for ill by their engagement with talk radio. She also notes that, "talk radio long has been the domain of Republicans and Conservatives" and that "dissonance and controversy are integral to the format's popular appeal" (ibid., pp. 63 & 64).

The Annenberg Report on call-in political talk radio agrees with her. It notes that the other mainstream US media view the phone-in as "powerful, pernicious and monolithic (and) at best, routinely uncivil and downright dangerous. It concludes that in the wider press, "talk radio is a domain of brash anger and bizarrely conservative behaviour that is generally disconnected from mainstream politics" (1996, p. 37). By focusing on moments in which talk radio may have mobilized citizens or influenced legislation but not those in which it failed to do so, newspaper articles on talk radio may exaggerate its impact" (ibid., p. 4). This report remarks on the emergence of powerful conservative figures of the stature of Howard Stern and Rush Limbaugh<sup>1</sup>. It also notes the arrival of a broader spectrum of liberal and alternative voices and topics, which find expression across the airwaves of the USA. But Stephen Coleman confirms that the dominant voice in the phone-in there is one of conservative anger when he brands American radio talk as "intentionally illiberal; it is America's least articulate having a rant against an absent but omnipresent subversive other" (1998, p. 9). Murray Levin characterized the tone of US talk radio as being indicative of a crisis of confidence and a sense of malaise in the American public - a sense of proletarian despair. These programmes, he says,

reveal the tension of American life: sorrow and anger, bigotry and tolerance, mistrust and pride in the country. (They) record a strong sense that the public good and communal feeling are being eroded by the callous self interest of big business and the veniality of political apparatchiks.

(1987, pp. xii & xiii)<sup>2</sup>

Crisell acknowledges the American origins of the radio phone-in and traces its introduction into the UK. "In Britain it made its *début* on a local station, BBC Radio Nottingham, in 1968, but was pioneered at network level ...

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<sup>1</sup> David Rowe cites the case of the 'Shock jock' Alan Berg, who specialised in abusing callers and who was assassinated in the station car park after one of his shows by an infuriated racist in 1984. (1992, p. 4).

<sup>2</sup> Levin talks of these programmes becoming a vehicle for working class themes: the loss of political power, the dangers of urban life, the debasement of daily existence through a decay in manners and morals, a lack of respect in children, worries about drugs, the neighbourhood after dark and a loss of trust in the police. Levin is of the opinion that, the unique quality of talk radio has much to do with the fact that it is the province of proletarian discontent, the only mass medium immediately available to the underclass.... Anonymity reduces the reluctance of the uneducated. The abundant civic complaints that are the show's stock-in-trade nourish the urge to talk. (1987, p. xiii).

and first heard on Radio 4 in 1970 as *It's Your Line*, presented by Robin Day" (1994, p. 191). Crisell seems keen to stress that feature of the phone-in which has the audience expressing itself, not just as a sequence of individuals, but in a corporate sense on the medium - the audience became visible (audible?) to itself. Early phone-in titles like, *It's Your Line* and *Voice of the People* were calculated to give an impression of breadth and representativeness. Early programmes were akin to traditional political interviews with the callers augmenting and replacing the programme host.

Crisell charts the growth of the format as it developed in the UK. Variation on the format evolved as it spread into commercial and regional radio and across other radio formats. In some instances pundits were employed in the studio and the host became a moderator between callers and studio guests. Some varieties were based on set or recurring themes and fixed weekly agendas. Though the different radio traditions on either side of the Atlantic shaped the format as it evolved, Crisell points out that by the 1980s a number of presenters in the UK, most notably Brian Hayes and James Whale, had adopted the shock jock tactics of their American counterparts and "were renowned for their unpleasant and even brutal treatment of phoners-in" (ibid., p. 198). Norma Ellen Verwey has researched phone-ins in Britain and in her native Canada. She felt that the commercial sector was the natural home of the phone-in and that::

.... the public networks did not invent the call-in format - they merely tried to imitate it. And they do this only to add some variety to their monthly schedule. Adding variety is the only manifest function a short series of call-ins can perform for a public network. The only type of call-in that has proved at all successful on a public network is the long-running, caller-to-expert-guest call-in with a question-and-answer format, where the expert guest and caller do most of the talking. .... This is indeed a public service. (1990, p. 235)

The phone-in in Australia initially drew on the Public Service attributes of the early British model while latterly it too has evolved towards some of the brashness and excess of the commercial radio sector in the United States<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> As was the case with early radio in Ireland, broadcasting in Australia was regulated under the umbrella of Post and Telegraphs and both Gould and John Tebbutt (2006) outline how the Postmaster General was, for a number of reasons, reluctant to permit telephone voices on air and how he introduced regulations which effectively delayed phone-in radio in Australia until deregulation in June 1968. In the first instance the PMG wanted to stave off competition between the phone and the radio as individual communications media. There was a reasonable concern with the broadcast quality of phone lines. There was also a Reithian reservation "that only 'notable people' with something to say would be given an opportunity to present on radio via the telephone" (Tebbutt, 2006, p. 866). Add to these concerns a curious policy context where Australian Security Intelligence was interested its right (and its alone) to record the phone conversations of citizens. Liz Gould mentions the ingenuity of a particular broadcaster in the early days of this prohibition.

One enterprising Brisbane station offered listeners the chance to speak 'on air', circumventing the restriction on the broadcasting of telephone conversations, by offering a free taxi ride to the station and morning tea for the first housewife to ring through to the station. (2004, p. 5)

Graeme Turner traces how radio in Australia became highly localised in the mid 70s and how it became effectively deregulated at the end of the 80s when stations were increasingly left to order their own affairs (2000, p. 248). The industry became dominated by FM music stations and AM talk. "Talk radio in commercial terms is now almost exclusively 'talkback' or what the British refer to as 'call-in'. ..... The market leaders in Sydney - the largest radio market in the country are all talk-back hosts" (ibid., p. 250).<sup>4</sup>

Examples from the English-speaking world and from elsewhere<sup>5</sup> show the phone-in evolved and expanded according as technology, the market, and government regulation permitted. The term now accommodates an expanding range of variations on the format. Moss and Higgins concluded that it is a format that, "has a subtle and, at times, unpredictable complexity" (1984, p. 355) and that it accommodates to contexts of locality, regulation, market and prevailing cultural conditions. It is not surprising

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When legislation was introduced to allow broadcasting of live and recorded telephone voices in the mid 60s, the issue of appropriate public voice was for a while open for debate. Women's voices, which had been highly circumscribed in broadcasting, found an outlet in 'Two-way' radio, which provided the opportunity for their comments on a broad range of topics (Tebbutt, 2006, p. 867).

<sup>4</sup> The power and influence of these hosts has been underlined in two significant manifestations, which have shaken the world of Australian phone-in in recent years. The first of these was the 'cash for comments' scandal. Talkback hosts were frequently paid more than the proprietors of the stations which employed them. The talkback format, according to Turner, developed more along the lines of American radio than the British/European model.

Talkback hosts kept their audiences in Australia through the promotion of their own power and personality as the commodity on offer. As a result they are opinionated, reactionary, arrogant and personally abusive to callers who offend them. The epitome of what is usually talked about as the tabloidization of the media; they are also the first port of call for politicians on the campaign trail. It is a worrying fact that talkback radio exercises an increasingly important influence over the shape and content of political and social debate in Australia - an influence that is out of all proportion to the quality of the information they seek to provide. (2000, p. 251)

The kernel of the scandal was the discovery that one of the most prominent and high profile of these talkback hosts, John Laws, was found to have entered into clandestine deals worth millions with banks and other public institutions to cease criticising them and to comment on them in a positive light and this, in spite of his adopted pose as 'champion of the people'. Enquiry revealed he was not alone in this.

The other episode, which brought little credit to talkback hosts in Australia, was the part played by radio in the outbreak of racial rioting in Sydney in December 2005. Phone-in radio combined with the spread of an anti-Lebanese mobile text message encouraged 5,000 to march,

...and they came with their beer-soaked hatred wrapped in the Australian flag, singing *Waltzing Matilda*. Alan Jones, former Australian International rugby coach turned right wing radio shock jock, ratcheted up the temperature on his show through last week and was very pleased with himself. On Sydney's number 1 rated programme he read out the notorious SMS, gave huge time to racist buffoons and encouraged their vile ignorance. (Padraig Collins, Sydney Letter, *Irish Times*, 15/12/2005, p. 15)

<sup>5</sup> See Rosalia Winocur's (2003) work from Mexico and Columbia or Francis Lee's (2002) assessment of the contribution made by the phone-in in Hong Kong during the delicate transition period to Chinese rule. Crisell (1994), Steven Vertovec (2006) and the Annenberg report (1996) each outlines how language and cultural minorities have used variants of the phone-in as a means of support within larger communities.



either that the history of the phone-in reflects instances of venality, ignorance, vacuity, engagement, high-mindedness and effectiveness in a manner akin to other discursive formulations.

### **Characteristics**

What makes the radio phone-in special, what distinguishes it from the other programmes heard on radio, is the fact that it is the only type of programme designed so the ordinary people, the audience members, the non-professionals, are heard to have their say.

Alongside the letters page in the printed press and the talk show on the television, the phone-in is one of the few locations where lay people can make their point in their own words within a mass media context. Callers' contributions are more than cheering spectators heard in a sports commentary, more than bystanders at news events and more than uncredited sound bites in vox pops. Callers' contributions have a greater civic intentionality than the chatter of participants in Reality TV and factual entertainment genres where, as Pantti and Huslage (2009, p. 78) remark, one half the audience now seems to be watching the other half but where the ultimate goal is signing a modelling or a recording contract or surviving to carry off the cash prize. New media - the internet, texting, desk-top publishing, digital photography - have made it easier for individuals to become their own producers and to publish their work and their opinions in formats that may be accessed by many. But that 'many' implies questions of scale and social cohesion. Effective and accomplished as these messages may be on occasions, they cannot as yet trade on the contextual cachet, the authority or the sense of ordinariness and continuity that comes from being produced and received in the institutional mass media. It is this very intersection, the voice of the private individual being produced and heard in a public institution, which makes the phone-in an attractive subject for examination if the aim is to interrogate the set of relationships between the individual and the society in which he or she lives. Fitzgerald and Housley catch the attraction succinctly.

The 'radio phone-in' forms a space within which democratic life and the 'public' are seen to air their views. This intersection of the enunciative modalities of the media and the public makes the site an attractive proposition for social analysis and commentary. (2002, p. 579)

#### 1. A Sense of Ordinariness

If we tease out these 'enunciative modalities' it is immediately clear that one of the salient features of the phone-in is the prevalence of ordinary voices and ordinary talk. The hosts are often the only professional broadcasters and they usually engage in the vernacular patterns of their callers, in their natural language and modes of address. There are, as Avery and Ellis (1979) and Armstrong and Rubin (1989) suggest, distinct parallels between the on-air talk of the phone-in and ordinary one-to-one

conversation. (As has been noted, there are also distinct differences). Ian Hutchby adds that, talk shows and phone-ins often have a hearable quality that is much closer to everyday conversation than the formalised patterns of other genres (2006, p. 27). Many of the pleasures and purposes are the same and some of these impact on our quest for the political. Livingstone and Lunt view day-to-day conversation as being essentially persuasive (1994, p. 137). Both Nightingale and Ross (2003) and Jones (2006b) remark on the enjoyment and purposes of gossip and small talk, pointing out that they can be useful tools for private discussion on wider issues like, for example, the law or morality. Anthony Wright also sees the phone-in as a space for both callers and listeners to gather information and to rehearse positions. "The phone-in format can perform several valuable functions. ... it can provide the entertainment of conversation and argument, of new voices and unpredictable comments, and this power to entertain carries with it an ability to engage interest and attention that can in turn provide new opportunities for information and education" (1979/80, p.18).

The Annenberg Report characterises talk radio as an intimate medium, "in which callers and hosts participate in spontaneous interaction" (1996, p. 5). Ian Hutchby develops this idea; "the talk as it unfolds in the real time of the show is not scripted, meaning that the participants have to be creative in reacting and in responding to one another's talk in the course of its production" (2006, p1). Hutchby believes that the non-professional and unscripted nature of the talk allows it to cross some key sociological categories - such as lay/expert and public/private - in complex ways

The opening provided by the phone-in for the untrained, the lay, the ordinary and the non-professional is more than an exercise in vocal variety, more than mere auditory slumming. It can also be a platform for alternative discourses to find an outlet. Phone-ins, as programmes, are no longer:

the top down informer from the public knowledge project but the bottom up provider of a platform for 'experience based experts' instead of just officials. For many 'ordinary people' - and minorities are a notable example - this is the only public space where they can address a wider audience with the sort of issues they deem relevant and confront dominant political discourse with common sense. (Brants, 1998. pp. 176 & 177)

Adding to the phone-in's attraction as a target for social research, Murray Levin (1987) hints that there is a whiff of the proletarian in its complexities and language and in its facility to locate otherwise hidden debates.

Liveness is a further quality, which adds to the ordinary, informal, unscripted and here-and-now character of the phone-in. Being perceived as live - being transmitted in real time and not subjected to editing - offers the listeners a status as witnesses and a sense of co-presence according to Åsa Kroon Lundell (2009). Its spontaneity and veracity contribute to

holding audience attention and impart a belief that contributors are not acting. Liveness links into notions of authenticity and truth. Crissell (1994, p. 5) describes radio as a present tense medium and hearing callers in real time verifies the existence of an audience for listeners. There are others listening and like them it is possible for me to call if I choose. Nick Couldry (2004), however, cautions against ignoring the ideological implications of liveness; the seduction of an over-simplistic faith in the media representing reality as it really is.

A number of commentators (Carpignano et al., 1990, Scannell, 1996, Lewis, 2000, as examples) link these ordinary modes of expression to the tradition of orality where conversation is the sense-making dynamic. Carpignano suggests that , "its immediacy is in its live-like quality and in the sense of real time progression. Its content spans the 'marvellous world of the ordinary'" (1990, p. 5). He reflects on the loss of story in living speech and a corresponding privileging of 'information'. This ties to Lewis's contention that the media have traditionally been explored and explained in the context of the literary tradition. As he puts it, "Radio and sound, however connect with an older oral and aural tradition whose contemporary traces have been until recently virtually unexplored academically" (2000, p. 163).

I have considered already the institutional overlay of speech on radio. For now I acknowledge the similarities between phone-in talk and this almost-ordinary-talk, which is transmitted in the most ordinary of media. Peter Lewis suggests that because of the dominance of the visual in our culture, radio has become "the invisible medium". He continues:

Radio is everybody's private possession yet no one recognizes it in public. ... (It is) woven into our lives so closely that it's like brushing our teeth or locking up at night, is taken for granted. Few of us discuss it, it needs no explanation: we listen to the radio. Yet this habit, and the intimate things it does for us as friend, trusted informant and sound-track for living are almost literally unmentionable in public. (2000, p. 161)

Paddy Scannell devotes considerable space to illuminating the ordinariness and the dailiness of radio and the way in which it structures and routinises our lives and reconfigures both the time and space in which we live. He draws on Heidegger's concept of *dasein* - being there. Heidegger (1962) interprets the possibility of radio as transforming spatiality; as bringing things close and hence within the range of attention and concern; as making the world accessible for anyone (Scannell, 1996, p. 167).

He elucidates further:

Broadcasting transposes the norms of everyday interpersonal existence into public life. It does so because it exists in two worlds of concern: the great world and everyone's my-world. If as an institution, it stands in the former, it speaks (as it well knows) to listeners .... who live in the latter and who judge what they see and hear by the norms of social, sociable daily life.....The

programme structures of radio .... will produce and reproduce - as they are meant to do - the everyday human social, sociable world everyday endlessly. In so doing they help to constitute the meaningful background of everyday existence. .... Meaningfulness shows up always in small ways and little things. (ibid., pp. 175&177)

This refusal to see the media as extraneous and extraordinary, as somehow outside the daily meaning-making enterprise, is consistent with his previous observation.

...broadcasting has done a great deal more than to present ordinary people in programmes dealing with social issues and problems. It has discovered the pleasures of ordinariness, creating entertainment out of nothing more than ordinary people talking about themselves, (1989, p. 13)

Open-agenda discussion programmes, in spite of considerable selection, management and filtering by their production teams, are some of the few non-fiction media locations where speech has the potential to meander across topics, both trivial and serious, in a manner that reflects chat at the dinner table, in the dental waiting room or in the pub. The possibility exists for changing the subject; for the vagaries of thought association or for the intrusion of the irrelevant in a way that would be out of the question in other speech programmes. The host will contrive to maintain the broad direction of the programme but the host will also be aware that conversational diversions, digressions, and non-sequiturs can add to both the listening pleasure and the informal 'feel' of the programme.

It may be gleaned from Myers' observation (2004, p. 202) that people often talk about politics just to pass the time so even when the focus is on overtly political topics, the phone-in engages in political talk for a variety of reasons and in different ways. Andra Leurdijk found that talk shows engaged "in a more mundane and less intellectual way" with the issues surrounding immigration in Holland, "In talk shows, for example, the debate focussed not so much on policies and ideologies but on people's daily life experiences in a multicultural society" (1997, p. 148).

The question follows whether audience discussion programmes end up simply valorising the trivial and the inconsequential. According to Livingstone and Lunt one outcome is that, "the discourse changes: expertise is undermined and lay discourse is elevated" (1994, p. 97) and they further contend that if policies and decisions are to be put into practice they must be amenable to everyday understanding. In a section entitled, *The Mediated Legitimation of Ordinary Experience*, they suggest that when it comes to discerning the difference between lay participants and experts/pundits/politicians, "both are presented as interested parties but as knowing different things in different ways" (ibid., p. 101). They dwell on the modernist separation of expertise and common sense. Traditional programme formats - features, documentaries, interviews - have usually valorised the experts whose contributions are deemed to be objective, grounded in data, rational, general, abstract, neutral, factual and counter-

intuitive; whereas against that the lay voice, where it gains admission is perceived as subjective, ungrounded, emotional, particular, concrete, motivated, suppositional and stating the obvious. But discussion programmes have challenged these oppositions and offer an alternative model. In these programmes the lay voice emerges as authentic, story driven, relevant, in-depth, grounded in experience, meaningful, practical and real while the expert comes across as alienated, fragmented, cold, irrelevant, superficial, ungrounded, empty of meaning, useless and artificial (ibid., p. 102).

The context for the listener also is usually informal and ordinary. Phone-ins are normally heard in mundane settings, in the car, the kitchen, in the open air on headphones (Hutchby, 2006, p. 13). Listening can be passive or distracted or as attentive as one might be in an interpersonal conversation. Listening can be haphazard or can be deeply embedded in a routine; the programme may be 'caught' on a day off work sick or it may be anticipated and planned for on a daily basis. Whether the listeners listen or not, they will be well aware of a programme's timeslot, regularity and scheduling.

This stress is placed on the ordinariness of the phone-in because it has been argued earlier in this thesis that it is in sub-political and open-ended conversations like these that politics is generated. But there are reservations about the effectiveness of ordinary talk; suspicions that it lacks depth and meaning or that it is too emotional (Pantti and Husslage, 2009, p. 78). Hutchby's (2006, p. ix) references to 'mindless talk show chatter' and to 'cultural fast food' certainly carry elements of validity and as does Joke Hermes' (2006, p. 30) assertion that the conversations of ordinary people in the mediated public sphere have little political impact.

To summarise, the phone-in occurs in what has been characterised as an ordinary medium and is heard in ordinary contexts. This much is true of all radio programmes. What is different is that the phone-in brings ordinary voices - both in the sense of unscripted/untrained and in the sense of being lay/non-expert - into this context. These voices are heard to talk about ordinary concerns, ranging from those deemed trivial to the overtly political and to talk about them in a way, which validates a different, lay, anti-elite epistemology. The fact that they represent, as Livingstone and Lunt termed it, the 'mediated legitimation of ordinary experience', is but a further pointer to the unique potential of the phone-in as a vehicle for democratic deliberation.

## 2. Access, Participation and Representation

Access and participation have already been addressed as aspects of media institutional power in Chapter Three. Diane Rehm can refer to the forum afforded by the phone-in as, "perhaps the epitome of participatory democracy" (1995, p. 70), but there is far from universal agreement on this

lofty assessment of its purposes and practices. It is true, as we have seen, that one of the defining features, evident even in the name 'phone-in', is that it provides a channel for access and participation by the ordinary citizen. Buckley can say, "the concept of communicative democracy lies at the heart of the participative media practice demonstrated by the use of radio as a popular communications tool" (2000, p. 184). Anthony Wright suggests that the opportunities for access and participation allows the phone-in to be considered as a controlled experiment in social democracy (1979, p. 66).

In *Liveline*, as in all phone-ins, there is access; there is participation. Callers do phone in; they do make their point in public; it is discussed and occasionally there is change as a result. There is also significant institutional control; there are selections and manipulations. Accepting that, our challenge is to ascertain what of the democratic can be salvaged when we have taken these limitations into account. The preponderance of academic comment would seem to say, 'very little'. Livingstone and Lunt summarise the reservations: the phone-in is a trick to capture lazy listeners via the illusion of influence and participation: it had a narcotising function which undermines the democratic: through such formats people know more, have more opinions but act less: Habermas is correct in dubbing media discussion, 'a tranquillising substitution for action' (1996, p.15).

Others, as we have seen, will go further and dub such access programmes as either pseudo democratic (Rowe, 1992, Day, 2003) or indeed, as being antidemocratic in that representative constitutional democracy is being displaced and superseded by 'legislation by airwaves' which itself is based on unrepresentative ideological values. (Fennell, 1986, pp. 51 & ff). Rosemary Day, writing from a perspective of community radio and community development, picks up on concerns about access and participation. Access, she says, is what happens on the "ubiquitous phone-ins" (2003, p. 88) - participation allows for greater involvement. She is critical of, what she terms, "pseudo participation (which) is tightly controlled, heavily mediated and facilitated for reasons such as the provision of cheap and popular programming or the projection of an image of inclusivity and localness" (ibid., p. 88). The stock in trade of such programmes is "adversarial gobbets of opinion" (Jones, 2006b, p. 24). Both Sara O'Sullivan and Andra Leurdijk (1997) remark on the fact that on such programmes, issues are closed as opposed to being resolved. There is a loss of process in favour of the 'quick fix'. Because the dominant discourse is one of emotion and personal testimony there is no scope for complexity and within such a code of individualism there is little potential for collective action (O'Sullivan, 2000a, p. 37). "Talk shows favour certain perspectives on social problems above others. Causes of social problems are attributed to individual failures, just as solutions are expected to come from individual achievements. Structural causes get less attention"

(Leurdijk, 1997, p. 159). Such programmes, she continues, "generally do not provide much analytical depth or historical background" (ibid., p. 161).

It is for this reason and for the prominence they afford emotional moments over rational discussion, that Gamson can write of such access programmes, "It remains unclear exactly how this access translates into a broadening of anything resembling say, democratic participatory decision making" (1999, p. 202) or again, "If one is looking for discussion of some sort of collective fate or common good, in which statuses are set aside in the service of argument, talk shows are also a bit of a bust" (ibid., p. 193).

Living, as we do in a representative democracy, the representativeness of the phone-in, in this case *Liveline*, also comes into focus. On the one hand there is Pantti and Husslage's justification for the voices of the public in the media, that "they allow the citizen to (hear) 'themselves' and to use these peer representations for understanding their own responses and for building their own images of the world" (1990, p. 80). On the other, the Annenberg Report cautions, "it is inappropriate to assume that the views of callers are identical to those of listeners or that the views of listeners reflect the views of the public at large" (1996, p. 11).

It appears there is similar difference of opinion about *Liveline* in the public mind as expressed in the critics' columns of the press. Gerry McCarthy writes that Joe Duffy, "can still claim to preside over a national conversation" and that particular shows, "display the depth of *Liveline*'s penetration into the national subconscious" (2008, p. 17). Sarah Burke claims, "he is still catching the pulse of the nation. It may not be everybody's pulse but it is a significant one" (2006, pp. 38&39). Set against that, Michael Ross underlines some realities:

Incredible as it might seem it is entirely possible to pass through life without meeting anyone who has contributed to *Liveline*. The phone-in slot prides itself as the show where the country communes with itself, bypassing the spin and hidden agendas with which other media outlets are thought to be riddled. There is only one problem with this self image. Only about one in 10 of the population listens to *Liveline* and only a tiny few of that number ever speak on air. The programme exists to feed the needs of the silent majority of listeners.  
(*Radio Waves*, 31/07/2005, p. 13)

It has been argued above that representative democracy itself is an imperfect construct where, via limited channels for access and participation, the opinion of the bulk of citizens ultimately legitimates how we activate the common good. My contention is that the phone-in, better than other media forms, has the capacity to illuminate aspects of this process.

### 3. A Forum for Argument

Different media forms ostensibly serve different social functions. Some 'factual' forms such as news bulletins, encyclopaedias and sports casts can claim to represent our world 'as it really is'. Others - documentaries, editorial features, academic journals - attempt to interpret that world. Movies, novels and music nourish our emotions and fuel our imaginations. Some forms are constructed principally as fora - places of debate, of deliberation with a purpose. These include interviews, blog sites, election literature etc. but within the mass media, the letters page, the radio phone-in and the TV talkshow are the principal sites which can lay claim to facilitating the debate of the general public as a central feature.

The phone-ins, talkshows and letters pages position themselves as fora. It is part of their pitch. "Talkback", "Have your say", "Talk to Joe"; the taglines and titles underline public entitlement to engage. O'Sullivan reckons the phone-ins "can provide a forum, albeit a restricted one, for democratic debate and discussion" (2006, p. 155) and Lee suggests they "provide an excellent unstructured outlet for public discourse" (2002, p. 58). Neither posits the phone-in as an ideal agora. O'Sullivan believes it does not live up to the opportunity it offers. Commercial considerations, discursive imbalances, issues of performance, concentration on the personal at the expense of the social, difficulty in initiating action or in resolving problems; these factors and more are seen to limit the modes of deliberation (2000, p. 35). Nonetheless, with Higgins and Moss, we are not blind to its capacity as, "a counter-hegemonic discourse phenomenon - as it is one of the few ways people can find to give public expression to private and perhaps dissonant viewpoints in a culture otherwise saturated with approved meanings" (1982, p. 1)<sup>6</sup>.

Lunt and Stenner suggest that we view talkshows as, "an institutionally constrained space that nevertheless offers the opportunity for expression to marginal voices that would otherwise not be heard in public", and that we should focus, "on questions of voice and expression as moments in a wider process of deliberation rather than microcosms of the whole process of deliberation" (2005, p. 61).

So phone-ins are not perfect agora - some are far from perfect; neither are they the only agora. Discussion in phone-ins is frequently part of a process of extended mediation, drawing on other media and being recycled in the press or on TV, but the phone-in itself offers the most obvious platform for the voice of the public and whatever it might bring of

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<sup>6</sup> That the phone-in finds a place for argument in the public mind was brought home to me over 16 years as the principal in a working class Comprehensive School. On more than a few occasions parents, who were frustrated by authority or bureaucracy, would threaten me or the Board of Management or The Department of Education with a call to a radio station. Frequently too they would identify some public injustice or dispute and foretell, "That will be on Joe Duffy tomorrow".



'common sense' to a debate. It is this that prompts us to interrogate the phone-in as an effective democratic forum in spite of its overt self-promotion and of its limitations and restrictions.

#### 4. Effectiveness

Phone-ins work. They get stuff done. They achieve results on a number of levels. The Annenberg Report has illustrated their perceived impact at election time in the USA and their capacity to effect change both at local and at national level. It notes,

In 1989 talk radio was given credit for mobilizing the masses against a recommended Congressional pay hike. Radio listeners also created public pressure against the confirmation of Clinton's attorney general nominee Zoe Baird and fuelled opposition to his proposed ban on discrimination against gays in the military. (1996, p. 45)

At times of transition and upheaval phone-ins have a capacity to rebuild communities, to explain, to reassure and to lubricate social change as has been argued by Francis Lee (2002) in the case of Hong Kong and by Stephen Coleman reflecting on the peace process in Northern Ireland (1998). There may be a dark side to effectiveness as John Hartley writes:

Of course, radio can be used in zones of conflict as well as for community purposes, and it can be used to build communities of hate as well as other more 'civil' societies. There are examples from Rwanda, Angola, the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere, including the so-called shock-jocks in the USA and Australia, to remind us that the possibilities of radio can be pathological as well as healthy to the body politic. (2000, p. 158)

I have already catalogued some of *Liveline's* significant and large-scale accomplishments of recent years and would suggest that the programme is perceived as a player on the formal political stage. Radio reviewer, Bernice Harrison, reports, "it's also the programme played in newspaper and TV newsrooms and it's in the rare position that its content regularly spills out into other media and even the Dáil" (*Radio Review*, 29/12/2007) and historian, Joe Lee suggests that government ministers are more afraid of on-air reaction to their decisions than they are of the parliamentary opposition (1997, p. 18). We might further observe that the programme also achieves a series of minor, more individual 'results'. Long lost relatives are found and reunited; companies offer refunds, apologies and explanations; hard-luck stories attract donations and compensations. These fortunate outcomes do not happen in every show but the programme must continue to offer the prospect of effectiveness if it is to maintain its democratic credentials. A platform for discussion is fine but as Barber (1984) stipulates, the talk at the heart of strong democracy as well as entailing listening and recognising the affective as well as the cognitive, it must also have intentionality; it must be more than simply reflective; it must be talk towards some end. These occasional coups in the political sphere and these minor victories for individuals hold open for both callers and listeners the possibility that something will be done. Again, Harrison offers an example:

The whole point of Liveline ...is its accessibility, especially for people who feel powerless - something hammered home in Kilkenny woman, Susie Long's comments rebroadcast widely this week to mark her sad passing. "I'm writing to you because the way this country runs leads me to believe that contacting a radio show is the only way to change things", she wrote in her initial letter to Duffy. (Radio Review, 20/10/2007, p. 16)

### 5 . Blurred Boundaries

Wayne Munson notes that this type of programme is frequently academically disparaged, possibly precisely because it is difficult to locate. These programmes mix cheap amusement with highmindedness; celebrity with anonymity; humbug with the seminar; the conventional with the exotic; the expert with the amateur and the clinical with the emotional (1993, p. 19). I contend that it is this very intersectional quality, this unease with definition and limitation, that makes them all the more suited as a lens to focus on civic communication in the real world.

Livingstone and Lunt suggest that "audience discussion programmes<sup>7</sup> challenge the existing conceptions of genre, particularly the distinction between entertainment and current affairs, ideas and emotions, arguments and narrative" (1994, p. 37). They also assert,

Any attempt to explicate unambiguously the political and social functions of the genre of audience discussion programmes must be doomed. ... The very form of audience discussion programmes is anti-genre and a host of oppositions traditionally used to analyse mass media are deconstructed by these programmes, including text/audience, production/reception, sender/receiver, interpersonal/mass communication, information/entertainment, hot/cold, critical/involved. ...

The programmes exist in a space structured by these oppositions and are a play on them. (ibid., pp. 174 &175)

They further claim that such programmes are highly intertextual and that this frequently results in a climate of endless cross-referencing. They suggest that these programmes are possibly best understood by employing a postmodern frame of reference. Wayne Munson agrees. His contention is that they are postmodern in that they draw upon the broad historical ruptures in Western discourse and that they work by playing with a range of contradictions. The subjectivity and expressionism of the host is set against the emotional investment and ad libbed contributions of the callers; the authority and autonomy of the corporate transmission site is set against the affordance of accessibility and the risk of the unexpected (1993, p. 13).

Van Zoonen agrees with Leurdijk (1997) and indeed with Livingstone and Lunt (1994) when she comments on these shows in terms of a postmodern

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<sup>7</sup> Many of the arguments which apply to television talk shows, in so far as they are unscripted contributions from 'lay' speakers, carry over into considerations of the radio phone-in.

platform for debate. She says they "succeed in cutting across various symbolic oppositions which are usually encoded in popular culture, such as the ones between public and private, information and entertainment, commercial and public (service)" (2000, pp. 13 &14). Her observation on the unique conjunction of the public and the private - public and private discourses, public and private channels, public and private issues and public and private sites of reception - is shared by a number of commentators (Verwey, 1990, Scannell, 1991, Crisell, 1994, Brants, 1998, Aslama, 2006).

Crisell draws two further complexities to our attention in relation to the phone-in. He says:

The phone-in represents a kind of inversion of the radio medium. The programme is about its audience, which in a way, and to an extent otherwise unknown in the medium gains a sense of itself as a varied yet corporate entity, the 'consumers' of the radio message who are both separate from, yet on a par with, the 'professionals' - the broadcasters, pundits and personalities. And third, the phone-in demonstrates that the radio audience can use the medium in many different ways, some active and some passive, and that the relationship between callers and listeners is a complex and varying one.

(1994, p. 199)

This disarticulation of the caller/audience in the radio phone-in is one significant difference between it and the television talk show. There the relationship between the studio audience and viewers at home entails a whole other set of discursive intricacies. It has been noted by Brand and Scannell (1991) that the phone-in host can slip effortlessly between modes of address while on air with the disjunction jarring unduly. Within a limited time span the host can address the studio crew (Have we another caller lined up?); a caller (and your point is?); and the station audience (Don't go 'way. We'll be back after these.), without sounding contrived or unnatural. Livingstone and Lunt note the constant shifting in the roles of all the participants but they credit the host with managing the general ambiguity, which we have noted as a feature of the phone-in (1994, p. 56).

In Chapter Three, as we considered the discourses at play in *Liveline*, we explored this disarticulation of address in more detail. We also visited the discursive implications of other intersections such as the tension between the personal and the institutional and between entertainment values and journalistic ones.

Referring to audience discussion programmes, Leurdijk can state:

Ambiguity and contradiction are built in the format. ... How audiences subsequently deal with these ambiguous and contradictory messages and representations is a different matter altogether. ... At best, (talk shows) offer some insight into the contradictory way in which people experience social realities and the discrepancies between official policies and academic knowledge on the one hand and daily life on the other. (1997, p. 166)

In this, she underlines two features of discussion programmes. The first is that alternative, counter-hegemonic voices, the voices of the marginalised and less articulate individuals or groups within society are more likely to be heard on formats like the phone-in than on orthodox news and features formats. The second point is her observation that programmes like the phone-in approximate more closely to the less structured and haphazard ways we usually make sense of our world. Our opinions and decisions normally emerge from an amalgam of loosely related snippets of information; from a variety of sources; from a smattering of the opinions of others, informed and ill-informed and all of these filtered and interpreted through our own experiences, cultures and personalities. This closeness to the daily sense-making process; where we manage the social, where, as Giddens would have it, we have to find a way of living with strangers with out resorting to killing each other, points to two features of the phone-in. The first we have already remarked upon, that it takes place in a setting of ordinariness; the second we will return to and that is, that akin to daily co-existence, the process involved may be constructed as fundamentally cooperative at a variety of levels.

### **The Irish Context**

Maurice Gorham outlines the beginnings of talk radio in Ireland in his book, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, (1976). From the foundation of 2RN in 1926 there developed a tradition of speeches, lectures and commentaries<sup>8</sup>. Talks were a feature of early programming. There were talks on farming, on gardening and on the annual budget. There were talks in Irish, religious services and there were charity appeals. The position of Talks Officer was established in 1939. Elements of ordinary voices on air and of audience participation began to emerge in programmes like *Question Time*, a consistently popular quiz show, and in *Information Please*, where audience members stood to win half a crown if their questions stumped a studio panel of experts. *Round the Fire* sought to recreate on air the atmosphere of neighbours gathered around an open heart and included storytelling, recitation and gossip. Two later significant additions to Radio Éireann's talk radio canon were *The Thomas Davis Lectures*, which introduced an academic dimension and *The School Around the Corner*, which traded on the unscripted responses of youngsters.

The facility to phone-in was first employed in RTÉ in the same year as it was in Britain - 1968. Martina Finneran (1987, pp. 30 & ff) outlines how, as the technical problems associated with line 'noise' and switching were surmounted, the station launched *Later Than Late*. As the name implies the programme was designed to cash in on the hugely popular and

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<sup>8</sup> Gorham credits the infant station with broadcasting the first ever commentary on a field game - the All-Ireland Hurling Final between Kilkenny and Galway in 1926.

sometimes controversial *Late Late Show* on television. The radio programme, which ran at 11.45 p.m. was intended to pick up on some of the themes which had surfaced on the television earlier in the night. The programme ran for three seasons and was eventually dropped in the face of the constraints it faced<sup>9</sup>. It was never a 'pure' phone-in as it did at various times feature a studio panel, a roving reporter, taped inserts, a small studio audience and music but it did represent the first structured attempt to broadcast contributions from listeners.

Finneran notes the subsequent introduction in 1970 of *Involvement*, "a very formal phone-in programme, similar to letters programmes where listeners were asked to write in on any topic they wished" (ibid., p. 35) .

Richard Barbrook sketches the developments that accompanied the arrival of television and the establishment of RTÉ under an independent authority in 1961. He notes the factors, which contributed to the emergence of Public Service Broadcasting Irish-style and the tensions within the state broadcaster between the pulls of secular republicanism and Catholic nationalism (1992, p. 203). The process of modernisation in Ireland during the 1960s and '70s brought with it increased competition from private and from overseas broadcasters. The pressure was on politicians to liberalize the market. There was also a push, especially among the young, for less formal radio and for more popular music. As a result, "During the 1970s and 1980s, RTÉ evolved from a defender of the national culture into a semi-commercial multimedia corporation, with limited public service commitments" (ibid., p. 212). The changes were not simply structural and commercial. Modernist changes were also taking place at a social and cultural level also and the media in general and radio and TV talk shows in particular are credited with playing a central role. Barbrook can suggest, "in many people's view, Gay Byrne's radio and television programmes have encouraged the emergence of more liberal sexual attitudes in Ireland" (ibid., p. 224). Sara O'Sullivan concurs;

In an Irish context, talk radio has provided a valuable space for issues around sexuality and self identity to be explored. .... Irish media such as *The Late Late Show*, *The Sunday World* and talk radio began covering more risqué topics. Irish commentators have emphasised the role that talk radio played in relation to recent changes in Irish society. ... The value of the genre is seen to rest in the forum it offers listeners to talk about issues that were once taboo..... It has been argued that telling sexual stories on Irish talk shows is progressive, liberating and educational.

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<sup>9</sup> In the first instance the radio centre was still, at that time, in Henry Street in Dublin city centre while the TV studios were out in Montrose, making any cross-over of *Late Late Show* guests awkward. Secondly, the *Late Late Show* team was reluctant to share its guest list in advance with the radio programme, which made topic planning difficult. In the third place, the technical trades union in RTÉ were prepared to breach the midnight close-down deadline which existed at the time, for a short trial period only. (Finneran, 1987)

Callers rang Irish talk radio shows to tell stories about their personal lives, to talk about their marriages, sex lives, relationship problems and so on. These stories did not erupt spontaneously or out of a vacuum. As Ken Plummer puts it, they were "modernist stories ... stories whose time had come". Talk radio provided a space where issues such as abortion and divorce could be discussed by those with direct experience of them. (2006, pp. 156 & 157)

One of the more significant talk radio spaces for such discussions was the magazine programme, *Women Today*, which has been described as, "a high point regarding the representation of women on radio. ... It comprised a mainly female production team and was presented at various times by Doireann Ní Bhriain, Marian Finucane and Hilary Orpen. The programme was replaced by *Liveline* in 1985. ... (M)anagement was looking for a programme with broader appeal" (Breen, 1997, p. 25). Marian Finucane became the presenter of the new programme<sup>10</sup>. A producer of the time recalls:

*Liveline* followed on in the tradition of the *Women Today* programme in that it continued to pioneer the empowerment of women. However it was seen as a more 'catch all' programme with a broader appeal. ...

In the early days *Liveline* was considered to be a magazine programme for four days a week - there were many reports included. On Friday there was usually a panel of experts in the studio with the audience contributing to a discussion.

Report inserts were phased out c. 1990 when the programme began to be considered as a mouthpiece for the nation. ...

In the early days it was mostly women calling from home who rang in to the programme. (ibid., p. 54)

As that quote indicates, the 'pure' open mike phone-in did not become established until 1990. Julian Vignoles, who was a producer in that period explained that it was as much about the production team gaining the confidence to fill the hour without the aid of music, guests etc., as it was about the audience becoming 'educated' to the format. Listeners grew to know what to expect of it and how it could be used<sup>11</sup>.

The phone-in as a programme segment seems to have found its way into many aspects of RTÉ's talk radio output - sports, gardening, business and even news. The two flagship phone-in programmes, *Liveline* on Radio 1 and *The Gerry Ryan Show* on 2FM, figured prominently in audience ratings. *Liveline* attracted a daily listenership of almost 400,000 and is the third most listened to programme in the country. *The Gerry Ryan Show*

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<sup>10</sup> Finucane's recollection is that there was an eighteen month gap between the end of *Women Today* and the beginning of *Liveline*. (in interview with the author.)

<sup>11</sup> Vignoles can point to the specific controversy - a woman phoning in, having walked out of Sunday Mass in Dingle after the priest had delivered, what she considered to be a very right wing sermon. The subsequent drama in the reply of the priest and in the responses of listeners on air afforded the spur to move forward with the show on a solely phone-in basis. (VIV 1)

attracted 300,000 listeners and sits at number eight. Both presenters were among the station's top earners.

There have been suggestions that the phone-in somehow suits the Irish temperament. Carmen Kuhling and Kieran Keohane attribute the popularity of Irish talk radio to "its dual function of celebrating modern individualism and simultaneously reconstructing traditional community; in articulating a unified sense of the common good despite the fragmenting, individualizing effects of modernity and the plurality of world views recent social transformations have engendered" (2002, p. 107). They suggest that the programme hosts are at one and the same time successful heroic individuals, household names, while also they are the embodiment of the community capable of relating to callers and listeners on a first-name basis. Thus they can say:

Irish talk radio is a strong representation of the localisation of the global. It is a forum which both articulates and reflects on the recent challenges in Irish society, and which upholds a sense of the collective onto the increasingly differentiated and globalised voice(s) of the people. (ibid., p.108)

A case could be made for extending Fiske and Hartley's (1978) 'bardic function' of television to radio as well. Indeed one aspect of it - the manipulation of language - seems to have a particular resonance in talk radio. Lewis (2000) and McCarron (1997) both examine the connection between the oral tradition and talk radio. Given the prominence of the oral tradition in Gaelic and later in Hiberno-English, it is unsurprising that the proclivity for chat and storytelling which are often the raw material of the phone-in, is offered as an explanation for the popularity of the format in Ireland. Frank McNally writing in *The Irish Times* (25th Nov. 1995) agrees and offers the additional suggestion that because the listenership of our national broadcaster is relatively small - no greater than that of a medium size city elsewhere - that the local and the national inevitably overlap. RTÉ has, on the one hand, the responsibility and the gravitas of the voice of the official state - the dissemination of government pronouncements, of national and international news, the celebration of state occasions and the promulgation of national festivities, commemorations and sporting occasions. On the other hand it has the familiarity and informality of reporting on sheep prices at local marts, congestion after annual Novenas, the achievements of individual students who have excelled in state examinations. It is not that long since the practice of broadcasting 'personal' and 'garda' messages has discontinued and it must also be conceded that this duality has been diluted somewhat by the arrival of licensed regional and local stations but the tension remains a feature of RTÉ radio.

Whatever reasons may be offered for the popularity of the phone-in and whether or not it has specifically Irish resonances, the fact remains that not all commentators are uncritical of the place it has assumed in Irish public

life. Not all are as convinced of the purity of, as Coleman phrases it, "the richly evocative ideal of public broadcasting as the nation having a conversation with itself" (1998, p. 8). Desmond Fennell queries if such power can properly be seated in an institution such as RTÉ, which he believes has,

a parochial, blinkered and unconsciously arrogant mentality in relation to Ireland as a whole. .... (It is) undemocratic and an offence against social justice. ... A purely Dublin institution, instead of a facility enabling the regions of Ireland to talk to themselves and to each other. (1995, p. 51)

His central concern is that the values of RTÉ are largely negative in relation to the values and beliefs of the national community it purports to serve. He believes that RTÉ operates by necessity (and not necessarily consciously) out of consumerist liberal values. In short, he says, "RTÉ functions, not as forum and expression of our nation, serving our national interests, but as a propaganda agency of Dublin's Anglo-Americanised bourgeoisie, serving the interests of that class" (ibid., p. 54).

Martin McLoone does offer one redemptive observation on the talk that takes place on national radio - at the very least it is our talk. It is our talk with our topics, our style and our slant. The other broadcast talk available to us via television and cinema is predominantly shaped, in the main, in America, Britain or Australia. (1991, p. 24).

### **The Phone-in on Independent Radio**

Before moving on to outline the specifics of *Liveline*, I will take a brief look at the current situation elsewhere in the Republic. A cursory survey of the websites of independent radio stations in 2008 reveals that in that sector only one of the two national stations, *Newstalk*, offers a prominent phone-in programme - *Your Call*. It also features callers on air throughout much of the day's programming. The other national station, *Today FM*, along with the three regional *Beat* stations appear to offer little by way of dedicated phone-in.

Of 26 local services, 18 of these promote a phone-in or access feature in their daily schedules. Those who don't are mainly city based and are primarily orientated towards a pacey pop sound. The other 8, generally rural stations, do offer phone-in slots or slots, which while not necessarily exclusively phone-in, do afford caller on-air access on local and topical issues. A number of the more successful - *Highland Radio*, *Radio Kerry and Midwest Radio (MWR)*, for example - have referred to approximating to the 'Rambling House' tradition in rural Ireland. It is a circumstance Barbrook recognises. Citing Curran (1990) he notes,

In the countryside there was a strong demand for speech radio among the listenership of the new stations. As one owner put it, 'country people like to talk. On MWR, we have successfully recreated the western "Rambling



House". Guests drop into the studio unannounced to discuss life, sex or whatever springs to mind. (1992, p.217)

It is also worth remarking that while some pop / youth stations do eschew the phone-in that presenters like Adrian Kennedy and Chris Barry have carved out a phone-in niche particularly with urban working-class young people. Their material may tend to the tabloid and the sensationalist but their audience is unlikely to overlap with that of the national broadcaster. Conor Goodman can write of Kennedy's late-night show on *FM104*, "it gives air time to the plain people of Dublin and is a genuine alternative to the generally class-cleansed broadcast media" (*Radio Review*, 5/5/2007, p. 16)

### **The Phone-in on RTÉ**

Cathcart (1984) and Maurice Gorham (1967) offer overviews of the early years of Irish radio. Twin, almost conflicting, cultural paths are discernible. On the one hand, significant support and technical assistance was afforded by the only slightly more senior BBC to the fledgling 2RN - later Raidió Éireann (RE) and later again in 1961 part of Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ). As a consequence many of the defining professional practices and cultural values of the BBC were adopted wholesale. There was a similarly straight-laced and worthy reverence cultivated and it resulted in a similarly paternalistic and precious mystique around broadcasting. Tovey and Share cite Hazelkorn to confirm that 2RN "was consciously modelled on the BBC formula for public service broadcasting. It was part of the civil service and was seen as a vehicle for promoting national sovereignty and cultural / religious identity" (Tovey & Share, 2003, p. 426). This adopting the 'best of British' did not appear to run counter to the expectation that the new station would be in the vanguard of the nation-building project of the new Irish Free State.

Richard Barbrook traces how, from the 1950s onwards, economic development, urbanisation and latterly membership of the European Community modified Irish culture at large. It became impossible to prevent foreign influences from reaching Irish people. There were corresponding changes in the Irish media. By the '50s British television could be picked up along the East Coast. By the early '60s rock 'n' roll had arrived and we had our own television service - RTÉ. Through the '70s pirate radio and popular music stations were making their presence felt so that by the end of the '80s the radio scene was transformed. RTÉ had established its own popular music channel - 2FM - and by the beginning of the '90s independent local and national radio stations had arrived on the scene. The result, according to Barbrook, was that RTÉ "evolved from a defender of the national culture into a semi-commercial multimedia corporation with limited public service commitments" (1992, p. 212).

Both Public Service Broadcasting as a concept and its manifestation in RTÉ are the subject of considerable debate. This was looked at in Chapter Three when the contemporary institutional nature of RTÉ was examined. For now it is sufficient to note that *Liveline* is consciously and unconsciously embedded in this PSB context. Any consideration of the programme's role within an Irish public sphere must take this into consideration both in terms of the limitations it imposes and the potential it affords.

Here it will be helpful simply to note the outlines of its radio broadcasting function and where the phone-in might be located within it. There are four radio services within the RTÉ stable - Radio 1, 2FM, Lyric FM and Raidio na Gaeltachta. Neither Lyric nor Raidio na Gaeltachta features a dedicated phone-in slot but again, like some of the local independent stations, they facilitate requests and responses to competitions and callers are encouraged to contribute on air to various magazine and topical programmes.

2FM, the popular music channel does foreground a prominent phone-in programme each week day - *The Gerry Ryan Show* - from 9.00 am until 12.00 noon<sup>12</sup>. This programme has been the subject of extensive academic work by Sara O'Sullivan (1997, 2000a, 2001, 2005, 2006); of a book, *Ryan on the Radio*, (Russell, 1991) and of a variety of dissertations (McCarron, 1997, Murray, 2006, for example). The distinctions between *The Gerry Ryan Show* and *Liveline* will emerge as this chapter progresses: for now it is sufficient to note that although both are the product of the same organization, each would regard the other as competition - each striving for the 'hottest' topics, superior listenership figures and newsworthiness. (McCarron, 1997, p. 54) On the other hand, listeners who enjoy the phone-in format can stick with RTÉ Radio from 9.00 in the morning until 3.00 in the afternoon with little more than a break for midday news.

*The Gerry Ryan Show* (now renamed as *Tubridy*) has a magazine format and in addition to its phone-in element, it will feature reviews of the press, studio guests, segments from roving reporters and competitions. The programme is self consciously zany, tabloid and off beat. O'Sullivan observes that staff, listeners and callers understand and play to the style (2001, p. 2). Titillation, sensation and humour are generally the order of the day.

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<sup>12</sup> Gerry Ryan, the presenter of the programme, died on 30<sup>th</sup> April 2010 and was replaced in the slot by Ryan Tubridy. There has been little chance to see if these changes alter in any way the institutional context for *Liveline*, except to note that Management at RTÉ gave serious consideration to moving Joe Duffy into the 2FM slot. (see *Irish Independent*, June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010)

*Liveline* is Radio 1's flagship phone-in but not its only one. Seasonally Radio 1 opens the airwaves to sports fans or gardening enthusiasts to express their opinion or to seek advice. Practically all current affairs and light entertainment programmes invite mail, email, phone calls, text messages and polled opinions in one shape or another. More and more frequently they relay these contributions or indeed insert callers on air throughout the day. This increased audience presence in station output is sometimes taken as a token of the increased democratisation of the medium but this proposition is open to question. Gerry McCarthy cautions:

Shows .....with their endless appeals for audience feedback, try to present this process as an advance in broadcast democracy, No longer, they say in effect, are we talking down to you: now we are listening to you as well, and letting you have your say.

The result is not merely banal: it cheapens and distorts communication. In one sense, audience feedback is a giant leap backward, not forward. Old-style pundits come with checks and balances built in, we know who they are, who they work for, and what kind of political spin they may impart to news or gossip. Yet the new feedback merchants .....are usually more or less anonymous.

Such opinions - however mischievous, trivial or daft - feed into the political mood of the day. Against our better judgement we submit to the lure of the individual voice, and assume that they reflect a genuine public mood.

(*Radio Waves*, 17/06/2007, p.15)

Aspects of the reservation outlined by McCarthy may be worth bearing in mind as we embark on a detailed description of *Liveline*.

## Chapter Five: Methodology

### A Case Study

The research in this thesis concentrates on the speech which forms the vast bulk of the (week)daily contents of *Liveline* - in other words, it is located in Dahlgren's (1995) Representational Dimension. This speech as we have pointed out, becomes meaningful as discourse and I approach this discourse via twin tracks. In the first instance, I employ a variant of discourse analysis in an attempt to determine how the talk may fit with communicative theories of the public sphere and of deliberative democracy with a view to assessing its potential for civic agency. Secondly, I examine the context of production of those discourses, the purpose being to establish if the professional packaging of the programme helps or hinders that same potential.

I elect to look at the production process as opposed to the contexts of reception or the experiences of callers<sup>1</sup> primarily because of my own background in programme making, as outlined in Chapter One. The production process informed my original curiosity and this aspect offers the best hope of my being able to contribute some modest insights or interpretations.

The methodology is located at the qualitative end of the research spectrum. This is the case because it seeks to explore the meanings assigned by individuals as they make sense of their social world. The research needs to be qualitative because it engages with the context of relevant discourses and it grapples with the complexity of interactions rather than attempting to identify and isolate variables. Klaus Bruhn Jensen underlines its appropriateness:

The communication model of a qualitative approach is implicitly dialectic in the sense that the analysis traces the process of establishing the units of meaning, and it does so by studying the interplay between media codes and audience codes and, in a wider sense, by interpreting the origins of these codes in different sectors of the social context. In sum, meaning is approached as it is being produced.

(1987, p. 32, cited in Lewis, 1991, p. 80)

The historical and institutional contexts of *Liveline* have been set out in Chapter Four. I set out below the defining characteristics of the programme and its particular generic shape in relation to the many other versions of the phone-in format.

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<sup>1</sup> In spite of the difficulties entailed in contacting callers after a programme has transmitted, both Sara O'Sullivan (2000a) and Anthony Wright (1979/80) have published work throwing light on the motivations and concerns of callers.

## ***Liveline* - the Programme Format**

- It runs for 75 minutes every weekday from 1.45 pm until 3.00 in the afternoon. Originally an hour-long programme, its popularity was rewarded in 2007 with an extension to an hour and a quarter.
- It is aired 5 days per week and is now available as a podcast in its entirety. "From January to September 2009 more than 501,000 Liveline podcasts were downloaded. This is an average of 55,600 downloads per month" (RTÉ Press Release, 12/10/2009). It frequently features at the weekend also as material in *Playback*, Radio 1's pick-of-the-week compendium.
- The programme runs a daily teaser type promo before the lunchtime news and is the subject of periodic promotional campaigns.
- It does not have a weekly rhythm in the sense of devoting particular topics to particular days. Any programme may deal with a number of issues. Alternatively a programme may be dominated by a single topic or a particularly interesting or engaging conversation can run over a number of days.
- One slight exception is the "Funny Friday" feature - usually once a month, when the studio is peopled with a panel of comedians and musicians and callers are invited to contribute parodies and "party pieces" and to lighten the usual tone of the show.
- The programme runs 52 weeks a year. This is somewhat unusual for what is a personality driven show. When the presenter takes a break or annual leave the format is sustained by the introduction of replacement. This possibly demonstrates an eagerness on the part of schedulers not to create a disjuncture or disturbance within the slot.
- The programme is presented by a single host.
- The programme does not 'fill' with recorded music. This was occasionally the practice in the early years but now the only music in evidence is the sig. tune and the occasional live parody on "Funny Friday".
- Calls vary in length from pithy reactive comments to prolonged, story telling or interaction which occasionally may comprise the duration of the programme or even spill into a follow-up programme.
- Interaction may be one-to-one between the caller and the presenter or may involve a number of callers simultaneously with the presenter, in this case choosing to act, sometimes as moderator and sometimes as a protagonist on one side of the discussion.
- The programme ostensibly avoids experts, guests, pundits and politicians but is relatively transparent about contacting participants, spokespersons or official sources as the need arises. This occurs sometimes in the interest of information, balance and fairness and sometimes in the interest of drama, controversy and topicality.

- The programme usually runs 4 commercial breaks, each containing 2 - 6 ads or station promos. The programme does not employ competitions or promotions except again as rewards for contributors to the monthly 'Funny Friday'.
- A significant recent development was the introduction of sponsorship. Beginning on 19th Oct 2009 *Specsavers* entered into a deal with *Liveline* which affords them six credited stings per show, podcast sponsorship and an on-line presence on the *Liveline* web page. This development is in line with other recent deals in RTÉ Radio but it poses questions for us in terms of the programmes positioning in the public sphere.

## The Questions

I identify four interrelated areas of research. These are:

1. The Relevance of Rational Critical Debate
2. Alternative Modes of Deliberation
3. The Production Process
4. Dimensions of Civic Culture.

### **Rational Critical Debate**

Under this heading I ask to what extent, if any, do the discussions on *Liveline* approximate to the ideal communication aspired to in the traditional model of the public sphere. Considerable space has been afforded to considering the merits and limitations of Habermas's insistence on the primacy of rational-critical debate as a foundation for Discursive Ethics, Communicative Action and ultimately, Deliberative Democracy. In his quest to establish a basis for normative implications, Habermas cautioned against a world that would discard reason and ignore reasons and which gave parity of agency to the unreasonable and the irrational. This, he said, was no basis for justice, consensus or democracy (1992, p. 463). So whatever about any overemphasis on rationality at the expense of other criteria for debate, we must agree with Graham that, "political talk must in part take the form of rational-critical discussion" (2008, p. 20). He cites Dryzek (2000) who puts it succinctly when he suggests that, "other forms of debate are welcome but not compulsory". Whatever other elements may be recruited into the deliberation process, they must in some coherent manner be shaped by the rational. Anger, poetry, silence, may all serve to advance a point but the point itself and its presentation must make recognisable sense. One component of being considered rational is eliminating the irrational and the unreasonable. I ask whether there are signs of this in *Liveline*.

I look for evidence that contributors are prepared to test assertions and to supply evidence for their claims. In this regard, Graham offers a range of

evidence types when establishing normative conditions for the process of deliberation. He suggests that evidence may be based on facts or verifiable sources; that evidence may be backed up by appropriate comparisons; that it may be based on examples; or based on personal experience (2008, p. 23). Following from this I ask if *Liveline* can be shown to contribute to the stock of 'civic' knowledge. For the audience, this becomes a basis for deliberation that is wider than the confines of the programme.

We have seen that Lunt and Stenner (2005) identified elements of formal debate in the apparent chaos of *The Jerry Springer Show*. Our analysis looks for similar traits in *Liveline* - how turns are allocated; to what degree does the host act as neutral moderator; whether there are summaries and opportunities to reply; or whether there are contributions from the 'floor' to support or oppose the opening protagonists?

I also ask how the deliberation moves forward to civic engagement. The first practical step, as Wessler and Schultz point out, involves identifying issues and interacting with others to address them.

The basic idea here is that claims are not just made but can be problematized and discussed. This can be achieved by giving good reasons for one's own claims and demanding reasons from others (justification) and by weighing arguments in a climate of mutual respect and civility. (2009, p. 17)

With Wessler and Schultz we ask if the phone-in is more geared towards understanding than success - either in persuasion or decision-making.

The 'political' effectiveness is further opened up to question when we bring Barber's criteria for 'strong' democratic talk to bear on the discourses. We are reminded of his injunction that strong democracy is based on action and not on reflection and that talk must enter the realm of intention and consequences. "Political talk is not about the world: it is talk that makes and remakes the world" (1984, p. 177). It is talk that is active, future-oriented and pragmatic. With that in mind we examine *Liveline* to see if decisions are arrived at or action is prompted.

Finally, under this heading I examine what similarity there may be between the discourses of *Liveline* and those of 'high' journalism. Journalism has traditionally been seen as central to the communicative domain of the public sphere. Habermas (1986) saw the reading public, nourished by a responsible contemporary press, as being better resourced to enter into the debates of civil society. This link retains currency and it is worth looking to the norms and values of professional journalism - accuracy, balance, objectivity etc. - and asking if they are in evidence in *Liveline*, especially on those occasions when the discourse of the programme leans in that direction.

## **Alternative Modes of Deliberation**

Birgitta Höjier (2007, pp. 40 & 41) distinguishes between two modes of thinking. The first mode is argumentative which she describes as the realm of concept formation, reasoning and argumentation. The second is the narrative, where we make meaning through stories by sequencing events and populating them with characters and actors. From childhood onwards we learn to experience our lives and we establish our identities, not through our behaviour, but by keeping our narratives going.

She also asserts that the trio of belief, narration and emotion are the building blocks of mediated meaning-making (ibid., p. 33). I suggest that in researching rational critical deliberation via the questions in the previous section, we are, in effect, also addressing her categories of argumentation and belief. As we broaden our understanding of the political and of deliberative democracy we must make room for emotion and narration as alternative modes of deliberation.

In truth, the three are not separate. There is no reasoned argument without some level of emotional engagement - if only in the interest and motivation to propose a position. There is also a level of narrative construction. Stories have dramatic quality and even the most fabulous proceed via a minimal internal consistency. As Cheryl Hall points out, even heightened emotional expression must contain a kernel of the reasoned - all emotions involve conceptualisation, interpretation, evaluation and purposeful behaviour (2005, p. 15). Emotions are experienced in concrete contexts that have a beginning, middle and an end and most often in response to other actors. Höjier sums up the interdependence,

Narration, beliefs and emotions are simultaneously communicative categories fundamental to the production of texts, for example broadcast or print news or documentaries, and interpretative categories used in our everyday understanding of the world. (2007, p. 47)

In this second research area, I single out narrative and emotion as discourses because of their predominance in *Liveline*.

"Narration deals with concrete space- and time-bound situations, places, events and courses of events or storylines. There are people or characters involved, main characters and minor characters, there may be heroes, victims, perpetrators and so on" (ibid, pp. 43 & 44). Stories will serve different functions and the research identifies some of these. Some are brief witnessings of personal experience to support a complaint or to highlight an issue. Others are longer, more complex 'storylines' - slices of biography - often coaxed by the host as extended chapters of social meaning-making. Riessman indicates a number of functions of storytelling - remembering, arguing, persuasion, engaging in the experience of the narrator, entertaining, misleading and mobilising to action (2008, pp. 8 &



9). Carpignano et al (1990), van Zoonen (2000), and Livingstone and Lunt (1994), all characterise stories as repositories of popular wisdom and common sense. Additionally, Livingstone and Lunt recognise that stories encode moral positions.

Some attention (Dahlgren, 2006b and Pantti and van Zoonen, 2006 as examples) has been paid to those emotions which connect directly to democratic engagement - interest, outrage, enthusiasm, motivation - but there is also a range of emotions which are less apparently political but which nonetheless feed into those emotions referred to above or contribute at a deeper level to citizenship. Feelings of loneliness and alienation impinge on how citizens construct their identities as members of groups and communities. Joy and despondency can both colour our capacity to act and contribute to the common good. Höjier reflects, "Emotions are thus natural and necessary parts in all meaning-making, at conscious as well as unconscious levels" (2007, p. 42). Emotions are reflected in interpretations and identities and they help people to judge social situations and to react suitably. Because people are emotional, they are able to be rational and consequently good citizenship and democratic engagement are based on the capacity to feel. Höjier suggests that emotion may be identified in two ways in discourse and I employ both. One looks to verbal expression - "They had me terrified"; "I still miss her" - and the other is identified in the tone of voice and the nonverbal markers evident on radio - chuckles, choking, protracted pausing, flippancy etc.

We have remarked already that these heightened points of emotional expression represent ambivalent and delicate intersections between the two communicative events happening in the programme. They can create a conflict between drama, pathos and voyeurism and they point to the necessity, as Höjier indicates, of integrating emotion into ethical theory and the development of compassion (ibid., p. 42).

In the research, I identify both the verbal and the metalingual expressions of emotion and draw what links are apparent to the political, the ethical and the enhancement of argumentation. Wessler and Schultz's (2009, p. 18) observation about the use of emotion in the first phase of public deliberation - the agenda building stage - is also applied.

### **The Production Process**

I agree with Hansen et al. when they say that little attention has been given to the production process or to the operations of professional producers. They stress the need to 'unpack the professional unconscious'. They maintain, "It is essential that, in our work, we should question basic assumptions and policies, challenge professional mythologies and prevailing values, enquire about existing structures, external pressures, and *modus operandi*" (1998, p. 20), although I would suggest that the tone

of their line of inquiry smacks a little of corrective supervision as opposed to an open and curious pursuit of insight.

The defining discursive characteristic of the phone-in is the access it provides for the voices and viewpoints of the non-professionals. Having said that, the prime and most potent shapers of the discourses are the radio professionals. There is nothing essentially wrong with that. In Chapter Three we examined the inherent balancing act in terms of circuits of power, 'good' radio and civic professionalism. Nevertheless there appears to exist on the part of commentators<sup>2</sup>, an expectation of a standard of transparency and absence of artifice so as to detract as little as possible from the authenticity and 'layness' of the discourse.

One major consideration from the research perspective is the facility to draw on my own experience as a radio producer in RTÉ. The programmes I produced were not phone-ins but often had a phone-in element. The aspiration is that an understanding of the pressures and the procedures may shine some light on how production shapes the discursive material.

I analyse the programme and interview transcripts in the first place to show where the production 'seams' are transparent. My suspicion is that listeners are a lot more media savvy than they are given credit for and if we ally this to a relative openness about the technicalities of production, then we must move to a more sophisticated communicative model than one involving slight of hand and the gullible.

I point to the challenges which programme makers face and which are apparent in the text of the programme - issues of time management; of balancing the needs of callers against the requirements of listeners; and of staying alert to the legal, commercial and political constraints within which the programme operates. I also suggest examples where professional 'nipping and tucking' may have added to the quality of the listening experience.

We return in the end to our fundamental question and look for evidence that the professional practices shape the discourses either to the betterment or degradation of civic agency. The research examines evidence where either the absence of openness or the presence of artifice distorts the balance away from the civic and towards the showiness of an empty public sphere.

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<sup>2</sup> Examples are Sara O'Sullivan's commentary on the blurring of fact and fiction in phone-ins (2000b, p. 161) or John Masterson's Analysis piece on Liveline's creating manufactured controversy. (Sunday Independent, 16th Aug. 2009, p. 25).

## **The Circuit of Civic Culture**

The research examines how the various strands of citizenship are collaboratively constructed in the discursive interplay between host and callers (keeping in mind the further dimension of collaborative construction being conducted with the listeners). Other studies have looked at host/caller cooperation from a variety of perspectives - knowing the rules, staying on topic, avoiding face threatening acts - but in this instance I identify examples where citizens, who in spite of their asymmetrical discursive relationship, nonetheless generate civic norms and values together. In addition to reinforcing previous work on politeness, I specifically look at illustrations where host and caller work together to generate meaning at Höjier's three communicative categories - the cognitive, the narrative and the emotional. I ask does the host work with callers to enhance their knowledge resources and to develop their argumentation? I ask also how he interacts with the stories - both long and short - that callers wish to tell; and I examine the positions he adopts in relation to emotional expression. Is he digging for the dramatic impact or is there appropriate interpersonal support and concern? Behind these questions I seek to question whether together caller and host move the discourses towards the normative and ethical.

A second aspect of the research employs Peter Dahlgren's circuit of civic culture as outlined in Chapter Three. The information gleaned from the programme transcripts and the interviews with the presenters will be assessed against each of the dimensions in turn. I ask, for example, if there is evidence of civic information being made available. How can civic values be identified? How does listening to the programme assist in the construction of identities as citizens in the wider sense? Given the centrality of the presenter to the programme discourses, particular attention is paid to his or her influence especially as it relates to the dimension of civic identity

## **Research Strategies**

### **Conversation Analysis**

In order to furnish the maximum coherence and density of information, all of the textual research targets one four-week period the month of May 2009<sup>3</sup>. Based on extensive listening to material in previous editions of the programme, I suggest that four weeks represents a significant proportion of the annual output. Listening to consecutive programmes allows for threads to be identified and arguments to be developed and concluded. Four weeks is long enough to illustrate the variety of public discourses

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<sup>3</sup> By a happy coincidence the original ground breaking research work on the phone-in conducted by Higgins and Moss, was carried out in May 1979 - exactly 30 years earlier

which can be aired on the programme and, in Schutt's words, "is a reasonable representation of the aggregate" (2006, p. 151). The programme itself recognizes a monthly rhythm, marking it off with its 'Funny Friday' feature.

The choice of the specific four weeks had an element of random sampling combined with convenience considerations. In order to preclude any 'after the fact' bias the month to be target was flagged in advance with my academic supervisor. Factors such as clearance by the RTÉ authorities and my personal and professional commitments played a part in the selection. A further consideration was the timing of the presenter's annual leave. As an aspect of the inquiry seeks explore the role of the host, it made sense to ensure consistency that the regular host should be in the frame for the duration.

There were 19 programmes hosted by Joe Duffy in the month. Appendix 1 enumerates them in table form and contains some informal remarks about their content and discursive styles. I identified 31 threads or themes over the course of the month and I coded them alphabetically from A to Z and then from AA to GG (Excluding I and O to avoid confusion). Most programmes were composed of two to four threads, some of them being revisited within programmes and some spilling on to subsequent programmes. Towards the end of the month *The Ryan Report on Institutional Child Abuse* was published and reaction to its findings (Thread FF) consumed most of the programme content for the remainder of the month. I subdivided this thread (FF1 to FF7) to distinguish between different aspects of the response.

In order to confirm Schutt's requirement that the May programmes would be a 'reasonable representation of the aggregate', I conducted a simple content analysis of the 879 topics aired on the show over a two-year period from 1st July 2007 to 30th June 2009<sup>4</sup>. The analysis was based on the descriptors applied by RTÉ staff to the podcasts on the station's website. I offer a couple of provisos. I do appreciate that I am at the mercy of how the station elected to describe the topics but having listened to a considerable sample of the programmes, I was satisfied as to their broad accuracy. Secondly, after a few false starts, I settled on the seven broad categories, which for me represented a common sense and practical way of grouping the topics, but I am the first to concede that these are open to contestation. Some of the topics were dealt with briefly involving only one or two callers; others played out over several of programmes. Where the station posted them as separate podcasts, I counted them separately.

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<sup>4</sup> Non phone-in 'special' programmes were not included in the count.

I assigned the threads to the categories below:

1.	Consumer watchdog and complaints department	262
2.	Ombudsman - complaints about officialdom	157
3.	Requests for help and offering cautions	21
4.	Sharing personal troubles and experiences	87
5.	Social/cultural/civic standards and values	229
6.	Identity - construction of the self and others	48
7.	Quirky, complex, difficult to categorise	75
	Total	879

A detailed breakdown of the topics within each category is supplied in Appendix 4. Similar work had been carried out on talk radio previously. Higgins and Moss (1982) plotted the topics on Australian Radio news bulletins. Norma Ellen Verwey (1990) undertook macro analysis of phone-in content in both Canada and the UK. Also in the UK Anthony Wright (1980) schematised the content of phone-in calls to three local radio stations over a twelve-month period. Similar but smaller scale work was done by Sara O'Sullivan (2000) in an Irish context when she categorized the topics on *The Gerry Ryan Show*<sup>5</sup>.

From within the 19 programmes, six threads were selected for analysis. The selection was made with reference to the questions outlined above. Thread A is overtly political and involves deliberation about the nature of representation and about democracy itself. Thread Y is predominantly a story thread - the story of a small guy against the system. Thread FF7 is one of those programme threads responding to *The Ryan Report* and is highly emotionally charged. Threads K, L, and M make up the entirety of the programme of Monday 11th May 2009. They were selected because, in my judgement, the programme was an unremarkable one and I believed that if the arguments I wished to make were valid they should be valid for even the most 'ordinary' of programmes.

The programmes were recorded and the threads transcribed. I borrowed the style of transcription from both Riessman and from Atkinson and Moores. Riessman talks about speech being, "'cleaned up' to some degree.... Texts erase dysfluencies and break offs.... 'messy' spoken language is transformed to make it easily readable. Although ambiguity remains, the investigator does not explore it, assuming a reader will 'fill in' and make sense of the main point" (2008, p. 58). Unlike Atkinson and Moores who undertook similar transcription (2003, pp. 133 & 138,) I do not record pauses or emphasis nor do I represent contiguous speech. I am more concerned with what was said not how it was said, bearing in mind

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<sup>5</sup> In the course of reading for this thesis I uncovered in an undergraduate study carried out in 1987 a list of the topics addressed in the first two years of *Liveline's* existence (Finneran, 1978). The list was not central to the focus of this research but would seem to invite a comparative study in view of the gap of 19 years.

that this is not always a watertight distinction. Like them, I have omitted many of the back channel supportive minimal responses. Some were little more than grunts or 'mmms' and while I acknowledge that they play an important role in supporting and encouraging callers, especially nervous or diffident callers, I will only refer to them when they form part of my argument.

A form of broad-spectrum conversation analysis was undertaken on the six threads. The overall approach had ethnomethodological slant in that it focused on peoples 'common-sense' knowledge of society. It is a study of everyday life and assumes, as Berger would have it, 'people's "adequate grounds of inference"' (2000, p. 146). Berger also suggests that "people have common understandings - which they don't always want to articulate - and this leads ethno-methodologists to examine how people reason and what's behind their everyday activities" (ibid., p. 146).

This form of conversation analysis (C.A.) borrows from the work of Harvey Sacks (1992). Hutchby says that his principal idea was, "that ordinary talk, though it sometimes appears chaotic and is grammatically imperfect, is nevertheless a highly ordered socially organized phenomenon" (2006, p. 20). Conversation analysis recognizes that utterances do not generally occur, "as isolated sentences but in the context of conversational sequences" (ibid., p. 21). They are meaningfully conducted and directed at making sense as van Dijk remarks and can be studied in informal chat or in formal settings (1997, P. 64). As we have seen, the phone-in has features of both. Deacon et al. suggest that the form of C.A. proposed, overlaps with discourse analysis in that it is "concerned with broad slabs of talk in given social settings" (1998, p. 309). It is these conversational slabs or threads that will be examined with a view to categorizing the varieties of discourses they reveal.

This analysis will also draw on Discourse Pragmatics which, according to Blum-Kulka, "bases its analysis mainly on discourse - extended sequences of actual text and talk - and sets as its goal the development of a comprehensive theory of the relations between language use and a sociocultural context" (1977, p. 38). In this case, we want to connect the topics aired on *Liveline* to their potential for civic enablement. The aim is to uncover the cultural/political meanings that are present in the discourses of the programme, to see how the topics addressed in the programmes may be linked to the four research questions I have outlined above.

Also of use here are the influences of Narrative Analysis outlined by Schutt (2006, p. 343). Many of the calls to *Liveline* take the form of troubles telling, survivors' stories, reminiscences or the narrative structuring of everyday experiences. According to Riessman, "Narrative analysis focuses on 'the story itself' and seeks to preserve the integrity of personal biographies or a series of events that cannot adequately be understood in

terms of their discrete elements" (2002, p. 218). Such narratives reveal the goals and intentions of the participants and they make cultures and societies more comprehensible as a whole. The strategy entails listening to the stories and classifying them into general patterns. Riessman talks of Narrative Analysis being grounded in the particular and of its being concerned with how speakers assemble events and use language to make a particular point (2008, p. 11). She also refers to Thematic Analysis where the story is kept intact and which is directed towards the told as opposed to the telling (ibid., pp. 53 & 54). On the face of it this approach appears to be well suited to the text of *Liveline*. The work of Morrill and his colleagues (2000, cited in Schutt, 2006, p. 343) on over 250 stories of youth conflict offers significant pointers on how to structure narrative categorization.

### **Qualitative Interviews**

I conducted a series of four extended interviews - two with Joe Duffy who has presented *Liveline* for almost a decade; one with Marian Finucane, the previous presenter who had been with the show since its inception; and one with Julian Vignoles, a series producer for three years in the mid nineties. The interviews with Duffy were carried out, one in his home and the second one in the Radio Centre at RTÉ<sup>6</sup>. The other two interviews were conducted in the public area of Dublin hotels. Following the advice of Lewis, (1991, p. 92) the interviews were recorded and interview notes were taken. The recordings were later transcribed in a style similar to that applied to the programme texts. Speech was cleaned up to some degree and interviewer utterances were simplified and condensed (See Riessman, 2008, pp. 57 & 58). For ease of reference each interviewee response was assigned an identifying code - for example, FIV 12, refers the twelfth reply in the Finucane interview. The transcriptions and a summary of the notes are attached as Appendix 2 on CD.

The style aimed for was what Schutt describes as, "intensive interviewing" which entails open-ended, relatively unstructured questioning, and which hoped to elicit in-depth information about the interviewee's feelings, experiences and perceptions. Such a technique allowed respondents to answer in their own words; it sought to take the working context into account and to embrace the immediate, concrete situation. It allowed for a more active engagement with the subject; allowed for lengthy explanations and follow-up questions; and generally facilitated access to interrelated belief and social systems (Schutt, 2006, p. 311). David Deacon et al. offer

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<sup>6</sup> I offer one methodological observation about the timing of interviews. Both interviews with Joe Duffy took place within a short period of his completing his programme. His responses, in some fashion I suspect, reflected his reaction and 'wind down' following the intensity of that day's work. I wonder if the interviews had taken place at some little remove would they maybe have been more reflective.

a useful set of guidelines for ordering and structuring questions (1998, pp. 74 - 80). Justin Lewis suggests that there are no hard and fast rules for this style of questioning. We can, he says, be directive or unobtrusive; we can follow a carefully constructed schedule or let the conversation flow freely. The important point he notes is to be aware of the consequences of such choices (1991, p. 82).

A broad set of themes related to the aims of the research were prepared in advance and referred to occasionally throughout the interviews as an informal structure. I was aware that in each instance I was dealing with seasoned media professionals who would not be unduly fazed by questioning or the presence of a microphone. Nevertheless each was furnished with a Statement of Informed Consent (copy appended) and The Research Ethics Committee at DCU approved the research strategy in advance.

### **Abortive Participant Observation**

I had intended undertaking some sessions of participant observation with a view to augmenting the information in the programme texts and in the interviews. I cleared the broad outlines of the research with the Managing Director of Radio over a year in advance. His response was encouraging and he passed the request along to the series producer. She was willing to facilitate interviews with the programme team but a little chary about an additional outside presence in the studio. At a meeting in the radio centre, she said the most she could offer was for me to sit in on programmes where she, herself was the producer of the day. We talked about a schedule for the interviews and this limited observation. However, twelve days before I was due to commence work I received a short email from her saying that she no longer felt in a position to facilitate my research. There is little point in speculating what may have induced the change of mind and the result was a shift of focus towards the programme presenters who both remained willing to be interviewed. I appreciate that there are confidentiality issues relating to callers and that an outsider can be an inhibiting factor during a live programme but the reluctance to cooperate mirrors the resistance experienced by Sara O'Sullivan in seeking access to the same programme in 1997. There is, I suspect, a wariness of academic intrusion and a reluctance to expose the production practices but returning to my suggestion that the media savvy of the public is underestimated, I further reflect that the democratic credentials of the programme might well be enhanced by greater transparency.

In any event there was always my prior familiarity with radio production to fall back upon.



## **Objectivity / Subjectivity**

Every aspect of this thesis is coloured by my history over a decade as a radio producer in RTÉ. It has been the source of my interest and curiosity. It has allowed me to come to the theory and literature with a certain familiarity and from a defined perspective. It has allowed me to question constructions of the programme maker's role with some little authority based on experience and practice.

In terms of the methodology, it has allowed me to approach RTÉ with a degree of confidence and to exploit past connections to both the Managing Director (Radio) and to the programme host with relative ease. Both assented to an outline of the research at an early stage.

When it comes to analysing radio conversation, a familiarity with the practicalities and constraints of the medium can help towards a more complete understanding of the institutional context. I have a broad understanding of the technology, structures and protocols that obtain (albeit twenty years on) in the making of a radio programme and will need correspondingly less explanation. I will, to an extent, speak the 'language' and have an appreciation of the challenges and short-cuts that go with the territory. I will be less likely to be hoodwinked and will have a 'feel' for what to look for. Above all, I carry, as I asserted in the opening paragraphs of this thesis, an affinity for the principles of Public Service Broadcasting and a faith in the capacity of programme makers to contribute, through their work, in the democratic process.

Clearly this "insertion of the self", as Creswell terms it, this trading on past experience, carries with it all of the downsides and pitfalls of "backyard research" and he calls for extreme sensitivity to the subjective role of the researcher.

This often leads to compromises in the researcher's ability to disclose information and raises difficult power issues. Although data collected may be convenient and easy, the problems of reporting data that are biased, incomplete, or compromised are legion. (2009, p. 177)

That which facilitates the research and makes it the richer is also that which, Schutt suggests, dulls the edge of criticism and increases the risk of 'going native' (2006, p. 307). There is also the danger that, slipping too easily once more into the discourses and culture of the Radio Centre, I can buy into the taken-for-granted and the professional 'common sense' that for a time was part of my working life.

I cannot strip back my history so, in truth, the only way to counteract these dangers will be through constant and informed reflectiveness and by triangulating the research data with more objective authorities and varied sources as often as possible. The project must be carried out, in the words of Peter Lewis, "through a reflexive self-ethnography" (2009, p.2).

## In Conclusion

In this chapter I have refined the research questions that have emerged from the theories evaluated in Chapters Two and Three. By analysing the conversations in the programme and by talking to those intimately connected with it, I investigate how various types of discussion in *Liveline* can contribute to different forms of citizenship. I ask too whether the production processes - where media professionals shape and package the speech and concerns of non-professionals - whether these processes enhance or impoverish the civic communicative potential of the programme. I explore how the host in building his own performed identity, can co-construct a viable cultural citizenship with his callers and listeners.

The research employs two qualitative techniques - a conversational analysis of selected programme topics and semi-structured interviews with actors who have been closely associated with *Liveline*. This combination, along with my own background in radio, offers the prospect of achieving a rounded insight into the discourses of *Liveline*.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Data Analysis 1**

# **Towards a Citizenry that is ‘Non-impulsive, Thoughtful and Fair’**

## **Rational Debate**

### **Supporting and Testing Evidence**

The first of the four research questions asks us to examine the discourses of *Liveline* to see to what extent they retain the character of rational-critical debate. I accept the Habermasian injunction that this form of deliberation is essential if we hope to arrive at ethical norms and to filter out the muddiness of delusion and unreasonableness. I accept also Graham’s prescription that whatever else is included in political talk; there must always be a core of rational-critical discussion. Consequently we set about measuring *Liveline* against this benchmark.

Szczelkhun’s description (1999, pp. 1 & 2) of rational behaviour as behaviour, for which there are good reasons, provides us with a starting point. Graham defines rational debate as reasoned claims which are critically reflected on and where an adequate level of coherence and continuity is maintained (2008, p. 20). Barber adds that such rationality results in citizens who are, “constructed as free choosers who are non-impulsive, thoughtful and fair” (1984, p. 127). Bohman sees rational debate as eliminating the unreasonable and appeals to fear and ignorance.

Rational discussion then offers evidence and tests assertions. It is present in the patterns of our everyday speech – each time we ask ‘why’. Not every assertion is tested; this is not necessary but we talk ‘as if’ our claims could be tested if needs be. This is the case in *Liveline* also; not every statement is challenged; this would unduly fracture speech and exceed the norms of politeness, but the public expects that assertions made by callers are, at least, open to challenge and checking. Graham speaks of evidence being supported from four potential sources – facts or verifiable sources, appropriate comparisons, examples and personal experience. These categories (which, incidentally are by no means watertight) provide us with a useful structure to interrogate the programme threads we have selected.

There are not many instances of purposeful recourse to facts and authoritative sources in the threads we have selected, once again mirroring the patterns of interpersonal conversation where points are supported by a range of evidentiary techniques. On two occasions where relevant facts are cited, the speaker also has some authoritative status. In

a discussion about problems with aggressive dogs (Thread M), callers devoted considerable time to expressing their frustration at the absence of official action on the part of the police or of dog wardens. Mark, a dog warden, phones in and outlines the necessary steps:

- JD 103           What can people do, Mark?
- Mark 104       Well basically in regard to the three German Shepherds that the lady rang in about; it actually falls under a civil case. Basically what happens is the person whose dog was killed goes to the local courts. They apply to the courts for what's called, *A Destruction Order*, okay? They are given a summons by the court clerk. They then go to the owners of the dog; hand them the summons; they'll both then appear in court and they put their case to the judge. Based on the evidence he has received, he will then make a decision whether the dog has to be removed or destroyed or certain restrictions are to be put on the dog by the owner.
- JD 105           But why is it up to Geraldine herself, who is already in distress? Has she got to hire a solicitor?
- Mark 106       No, no, there's no solicitors or anything involved. She can hire one if she wants to.
- JD 107           But how....? People don't know how to access the courts in fairness now.
- Mark 108       Well, you just maybe go into the court office in whichever local courthouse it is and you tell the clerk you want to apply for.... You tell them your story, what happened and basically, you know, because they are a restricted breed as well, they are meant to have no way out into a public place.
- JD 109           So, an Alsatian is a restricted breed?
- Mark 110       Yes, it's one of the eleven dogs on the restricted breeds list. It must be muzzled and on a leash in a public place at all times. If not.... If anyone is seen with a restricted breed unmuzzled in a public place, the dog will then be seized.
- JD 111           And have you power to destroy the dog?
- Mark 112       No, no. The courts are the only ones who have the power to destroy a dog. Nobody else has the power to destroy a dog, only the courts. It's for a judge to make a decision but besides all that, it basically falls under a civil case unfortunately.

In another discussion (Thread L), where a customer complains she was overcharged by car rental firm, Hertz, when she has €1,000 charged to her credit card for a 'scratch', her case was considerably strengthened by a call from Edward, a body repair specialist. Hertz was prepared to reduce the bill significantly before the end of the programme.

- JD 23            Okay, stay there for a sec. Ruth. Edward is on the line. 51551. Edward in Limerick, good afternoon.
- Edward 24        Good afternoon, Joe, how are you doing?
- JD 25            You're in the auto-paint repair business.
- Edward 26        I am, that's true, yeh, yeh.
- JD 27            And you're familiar with this.... It sounds to me more like a score than a scratch, but anyway.... I know it's hard to communicate over radio.
- Edward 28        Well regardless of whether it's a score or a scratch, the price she was charged seems totally ridiculous. Typical of that type of work would cost between €150 and €250. Occasionally it might go to 300 if there was a lot of damage – panel beating involved or something like that. But for a small scratch it certainly shouldn't be more than €250. A lot of jobs can be fixed for even a lot less than that.
- JD 29            Ruth was charged €580 for labour and €200 for material; €100 – slightly more – for loss of revenue; €100 – slightly more – for transport and recovery. I presume that's for moving the car to the paint ....to the body shop, was it?
- Ruth 30           I have no idea. I mean I emailed, needless to say, Hertz and just explained my outrage.
- .....
- Edward 38        Well, obviously in that case it should certainly cost no more than €300, I think myself. I don't see any reason, and charging you €200 for materials alone is .... I don't know how they could justify that. I'd like to get the breakdown of that because if you look at a gallon of lacquer or something. A full gallon of lacquer would cost you €200.....
- JD 39            How much lacquer would I need for a scratch?
- Edward 40        I would safely say they would use no more than 100 mls probably on that door so it's one tenth of that – 20 or 30 quid's worth maybe.
- Ruth 41           And €600 for labour, which I thought was unbelievably expensive?
- Edward 42        I want to get a job in that body shop.

These interventions from informed sources appear to augment what may, on occasion, be a somewhat directionless and unfocused 'lay' argument especially in situations where there is a vague aspiration that 'something should be done'.

It seems that 'lay' callers are more likely to argue employing appropriate comparisons. Comparisons work to underline inequities and do not demand that the speaker has any particular standing or status. When George Lee, a high profile Economics Editor in RTÉ, declares that he intends to stand for election (Thread A), a caller objects to his inbuilt

publicity advantage which has been funded by licence payers. He argues that there ought to be a twelve-month 'cooling off' period for the sake of democracy.

JD 31            You mentioned democracy. How would that be democratic?

Jim 32            It would be totally democratic. It's involved in several contracts that people leave. I believe many high profile people, leaving RTE, have to sign certain contracts that they won't get involved in other companies etc. In a democracy everybody would be starting on a level playing pitch but if you already have a serious high profile because of your job then it's not a level playing pitch and the fundamental basis of democracy is that people start on a level playing pitch.

JD 33            So you think it's simply unfair?

Jim 34            Totally unfair, absolutely unfair.

JD 35            Unfair on other candidates?

Jim 36            Totally unfair on, not alone the candidates but the way we run our country. It's supposed to be totally absolutely fair. Now, if you're a director of *Bord Planala* you have to sign as part of your contract that for a year after leaving *Bord Planala* you cannot become a consultant in planning in certain issues because you have an inside track and these things appear in order to have a level playing pitch and this is no comment on George Lee or anybody else. RTE itself in public service broadcasting has huge questions to answer in any event about the kind of.....

He draws pertinent comparisons with other institutions to support his claim. Later in that same debate Tommy (A 104) draws comparisons with similar public personalities to reinforce his argument. In Thread K where a wedding competition entrant feels aggrieved because no prize was awarded when the winning couple were disbarred, she appeals to comparison with procedure in similar competitions. "In normal circumstances when someone wins a prize and it's revoked - let's say, for example, the Miss Universe or Miss World - if that's revoked, it goes to the runner-up" (K Sarah 8). Much later in the debate a caller supporting Sarah's position repeats the same comparison, "We've had the Miss Worlds who were found to be pregnant or over the age and the person who got it was on quite successfully. It's a cop-out, Joe" (K James 175).

Strengthening an argument by employing examples is not unusual. The drift of this thesis would be weakened without them. Joe Duffy challenges George Lee's contention (Thread A) that he was a very recent convert to the Fine Gael party (FG) by producing a clip from a programme six weeks earlier where George challenges the Minister for Finance with less than journalistic objectivity.

JD 11            Is it fair to say that it's slightly disingenuous of George Lee now to say (He's obviously become a member of FG in the last hour or so).... It was about six weeks ago on this programme, we got calls about a contribution

George had made - once again extremely articulately, extremely passionate and he made this point on the *Late Debate*, presented by Fergal Keane that night. Do you think when George Lee was saying what he said on the *Late Debate* that he had any intention of joining FG? Let people make their own minds up. Lets listen to it.

Lee (tape) 12 It gets more and more serious by the day and this is the same rubbish we've been getting from the beginning. We don't know a thing. We still don't know a shaggin' thing and we now know that the bankers are quite capable of cooking the books and pulling the wool over everybody's eyes and we're sitting here bailing them out left, right and centre and its so annoying to hear the type of language that they're at.. We want to bloomin' know. We're the ones footing the bloomin' bill.

JD 13 This was the day when Brian Lenihan admitted that he hadn't read some sections of the Price Waterhouse Report. Now, do you not think that FF can say that they were duped all along; that someone who was Economics Editor of the national broadcaster has declared for FG?

Tommy 14 He's declared for public politics.

JD 15 No, he has declared for FG.

Later in that discussion a caller, Jim, gives an example of how RTÉ personalities have an unfair advantage when it comes to attracting publicity.

Jim 38 For instance if you're out there in the world trying to make an impression one way or another as an ordinary person and supposing....and I'll give you an exact example .... many, many people out there, including myself, might have written a book but you wouldn't have a dog's chance of getting that book presented or looked at in RTE in certain instances, whereas if you're a presenter for RTE or working for RTE, not alone would you get it on one show, you'd get it on every show including *Podge and Rodge*. So, yes, there is a massive unfairness.

The great bulk of evidence offered to support claims on *Liveline* takes the shape of personal experience. I will deal with storytelling and witnessing as an alternative deliberative mode in the next section of this chapter but Graham's inclusion here of personal experience reminds us that witnessing in this form is not something distinct from rationality – quite the opposite; there is nothing to be rational about in the absence of experience. Habermas allows that ethical reasoning must be embedded in life history (1992, p. 473). If we look at the threads over the past couple of years (Appendix 4) we see the scam warnings, the complaints, the sharing of troubles and the offers of help – all based on callers reacting to slivers of their own lived realities or reaching out to the realities of others. Each of the threads we have highlighted, whether the issue is being hard done by, by Hertz or *The Wedding Journal* or Wicklow County Council; being intimidated by out-of-control dogs; or reliving the horrors of an institutionalised childhood, each becomes the focus for a cluster of accounts and like statements in a courtroom they add weight to a body of circumstantial evidence. Miriam (Thread FF7), an ex child resident of

Nazareth House in Tralee, forcibly illustrates the proximity of recounting in a phone-in to being a witness in court.

Miriam 16 I would stand up in court and I would stand for every person that was in an orphanage and I would swear on a bible that these people should have been brought to court and the Vatican knew about it; the Government of Ireland knew about it; everybody knew about it but nobody did nothing about it because you know what we were? Wasters! That's what we were called - Rubbish! I was never called by my name, just by a number and if you look back to the holocaust that's what it was like.

### **A Debate Structure**

I am aware that all speech radio has the potential to facilitate this claim-testing facet of rational-critical deliberation. Even radio drama may do so in a hypothetical manner. *Liveline's* claim to distinction lies in its general perception as a space specifically for debate. Lunt and Stenner recognise that there are misgivings about the relevance of public sphere theory to media formats like the talk show and the phone-in. They insist that, in spite of their limitations, "they do express something important and characteristic about public opinion and involvement in civic culture" (2005, p. 31). Their research subject is *The Jerry Springer Show*, which they see mainly as televisual theatre. Even so, they detect within that broad discursive framework, elements of a traditional debate or of a public enquiry. I suggest that there are parallels in *Liveline*, which raise the contributions of callers above the level of off-the-cuff private opinions and which elevates them into a semi-structured wider public debate.

Describing *The Jerry Springer Show*, Lunt and Stenner observe that guests:

Act in a predictable way by entering in order and on cue, answering the host's questions, and deploying arguments in a manner that is consistent with their roles in the debate. ... The host's role is similar to that of the chair of a debate in framing the question for debate and managing the turn-taking of the speakers, taking contributions from the floor and providing a summary. All this follows the structure of a debate from the chairs introduction, through primary and secondary motions and counters, to taking the points from the floor and the summing up. The only thing that is missing is the vote at the end of the debate. (ibid., p. 67)

I hope to show that the parallels are also strong in *Liveline*<sup>1</sup>.

Lunt and Stenner link the show to another formal deliberative structure – the public inquiry:

The host does more than introduce the parties to the debates. He is active in managing the contributions of participants using a variety of elicitation techniques to facilitate guests' contributions, and using a range of methods to contest the accounts offered by guests. In particular, he asks for further

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<sup>1</sup> Since May 2009 the programme has introduced text polling so even the vote is not entirely missing.



clarification of the description of events, he sometimes questions the rights of participants to talk or act in the way they do, and he questions the sincerity of some contributions. (ibid., p. 67).

The *Liveline* programmes selected are littered with examples which illustrate the connection which frequently exists between the programme format and the format of formal debate and enquiry. The host introduces the speakers – “Tommy, good afternoon” (A JD 1); “Okay, Jim Connolly is on the line. ... Jim is in Clare” (A JD 25). In Thread FF7 dealing with institutional abuse of children there is a succession of short introductions of victims queuing to tell their stories. The host gave six speakers an opportunity to tell their stories before the first ad break. He felt that the programme had an obligation to be open to them and not to deprive them of a hearing This would compound their childhood victimisations (DIVi 24).

Tommy, good afternoon (FF7 JD 1).

Okay, Miriam. Stay there, Tommy. Miriam is in Tralee. Miriam, good afternoon (FF7 JD 7).

Stay there for a sec, Tommy. Noel? Noel, good afternoon (FF7 JD 30).

Let me bring John in. ... John, good afternoon. You’re in Tallaght in Dublin (FF7 JD 40).

Stay there for a second, Miriam. Mary was also in Nazareth House in Tralee. Mary, good afternoon (FF7 JD 78).

Ray is on the line. Ray, good afternoon, you were in St. Joseph’s in Kilkenny (FF7 JD 88).

The host also introduces the topic and frames the question.

Would you canvass for George Lee in Dublin South? (A JD 5)

So why do you think that you’re now entitled, or someone else is entitled, to a share of that fifty grand prize? (K JD 11).

What do you think of the President’s statement this morning that she would wish that these people be followed to the courts? (FF7 JD 9).

We see evidence of his employing elucidation techniques; for example in the series of short questions to George Lee about the practicalities of his taking leave of absence from RTÉ (A JD 163 – 175) and we see him asking, usually in the form of questions, for clarification from contributors:

What did George say when you asked him? (A JD 21).

And how did they breach their terms and conditions? (K JD 11).

Sometimes he contests what speakers have said....

What’s wrong with saying that? (A JD 37).

You’re not answering the question. Is it in your terms and conditions? (K JD 92).

...and sometimes he contributes to the points speakers wish to make:

(Alex White, he is) a senator. He’s been working there for a number of years and he was a counsellor there (A JD 110).

He adds to the institutional abuse discussion by outlining his understanding of the Director of Public Prosecution’s position on pursuing cases where there has been a considerable time lapse (FF7 JD 48).

As 'chair' the host manages the turn-taking – “ David Bolger and then Izzy O'Rourke” (A JD 23); offers due process - “George, I presume you (wish to reply)” (A JD 269); moderates the debate – “Just hold on a second, Sarah” (K JD 33); and summarises the points made – “Isn't that Tommy's argument, Jim, in favour of George Lee, that he does have economic qualifications; that he did work in the Central Bank” (A JD 46). He takes supportive calls, 'points from the floor' – “Chris, good afternoon, you want to give your support to Jim, the chip man of Glendalough” (Y JD 117); and he takes subsidiary motions - “(You're) saying if anyone has a conviction they can't enter a competition, like. Is that the way it's going? That's the point I'm making.” (K David 128).

*Liveline* is neither a formal debate nor a public inquiry. It never intends to be. Some of its discourses may stray from structured rational expression but, as I have illustrated, others of its discourses draw from these forms of public procedural rationality. To the extent that they do, they facilitate the development of a citizenry which is 'non-impulsive, thoughtful and fair'. The modelling of procedural knowledge connects to Dahlgren's Civic Knowledge and Competence' and to the 'Procedural Values' dimensions of civic culture (2009, pp. 108 & ff.). Listeners and callers know they are engaged in more than just passing time and shooting the breeze: “Jim, Jim, I could just say to you – and I think you're making a very good point – and we're having a discussion about it, but the reality is that we're underestimating the ability of the voter to discern here and democracy does have its problems” (A Tommy 48).

### **Political Purpose**

Dahlgren suggests that debate for its own sake is not enough.

At its point of departure, deliberative democracy underscores the importance of providing reasons for decisions taken. This is a moral principle common to most theoretical versions of democracy, since it lays down the foundation for reciprocity. (2006b, p. 28)

It is from this reciprocity, this 'enlarged vision' that the normative and the ethical emerge. Habermas tells us that the most important trait of the public sphere is its reflexive character. He speaks of “a justified presumption of reasonable outcomes” and these leading to “rationally motivated yes- or no- reactions” (2006, pp. 4 & 5). Debate without purpose is not political; it plays no real part in democracy.

The deliberation on *Liveline* may, for the most part, serve the 'weaker' public spheres and appear removed from the centres of decision-making and political power. Occasionally the programme has created a perceptible political impact. We have noted already successful campaigns on cancer services, cystic fibrosis facilities, pensioners' medical cards and bank deposit security. No spectacular achievement occurred within our

target month although the discussions on institutional abuse were rooted in the programme's prior success in tackling the overcharging of victims by some solicitors.

The avenue I will use to investigate how the purposive and normative may begin to emerge from the selected programmes will be to combine one of Barber's (1984) functions of 'strong' democratic talk – agenda setting; the grass roots formulation of issues and concerns – and to merge it with Graham's criteria for identifying political discussion – participants making a connection from a particular experience, interest, issue or topic in general to society and stimulating consideration and response in others (2008, p. 22).

Seeking in this way to identify the emergence of the political and the genesis of normativity, I will not focus on the overtly political Thread A. Much of the debate there is patently partisan and follows well-worn pro- and anti-government grooves. Some useful issues surface. From the point of view of this work, there is an underlying concern with the quality of democracy (see A Jim 28 & 32 as examples). At one point this broadens out into a disagreement over whether politicians should, on the one hand, be qualified (A David 24) or, on the other, simply represent the 'ordinary' voter (A Jim 45). There is disagreement too on whether it is unfair that a media personality had a publicity head start if they enter politics. In fact, if one were to distil a broad ethical theme in this thread it would come down to 'fairness'. Variants of the word turn up on thirteen occasions in this thread alone.

Thread Y is predominantly the story of a small businessman, Jim Staken, with a fast food concession in Glendalough, the County Wicklow tourist spot. Here again fairness is an overriding issue (Y JD 81). He and his family have worked the site for over thirty years providing food and a range of additional services to the public. Now, having been outbid in the annual tendering process, he has to abandon the site and his not inconsiderable investments there within a fortnight.

On the face of it, it is the classic case of the little guy being steamrolled by the impersonal system. The humble, hardworking local is suffering at the hands of an unreachable and unreasonable bureaucracy. There is much merit in Jim Staken's case; the story that he builds with Joe Duffy confirms that he is industrious, conscientious, obliging and committed to the locality.

Jim 36 To clean 14 toilets and keep them cleaned. Like, you'd be in there four and five times a day, changing toilet rolls, cleaning floors. We got busloads of kids and you know what they're like when they go into a toilet

Jim 54 I done it for tourism in Glendalough, if you know what I mean, because I'm around the fifth generation of Stakens in Glendalough. I'm very proud of Glendalough.

Wicklow County Council, on the other hand, emerges as uncaring and remote.

JD 83 Yeh well, we tried to get on to Wicklow County Council. Have you been able to argue your point?

Jim 84 I haven't really. I've been on to a councillor and that..... I mean, they won't even speak to you, Wicklow County Council. I spoke to one very nice girl yesterday who I had great time for all the years - Ann. She said she was disappointed, you know but I mean there's nothing to do with her.

It might be presumed that this is a clash of conflicting ethical and political principles. Jim can cite custom and practice, his track record and his personal circumstances. We assume that Wicklow County Council has an obligation to follow procedures based on transparency and best practice when awarding public contracts.

When it comes to debating this balance on *Liveline*, there is only going to be one winner. Jim's case has everything – it is a human-interest story, it is uncomplicated and it has personal and emotional resonances. The discourse is almost tailor made for the programme. The best the Council could hope for would be a detached spokesperson talking of sterile procedures and obscure sub-clauses in regulations. It is little wonder they were 'out to lunch' (Y JD 149).

When we examine how political action might be progressed in this case we learn of vague talk about a possible petition (Y JD 93) and when one supportive caller begins to explore a legalist and contractual route the option is not encouraged with any enthusiasm by the host.

Chris 133 Surely he has some kind of rights at this stage?

Jim 134 No, I wouldn't. I don't think so, legally, I don't think so. It's the way the franchise.....

Chris 135 Do you have anything in writing from the Council over the years, you know?

Jim 136 Well, I have a few little bits now. Well, I have it with a solicitor at the moment.

JD 137 But they would be saying you have it for the next twelve months?

Jim 138 No, I haven't, no.

JD 139 No, no, the letters you would have got.

Jim 140 Oh yes, yes. Now, up to two years ago it used to be only a six months contract because of the winter months but then I never moved that unit off that for the whole twelve months.

Chris 141 Do you have to pay them a fee to be on that site?

Jim 142 Yes

- Chris 143      You do, so you have a contract in place with them to be there.
- Jim 144      Well, up to the 31st May.
- JD 145      Well maybe the next question, Chris, to Jim, has your tenure in Glendalough been unbroken for the twenty years?
- Jim 146      Oh yes, since 1989.
- JD 147      Well, that's interesting.
- Chris 148      I'd say you have more right than you might realize, Jim, in that case.
- JD 149      I know a lot of..... well, anyway..... I know the deal, Jim; your case has been heard. I'd say unfortunately Wicklow County Council are out to lunch or having their chips. They're not having their chips up with you... their Friday 'one and one'<sup>2</sup> up with you.

The discourses of protest or due process do not sit easily with the personal narrative which, as we have noted previously, can hinder the political (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994, p. 140).

Both Thread K and Thread L can broadly be described as consumerist complaints. We see from Appendix 4 that these are a typical component of *Liveline* fare and it confirms that this long-standing civil liberty is well facilitated. The first and biggest category, at a fraction below 30% of all threads, is that designated as 'Consumer Watchdog and Complaints Department'. In fact, looking across categories, complaining and negativity are very much a feature of the phone-in – an observation noted by other commentators (Verwey, 1990, Higgins and Moss, 1982, Annenberg Report, 1996). *Liveline* is subjected to a degree of criticism on this account, being branded in the popular press as, "Whineline" or a "Whingefest" but it might also be borne in mind that the right to complain is fundamental to democratic expression. Slavko Splichal (2002) frames this as a natural and civil right, part of a larger right of expression and publication. He cites John Milton who encouraged, "the utmost bound of civil liberty" under conditions where "complaints are freely heard, deeply considered and speedily reformed" (1644/1999, p. 4). John Keane cites Montesquieu's assertion that, "the right to grumble and complain .... helped liberate England from the heavy silent fear of despotism" (1991, p. 27). *Liveline* may not attain the ideal of deep consideration or speedy reform but it may be the case that those who complain about complaining are unaware of the irony of their position and of the taint of elitism.

Nonetheless, Thread K is essentially an unproductive bickering session where a disappointed runner up in a magazine competition attempts to persuade a spokeswoman for the magazine to divide up the main prize

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<sup>2</sup> A colloquial Dublin expression for a single order of fish and chips.

which had not been awarded because of a problem with the winners. There is no meeting of minds. The caller's discourse is a personalised one with appeals to reasonableness and fairness. The spokeswoman has recourse to ethos, logic and 'terms and conditions'. Nothing is resolved. The closest we come to a decision is the caller's parting shot.

Sarah 231 Thanks very much. Well, I won't be buying the magazine.

Win 232 I'm sorry, Sarah.

Sarah 233 Well, your attitude is, 'that's fine'. You think I'm one listener.

Win 234 It certainly is not.

Sarah 235 A lot of people from my office here who buy your magazine and a lot of my friends at home... all my family..... There's numerous websites.... You're saying you can't re-award the prize because of negative.... Well, this is very damaging that you're not doing anything about it. You're saying the ethos of your magazine is this, that and the other. I think this is way, way more worse, what you're doing now.

Win 236 I think, if you think about it in logic terms, maybe you'll come to another way of thought but certainly we've thought about all the different aspects of it and we feel that, unfortunately, this year the matter is better concluded.

Sarah 237 Very convenient for yourself! That's all I'm saying.

Thread L is also a complaint – overcharging by Hertz for a scratch on a returned rental car. The caller is reasoned and considered. This time there is no spokesperson from the company although the host seems oddly anxious to moderate any heavy-handed attack on them. This time there is a result. Before the end of the programme Hertz reduces the €1,000 bill by €200, 'as a gesture of good will'.

It is difficult to construe this as a political outcome. One suspects that the compensation was made, more on the grounds of positive publicity than any newly acquired sense of equity and it is unlikely to have any long term impact on the price structure for repairs. In both cases private issues were aired in public but the connections to the general good are thin. There can be an increased public awareness and vigilance – read the small print and study the terms and conditions.

Thread M opens with the story of a woman whose Jack Russell pup was mauled to death by three out-of-control Alsatians. She is clearly upset by the experience and her upset is compounded by the fact that she can do little or nothing to address what happened. "I rang the Guards and I rang the County Council and the Dog Warden and, up to now, Joe, I've got nowhere" (M Geraldine 30). The laws are there; dogs must be licensed

and under control; and restricted breeds must be muzzled and enclosed. Yet she is at a loss when she requests action and assistance.

Geraldine 38 Yes... Apparently, Joe, these dogs have a history in the area of coming out on the road. There is a history with these dogs, Joe, and it's known. And that's what I'm on about, that it wasn't only that day, Joe. There's a history in the area with these dogs. And this warden who doesn't seem to have done ... I asked him if he'd get back straight on to me. He asked me where they lived. Four days later we happened to be on to the pound who gave us his number because it's the local pound here and they said, "we'll give you the dog.....". There's actually no mobile number for this man, by the way he's impossible to get, this dog warden. He rang my house and I told him where this person lived. This man, I asked him would he get back on and let me know was ... anything..... Four days later, Joe, as I said, we got this number and this man had still not done anything about it. I have been to the local police station and it went on and on. "Oh, you have to come over and give statements and then it will have to go to a local judge".

JD 39 That's fair enough.

Geraldine 40 I mean, Joe, at this stage I had to go to my doctor because the state I was in after it. It was horrific - the trauma and the loss of our dog. No one seems to have done anything.

Supportive callers who have had similar experiences agree:

Ann 44 We have the same problem. I live in County Westmeath and I also go walking in Meath and anywhere in the countryside and it's a problem all over with dogs. I was pinned up against a ditch with a dog. I phoned the County Council, the dog warden. Nobody wants to know and it's a pity - the countryside is ruined.

Ann 48 I can't go out for a walk. I couldn't bring a child out for a walk on a bike. Can't do anything. So I'm just waiting for the council to come 'round and see what their response will be.

Marge 62 Then we rang the dog warden because the people whose house we were in didn't even ring to see how the child was or anything. So we done that and then my husband and the child's mother had to go and make a statement to the police. We done that. Back to the dog warden - back and forth, back and forth - this is over a year later now, a year and a couple of months later, and still nothing's been done. They can't do anything; that's what we're being told.

We return to Geraldine:

Geraldine 52 I've had Jack Russells all my life. I've reared three dogs and, as I said, this has never happened before. I thought in this day and age that people would... you know, particularly Alsatis and German Shepherds would be muzzled. I thought dog wardens were there for the like of when something like this happened, they would be activated. It's well known about these dogs in the area and like, Joe, nothing has been done. So I just feel it's my duty to let people know what's happening there and maybe someone will do something.

This concept of warning others as a civic responsibility, especially where no other effective course of action presents itself, is a recurring theme on *Liveline*. This is clear in Appendix 4 where sharing troubles and offering cautions merits a category. In this target month there are similar themes in Threads B, C, G, and J. Joe Duffy is conscious of it especially identifying deliberate cons, “We’re always watching out for scams. I’m just very conscious of people getting ripped off. ... I think the scam is an important (topic) of *Liveline*.... We offer a forum for it. We want the people to know, who’ve been scammed, that if they come to us, they’ll get on air” (DIVi 1). This inclination to warn, to broadcast a caution to others is an illustration of the political emerging. An issue is taken out of the private realm and placed in the public domain for discussion with a view to effecting the general good.

The programme does succeed in moving beyond the, “somebody should do something” ineffectuality. The door is opened for ethical reflexivity and the ‘extended vision’ necessary for empathy and taking the view of the ‘other’. Mark, a dog warden, calls in and talks the host and the listeners through the procedures to be followed. The dog warden is no longer a nameless, faceless waster. Almost immediately we hear a caller, Declan, shifting the target for frustration.

Declan 114      Yeh, I was just saying to your researcher there that whilst I know people like Mark there are working very hard to try and help the situation, it just seems that a lot of the laws aren't enforced strongly enough and I've often commented myself that there should be a branch of an Garda that works on animal control and animal protection as well. I don't think there's anything like that at the moment.

Declan 135      I just.... Hearing stuff like that.... I know Mark has a job to do as well and I know obviously the situation, that the dogs cause the damage that they're going to be destroyed, but I think it's an awful shame that the people get off scot free....

Mark 136        Yeh.

Declan 137      ....and the dogs are killed and I'm sure Mark will agree with me, that he sees it every day. I'm certain of it, I just think that it's awful that there's laws there - I know they're there somewhere - I don't know the ins and outs of it. I've had conversations like this before with a dog warden and I know that there are laws there but they're just not being enforced.

Any residual notion that lazy dog wardens are the villains of the piece, is dispelled when we learn that they are under-resourced and that they are now wearing anti-stab vests going about their work and are subjected to regular attacks (M Mark 139, 143, 145 and 147)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Thread S likewise begins with complaints against the Sheriff service but when a sheriff comes on air the discourse again changes perceptibly to one of greater understanding and an appreciation of the complexity of the work.



Being able to accommodate the other point of view; even listening to it on radio takes callers and hearers beyond clichéd, monocular and ultimately unproductive versions of cause and effect. While this sensibility is most pointed in this thread it is evident in others too. While Deborah was keen to support Jim Staken in Thread Y, in the exchange below she plays along with Joe Duffy's light-hearted barb about the Council but catches herself and sidesteps a crude generalisation.

JD 174 But you fought forest fires and I'm sure you fought polar bears with your bare hands, Deborah, but you never fought the Wicklow County Council.

Deborah 175 **(Laughs)** No, and I've heard it's not very pleas..... Excuse me, I'm sure they're doing a good job and maybe made the right decision but.....

JD 176 Okay, okay.

Even in the dark and emotional discourses of Thread FF7 we note that some of the victims can distinguish that there were good people and good moments in the otherwise wretched institutions. (FF7 Miriam 18 & 49).

Thread FF7 is a succession of victims' stories. They come on air and relate their experiences in raw emotional terms. This day is the seventh successive programme where these stories have been told. There has been a relentless parade of hurt and damage. If the stories have a common undefined moral emerging from this accretion of personal narratives it must be the recognition that society is capable of creating cultures where the abuse of power becomes normal and institutionalised. This is unfairness unconstrained. However, there is no sense of a common strategy among victims, no obvious consensus. Individuals call for punishment, vindication, compensation, exoneration or closure. Each call is justifiable but there is no meeting of minds. The vehemence of the reactions illustrate Wessler and Schultz's contention, noted earlier, that these legitimate forms of public utterance – emotional protest and accusations, public testimony concerning grievances and demands can clash with standards of civility in deliberation. Callers are less controlled and measured in attempting to articulate their frustrations and loss. Such outrage, they said, could be vital to ensure that problems were not forgotten or marginalised (2009, pp. 17 & 18). The challenge becomes to transform this outrage and mindfulness into a purposeful agenda. Spaces like *Liveline* become important as a rallying point and support as one caller acknowledges:

William 148 Nobody! ..... The only way I'll get my life back; the only way I'll get peace from this is when I'm dead. .... And I would like to thank Mary Rafferty, yourself, Bruce Arnold, Paddy Ferguson, John Kelly - people that have fought this and let people have their say over the last ten years.

Joe Duffy frames the perspective for this day's discussion by asking for reaction to a statement from President McAleese that those responsible

should be brought to trial. Most callers (FF7 Tommy 4, Miriam 10, Noel 33, Ray 93) respond to that question but there is little unanimity about where responsibility lies. The Vatican, the nuns, the Christian Brothers, the Gardaí, the judiciary, and the ISPCC 'Cruelty' men are all identified as targets for retribution. Some insisted that the organs of the state should be held accountable – the government in the shape of the Department of Justice or the Department of Education, the President herself, or the Redress Board which had been set up to respond to the needs of victims – these became the focus of scattered anger.

Callers wanted more than prosecutions. For example, there was a need for the credence and acceptance that had been denied:

Harry 252        Now then, I wanted to speak to you anyway. It's wonderful to see all this coming out now because the bottom line for people like me - we were never believed, really; never accepted and you have to bear with me now **(audibly upset)**..... I'm okay.

There is a hope that innocence and identities can be restored; there is a call to have petty criminal records for loitering or truancy to be expunged and for a recognition that they are no longer numbers and are entitled, literally, to their good names (see FF7 Mary 83, Miriam 16 & 57, Tommy 260). Some simply wanted closure and peace but realised that both were unlikely:

William 142        No, I think it's time that a proper compensation system is put into place where the victims are properly looked after and their families and this has to die. It has to finish. I've spent ten years of my life on this. It is time now to put closure to this and bringing in these wretched - I don't know how to describe them - but bringing these animals before the courts is not an answer. The answer to this is closure.

(see also FF7 William 148, Richard 210 & 216).

William, in particular seems to have lost faith in the political. He had hoped that their protests and agitation of ten years previously would have stimulated support and a response:

William 142        I don't like the way the bishops and everybody else has jumped on the bandwagon now. Why didn't they jump on the bandwagon ten years ago when we were outside the Dáil - myself, Kelly and a few more - when we were demanding justice?

.....

William 246        Well, you can leave me with this, Joe, right. Mary McAleese and the politicians that are now jumping on the bandwagon, where the hell were they ten years ago when we needed the support; when we were outside the Dáil - myself, Kelly, Irish Trócaire and a few more groups? We were outside the Dáil protesting to get justice. Where were they then? Joe there is no answer to it. There is no answer to any of this. I mean, the man you had in front of me now, I wish I was like him. I wish I could cry. I never cried anyway. Take care, Joe.

JD 247            You too, take care, William.

It is William also who recognises that the issue had wider connotations than individual or even institutional acts of cruelty. Such acts would not have become commonplace without the connivance and silence of the culture at large:

William 110      Instead of giving us justice, they set up the Redress Board and this inquiry. There was no need for an inquiry. Everybody in Ireland knew what was happening in the Industrial School when I was in it. Everybody threatened their children with it. No, I think the time for justice is gone.

Rightly, Harry is not prepared to let the politicians of the day off the hook based on cultural revisionism:

JD 279            That's Michael Woods, the Minister.

Harry 280        Mr. Wood said,... he stated....., he said, "you know that was the culture of the time" and we're getting buggered, getting whipped, getting kicked all over the place and he said that was the culture of the time and , "don't forget that was all imported from England". In the name of heavens above, what type of man is he? Imported? ...And these adults, like! They had the Minister beside them saying this is what you do, is it? Is he trying to treat us all like idiots?

One caller, Tommy, having finished his story, in a parting word to Joe Duffy, relates his anger to the overriding political question we posited at the outset – what is it that makes abuse of power invisible in a society to the point where individuals are destroyed? For him these stories are not history. They link to a contemporary failure to respond to homelessness, health care and disadvantage:

Tommy 284        Joe, can I say just one more thing?

JD 285            Briefly, Tommy, please.

Tommy 286        No one says cruelty man. Well, there's people out in the streets - now that's cruelty..... There's people in hospital. The government said they put the people up front. They're not. They're cutting the poor kids that's handicapped and all. They shouldn't give.... They should give the people the money, the hospital...

Ken Plummer argues that, “the stories we tell of our lives are deeply implicated in moral and political change” (1995, p. 144). I support his argument; the fragments of narrative we observe in this thread address, in a fundamental way, the norms that govern our collective morality. They render the invisible a little more visible. We each question our own blindness. Via a process such as Ellis’s ‘working through’ (2000), in striving to make sense of them, their implications cannot but feed into collective decision-making.

## **Journalistic Discourses and Norms**

As Jeffrey Jones points out there has long been an assumption:

That the most important sphere of political communication occurs in the interactions between politicians/government officials and the news media. The Fourth Estate is seen as the central and most legitimate institution in a democracy to keep a check on power, to uncover facts, to seek truth, and to present reality in a fair and unbiased manner. Furthermore, the press maintains a formal and routine relationship to political power, with regularized, institutional-based interactions including regulatory oversight, office space, supplied content (e.g. press conferences and interviews), and so on. The news media are therefore seen as the most important players in the creation and / or representation of political reality, even leading some scholars to consider it the fourth branch of government. (2006b, pp. 366 & 367).

While arguing that this is a flawed assumption Jones assures that these functions are vital to successful self-governance. Whatever its flaws, it is difficult to argue with the perception that, as Louw puts it, journalists are political semi insiders (2005, p. 17). In terms of the public sphere, Daniel Hallin argues that, “Habermas is wrong in portraying the history of journalism as a decline from a golden age” (1994, p. 6) and he proceeds to make a case for the ‘rational’ qualities of the journalistic process (ibid., p. 9 & ff.).

I have pointed out already that, while *Liveline* may not be ‘pure’ journalism, it floats in that space between the news and light entertainment. We have seen that it follows the main midday news; that it draws on news sources for its material; and that it is not infrequently the subject of reporting itself. Examples in Appendix 4 illustrate that it frequently adopts the ‘watchdog’ role associated with the Fourth Estate.

The programme does not have a single discursive mode. Depending on the issue and the material, the mode can be jocose or earnest. Sometimes it is about the story or about indignation or about empathy and most often it shifts and changes in response to the demands of callers or the logic of production. Occasionally it takes a journalistic turn and at those times it may, I suggest, be judged as contributing to formal political policy making and decision making.

Thread A is a case in point. The transition between *Liveline* and the One O’clock News is almost seamless. The big story of the day was the decision by George Lee, RTÉ’s Economics Editor to stand for the Fine Gael Party in an upcoming by-election. Lee had undergone a searching interview by Sean O’Rourke during the news and *Liveline* opened its lines to members of the public to react to the decision. From the outset, Joe Duffy adopts a journalistic tone, putting a lot of emphasis on fairness and asking callers to identify their part allegiance in the interest of transparency. Lee, who up to that moment would have been part of the team, is now an outsider. When the programme team manages to secure

Lee on a phone line, little in the conversation resembles an exchange between colleagues. Duffy's questions are pointed, loaded and sharp. Lee's responses are guarded and 'political'.

- JD 180 George, do you believe Children's Allowance .... Child Benefit should be taxed?
- George 181 No, I don't believe that. I believe very strongly that it shouldn't be taxed.
- JD 182 If there was a general election this year and FG and Labour were returned and they decided that the Children's Allowance had to be means tested, would you leave the party?
- George 183 Well, it's a very hypothetical question, Joe.
- JD 184 But I'm saying, what is your bottom line?
- George 185 A general election is way, way, way beyond where I am. I'm trying to seek a nomination to pursue and hope to get a chance of running in a by-election and I don't believe.... I mean, it's way beyond where I am at the moment.
- JD 186 Do you think there should be a property tax?
- George 187 I do believe that the exchequer and the government now, unfortunately because of mismanagement, have to find new sources of revenue.
- JD 188 Okay, so there should be a property tax. **(Aggressively)** Do you support the Public Service Pension Levy?
- George 189 No, I don't support the Public Service Pensions Levy because people have had a contract of employment on what they do. The levy is being imposed on people in the public sector. I think if they really wanted to cut their wages they should have the guts to **(indistinct)**...
- .....
- JD 193 George, sorry, I asked you about the pension levy. You're against that?
- George 194 I am against it because it's not addressing the issue. I think if they wanted to cut the pay that they should have cut the pay.
- JD 195 So, you're in favour of public service pay cuts?
- George 196 In favour of government trying to put public finances right and taking appropriate action with regard to how to do that. There are many things they could have done in relation to that. They could have done an awful lot of saving in reforming the public service before they decided to go for the pay.
- JD 197 Do you think there are too many public servants and civil servants?
- George 198 It depends on how you use them, Joe. That is a question it's really difficult to give a straight answer to. It's easy to say, it's grown too much - there must be lots of spare public servants out there, which most likely

there are. The thing is what they're doing. Are many of them being wasted in relation to what they are doing?

There were callers lined up during this exchange and they had an opportunity to contribute subsequently but for that segment Joe Duffy was patently in journalist mode<sup>4</sup>.

There are traces of investigative journalism elsewhere. In thread K, where *The Wedding Journal* prize is an issue, it becomes clear to listeners that Joe Duffy suspects something untoward.

JD 195 Win, Win, when I heard your voice and I heard the name *The Wedding Journal* something went off in my head. That's why I asked you that question, has there ever been controversy about this competition before and, in truth, there has, hasn't there?

Win 196 Not with this particular competition.

JD 197 No, but with a similar competition run by *The Wedding Journal* about a free prize. Have you been on *Liveline* before?

Win 198 It was to do with our on-line voting.

JD 199 Have you been on *Liveline* before?

Win 200 No, I haven't.

JD 201 Someone, in my head..... somebody from *The Wedding Journal* has been on this programme before.

Win 202 Not me.

JD 203 There's a terrible sense of déjà vu in my brain about this. When I heard the details as you enunciated them on Sarah. There was a competition before run by the same magazine around the same type of prize as well - sponsors.....

There are two other ways in which *Liveline* can be linked to extended concepts of journalism. The first is in the emerging field of citizen journalism where increasingly non-professionals are contributing to reporting news events. It is usually associated with new media affordances but during the research month there are examples of two phone callers reporting from the scene. In Thread W we hear a report from a local man at a foiled armed robbery in Lucan. This had been reported initially in the preceding news bulletin but his account is refreshing in that it is not couched in journalistic language and it reflects a difference of observation and perspective. In Thread T a construction worker at a

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<sup>4</sup> That this journalistic mode was not a permanent condition is well illustrated in the same programme where Máiréad McGuinness, a Fine Gael candidate in the upcoming June European elections, was given an uninterrupted and substantial platform over six minutes of air-time (A Máiréad 156 & 158).

vantage point on the North Quay gives a moment-by-moment account of the towing into place of Dublin's newest bridge – Beckett Bridge. Once again, there is a freshness and richness in the report.

The second link is with the field of Civic Journalism. For a programme like *Liveline*, located more towards the 'serious' end of the phone-in spectrum, this calls into play norms of professionalism often associated with journalism. Denis McQuail (2006) renders these as three possible functions – acting as an observer and informant; providing a channel and forum for outside voices and thirdly, playing a participant role in society. I contend that there is a link between these functions and the tenets advocated by Jay Rosen (1999) of the Civic Journalism Movement in the USA. They postulate that journalism should be more about being a participant than a spectator; that it should favour issues and events important to ordinary people; that public opinion should be engaged via debate; and that journalism should seek to enhance social capital. I suggest that *Liveline* scores, at least partially, on each of these principles.

*Liveline* is occasionally journalistic but journalism is not what the programme is about. To the extent that it uses the discourses of journalists, we may apply the professional norms of accuracy, fairness and objectivity to the programme but to the extent that it changes and shifts its discursive footing, then it becomes more complicated. Fairness may occasionally be sacrificed in the interest of the dramatic or of the populist. Objectivity may be difficult in the face of anger or injustice. In the end we are thrown back on a different professionalism and a different way of establishing professional norms. Sometimes, for example, fairness is better achieved over a number of programmes and in a variety of modes; maybe establishment positions are well enough represented elsewhere; possibly accuracy is more about multiple voices in a free-for-all of points of view; and it could be that objectivity does little to encourage engagement.

### **Reviewing Rational Debate**

In this section I have attempted to identify the characteristics within the discourses of *Liveline* which correspond to the requirement that deliberative democracy must, in part, have a foundation of rationality. If this translates into offering evidence for the assertion and testing of truth claims, then the programme can be shown to accomplish this. The programme also exhibits many of the characteristics of formal structured debate and offers the public a procedural model for dealing civilly with differences of opinion. The deliberation in the programme is also shown to be purposive in that it uncovers private issues for public consideration; it contributes to the agenda for civic debate; and it occasionally makes an impact close to the 'strong' democratic spaces of political decision-making. Finally, allowing that journalism has often been assumed to be the media corollary of the formal political system, I assessed the implications of *Liveline*'s sporadic forays into journalistic discourse.

## Deliberation – Alternatives

### Narrative

At a very basic abstract level of social cognition Bruner (1986) distinguishes between two basic modes of thinking, the argumentative or paradigmatic mode and the narrative mode. In the former ... concept formation, reasoning and arguing play important roles, while the latter thinks by means of stories. Stories deal with sequences of events, characters and actors and so forth – all the classic elements of narratives. They have dramatic qualities and some moral point. (Höjier, 2007, p. 40)

The previous section focused, in the main, on cultural thinking in the argumentative mode. The focus now shifts to narration but, in so doing, we keep in mind that cognition, narration and emotion are 'intrinsically interlinked' (ibid., p. 41).

There are stories told in each of the research threads under consideration; some are brief loosely linked sequences of events, others are more substantial and structured. Thread A itself is part of a breaking political news story. Within it contributors (A Tommy 4 and A Máiréad 156, as examples) recount their own experiences to make a point. The question and answer technique employed by the host – each its own micro-story – builds the exchanges into a storied understanding of George Lee's motives. The consumer complaints threads, K and L, feature witnessing to reinforce arguments but the discourses in both these threads are fundamentally argumentative. Thread M about the marauding dogs argues a point too but here the discourse is predominantly narrative and Thread FF7 on institutional abuse is built almost exclusively, as we shall see, on the impact of story after victim's story.

Any narrative analysis is grounded in the particular. Stories are based in the concrete; they are tied into particularities of time and location; and they order the events which occur into a sequence or plot. This plot is moved forward by a cast of characters often in recognisable roles as heroes or villains, perpetrators or victims. Riessman refers to this effect as 'contingency' – the consequential linking of events and ideas and the imposition of a meaningful pattern (2008, p. 5).

In Thread FF7 there seems to be an urgency to air as many of the victims' stories as possible. Joe Duffy evinced a desire to allow the victims of abuse to be heard as opposed to commentators or experts.

By that time of the week I was very, very conscious that victims were not getting on (air) anywhere except *Liveline*; that we had the same five or six



brilliant people – brilliant commentators – on all the programmes across all the channels, the same brilliant people and not the victims themselves. And I remember saying, “It’s a forum for victims”. We had no experts, no commentators, no analysis of the church or... just people to tell their stories.  
(DIVi 26)

In this particular programme, Duffy condenses the usual phone-in introduction and in most cases combines the callers’ names, their location, the institutions in question and he implicitly invites them to begin their stories.

JD 1 Hello, good afternoon and you’re very welcome to Liveline. Tommy, good afternoon.

Tommy 2 Good afternoon, Joe, how are you?

JD 3 Good. You were in Marlboro’ House in Dublin, the detention centre. You say you’re delighted to hear President McAleese on Morning Ireland and saying these perpetrators should be brought to court.

Likewise:

JD 7 Okay, Miriam. Stay there, Tommy. Miriam is in Tralee. Miriam, good afternoon.

Miriam 8 Good afternoon, Joe, pleasure speaking to you. Thank you.

JD 9 Thanks for your call. What did you think of what President McAleese said? You were in Nazareth House in Tralee.

Each introduction is along these lines and most offer two locations for the story – the present position of the caller and the site where the original story took place. Details about a location also contribute to establishing the contingency of a narrative and reinforcing its sincerity. The picture-building – often ascribed as a feature of radio – is in evidence in one of Miriam’s stories in FF7.

Miriam 59 Yes, my sister.....was brutally, brutally attacked. She never went to school. My memory of my sister is being torn on the floor with another girl constantly by the head, her hair .... And on the morning of her Holy Communion, I was waiting for her to come down the stairs and all I saw was her being thrown over the banisters on her First Holy Communion morning because she ate a sweet because that’s what we were given the night before by my Mom or by my sister – my older sister and she never made her Holy Communion. My memory is just of a pool of blood and she lying there – my sister. **(Weeps)**. And they can do that to a child on her First Holy Communion Day. In a white dress!

JD 60 And who threw her over the balcony?

Miriam 61 The nun who was in charge and I’m going to name her and I don’t care. Her name was Sr. Mary Enda.

JD 62 And how high was this balcony, Miriam?

- Miriam 63 You know when you went in you kinda went up the stairs to the dormitory and there was a kind of landing and there was plants around it and it was like a wooden.....
- JD 64 Are you saying that it was higher than a normal stairs in a normal house?
- Miriam 65 Oh yes, now, to me the house looked huge.
- JD 66 Yeh, I know.
- Miriam 67 To me as a child, and I'm small and all, looking up I suppose my image would have been like, say in real terms, *Gone with the Wind*. You're waiting for someone to come out, looking beautiful and all you see is your sister going over the banisters. And the other girl who was making Holy Communion with her made it that day but I know it was a couple of weeks later that she made it. But you know... it was just .... I mean I was six years old.

The lived horror of a six-year-old is made vivid. One point of reference is expressly cinematic, to *Tara*, the Big House in *Gone with the Wind*. The details anchor Miriam's memory – the stairs, the sweet, the group awaiting the communicants, and the contrast in colours – “My memory is just that, of a pool of blood and she lying there – my sister. And they can do that to a child on her First Holy Communion Day ..... in a white dress”.

Miriam's story is like most of the stories in our research example – tales of victimage or of troubles. Tommy's story in Thread A is an exception. Tommy has little difficulty in casting himself in the lead role in the political saga:<sup>5</sup>

- Tommy 4 I was an active member and a candidate for FG for 12 to 13 years, programme manager with Jim Mitchell, a special advisor to Gay Mitchell in the John Bruton government; not a member now and I'll be going out canvassing tonight for Vincent Jackson in Ballyfermot
- Tommy 10 I rang in to Liveline the minute I heard the one o'clock news. I was hoping you were going to cover it and I was asking the production team to cover it. I thought it was necessary that Sean put it to George about his reporting and his job in RTE and the national profile that he had, particularly in the last six months when this country was going down the tubes and I'm not talking party politics here when I say that. I work with the health service at the moment and, Joe, you have no idea the impact it's having.
- Tommy 22 You don't ask people. I didn't go to George Lee and ask him if he was standing for FG. On a number of occasions I was in George's company.....on two occasions. One occasion I asked him about the offer that Charlie McCreavy.... About the savings project and I said, “George, is that good?” and he said, “It's money for nothing” and I heard what he said. The second time I spoke to George in Jim's company and Jim looked at George... they were talking about the DIRT inquiry and I indicated to him afterwards when I was walking out. I said, “George,

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<sup>5</sup> Tommy, in fact, is the only clear-cut example of a caller whose focus is more on his own performance than on the point he wishes to make. At one point he goes so far as to assume the turn distribution role of the host (A Tommy 67).

would you ever consider taking this up and standing in public life and he looked at me and I said, "I'm serious – we're looking for candidates?" Now, he may not have taken that as a direct offer.

In the examples above we have been looking at how stories in *Liveline* share those features of all stories – they sequence events in a specific location and via a cast of characters. With Riessman, we now ask, what does narrative do? She answers it by saying that most obviously individuals and groups construct identities through storytelling and she then offers a list of uses that are made of narrative:

Individuals use the narrative form to remember, argue, justify, persuade engage, entertain and even mislead an audience. Groups use stories to mobilize others and to foster a sense of belonging. Narratives do political work. (2008, p. 8).

This implies that the potential of stories for civic meaning-making is linked to the functions she outlines and for that reason, it will be helpful to see how they can have relevance for the stories in *Liveline*.

Riessman reckons that remembering the past is the most familiar function; that, "individuals turn to narrative to excavate and reassess memories that may have been fragmented, chaotic, unbearable, and/or scarcely visible before narrating them" (ibid., p. 8). We have already heard Miriam say, "My memory is just of a pool of blood ..." (FF7 Miriam 59) and I offer, with no preamble, two further examples from Thread FF7:

Tommy 23      The thing that got me, Joe, was I was taken in for loitering. I used to sell newspapers and that and I was taken and taken to the children's' court and I can always recall being in that big waiting room in the court and there was lots of kids waiting there with their mothers. And I was brought up, Joe, to the judge and you walked up along a red carpet; you stood beside the fireplace and the judge – my mother was with me when the judge put me into Marlboro House. My mother screamed out and I looked back to see her screaming and this man came running up along the red carpet, Joe, and picked me up in his arms in a bear hug and carried me down the stairs, Joe, and my mother was screaming. Another man had her by the arms and we were taken into a room underneath the courthouse and thrown in there. Joe, there was all these kids in there and we were screaming our heads off inside that room to get out. And what would happen? They had these men, either court officials or police, I'm not too sure but there was a sliding hatch on it, Joe, and we used to be kicking the door to get out 'cos we were all actually terrified in it and they pulled back the sliding hatch and told us to stay quiet and when your face was up against the sliding hatch, they used spit in at you, Joe. And here's the horrible thing that I never forget, Joe, when the courts was over at four o'clock all our mothers were outside the court waiting. They drove the big van up; backed it into the courthouse and these people ran in around the rooms, Joe, grabbed us one at a time in bear hugs and carried us out and threw us into the van. And I can remember my poor mother and other mothers screaming, reaching out for us and the police pushing them away and they were banging at the vans as we drove away, Joe. And I was taken into Marlboro House – into that place, Joe, and I'll never forget it, what they done.

Mary 83 I'm just going on to speak for myself and having gone through my own files and family history, I was put in at fourteen months on the 13<sup>th</sup> June 1969 with a baby brother that was only less than two months old. My father put us in, myself and my brother, on a voluntary basis, 'cos there were two more at home. My mother suffered, from my files, from a mental illness so she wasn't at home at the time so my father wrote a letter and asked for me and Michael Patrick – there's so many different names for my brother, Joe, Vincent Patrick – and I have the documentation here now of who his name really was – but getting back to the story, we eventually went home on 20<sup>th</sup> September, 1969 after my father wrote a very heartfelt letter begging them to let us out, myself and my brother, 'cos my father was reared in St. Joseph's. We were a second generation family having been reared in the system by the same nun that reared my aunts above me – my father's sisters – in the late 40s, I would assume, and to be told or to find out then that I went back in, in the December of that same year without my baby brother. He died three days after being sent home from the orphanage (**Sniffles**).

Tommy concludes, "Joe, and I'll never forget it, what they done". There is the distinct impression that this is not the first time he has rehearsed this scene in this form. His account reads like a Dickensian version of bedlam; again we are treated to precision in details – the big waiting room, the fireplace, the red carpet and the door with its sliding hatch – we are offered a cast of characters – screaming mothers, bear-hugging custodians and kicking kids – and the account is dotted with references to memory – "I can always recall...", "The horrible thing that I'll never forget...". The fourteen-year-old who found this experience 'chaotic' and 'unbearable' seems likely to have shaped this episode into the form of the story we hear many years on.

Mary's method of shaping the past is a little different. Her story is more ordered and precise and less chaotic. She has put her faith in written evidence rather than unaided memory. She can offer precise dates and details, "having gone through my own files and family history"; "My mother suffered, from my files, from a mental illness"; "my father wrote a letter"; "and I have the documentation here now". Her approach is at odds with a later caller, Michael:

JD 291 Have you still got the documentation from your case, for example?

Michael 292 I haven't, Joe, but to tell you the truth, I burnt the whole lot.

Both Tommy's and Mary's accounts show stories functioning to make sense of past experiences and to do it in a way that fits with a contemporary need to revisit their childhoods. Mary's approach is simply more forensic.

There are similarities between using stories for argumentation and for persuasion. This section refers to narrative under the heading 'alternative deliberation' and this would appear to give rise to conflicting implications.

One suggests that stories can add to the deliberative process in the same way as other forms of evidence. Stories can support or contradict a claim much like witness statements to a court or a tribunal and in this way they are a resource in the rational cognitive arsenal. The second implication suggests that stories are a different way of arguing; they seek to get at truth in ways that may be classified as precognitive. They draw from the mythological, from folk wisdom and from an intuitive grasp of authenticity. They also work differently; they represent a different way of knowing; a way that need not necessarily be formal, sequential, or even fully logical. Any conflict between these understandings is not one we have to reconcile. The important thing is to realise that both sketch different and complementary avenues towards communicative agency. It is worth distinguishing briefly between fictional and factual stories. In *Liveline* stories purport to represent events and thus, may be interrogated from both of these perspectives. Fictional stories will favour a more symbolic and mythical reading; they are seldom used for evidence except in parable mode.

Frequently callers use their own stories to make a point. A simple example is Máiréad McGuinness's response in Thread A when Joe Duffy asked her if George Lee realised how tough the job of a politician might be. She recounts her own experience in making the transition from journalism to politics:

Máiréad 156 I'll be quite honest, in 2004 when I stood for election for FG for the European Parliament, I understood some of politics but I didn't understand the nuts and bolts and the process of getting elected (indistinct) business of getting elected. It is a tough decision to take. People might remember I worked on a programme called, *Ear to the Ground* and that was contract so there was no question of me looking for leave of absence from RTÉ. But I was Agricultural Editor of *The Irish Independent*, a paper that I've huge respect for and I went to the editor, Vinny Doyle, and at the time said, "Vinny, I'm thinking of doing this", and without even looking twice at me he agreed to give me leave of absence so that was a private company respecting the fact that standing for public office is not a bad thing to do..... RTÉ, of course, do take a particular view when somebody who is in the public domain runs for public office and I do recall somebody at the time saying to me that...what was I doing?... that my career in broadcasting was doomed. I had no entitlements within the RTÉ framework. In fact, I had worked outside it for a long number of years but I had decided (a bit like George, perhaps) that, okay, I could have stayed doing what I did but I had an inkling that I would like to get involved in politics. You can talk about it forever or you can make that leap and I made the leap and it is a tough one to make but if you feel you can do something, I think you should do it and that's why I compliment what George has done. It will be very tough.

JD 157 What was the biggest surprise, Máiréad?

Máiréad 158 I suppose the biggest surprise.... It wasn't surprise.... I think the element of a sense in which there are so many pulls on your time and on your mind because, like George, I was.... I had my own space created in

life. I had a few kids. ....and if there's a little bit of advice I can give to George, 'cos I wish I'd got this myself, you need to hold on to your own space; follow your own gut instinct. I think there was about a month where I declared I was listening to everybody and I wasn't able to do anything and when I sorta came out of that phase, I knew what I was about. I knew an area of policy which was around food and agriculture that I had studied and that I fully understood and I felt that I knew what I was talking about, particularly in that area but I also have an economics background and I went out and I spoke to people about that and they listened. Now they respected me back then and I was lucky to get elected on that platform. But five years later I have to go out again and talk to people and hope that they will vote for me and my track record.

Riessman talks of stories engaging the listener, of inviting the listener into the world of the teller. This function may help with the persuasive and argumentative functions and, as we shall see shortly, is particularly effective when we are invited into the emotional world of the teller. Callers who ring to air complaints frequently invite the listener to stand in their shoes. We hear Sarah in Thread K, having told the tale of her disappointment with *The Wedding Journal*, inviting the spokesperson, and by extension, the listeners to put themselves in her shoes:

Sarah 190      Can I ask something? I completely know... If you had a daughter that got into the final ten of a competition like this and it was with another magazine and the same situation happened, would you not be like, "hang on a minute, that's a bit of a cop-out"?

Ruth's story in Thread L invites our support.

Ruth 8            I rented a car with Hertz at a cost of about €300 for my twelve days holiday and unfortunately when we went to give back the car we noticed a scratch. Well, in fact, Hertz noticed a scratch on the driver's door, which must have happened right at the end of the holiday 'cos we hadn't seen it ourselves and we had no collision. So anyway, they decided that they'd take €1,600 off us at that moment in time and then they'd refund us the difference once they'd figured out how much the cost of the repair would be. So we weren't too pleased about it but we were rushing for a flight with three children.

Ruth 16          So I said to my husband, "look, this is a pain but not to worry. We'll get most of it back because it's only a scratch. It'll only cost €200 or €300 to fix". That's what we thought in our heads. So off we went home and settled back to find out that Hertz charged us €1,000 to fix that scratch.

Ruth 22          When he pointed it out you could see the scratch alright. Now, we hadn't noticed it 'til then but we could see it and we thought, fair enough, but we honestly thought, "Look, they're going to overcharge us anyway but maybe it might be €300. We're really unlucky. Oh dear, what are we going to do? Well, not to worry. Well, €300, we'll just have to add it to the cost of the holiday". But €1,000 to fix a scratch! It's just ..... !

The picture she draws of hassle at the airport – end of the holidays, rushing for the plane, three kids in tow, the fluster of being accosted at the

rental desk over a scratch they hadn't noticed – this picture is one that many people can identify with.

More often than not these stories are not protracted. They are usually snippets of personal experience, O'Sullivan's *petit récits* or Scannell's 'communicative entitlement' in practice. Often the line of argument is not straightforward. We return to Livingstone and Lunt's observation that often, "argument is built up in a haphazard manner by layering, recursion and repetition" (1994, p. 140). In the FF Threads one victim's story may shock or anger us but the cumulative effect of story after story, day after day induces a different response. We may no longer claim exceptional circumstances or the damage of individuals. On 28<sup>th</sup> May 2009 alone, the FF7 day, *Liveline* broadcast the stories of eleven victims one after the other. Each was different in the telling but the overall moral impact was inescapable – the evil of abuse had been widespread, systemic and 'normal'.

Riessman talks of the power of such stories to mobilise groups for social change. She tells of resistance movements, including civil rights, feminist and gay and lesbian groups, growing out of telling stories about small moments of discrimination (2008, p. 9). The oral *testimonios* of Latin America, the procession of witnesses to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and closer to home, the *Theatre of Witness* in Derry, each had moral and political consequences beyond the power of the lone voice. The succession of stories told in the FF threads illustrates the power of argument via layering and repetition. In terms of support for the caller, we are mindful of O'Sullivan's remark that when subsequent callers phone in to air similar stories that they provide 'emotional reciprocity' for each other (2005, p. 722). They are not alone; they are not abnormal.

Sometimes the stories of individuals are none the less powerful for being haphazard and unsequential. Take the case of Richard in Thread FF7. A victim of childhood abuse, he has not long finished telling Joe Duffy that his son had prevented him committing suicide. Now he says he feels fine – never felt better.

Richard 232      No, I definitely..... No, Joe, I think that..... I went to counselling for about five years. I have a good counsellor and that. I have a great counsellor and she'll probably get back on to me now if she hears me on the phone on the radio or whatever but no, I've been through a hell of a lot, y' know. You have to experience.... When you experience what we went through, y' know.... Like people put us down – that we're only cranks – and you meet these in the street and you'd never dream we were in there. Some kids you'll see, down-and-outs.... I can never pass a young fella on the street without throwing him a few bob – once I had a few bob in my pocket. I'd always bring a few bob and see a lad on the street. I'd always.... I met one lad in Parnell Street. I know he was in Artane and he was crying out and put his arms round me and everything a couple of years ago and y' know, I haven't met that many lads from Artane y' know.

I haven't met many but... No. I've been the Redress Board. I'd love to go to court. That's part of it. I'm sick as a dog. They got the easy bit. They probably had the good life and went on and whatever and they probably.... Like, I hear kids crying. You'd see kids coming out of the Brother's room at nighttime. Y' know, crying at nighttime. I didn't know for a while what that was all about. I was only there one or two nights and the first kid, I seen him coming out and he started, like, crying but that's probably two or three in the morning, Joe. I actually got bet up myself and another friend of mine from me pal (**inaudible**). He was from Bray. I haven't met him since that day. They sent him to Letterfrack. We.... Some kid threw a lump of muck at the door. We were coming back after working, Joe. Joe, you got up at half six in the morning. You had prayers and you went to Mass. You had prayers and Mass seven days a week. You had the Rosary five days a week – Benediction. At breakfast time you had to go over the kitchen; set all the tables out; clean up after that; then to school and the same again dinnertime and after dinner, then I'd be in the laundry. The weekend you'd be down the farm. You probably worked in the school, like you never got one minute to yourself, y' know. That's because.... But I loved that, that never.....I was great for that.

JD 233            The routine, yeh.

Richard 234      I'm still the same today. I'm still the same. I've got to be working, y' know – up the same time every morning early and do the same thing. I'm up now. I don't sleep.... I sleep a couple of hours. I'm up then. It's all that but definitely, Joe, I'd love to go to court. I haven't seen a Brother since.

JD 235            Okay, Richard, thanks indeed.

Richard 236      Thanks, Joe.

JD 237            And look after yourself.

Richard 238      I know how to do that and hopefully, Joe, 99% I'm okay.

JD 239            Okay, that's enough.

Richard 240      But there's that one little percent where I can just take off and go.

JD 241            Well, long may it be overpowered.

Richard 242      Thanks a million, Joe, thanks. God bless you too.

There is little order in this story. Richard speaks in fragmented sentences; there are improbable emotional leaps; the time frame ricochets between the Industrial School at Artane, the present, his counsellor, and the Redress Board; we are introduced to a jumble of characters. Listening is an impressionistic experience. For all its untidiness and incoherence, I submit that this is an extremely potent statement. The very agitation, the absence of artifice, and the patent disregard for performative elements, all tell an underlying story of suffering and survival which it is difficult to dismiss. The simplicity of the sub-story within, of children emerging from



the Brother's room crying, outweighs, I suggest, the possible impact of discourses based on graphic description or clinical reports.

Stories, Riessman continues, also function as entertainment. This is not the function that springs to mind when we read Richard's story above but, as we noted in Chapter Three, it accounts for the prominence of stories in the phone-in. Even horrific stories have an element of fascination and 'human interest'. Ken Plummer implies that the host plays a significant part in constructing the entertainment value in the stories produced by callers.

Closely allied to the tellers are the second kind of producer; the coaxers, coachers and coercers. These folk possess the power, at least momentarily, to provoke stories from people. Their line of activity is to seduce stories; coaxers become listeners and questioners.... Coaxers can play a crucial role in shifting the nature of the stories that are told. (1995, p. 21).

The story of Jim Staken and his chip van and his battle with Wicklow County Council in Thread Y illustrates this co-production of entertainment at work.

- JD 3            How are you, Jim? You're well? You're in Glendalough?
- Jim 4            I'm in Glendalough, yes.
- JD 5            and what's the problem?
- Jim 6            The problem is that I've been in the Upper Car Park in Glendalough, trading with chips, fast food and that, for the past thirty years.
- JD 7            You have a van, a chip van.
- Jim 8            Well, I did have but since '94 I have kind of a permanent building there that has never been moved. It's in the Upper Car Park..
- JD 9            In Glendalough in County Wicklow, the tourist spot and who allows you sell chips there?
- Jim 10           The Wicklow County Council. I get a franchise from them every year.
- JD 11           Okay, you buy it off them?
- Jim 12           Yeh, The building is mine, its only the ground, you know, the bit of ground it sits on.
- JD 13           Okay, so what's happened to Jim Staken's chips?
- Jim 14           Well, Jim Staken's chips has gone to a higher tender. I suppose and I have to believe that....
- JD 15           Oh, you're being thrown out?
- Jim 16           Yes, I've got the 31<sup>st</sup> May to take my equipment off the car park.
- JD 17           When did you get that news, Jim?

Jim 18 I got that yesterday morning. I'm told to take everything away. My new unit is worth £100, 000 worth of equipment on it and I may just dump it if things don't go for me as I hope it goes.

JD 19 ...and what was your reaction when you opened the letter?

Jim 20 Gobsmacked! I couldn't believe that they could do it to me after thirty (years) and all the work I had done for them for nothing.

JD 21 Like?

Jim 22 Like opening and closing barriers, removing all the litter from the car park and then they have an automatic barrier on it that you put €4 in. People that don't have the money, they'd come over to me. If they have a problem with the barrier they'd come over to me. I cleaned the toilets. There was 14 toilets to be cleaned every day and two or three times a day and they were kept clean.

JD 23 Is that part of your job?

Jim 24 Part of my job, yeh.

JD 25 Did Wicklow County Council insist you clean the toilets?

Jim 26 Well eh, what they done was, at the start they gave me 500 a year to clean them and that works out about 175 a week and it's a fulltime job.

JD 27 That's a tenner a month.

Jim 28 In order to get the franchise at the car park you had to take the toilets.

JD 29 I know what you mean.

Jim 30 You know what I mean.

JD 31 So, you took the toilets. You cleaned the toilets for a tenner a week, less that €2 a day.

Jim 32 Well, it was 5,000 a year.

JD 33 Oh, 5,000 a year, so, a hundred a week.

Jim 34 175 a week.....

JD 35 .....to clean 14 toilets.

Jim 36 To clean 14 toilets and keep them cleaned. Like, you'd be in there four and five times a day, changing toilet rolls, cleaning floors. We got busloads of kids and you know what they're like when they go into a toilet.

JD 37 **And how did...?**

Jim 38 Bigger money! Money, bigger money has spoken. The fellow that got this, I believe has other businesses and is a wealthy man and they could

give that to him and take my livelihood away. I'm an old age pensioner. I'm a fit man, thanks be to God, and able for the work myself and my wife. I lost my pension, the one I had in Irish Life, and that all went.

We have already noted the political issues inherent in Jim's tale but leaving that to one side this becomes an engaging vignette of social history, a backwater of Irish life which listeners may have given little thought to previously. This, I suggest, is 'good' radio.

Jim Staken does not appear to be an effusive or verbose man but a rhythmic exchange develops between himself and Joe Duffy, which is more like the companionable chat of two old acquaintances than of interviewer/interviewee. We enjoy overhearing it. They repeat phrases from turn to turn (underlined); they finish each other's sentences (linked by curve); and on one occasion, there is no need to complete a question, so well tuned is the rapport (**bold**). The conversation rambles on in this comfortable fashion.

We saw earlier a reluctance to disturb this tone when a supportive caller is introduced who suggests legalistic avenues. This is very much a story for its own sake and Joe Duffy is aware of this, "I thought it was a brilliant story. That's the 'magic call'." (DIVi 25).

The vicissitudes of live radio are illustrated later in the same thread. A possibility for further human interest and entertainment went abegging. Deborah, an American, rang in to support Jim. With only seconds to run in the programme she seemed to offer unusual and exotic story potential.

- Deborah 167 I want to give great support to him. I first came to Ireland in 1999, hiking those slippery, wet, dirty, mucky mountains and then coming down to that wonderful food and that smiling face and knowing that my car was safe was really important to me and they're a family business. Good Lord, they ought to be able to stay there.
- JD 168 Where are you from originally?
- Deborah 169 I'm from Oregon and Alaska.
- JD 170 Fantastic!
- Deborah 171 and here in Ireland now.
- JD 172 so you have camped and hiked.....
- Deborah 173 I've worked in the woods for ten years, fighting forest fires and planting trees – but we never got off the mountain and had some nice food like that. That's not how it is up there.
- JD 174 But you fought forest fires and I'm sure you fought polar bears with your ..., but you never fought the Wicklow County Council.

Deborah 175 **(Laughs)** No, and I've heard it's not very pleas..... Excuse me, I'm sure they're doing a good job and maybe made the right decision but.....

JD 176 okay, okay.

Deborah 177 But I just want to say, when you get somebody like that, with that kind of work ethic and they put their family behind it and they give that kind of hours, it's just not every person... and that should be rewarded in Ireland, in my opinion.

JD 178 Okay, well said, Deborah. I'd love to talk to you longer except I'm over time.

Subsequently in interview, Duffy reacted to the suggestion that an entertaining side-story had slipped away. "Aw, don't be talking to me – from the Arctic! From Alaska!. Aw Jesus, I'm fuming that she (was) only put up with a minute to go. Ah, we'll do her again, so" (DIVi 4)<sup>6</sup>

To this point we have been measuring Liveline's stories against the functions outlined by Riessman – remembering, arguing, persuading, entertaining and we have taken on board Plummer's assertion that these stories are 'deeply implicated in moral and political change'. We also acknowledge O'Sullivan's suggestion that callers' stories connect to the wider stories a society chooses to tell itself. An example of this in our sample is where the global recession, which is the prevailing macro news story, forms an understood backdrop for more personal micro stories. In Thread Y Jim Staken's need to keep working in his chip van is exacerbated by the loss of his nest egg.

Jim 38 I'm a fit man, thanks be to God, and able for the work myself and my wife. I lost my pension, the one I had in Irish Life, and that all went.

JD 39 How did you lose that, Jim?

Jim 40 Investment.

JD 41 Investment, I know, like so many people unfortunately.

In bidding good-bye to Edward, the car body expert in Thread L, once more the recession is assumed.

JD 70 Eddy, God bless the work.

Edward 71 Thank you.

---

<sup>6</sup> Joe Duffy did keep track of Jim Staken's fate:

Oh, he's gone. He's gone. When we did the beaches yesterday we got a call from somebody who was in Glendalough on Bank Holiday Monday and it's gone and there is no replacement. The place in flitters and people are starving and dying of thirst coming down off the mountains. And I said, "would someone ring Wicklow County Council and see what's happened?" So they've thrown him out and they got a replacement but the replacement isn't there for what will probably turn out to be the busiest weekend of the bloody year. (DIVi 25)

JD 72 I hope it's going okay for you at the moment, is it?

Edward 73 Well, it's slowed down quite a bit. The motor trade, as everybody knows, has taken a serious downturn but there's more and more private work. More private people are getting their cars repaired so that's....

JD 74 Okay, Edward, thanks.

Of greater weight and with considerably greater moral resonances is a pattern we detect where survivors of the institutions in Thread FF7 link into associations with the holocaust of World War II. The holocaust seems to act as a byword for the nadir of evil.

Miriam 16 Wasters! That's what we were called – Rubbish! I was never called by my name, just by a number and if you look back to the holocaust that's what it was like.

JD 17 And they even changed your number..... your name when you went into....

Miriam 18 Yeh, I went in as Mary and I got a name – Miriam. But I love my name, Miriam but the nun that gave me the name, Miriam, was a lovely nun. But she wasn't there for me 'cos she was taken out. The good were taken away.

.....  
Miriam 57 Older girls and younger girls being laid in a line like we were going to be executed and called by your number and half naked and you got the big girls trying to cover themselves and you got the little ones and they don't know what's going on. And they just laughed at it, like. They just loved it.

.....  
William 144 Look, look, the Guards were involved in this. If somebody ran away from the Industrial School he was dragged back by the scruff of the neck to be whipped, abused, have his hair shaved and you name it.

.....  
William 164 Two of them died in the mental hospital so when people say they were concentration camps, believe you me they were concentration camps for the poor of Ireland.

.....  
JD 259 How are you, Tommy? Alright? You can even remember your bed number.

Tommy 260 It wasn't a bed number, it was me pair of shorts, 163, but I had a number on my sheet – 163 – because of wetting the bed and they brang me down. These was .... I won't mention the names, right ....

Plummer tells us that, “story telling can be placed at the heart of our symbolic interaction” (1995, p. 20). Accepting that this is the case, then we are witnessing these callers drawing on a recognized package of symbols the numbering, the shaved heads, the naked lines – and using these latter-day constructions to find a frame to explain their own scarring.

I question that the recounting of personal stories inhibits analysis and obscures the political and that this points only in the direction of individual solutions at the expense of social change. Yes, a caller may receive €200 refund from Hertz but the public which has been engaged by her plight will be that much more aware and cautious in its dealings with corporate practices. A public listening to a succession of experiences being likened to the holocaust is less likely to see institutional abuse as something that happened in a distant time and at a distant place. There is a better chance that they may ask what in our contemporary social arrangements are we refusing to see.

The events of which callers speak have gone, receded into a mostly unknowable past. It is the stories that we have to continue to deal with.

Whatever else a story is, it is not simply the lived life. It speaks all around the life; it provides routes into a life, lays down maps for lives to follow, suggests links between a life and a culture. It may indeed be one of the most important tools we have for understanding lives and the wider cultures they are part of. But it is not *the* life, which is in principle unknown and unknowable.

(Plummer, 1995, p. 168).

Many of Riessman's functions of storytelling sit easily with the deliberation expected in the public sphere. We have shown where examples from *Liveline* have been used to argue, to justify to persuade and to engage. But all of her functions of storytelling, including remembering and entertaining, may be linked to deliberative democracy if we are mindful of the need to embrace the twin dialectic functions of all speech; to open ourselves to others and to discover the world via cultural texts to ourselves (2009, p. 14). Enjoyable stories and reminiscences are part of that 'adequate civic culture', which allows for a wider repertoire of discussion modes. Their civility, their humour, their associations, their very ordinariness becomes grist to the mill of civic identity. 'Human interest' is no bad thing.

## **Emotion**

There is a degree of redundancy and overlap in moving on to consider emotion as a feature of the discourses of *Liveline* immediately after treating with storytelling. There are clear connections. All good stories have an emotional core. The 'interest' in 'human interest' is at base emotional. Indeed, stories are a good illustration of the junction between cognition and the affective. The structure of the story – its beginning, its middle and its ending – affords the necessary coherence and, as Höjier points out, "emotions are natural and necessary parts in all meaning-making at conscious as well as unconscious levels" (2007, p. 42). Like Höjier we recognise that cognition and emotion construct a 'functional unit' but it is helpful to make a theoretical distinction between them.

Emotions are frequently associated with the private realm and attributed to individuals; we do not tend to think of corporations or committees as having emotions. Frequently too they are seen as a feminine attribute and as a result, as Cheryl Hall points out, women become marginalised in political discourse.

This perception is reinforced and perpetuated by the association of reason (seen as a political resource) with men and the association of passion (seen as a political liability) with women. Making reason as public and male and passion as private and female contributes to a culture in which women are seen to be out of place in politics unless they conform to standards of masculine comportment – in which case, they are promptly vulnerable to accusations that they are somehow (as women) unnaturally cold and hard. (2005, p. 36)

Sara O'Sullivan in her study of phone-in caller types found that callers looking for emotional reciprocity (as opposed to advice) were exclusively female (1997, p. 171). This was not the case in the calls of May 2009; if anything, there was more 'emotional' calls from men but this may be explained by the fact that in the FF (institutional abuse) Threads, young boys were more likely to have been institutionalised in the 40s and 50s than young girls. Again, from the point of view of the phone-in, Hall points out that there is a link in the listener's mind between emotional speech and a perception of sincerity and even likeability. We are less inclined to believe or to be moved by voices or personalities we perceive to be 'wooden' or 'robotic'. Absence of passion is read as a lack of integrity, "because integrity, like passion, entails caring about and being committed to something" (2005, p. 124).

In spite of the power of spin and demagoguery, the connection between commitment and emotion is not simply one of perception. It allows Dahlgren to argue:

To be engaged in something signals not just cognitive attention and some normative stance but also an affective investment. Engagement in politics involves some kind of passion. Given all the obstacles that exist to the realisation of achieved citizenship, given all the barriers to be overcome before people enter into political discussion or take political action, we would be foolish to deny the indispensable role of the affective side of civic engagement. (2006b, p. 25)

Höjjer reinforces the centrality of emotion in civic agency:

Because people are emotional they are also able to be rational. Good citizenship and democratic engagement is (sic) based on the capacity to feel. Philosophers have also recently criticized the long-lived traditional emphasis on rationalism as abstract reasoning in ethical theory. Instead they argue for the necessity of taking emotions seriously and integrating them in theories of moral thinking. (2007, p. 42)

It is only working from this point of view that Benhabib's 'epistemological deficit' may be addressed and a basis established for interrogating the phone-in as an 'emotional public sphere'.

When asking how listeners encounter emotional expression in *Liveline* we are nudged in the direction of considering emotional intelligence. We require a framework to accommodate the resources they bring to respond to the emotions they hear and the emotions aroused in themselves. This emotional (or affective) intelligence includes the capacity to judge social situations and to react suitably. We look to the work of Daniel Goleman (1995) and Howard Gardner (1993) and we find that emotional intelligence has its roots in the concept of 'social intelligence', first identified by E. L. Thorndike in 1920. According to Young, it may be categorised into five domains:

**Self-Awareness**

Observing yourself and recognizing a feeling as it happens.

**Managing Emotions**

Handling feelings so they are appropriate; realising what is behind a feeling; finding ways to handle fears and anxieties, anger and sadness.

**Motivating Oneself**

Channelling emotions in the service of a goal; emotional self-control; delaying gratification and stifling impulses.

**Empathy**

Sensitivity to others' feelings and concerns and taking their perspective; appreciating the differences in how people feel about things.

**Handling Relationships**

Managing emotion in others; social competence and social skills.

(1996, p. 2)

In sum, emotional intelligence is the capacity to read and to react to the myriad micro cues that are a feature of all interpersonal communication. It is essential for both our sanity and integrity as people and our identities and effectiveness as citizens<sup>7</sup>.

Höjjer, as we have noted, suggests there are two ways of identifying emotion in discourse. She says we may look to explicit emotional expressions – "I am lonely" – and to nonverbal markers – tone of voice, change of register, sniffing, chuckling and so on, these latter manifestations being referred to as 'emotional leakage' (2007, p. 47). I suggest that there are other ways of identifying emotion in discourse. One is where a speaker connects to recognised emotionally laden words or concepts and employs them for their affective as opposed to their literal values. We have seen in the section on narrative where callers invoked

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<sup>7</sup> There appears to be a regrettable tendency to design tests for emotional intelligence with the singular aim of enhancing 'leadership' and 'management' skills in business. To be sure, such skills are useful in democratic politics but used for this purpose alone they represent a one-dimensional and impoverished view.



the holocaust and in so doing brought a world of shame, fear, guilt, hopelessness, and so on into the discourse.

One further way of identifying emotion is by deduction from the responses of the host or other callers. Often they will offer sympathy or shock or a matching sentiment appropriate to what they have heard.

As we examine emotional expression in *Liveline*, we enquire principally how the affective intelligence we hear is contributing to the potential for civic meaning making. We also bear in mind two cautions mentioned previously. One is to gauge whether excessive emotional expression is, in fact, disrupting the communicative ideal. The second is to look for evidence that the host is exploiting emotional expression in order to increase the entertainment quotient of the programme at the expense of the deliberative.

As we examine in turn each of the threads in our sample, we note that the affective content may vary from one discourse to another to suit the intent of the speakers. For instance, in the overtly political Thread A, examples of expressed emotion are scarce and are seldom significantly intense. When Ronan says that he is ‘very saddened’ (A Ronan 178) to hear that George Lee is leaving RTÉ as its financial commentator, we would be surprised to hear him weeping. It is of note that the tape insert of Lee from an earlier TV programme, *The Late Debate*, has him stepping out of the objective analyst mode and shows him raising the emotional / sincerity temperature somewhat by using mildly intemperate language and imagery.

Lee (tape) 12 It gets more and more serious by the day and this is the same rubbish we’ve been getting from the beginning. We don’t know a thing. We still don’t know a shaggin’ thing and we now know that the bankers are quite capable of cooking the books and pulling the wool over everybody’s eyes and we’re sitting here bailing them out left, right and centre and its so annoying to hear the type of language that they’re at.. We want to bloomin’ know. We’re the ones footing the bloomin’ bill.

We are left with the impression that this is indeed, ‘so annoying’ to hear about the books being cooked and the wool being pulled over our eyes when Lee injects a sprinkling of shaggin’s and bloomin’s.

Thread Y – Jim Staken in Glendalough – plays in a different emotional register. We have already heard the cosy, sympathetic atmosphere created between Jim and Joe Duffy and into which we, as listeners, were invited. Against this, the cleaning of the toilets becomes a token of the humble service he has faithfully provided and it is little wonder that he is upset.

Jim 20 Gobsmailed! I couldn’t believe that they could do it to me after thirty and all the work I had done for them for nothing.

JD 21 Like?

Jim 36 To clean 14 toilets and keep them cleaned. Like, you'd be in there four and five times a day, changing toilet rolls, cleaning floors. We got busloads of kids and you know what they're like when they go into a toilet.

To make matters worse Jim introduces an extra emotional trigger - the family:

Jim 42 So I mean, the way it works out now, I've nothing for myself and my family.  
.....

Jim 66 Joe, It's left me and my family devastated, gobsmacked.

JD 67 and who worked in the building?

Jim 68 My family, my family. I had three other workers then I had part-time workers at the weekend.  
.....

Jim 82 Morally it's wrong, if you know what I mean, I think morally it's wrong because in this environment, to throw a whole family out of business for the sake of an extra few pounds, as far as I can gather.....

Jim has based much of his argument on its emotional merits. His family roots run deep and his investment has been substantial

Jim 54 I done it for tourism in Glendalough, if you know what I mean, because I'm around the fifth generation of Stakens in Glendalough. I'm very proud of Glendalough.  
.....

Jim 102 I've a mountain of stock that may just be dumped.....ah, it's devastating, Joe. I'm.... **(audible choking)**...broke up.  
.....

Jim 126 We take great pride in it, do you know what I mean? We have done over the years.

It is clear that Jim Staken's loss both financially and emotionally is real. He has little chance of winning the procedural battle so, consciously or unconsciously, he seeks to engage the public's support using an affective logic.

In Thread K – *The Wedding Journal* prize controversy – we witness two discourses which never connect significantly to allow for any productive deliberation. Win, the spokesperson for the journal, scatters emotional expressions liberally through her contributions but there is distinct impression that these do not match up to sincerity.

Win 18            ...so you can imagine we at *Wedding Journal* and our sponsors are very disillusioned and very disappointed. We obviously were not aware of the conviction until after the results of the competition was announced. Needless to say, we are totally devastated as are our sponsors, devastated.

.....

Win 24            Sorry, I'm sure if you think about it logically, we would love to have awarded the prize to another couple who entered but it is with deep regret and with much, much discussion with our sponsors as well, that we have come to the decision that we will not be awarding any prize this year.

.....

Win 40            And as for Sarah, we know how much hard work goes into these entries and we know people enter with great enthusiasm in their hearts and that's why it's so devastating for us not to be in a position to hand this to anyone. You know, we love to cover the wedding. We get involved with the wedding when they win the prize so for us....

While there are expressions – 'totally devastated'. 'love to award', deep regret', 'great enthusiasm', 'so devastated' – they are not matched by the defensive, legalistic and hectoring tone of her exchanges.

Sarah, her main protagonist, comes across as aggressive and peevish. We hear her interrupting (K Sarah 25 & 103) and she too tries to invoke family to bolster her argument.

Sarah 190        Can I ask something? I completely know... If you had a daughter that got into the final ten of a competition like this and it was with another magazine and the same situation happened, would you not be like, "hang on a minute, that's a bit of a cop-out"?

Win 191            If I had a daughter, honest to God, who won the competition....

Sarah 192        Who got into the final....

Win 193            ...and she was chosen in second place – and I do realise it's a lot of money involved and I do realise it's a great prize for someone – but I would not want my daughter's picture appearing in the paper with the next line saying ..... and referring back to this situation. I think it's tainted and I think that's our decision.

Sarah 194        Well, my mother and father are the opposite. They think that it's scandalous that we're not being awarded some form of..... Either reopen the competition or split the prize.

In the end there is no meeting of minds. The issue itself is relatively trivial in terms of political implications and I suggest that the entire thread makes less than riveting radio. The possibility is that no more exciting material was available. One caller, supporting Sarah, tries to up the emotional ante:

James 175      It's a cop-out, Joe. It's cute hoor [whore] carry-on. It's disgraceful. It's despicable.

The host quickly sidelines this minor 'outburst' and shifts the conversation into mundane details:

JD 176          Okay, 51551 – text. Is there.....? In your terms and conditions, Win – I'm trying to get a copy of them at the minute – in your terms and conditions, Win, is there any proviso for withdrawing the prize?

Possibly the most authentic emotional note sounded in this unproductive clash is to be heard in Win's irritated repost to Sarah's 'suffering'.

Sarah 111      So we're all suffering because of one man?

Win 112        Well, you didn't win in the first place, Sarah, 'cos you're not suffering, you know. Okay, it would be lovely to go back and split the prize but that's not the real world.

In Thread M – the marauding dogs – we hear the host offering the caller an emotionally charged discourse from the outset.

JD 1            Geraldine, that's a very distressing incident. Tell us what happened.

Geraldine 2    Eh Joe, eh, a fortnight ago, Monday fortnight ago, 27<sup>th</sup> April, I went for a walk with a young puppy we got after losing my old dog there, after fourteen years.

JD 3            It was a little Jack Russell.

Geraldine 4    ... A little Jack Russell and the other one was a Jack Russell. This was a little she dog – a little beauty. We had her injected and neutered and we were ...eh... enjoying life where she was six months old. I brought her on the lead for a walk down a country road here – a main country road and I passed by a house and I seen this big....like an Alsatian or German Shepherd. I'm not an expert on them but this big dog jumped up on the wall. It was a wall as far as where your shoulder would go. I walked to the other side of the road and, like I've seen dogs in houses but they're all well protected in and there's no way any dog has ever got out. And I passed - beside the house was this big gateway and when I looked up I seen three German Shepherds or three Alsatis running up the drive. I took it they were going up to their house or someone was calling them after hearing them barking. I walked on – proceeded to walk on with my dog and the next thing, they must have cut through some hedging up the drive and into a field beside them and straight out through the bushes – straight out on top of me and grabbed my dog and killed him.

JD 5            Oh my God! – the three Alsatis?

Geraldine 6    The three of them. They neither had muzzles on them, Joe. They were able to get out. I screamed and screamed and screamed. I screamed so

much that at one stage they let her drop. She made it up the road a certain point.

Both the caller and the listeners are primed to experience 'a very distressing incident'. Within a handful of exchanges the sentimental tone is set. We hear of 'a young puppy' (another common emotional trigger), 'losing my old dog', 'a little Jack Russell', a 'little beauty', and 'enjoying life'. This softness is disrupted by, "I screamed and screamed and screamed". Joe Duffy acknowledges Geraldine's distress, responding with, "Oh my God!" on several occasions (M JD 5, 15, 61 & 75).

Geraldine's account offers us that authentic blend of narrative and emotion, a blend we did not find in complaints about *The Wedding Journal* or Hertz.

Geraldine 26 No, Joe, I was screaming. This lady came out. She said.... I said, "Are they your dogs"? She said, "Did my dogs get out"? I said, "They've just torn my dog asunder here on the road. There's no muzzles – nothing" I mean, I didn't say that at the time. I didn't know where I was, Joe. I was screaming. She didn't come out the gate. I went up to see where my dog was. She was lying up on the road, collapsed. She was bleeding from her mouth, Joe, and she was choking. I lifted her up. I could see she was very poorly. I looked around. That lady or nobody was on the road. I then in panic tried to run back up the road where I lived, which is ten minutes up the road. She bled all the way. All my clothes is full of blood – my hands. It was a most horrific memory, Joe, and I'll never forget it 'till the day I die. She died as I just got before my house. She died in my arms.

.....

Geraldine 34 No muzzles on them, no muzzles on them, Joe, nothing on them. I would have had some hope or chance. Had I time, Joe, I wouldn't be talking to you now 'cos I would have been down lifting the dog but they were out so quick. Can you imagine what could have happened after that, had I would have went down to lift her? With fright or panic, I probably would have bent down to lift her and I would dread to think.... 'cos they'd no muzzles, Joe (**voice cracking**) and they were vicious and snarling. And when I screamed they even snarled at me and dropped her and she got... But they were still out on the road and I speaking to the lady. I said, "they're down there and three of them sitting together and ....".

.....

Geraldine 40 I mean, Joe, at this stage I had to go to my doctor because the state I was in after it. It was horrific – the trauma and the loss of our dog. No one seems to have done anything

We see examples of explicit expressions of emotion; 'I was screaming', 'in a panic I tried to run', 'it was a most horrific memory', 'I dread to think', 'It was horrific – the trauma and the loss'. In the face of this depth of fright and fear we appreciate the inadequacy of the Alsatian owner's "I'm very sorry" (M Geraldine 30).

Geraldine tells a jumbled story; sentences meander and she is sometimes at a loss for words but we cannot miss the emotional point of her argument. She conveys her feelings adroitly both in the images she chooses and in the sounds of her still raw hurt.

Geraldine 26 She bled all the way. All my clothes is full of blood – my hands. It was a most horrific memory, Joe, and I'll never forget it 'till the day I die. She died as I just got before my house. She died in my arms.

.....

Geraldine 30 One little girl made her First Communion, ...brought me over a bunch of flowers (**voice breaking with emotion**).... Was very, very upset about it, to think that Lady was gone.

.....

Geraldine 26 .... 'cos they'd no muzzles, Joe (**voice cracking**) and they were vicious and snarling. And when I screamed they even snarled at me and dropped her and she got...

It would seem that Geraldine's most pronounced need was for a response to her upset, an acknowledgement of the ugliness that had scarred her world. The apology from the owner of the Alsatians could not match her distress and the inaction on the part of the authorities added to her frustration and feelings of powerlessness. She gains some comfort from a sympathetic airing of her feelings in public.

JD 55 It was only a couple of weeks ago – only about the 27<sup>th</sup> of April so no wonder you're still in shock. I'm sorry to hear that, Geraldine.

Geraldine 56 Thank you, Joe, for listening to me.

JD 57 And thank you for making the point and also thanks to Ann who was on the other line.

Later in that same thread, following two callers who echoed and supported Geraldine in her plight – examples of emotional reciprocity – the host changes the tone of the discourse with the help of another caller, Roisin. He would be aware from experience that the audience needs the mood of tragedy to be lifted. When Roisin arrives on air it seems that her interest is more in having a sociable chat than in reliving any traumatic experience with her Boxer. The exchanges are light-hearted, almost flirtatious and flavoured with attempts at weak humour. Caller and host remember to stay 'on-message' and round off their chat by acknowledging Geraldine once more.

JD 83 What happened .....? What was your Boxer's name, by the way?

Roisin 84 Well, his name is ..... (**laughs**) .... His name is Bubu.

JD 85 Bubu! And is Bubu still alive?

Roisin 86 Yes, yes, he's hale and hearty. I was out with him this morning.

- JD 87           And does Bubu frighten people still?
- Roisin 88       Yep, yeh. He doesn't frighten English people. English people tend to know one breed from another but – **(laughs)** my Irish friends are just going to think I'm such a spoofer – but no, he's em..... It's unpleasant. There's always a row. There's always a row with the dog when you go out with him and it makes the walk extremely stressful and I was listening to Gerry Ryan describing something last week about how to stop your dog fighting. And I really said, "right, eleven years too late but I'm definitely going to do this".
- JD 89           And how do you stop your dog fighting?
- Roisin 90       Okay, what you do is you have to try and remember that food is always going to be bigger than anything and this is what the guy on *The Gerry Ryan Show* was saying. I think he's this really big American dog psych... I think it's Ian Dunbar, or something like that. But anyway, every time a dog comes along and it looks like there might be a bit of a row, you keep the dog on the lead for a short period and then you offer the dog food every time he sees the dog and he does his pre-fight stance. And eventually he says – and this is according to the dog trainer – the dog says, "Oh, brilliant! Another dog, I'm going to get fed", and after a while he stops even looking at the other dogs so I must try it.
- JD 91           It might be a bit late for Bubu.
- Roisin 92       I think it's a bit late for Bubu – **(chuckle)**.
- JD 93           But Bubu is a pussycat according to you.
- Roisin 94       No. Well, he is now. Five years into his long life he had the wherewithal taken away from him and things were great after that. Well, they weren't great but they were better.
- JD 95           So Bubu was made a baba when he was five and doesn't know whether he's coming or going – Bubu.
- Roisin 96       Ah now, poor Bubu. Yeh, it's true, yeh, and he's much better.
- JD 97           Okay, okay, Roisin.
- Roisin 98       And I'm really sorry for... was it Geraldine?
- JD 99           Yeh, God it.....
- Roisin 100      My heart goes out to her. God, to lose your little dog at six months. I... I... My deepest sympathies to her.
- JD 101          To be savaged like that and run down the road.... Okay, Roisin, thank you.

The exchange is relatively trivial. There is no deep hurt and there are no profound issues. This is a pleasant interlude where the nearest we come to the normative is an implied agreement that it is responsible behaviour to

keep a dog under control; that having it neutered will help; and that it is a civil and thoughtful thing to sympathise with the distress of others. However if we take it as a fragment of a wider shared template for a well-ordered society then, with van Zoonen (2005), we may agree that citizenship can be fun.

We return to Thread FF7 where we have already experienced the stories of abuse of Tommy 23, Miriam, 59, Mary 83, and Richard 232. These are not your run-of-the-mill, troubles-telling stories. Callers are not seeking to identify with fellow sufferers; this as not, as O'Sullivan describes it, the ethos of a self help group (1997, p. 180). No clear-cut solutions are being touted. These stories are raw witnessing to systemic physical and emotional, abuse. They represent Scannell's 'communicative entitlement' –“ to describe an event that has happened to oneself and to say what one feels about it” (1989, p. 162). The stories we have looked at are littered with explicit emotional expressions and nonverbal expressions of pain. We have noted the linkage to holocaust references and, as was the case with Jim Staken, emotion is often heightened by references to the family and family members. (See as examples FF7 Tommy 23, Miriam 51, Mary 83, William 126). It appears the perpetrators were aware of this too. For all the stories of physical beatings and depravations, it is difficult to surpass the impact of a story of calculated emotional cruelty where the abuser traded on idealised family ties.

Miriam 57 I never, ever said my mother had made a mistake, ever. I never blamed her. I just said she trusted them, you know. And as children..... I'm saying my mother was treated like ..... I saw my mother about three times and each time I saw her she was in the parlour and everybody who was special was put into the parlour so my only reckoning of my Mom is that she was special. But we couldn't tell her anything because the nun was there constantly so if we did..... You know we were just scared – totally, absolutely petrified - and it was not only that, Joe, it was the way she watched you. She brainwashed us. She'd tell us to get on our clothes on a Sunday; tell us that Mam was going to come up to see us and she'd make us stand at the gate all day and then (**voice quavering**) in the evening she'd say, "What are ye doing?". We'd say, "You said our Mom is coming up to see us" and she went, "Your mother, sure, your mother gave you away". And we believed it always. We always lived in hope that she would come up, you know. She had her ways of cruelty physically and mentally and I think it was the mental abuse of the things that were said to people and the way we were degraded, you know.

In that story we hear Miriam's voice quavering. This 'emotional leakage' happens quite frequently throughout the FF7 Thread. I counted 12 separate examples where contributors became noticeably upset. This evidence of upset certainly engages the listener. We noted earlier the somewhat cynical, if pragmatic attitude of a Broadcasting Assistant who rejoiced in recruiting a 'crier' for her programme. It is very likely that the programme team on *Liveline* is aware of the dramatic and authenticity value of tears and choking but that is not to say that it is the sole



perspective. The ethical challenge for them is finding a point on the balance that stops short of excess, exploitation or provocation. If we accept that these stories and outpourings are appropriate and important and that upset has a place in how we come to terms with injustice then we look to how it is handled. In these instances there is little evidence that the host is either cynical or exploitative in the way he engages with callers. On the contrary, the evidence is there that he is generally calm, responsive and restrained. The emotional 'moments' are neither laboured nor unnecessarily prolonged. On three of these twelve occasions, Duffy maintains the speakers flow of thought by asking a simple, factual, follow-on question (FF7 JD 15, 60, 84). He achieves the same effect on three more occasions by adding in an explanatory piece of information (FF7 JD 52, 76, 223). In general, he is unhurried and he allows callers the necessary time to collect their thoughts and to continue with their stories. We see him naming the emotion after Richard has been tearful.

Richard 230      Everything would have been..... It's the end. I wanted to do it. I knew I didn't have to suffer any more. I knew that was the end. Once I got there I was happy. I was happy as Larry. **(Clearly tearful through this segment)** I was a bit agitated in some ways but when I got there and my young fella seen the look on me, he couldn't believe and he just caught me and brought me home. I had strength.... Bucked me up an awful lot since that happened. Now I had a grandchild – that has made a big difference, y' know. ....

JD 231            Even the hurt and the pain you're going through now recalling all this, to do it in a court.....

He offers Harry time and reassurance:

Harry 252        Now then, I wanted to speak to you anyway. It's wonderful to see all this coming out now because the bottom line for people like me – we were never believed, really; never accepted and you have to bear with me now **(audibly upset)**..... I'm okay.

JD 253            Take your time. Take your time.

My observation, over a more extended time than our sample period, would be that Joe Duffy is a consummate coaxer. There is no evidence in the programmes of May 2009 of emotional exploitation or abuse; his attitude was generally respectful and appropriate. That is not to say that there have not been examples outside of this sample period when the programme has been open to charges of trading on the emotions of callers. In my observation such instances are relatively rare and the tone we experience in our samples is close to the norm for the programme.

Broadcasting emotions – especially upsetting ones in a mass media context where there are no visual cues – is a complex affair and it must find a balance in an intricate web of conflicting needs. Duffy is aware of

this. We get some insight into his thinking when he reacts to a critical review in a Sunday newspaper around the time of the FF Threads.

Yeh, I was annoyed at that (Previous weekend's *Sunday Times*, Radio Review column). I thought that was unfair but maybe.... The thing .... None of these people have ever met me. I remember the first (call) – it was a Friday. The day after Ryan (Report), or whatever – there was a woman on, who was very upset, (from) Goldenbridge. She got very upset and I said to her, “Now you don't have to do this; you don't have to do this if there's ways you can tell the story – other ways – someone with you or whatever”, and she recovered and she was fine.

The reason I'm able to say that now is because I'm comfortable in knowing, one, that I try and empathise with the woman for a start but two, that other people will come on and tell their stories, you know. We don't need to put people on air who don't want to be on air, who are unable to be on air and I thought I made that clear and that's why .... I can't repeat it for everybody but when the people did get upset that day.... I had known by that stage that people wanted to tell their story and that before ringing *Liveline*, they probably knew they were going to get upset but they still wanted to do it 'cos this was a week into the story so I wasn't.... Your man said I milked it. Those pauses would be to let those people recover. By that time of the week I was very, very conscious that victims were not getting on anywhere except *Liveline*;  
(DIVi 26)

As was the case with narrative, we have shown that emotion can be deployed to argue, persuade and deliberate. We see evidence, especially in the examples of witnessing to personal suffering, that affirms Wessler and Schultz's thesis that emotion contributes at the early stage of deliberation where issues are discovered and political agendas are built. Emotions, “help to ensure that particular problems and concerns are not completely forgotten or marginalised” (2009, p. 18). In that *Liveline* represents. “a managed space that engages with deeply held emotional commitments that are central to participants' identities” (2005, p. 77) we may endorse Lunt and Stenner's' postulation of an 'emotional public sphere'.

Ultimately with Hall (2005) and Dahlgren (2006b) we refuse to conceptualise emotion as distinct from reason. It is only in combination that a vision of the good and the interest and motivation necessary to attain it may be attained. Nothing worthwhile in terms of civic agency can be achieved in the absence of emotion – in a state of apathy. “Passion is crucial for making political choices, creating political community and motivating political action. No passion, no participation.” (ibid., p. 25)

# Chapter Seven

## Data Analysis 2

### Producing and Performing Cultural Citizenship

#### Programme-making

This thesis concerns itself in the main with the representational dimension of *Liveline* and it seeks to make sense of the programme's output by considering it in terms of discourse – those shared sets of 'understanding embedded in language' or, as Cook puts it, "stretches of language, considered in their social and psychological context" (1989, p. ix). In this section the aim is to investigate one aspect of the social context - the programme's production process – and to see how this arena, with its values, practices, constraints and affordances, may inform how the public makes sense of what it hears each day.

The production process is the site where many of the tensions and conflicting expectations of the programme find realisation and practical expression. The balancing act between the access and participation held out to citizens, on the one hand, and the necessary packaging and selection of the lay voices by professional programme makers, on the other, must be negotiated. This is where the calculations about programme ingredients move from the theoretical and into the practical realm. How much fun and interest must be injected to entertain and attract listeners and how much information and argumentation will justify any claim to public service responsibilities? What constitutes an excess of emotion? Where does the balance of fairness lie? What obligations exist under the law?

Initially I propose considering the practical activity of putting the programme together on a daily basis. It is only when we examine the challenges and pressures entailed in the routine processes of production that we can move on to assessing how these circumstances shape the social purposes of the discourses of *Liveline*. Scannell (1996) has maintained that the problems entailed in production have long since been solved. He is right in the sense that the members of the programme team are experienced; they do this kind of work on a daily basis; they are accustomed to handling the routine demands. However in the case of the phone-in, given that it is live and somewhat unpredictable and that it may be at the mercy of large tracts of speech not generated in the studio, specific skills are required.

## **Planning, preparation and packaging**

For a programme that is ostensibly live and spontaneous, there is a considerable amount of planning and preparation involved. In the long term this entails members of the team being open to recognising what might work as material in a programme, which has a voracious appetite. They must constantly be on the look out for what might be fresh, interesting or provocative and which will broadly fit with the programme's style. Duffy gives an example of finding material in an unusual source.

I'll tell you one of the unexpected things that came up. I was in Waterford with my kids. It was about eight years ago. They were quite young. We were rambling around looking for something to do in Waterford. I remember going in. We rambled into Waterford Cathedral and I saw this little leaflet in reception saying, "The relics of Saint Thérèse coming to Ireland", right, and I said, "the relics?" What do they mean, the bones on a procession around Ireland? So I did it. I put it out on the promo on Monday. "The relics of Saint Thérèse coming and er..., some people say it's daft to be parading around a coffin around the country" and the phones took off and by the time the relics came it was just.... We had arguments for and against. We had people who had been touched by other relics - Padre Pio, the whole shebang, Valentine. It just got bigger and bigger and bigger and, as it happens, nothing to do with us. We had tapped into something because when the relics did come to Ireland there was outpourings of joy and great fervour everywhere they went; everywhere they went and that was in the middle of the Celtic Tiger. (DIVii 14)

Topicality is also a factor. We get a clear impression of the presenter and producer being very attentive to other media in the cause of being aware of 'what's around' and to avoid overkill and repetition.

I listen to the radio from seven and I monitor the radio. I go from whatever's around - what would it be? - *Morning Ireland*, *Newstalk*, Tubridy, G.Ryan. I flick from one to the other; get newspapers; talk to Margaret around nine o'clock everyday; see what's around. At that stage I try and have seen *The Indo*, *The Times* and *The Examiner* especially the letters pages. You get a sense of what's going around; have a chat with Margaret (The series producer) - "What's around? Any ideas?" I might suggest, "Did you see this? Did you see that?" or "I heard this" or "Don't forget after yesterday's call about X. We should be doing Y or whatever". Then, that's about fifteen minutes and then Margaret and the team have a meeting at ten o'clock. Now, I still see my job as listening to what's on radio. They don't 'cos they can't. - on the phone or whatever - so, I'd be listening. ....

.....papers, emails - you're hunting for stuff, listening, getting a sense of the day rather than, are we going to do Ryanair or A&E again and again and again? We can but you'd have no listeners. (DIVii 41)

*The Ryan Report* on institutional abuse would come to dominate seven of the programmes in our sample. The team was very aware that the report would be published during their broadcast slot. They were pulled in a number of directions. There would be very little time to consider the text or to generate a caller response. The programme had a solid record on

issues connected to institutional abuse. There were worries about rehashing old material or just being part of blanket media coverage.

The whole Ryan Commission stuff to me now would be a good case study in itself because it was due out at half past two on that Wednesday. We didn't have an advance copy. We'd no idea what was going to be in it, okay, but we had done it before. We did it in 19...., I think it was 2001. .... This goes back to the current incarnation on the Ryan thing. Margaret was saying, "what are we going to do on it?" and I said, "Jesus, is it going to be the same again?". I was conscious that we'd done all this between the Redress double charging and the *McGill* article and we'd nothing planned. Then the report came out at half two and Margaret came down with a load of pages from it and we had Michael O'Brien lined up - he could access it on the net - and I just, for whatever reason .... The first page I picked up had that remark on it. I don't know how I spotted it - it was accidental, nothing journalistic about it - where it said there was ...., sexual abuse in these institutions was systemic. .... I think I remember saying, "this is shameful" and then it began to strike me that this could be much bigger than just everyone telling their stories. .... So that came on us ...., the current...., that set of stories that were generated by the *Ryan Report*, coming to the Thursday, came at us unexpectedly, I think. We wouldn't have thought.... We knew that they were there. We didn't think the public would engage with them as much because we had done them before and obviously the *Ryan Report* created a milieu or whatever, created a different context so they ratcheted in and got traction there. (DIVi 10)

One thing we see from these examples is that previous calls are considered as potential source material and that the team will occasionally line up an interested party. A database of previous contributors is maintained and contacts listed there make useful resources if a topic is likely to be revisited or a story 'breaks' in a location close to them (see DIVi 7 for a report on an armed robbery).

The running order – the detailed list of callers and items to be covered in the programme – might, on first thoughts seem to be something of a contradiction in this type of phone-in but a little deeper reflection will point to the need for a structured safety net or fall-back position in the event that calls are slow or simply not interesting enough. At the very least listeners hear the programme kicking off each day with a lively opening call, one that invites response or links into an ongoing debate. This clearly takes preparation. Duffy confesses to taking a chary attitude to the running order. Doubtless, he acknowledges its necessity but he expresses a fear that it may restrain the reflexivity and responsiveness of the show. He worries if he is provided with a long running order (DIVi 24) and, as we can see from the following, he does not want it prepared too early before the show.

I arrive in around a quarter to eleven..... and then you get a sense of what's up and what's down. If there's any briefs written, start going through them; potter around – papers, emails. Then, twenty past twelve, the promo; write

the promo; go down and do it. Again the promo<sup>1</sup> ...., you're beginning to.... That focuses the team a bit more. Come back up; at your desk all the time. The funniest thing I ever heard was a new *Liveline* producer came in one day – seriously asked what time he could go to lunch for. For God's sake, go now! Down to the studio at half one; in the loo at half one. Put the running order down in terms of what's... There is a running order every day. There's what calls one, two, three and four are. If I see a long running order I get worried that there's no .... I have this thing about one o'clock. I don't want to see anyone doing a running order at one o'clock. I want to wait 'til half one – twenty five past one – waiting for the magic call; waiting for the magic call; waiting for the magic call, you know, which invariably doesn't come, you know, in terms of something out of the blue. And down to the studio at half one and you're at it then 'til three o'clock. (DIVii 41)

As is apparent in two years' topics in Appendix 4, the programme returns to some subjects on a regular basis. The scam warnings, the health service shortcomings, and the antisocial behaviour of young people, crop up repeatedly. To avoid sameness the programme team needs to bring experiences and creative eyes and ears to the material on offer if it is to engage the listeners. They need to be aware of the latent potential in calls and to ask the right questions.

"Why should we have that on national radio? Why did we miss this? Why are we not doing that? How come we can't get someone on this? How come we can't get someone on that? Did no one even think of this?" What I intensely dislike is someone just getting a phone call; looking at the phone call and blankly just using the phone call instead of saying, "Hang on a minute, there's going to be a consequence to that phone call". We need to ring. There's added value there. You need to find out. Or, that woman is giving out about whatever; you need to get the other side on, you know. "What can we do that's different? What can we add to it?". (DIVii 40)

It was mentioned earlier that the two resources open to the production team are content and time. Insufficient content which has to be 'stretched' results in a flat or thin day; too much content and there is the risk of losing good material or not having time to do it justice. Always the challenge for the team is one of selection – selecting what topics to run with; which callers have attractive voices or personalities or stories or points of view? The host or the producer selects whether to change a topic that is running out of steam or to let it take its course. Once the programme is on air the major selections are made in the control room outside the studio proper and conveyed to the presenter via talkback or his monitor screen. He still has choices to make about the angle or the tone to take with callers, about the offering of turns and their duration on air. However he is technically

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<sup>1</sup> The promo is the brief promotional piece inserted into a previous programme at 12.20 each day. It is intended to drum up interest and stimulate calls. Usually Joe Duffy suggests a menu of topics inspired, in the main, by earlier callers. It is not unusual that the programme as eventually transmitted bears little resemblance to the promo menu – again, an indication to listeners that preparations and selections are afoot.

limited to the four viable callers he may be offered on his screen at any one time.

Previously we have seen that the programme attracts criticism for its 'trickery'; for the fact that it engages actively in seeking, selecting and preparing material. We have the comment of Justice Carney on learning that a Liveline researcher had approached a court official for comment on a case, "Finally, we got an interesting insight into how Mr Joe Duffy operates. In the explosive atmosphere after sentence being imposed, in ignorance of who he was, one of Mr Duffy's researchers approached a court official looking for a comment. This shatters the myth of Mr Duffy being a kindly old gentleman who sits by his telephone in Dublin waiting for it to ring"(Sunday Times, 28/09/08, p. 17). I suggest that the public in general has not subscribed to this myth. In fact the programme is relatively transparent about the production process. We have examples of callers confirming that their calls have been at least minimally vetted. People do not expect to ring through to the studio 'cold'.

Yeh, I was saying to your researcher there..... (M Declan 114)

I just spoke to your producer ..... (FF7 Mary 81)

I have, as I said to your researcher, a minimum .....(FF7 Harry 265)

I rang in to *Liveline* the minute I heard the *One o'clock News*. I was hoping you were going to cover it and I was asking the production team to cover it.

(A Tommy 10)

I repeat my earlier suggestion that listeners have considerable media savvy. They can deduce from such references that caller must at least state their case and explain their relevance. Furthermore it is obvious that the host has some prior knowledge of their point before their lines are opened on-air. In the FF7 Thread, for example, where there is an urgency to air as many stories as possible, the host supplies details not disclosed in the conversation to that point.

Miriam 51      My Mom was sick. There was a lot of us there and my Dad couldn't look after us so **(Weeps)** Mom just decided, well, I suppose.... Mom being in hospital ....

JD 52            She had TB.  
.....

JD 58            The incident about the needle on a sewing machine?  
.....

JD 68            And the Dog Yard, what was the Dog Yard?  
.....

**(Two spot commercial break)**

JD 291            .....And joe@rte.ie. Michael, you've been holding for a long time. Michael was in Daingean from '63 to the following year. He was sixteen when he went in. You're from Dublin.

This last example not alone demonstrates the host's familiarity with Michael's history but it also illustrates a complex set of communicative dynamics. Coming out of the break, the host offers the email address to potential callers. He switches to the second person to register his concern for Michael who had been holding through the commercials. He shifts back to third person address to give listeners a truncated introduction to Michael's story in order to save time before switching again to address the caller. Once more listeners can accommodate these shifts without awkwardness and they can appreciate that the team behind the presenter provided the pithy biography. In a sense the team and their unseen industry become actors in the discourse. We are aware of them trying to contact Wicklow County Council (Y JD 83) and wringing a concession from Hertz (L JD 62). They are going to contact Ruth in France to tell her of their success (L JD 83) and they are monitoring the 'terms and conditions' on *The Wedding Journal* website (K JD 255).

As a rule callers are dealt with respectfully on air. They are greeted and if they have been kept waiting this is acknowledged:

Izzy is in Leitrim. She's been holding the line (A JD 69)

And having interrupted Declan in a bid to draw the programme to a conclusion:

I presume.....sorry, Declan, .....I presume.....sorry, I'm being rude. Mark, I presume if someone attacks you as a dog warden they're brought to court? (M JD 153).

Joe Duffy usually thanks his callers and often signs off wishing them well and complimenting them on their contributions.

Those points are well made. Sorry to all our callers. George Lee, good health to you and your family and thanks indeed for participating. (A JD 278)

And thank you for making the point and also thanks to Ann who was on the other line. (M JD 57)

The normal goodbyes seem somewhat inadequate after listening to particularly harrowing stories of abuse. Duffy returns to one caller, William, who has been quiet for a while.

JD 243 William, how are you?

William 244 How am I?.... I'm fine.

JD 245 Okay, okay, I'm just wondering how I'm going to say good-bye to you, that's all. I don't want to say anything patronizing or .... It's a tough place you're in. You've articulated it very strongly but how can I leave you?

William 246 Well, you can leave me with this, Joe, right. .... Joe there is no answer to it. There is no answer to any of this. I mean, the man you had in front of me now, I wish I was like him. I wish I could cry. I never cried anyway. Take care, Joe.

JD 247 You too, take care, William



William 248 All right, 'bye.

Duffy's concern at a personal level is, I believe, genuine. We see his anxiety about lining up callers and giving them the expectation that they would be heard if this was not likely to happen.

I'm really worried about, these people have been given the fucking run around anyway by the religious orders", and I said, "we have got really to be careful not to give them the run around". You know what I mean, we've got to be careful that lining them up; telling them they're going to be on and then letting them down. And I'd make this point to Margaret – that would be her job in many ways, to make sure. ....These people have been victims and we don't want to start abusing them or exploiting them by saying, "you're going on today to tell your story", and they're sitting at home. I know what it's like, you know, from a previous incarnation – "oh, we'll ring you at....". (DIVi 24)

The considerate tone modelled by the host is adopted by callers who frequently thank him for listening or for allowing them to make their point. Nine of the sixteen contributors in Thread A took time to welcome Joe Duffy back after he had been on sick leave for a month as a result of a motor accident.

There are exceptions. Not every caller has a wonderful experience. We notice in Thread A, a caller, Ronan, being sacrificed because the man-of-the-moment, George Lee, suddenly becomes available to enter the discussion.

JD 159 Okay, MEP, Mairead McGuinness, of FG, thank you. Is Ronan there? Ronan, good afternoon.

Ronan 160 Joe, good afternoon.

JD 161 George Lee is on the other line, George, good afternoon.

George 162 Good afternoon, Joe.

We saw earlier that Joe Duffy slipped into journalist mode, questioning George Lee. Ronan does not get an opportunity to contribute for some time at which point he is offered one question to Lee before the host resumes his reporter role and Ronan is not heard from again.

Duffy will also adopt the populist position as a rule when a difference of opinion arises. Spokespersons for organisations or businesses are likely to be subjected to a tougher grilling than individuals making their case. Julian Vignoles, previously a series producer, cites his own unfair treatment on the programme as a spokesperson for *The Eurovision Song Contest* (VIV 6) when he ironically was 'the voice of officialdom'. In Thread K, it seems that Win from *The Wedding Journal* is given less latitude than her protagonist, Sarah.

However, having noted these examples, the exchanges on *Liveline* are far removed from the ritual abuse practiced by shock jocks elsewhere. In the main the dominant tone of the programme is courteous and considerate and in keeping with Wessler and Schultz's expectation of "weighing argument in a climate of mutual respect and civility" (2009, p. 17) which, we recall, is about more than good manners and orderly exchange; it is a manifestation of the 'enlarged vision' which is a condition for establishing social norms.

### **'Good Radio'**

This, in a sense, prompts us to refocus on the central theme of this research. What is it that motivates these people who impact so essentially on the text of *Liveline*; who select material and callers and modes of discourse; and how does such motivation connect to the programme's potential for civic agency? What vision drives them on the 'thin' days and what sustains them through the routine and repetition? What for them represents the 'good' radio that Brian O'Neill (1993, p. 70) refers to?

For Marian Finucane, the first presenter of *Liveline*, it comes down to a 'gut' feeling. She defined a good programme as she saw it:

I know this is very unsatisfactory .... but you just know it...and you know when it's as flat as a pancake. Sometimes they say – but don't quote me – when the sound op(erator) is listening. Well, I suppose when you know yourself that you're listening to something that you think is compelling, that you're not that different to everybody else and if you find this that compelling, there's a pretty good chance that they will too. There's a lot to be said for the gut, you know.

(FIV 4)

For Joe Duffy it is a matter of variety.

A good mix. Obviously the underlying thing, the difference in *Liveline* is we're punter orientated. We did that before – a good mix; a good lively discussion; stories – good stories; pictures – very good pictures; the "I remembers, I remembers, I remembers"; animation; geography – spread across the county; class – spread across classes; unexpected conversations – unexpected. You know the absolutely fabulous scenario where the conservative is the eighteen-year-old and the radical is the fifty eight-year-old. Unexpected things like that; unexpected voices delivering the opposite to what you might expect. In other words, a middle class person or whatever delivering something that could be considered as being very radical or very different or an older person delivering something vice versa. But voices – different voices, different sounds, different geography – and then trying to make sure that if people are listening in their car, that they won't get out of their car, you know – trying to create those moments.

(DIVii 2)

That image of pausing in the activities of the day simply to listen catches the quality of 'good' radio precisely – "keep people interested. Keep moving it, changing it" (DIVii 32).

Julian Vignoles also stresses variety and unpredictability as ingredients.

When the phone calls would just come in, in their droves; you'd go down to the room where they were taking the calls and there were stacks of them and you'd know this was interesting; people were engaged by this and you could never predict what that would be. Well, you could but it was often the test. If someone came on and was very warm and people were touched by them and that would spring a lot of stories and would bring people out and I think it gave people confidence. I think if somebody told a story and revealed something about themselves it provoked other people into doing the same, you know.

Whereas if some one was just ranting or somebody was giving a very contrary opinion about something or a very, very, particularly conservative opinion on something or was very dogmatic, that would spark something in other people.

But world affairs never rated – never rated at all – never. Party politics didn't really either and it's 'cos it's kind of boring. (VIV 6)

Vignoles' observation that world affairs and party politics did not inspire reaction is borne out by the figure in Appendix 4.

Unfortunately from the point of view of the team not every day brings calls coming in 'in their droves' and 'unexpected voices'. One of the more difficult challenges they face is coping with the 'thin' day. They can even predict when they are likely to occur.

You know Monday's are hard days. Fridays are easier 'cos there's stuff going. Outside school term is harder. School holidays are harder because people aren't... The routine has changed. Summer is harder for loads of reasons. Listeners, people on the beach rather than listen to *Liveline*... (Inaudible)... The Dáil is not sitting, you know, all that stuff, so you're.... There's no product, you know.... Like yesterday which would be a thin day; yesterday which I would have thought was going to be thin day because of, one, the very hot weather, the schools off and I remember I had this tantrum yesterday in work. A call came in about rubbish on the beach and someone said, "we're not doing rubbish on a beach". I said, "we will do anything today that will get us fucking calls" and I said, "because this is a day you will not get calls. If people want to talk about the beach...." I said, "talk about something summery anyway, of the day like, and if we can get people talking about beaches, well then, we'll get them talking about beaches". (DIVi 14)

Vignoles remembers them too.

Ah, there's days when you come up and nothing has gone; nothing has taken off and the calls had kinda gone really quiet and you were taking absolute rubbish and you know it just hadn't worked and you just kind of.... The great thing about the five days..... Next! And then the next show, if it goes well, the old show is a memory. (VIV 20)

It is on days like those that the team hops from topic to weak topic, hoping that one of them will ignite. They will use items that fit poorly with the normal discourses of the show, pieces that cannot reasonably be dubbed 'phone-in'. Two such inserts were employed during our sample period. One was an interview with novelist, Catherine Dunne and the other a conversation with a retired Garda Detective about the disappearance of a young Dublin boy, Philip Kearns, 23 years previously. Neither had rung in

and neither inspired any follow-up phone reaction. Duffy readily acknowledged these fillers.

That was me going back over something I had in my head, that's all, and it shouldn't have been on. It shouldn't have been on *Liveline*. We couldn't come at it properly and it was a wrong item for *Liveline* and I take complete blame for it. I'd known before that Berlusconi... His wife had mentioned this before about, "I'm not a character in a Catherine Dunne novel", and that Catherine Dunne was in Dublin. Now it transpires.... I'm sitting there arguing this to try to come up with a few ideas. I said, "Catherine Dunne", and it transpires, one of the producers on the programme, she's her mother's best friend. She didn't know it. She hadn't made the connection. ((DIVi 15)

And in relation to the Philip Kearns' piece:

Again, you're right – (That) didn't fit either. I think they are jarring now, looking back. (DIVi 16)

Relief comes in the shape of 'The Magic Call' (see DIVi 1, DIVi 25, DIVii 41) the ideal unexpected call that will light up the switchboard with other callers clampering to be heard. It contains a combination of those features which inspire engagement and which catches the imagination of the listening public. Duffy described his conversations with an old Parish Priest, the victim of a novel scam in Thread G and his shared yarns with Jim Staken in Thread Y as magic calls. Neither conversation was run-of-the-mill and the characters at the other end of the phone lines were off-beat, open and sympathetic. Neither chat resulted in days of heated response but in his view, they had enough of those elements of surprise, entertainment and interest to stand out, to be considered 'good' radio. After all, as Marian Finucane points out, "All programmes should be entertaining. ... I mean, 'worthy but dull'; no thanks!" (FIV 23).

Dull is to be avoided at all costs. When asked to consider the role of the presenter on *Liveline*, Duffy was clear-cut and emphatic about the eminence of its performative and entertainment aspects. Was he primarily a performer?

Oh yes, absolutely. You have to... you've got to get up there and perform. You know you can't be .... When I go in to do *Liveline* I do deep breaths. I do go to the loo. I have a routine. I do go to the loo. A little mantra – "entertainment, libel; entertainment, libel, you know, try to entertain, try and keep people listening and watch out for the libel. Do a few "lilly lallies, lilly lallies", which are vocal exercised to get your voice up a bit. And that you are performing? - that's your job. You have a job to do and that's why I dress the way I do for *Liveline*. I dress every day in a suit and a shirt, a double cuff shirt and tie and that's because I believe in..... I'm not going to slouch in. This is my job. I've got to keep people listening so 'performer', yes. (DIVii 26)

The pay off for a good performance is high listenership. Both Duffy and Finucane (and, I suspect the majority of radio presenters and producers) place heavy emphasis on maintaining and increasing their listenership. The quarterly figures are of intense significance to both. Marian Finucane

describes the anxiety attached to the publication of the quarterly listenership numbers as, “like doing your Leaving Cert.<sup>2</sup> in public” (FIV 6).

Duffy links maximising his listenership to the democratic significance of the programme and to the universalist dimension of the Public Service remit. There is a duty to reach all.

To make a good radio programme that people listen to and keep listening to – that’s the main aim. In the current atmosphere, and it’s never been any other way since I started *Liveline*, it’s trying to get a lot of people listening – get a lot of people listening across the country. And that has a two pronged effect; one, it becomes a popular programme that can sell advertising but, two, I’ve always argued that it is essential for *Liveline*; that good Public Service Broadcasting in *Liveline*’s case means a good audience. .... If you’re looking for a conman and he’s last seen in Dublin, you will be able to find him in Kerry. So that is a difference we can offer – that nationwide spread - and that’s really important. So good strong numbers mean good Public Service Radio as well. (DIVii 1)

You get unexpected calls; unexpected angles on things, which is the brilliant thing about *Liveline*. That’s why it’s so critical that the numbers keep going up because you’ve a bigger well to draw on and you’ve a better chance of finding the employee or the employer or the lost person or whatever. (DIVii 30)

He is not over-enthused by the idea that his role might be about caring or about ‘making a difference’.

Yeh, you try and do that but I also say to people, “we’re not social workers, you know”. I used to be a social worker but I’m not a social worker any more. That’s not our job. Our job is to get listeners and to keep people listening. That is our fairly fundamental job in the context of what *Liveline* is – a phone-in talkshow. Make a difference? I think the making a difference thing can be exaggerated, you know. (DIVii 13)

Duffy is aware of the fundamental tension at the centre of his role.

Reacting to press criticism that the programme was ‘all contrived’ and something of a circus, he protests:

On the one hand, I think we’re more of a service, you know, but also that we have to get listeners. Also there’s two sides to most things and it’s really important to try and get the two sides preferably at the same time – preferably. ... So I’m just saying – a service but also I’m very conscious of entertainment, trying to keep people listening, you know, especially after the few weeks I was off, as I was at home I listened to it. Well, I wasn’t great at listening to anything and I’d say to myself, “how do we expect people to stay listening?” You can not assume..... Nobody has any obligation to listen to *Liveline*. You’ve got to make it listenable; you’ve got to make it listenable, you know. (DIVi 23)

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<sup>2</sup> The terminal school examination at the conclusion of Secondary Education in Ireland and a time of high anxiety for students and their families because the results are the gateway to Third Level college admission

He confesses that for him 'listenability' is paramount. Contrary to orthodox perceptions of how deliberation works, he admits that he will delay closure or conclusion in a discussion if there is more drama to be heard if the argument continues.

I'm obsessed about looking for stories to the detriment obviously of the bigger questions. I'd be saying to myself in my head, "do not close this discussion", are you with me? And if they say to me, "we have a guy on, the organizer of....", he didn't get on air. I said, "we're not closing it". You keep it open; you let people tell their stories. That's what I want to hear and I want to see those pictures and I want to hear those stories 'cos I think they're more real on radio than the spirit level discussions. Now, they can be good. (DIVi 18)

Clearly there is no great openness for a more Habermasian *Spirit Level*<sup>3</sup> debate in *Liveline*. When the host was asked if it was his responsibility to referee and adjudicate on issues, he returned to the same philosophy.

Referee? Yeh, up to a point. That wouldn't be all that strong now. I would often say, being straight with you, I would often say like someone comes on telling a story about say, an event that they were unhappy with. Now if the event organizer rang up immediately and said, "I want to explain that", I might say, "hang on for twenty minutes. Just leave it off and see can we get more stories first. Don't kill the story. Don't kill the story right at the start. We can hold on for another day, you know, but if there's more stories out there let them come in". Or if someone comes in saying, "I went looking for social welfare and they wouldn't give it to me because of this; because I'm blind in one eye or whatever or I was going on my holidays", which is a recent one, and you can give the answer to that fairly quickly on paper. Say, "social welfare says you can go away for two weeks but not three or whatever", but you don't give that out. I wouldn't give that out there and then. I'd wait until we got more stories; see is there more angles in it. (DIVii 31)

The airing, the looking for angles, the dramatics, these are more important to the programme than any shortcut to useful information or a solution to callers' problems. Considerable space has been devoted to drawing parallels between *Liveline* and formal debate. Neither format has as its principle goal the resolution of political issues through argumentation; both are about performance but the challenge remains to reconcile the theatrics of *Liveline* with the outcomes desired from deliberative democracy.

Related to the theatrics is *Liveline's* reluctance to broadcast unproductive calls for help where there is little prospect of an outcome. The search for lost family members or missing heirlooms will only be entertained if there is a reasonable chance of a eureka moment.

I like to have a bit of an idea if we go looking for somebody..... I like to have a bit of an idea that we have a chance of finding them. I'm not a great believer in just putting on everyone who comes on looking for a relation or whatever 'cos you have to have some sense that there is a chance. One of the most surprising ones recently was after the *Ryan Report* – that Freddy Boyne story. (Thread FF4) (DIVii 11)

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<sup>3</sup> An RTÉ television religious programme, also hosted by Joe Duffy.

Calculated as these tactics may appear, it is difficult to disagree with Vignoles' assessment of Duffy's strengths as a presenter. "I think it's his knowing what will work, knowing what people want to talk about. He has a great instinct for it" (VIV 10). When Duffy talks about his pre-programme mantra – entertainment/libel, entertainment/libel – he is setting out the twin overarching guiding principles in his daily job. There is no reference here to informing or educating or deliberating. These may be hoped for by-products of the entertainment process.

Libel, we note, is the other side of the entertainment coin. In one sense it defines the limits of what may be said in the programme. I have referred previously to the fact that *Liveline* has been on the losing end of two expensive libel cases and one suspects that there have been settlements for damages that have not reached the courts. On the day of our second interview, as a case in point, Joe Duffy revealed that the team had to cope with, "a big long solicitors letter at half one on something we'd been doing on the programme" (DIVii 10). There is an ever-present risk in opening the airwaves to unscripted and unedited comment. While it is part of the fascination of the show it is also its vulnerability. This vulnerability is the greater because, contrary to popular (and judicial) belief, time delay technology simply does not work. (DIVii 3).

*Liveline* cannot afford to play entirely by the rules of the Legal Department in RTÉ. Of its nature the programme needs to be a little risky and a little edgy. Duffy, for instance, speculates how far they might have risked naming perpetrators during the FF Threads on institutional abuse.

And should we have gone bigger on naming them? We tried to name Una Rafter on the first day and we got on to our Legal Department. They just say 'no'; anyway they couldn't be bothered. At this stage, you just give up getting on to them. (DIVi 20)

Julian Vignoles sheds some light on the institutional trade-off that allows *Liveline* to operate:

I've never heard it stated but I think that *Liveline* is tolerated for its indiscretions over the years; its campaigning when...and I think it's tolerated because it does just that and there's no other programme like it. And every time it gets into trouble over maybe unfair reports – what was the last one they were ruled against? – all those kinds of incidents, then they suddenly come on and highlight some injustice and so they're saved for another time. I think you really need strong production on these shows. (VIV 16)

In spite of the hints of a cavalier approach to legal requirements efforts are made to forestall anticipated pitfalls. For example in the *Wedding Journal* Thread K there are multiple stipulations that the woman of the couple from whom the prize was withdrawn was not convicted of any crime (K JD 39, 199, & 127). It is also made clear that only a court can determine the conviction on the part of the man in question (K JD 136, 172, & 174).

The danger of broadcasting 'raw' opinion as fact is well illustrated in Thread FF4 where, had a late caller that afternoon made his opinion public on air, *Liveline* might well have been exposed to serious legal consequences.

On the Freddy Boyne thing, the last call I saw on the screen, which thankfully I didn't say, the last call on the screen was somebody - you talk of all the misinformation - somebody phoned in to say, "Freddy Boyne left Ireland, whenever, when he was seventeen and he hunted down the man that killed his mother and killed him". Now, if I had said that on Friday..... Now, Freddy didn't do that, obviously. He became the exact opposite. He became a law enforcer, so to speak. And at that stage, I was kind of convinced that Freddy was dead. Anyway, as it turns out, on the Monday he wasn't. He said himself..... I said, "did you ever hear what happened John Fanning?" and he said, "well, I know he died in London, but it wasn't me". (DIVi 11)

The programme works to other communicative guidelines also. In the political Thread A we hear the presenter asking callers to identify their party allegiances up front in order to forestall complaints of partisan bias (A JD 3 as one example). In light of the fact that the events discussed related to one prospective candidate in an upcoming by-election we are treated to a couple of references to the full list in the constituency (A JD 118 & 276). There are other instances where the presenter corrects unsubstantiated inferences by callers referring to others; to media personality, Gay Byrne and his wife (A JD 112) to Fine Gael leader, Enda Kenny (A JD 205) and to the Irish Christian Brothers (FF7 JD 100).

Communicative probity is not governed by the laws of libel or by in-house guidelines alone. Those who work on *Liveline* are conscious of the ethical norms that pertain to society at large. Marian Finucane shows how such considerations arose in relation to a woman's request for retrospective anonymity.

..... Two days later she was saying. "if you get a phone call from somebody will you promise to tell them that it wasn't us and that it wasn't me that was on the radio"? We had a lot of ethical discussions actually about that and we would from time to time. I remember one in particular where a fellow who had been convicted of some kind of paedophile crime, wanting to make his own case, you know, those kind of things. You'd have a lot of chatting around that before you would do it or merge in the middle of it. (FIV 10)

We recognise as we study evidence of the production and packaging in *Liveline* that it cannot be otherwise. Even a random transmission of unmonitored phone calls would demand some sequence and selection. Even then this formula would most likely result in chaos and defy sense. In the case of *Liveline* no secret is made of the fact that material is prepared for the programme, callers are processed and there is a production team active in the background.



The aim of this team is to deliver good radio – a quality which they believe is defined by professional gut instinct – ‘you know it when you hear it’. However it does entail furnishing a flow of fresh, engaging material and making the listening experience as entertaining as possible. It involves a struggle to fill those days when calls are slow or simply uninteresting and always waiting for the ‘magic call’.

The strategic aim of *Liveline* may well be civic and it may well function effectively as a forum for the people and an advocate for their concerns but the tactics are distinctly theatrical. The driving dynamic is one of performance and entertainment and other civic considerations – explanation, education, adjudication, mobilisation – come some distance down the line at least in the heat of delivering the next programme to air. This realisation should not return us to an unproductive duality; we are not looking at either/or. The drive to maximise listenership does not empty the programme of civic agency but it does have something of the status of a by-product. The ‘political’ clout of the programme is all the more effective for its being well produced and popular. Privileging the performative does not necessarily detract from a genuine concern for callers, from the civility of the exchanges or from those deliberative strands we have considered earlier. What the significant emphasis on being entertaining does demand is a continuous and reflective policing of the format to ensure that the performance does not exploit vulnerability or obscure the political entirely.

## **The Circuit of Civic Culture and the Host**

We have seen Brand and Scannell characterise the job of the host as a ‘histrionic’ one, “to a greater or lesser extent dependent on performing in public” (1991, p. 203). Moreover we should not be too surprised to find that entertainment and performance are prime drivers on *Liveline*; after all we saw, in Chapter Three, Higgins and Moss’s observation that the phone-in hosts, in their bid to bring order and meaning to their material, will maximise entertainment (1982, p. 5). Livingstone and Lunt judged that the process was valued over the product to the extent that there is a danger of exploitation (1994, p. 60).

I have used the terms ‘host’ and ‘presenter’ interchangeably but they both point in the same direction. Both have resonances that relate to performance and entertainment. In more usual contexts a host is one who receives guests at a social gathering, incidentally often referred to as ‘entertaining’. A presenter draws our attention to that which he wishes to present, to bring forward for public interest.

Returning to our notion of a triological communicative relationship in the phone-in, the host stands very much at the centre presenting the various other parties – listeners, callers, and the production team - to each other.

Within this discursively unique position we have identified a variety of distinct roles which the presenter shuttles in and out of. We have noted his construction as a star, as a manager, as an ombudsman, as the chair of debate, and as a coaxer of stories. My aim in this section is to ask to what extent we can also consider him in another role, that of citizen, and not simply as an isolated atomic citizen directing traffic at a communicative crossroads but as one who is pivotal to communicative democracy. We are talking of one who, not alone is a citizen in his own right, but who, by virtue of how he constructs his own public identity, contributes to the collective identity of the listening community.

In order to assess that suggestion I return to Dahlgren's Circuit of Civic Culture principally because it allows me to draw on both the Habermasian construction of communication within the public sphere and on politically informed directions from cultural studies – the idea of cultural citizenship. I have striven to maintain the dialectic between these strands throughout and both approaches recognise that citizenship has a normative and ethical dimension, whether that citizenship is about rights and responsibilities, or about belonging or about identity. On that account, as we apply the insights afforded by the Circuit of Civic Culture into the work of the host, the aim will be to identify the normative implications.

### **Knowledge and Competence**

Tuchman has told us that the host is expected to have the ability to hold a conversation about almost every subject (1974, p. 87). Duffy has the reputation of being well informed and a voracious reader (see *Sunday Times*, 28/09/08, p. 17) and he is seldom lost for a response or an informed insertion into the unscripted exchanges with callers. In Thread A he can reel off a potted biography of Senator Alex White (A JD 118). We hear him pinpointing the exact locations of Ferryhouse Industrial School (FF7 JD 107) and of the Redress Board offices (FF7 JD 295) and he prides himself on being familiar with every remote corner of the country (see DIVii 14). He is able to summarise accurately the state of play of abuse cases being sent to the DPP (FF7 JD 88).

In terms of the knowledge content of the shows, there has been ample evidence in our chosen samples of listeners being afforded access to raw civic informational material – facts, knowledge, reports and discussions – some of it weighty; some of it less so. Once again Thread A offers the most overt examples of political debate and procedural information. Early in the discussion the host picks up on a reference to democracy and the substantive democratic values of fairness and equality are aired in that context.

- Jim 28            So my proposal, quite simply is this; every RTE presenter's contract should contain a line that would prevent them going into public politics in particular in a democracy within 12 months of their leaving their job.
- JD 29            Why?
- Jim 30            And I think that would probably sort the whole issue.
- JD 31            You mentioned democracy. How would that be democratic?
- Jim 32            It would be totally democratic. It's involved in several contracts that people leave. I believe many high profile people, leaving RTÉ, have to sign certain contracts that they won't get involved in other companies etc. In a democracy everybody would be starting on a level playing pitch but if you already have a serious high profile because of your job then it's not a level playing pitch and the fundamental basis of democracy is that people start on a level playing pitch.
- JD 33            So you think it's simply unfair?
- Jim 34            Totally unfair, absolutely unfair.
- JD 35            Unfair on other candidates?
- Jim 36            Totally unfair on, not alone the candidates but the way we run our country. It's supposed to be totally absolutely fair. Now, if you're a director of *Bord Planála* you have to sign as part of your contract that for a year after leaving *Bord Planála* you cannot become a consultant in planning in certain issues because you have an inside track and these things appear in order to have a level playing pitch and this is no comment on George Lee or anybody else. RTÉ itself in public service broadcasting has huge questions to answer in any event about the kind of.....

The debate develops along relatively sophisticated lines and is broadened to encompass consideration of whether democratic representation should be enhanced by the inclusion of qualified experts or whether representation should simply be that – representation of the 'ordinary' people.

- Jim 45            The gentleman is perfectly correct and there's another issue where the previous gentleman raised about having people with qualifications in the cabinet. This is a serious side to democracy which is actually contrary to democracy because the only people who can get elected is or at least.... the only expertise that is required in any democracy is the expertise of getting elected. You require no other expertise. Once you get elected you have a mandate.
- JD 46            Isn't that Tommy's argument, Jim, in favour of George Lee, that he does have economic qualifications; that he did work in the central bank?
- Jim 47            I'm afraid I disagree with him.
- Tommy 48        Jim, Jim, I could just say to you and I think you're making a very good point... and we're having a discussion about it but the reality is that we're underestimating the ability of the voter to discern here and democracy

does have its problems. It's not an exact science but we do have to, at some stage, hand over the responsibility of people choosing at the end of the day.

.....  
Jim 68            There are many other people who might differ from George Lee so we cannot get away from the principles of democracy and the principles are, it has nothing to do with qualifications. It has all got to do with being expert at getting elected – nothing else. Could I quote Thomas Jefferson? Thomas Jefferson said, "If the people aren't fit to lead themselves, then who is?"

The early part of the thread is an informative compendium of figures who have crossed from a career in the media to one in politics. The implications are teased out at some depth. We hear two callers apply an element of common wisdom, pointing out that the electorate is capable of discerning between the relative advantages that candidates bring.

Izzy 119            I really want to ask everybody there a question, right, and it's to do with what they think about the intelligence of the voter.

Tommy 120        Exactly

JD 121            Let the people judge

Marguerite 122    Of course

Izzy 123            Do people really think that the voter is stupid enough to vote for a man just because we hear him on the radio? Now I'll give you an example of a celebrity candidate we had in the past and it's Dana. Now, Dana was a celebrity candidate. I don't share her views in the slightest but I don't think for a moment that the people who voted for her, voted for her because she won the Eurovision. They voted for her because they shared her well-publicized pro-life views. That's why they voted for her and if people vote for George Lee, it'll be because they agree with FG policies.

Further along we are told that being in the public eye is not the only head start for an aspiring politician.

Máiréad 158        .... and I respect the point that somebody made – they suggest, "look, you're public. You almost have an edge on other candidates" but people with family names in politics also have an edge.

We also saw, earlier in this chapter, the host engaging in journalistic interrogation of the prospective candidate. There is, throughout Thread A, a considerable sprinkling of political and procedural information. Other threads are less 'informationally' dense – we are reminded, for example, that franchised concessions in public land need to go out to tender (Thread Y) and we learn to correct procedure for processing complaints about vicious dogs (Thread M) - but, as we shall see, they do offer other resources for civic competence.

## **Civic Values: Substantive and Procedural**

Much of what has been written about the host up to now points to *Liveline's* capacity to model and reinforce procedural civic values. Listeners are learning the rules of the game of citizenship. The host in his roles as facilitator, coordinator, agenda setter and moderator may be considered as demonstrating deliberative procedures in practice. This is also the case when the host is heard to test the evidence for claims or where he negotiates differences of opinion with civility and consideration. Possibly overlooked is the attentiveness inherent in listening as a civic action. "I always say to people, 'I don't talk for a living; I listen for a living', which certainly on *Liveline*, that's the skill – to be able to listen" (Marian Finucane, FIV 20).

There are illustrations throughout the samples of a variety of substantive civic values. George Lee in Thread A proclaims, in no uncertain terms, his commitment to self sacrifice for the common good.

George 239 .... But the price a person has to pay to go down this route is enormous. I'm walking away from a very well paid job. I'm walking away from a job that I have for life, from total security to play a role with no guarantees that I'm going to make any impact at all and to get into an area about which I still have to go on a learning curve. That is the kind of thing that not everybody is going to do. The suggestion that .... When you think and consider the risks that I'm taking and the role that I want to play - the bits of it that are completely un-nice - you'd wonder to yourself, why would you need to worry about somebody being given gardening leave before they make such a decision? I will be taking a significant cut in pay to do it.

.....

George 241 There are things, which when I analyse it, which have motivated me and also when I think of the future for my kids, for myself, for everybody else in the country. I think people who can play a role, need to play a role because we are now in an economic emergency. So in terms of any one particular thing that the government did recently, no. It is a sequence of things. What happened is I got an opportunity to consider whether I could or might play a different role, given how serious the situation has been and I think it is my duty. I feel that is a kind of calling. I must play this role. I could reach retirement age and feel regretful that, when it was put to me, that when the opportunity was presented that I didn't do it. For me to say to grandchildren, to children, to whoever in the future, that we went through these hard times when you could have played a different role; when you could contribute and do something more and you were asked to do it, what did you do? Well, I know my answer is going to be, I made a massive personal sacrifice; took enormous personal risks; it may work, it may not work but I did it with good intention.

Jim Staken's story is also one of service above and beyond the call of duty – a story of honest industry, loyalty and pride in his home place.

JD 53 You didn't charge them a hundred euro break-in fee?

- Jim 54 I done it for tourism in Glendalough, if you know what I mean, because I'm around the fifth generation of Stakens in Glendalough. I'm very proud of Glendalough.
- JD 55 Is that where you live, Jim?
- Jim 56 Oh yes and anybody that has come to the car park in the last two years will see that the car park is well kept. The toilets are well kept. My food is good.

Thread FF7 illustrates civic values more by their absence than by their presence. For the want of equality, liberty, protection and compassion the weakest in three generations of children were deprived of the most elementary rights.

If there is a common ethical theme running through the sample threads I suggest it may be condensed into the concept of fairness. The word has become almost a speech mannerism of Joe Duffy's – 'but in fairness'. Leaving aside the politics of Thread A, each of the other threads espouses the cause of individuals in collision with the system and fairness is a frequent casualty as a result of that collision. Jim wants fairness of access to the media spotlight (A Jim 38). Jim Staken wants a fair hearing from Wicklow County Council (Y Jim 82). Sarah wants her fair share of the Wedding Journal prize (K Sarah 8) and Ruth wants to be charged a fair price for the scratch on her car rental door (L Ruth 8). Geraldine wants fair treatment by the proper authorities who seem to be ignoring her distress about the loss of her dog (M Geraldine 42) and fairness seems almost too narrow a word for the outcomes wished for by the survivors in Thread FF7 – justice, vindication, closure, credibility, exoneration, compensation, peace. In many ways this wish by individuals for fair treatment defines *Liveline's* territory. It links in to Habermas's observations on the divisions between the system and lifeworld. "The lifeworld is the realm of personal relationships and communicative action. But to it is counterposed a system ordered on the basis of non-linguistic steering media (money and power), integrating society impersonally through functional or cybernetic feedback. ... the lifeworld is the locus for basic human values" (Calhoun, 1992, pp.30 & 31). In conditions of modernity the individual has to grapple with these powerful social institutions. In our samples the battles are with the media, Government Departments, corporate business, the Gardai, the church, the law. Joe Duffy becomes a public ally in the struggle and the ethical aspiration becomes the plea for fairness beginning with a considered recognition of the plight of each. He sees this as his brief.

I tell you the sense of responsibility it imbues is, that when people come on, especially who are in a difficult position – victims or underdogs or whatever, people who feel they've been badly done by – I think we have an obligation to do our utmost to let them on air and I really go berserk in here when, for legal reasons or people get scared or whatever, that people pull away from that and I really have this sense that we should do, as producers, journalists .... We're

supposed to be a broadcasting organization and we shouldn't be an organization obsessed by money – that as a broadcasting organization, it's not just to broadcast music we're here for, it's actually to give people a voice and we should do our absolute utmost if people feel they have been run down and we can stand up as best we can, as best we can. ...We should speak.... without losing the run of myself.... we should speak truth to power and that's what *Liveline* should be about.. (DIVii 5)

It is of note that procedurally the practical application of fairness is translated, in these samples, into legalities. John Staken has already consulted his solicitor and Chris wants to explore contract law with him (Y Chris 143). The small print and terms and conditions are scrutinised to engage with Hertz and the *Wedding Journal*. Mark, the dog warden, guides listeners through the legal procedure for dealing with unruly dogs and assaults by their owners. Joe Duffy offers each of the institutional abuse victims in turn the renewed prospect of prosecution as a hook to probe their responses even though in certain instances the legal system of the time had contributed to the problem. In a world of receding certainties the law appears to offer a recognised normative structure.

There is an irony in that callers have recourse to RTÉ - a media institution – and have come to view the courts – another institution – as an avenue to operationalise fairness. As we hear Margaret in Thread A, we realise that this is only an irony and not a contradiction.

Margaret 277 Yeh, I do, Joe. I just want to make... I'm very disappointed that we're losing (in inverted commas) we're losing George. George was there for the ordinary Joe Soap such as me and my family. He broke it down in English. Now he's gone over to the other side and, in my opinion, you know, he's making a major mistake. We need George. The government don't. It's one up for Enda Kenny because George is such a professional, such a knowledgeable person and such a capable person and we need..... The ordinary Joe Soap are at such a loss. They have made such a professional job of it they are better than the mafia.

Individuals engage with their social world in complex ways. Phoning *Liveline* is one of them.

### **Affinity and Trust**

Trust, Dahlgren's 'minimal sense of commonality' (2005, p. 427), is that which makes all democracy, all politics, all sociability possible. At its most minimal it does not even constitute an agreement to cooperate towards a common goal; it simply represents agreement not to mutually co-destruct. In our daily world we usually conform to the rules of the road, to paying our taxes, to not trespassing in a stranger's living room and we trust that others are doing the same. In general our trust is justified. We have learned this from experience.

We accept Putnam's (2000) distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' trusts. This trust, according to Dahlgren, is that "generalised honesty and

expectation of reciprocity that we accord people we don't know personally" (2009, p.112). It is essential for politics to function and indeed for deliberative democracy. Thick trust is founded on our personal experience with others and on established personal relationships. The work on attachment theory of Erikson (1950), Bowlby (1970) and Fahlberg (1991) indicates that the capacity to trust in others, and indeed to trust in the world, is forged in child's early experience of secure attachment.

Public media figures operate in a space between thick and thin trust. Just as the audience/broadcaster relationship has been described as 'parasocial interaction' so, while Joe Duffy is not one of most listeners' friends, neither is he entirely a stranger. There is some degree of familiarity with radio personalities – usually one-way. Certainly, they are known by individual listeners – their voice quality, their sense of humour, and their 'routineness' and dependability. In the phone-in there is an added degree of observed interaction. We get a sense of how the presenter reacts, emotes and thinks and we become familiar with snippets of his personal biography. The potential for a version of thick trust deepens somewhat. In the case of *Liveline* there is also the built-in 'guarantee' of trustworthiness attached to the PSB aura discussed earlier..

George Lee's jump from this world of 'parasocial trust' into the world of party politics, where trust is distinctly thinner, confused callers in thread A  
JD 58 Stay there for a sec. both of you. Veronica Barnes is in Galway,.  
Veronica, George Lee, you're disappointed?

Veronica 59 I am. I really feel it's how the whole thing was handled. I listen to the news everyday if I'm in the office or on the road. I listened to the interview between himself and Sean O'Rourke and I know that he gave him a fairly tough interview but George was well able to hold his patch but that's not the issue. The issue I now feel is, I now feel that me and all the people like me will question a lot of stuff he said in the past and before I never would. I always listened to him and thought that he had a great angle on the economic situation.

.....  
Marguerite 98 Well, unlike that lady I seriously have to question his impartiality and his independence and I actually thought that Stephen O'Rourke did a great job.

JD 99 Sean (**offering a correction which went unheard**)

Marguerite 100 I was delighted at lunchtime to hear the questions that Stephen O'Rourke was asking 'cos those questions need to be asked and I would really like to know what was his motivation behind the *We Blew the Boom* programme. George Lee did not become a FGer over night. Unlike that lady said, "he only decided today", one of your earlier callers said he approached him in 2002. To me, you'd have to question whether he was in FG all along.

.....



- Michael 268 I think they do. It appears now that his views have been coloured in the past. That's the way it looks to the general public, I think.
- JD 269 George, I presume you ....
- George 270 Well, I suppose people might be inclined to draw that conclusion but it isn't true. I was not involved in politics. I was not asked to run until recently. I did not give it adequate or serious consideration until recently. I think when you look back through the reports I have contributed to RTE, they'll see no political bias. They'll see very many in which I was quite supportive of areas, decisions and proposals. They'll see the fairness in it and I know people want to kind of ....
- Michael 271 George, George, could I just say you're in the media business. You know the media business better than anybody else and you know that perception is nearly as important as reality and people will get that perception about you.
- George 272 No, I don't accept that. I accept truth. I think people are reasonable. I believe in people. I think people will be aware that throughout all the years in terms of the economy that I was straight; that I told it as it was; that I used whatever economic knowledge and training that I have and I communicated that to people with a view to trying to make the right policy choices and, with regard to economic debate, to improve things.

George's assertion, "that I was straight, that I told it as it was", is being tested by Michael's assertion, "that perception is nearly as important as reality". The perception appears to be that politicians are not to be trusted. Joe Duffy, on the other hand, has not crossed over. We find callers thanking him and listing him (along with other journalists) amongst their fellow campaigners. In Thread FF7 we hear:

William 148 .....And I would like to thank Mary Rafferty, yourself, Bruce Arnold, Paddy Ferguson, John Kelly - people that have fought this and let people have their say over the last ten years.

.....

Harry 250 Good afternoon, Joe, can I first thank you for exposing all this. How are you?

JD 251 Ah, I'm okay.

Harry 252 Now then, I wanted to speak to you anyway. It's wonderful to see all this coming out now because the bottom line for people like me - we were never believed, really; never accepted and you have to bear with me now (**audibly upset**)..... I'm okay.

This latter brief excerpt is almost a cameo of trustful warmth showing concern, gratitude and willingness to open up and it introduces a theme to which I will return shortly – the difficulty for abuse sufferers in trusting a system, particularly a system that did not trust them.

While the programme, especially via the public face of its host, benefits from this public trust, this faith in Joe Duffy and the generalised belief that the programme team is broadly functioning for the public good, it has to be careful to maintain that trust. I have suggested that the public is conscious and accepting of a level of production, of the 'nip and tucking' and selection of calls, but care has to be taken not to abuse that trust by engaging with the patently phoney or by stirring artificial controversy or by blatant misrepresentation. This public trust in a phone-in is a delicate gift, as Turner (2000) shows in relation to the 'cash for comments' scandal in Australian talkback.

In line with Warner's (2002) observations on the paradoxical nature of trust in democracy, the phone-in, on the one hand reinforces thin trust by its broad acceptance of the rules of the democratic game and the scope of the playing field. Little about the fundamentals of democracy is questioned. Yes, we are entitled to our personal democratic rights; yes, representative parliamentary democracy on balance is a good thing; yes, somebody needs to run the country. As Dahlgren observes, "politics involves conflicts of interest as well as identities in opposition which insert an element of mistrust into these social relationships from the start" (2009, p. 113). It is not for nothing that the opposition is termed the opposition. The 'built-in antenna for scepticism' seems according to some commentators (Wright, 1979/80, Verwey, 1990, as examples) to find a more than suitable platform in phone-in formats.

Remarkably there are few enough examples of complaints directed at government institutions in the month of May 2009. We note some partisan rumblings, as might be expected, in Thread A and I will treat with the specific circumstances of FF7 shortly. Apart from that the month was untypical.

To get a truer picture of what I call the 'ombudsman discourse' – complaints about officialdom – I refer to Appendix 4, the categorisation of all threads aired between 01/07/2007 and 30/06/2009. here we see that of a total of 879 threads, 157 or 18% relate to complaints against government departments or agencies. Considerably ahead of the rest are complaints about the health service (59); the next highest being about Social Welfare payments and entitlements (15). *Liveline* almost seems to encourage a 'subaltern counterpublic' in Nancy Fraser's (1992) terms. Some of its most significant and successful social campaigns have been in the realm of health care. Prominent among them were the campaigns on overcrowding in A and E, cancer services for public patients, the provision of a dedicated unit for cystic fibrosis sufferers, and improving services for the visually impaired.

The other aspects of government where complaint threads reached double figures were the misbehaviour of politicians (14), the courts and the legal system (12), and education and schooling (11).

It is suggested that one of the defining features of modernity (and maybe particularly of late modernity) has been the erosion of this thin trust. Faiths in authority structures and respect for the institutional pillars of our society have weakened throughout the democratic world. This deterioration, according to Fintan O'Toole has been particularly pronounced in its singularly Irish manifestations.

Mapping Ireland's future is even more difficult because so many of the old landmarks have disappeared. The twin towers of southern Irish identity – Catholicism and nationalism – were already teetering before the great boom began in 1995. Institutional Catholicism began to lose its grip in the 1960s; by the early 1990s its foundations were already undermined by secularisation, the sexual revolution and its own scandals. Nationalism had become vastly more complicated, a set of troubling questions rather than answers. The vicious conflict in Northern Ireland, the venality of 'patriotic' politicians, the effects of membership of the European Union, and cultural globalisation all made nationalism a slippery and ambiguous concept. (2010, p. 3)

This weakening of two major planks of Irish identity made trust in its thin form a particularly brittle issue for those who spoke to Joe Duffy in FF7. O'Toole summarises how the convergence of the unquestioned hierarchical power of the Catholic Church and an impoverished and subservient polity resulted in the stories we listened to.

The most extreme example of this problem in recent years has been the way the Church authorities dealt with revelations of child abuse by priests, brothers and nuns by seeing these basic issues of human rights and legality as essentially internal matters governed by canon law and the short term interests of the institutions. But there is also a less dramatic, if no less corrosive, conflict between, on the one hand, republican notions of the equal entitlement of citizens to public goods, and, on the other, the persistence of private church power in the provision of those goods. (ibid., p. 29)

Here I return to theories of attachment. As Vera Fahlberg points out, the development of attachment helps a child, "develop social emotions, develop a conscience, and trust others" (1991, p. 20). She says further,

Studies done on children raised in institutions have shown that adequate physical care is not enough to lead to the development of a physically and psychologically healthy child with optimum functioning. For normal development to occur, the child needs a primary attachment object.

(Ibid., p. 21)

I have to be extremely cautious not to generalise and not to draw inferences based on insufficient evidence in a field in which I am not qualified, but it appears to me, based on naïve observation of the conversations in FF7, that many of the victims of institutional child abuse have experienced problems with trust in both its thick interpersonal sense and in its thin civic sense. There is a distinct sense of having been failed

by all the organs of the state and the trust necessary to now repair or salve the damage is in short supply. Look at the litany:

Miriam 16 ..... and the Vatican knew about it; the Government of Ireland knew about it; everybody knew about it but nobody did nothing about it because you know what we were? Wasters!

.....

Noel 39 .....because my da was a heavy drinker and because he was going out drinking all the time. The Social Welfare got involved and they sent me in to, I think it was, Clifden at two years of old.

.....

William 116 And, and wait 'til I tell you, the main culprit in this is the Department of Justice. There's no mention in the Ryan Report of the Department of Justice.

JD 117 Well, there is but it's hard to .....

William 118 Very little

JD 119 Well, between the Department of Education and the Department of Justice there is.

William 120 Yes, but the Department of Justice was the ones that sent us into the Industrial Schools and everything that happened after that was down to the Department of Justice and the Irish Government. This was a crime against humanity.

JD 121 But isn't that the point that has been raised again and again in the past few days? If it was a crime against humanity .....

William 122 It should never have been dealt with by the abusers - the Irish Government.

JD 123 But there's no facility for the Irish Government to take a prosecution without people giving evidence.

William 124 But what's the point of the Irish Government when they are actually the guilty ones? How can they convict anybody?

.....

William 130 With the help of the NSPCC<sup>4</sup> - they were as guilty as anybody else.

JD 131 The Cruelty Man.

William 132 No! The Bounty Man.

JD 133 'Cos he got paid.

---

<sup>4</sup> The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which became the ISPCC in Ireland in 1953. The inspectors of the society were usually drawn from the ranks of retired military or the Gardai and were popularly referred to as The Cruelty Men

William 134 They got paid. In the ten years I was in Ferryhouse there was never a bed empty.

.....

JD 143 Now the Gardai have just been on to us - the Assistant Commissioner's Office - they say they've just set up, William, a special unit to deal with complaints from the Ryan Report.

William 144 Look, look, the Guards were involved in this. If somebody ran away from the Industrial School he was dragged back by the scruff of the neck to be whipped, .....

.....

William 150 The Irish Government, the priests said they were going to put money in a fund for the survivors and the Irish Government said, "yeh, we'll manage it". They are the abusers.

That it is difficult to build or to rebuild civic trust becomes more obvious when we note the negative response to the institution which a recent government had put in place to administer compensation for the victims. In spite of the positive intentions invested in the work it undertook, there persists an understandable suspicion of any official institution.

Miriam 77 I swear, Joe, I am totally focused on what the government are doing and what they put those people through. The Redress - they didn't believe them and if you went back and appealed, your money was dropped sometimes by a quarter and often by a half so you were punished over and over and over again. You don't not have a leg to stand on.

.....

JD 96 Did you on a separate occasion go to the Redress Board?

Ray 97 No, Joe, I didn't. I was offered that option and between myself and my legal team, I decided not to take the Redress Board because I didn't trust them. And, Joe, can I say really what's going on with the Redress Board and people complaining - such as Christine Buckley and what have you - and I have to say this, Joe, the Redress Board are the most shameful people that I ever heard of and they should be sacked; should be investigated and never put victims of child abuse through a system like this again.

.....

William 110 Instead of giving us justice, they set up the Redress Board and this inquiry. There was no need for an inquiry. Everybody in Ireland knew what was happening in the Industrial School when I was in it.

.....

William 150 Every day of my life I've suffered because of this and yes, I did go before the Redress Board and the Redress Board is just another form of abuse.

.....

Michael 294 I was before the Redress Board. I was three times before the Redress Board. I had to go to Clonskeagh and they made an offer and my solicitor said the offer wasn't good enough and then I had to go in to a place like a court. I felt like I was the one who committed the crime, that's

the way I felt. I was questioned and the offer they..... They cut the offer in half and then it was re-appealed again and it went to South.... just off Molesworth Street there - the name evades me now, and I can't think of it.

JD 295 South Frederick Street, was it?

Michael 296 South Frederick Street, yeh, that's it, Joe, and in there they gave me an extra few bob - not much. In other words, the first offer I got was cut in half really. I went through all that and it was like I was on trial.

JD 297 And why did you burn your papers?

Michael 298 I couldn't handle it any more. I just said that's the end of it.

Joe Duffy offered as a topic for the day a statement made by the President, Mary McAleese that, in spite of the lapse of time, the perpetrators of abuse should be prosecuted.

That has become a big thing now. They should be named and shamed. McAleese made the prosecution thing a big thing and I thought the most pertinent argument I heard that day, which convinced me that they should be prosecuted if they're still there, was when people say, "Oh, they're old", they say, "well, we were young". (DIVi 20)

The president, considered to be above party politics, is not normally the subject of controversy or mistrust but even taking that into consideration, there is a notable divergence of opinion about her among callers. In the minds of some, she is associated with failed attempts to clear the names of those who had been committed to Industrial Schools. There is no unanimity.

Tommy 4 Joe, I was absolutely, really delighted 'cos there's lots of people now who would be really ecstatic that the President has come out and kind of highlighted the fact that these people are getting away with what they done to us. We were only children, Joe, and what those people done to us is just unforgivable.

.....

Miriam 10 I had a mixed reaction really because first of all I said that should have been done twelve years ago. When it all came out then it should have been made legal, that any person that was mentioned that was abused(?) should have been brought into court and brought to justice. Taking them to court now, they'd probably bring them in wheelchairs and we'd have to feel sorry for them but nobody felt sorry for us as children.

JD 11 So, do you think anything would be served by.....?

Miriam 12 I do appreciate that she has come out now and as being a mother and a woman she must feel....she just left us down, you know.

.....

Ray 93 Oh, I welcome her comments, Joe. I was glad to hear.... I wasn't just looking at her as President of Ireland - a mother, a Catholic - . I was delighted she spoke, Joe, from the heart.

.....  
William 112 I think the Catholic Church and the politicians and especially Mary McAleese, who many of the victims have wrote to, to have their convictions squashed and she told them it was nothing to do with her.

JD 113 Well, it is nothing to do, unfortunately....

William 114 Exactly, but the point is the criminal convictions still stands.  
.....

William 246 Well, you can leave me with this, Joe, right. Mary McAleese and the politicians that are now jumping on the bandwagon, where the hell were they ten years ago when we needed the support; when we were outside the Dáil? We were outside the Dáil protesting to get justice. Where were they then? Joe there is no answer to it. There is no answer to any of this.  
.....

Harry 282 ..... and good luck to our President and hope that people like me will get the opportunity to stand up and hang those animals.  
.....

JD 301 I understand, I understand. What....what,,,what do you think of President McAleese's statement?

Michael 302 I think it's, Joe, right, fair play to her. She's our president and all that and I agree with a lot she says and if you heard her on *The News at One* there and she says the lawyer in her says about the inquiry that the names.....

JD 303 So you would be prepared to stand up in court again?

I embarked on this section with the intention of enquiring whether *Liveline* might contribute to the construction of civic trust – a dimension of the Circuit of Civic Culture. I finished by suggesting that the stories in FF7 illustrate the personal and social consequences if trust has been weakened or damaged. As ever, the telling of these stories serves one purpose for the tellers. It serves an entirely different one for the hearers. The hope is that those whose trust is intact will be moved to question contemporary institutional provisions and societal blindspots. Trustworthiness requires the vigilance of citizens. Dahlgren suggests a direction:

Low trust in institutions can be ameliorated if they do a better job in telling the truth, keeping their promises, and acting with fairness and solidarity. Or alternatively, trust can be enhanced by a growth in positive experiences among citizens thereby expanding the cultural disposition to expect positive performance. (2009. p. 114)

My contention is that the discourses of *Liveline*, be they hearing complaints about inadequate government services or hearing how institutions can become perverted, these represent an expansion of the 'cultural disposition' to expect better.

## **Civic Practices**

I accept Dahlgren's assertion that:

A viable and growing democracy must be embodied in concrete recurring practices..... Such practices help generate personal and social meaning to the ideals of democracy and they must have an element of the routine, of the taken for granted about them if they are to be apart of civic culture.

(2009, pp. 116 & 117)

In Chapter Three we related *Liveline* to civic practices in a number of ways. We linked at the routine and daily nature of the programme to Scannell's (1996) concept of 'ordinariness'. We suggested that the listening that happens both in the studio and at the sites of reception could be construed as civic practice – part of the creation of a collective vision as Douglas (2004) puts it. We accept Jeffrey Jones' (2006a) idea that calling in to a phone-in is akin in ways to the act of voting in representative democracy. Not every listener calls but every listener knows they can call. Most of all there was the talk, the discussion that renders *Liveline* a significant stimulant for our social meaning-making project.

At this juncture I wish to focus on one aspect of that talk – that which constitutes the social campaign. These are instances where, "civic culture must allow for the spontaneous, the one-off, the novel; in a sense meta rules for breaking the normal rules" (Dahlgren, 2002, p. 21).

Much of what we have considered to date in terms of *Liveline* as communicative action has fitted into the 'thin' version of democracy and of 'weak' democratic discussion in Barber's (1984) terms. It has been removed from the sites of political decision-making and geared more towards cultivating and maintaining a collective civic identity and jointly uncovering latent norms.

Social campaigns on *Liveline* produce results. They can be shown to change things in our society and are clearly political in their focus. In some respects they approximate to what Denis McQuail terms, "the more normative forms of journalism (which) tend to favour participation, advocacy, commentary and ideal goals" (2006, p. 51). It plays a participant role in relation to the surrounding society. These campaigns fall broadly under the related concept of civic journalism as propounded by the Pew Centre in the USA (see Rosen, 2001 and Shaffer, 2004). Amongst the values it espouses, it seeks to actively engage citizens to become players in civic issues and not merely observers and reporters.

Joe Duffy enthuses, "The level of engagement with politics in Ireland at the moment is brilliant" (*Sunday Times*, 02/05/10, p. 11). It is hard to disagree with his experience when he suggests that we are witnessing some of Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds* (2005).



We have seen Julian Vignoles' observation that management in RTÉ tolerates some of the risks associated with *Liveline* because every so often it redeems itself (in the eyes of the station) by embarking on one of these campaigns (VIV 10). I use the term 'social campaign' to describe issues which have been sustained over a number of programmes; where there has been a clear advocacy for a cause; and where there has been an outcome or result beyond simply airing the problem. They are usually sparked off by a caller; and the volume of response becomes such that the issue develops its own momentum. I surmise that the production team recognises the potential such campaigns have to deliver good radio, to attract listenership and to boost the civic credentials of the programme but here again that does not necessarily add up to cynicism. I found both presenters to be relatively modest about the show's track record in this regard. Duffy's reaction, when asked, was, "Make a difference? I think the make a difference thing can be exaggerated, you know (DIVii 13). Marian Finucane's reaction was:

You don't like to go around all worthy, do you know what I mean. I mean, it's great if you're involved in a campaign and it builds up but it's the connection really that you want with the listeners. (FIV 7)

Vignoles acknowledges that there is a tug-of-values at play. Asked if it was important to feel that *Liveline* had accomplished something worthwhile, he said:

I think, in my experience, it always was, yeh. I mean you're a kind of professional and you're cynical and you're story driven and you want people to kinda empty their hearts but at the same time the human being in you always likes when something is uncovered or something is revealed and there's always that great satisfaction you sense that people have when they say something or they tell Marian, as it was in my time. It was a good feeling you had about it. (VIV 14)

There was no fresh social campaign in our sample month so I will draw on the information available in the web cast archives which stretch back to early 2007.

Even though there was nothing new in May 2009, the FF7 Thread on Institutional Child Abuse sits clearly in a well-established relationship the programme had forged with victims of abuse under various headings. In DIVi 10 we see Duffy and his producer attempting to place this latest chapter, *The Ryan Report*, into the larger story. Duffy explains how he was originally impelled to engage with the topic.

...we had done it before. We did it in 19...., I think it was 2001. Anyway, I'll tell you the reason why we did it before and it's very straightforward. This is how it came up. John Waters wrote a piece. He was editing *McGill*, right, he wrote a piece in *McGill*, right, saying the Redress Board should be very careful about giving out money to those people because all these people have a history of criminality and their word can't be trusted, okay. And I remember reading this and being annoyed to say the least. I just thought it was....., 'cos I'd read a fair bit about it and in my previous life as a probation officer, I knew

who was in those places in the main. And Michael O'Brien, of *Q & A* fame now, had been with us before on the same story so Margaret rang Michael and Michael went out and bought *McGill* and went berserk and that started..., that unleashed a lot of those people who spoke out and then the whole Redress thing came about the double charging subsequently. So at that stage a lot of those people told their stories and, in one sense, it gave us a lot of credibility with them as well, that they could get on. (DIVi 10)

The very pronounced impact that the programme had previously achieved in convincing the Law Society to address the handful of solicitors who were double charging victims was one of the spurs that persuaded me to embark on this thesis. The RTÉ television news bulletin of Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> October 2005 explains the issues succinctly.

Ken Murphy, Director General of the Law Society, in response to questions, assured that claimants will be compensated if allegations that the legal profession was paid twice for the work proved to be true. He said the profession was disgusted by the allegations, which were made by callers to RTÉ's *Liveline* programme.

Reporter Calls to the *Liveline* have been coming thick and fast following allegations that some solicitors representing clients at the Redress Board had been charging for their services despite the fact that legal costs are covered by the Board.

Caller 1 He took €7,000 from me.

JD But did you give him a cheque for seven grand?

Caller 1 No. He just... When he sent me my cheque €7,000 was taken out of it.

Caller 2 Five minutes after I accepted my award my solicitor called me outside and said, "There's going to be shortfalls", and I said, "How much?" She said, "It won't be much, roughly around six, seven thousand".

Reporter In Britain, the London Irish Centre says it believes hundreds of people have been overcharged. In one case, a woman was asked to pay her solicitor €12,000 out of her compensation.

Its track record and this success enabled the programme to be a forum and an advocate as other groups of victims emerged into the limelight. As we look back at the record we see the *Ryan Report* getting another airing in the following month (10<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup> June 2009). In September of 2009, past residents of the Magdalene Laundries<sup>5</sup> were featured on air for three days (28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup> & 30<sup>th</sup> September 2009) to stake their claim to a hearing at a Redress Board of their own. The *Murphy Report* on child sexual abuse by priests in the Dublin Dioceses came later in the year and its publication

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<sup>5</sup> Girls were placed in these laundries who were either abandoned by their families (often for extramarital pregnancies) or who were transferred on from Industrial Schools. What gave rise to distress at this particular time was a statement from the Minister for Education characterising survivors as "former employees of the Magdalene Laundries". He apologised and substituted the word "workers". Survivors characterise themselves as "slaves". They did not choose their labour. (*Justice for Magdalenes News*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, October 2009)

was followed by *Liveline* programmes on four days (26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup> November and 1<sup>st</sup> December 2009).

I suggested in the previous section on civic trust that *Liveline* seems to constitute a counterpublic in relation to health care services. Occasionally the programme runs relatively limited and focused campaigns. We note a series of programmes addressing the poor provision of services for the deaf. One was broadcast in November 2007 and there were two special editions in February 2009. They were special in that *Liveline* departed from custom and had guests in studio where they engaged hearing assistance to allow the conversation to work on air. This device effectively brought home some of the challenges to the listening (and hearing) public. A series of programmes over the week 14<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> September 2009 which began with the story of Frank Deasy, a scriptwriter suffering from liver cancer resulted in the headline, “5,000 apply for organ donor cards after writer’s emotional *Liveline* plea”. The article which followed quoted Mark Murphy, chief executive of the Irish Kidney Association, “Joe Duffy did not express an opinion while highlighting the issue during the past three days, preferring to let the people who called speak for themselves. It worked well because we are just inundated with calls for donor cards to a point where we have never been before. It is the power of Joe Duffy and it is wonderful” (Caitlin McBride, *Evening Herald*, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2009)

The most recent endeavour in this vein has been the prolonged and relatively successful campaign on behalf of cystic fibrosis sufferers. Apart from all of the discomfort, pain and distress attached to cystic fibrosis, the main issue of concern was the failure to provide a dedicated and separate unit for those who had to be hospitalised occasionally. Contact and shared facilities with the general hospital population simply exacerbate the risks. A series of programmes in January 2008 (8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> & 23<sup>rd</sup>) highlighted the difficulties and contributed to promises on the part of the health authorities. On the 27<sup>th</sup> March 2009 the programme revisited the topic to mark the deaths of two of the young people who were central contributors to the earlier programmes. The subject was tackled again on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2010 and again on 28<sup>th</sup> June. There appeared to be difficulties committing to a starting date for the promised unit and similar projects were being long-fingered in the recessionary climate so in the second week of October 2010 cystic fibrosis campaigners took up the fight again. Maeve Sheehan of the *Sunday Independent* writes of:

...a week of relentless coverage of the conditions endured by cystic fibrosis sufferers on Joe Duffy’s radio show. A succession of cystic fibrosis patients and their families vented their anger at the delays in building a dedicated treatment unit at St. Vincent’s Hospital in Dublin.

Among the most disturbing calls was one from a father who told how his 22-year-old son, who had cystic fibrosis, died two weeks after he contracted a bug in a shared hospital ward. John Murtagh said he had to break the news to his son that he was dying. The moment was captured in a photograph and

subsequently published in newspapers.

(Sunday Independent, 17<sup>th</sup> October 2010)

She also reports a quote from Philip Watt, chief executive of the Cystic Fibrosis Association of Ireland, "...Referring to the Liveline show, it is important to acknowledge that Joe Duffy has been a very good friend to cystic fibrosis" (ibid.). In *The Munster Express*, Dermot Keys refers to Orla Tinsley, a fellow journalist and a CF sufferer:

Were it not for Orla Tinsley's presence on RTÉ's 'Liveline' recently, the health bureaucrats would surely have cited the recession as a reason for not to provide the long-promised specialised 34-bed unit at Saint Vincent's Hospital. But given the massive level of public support which Miss Tinsley's radio presence generated, confirmation that the facility will now be operational by 2011 demonstrated that people power can truly achieve something.

(*Munster Express*, 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2009)

Discussion on this issue on *Liveline* did reach the highest decision-making forum in this democracy. I was in The Dáil visitors' gallery on Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> October and witnessed, as the official record shows, the leaders of both of the main opposition parties using Taoiseach's Question Time to extract firm commitments from the government. The Labour Leader, Eamonn Gilmore refers to the stories they have been hearing over that past number of days" – an indirect reference to *Liveline*. This would not surprise Joe Duffy. "I think politicians go out of their way not to quote *Liveline* because they'd be afraid of giving *Liveline* credit for stuff. They (the opposition) don't want *Liveline* to be perceived as doing their job either 'cos that's a reflection on them, isn't it?" (DIVii 13).

*Liveline* also conducted a sustained campaign to improve services for public cancer patients. In June 2007 seven programmes were aired to highlight the plight of John Moriarty. These were an extension of themes first exposed in the previous year by the late Susie Long. *The Sunday Tribune* comments:

Last Friday week, 41 year-old Susie Long died of cancer.

There is strong evidence to suggest that had she been a private instead of a public patient, her condition would have been diagnosed seven months earlier, and may not have been fatal. Last January, under the pseudonym 'Rosie', she read out a long letter on Duffy's show, highlighting how the two-tier health system may well have condemned her to death. Later she revealed her true identity and campaigned on Liveline against the inequities of the system. The two became friends. Duffy dedicated last Monday's programme to her, and was among the mourners at her funeral service that day. The campaign did more to highlight the inequities than a forest of analytical or investigative newsprint would have managed. Many believe Susie Long made a difference after she began talking to Joe.

(*Sunday Tribune*, 21<sup>st</sup> October 2007)

Possibly the most spectacular health related campaign was the 2005 bid to ameliorate conditions in overcrowded A and E Departments. Joe Duffy, to great fanfare, took delivery of three donated portacabin units along with

considerable other resources donated by the public as a response to callers reports of intolerable conditions. An embarrassed Mater Hospital spokesperson, “said the hospital had rejected the portacabins but had not rejected the other items offered by listeners to RTE Radio’s Liveline programme” (*Irish Independent*, 16<sup>th</sup> April 2005).

Apart from health issues, the most recent campaign to make an appreciable impact was that targeted at closing the Head Shops, which had begun to appear in numbers nationwide. The topic was aired first in November 2008. However from January through March 2010 a further ten programmes took on the issue. The public pressure generated by the programme forced the closure of a number of shops and hastened the introduction of legislation on 11<sup>th</sup> of May this year.

In terms of the political climate prevailing at the moment and in what is considered generally to have been the most effective and coherent protests to date against budgetary cutbacks, the over seventies rallied support via a series of *Liveline* programmes in October 2008 (13<sup>th</sup> 14<sup>th</sup> 15<sup>th</sup> 16<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup>).

Only elder citizens have managed successfully to organise themselves into a demonstration of public defiance. They descended on a church in Dublin’s Westland Row after the October 2008 budget and refused to give up their automatic right to the medical card.

(Power To the People, *Sunday Times*, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2010, p. 11)

Reflecting on the clout of the programme since her tenure, Finucane comments:

I think that people have a lot to thank the programme for and I’m not looking for any gratitude for me .....and indeed the way Joe does it; if you take the over seventies medical card, that was an opportunity for people, who if *Liveline* weren’t there, could not have got their point of view across in the manner in which they did and I think that it works very effectively that way.

(FIV 27)

The controversy that arose around the *Liveline* programme of Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> September 2008 would be difficult to overlook in terms of its direct impact on the lives of citizens and its formal political ramifications. It was not part of a specific series of programmes but was in keeping with a recent trend to show how the fiscal squeeze was affecting the lives of ordinary people. Two headlines from the week catch a flavour of the differences that arose between Brian Lenihan, the Minister for Finance, and *Liveline*.

Lenihan lash at Joe Duffy banks panic: Finance Minister rang RTÉ’s Director General over ‘run on banks’ fear after Liveline broadcast.

(*Sunday Independent*, 21/09/08)

Liveline can take credit for forcing Lenihan to act.

(*Evening Herald*, 3/10/08)

The Sunday Independent story explains the sequence:

Significant sums are believed to have been removed from Irish banks last week following the Liveline programme. An estimated €50m was lodged to An Post's state-guaranteed savings scheme in just one 24-hour period. Liveline began its programme on Thursday with an An Post employee extolling its security. A spokesman told the Sunday Independent: "The Joe Duffy Show did prompt a huge level of interest in terms of inquiries across the board."  
(Jody Corcoran, *Sunday Independent*, 21/09/08)

Two significant developments followed. The *Liveline* follow-up promo-ed for the next day was replaced and the Minister raised the guarantee on bank deposits from €20,000 to €100,000 within 48 hours. Whether you believe, with a senior figure in Irish banking, "That Liveline programme on Thursday was absolutely its single most destructive broadcast ever" (ibid.) or you agree with Cathy Sheridan that,

Absolutely no one – neither experts nor amateurs – trusted the banks or their guarantees, a point made by Joe Duffy. ... In fact people with entirely rational concerns were moving to protect their assets.

(*Irish Times, Weekend Review*, 04/10/2008, p. 1).

The banking crisis with its complexity and its potentially serious implications is not the only case where *Liveline's* intervention has caused opinion to be divided. Three of the Head shops were burnt to the ground and another pipe-bombed when pressure for their closure was at its height. Indeed, the case for criminalizing 'legal highs' has not been conclusively closed. Even the blanket coverage of cystic fibrosis problems did not have universal approval among campaigners; there were those who cited a heightened reluctance of patients to attend hospitals for treatment. The question becomes how it is appropriate for a powerful programme to function as an agent within the democratic process. There are issues of answerability, accountability and follow-up. It has been evident from our perusal that Duffy's and his team's investment in these causes, especially in the area of health care, is genuine and but there also exists the need to continuously question and monitor how the balance is maintained between the performative and the political and to preserve an awareness of the programme's place in the wider common good.

From the point of view of civic practices, these campaigning discourses, with their arousal to action and their proximity to centres of political decision-making, lift the programme beyond simple discussion and move on to a purposeful plane within the public sphere. There is an argument within the fields of popular culture and cultural citizenship that seems to attribute almost equal potential as a civic resource to a wide range of programmes. Citizenship is undoubtedly enhanced by sports reports and by reality TV shows. However my contention is that where there is purposive and effective engagement, such as that exemplified in these campaigns, then the nature of the civic resource is more direct, apparent and appropriate to the other dimensions of the circuit of civic culture. If I

may venture a sporting analogy; our daily routines – walking about, socialising, and solving the problems life poses for us - will, no doubt, make us better football players but it is difficult to better the benefits of training and match practice. Doing citizenship or listening to it being done is central to how we construct that facet of our identities.

### **Civic Identities**

Dahlgren suggests that this dimension is central to the circuit of civic culture and that it is entwined with each of the other dimensions. The knowledge and competence and values must both construct and be informed by our identities as citizens. Those practices we identify as civic, are civic because they entitle us to consider our selves as citizens. We cannot be citizens of nowhere or without belonging to a grouping into which we invest that 'minimal communal trust'. Hence his conclusion that, "identities of membership are not just subjective, produced by individuals but they evolve in relation to social milieu and institutional mechanisms" (2005b, p. 159). People need to see themselves as citizens for democracy to work and much of my argument to this point has been to suggest that *Liveline* offers particular resources as part of the social milieu and that these are enhanced to a degree by its nature as an institutional mechanism.

I preface the exploration of the ways in which the programme functions as a resource for civic identity by noting with Dahlgren, that citizenship is but one of our many identities (and I further suggest that it is possible to have even multiple identities as citizens). Thus we avoid the unrealistic "predetermined one-size-fits-all model" (2009, p. 119), which leaves us little room to manoeuvre psychologically, socially or politically. Secondly, he observes that identities change and develop. They are, he says, "not static but protean and multivalent (ibid., p. 119). Thus, we hear of people becoming conservative with advancing years or becoming more radicalised by oppression. Building on these observations, I suggest further that our identities as citizens are not monolithic. They can house within themselves contradictions, confusions and even inconsistencies. We may be conservative on one issue and liberal on the next. We may judge one situation with rational detachment and the next by applying an affective ethic of care. Some problems may leave us paralysed by doubt and confusion and to others we may apply the letter of the law. There is room for this spread within civic identity once there is a governing predisposition towards an expanded vision of a common good.

So where does *Liveline* fit as a resource for civic identity? I propose examining the data under two headings. The first will seek to examine how we construct our civic identities as members of a political community and the second suggests that the construction of identities is not a solitary project but is most often done in social settings. I suggest that, as listeners

to *Liveline* we, in a sense, co-produce our identities alongside the callers and the programme host.

For all the suggestions that our identities as members of a nation are being diluted by globalisation or by fragmentation or by individualisation, I suggest that our identities as citizens of a state continue to be robust planks in our understanding of ourselves. We have averted earlier to Anderson's (1991) concept of nations as 'Imagined Communities' and to Michael Billig's assertion that national identity is renewed and buttressed by the 'daily deixis of small words' (1995). *Liveline* contributes under both of these constructions. There is little doubt that it is a national institution: it is produced in the 'National Station'; it is predominantly received by a nationwide audience; it covers topics of national interest; and, as we have seen, it eschews extra-national affairs (VIV 6 & Appendix 4)

Looking at the text of *Liveline* it is apparent that the programme is intended for the ears of a national community that shares a common understanding of its own history and culture. Transpose it to non-Irish ears in, say, South Africa or Canada and the turns of phrase, the shortcuts to common understandings, and the cultural references would make little sense and require prohibitively long explanations. This might be illustrated in many ways but I will confine myself to some aspects of shared cultural references.

The talk in the sample threads is populated by a cast of characters who, literally, 'need no introduction'. There is a dense example in Thread A:

Tommy 48      It's not an exact science but we do have to at some stage hand over the responsibility of people choosing at the end of the day. You take for instance, Jim, Ted Nealon, David Thornley, Una Claffey, for instance, Sean Duignan – they went into private office in a political party. I could name a few others – Liam O Murchu, Joe,

JD 49            Stood for election. Orla Guerin stood for election

Tommy 50      Joe, stood for election four years ago and was on television and the radio – stood for election down below. Pat Cox. Pat Cox made a huge contribution....

Throughout this thread we are treated to a list of over 20 media and political figures who, as Irish citizens, we recognise readily. Again we are unlikely not to recognise the various institutions that crop up. We understand where Young Fine Gael (A Stephen 137), An Bord Planála (A Jim 36), The DIRT inquiry (A Tommy 22), and the NSPCC (FF7 William 130) fit into the national picture. In the cultural realm also there is an assumption that we live in a shared media world. There is no need for speakers to expand on *The Gerry Ryan Show* (M Roisin 90), *The Late Late Show* (K Jenny 248), *The Late Debate* (A JD 11), *The Irish Times* (A George 174), or *The Sunday Independent* (A JD 134).



Much the same type of consideration applies to the ritual introduction of new callers. They are usually identified by forename and broadly by county or large town.

A JD 95 Stay there, Maura in Longford. Marguerite is in Navan and, Marguerite you're a Fianna Fáil candidate in Navan.

.....

K JD 170 Let me bring James in. James, good afternoon.

K James 171 Yeh, I'm in Swords as well as that chap, Gary, there.

It is almost as if James needs to remind the host of the formula. Ian Hutchby makes the point that these geographic markers are offered to establish orientation (1996, p. 14). On the one hand, they are pins in the programme's map and, on the other, they are reference points for listeners and may shape the sense of what they are about to hear. Much the same may be said about locating the residential institutions in Thread FF7.

There is one idiosyncratic national reference from the host, a patriotic rally as he concludes his conversation with Ruth, who lives in France.

L JD 66 Okay, thanks, thanks indeed, Ruth. I do hope you'll come back. Remember Aer Lingus and Ryanair have special fares at the minute – do everything to get people to come to Ireland this year – spread the word! Spread the word, okay? Thanks indeed, Ruth.

L Ruth 67 As long as they don't use Hertz, maybe.

L JD 68 Well, we'll see. We might get a response and, by the way, Hertz do employ a lot of people in Dublin, in Swords, in their call centre in fairness and if you ring them from anywhere in the world you invariably get an Irish voice, which can be very friendly.

Duffy is keenly aware of how language constructs insiders and outsiders. We should examine our language, especially the use of words like 'we', 'us', 'them', 'society'. These words are used by the media in discussions and articles as terms of inclusion, but rather are heard and read as terms of exclusion, especially by the marginalised in society. Consider the word 'marginalised': it suggests a small space at the side of a page – yet the number of people who are outside the economic, social, political and power loop in Irish society would bring that margin into the centre of the page. (2002, p. 101)

It is of note that in a country where 10% of the population are foreign born,<sup>6</sup> there is only one contributor throughout our sample threads who fits that category and that is Deborah in Thread Y, who is from "Oregon and Alaska", a fact deemed "Fantastic!" by the host (Y 168 & 170). Deborah, I

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<sup>6</sup> See Share, Tovey & Corcoran (2007, p. 164)

suggest, is not exactly representative of the immigrant community and there were no other non-Irish voices evident in the rest of the threads in May. I have not specifically noted how frequently such voices have featured on *Liveline* in recent years but my impression is that, as a rule, the programme plays to and constructs a traditionally homogeneous version of Irish citizenship – an example of a discourse of absence<sup>7</sup>.

Jim Staken has noticed the change in demographics:

Y Jim 114 ...and I'll tell you what, I've been feeding a lot lately, Joe,... was a lot of foreign people. They come every weekend to me.

But there is an interesting cameo elsewhere in Thread Y that is indicative of a difference in the way rural and urban communities 'do' identity. In a rural context personal and family connections are important ties. We hear Michelle Miley phoning in from Vallemount in Co. Wicklow to support Jim Staken's case based on a connection going back over a quarter of a century:

Michelle 159 Yeh, I just wanted to call to express my family's support for him. My dad used to fix his ice cream van 25 years ago.

It does not work quite as well when an unconnected urbanite calls.

JD 117 Hang on, Chris is there. Chris, good afternoon. You want to give your support to Jim, the chip man of Glendalough.

Chris 118 Yeh, how's it going, Jim? You provide a brilliant service up there in that car park for a long time.

Jim 119 Who is this Chris?

Chris 120 Er..... Chris from Dublin.

JD 121 One of the walkers.

Jim is disconcerted and unsure how to deal with Chris, only entering into direct conversation with him after a further 12 exchanges.

Community identity and even citizenship become opaque in Thread FF7. we have seen how trust in the national community has become fractures for those abused. Figuring out who 'they' are and if there is a 'we' who can now aspire to joining 'them' is traumatic and not likely to be easily resolved glibly. We hear some of the results – broken and dysfunctional family life; splits and differences, even in their own support groups; and a deep loneliness and withdrawal from community. It was almost axiomatic to emigrate upon leaving the institutions. If citizenship was to be possible,

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<sup>7</sup> Aphra Kerr (2007) offers a useful overview of immigrant use of media in Ireland, including reference to phone-ins.

then it would only be possible outside this national community. We learn of the Boyne brothers in FF3+, one leaving for Canada and the other for the UK (DIVi 11).

Noel 39 I want to go away to Australia. I am going to have to make sure that my record is clean because I will be moving out of Ireland next year.

.....

William 150 The day I left Ferryhouse I got a fiver off the priest to get myself to England. I arrived in London. I became a *Long Haired Lover from Liverpool* – a hippie. I spent maybe eight or nine years at that before I settled down.

.....

William 166 Listen, I live on my own, right. I can't settle anywhere. I shag off as much as possible. I go down to London. I go to Morocco. I go somewhere, just .... I'm running away from myself.

.....

JD 201 So groups of Irish people who suffered are everywhere....

.....

Richard 216 I went away to England and lived ten years in England and I wasn't too bad. I was able to get on doing a bit of work and I used to do a bit of boxing and into sports and (inaudible) but when I came back home and it all came back.

If an illustration is needed of their disillusionment with the greater Irish 'they', Miriam provides it:

Miriam 14 But sure by the time *they're* going to bring *them* into court, *they're* going to be dead anyway. Do you know what I mean, Joe? It's just that *they're* prolonging this as long as *they* can. **(Voice cracking)** *They* should have done this .... *They* never believed *us* and little did *they* know it was going to come out 30 and 40 years later.

JD 15 And how would you feel about having to give evidence, Miriam?

Miriam 16 I would stand up in court and I would stand for every person that was in an orphanage and I would swear on a bible that these people should have been brought to court and the Vatican knew about it; the Government of Ireland knew about it; everybody knew about it but nobody did nothing about it because you know what *we* were? Wasters! That's what *we* were called – Rubbish!

**(Italics added for emphasis)**

William reaches for a metaphor to capture his exclusion in his home community:

William 160 I went back to Ireland. I lived there for a few years in Clonmel but I was just a monastery boy.

JD 161 What does that mean?

William 162 The blacks of Ireland, that's what we were.

There is a bitter irony in a government Minister insisting that the culture which gave rise to the catalogue of abuse was somehow un-Irish – imported.

Harry 278        Yeh, there was something on the radio on *The Marian Finucane Show* on Saturday morning and Mr. Wood was on and I'm absolutely disgusted at what he said.

JD 279            That's Michael Woods, the Minister.

Harry 280        Mr. Wood said,... he stated....., he said, "you know that was the culture of the time" and we're getting buggered, getting whipped, getting kicked all over the place and he said that was the culture of the time and , "don't forget that was all imported from England". In the name of heavens above, what type of man is he? Imported? And these adults, like! They had the Minister beside them saying this is what you do, is it? Is he trying to treat us all like idiots? He was protecting the clergy in my mind when he was speaking on Saturday morning.

Maybe these examples from FF7 contribute to the formation of civic identities only through a shared shame and possibly a spur to continuously question the contemporary institutional arrangements in which we invest our civic trust. Joe Duffy is right, on *Liveline* we learn as much about our own identities from what we exclude as we do from whom we count as 'us'.

I have adopted a phrase employed by Kees Brants where he refers to the phone-in host as 'a prudent co-citizen' alongside the 'lay' callers (1998, p. 176). The phrase has, I believe, an even greater richness than Brants originally intended.<sup>8</sup>

It reminds us in the first place that the host and, indeed, his co-workers are citizens in their own right. Citizenship is one of their multiple roles and their professionalism and performances are linked to their civic identities<sup>9</sup>. They do not cease to be citizens as they enter the door of the Radio Centre and their jobs there do not make them better or worse citizens. It is simply a matter that the cultural and technological affordances are different. It is, however, my contention that what they do in either site feeds across into the other. There is an inevitable consonance between the professional and the personal identities. Habermas asserts that your whole identity is linked to your life history (1992, p. 473). This realisation allows us to look at their biographies and settings outside of the studio to see where cross fertilisation might occur and how this informs how listeners make sense of *Liveline*.

This ties in to the 'co-', to the fact that the civic identities built by listeners are not built in isolation. At the reception end, the programme may be

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<sup>8</sup> Confirmed in personal correspondence.

<sup>9</sup> See Beck (1997) for a discussion on the links between professionalism and citizenship.

heard in social settings – the family, the workplace – and is often the source of subsequent discussion with others or of extended mediation. The interaction between the host and the caller is, at base, a collaborative one<sup>10</sup>. In addition to that, the interaction the audience experiences listening to the host conversing with callers generates a collaborative meaning-making environment.

The ‘prudent’ refers to the responsibility on the host to reflectively draw the line of practice on the civic side of the balance sheet.

I return to Brigitte Höjier’s argument that:

Narration, belief, and emotion are the building blocks of mediated meaning making. .... (and that) it is necessary to include perspectives of mind and cognition – human social thinking – in theorising and studying meaning-making. (2007, p. 33)

I submit that on each of these levels, we witness a collaborative process at work. On a cognitive level, as the listeners sit in the kitchen or the car and process the speech they are listening to, the host’s interventions are central to framing and organising the material for them. He sets the context, fills in the gaps in the information and asks the questions on their behalf. This latter Hutchby refers to as, “proxy questioning”: that is, standing in as a questioner on behalf of matters that the caller may not have thought of, or even of possible interests other than those of the immediate caller” (2006, p. 112). We see two among many examples:

FF7 JD 155      And William, if the extra money is going in, to ask this awful question, how do you think it should be given out?

M JD 53          By the way, when your dog died, what do you do with your dogs who died? Do you bury it or do you give it to the vet or...?

We have shown how he acts as a coaxer of stories, prompting, confirming and drawing out the teller – even picking up the threads of the yarn himself. He becomes the good listener that listeners have themselves would become. This is remarked as one of Duffy’s strong points. “The great thing about him is he is a terrific listener. He also has a finely tuned journalistic ear and doesn’t feel the need to impose himself on the subject” (Clifford, *Sunday Tribune*, 21/10/07). Duffy acknowledges this trait:

Yeh, I’d be a good listener. ... I think I have an intimacy in my head when people are talking to me – this whole thing, the one lone person.... single person.... headphones on....very much in your own world. (DIVii 29)

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<sup>10</sup> Avery Ellis and Glover (1977) point to the host and callers supporting one another. Brand and Scannell (1991) show the host and callers working together to produce appropriate talk in keeping with the style of the discourse. Ian Hutchby (2006) considers the interaction in phone-ins as joint achievements based on elements of turn taking, politeness, and ritual deference. Atkinson and Moores (2003) base their observations on Goffman’s notion of ‘face threatening acts’ and they show how speakers claim common ground in an effort to construct solidarity using forms of familiar address or colloquial discourse.

A necessary skill on the part of the production team is to allow the host the space to listen:

The shuffling of the studio can be an interference from..., can be a problem depending on who the producer is. ... Newer producers would start talking to you when you're talking, which is the most incredible gobbledygook. You can't, it knocks you off your stride. Some people talk too much in your ear. Some people come in too much .... but there is a concentration there.

(DIVii 29)

And Marian Finucane:

You're completely focussed on what's going on in your ears – just completely focussed. Carol Louth was a great producer. I remember we got another one in, who used to use the talkback, which used to drive me nuts and I was trying to figure out how I would say to this producer, "a better way to use the talkback is....". So I remember two days going down to studios with Carol, saying to myself (didn't tell her), "I must watch how Carol uses the talkback", and on both occasions, I came up and I couldn't remember. She just used it so well – just didn't intrude at all, but now it's all on messaging.

(FIV 25)

For me listening was always the big thing. .... I always say to people, "I don't talk for a living; I listen for a living", which certainly on *Liveline*, that's the skill – to be able to listen.

(FIV 19& 20)

Dahlgren, speaking of identities, notes that they, "develop and evolve through experience and experience is emotionally based" (2009, p. 119). We have recognised that storytelling, the witnessing to experience, is the predominant discursive mode in *Liveline*. We recognised too the importance of applying affective intelligence to the civic project and of learning the 'rules for feeling'. Listeners attend to the programme host as he responds to and empathises with the plight of callers and with their expressions and shows of emotion. The audience has the choice to accept or reject the emotional modelling on offer and in doing so to rehearse and review their own emotional responses. They may find in themselves the necessary enthusiasm and engagement to act civically upon what they are hearing.

The collaborative meaning-making is facilitated by Duffy's personal discursive style which allows him to link with his audience. Clifford describes Duffy as, "The voice of the people. Joe Duffy has gone from reading prayers for the Pope to taking calls from the proletariat and all in a homely Dublin accent." (*Sunday Tribune*, 21/10/07). When asked if he saw himself as a spokesperson for the common man or woman, Duffy was dismissive. "I wouldn't lose the run of myself now on that, if you know what I mean (DIVii 38). Finucane, in response to the same question, answers, "To a certain extent. And, also you feel you are facilitating people who are not experts or professionals. Oh, they're allowed on air too – but you are facilitating people in getting their point of view across" (FIV 26).

Duffy is right not to 'lose the run of himself'. His relationship and standing with his audience is a complex one. We have noted the contradictions earlier. He is, at one and the same time, a well-paid media personality and yet is positioned as a voice for the disadvantaged in society. I suggest that the reasons the programme 'works' in spite of this are, firstly, that the public has the capacity to absorb and obscure the necessary conflict entailed in their desire for a focal point and a voice and the knowledge that, to be effective and significant, such a voice needs to be located in a high-profile, well-resourced media institution. Secondly, Joe Duffy's story and personal style do not jar with his role. His is an acceptable narrative trajectory – guy from working class neighbourhood makes good; knows the story. Fair dues to him!

There is admittedly an element of speculation in this but at the very least there is no prohibitive dissonance between the public perception and the role. If Joe Duffy, or indeed, Marian Finucane before him, flaunted an ostentatious celebrity lifestyle smacking of privilege and patronage, then I believe, reconciling the identities would pose a far greater challenge.<sup>11</sup> Based on my assertion that the host as citizen shapes the programme and that the programme, in turn, shapes the citizen, it is worth looking briefly at those personal attributes of the presenters which are in the public realm and their links to the civic credentials of *Liveline*.

Joe Duffy was born in Ballyfermot, a working class suburb of Dublin.

Duffy grew up in a family of six and his father moved to England to get work. It was a tough childhood. When he was 12 he got a job at the Metropole cinema and joined an advertising agency after he left school.

(Profile, *Sunday Times*, 28/09/08)

He talks of his old school, St John's De La Salle College in Ballyfermot, and how he was lucky to get the break into college (Trinity) and broadcasting (RTÉ). "I look around that class and see all the people in that room", he says. "The smartest people I met through this business are no brighter or no duller than the people who were in that school in Ballyfermot. I think the foundation for that anger, or whatever it is I have, comes from the statistic I discovered when I tried to go to Trinity College. That statistic was that if you were born in Mount Merrion<sup>12</sup> you were 44 times more likely to go to college than if you were born in Ballyfermot".

At Trinity College he entered student politics, eventually becoming President of the Union of Students in Ireland. "He was the man with the megaphone, a working class hero destined for greater things" (*RTÉ Guide*, 01/06/09). "I majored in student politics", he has said. 'Throwing eggs and disrupting petit bourgeois affectations which bedevilled Trinity at

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<sup>11</sup> Commentary, following the recent death of Gerry Ryan, Joe Duffy's colleague on the successful Radio 2 phone-in programme and a self-confessed *bon viveur*, certainly opened a debate about the conflict between style and substance in our national confessions of the airwaves.

<sup>12</sup> An affluent Dublin suburb.

the time – and still do” (*Sunday Times*, 28/09/08, p. 17). “Like all good revolutionaries, he did some time. He and fellow activists were jailed for a week after occupying the offices of the Department of Social Welfare in a student medical card dispute.” (Clifford, 21/10/2007).

From student politics he moved to a job in the probation service and from there he joined RTÉ as a trainee producer in 1989. He found work on the *Gay Byrne Show* and the association with Byrne proved to be a productive one. He claims he earned his respect for callers from Byrne, but more than that, he could link to Byrne’s stature as the broadcaster, who was considered very instrumental, both via his daily radio show and *The Late Late Show* on television in drawing traditional Ireland along the road to modernity. It was on Byrne’s shows that, as Sara O’Sullivan (2005) points out, many of the intimate stories of a hidden society – joyless marriages, the stigma of illegitimacy, etc. - first saw the light of day.

Duffy leads a relatively modest lifestyle. Outside of the studio, his interests are solitary – reading, swimming and painting – and he is described by friends as, “quieter than you’d expect..... he far from dominates the conversation - quite the opposite” (*Sunday Times*, 28/09/08, p. 17). His public appearance outside of work are most frequently linked to community fora or to charity events.

He is also described as an intellectual and as masking a deeper and more complicated soul than being a rabble-rouser. The moral sphere seems important to him. We have heard his *Liveline* discussion range from a celebration of the relics of St. Thérèse of Lisieux to a rant about a nun’s complicity in abusing children. He has presented *The Spirit Level*, an RTÉ monthly TV series about faith. He does not see himself as particularly religious but says he has respect for faith (*RTÉ Guide*, 01/06/09).

He explains why he eschews the celebrity lifestyle:

I stay away from that one because the year I got my first break on *The Gay Byrne Show*, 1995, that’s the year my three kids were born at the same time. I started doing Monday and Tuesday on *The Gay Byrne Show*. Then in ’99 I got *Liveline* but at that stage my kids were four. I just couldn’t go out. You couldn’t go out ‘cos they’d only be ringing you saying, “Where are you?” and, “Who’s coming home?”, you know what I mean? So I didn’t. A lot of it is vacuous anyway. I was married with three very young kids at the same age so I just stayed away from that and still have. And, by the way, the more you stay away from it, the less they’re interested in you anyway. If you just don’t attend; if you just don’t respond to the invites, the invites stop coming – the openings and all that carry-on - and that’s the way. Sometimes there’s some things I’d love to go to. I won’t be invited. Oh, and the other thing is as well - it comes back to this thing - because there is nothing out of bounds on *Liveline* you have to be really careful that you don’t end up getting free tickets for concerts and for Slane and all that carry-on, which I don’t, ‘cos you could be complaining about them. You could be listening to people complaining



about them and I think the worst thing to say is what I heard recently. Someone was going on, raving about some Irish football match to a presenter in here – and Irish football match. And one of the callers said, “Well, hang on, how much did you pay for your ticket? I paid €85 to stand with my kid who paid €85 as well. How much have you paid?” And, of course, he hadn’t paid anything. So, without being po-faced, you have to be a little bit careful on *Liveline*, you know, because it is very transparent. Radio is very transparent.  
(DIVii 23)

Marian Finucane is similarly conscious that presenting *Liveline* carried an enforced responsibility:

I would be very conscious that if I were drink driving that it would be derrangl, so that puts manners on you. I think that what you hear – what you see – is what you get, that, that is who you are.  
FIV 13)

Her disposition in public life is also broadly civic. In an earlier chapter it was suggested that she brought to the early *Liveline* an aura of the pioneering activism of *Women Today*, a ground-breaking radio programme of the 1980s. Looking back she declares, “Well, I mean, I’ve been a card-carrying feminist all my life, do you know what I mean? So that’s going to slant what you do” (FIV 15). Asked if she considered herself to be politically active, she replied:

Not active but very aware; not a member of a political party. I was an activist when I was in college and I suppose you could say that I – what’s the word I want? – that I’m an advocate on behalf of hospice services. We have our own charity now, *Friends in Ireland* and that takes up a lot of my time but in terms of actual politics, absolutely not. I suppose you have to come back to what is political. I think I would have a fairly strong sense of justice and injustice – you know those kind of things which are not party political or anything like that.  
(FIV 14)

In fact, Finucane, who now broadcasts two of the station’s most listened to programmes at the weekend, devotes much of the rest of the week to her charity work and she spends part of each year visiting the orphanages and refuges she and her husband have established in South Africa.

Doubtless there are inconsistencies and anomalies in both of these public identities and there are always the huge salaries. However my contention is that the public perception of *Liveline* as a civic site is more cogent and more powerful when the biographies of the presenters are seen to correspond to the ethos it espouses. The performance of these civic identities on and off the air, adds an element of authenticity to the other dimensions of civic culture – the trust, the practices, the values.

### **Civic Spaces**

There is a general concern that in late modernity the spaces where citizens can encounter each other to talk have been shrinking or are under threat. (see Putnam 2000, Miller, 2006 , as examples). The worry is brought into focus for us by technological and social changes. New technologies have resulted in our being able to speak freely at almost any time and on any

subject. However, as Samuel Jones points out, we are talking less to those who do not share our interests and less to the people who are physically close in our surroundings.

It is an irony of our newly hyper-connected world that we frequently come across reminders that our face-to-face conversation is lessening. As we develop into a more individualised society, the time that we spend talking and in conversation with each other seems to be being eroded. (2006b, p. 23)

Jones goes on to argue the case for encouraging and constructing public spaces for deep conversation (ibid., pp. 112 & ff.).

In post boom Irish society there is a sense that the prevailing discourses have failed the citizens and there is a perceptible push to facilitate public discussion in a bid to uncover fresh approaches to common problems. Referring to the current crisis, which is as much political as economic, the President, Mary McAleese remarks that we are now obliged, "'to take a step back' and discuss the country's future. Ireland needs to channel the 'righteous anger' people are feeling into national debate, she said, and 'the more people who are engage in that debate, the more valuable and profound the outcome is likely to be'" (Scally, 2010, p. 12). Organisations like TASC and Claiming our Future are committed to public discussion but are hamstrung by lack of resources. Fintan O'Toole, as one of his key recommendations for democratic renewal in the present climate, includes, "Establish 'deliberative democracy' experiments in every substantial community in tandem with new local government structures" (2010, p. 241).

Scally continues:

Newspaper opinion and letter pages, television discussion shows and radio phone-ins all play an important role in national debate. But they are limited in reach and the need to attract audiences can leave discussion subordinated to polemic and populism. (2010, p. 12)

Commentators see some place for the phone-in in this newfound urgency for public discussion but are quick to identify its shortcomings. There is little difficulty in acknowledging that a programme like *Liveline* is not the whole answer but that should not prevent us seeing it as an important component of a multifaceted solution. It is as close as we come to a mediated national forum and it runs counter to the tendency towards fragmentation. It is the space where we hear voices other than those in our normal social ambit. It meets, in the context of civic cultures and in a limited way, the necessary "experiential proximity to citizens, (where) citizens feel that these spaces are available to them for civic use" (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 115). It is proposed to develop this idea of civic space further in the next chapter.

## Chapter Eight

### Discussion and Conclusions

I wanted to find out if listening to *Liveline* made its audience better citizens thereby enhancing the quality of democracy in Ireland. I was interested in finding out what it was about the programme that made it such a force and in finding a way to assess whatever effects it was having.

The story began in my reflecting on my own experience in radio production and a belief that it was possible to achieve worthwhile change via the airwaves. Here was a programme whose purpose seemed linked in some ways to democratic values and practices. In that sense, it made an obvious candidate for investigation. The story could have been told in a number of ways and from a number of perspectives. It might have researched listeners or callers and their insights and impressions. The story might have taken a formal political slant or a socioeconomic slant but the logical approach was to build on what I already knew of the production process and to use that as an aid to understanding the hours of talk which originate in the studio and which are heard across the country. I wanted to explore the link between that talk and the health of our democracy. I decided to listen to the programme over a one month period and to see if what I was hearing could be analysed in such a way that the civic impact could be established.

I needed to find out if this space for talk that was available to people could construct or change public opinion and what the result of that might be. One way of addressing this was to ask how the programme might sit within the theoretical frame of Deliberative Democracy. Consequently, as one main objective of this research I sought to determine to what extent, if any, *Liveline* might be considered to be functioning as public sphere. Certainly it provides a space for individuals to communicate in public so the focus falls on the quality of that communication. In order to qualify as effective, it was established that discussions should result in behaviour for which there are good reasons and which would be non-impulsive, thoughtful and fair. The way to establish good reasons and to eliminate the unreasonable is to offer evidence for claims made and to test assertions. I utilised Graham's (2008) suggestion that there are four possible ways of supporting and testing evidence. Speakers can offer facts or verifiable sources; they can make appropriate comparisons to corresponding circumstances; they can cite other examples; or they may draw on their own experience.

When I examined the discourses in six of the programme threads I could show that there was a handful of examples where facts were marshalled in support of whatever case was being argued. There were also some instances where speakers strengthened their arguments by reference to

comparisons with similar situations or using apposite examples. This is not particularly surprising. Habermas talks of rational critical debate as being similar to the testing of claims that is done in daily conversation (2006, p. 5). It is not that others dispute every claim made or there is an insistence on empirical evidence in every case; it is more that such claims are believed to be testable. We trust that speakers would be in a position to support and defend their claims if challenged.

I suggest that such testability is even more pronounced in *Liveline* for two reasons. In the first place, its public mass mediated character places a greater onus on speakers to be sure of their facts. They are open to a greater number of potential challengers and these challengers will have visual anonymity; they are open to a greater number of hearers, which widens the potential for the embarrassment of contradiction; additionally, their assertions become public record. In the second place, an important part of the preparatory work of the production team is the checking and verification of sources used in the programme (see O'Sullivan, 2000a, p. 53). The case has been made by Livingstone and Lunt that in access programmes, "expertise is undermined and lay discourse is elevated" (1994, p. 97). However in our samples we heard three authoritative voices contributing usefully to the arguments being developed. I suggest that these 'expert' voices are accepted as evidence of claims and do not jar with the general discourse because, in the first place, they are couched as 'ordinary' phone contributors and not inserted as pontificating studio guests; secondly they are shown to be of relatively low status and along with other callers they appear to have their own problems.

I was able to demonstrate that the final verification source identified by Graham is by far the most salient in *Liveline* – the recounting of personal experience. Given that Habermas allows for ethical reasoning which is embedded in the particularity of our life history (1992, p. 473), and given also the parallels to the use of witnesses as evidence in courtroom argumentation, I make a strong case that these testimonies represent *Liveline's* best claim to agency within deliberative democracy. Having looked at all the threads in the sample, I could confirm that the recounting of personal experience is one of the defining discursive modes in the show. These stories certainly act as a source of valid evidence but, in addition to that, they play a far more complicated role in the way listeners make civic sense of the programme.

The ideal, according to Habermas, is 'rational-critical debate' but it is acknowledged that *Liveline* is patently not a debate in the common sense of that word. There are not equal teams with matching eloquence and equal time allocations trading structured, logical arguments under the guidance of an objective moderator who will put the eventual outcome to a vote of the audience. However, neither is it the free-for-all, informal chat of, say, the hair salon or the barbers. I borrowed from Lunt and Stenner's

(2005) work on *The Jerry Springer Show* to demonstrate that *Liveline* elevates conversation to the level of a semi-structured debate and that it does have a range of debate elements. Proposals for discussion are offered; there is an agreement to stay on-topic; speakers are introduced and offered turns; and there is generally provision for a right of reply and contributions from other speakers. The host may moderate or question or summarise as suits.

These debate elements vary within and between programmes and from discourse form to discourse form but they have a bearing on the perception of rationality in the way *Liveline* is received. By their presence they contribute to making contributions less impulsive and more thoughtful; they also increase the levels of coherence and continuity. In addition, they afford a model for deliberative procedure, especially for dealing civilly with differences of opinion. I conclude that in the broader picture, the semi-structured quality reinforces the position of *Liveline* in the public mind as a routine forum where issues may be contested and aired.

I am aware that for debate, structured or otherwise, to contribute to the public sphere there must be political purpose. The normative and ethical must emerge. We are reminded by Habermas that without reciprocity or an 'enlarged vision', deliberation can play no real part in democracy (1992, p. 743). I show where *Liveline* has engaged in significant political pressure and social campaigns over the years. However for the most part in our sample threads we encountered the 'thin' democratic talk of a 'weak' public sphere. In other words, I concluded that any connection to decision-making as it related to political power was relatively remote.

I could show that each thread exhibits clear-cut examples of the emergence of the political, where personal issues were presented for public consideration and were responded to by at least one other. Many of these instances on *Liveline* find expression in the form of consumer complaints or warnings about scams. Civic responsibility takes the form of letting the public know or urging that 'someone should do something'. This is not to trivialise these aspirations or to render them ineffective. Given that the dominant discursive form is the recounting of personal experiences, this, almost by its very nature, positions others – both callers and attentive listeners – as having to process the enlarged vision; as accommodating the point of view of the 'other'. Hearers may ally with, or reject, or even be confused by the speakers position or argument but, in doing that they are engaging with it normatively.

I discovered that one broad normative theme emerges from all of the research examples and that is a bid for 'fairness'. From the opportunist plea for a share in a prize that was not won through to the confused and painful reactions to the details of systemic institutional abuse, there is an underlying appeal for fairness – a fair hearing, fair procedures, fair prices,

fair results. As listeners hear these stories which 'are deeply implicated in moral and political change', I suggest that they must, of necessity, inform the ethical frameworks of their future collective decision-making.

Just as *Liveline* is not debate, in the sense of a formal rhetorical contest or a political face-off, neither is it journalism in the 'reporter' sense, but once again I uncovered examples where the programme adopts a quasi-journalistic discourse. Journalism has traditionally been regarded as the domain where the mass media converge most closely with the ideals of the enlightenment and through those with the rationality, objectivity and accuracy required by the public sphere and deliberative democracy. I identified a couple of examples of journalistic discourse but in RTÉ these are usually the province of the newsroom or of Features and Current Affairs. The evidence throughout the month and over recent years shows *Liveline* functioning in the Fourth Estate 'watchdog' capacity. Both the corporate world and government agencies are subjected to frequent scrutiny. Taking a republican or transformative view of democracy, *Liveline* also showed its potential to act as an outlet for citizen journalism and when it engages in its social campaigns, the programme leans in the direction of civic journalism where it becomes a participant as opposed to a spectator or reporter of events.

My objective had not been to squeeze *Liveline* into some notional rational-critical debate box or to salvage the programme as a sort of make-do, imperfect public sphere. Rather, I aimed to acknowledge that for deliberative democracy to effect civic agency, to reach a point where the normative emerges from discussion, there must always be a minimal coherence, continuity, reflection, reflexivity and elimination of unreasonableness. In practice, listeners to *Liveline* hear callers making their points through a variety of discursive modes and with varying levels of clarity and conviction, but they do make their points. The points may not result in persuasion or in changing the minds of others but they are all, in Beck's (1997) terms, uncovering the 'prepolitical'. They are presented in a public and sufficiently structured and understandable way to allow them to contribute to the necessary filtering of public opinion. Whatever the pressures on *Liveline* as an actually existing public sphere, an analysis of the discourses I have chosen shows that it meets with Graham's (2008) and Dryzek's (2002) stipulations that the discourse must, in part, take the form of rational-critical discussion. Based on the evidence where I have shown that truth claims are made and tested, especially with support from callers' life experiences, *Liveline* belies assertions that it is a pseudo public sphere.

One of the things that emerges most clearly from the research is the importance both of stories and of the emotions they relate or inspire. I work from the premise here that cognition and emotion act as a functional sense-making unit and that both cognition and emotion are intrinsic to

narrative at all levels – for shape, for linkages, and for anchorage to a holistic real world.

I show in the sample threads that the most common verification tactic is the witnessing to personal experience – telling one’s story to make a point. “That’s true, it happened to me”. Stories are not only everywhere throughout *Liveline*, they are everywhere in human interpersonal communication and, as was noted, they serve other functions in addition to their power to argue and persuade.

The stories in our sample threads illustrated how they are located in the particularities of the lived experience – the geographic locations, the details selected in each scene, the cast of characters – and these particularities became the raw material for the creation of meaning-making patterns in a collaborative process involving the host, the callers, and the listeners.

I used Riessman’s taxonomy (2008, p. 8) of the functions of narrative in an attempt to link these meaningful patterns to the ways in which identities are constructed. She considers remembering – putting a shape on the past – to be the most familiar function of storytelling. This was most vividly illustrated in the cases of institutional abuse. *Liveline* offers the victims a space to remember in public and thereby takes their stories beyond purely interior validation.

When stories are used to persuade and to justify they can do so firstly, as I suggest, as evidence. They can work as evidence in a way that is distinct from piling up facts and figures. Where story follows story there is a powerful cumulative impact based on repetition and layering. Such stories draw the listener in, create an engagement, in a way that simple factual evidence cannot. However they can also be effective at establishing a pre-cognitive truth by drawing on the mythological or on pre-existing meta stories. The most pointed example from the research data was the connections made by abuse victims between their experiences and the Jewish Holocaust.

One of the research questions I asked was about alternative modes of deliberation – other ways of testing a claim or of making a case in the public sphere. In fact, it is more useful to think in terms of complementary or conjoint deliberation when we move to consider how the stories told or the emotions expressed in *Liveline*, not alone advance deliberation, but also introduce us to a more rounded understanding.

The majority of the stories we hear in *Liveline* are brief snippets. They correspond to the conversational social fragments from daily chat. “How was your day?” “Do you know what happened to me?” “Any news?” This goes some way to explaining their prominence on the programme but,

most of all, they are entertaining. We know that from childhood. It is difficult to resist the charm and human interest on offer in a tale such as that of Jim Staken. The host cajoles a yarn of loyalty betrayed by faceless and unresponsive bureaucracy. It is difficult not to engage with the drama.

However, as well as drawing on our sympathies, stories like this also reveal the pitfalls. There is a danger that analysis of the underlying political process is overlooked and a further danger that the emphasis on individual stories will lead to a corresponding emphasis on individual accommodations as opposed to collective consideration of the common good. Ruth may be satisfied with a refund from Hertz but the company is unlikely to change its corporate ways.

In the drive to entertain and engage listeners, the story becomes everything, as Joe Duffy concedes. There is a dilemma here. The stories contribute, on a number of fronts, to the civic project but without the guidance of critical reflection they have the capacity to obscure the political. In our samples, particularly in the case of the 'abuse' stories, the civic impact is potent and outweighs any fascination or hint of prurience. Jim Staken's story is about entertainment – the tale will not be disrupted by analysis and reasoned attempts to derail the human-interest discourse are resisted.

Similar reservations have been voiced about emotion in *Liveline*. Given the storied nature of the programme, it is hardly surprising that emotion is in evidence. Having said that, the emotion in programmes varies in its intensity, in its expression and in its function from thread to thread. I sought to identify emotional 'content' in a number of ways – explicit expressions of emotion, non-verbal emotional 'leakage', and callers linking into emotionally laden social triggers, such as family or puppies. The threads in our sample offered examples across the range. We heard mild expletives of frustration and we heard raw pain and distress.

There was no example here where emotion was gratuitously exploited and, to judge by these transcripts, callers were treated respectfully and sensitively. Broadcasting emotional expression and display poses complex difficulties especially on radio, which has advantages as an intimate medium but disadvantages in the absence of visual cues. It is difficult sometimes to read silences.

Apart from the occasional light or jocose interlude, emotion in the programme tends to translate into negative and distressing emotions.

Emotion, as I indicated, becomes part of the argument but as well as having persuasive properties there are other virtues in the listeners' experience. Engaging with mediated emotion can contribute to counteracting the 'epistemological deficiency' and under-emphasis on



affective intelligence and, as Pantti and van Zoonen (2006, p. 210) suggest, it can create an area where the 'rules of feeling' may be learned and rehearsed.

I wanted to examine how the process of production affected the discourse of the show. I asked what happened when 'ordinary' people's stories and arguments were repackaged by professional programme makers. I also wanted to ask what motivated the production team.

I found that a great deal of thought, planning and preparation is invested in each day's show. It would be naïve to believe it is otherwise. The drive to find enough suitable material could not possibly be left to the vagaries of spontaneous phone callers. While the programme does not trumpet the contacting and the research neither does it go out of its way to hide it. Regular listeners accept the conventions on offer – they hear contributors referring to their calls being processed; it is clear that the host has access to considerably more information than has been uncovered on air. The presenter makes a telling point when he describes the programme as 'caller driven'. It matters little if a topic is the result of an unsolicited and timely call or if a contributor has been contacted to initiate a topical discussion. If the calls do not continue to arrive the programme fails.

Once it is on air, the production process is principally one of selection – choosing what calls to put on air; choosing what discursive style and angle to adopt; choosing when to intervene or to terminate a call; choosing when to change the subject. There is one set of choices to be made when calls are plentiful and a different set when the going is slow.

It becomes apparent that a significant level of production is necessary. The programme will also fail if it is disjointed, confusing, boring or chaotic. Production is not just a necessary evil; it is central to the discourse. Every efficient manifestation of the public sphere in any walk of life demands elements of selection and production.

The evidence, particularly in the interviews established that the overriding aim of production is 'good' radio and in the case of *Liveline*, variety is seen as the best way to achieve this. We learn that commanding the attention of the listener demands a mix of voices, stories, 'pictures', topics, and the unexpected. The pay-off and confirmation comes in the shaped of maximising the listenership. The mix is marshalled by a good performance by the host. I should not have been surprised to discover that, while there may be other aspects to the role of the host – the ombudsman, the therapist, the referee, the activist, the preacher – these are secondary to the overriding imperative to entertain and to perform, and sometime at the cost of the civic.

In trying to square this demand to entertain above all else with civic and public service expectations of the programme, I suggest the distinction lies in the difference between tactics and strategy. Programme makers experience, on reflection, a satisfaction that the programme offers access and a platform for the voices least heard; that it challenges injustice and that it creates a significant stir in its campaigning but in the white heat of the studio, when the red transmission light is on, the emphasis is unequivocally about entertainment. All else is a means to that end. This is not a show about citizenship that happens to have entertaining qualities; this is entertainment that happens to have civic qualities. Who is to say it is the less civically effective on that account?

The way to reframe that question is to be found by expanding our idea of citizenship to encompass notions of membership of a national community and notions of the identities we create which prompt us to act in a civic way. The idea of a Civic Culture allowed me to interrogate many aspects of the programme with that in mind.

The discussion needs to move beyond unproductive dualities. There is no essential necessity to plump for a judgement on the balance of entertainment over the political, to set stories against debate, emotions against rationality or citizens against consumers. Such judgements are useful to monitor distortions, excesses and exploitations but ultimately limit our understanding of what are dialectic tensions. Dahlgren's idea of Civic Culture afforded the scope to reappraise the discourses in *Liveline*. I do this by looking at the programme in general and at the host in particular and how he, as a citizen in his own right, offers callers and listeners a collaborative meaning-making process. The dimensions of the circuit of civic culture furnish instruments to gauge how that meaning-making contributes to the public's construction of identities as citizens.

I could show readily that the programme does act as a resource for civic information. I suggested that information may not be as concentrated as might be expected in a news bulletin or current affairs programme (though, we had one example where *Liveline* followed on almost seamlessly from the preceding bulletin) but neither is it entirely lightweight. Information in the programme has the virtue of responding directly to the needs of callers and of being able to draw on unofficial and unusual sources. The elements of formal, structured discussion, I suggest, add to callers' and listeners' social capital and improve their civic competence.

I demonstrate that civic values become apparent via two channels. Those elements of semi structured deliberation identified earlier, offer a mediated template for procedural values, for dealing with differences of opinion with basic civility. The end result may seldom be consensus or a negotiated settlement but the process, as heard in our samples, with minor exceptions, certainly models respectful and attentive listening. Also in our

samples there are instances where substantive civic values are discussed. In one thread the nature of democracy itself is teased out. The stories of callers invite reflection on, for example, loyalty, honesty, and self-sacrifice but in May 2009, the most graphic illustration of civic values was by their absence. The right to care and kindness, to freedom and equal treatment, and a sense of justice and responsibility were extinguished for a group of young citizens and we heard the result. The value most discussed and sought after by callers as they aired their concerns, be they minor or major, was, as already noted, a demand for fairness.

I argued that *Liveline* exists in an arena of parasocial trust, somewhere between the 'thick' trust, invested by people in those they know and the 'thin' trust necessary for social interaction with strangers. (Politicians, it appears, operate on the thinnest filament of trust.) The programme host, and by extension, the programme itself benefits from a broad public trust. This is overtly confirmed by some contributors and is implicit in the fact that the calls keep coming.

*Liveline* reinforces the broad general thin trust of our society. It could not be deemed fundamentally revolutionary or subversive. On the other hand and especially in its ombudsman mode, it conforms to a trend in phone-ins where an almost subaltern counterpublic pose is adopted. The tone of the programme favours the populist and complaining about government seems to be a national hobby. Judging by the patterns of *Liveline's* sustained social campaigns, the Irish health services seem to be a particular target. Thread FF7 offered a pointed example of what can happen to individuals when trust never develops or is damaged by the system.

Civic practices are also identified in two ways in *Liveline*. The first manifestation is embedded in the ordinariness and routine nature of the programme's defining activity – citizens ringing in to make their points, to exercise freedom of speech. This activity is enlarged by the concepts of representation and of possibility. "Yes, that needed to be said" and "I may never call but I know if I get mad enough I can".

The second and more headline set of civic practices happens in the social crusades that *Liveline* embarks upon from time to time. It is my contention that these produce results; they make the news; politicians sit up and pay attention. These campaigns give the show clout and credibility. They raise its civic relevance above that of other popular cultural formats; they strengthen the show's credentials as a purposive public sphere with influence in formal decision-making arenas; they are something of a beacon in the remnants of RTÉ's public service remit; and they grow out of a genuine disposition to challenge unfairness and inequality. This is not to say that the boost in numbers, or the prestige, or the drama is not welcome but these do not necessarily indicate an overriding cynicism or negate a disposition of concern.

I address an important question when I ask how our identities as members of this democratic state is played out in *Liveline*. Yet again, I approached this dimension of civic identity along twin tracks. In the first, it was a relatively simple matter to show how *Liveline* helps to cement our identities as members of the national community through its use of the language of inclusion and by taking for granted large cultural parcels of shared understandings. There is not a one-size-fits-all Irishness but, in spite of shifting and porous identity boundaries, there is a sense in which the programme is defined by (and possibly helps to define) a 'middle Ireland'. Identity is complicated too for the 'new' Irish, the immigrant community whose voice was absent during our sample month. It is complicated also for those who had been 'othered' by institutional mistreatment and isolation.

The second perspective on civic identity drew on Habermas's (1992) observation that identity builds on an individual's life history. My argument was that the significantly civic and political features and the broadcasting track records of both Joe Duffy, and of Marian Finucane before him, have shaped the character and perception of the programme. There is strong consonance between the medium and the message.

It was important for me to establish that the programme makers themselves may be cast as citizens in their own rights. This, in turn, supports my suggestion that the meaning making, the civic working through that happens, is a collaborative co-construction of citizenship which is facilitated at the site of production but which is mainly played out at the site of reception. There is clearly scope to undertake corresponding research amongst listeners to fill in this picture of collaborative meaning-making

I have shown that there is a renewed demand for a space to address our current national issues. The phone-in is sometimes frowned upon in this regard with critics citing its limitations and the conflicting pulls on its priorities. There never was a perfect public sphere and it is difficult to conceive of a universally acceptable public forum. There will always be constraints about location, agenda, vested interests, procedures, representation, timing and so on. Part of the solution lies in making the best use of multiple fora; part lies in experimentation and innovation; and part lies in recognising and refining what is already available. *Liveline*, as a space, should not be ignored as a significant communicative agent in the democratic process.

This thesis had its roots in a personal reflection on the civic value of my own work as a radio producer at one period of my life. In many senses it can be said to celebrate the work of programme makers and this leaves it open to accusations of smugness, myopia and self-justification.

I attempt to counter this in critique in two ways. The first is to suggest that the perspective I have taken, in a sense, offers a necessary correction. I have found little work treating with programme makers as citizens in their own right. Indeed, they seem to be held responsible for many of the threats to the wider democratic process – dumbing down, ideological loading, consumerist dominance, tabloidization, and so forth. Academics in the media field and professional programme makers have different and conflicting sets of agendas. As Aslama reminds us, the mass media hold a dominant position in the public sphere but the dominant purpose of the media is not ‘public sphere-ing’ (2006, p. 15). Consequently there is a constant tension between civic and professional norms which needs to be policed.

The second defence I offer is to reaffirm my conviction that whether we are talking about radio output as deliberative democracy or as a symbolic resource, it is all the more effective for being produced, packaged and pleasing to the ear. Ginsborg notes, “Deliberative democracy is inherently chaotic. It needs ‘publicity’, facilitators, co-ordinators, meeting places, etc., which will speed the process on its way” (2008, p. 105). Schönbach points out, “In principle there is nothing wrong with this power of ... radio to set the agenda for public discourse. This is what the media are for in complex societies – to help direct public opinion” (1999, p. 57). I agree. Schönbach is aware of the consequent moral dilemma which requires an ethic of responsibility and accountability which is more than just about truth and accuracy – it demands sensitivity, care, a sense of proportion and balance.

Another possible critique of this work might be similar to Jacka’s commentary on the work of John Hartley. She suggests that in debating the ‘delightful demotic messiness’ of media, that, “he underplayed the way in which .... (a)ny form of public culture is structured by a series of power-laden discourses that require interrogation” (2003, p. 198). She lets Hartley off the hook by conceding that, “it was not that he was unaware of it – it is that he underplayed it” (ibid.). I may be accused of underplaying it also. I recognise and acknowledge the validity of the insights of those, such as Eoin Devereux (1998, p. 3), who posits that within RTÉ, programme content is shaped by the organisational environment and that as a result dominant messages are transmitted that serve powerful interests in moulding popular consent. Devereux instances images of poverty that divide the poor into the deserving and the undeserving. It requires no great conceptual leap to draw parallels to the portrayal of social ‘problems’ on *Liveline*. It would be not alone foolhardy and smug to downplay the significance of the ideological effect, it would be ethically negligent. I am taking it as a case that is made.

Ultimately though, I am swayed by Scannell’s argument that it is a ‘one-dimensional critique’, which need not be constantly rehashed. Under its

influence, “There is very little positive to study and nothing to learn from broadcasting. It cannot produce knowledge or understanding. It cannot transform perception” (1989, p. 157). It condemns all broadcasting to being inauthentic and capable only of being a pseudo public sphere. It is not as if *Liveline* tries and fails to produce a public sphere. Similar to Lunt and Stenner’s verdict on *The Jerry Springer Show, Liveline*, “combines some of the elements of emotional engagement, excitability and interest that are the province of the cultural public sphere, with some of the structures of rational-critical discussion that are characteristic of the political public sphere” (2005, p. 68). Habermas would have us believe that these features are inimical and displace each other but, with Lunt and Stenner, I suggest that they can work side by side. This has been my argument from the outset; it has never been about public sphere versus popular culture; both perspectives are central to any interrogation.

There is broad agreement that interactive media such as the phone-in can contribute to the democratic process. Graham and Harju encapsulate the main points of the argument:

The discussions that emerge in these spaces are an important object for research not only because they contribute to the web of informal conversations that constitute the public but because they also offer us insights into what matters to everyday citizens in society. They tap into a public sphere that is driven by citizens’ everyday life knowledge, identities and experiences and offers us insight into when the personal becomes political. Consequently these spaces, or the communicative spaces devoted to popular culture in general, are important because they help us better understand the ways citizenry is intertwined with aspects and practices of everyday life, the moments when the feel of citizenship emerges. (2009, p. 18)

So it is, as we see, possible to argue convincingly the democratic merits of the phone-in in general but generalisations, by their nature, have their limitations. The range of programmes which fall under the heading of phone-in is simply too wide and the balance of discourses between them and within them is too disparate to draw universal conclusions. This is the reason I have chosen to focus on the discursive context of one particular example. The hope is, in doing that, it becomes possible to extrapolate appropriately to other media formats.

To summarise the evidence in the case of *Liveline*, it has been shown that reasoned discussion did occur where claims were routinely asserted and tested; this assertion occurred predominantly through the recounting of personal experiences; the programmes exhibited elements of structured debate and that these contributed to the reasonableness and coherence of discussion; the programme also borrows from journalism, an influence most easily identified in its ‘watchdog’ role.

My analysis of the programmes showed how persuasion was enhanced and complemented by storytelling, which is a mainstay of *Liveline*.

Emotional expression, which was commonly intertwined with the stories, far from threatening rational discussion, reinforced deliberation by introducing the qualities of authenticity and sincerity. I argue that the application of the sense-making capacity of stories used alongside affective intelligence, not only enrich the cognitive elements of the programme but they add to the motivational and entertainment qualities as well.

The data indicated that the production process is where the balance has to be struck between 'good' radio and radio that does good. Undoubtedly the focus during production is all about 'good' radio – the theatrics, entertainment, performance, variety – always maximising the listenership. Civic values are essential to the successful product that is *Liveline* but they are almost incidental at the point of production. Conversely, for the civic values to be effective, they need the programme to be 'good' – to be clear, ordered, interesting and entertaining.

I systematically examined *Liveline* in the light of the various dimensions of civic culture and concluded that, yes, the programme could be shown, on balance, to contribute to each. The evidence was that it acted as a resource for civic information and to enhance civic competence; it could also be shown to both exhibit and to promote civic values. In spite of its decidedly populist style and the standard, phone-in anti-establishment stance, *Liveline* does not threaten that 'thin' trust which is necessary for the continuity of social arrangements and it reinforces an ill-defined but nonetheless real national identity. We saw civic practices manifested in the programme, firstly, via its institutional discursive positioning as a daily opportunity for ordinary citizens to air their concerns. Secondly, we saw it via its periodic social campaigns which demonstrate that such concerns may be acted upon successfully and may ultimately impact on the centres of political decision-making and power. *Liveline*, in its taken-for-granted, shared frames of reference builds its listeners into a common, if loosely defined sense of Irishness with both the positive and negative implications that carries. In an age when the public space in which these civic dimensions can find expression, is shrinking, the programme offers at least one extra institutional and varied arena.

Almost inevitably this work opens up more questions than it answers. Of its nature, it has its limitations and its blind spots. It sets out to meet the challenge of putting theoretical flesh on an actually existing public sphere by engaging in one form, of what Scannell calls, 'situated micro-analysis' of a concrete institution within Public Service Broadcasting. If the scope of the analysis had been broader the information and its interpretation would have been correspondingly richer. Although attempts to engage with the entire programme team and to undertake participant observation were frustrated at short notice in this instance, the justification for such broader based research still stands. Institutional transparency can only enhance

the programme's civic credentials. There remains a necessity to inquire further into the professional culture that surrounds programme making and to move our understanding of 'good radio' beyond a gut feeling.

Qualitative research into other perspectives would further broaden our understanding of the location of the programme within the wider public sphere. I have made passing reference to the policy-making and executive tiers at RTÉ. Detailed research here as well as with politicians and pressure groups could illuminate aspects of the 'clout' of the programme.

I am conscious that I have effectively shelved the necessity for audience research and research into the motives and meaning-making processes for callers. Given that I am postulating notions of co-citizenship and collaborative civic roles, the case is clear for complementary work in these areas.

A further widening of the research potential would be to exploit the opportunity afforded to engage in content analysis over time. A comparison between the threads in the first two years of *Liveline* and those I have identified in 2007 – 2009 might yield insight into how public discourses have modified over the intervening years and what this reveals about changing constructions of civic identity.

As this thesis evolved it became clear that there is room to explore further the margins of the theatrical and the civic. It is within these blurred boundaries that *Liveline* is located and there is, I suspect an imperfect and partial understanding of the processes which link the performative and the ethical. The question which arises how a vision, expanded by arational resources like narrative and emotion, can become normative and universal.

As callers stories were analysed (especially those of the abused), I became intrigued by the possibility of links between the individual's capacity to form civic trust and affinity and the larger capacity for ontological security. The stories point, as I suggested, towards theories of attachment and they open up this further arena for investigation. In a related area, there is the potential to investigate that curious parasocial trust we seem to invest in media personalities.

I feel I have only scratched the surface of understanding the mediation of emotions and the role played by these emotions in our sense-making project. We have, it appears, become comfortable with the portrayal of emotions in the fictional media genres but seem less sure about 'the rules for feeling' as they might apply to the production and reception of individuals recounting or displaying their emotions. I would make a case for a nuanced investigation of affective intelligence and how it may be



applied to address that 'epistemological deficiency' which inhibits a holistic understanding of ourselves and our links to society as complete embodied citizens.

On the grounds that there is little effective option, I take seriously Karl Popper's (2000) injunction that optimism is a moral duty and to that extent I have refused to demonise concepts which have predominantly attracted negative connotations in academic commentary – entertainment, institution, the market, politics, human interest, emotions, power. I suggest that we continue to approach these human constructs with a curious eye that sees them first as achievements and then subjects them to critical interrogation.

The arena that is *Liveline* is but the end product, the concrete convergence of an array of factors, of personal, professional, and political aspirations and pressures. It is the fruit of institutional and technological constraints and affordances. When we ask how it contributes to the democratic process we must also accept that there always lurks the potential for uncivic agency also. We have noted the dangers in our discussions – dangers that the quest for stories may inhibit analysis or a vision of a common good; dangers that the imperative to entertain comes at too high a price; dangers that the emotional becomes an end in itself; dangers that the standards of transparency and accountability it seeks in other institutions become diluted in its own case and particularly in the light of its considerable and effective public clout.

Judging primarily on the evidence and analysis presented here, and beyond that, drawing on a familiarity with the tenor and text of the programme over recent years, on balance, *Liveline* must be judged to have contributed significantly to the democratic process in the country. This judgement is possibly best understood by inverting the proposition. If those elements, which *Liveline* brings and which we have been examining, were to be subtracted from the media mix and if, for instance, the daily slot was to be filled by a different radio programme - say music requests or an expanded news feature – then I contend that the scope of communicative action within Irish democracy would be considerably impoverished and diminished.

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# APPENDIX 1

## The Programmes – May 2009

<b>Date</b>	<b>Thread</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Remarks</b>
Tue. 05/05/09	<b>A</b>	George Lee, RTE Economics Editor, enters politics	Variety of discourses evident – exchange of views on theories of Democracy, journalistic probing and political posturing
	<b>B</b>	Pressures and scams faced by small businesses	Routine warnings and recounting of personal experiences
	<b>A</b>	George himself	
Wed. 06/05/09	<b>C</b>	Burglaries	Victims' stories
	<b>D</b>	Tesco price reductions	Consumer complaints
	<b>C</b>	New twist at weddings communions etc.	Warning to others
	<b>D</b>	More Tesco.	
	<b>E</b>	Plastic bags at Dublin Airport.	Consumer complaints
	<b>F</b>	Catherine Dunne & Veronica Lario	More of a feature interview.
	<b>E</b>	More about DAA bags	Official spokesperson - a trivial and disproportionate debate
Thurs, 07/05/09	<b>C</b>	Burglaries at funerals	
	<b>G</b>	Car park painting scam Diversion to career of priest	Victim stories and warning to others – expert and official voices.(Result 1)
	<b>H</b>	Philip Cairns – search for body	Reminiscence with Garda
	<b>G</b>	Other examples	Victim stories in the recession.
	<b>J</b>	Repossessions by Finance companies	Very flimsy evidence
	<b>G</b>	More examples	
Fri. 08/05/09	<b>J</b>	Another example	
	<b>G</b>	Praise for Priest	Reminiscence
		“Funny Friday” Topics revisited - George Lee, DAA plastic bags, JD’s broken leg, the recession, Shopping in Newry.	Jokes, songs from callers & studio guests. Commercial discourse regarding prizes. Caution re election candidates
Mon. 11/05/09	<b>K</b>	“Wedding Journal” prize	Consumer complaints Aggressive debate

	<b>L</b> <b>M</b> <b>L</b> <b>K</b> <b>M</b>	Hertz overcharging for scratch Dogs out of control Hertz response More examples Dog Warden – the dangers of the job	2 interesting back stories. Consumer complaint Expert discourse also Personal stories –emotional. (Result 2)  Website taken down 'Light' exchange. Authoritative voice
Tue. 12/05/09	<b>N</b> <b>P</b> <b>M</b> <b>Q</b>	Difficulty collecting money owed Affordable housing draw More dogs out of control Traffic changes in Dublin City	Consumer complaint  Consumer complaint  More personal stories  Debate on the common good Celebrity voice Expert voice
Wed 13/05/09	<b>R</b>  <b>S</b> <b>T</b> <b>R</b>	Egg thrower at AIB AGM  Ineffectuality of recourse to the sheriff Report on arrival of Beckett Bridge More losses at AIB	Initially very much an interview – straight out of the previous news. Callers discuss manners, unfocused anger and the irrational. Complaints followed by the 'official' voice. Non-professional reportage.  Callers' stories
Thurs. 14/05/09	<b>U</b>  <b>V</b>  <b>U</b>	Single parent refusing job at IKEA – money not much better than Social Welfare Foster parents on absence of out-of-hours support service Resumes discussion	Callers express conflicting opinions – doesn't develop anything – Some useful civic information Experience supported complaints
Fri. 15/05/09	<b>W</b>  <b>X</b>  <b>W</b>	Report from a local at foiled Lucan armed robbery Recruitment agencies and nonexistent jobs	Link to prior news and fresh non-professional reportage.  Complaints and stories,  Discussion on sympathy for wounded robber, the jobs of security workers and the gardai.



	<b>Y</b> <b>X</b> <b>Y</b>	Lost fast food franchise in Glendalough.	Individual battles the faceless system. Cameo of local history An Institutional voice Additional calls of support
Mon. 18/05/09	<b>Z</b> <b>AA</b> <b>BB</b> <b>Z</b>	Dangers of Motor Cycling road racing  Welfare allowances stopped if abroad for more than 20 days. Caravan stolen within 24 hours Revisits Road Racing	Discussion pro and con. Some big underlying themes. Woman rings from Norway. Chat meanders colourfully. Caller seeks help.  Further callers
Tue, 19/05/09	<b>CC</b> <b>DD</b> <b>CC</b>	Complaints re antisocial behaviour by Blackrock Leaving Certs. Relatives being charged for fatal accident reports Further calls re school	Unproductive claim and counterclaim – central issue shifts to class prejudice.  Ombudsman session based on personal stories Does not add much – ‘light’ personal finale
Wed. 20/05/09	<b>EE</b> <b>CC</b> <b>DD</b> <b>CC</b> <b>FF1</b>	Complaint from unsighted man re parking on path More on prejudice towards Blackrock. More on fees for accident reports.  Further contributions Report on Institutional abuse	One-off complaint. Part of personal campaign?  2 Personal testimonials  Effective personal testimony with normative implications Attempts to simplify the issues and question JD’s partiality. Live reaction from 2 previous contributors
Thurs. 21/05/09	<b>FF2</b>	Mostly victims’ reactions to report. 2 contra-voices from Cappaghquinn.	Victims’ stories incl. UK magistrate and author. Unusual cross –discourse with callers who want to tell a different story.
Fri. 22/05/09	<b>FF3+</b> <b>FF3</b>	Caller from Canada trying to trace cousins. More tales of horror	Builds into colourful social history. Highly emotional calls.
Mon. 25/05/09	<b>FF4+</b>	Cousin found and on air.	Feelgood celebratory piece. Contrary to expectations and stereotype of victims.

	<b>FF4</b>	More horrific stories	Includes row-back by L.O.V.E.
Tue. 26/05/09	<b>FF5</b> <b>GG</b> <b>FF5</b> <b>GG</b> <b>FF5</b>	More personal stories of abuse. Reaction to Frank Dunlop sentencing. Yet more stories Disagreement over Dunlop sentence. One further experience	Particularly aggressive caller. Speech impediment not an issue
Wed. 27/05/09	<b>FF6</b>	More victims' stories – additional cash to Redress Board as unifying theme	1 major internal squabble – a lot of heat and anger – no consensus. Also much politeness
Thurs. 28/05/09	<b>FF7</b>	Yet further stories inspired by the Ryan Report loosely responding to President's remarks on possible prosecutions	The banality of the repetition of abuse
Fri. 29/05/09		Funny Friday 2 Again revisits some of the themes of the month but avoids any reference to "Ryan" Beckett, Leinster Rugby and the Taoiseach all come in for mention.	Opens with Pat Kenny on his last Late Late day. Mixture of homage and poking fun.



**APPENDIX 3  
DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY  
Informed Consent Form**

- I. Research Study Title:** Radio Airing: An examination of the role played by *Liveline* in the democratic process

School of Communications: Researcher Frank Byrne

- II. Clarification of the purpose of the research.** To inquire if the presence of *Liveline* on our airwaves facilitates listeners and callers to be better and more effective citizens

- III. Confirmation of particular requirements as highlighted in the Plain Language Statement**  
Participants will be asked to engage in a qualitative interview, which will be audiotaped

Participant – please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

Do you understand the information provided?	Yes/No
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?	Yes/No
Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions?	Yes/No
Are you aware that your interview will be audiotaped?	Yes/No

- IV. Confirmation that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary**

Participants may withdraw from the Research Study at any point. There will be no penalty for withdrawing before all stages of the Research Study have been completed.

- V. Advice as to arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations**

Participants are advised that they will not be named individually in the thesis or any subsequent reporting. All recordings and transcripts will be stored securely and ultimately destroyed. Information offered will not be used for any purpose other than academic research without renewed consent .

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Office of the Vice-President for Research, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000

- VI. Signature:**

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

**Participants Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name in Block Capitals:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX 4

All Liveline topic threads between 01/07/2007 and 30/06/2009

Cat	S1	S2	Thread Category	#	Sub	Total
<b>A</b>			<b>Consumer Watchdog and Complaints Department</b>			<b>262</b>
	A1		Prices		31	
	A2		Loss of earnings/deposits/investments		21	
	A3		Warnings re scams and con-artists		22	
	A4		Business owners complain		23	
	A5		Service complaints		165	
		A5	Financial institutions	26		
		A5	Airlines and airports	25		
		A5	Gigs and events	24		
		A5	Treatments and therapies	16		
		A5	Claiming prizes and vouchers	11		
		A5	Builders, furnishings and gardens	9		
		A5	Restaurants, hotels, caterers	7		
		A5	Miscellaneous service complaints	47		
<b>B</b>			<b>Ombudsman - complaints about officialdom</b>			<b>157</b>
	B1		Courts, sentencing, the legal system		12	
	B2		The Health Service		59	
	B3		Welfare payments and entitlements		15	
	B4		The behaviour of politicians		14	
	B5		Education and schooling		11	
	B6		The police		8	
	B7		Local Government actions and services		9	
	B8		Taxation		6	
	B9		Miscellaneous official services		23	
<b>C</b>			<b>Requests for help and offering cautions</b>			<b>21</b>
<b>D</b>			<b>Sharing personal troubles and experiences</b>			<b>87</b>
	D1		Addiction		8	
	D2		Physical/sexual/institutional abuse		23	
	D3		Financial hardship/ unemployment		13	

<b>Cat</b>	<b>S1</b>	<b>S2</b>	<b>Thread Category</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>Sub</b>	<b>Total</b>
	D4		Grief and loss		16	
	D5		Troubled/missing young people		7	
	D6		Miscellaneous hardships		20	
<b>E</b>			<b>Social/Cultural/Civic standards and behaviours</b>			<b>229</b>
	E1		Antisocial behaviours		150	
		E11	Attacks and assaults	43		
		E12	Theft and burglary	26		
		E13	Gangland related	9		
		E14	Bullying, intimidation	11		
		E15	Poor taste/ offensive/ bad manners	22		
		E16	Littering, vandalism	7		
		E17	Discrimination - ethnic/gender	6		
		E18	Miscellaneous misbehaviours	26		
	E2		Discussion of religious/moral issues		22	
	E3		Political issues		12	
	E4		Protests and industrial action		12	
	E5		Popular culture		33	
		E51	Sport	13		
		E52	Celebrity and entertainment issues	8		
		E53	Media	7		
		E54	Art	5		
<b>F</b>			<b>Identity - Constructing the self and the other</b>			<b>48</b>
	F1		International events		10	
	F2		Cross-border issues / boundaries and differences		13	
	F3		Historical events		7	
	F4		Personal reminiscences - micro history		9	
	F5		Celebrations and tributes		9	
<b>G</b>			<b>Quirky, complex, difficult to categorize</b>			<b>75</b>
			<b>Grand Total threads</b>			<b>879</b>

