

Chapter 6

Government, Public Broadcasting and the Urge to Censor

Farrel Corcoran

As many dissident artists have noted over the years, Irish society in the first half of the twentieth century tended to be closed and introverted, dominated by authoritarian traditions well entrenched in both church, state and many parts of civil society. Journalism too was influenced by the general cultural climate in which censorship thrived and it developed no great tradition of independence or assertiveness. The general tendency towards caution made it easier for political authorities to keep the media under control. So in the ten years before Section 31 was activated, it is not surprising to find that the urge to control broadcasting output was constantly bubbling under the political surface, though governments hesitated at the thought of actually invoking their legislative power to censor. It is worth reviewing the period of the 1960s briefly, to get a sense of this urge and the tensions that existed between government and the public broadcasting system it created.

The urge to censor

Shortly after Tom Hardiman became Director General in April 1968, the Chairman of RTÉ, Todd Andrews, invited the Minister in charge of Broadcasting, Erskine Childers, to dinner to meet the new Chief Executive of the country's most important cultural organisation. RTÉ had come through its first seven years of existence, the last three of them characterised by growing unhappiness among the staff at what was seen as increasing pressure from ministers to control television output in their favour. In the course of the meal, the Minister handed Andrews a plain sheet of paper containing about a dozen names of RTÉ employees and programme guests who, according to the Minister, were 'lefties, if not card carrying Communists, who should be treated as suspect subversives'. The Minister refused to disclose the source of the document, but Andrews

immediately replied that it had been compiled by the Garda Special Branch (recently the object of a television documentary probe) under the inspiration of the ‘paranoid Department of Justice’, that RTÉ would pay no attention to the allegations, and that it was not the job of the Special Branch to ‘institute a system of thought control or act as purveyors of political gossip’.¹ The Chairman made the point that as a young man he and many of his associates had suffered from harassment by the Special Branch, some being driven to emigration, and that he was determined that no one should suffer economically or otherwise for their political opinions. He later put these thoughts to the Minister in a letter and asked that it be shown to the Taoiseach, Sean Lemass. It wasn’t, but secret lists were never mentioned again.

This dinner table vignette illustrates the enormous vulnerability of RTÉ to manipulation by the forces of the state. What is at stake is the demonstrated power of the media to shape the agenda of public discussion, to impose a primary definition on a controversy and to put a particular frame around issues of vital importance to the health of a democracy. RTÉ had to learn, through several bitter experiences, how to handle pressure from government and facilitate the emergence of an ethos that would have more in common with an ideal of public broadcasting rather than a state broadcasting model. Irish broadcasters and politicians had to learn, slowly and painfully, how to reconcile the desire for political freedom and the liberty of political choice, with the need to defend the cultural preconditions and accommodations on which both depend in the public sphere, especially freedom of expression.

There is no doubt that government found it extremely difficult to come to terms with the new radio and television organisation that it had created. Boundaries between government and RTÉ had to be established pragmatically, by experimentation and within the political culture of the time, each side testing its power and gauging possible reactions. Before the station opened, its first Director General, Ed Roth, asserted that RTÉ ‘would not be a political organ of the government of the day’. After six long years of frustration, much of it with RTÉ’s news and current affairs output, during which he dallied with the notion of establishing a Minister for Information to oversee the work of

RTÉ, Lemass made his famous declaration in the Dáil that ‘RTÉ was set up by legislation as an instrument of public policy and as such is responsible to the Government...to this extent the Government reject the view that RTÉ should be, either generally or in regard to its current affairs and news programmes, completely independent of Government supervision’.²

This well-prepared assertion of government power was prompted by a row between Charles Haughey, Minister for Agriculture, and the National Farmers Association, that dragged RTÉ - government tensions fully into the public spotlight. Haughey complained to the RTÉ Newsroom about the insulting juxtaposition on the news of a statement from the NFA with a statement of his own. The NFA statement was deleted from subsequent bulletins. The NUJ and the Dublin newspapers were incensed by this interference. Haughey responded with further pressure on the current affairs television programme *Division*, which insisted on presenting both government and farmers’ views. Haughey boycotted the programme but *Division* continued without Fianna Fáil input and its sister, the current affairs programme *Seven Days*, responded by devoting a whole week of programming to media freedom, exploring government and commercial interference in broadcasting in other European countries and the USA.³

Todd Andrews believed in the Lemass doctrine that it was the duty of the RTÉ Authority to support official policy and this emerged clearly in his handling of the Hanoi affair. The Authority initially supported the sending of a television team to North Vietnam in April 1967, feeling that RTÉ coverage of the war relied excessively on British and American sources, and that it was time that RTÉ developed a more ambitious news gathering operation in its coverage of world affairs. An Irish point of view could replace what was perceived as an excessive reliance on a British or American interpretation. When the Department of Foreign Affairs objected to this, Andrews’ concern was to find out if the objection was based on a government decision or merely the personal view of an individual Minister. He considered, and then rejected, the possibility of insisting that if the government wanted the project cancelled, it should exercise its statutory powers of veto by issuing a formal instruction. He telephoned Jack Lynch, who had succeeded Sean

Lemass as Taoiseach, and they agreed to publish a public statement to the effect that sending a news team to Hanoi ‘would be an embarrassment to the Government in relation to its foreign policy’.⁴ A short time later, a *Seven Days* team led by Muiris MacConghail, on its way to Biafra during the Nigerian Civil War, was recalled when it was already in Lisbon, though Todd Andrews was at pains to point out to Garret FitzGerald at the time that the Irish Government was not involved in the decision. Despite this setback, a programme on Biafra was put together, combining acquired footage with an RTÉ commentary. This was criticised by the Nigerian Ambassador for giving ‘an unfavourable and unfair impression of the Nigerian Government’ and the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs asked the Authority for a copy of the programme. The uproar that ensued inside RTÉ, in the newspapers and in Dáil Éireann, focused on both inappropriate use of government power in broadcasting and excessive acquiescence to this power by RTÉ.

The effects on RTÉ

Arising from these skirmishes, there were significant long-term consequences for the national broadcaster. Staff morale and confidence in senior management were left severely bruised. Many felt the Authority, which had been appointed to defend the rights of free expression in broadcasting, had abandoned those rights. Todd Andrews himself regretted not having insisted that the government use its statutory veto power, though this extended only to preventing the transmission of a programme, not gathering material for its production. Yet he and the Authority went on to veto a programme dealing with the activities of the Garda Special Branch, after it had been made and scheduled for transmission. The subsequent moving of *Seven Days* to the News Division, widely seen by staff as an expression of no confidence by the Authority in the Programmes Division, brought the organisation to the brink of an all-out strike.⁵ Yet the government assumption throughout the 1960s, that it should control RTÉ as tightly as it could a government department, continued to impinge on the organisation and on public perceptions of the ‘independence’, or lack of it, in the national broadcasting organisation. When Director General, Kevin McCourt, resigned and the RTÉ Authority was in the process of selecting his successor, the Minister, Erskine Childers, conveyed the government’s interest in

knowing the names of applicants for the job, a request refused by Todd Andrews on the grounds of an obligation to observe confidentiality for all candidates.

The impact of Section 31 on RTÉ after 1972 has been well documented elsewhere (see especially Horgan, 2004 and other contributions in this volume), so only a few brief observations will be made here. Firstly, Section 31 acted as a censoring device in political communication for a long time but it can be argued that it also provided a form of protection for RTÉ in other areas. It allowed broadcasters to deflect inappropriate government pressure by pointing out that there was a statutory method available – the written directive – should government choose to use it. Both sides knew that government was unwilling, for political reasons, to invoke Section 31 except in the most serious circumstances. Secondly, Irish newspapers provided very little editorial support for RTÉ in its early difficulties with political censorship (though NUJ members supported their colleagues in RTÉ who used a 48-hour work stoppage to protest against Kevin O’Kelly’s conviction in 1972). There is even some evidence that a ‘Section 31 mind-set’ took a hold on newspapers too, though they of course had no legal obligations under the 1960 Act.⁶ Thirdly, many of the more absurd applications of Section 31 (such as its extension to court reporting, or the cutting of two minutes from a Robert Kee documentary on Irish history purchased from ITV, or the censoring of Sinn Féin members’ views on industrial relations disputes or rose-growing or bee-keeping) can be traced to the imprecise language in which directives were written and government refusal to offer clarification. The technique used by Kevin O’Kelly in his controversial 1972 radio programme, for instance - reporting on an interview with an IRA leader without allowing the leader’s voice on air - was used by another journalist, Liam Hourican, a little while earlier and produced no adverse government reaction. (In the attempt to allow some information about the IRA to be transmitted, RTÉ reporters later resorted to the expedient of having one journalist interview another journalist who had interviewed an IRA member.) Fourthly, the history of RTÉ’s adjustment to Section 31 directives is characterized by complex tensions between and within trade unions in broadcasting, and between the RTÉ branch and the NUJ headquarters. Tensions between the National Union of Journalists and the Workers Union of Ireland were particularly strong and tended to amplify existing

organizational turf wars between News (staffed mostly by NUJ members) and Current Affairs (staffed mostly by WUI members in the Programmes Division) over coverage of general elections, budgets and other critical events. Attempts to answer the rather innocent question of why RTÉ workers could not have found a consensus against accepting censorship, or in favour of constantly testing the limits of the regulations, must take this frequently fractious and bitter trade union history into account.

Many of the later criticisms of RTÉ's excessive caution in investigative journalism and its constant apprehensions about government attitudes in general, should be examined in the context of organizational reactions to a prolonged period of censorship. Editorial caution can be seen in hindsight as one of the long-term, deep structural effects of Section 31. A 1977 NUJ document, for example, notes that 'the ultra-cautious atmosphere which Section 31 and the guidelines have fostered in the newsroom and programme sections has meant that enquiries into controversial areas have not been encouraged... There is now a general anxiety about tackling stories which might embarrass the government on the issue of security'.⁷ Ten years later, an International Federation of Journalists fact-finding mission to Ireland to examine the question of news censorship pointed to several contradictions in the application of Section 31, including the banning of Sinn Féin from the airwaves but the official recognition of it as a legitimate political party. Several journalists and editors interviewed by the IFJ team saw Section 31 in the light of Irish Governments responding to British pressure, while at the same time gaining some electoral advantage at home in denying publicity to Sinn Féin. The IFJ concluded that 'the most dangerous effect of the present Section 31 practice is the creation of a general climate in which restrictions on the media and free journalism are accepted and defended'.⁸

Post Section 31 adjustments

The Section 31 directive was finally allowed to lapse in January 1994 in the lead-in to establishing a new IRA cease-fire.⁹ The British ban was lifted shortly afterwards. The Minister in charge of broadcasting, Michael D. Higgins, argued that 'deterministic' views of television's power over viewers were now outdated and that people had the capacity to

make up their own minds about what they saw on television. The final act in the long saga of Section 31 was RTÉ's own difficult adjustment to the new censorship-free environment. This writer found himself at the centre of this period of change, as a participant rather than an observer, when he was appointed Chairman of the RTÉ Authority for the period from 1995 to 2000.

Passionate debate was the order of the day when we came to discuss how RTÉ journalists were handling Sinn Féin interviews, in a broadcasting atmosphere adapting very cautiously to the ending of the ban. In the opinion of many commentators, but probably not a majority on the RTÉ Authority, the decisive ministerial action of allowing the Section 31 directive to lapse, reversing a policy that had been in place for two decades, was to play a major role in advancing the peace process in Northern Ireland. I believe historical hindsight will validate this judgment. But in the first few years of post-Section 31 broadcasting, I could never be sure that a majority of my colleagues didn't deeply resent the newfound freedom of Sinn Féin to speak directly to journalists and to Irish audiences. Over the previous two decades, many complex layers of self-censorship regarding 'The Troubles' had evolved within RTÉ, aided by the formation of unofficial staff watchdog groups associated with Sinn Féin the Workers Party, which had descended directly from Official Sinn Féin after the split in the Republican movement in the early 1970s. The 'Stickies', as they were popularly known, had become increasingly sympathetic to unionist and revisionist interpretations of the conflict in Northern Ireland and pushed their newfound interpretation of the conflict through the Ned Stapleton Cumann, which operated within the RTÉ branch of the Workers' Union of Ireland. Pressures towards censorship, deeply embedded in different parts of the organisation, intimidated staff into accepting, however reluctantly, forms of self-censorship that went far beyond the letter of Section 31. President Mary McAleese has given some insight into the editorial atmosphere of her time in RTÉ, sometimes encountering a tendency towards anti-Nationalist bullying in her work as a researcher in Current Affairs, especially around the time when hunger striker Bobby Sands was elected to Parliament at Westminster in the early 1980s.¹⁰ Revisionism had also taken a grip on most of the national newspapers, to the extent that many print journalists avoided important stories like the Guilford Four

and the Birmingham Six miscarriages of justice, for fear of being labelled Provo sympathisers.

The challenge in 1996 was how to sweep away the damaging aftermath of the censorious mindset of the 'Stickies' and remove the fear of being a 'hush puppy' (the derogatory term used to signify those considered to be 'soft' on the Provisional IRA and Sinn Féin). The challenge was made all the more difficult because of the deeply coded way in which discussion of this problem usually took place within RTÉ, even at senior management level. It was difficult for a newcomer like myself to decode some of the talk, and some of the silences, about the internal censorship campaign waged by the 'Stickies'. In some cases, there were obvious similarities with the anti-communism hysteria and the purges of staff in the US media industry in the early 1950s, where various layers of guilt for not recognising and resisting the danger to free speech represented by McCarthy outlasted the end of the actual purges by several years.

The question of how to handle Sinn Féin, newly released from years of broadcasting exile, surfaced in Authority discussions in 1996, initially in the form of reactions to news coverage of anti-drugs campaigns in Dublin's inner-city neighbourhoods and Sinn Féin's role in them. There is a certain irony in the fact that as journalists were adjusting slowly to the ending of Section 31 censorship, RTÉ was at the same time working to increase its transmission power northwards. This reflected the belief that by achieving symmetry of television reception on both sides of the border RTÉ could play a role in increasing mutual understanding between unionist and nationalist cultures and perhaps achieving reconciliation across the various borders of tradition, politics, religion, group memory and historical identity that had plagued Ireland for so long. RTÉ engaged in diplomatic negotiations and engineering field strength trials that precede full-power operations in a very low-key manner, announcing the increased television availability in the North only to television set dealers and on teletext. This was to avoid adverse reaction and xenophobic outbursts from politicians representing certain sections of Northern Ireland society who would abhor the ideological pollution that would start drenching the population from full-power RTÉ transmitters, now liberated from Section 31.

The summer marching season in Northern Ireland presented special challenges to the Newsroom. How does a journalist maintain high standards of fairness, impartiality and objectivity in some of the highly-charged, key confrontations in the summer calendar, where one group is driven by fanatical feelings of group superiority, historically rooted in the need to intimidate neighbours, and another group is organising resistance to this triumphalism? There was a certain timidity on the part of the RTÉ Newsroom about coverage of the Northern Ireland summer confrontations over use of public space for marching, a fear that television news, as it sought to report on events, might in fact inflame those events. This was the old Yeatsian worry that our words and our pictures might send certain young men out to die. My academic instinct was to distrust this ‘hypodermic’ paradigm of media effects – the notion of media directly, powerfully and uniformly influencing viewers – as a simplistic approach to understanding the television viewing experience, already abandoned by media theorists.¹¹ Whatever about a poet’s verse, television output has an impact that is more inclined to be indirect, complex and biased towards cultivating a ‘mainstream’ view.

Some Authority colleagues worried about Charlie Bird’s animated style of delivery, in his reports from northern hotspots like Drumcree and the Apprentice Boys march in Derry.¹² My fear was that an institutional timidity about reporting Northern Ireland, deeply entrenched in Section 31-induced self-censorship patterns, might continue to produce a televisual blandness that would bore and alienate audiences and lack relevance, rather than grip and involve the core RTÉ audience. If it is to remain relevant to Irish people, RTÉ must in fact be shielded from all forms of censorship, so that it can sharpen its critical edge. The colour and emotion in Charlie Bird’s reports were therefore to be valued for the way in which a real sense of the tensions in Northern Ireland could be communicated to people who rarely travel north of the border. After all, within a few years, new commercial radio and television stations would be reporting in their own graphic styles, unencumbered by any institutional memory of ‘Stickies’ or Section 31.

The Sinn Féin challenge

Such was the unhealthy legacy of Section 31 in RTÉ that loose talk about ‘robust journalism’ could be quickly recoded as ‘hush puppy journalism’ that might give succour to the Provos. Some colleagues on the Authority believed that the RTÉ Newsroom had a ‘Republican agenda’ and that this was obvious in its coverage of the anti-drugs campaigns in Dublin, which did not sufficiently highlight the ‘sinister’ leadership role of Sinn Féin in these inner-city crusades against drug dealers. But side by side with this view on the Authority was the criticism that some RTÉ programmes were treating Sinn Féin politicians in an unnecessarily aggressive way. The phenomenon of selective perception operated consistently in this area, linking commentators’ personal orientations to ‘The Troubles’ with their perceptions of how RTÉ was handling Sinn Féin. In the jargon of the time, who was in charge of the news, ‘Stickies’ or ‘Shinners’? The question was something of a Rorschach test.

In 1997, Authority discussions about Sinn Féin tended to focus on two questions: was Sinn Féin being given too much access on the airwaves and were RTÉ staff adequately prepared in interviews to manage the very considerable oratorical acumen believed to reside within the Sinn Féin organisation? Some colleagues felt RTÉ needed clearer editorial guidelines as to when it was appropriate to interview a Sinn Féin spokesperson, as the party was adroit in managing its media exposure to suit its own circumstances. We tended to disagree over whether there was too great a presence of Sinn Féin people on air. On the one hand, the party was relatively small in electoral terms and its share of broadcast time should arithmetically reflect this. On the other, decisions made by Sinn Féin were inherently more newsworthy than the moves of most other parties, since they were the main conduit of information from the IRA about maintaining a ceasefire, and later, moving towards decommissioning weapons, two key aspects of the unfolding drama of the peace process.

There was by now no longer a strong belief among members of the Authority that there was a seriously sympathetic ethos in favour of Sinn Féin embedded among RTÉ staff, and certainly no fear of a conspiracy to promote its aims in contravention of the legal

requirement for RTÉ to observe impartiality in its news and current affairs output. Eoghan Harris, long since retired from RTÉ, stridently kept alive his ‘hush puppy’ accusations from the vantage point of a weekly column in the *Sunday Times*, but the actual debate had moved on to the notion that RTÉ staff were simply not able to handle the very sophisticated debating skills of people like Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness and Mitchell McLoughlin. RTÉ managers were frustrated by Sinn Féin’s capacity not to respond to critical questions posed by journalists, or to respond only with bland truisms, particularly when challenged to clarify the Party’s relationship with the IRA. This was an obsessive question, on the lips of most journalists in 1998, and Sinn Féin was giving coy or evasive answers when challenged, or brilliant long-winded lectures on nationalist history. The ambiguity inherent in Sinn Féin’s depiction of its relationship with the IRA was intensely frustrating for many journalists, though commentators today would tend to acknowledge the necessary role played by ambiguity on all sides in this period, in keeping the peace process alive for so long. Most broadcast interviews quickly turned into very emotionally tense debates, and the concern about this at Authority and senior management levels tended to be framed in terms of perceived imbalances in debating skills: on the one side, naïve and poorly trained RTÉ journalists, and on the other, battle-hardened men and women whose debating prowess stemmed from long years of training in survival skills, including, as we were reminded by one Authority colleague, preparation for the intense experience of interrogation in grim RUC and British Army conditions, far removed from the niceties of Dublin 4 studios.

To my mind, the bottom line for the Authority was to avoid a situation where a heavy-handed top-down regime of managerial control would be re-imposed on journalists before they had the time to get to grips with Sinn Féin’s debating style. It was vital to avoid the re-imposition of the rules of upward-referral put in place in the Newsroom in the immediate aftermath of the suspension of Section 31 but then relaxed. Even a partial re-imposition of censorship would be no help to the peace process. There was certainly an imbalance in many interviews on radio and television in this period, where RTÉ journalists seemed frequently to be losing the argument. Even the urbane Gay Byrne, who had interviewed kings, emperors and vagabonds with supreme confidence, seemed

to some critics to come off second best in his very wary encounter with Gerry Adams on the *Late Late Show*.

Any realistic analysis of the situation would have to conclude that Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness were not at this time going to clarify the exact nature of their relationship with the IRA, no matter how high the 'skill levels' of RTÉ journalists. When they were allowed access to the airwaves from 1994 on, it was inevitable that they would have long, pent-up tales to tell of oppression and humiliation suffered by the nationalist population in Northern Ireland over many decades, whether or not we in the Republic wanted to listen. Sinn Féin had been waiting a long time to tell its side of a story. Hitherto, the story had had been dominated for a very long time by the press relations skills of the British army, aided by friends in the London newspaper establishment like the *Daily Telegraph*.¹³ But RTÉ had been conditioned by decades of censorship to be unprepared for these outpourings, which were radically transforming the mix of political information available to Irish citizens. At no time was I sure that a majority of my colleagues on the Authority agreed with me, some claiming that they knew what was 'really going on' inside what was called 'Sinn Féin-IRA'. The problem was never formally put on the agenda for an Authority meeting and it was never voted on. My tendency was to put the brakes on discussions that took the form of circling back towards the comfort zone of the old Section 31 mentality. We compromised on a stance of light-touch supervision by the Director General in this sensitive and contentious area, and avoided re-imposing upward-referral rules about contact with Sinn Féin.

It was important not to let these teething difficulties in the initial stages of the post-Section 31 era force us to decide prematurely on another very long-running question: should Television News and Current Affairs maintain their editorial separateness, or should they be organisationally merged, forming one structural entity where the 'rashness' of reportorial impulses to chase the immediate story might be tempered by the more reflective and analytical instincts of Current Affairs? Such a hasty decision on our part might in fact have been counterproductive, in the sense of signalling that we expected Current Affairs to play the 'safe' role. All of our discussions on the future of

Current Affairs in fact were critical of the voices of caution that envisaged Current Affairs as essentially the location for the elaboration of stories broken elsewhere in the Irish media. We were unanimous in urging Current Affairs to listen to the accusations of blandness and timidity levelled at RTÉ by its more intelligent critics, to invest resources in investigative journalism and to trust the Authority to be supportive when good journalistic work was accomplished, even if that might sometimes disturb political authorities and other vested interests in Irish society.

The shadow of Section 31 still fell over RTÉ at the beginning of 1998 (four years after it had ceased to have legal power) when the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mo Mowlam, decided to visit Republican and Loyalist prisoners in jail, to engage with their views on the peace process. Rules for allowing the views of paramilitaries to be broadcast were broken in at least one instance (an unauthorised interview with a UFF prisoner in the Maze prison, aired on *Today with Pat Kenny*) and were soon relaxed. But it is significant that what exercised minds in RTÉ at this time was not the intermittent airing of convicted prisoners' views but the daily challenge of dealing with Sinn Féin as it moved inexorably towards the centre of mainstream politics and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement.

Conclusion

Final considerations in this chapter must return to the question of the relationship between government and public broadcasters, whose programme output occupies a special place in public discourse. But one dimension of this special status is that it makes public broadcasting particularly vulnerable to the political urge to censor. This is not a uniquely Irish problem, as we can see from recent events in England and Italy. The Hutton Inquiry was established in London in the second half of 2003 to investigate the role of the BBC and the British Government in conveying to the public, information about the level of threat posed by Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. It brought government-broadcaster tensions to new levels of intensity. Until Hutton, 2003 had been a very good year for the BBC. The New Labour Government had appointed one of Tony Blair's advisors on broadcasting policy (author of the Davies Report on the BBC) to be

Chairman and had promised a major role for the BBC in the roll out of digital television, after the collapse of private sector efforts in Digital Terrestrial Television. Its Freesat digital system was destined to take the Corporation to new heights of success even beyond the borders of the UK. But all this depends ultimately on the continued goodwill of the British Government. Even before the Gilligan / Campbell clash which led to the Hutton Inquiry, many in New Labour were asking, is the BBC not biting the hand that feeds it, in a most public and embarrassing way, through its news coverage of Iraq? The devastating findings of the Hutton Report, which exonerated the government and blamed the BBC for editorial and reporting shortcomings in its coverage of the war, resulted in the resignation of both the Chairman and Director General. The BBC has been badly shaken and it remains to be seen how these two major British institutions, Government and public broadcaster, will relate to each other in the future.

In other countries, governments lean towards the view that private television companies can be trusted to be more supine than public broadcasters when it comes to the watchdog role of the media. Hostile newspapers are not to be taken lightly at election time, but hostile television channels are too much to tolerate. In Italy, the Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi now exercises unprecedented power over both the public and the private television systems. His control over the public broadcasting system RAI has tightened to the point where major broadcasting trade unions are objecting to sinister forms of 'manipulation' of RAI news output and documenting it all in a 'White Book', while many critics believe RAI news is being deliberately turned into a distraction rather than a credible source of information. The Italian Government is poised, early in 2004, to privatise parts of the RAI system.

In Ireland, Ray Burke, Minister for Communication in the early 1990s, had a devastatingly negative impact on public service broadcasting and this alerted many people to the dangers that can arise when political power is abused. Could RTÉ be damaged in the future by massive political influence? Will its structures of regulation and governance, once the new Broadcasting Act is passed, always pass the Berlusconi test? In order to ensure that government will not react aggressively against it in the future, will

RTÉ always be able to follow its editorial, rather than its political instincts, when it is timely to critique government performance? In a much more competitive broadcasting environment, will RTÉ be able to project the ‘whiff of danger’ that audiences increasingly want, particularly when it turns its cameras on the politics of corporate Ireland? There has been one positive development in recent years: the changes brought about by the Freedom of Information initiative. One of the main reasons for the decline in overt pressure on broadcasters from powerful interests in political institutions is the knowledge that what may be intended as a quiet word in the ear of the Chairman or the Director General may well end up on the front page of a newspaper or in a feature story in a current affairs television programme. The very real possibility of publicity is itself one of the principal bulwarks against interference.

¹ Andrews, C.S. (1982) *Man of No Property*. Dublin: Mercier Press, 286.

² Horgan, J. (1997) *Sean Lemass: The Pragmatic Patriot*. Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 231.

³ Doolan, L., Dowling, J. and Quinn, B. (1969) *Sit Down and Be Counted: The Cultural Evolution of a Television Station*. Dublin: Wellington Publishers, 91.

⁴ Andrews, C.S. op. cit. 278.

⁵ Doolan et al. op. cit. 102.

⁶ Doornaert, M. & Larsen, H. (1987) *Censoring the ‘Troubles’: An Irish Solution to an Irish Problem? Report of an IFJ Fact-finding Mission to Ireland, January 1987*. Brussels: International Federation of Journalists, 10-11.

⁷ Horgan, J. (2004) *Broadcasting and Public Life: RTÉ News and Current Affairs*. Dublin: Four Courts Press,

⁸ Doornaert, M. et al. op. cit. 18.

⁹ The Order lapsed on 19 January 1994.

¹⁰ Mac Manais, R. (2003) *Maire Mac Giolla Iosa: Breathaisneis*. Galway: Clo Ian-Chonnachta.

¹¹ See chapter by Mary Corcoran.

¹² Then RTÉ’s special news correspondent.

¹³ Miller, D. (1994) *Don't Mention the War*. London: Pluto Press; Miller, D. (1994) *Rethinking Northern Ireland: Culture, Ideology and Colonialism*. London: Longman; Rolston, B. (1996) *War and Words: The Northern Ireland Media Reader*. Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications; Curtis, L. (2000) *Ireland: the Propaganda War*. Belfast: Sasta; Fennell, D. (1993) *Heresy: The Battle of Ideas in Modern Ireland*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press.