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'The French have got a great culture – I've been to Versailles' (Ted Turner): Towards a 500 channel world

Raymond Snoddy

Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening and thank you very much indeed for the honour and pleasure of being invited to give the second Annual Rathmines Media Lecture. First of all I owe you a necessary word of explanation for the strange title of this talk, 'The French have got a great culture – I've been to Versailles': Towards a 500 Channel World. It sums up rather well some of the themes I want to touch on tonight.

I heard these words about French culture spoken during a supposedly serious interview last month. I was on a 24-hour visit to Atlanta, Georgia to interview Ted Turner, the man crazy enough to fly in the face of all conventional wisdom and launch cable news network – 24 hours a day television news by satellite. The CNN service is now broadcast on no less than thirteen satellites ringing the globe, carrying in general a rather American view of the world. The only remaining places on earth where you are safe from CNN, Lou Dobbs and the remorseless, never ending headlines is Antarctica and part of Greenland.

I met Ted Turner on a difficult morning in the life of a media tycoon and his doubtless sincere interest in French culture arose in a particular context. The French, more mindful of cultural imperialism than most, had just banned Turner's TNT/ Cartoon network from French cable systems. Ted was puzzled. How could they do such a thing? How could they ban good wholesome entertainment – old films from the MGM library – *Gone with the Wind*, even, and the very best Hollywood cartoons from Hanna Barbera? His first instinct was to get his staff to review all the films in the MGM library to see how many were made in London, how many had an Italian director, how many could somehow be made qualify for the euro-production quota. Then Ted Turner expressed hurt that someone who had admired French culture, who had been to Versailles, could possibly be treated in such a way.

The remark sums up for me the naivety, cynicism even of some Americans who subconsciously at least see European cultures as museum pieces, chandeliers to be admired. But when the due respects have been paid then it is on with the serious business of making money, taking the American language, the American culture around the world with little thought about the repercussions on the great French culture or much more importantly the effects on cultures less able to defend themselves than the French.

Technological Revolution

My main purpose tonight is to issue a warning about a technological revolution that I believe will in retrospect be seen as perhaps the defining characteristic of the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decades of the next. The basic facts, the basic trends have become almost clichés, the information age, convergence of technologies.

Rupert Murdoch, who clearly could be one of the main beneficiaries of the new age – and remember his only inheritance was a clapped out newspaper in Adelaide and that

percent is not far off. As well as the independents, I would suggest you also need continuity of production centres of excellence and greater co-operation with the broadcasters of the North. I hear Michael D. Higgins has embarked on another review of broadcasting in Ireland. I am tempted to say I am sure it will be as far-sighted and influential as the previous two reviews. It is very unusual for politicians to prevaricate and be indecisive. They are usually not that wise. But maybe now is the time to start thinking about doing something – but not too much please.

I note that RTE has not had a licence fee increase for four years. It is about time they did. That unfortunately is the real weakness in mixed licence fee/advertising channels. Politicians never keep their side of the bargain and find it politically easier to freeze the licence fee and increase the amount of advertising. This is a real mistake. A serious broadcasting organization should be seriously financed for cultural as well as industrial reasons. Encourage choice and competition by all means though both will be arriving anyway whether sought or not. I do believe however that the best way of maximizing choice while protecting quality is to draw on three separate sources of funding and keep them as separate as possible – a licence fee for the public broadcaster, advertising for commercial channels and subscription for the additional and valuable choice that cable and satellite can bring from all over the world for those who want to pay for it.

The decline of public service broadcasters is not inevitable, though they must clearly adapt to changing circumstances. Indeed I would argue that, in a world where hundreds of channels are flying around, properly financed public service channels in small countries such as Ireland become more vital not less. And this is too important an issue to leave to politicians alone. Because broadcasting touches every life in a society, few topics could be more suitable for a thorough public debate. The danger is that through carelessness, or default the culture you will get will not be your own but the culture of Rupert Murdoch and Ted Turner.

Note: Second Annual Lecture on the Media in Ireland, Dublin Institute of Technology, College of Commerce, Rathmines, 28 October, 1993.

average viewing of one hour fifty minutes is the channel that comes closest to a mixed general entertainment channel along traditional lines. Among the second tier of satellite channels, the one that gets more than double any other is UK Gold, which resembles the traditional mixed channels based on the libraries of the BBC and Thames television. The theory that satellite and cable is about targeted thematic channels is fine so long as you accept that niche audiences and subscription is probably the only way to finance them.

I am not proposing any iron law of nature here – in Germany for instance, in very different circumstances, since 1987 the public service share of viewing has dropped from 83.1 per cent to 46.5 per cent by last year. But it would be interesting would it not, if as more and more satellite channels arrived they merely continued to fragment the finite audience for those channels.

I am reluctant to pontificate on the state of broadcasting and the media in Ireland – unaccountably I still cannot get RTE or the Ulster TV news in Middlesex where I live – an omission that I hope will be put right soon via digital compression. I would however strongly advise you to keep a very close watch on what is happening in the UK – and ignore most of it. You are in the fortunate position of being able to learn from some rather expensive mistakes. I would hope the Irish were too wise to even contemplate anything like the absurd competitive tenders for ITV franchises.

The letter from John Major to the ITV companies suggesting they should not move *News at Ten* is a classic example of the confusion in the minds of UK politicians over broadcasting – of the tradition of trying to have it both ways, market forces and control and influence. A private conversation between a senior ITV executive and a former broadcasting minister over the *News At Ten* underlined the dilemma. Why on earth did the Prime Minister intervene in a scheduling decision? Surely the 1990 Broadcasting Act was designed to open up ITV to market forces? 'Oh we don't do market forces any more,' said the former Thatcherite broadcasting minister.

There has been a sea-change in the political attitudes to broadcasting in the UK nowadays and few are happy to admit responsibility for the 1990 Broadcasting Act. The BBC feels itself very lucky that it was not first into the firing line. Now the government will continue to make noises about efficiency but there is little sign that the privatizers are anything but the mad fringe. Ministers such as Michael Heseltine are starting to realize that this is an industry where the UK is internationally competitive, something to be encouraged for its exports rather than thrashed to within an inch of its life. I would also suggest that a good hard look at the BBC over the past two years would repay the time. Look at the results of the millions spent on consultants and strategic analysis very carefully – and then throw it in the bin. Forget programme strategies that involve moving to higher ground, providing only what the market does not provide – a strategy for painting yourself into a corner if ever I heard one – being distinctive, innovative, high quality, no more derivative imports... but actually it is all much simpler than that. If you force people to pay a licence fee by law then all of the people all of the time have the right to expect something that interests them: the late Les Dawson as well as *French and Saunders*, *Neighbours* as well as *Newsnight*, *Noel Edmond's House Party* as well as the *Last Night at the Proms*.

The BBC has rather belatedly realized this very obvious truth. In the interests of greater efficiency, however, organizations like RTE could, if they are not doing so already, look at total costings of all programmes. Not the unnecessarily bureaucratic producer choice system of the BBC but more I would suggest Australian Broadcasting Corporation version – user pays. It is as simple as that. At the ABC these days you have to pay for everything at the full cost, including studio and editing time. Miraculously there has been an enormous increase in efficiency, more Australian programmes are being made from the same money and the ABC has greatly improved its viewing figures.

Likewise the move to independent production is a positive one above all else because fewer ideas are excluded although I suspect the Irish target of moving around twenty

I believe absolutely in freedom of information. Within a framework of decency, accuracy and fairness such freedom is more important than almost anything. One of the additional benefits of technology such as satellites and fax machines – surely with the video recorder one of the greater unsung, taken-for-granted technologies that needed no government to promote them – are that it is now virtually impossible for governments to prevent their citizens getting access to what is being written or thought or portrayed anywhere in the world. I cannot claim that the result of the vast quantities of available information is that intractable problems are always solved. All the information in the world, I fear, will not stop the IRA blowing up women and children visiting a fish shop or murderous members of the UVF shooting dustbin men going about their business. I only argue that free flows of information and knowledge, preferably backed by freedom of information acts, are better than their absence and will tend on the whole to lead to more rational government.

I look forward with enormous anticipation to see which way Michael D. Higgins – I am reliably informed a resolute opponent of section 31³ when out of office – copes with the renewal of the restrictions now that he is minister responsible for broadcasting. As an uncompromising opponent of terrorists everywhere I am firmly convinced they do their cause so much more damage when allowed to try to justify it than through artificial prohibitions. Narrowly drawn rules on incitement to hatred might better suffice than blanket bans. At least section 31 is not quite so ludicrous as the UK equivalent. The art of lip synchronization, presumably with the help of digital editing, is now so advanced that Gerry Adams is back to being as eloquent and polished again as he ever was.

I hope I have convinced you that fundamental technical changes are now in train. But how deep and irreversible are the changes? I believe that the greatest single danger faced by public service broadcasters, certainly in the UK and Ireland, comes not from Rupert Murdoch but from foolish politicians of which there never seems to be any shortage.

Last week I had the enormous privilege to sit through a session of the National Heritage Select Committee in the House of Commons questioning top executives from commercial broadcasting as part of their look at the future of the BBC.

'Do you realize', said MP Michael Fabricant, 'that the income of the BBC is more than the gross domestic product of Iceland?' Well, he was close but actually the BBC takes about 1.5 billion pounds a year and Iceland manages more than four billion pounds. 'Why are most of the ads on ITV rubbish?', inquired Toby Jessel. Some wondered whether the BBC should be privatized: others stated as a law of nature that this would be the last ever licence fee settlement, because of the dramatic changes I have been talking about.

A quick glance at the official ratings in the UK is enough, I believe, to put this dramatic new world into some perspective at least for now. Yes, the new broadcasters have come from nowhere to take roughly a one third share of viewing in cable and satellite homes. But what is most interesting to me is that the proportion has stayed roughly constant, give or take two or three percentage points even though the number of available channels has greatly increased and will have reached twenty within the next few months.

Could it be that, given the nature of the sort of channels provided by the BBC, ITV and Channel 4, this is going to be satellite's natural lot in life – an additional add-on service that people dip into from time to time but is, at least for the foreseeable future, no substitute for the mainstream channels? In a recent week, for example, Nickelodeon managed average weekly viewing of only seven minutes, the family channel eight minutes and Ted Turner's TNT/Cartoon network twenty three minutes. By way of contrast, viewing of the BBC averaged nearly seven hours and ITV nearly eight and a half hours. It is also rather noticeable that the leading satellite channel, Sky One, with

3. Section 31, Broadcasting Authority Act 1960. The order under the act was allowed lapse in January, 1994. (eds.)

1. RTE is actively pursuing this possibility for television. RTE radio is already on the ASTRA satellite and in the World Radio Network (eds.)

Gastarbeiter in Germany, for Japanese managers in Europe and for the Chinese everywhere. There ought also to be a combined international RTE channel for the Irish abroad although I believe there are rights problems.¹

Here is a clear example where the extra choice that satellite television can offer, far from merely being a vehicle for the homogenizing influence of an increasingly universal American culture, can actually underline and protect both the language and culture of internationally scattered minorities. Instead of half an hour a week of the BBC's valuable time early on Sunday mornings for Asian minorities, now they can have their own channel. You can even argue the opposite: that the possibility for ethnic minorities to control their own media could slow down assimilation. Apart from channels for ethnic minorities – and in culturally diverse countries like the US that could add up to a large number of channels – and extra choice, the new technologies offer greater convenience of viewing in the hope of generating greater revenues.

In most scenarios now being planned at least sixty or seventy channels would be devoted to the top ten films, with no less than six or seven channels showing the same film with staggered start times, the viewer would never be more than fifteen or twenty minutes away from the start of a film – virtual video on demand. The real thing – the right to call up anything you want to watch at any time – is not all that far off either.

British Telecom will decide next month whether to go ahead with a significant commercial experiment in the Colchester area of Essex sending a service down conventional telephone lines.² I am assured by BT executives that they can send pictures better than VHS video recorder standard down conventional telephone lines at the same time as the line is being used for a conventional telephone conversation. For BT now facing increasing competition from cable television operators who have the right to offer telecommunication services there is the enormous attraction of a possible new business and an existing network that goes into twenty three million homes in the UK. Other entrepreneurs are planning to offer video on demand by squirting a digitally compressed feature film from a satellite to specially adapted video recorders in the space of ten minutes. You pay your money for two viewings of the film.

2. This experiment went ahead. (eds.)

It is very easy for me to present to you layer upon layer of technological change and not just for television. Work is already advancing on the electronic newspaper, on the individual newspaper that is tailored to your individual preferences. A computer informed of my personal interests will tirelessly scan electronic data bases in the middle of the night and deliver my very own 'newspaper' to my personal computer for viewing on the screen or for printing out first thing on the morning. This coming Sunday, if I had such a newspaper I hope the first page would contain an article along the following lines: 'Les Ferdinand scores three in Queen's Park Rangers defeat of Manchester United'.

The US newspaper group Knight Ridder earlier this month demonstrated the prototype of an electronic newspaper system called the Tablet – a flat portable screen that can have the contents of one newspaper or many downloaded each night for the scrolling and reading wherever you are. The machine has convinced me above all else of one thing – that dead trees have a real and continuing future.

More media, greater choice?

What I am convinced of however is that the era of mass media will slowly give way to an era of more personal media, an era of greater individual choice. It will happen as always at the top end of the market first as a service to those who can pay a luxury media price and will concentrate on need-to-know information rather than the serendipity that is one of the prime joys of a good newspaper. (For instance, I did not know I wanted to know that if you put a compact disc in the freezer the sound quality was improved. Our freezer now has a few experimental frozen discs at this moment!)

domestic satellite dishes and rapidly building cable networks – so much more controllable – in the major cities.

Ultimately there is no way of blocking the endless flows of pictures and words because the footprint of satellites rarely coincides with the boundaries of most nation states. Murdoch says, for example, if his Star TV is kicked out of Hong Kong after 1997, he could probably continue to run the service by sending the signal up to the satellite from Los Angeles but certainly from Australia.

What actually is the point of all that communicating? What on earth is going to be shown on 500 channels that anyone would conceivably want to watch? And will humanity benefit as a result or are we all in danger, as the American social theorist Neil Postman has it, of 'amusing ourselves to death'? Postman takes a gloomy view of the effects of the onward march of entertainment, the surfeit of visual images and the blurring of the lines between politics and show business.

When a culture becomes overloaded with pictures, when logic and rhetoric lose their binding authority, when historical truth becomes irrelevant, when the spoken or written word is distrusted or makes demands on our attention that we are incapable of giving; when our politics, history, education, religion, public information and commerce are largely in visual imagery, rather than words, then a culture is in serious jeopardy.

I stopped in the middle of typing that paragraph not to draw breath because of the weight of words but because Classic FM, the new commercial classical music station was playing a 1916 recording of Enrico Caruso singing 'Santa Lucia'. I know it was words and music and not the visual images that Postman was railing against but it was still a timely reminder that not all the outpourings of technology and the electronic media can be so easily dismissed or destructive of culture. How much poorer we would all be without the sound of Caruso in New York nearly eighty years ago or even more modestly David Frost and Millicent Martin for ever rattling out 'That Was The Week That Was'.

I believe that overall the opportunities presented for more choice, for more convenience, are on balance beneficial. I do not think there is any chance of going back, however attractive and comfortable it might seem, to the days when television was new, when there was only a tiny handful of channels and the family gathered around the single set like an alternative hearth. It is useful and fun to be able to select from a wide range of channels – films, sport and news. It is interesting to be able to watch the CBS evening news in your home as it goes out live in the US. As a potential news junkie it is great to have the ability to watch non-stop live coverage provided by CNN or Sky Sport on the really big news days such as the storming of the Russian parliament – to have a seat at history in the making. I would like to point out though that however dramatic those pictures were, and they were memorable, you got much more of a sense of what was going on from the Italian newspaper journalists who actually risked their lives by going inside and meeting the plotters – an article well deployed across the front page of *The Independent*.

On a more trivial level the extra channels can quite simply give more time over to a particular sporting event than the traditional mixed channels that must serve all of the audience as often as possible. For instance, the BBC at least for the time being, does an excellent job covering the Wimbledon tennis championships but then top level tennis virtually disappears off the BBC screens until next year. It is as if all the players disappear too even though we know they are playing world class tournaments week-in-week-out. As a tennis fan I find it is a great boon to be able to watch the French or the US Open live on Eurosport, Sky Sport or even Screensport where the German commentary is not particularly intrusive.

Satellite television can also play a significant role in easing the pain of emigration, whether permanent or temporary. There are channels already for the Turkish

influence. Apart from Ted Turner, they include Mr Sumner Redstone, chairman of Viacom, the company that owns MTV, the pop music channel and Nickelodeon, the children's channel. Sumner Redstone is a particularly interesting character. An old fashioned Boston liberal who lives in a simple stone house even though he is a billionaire. Redstone wants to take his channels around the world but he also sees the need to be sensitive about local cultures although here unconscious assumptions play a role. No matter how great the understanding and the sensitivity – and in Sumner's case I believe it to be genuine – the economic imperative we are seeing at work here is that programmes are made and amortized in the saturated US market and then the jam is earned through export. Rupert Murdoch is taking a similar route and it is difficult to over-emphasize the enormity of what he has achieved in the past four years.

I was there at 6p.m. on 6 February 1989 when four new channels were simultaneously switched on by Murdoch and he announced, to considerable derision, that a new age of broadcasting was born. The joke then was: what is the difference between the Loch Ness monster and Sky Television? Answer: more people have seen the Loch Ness monster. In the four years since its launch Sky Television has expanded to a system received in more than 3.5m homes in some form, earning operating profits of stg £2m a week and financially strong enough to take premier league football and other important sporting events such as the Frank Bruno world title defence away from terrestrial television. I shall get to a judgement on what Sky has achieved and is likely to achieve in a moment.

The expansion, thanks to a merger with BSB, and despite difficulties with banks and \$7bn of debt, has taught Rupert Murdoch an important lesson. It is that, with satellite television, first in wins the market. It is a lesson he plans to export around the world and the first step has already been taken with the purchase of the controlling interest of the Star television system in Asia for \$525m. Murdoch quite simply is broadcasting satellite television channels to no less than thirty eight Asian countries containing two thirds of the world's population. He wants to take Sky News – a decent basic service, politically straight unlike some of his newspapers – and Sky Sports around the world.

You will be relieved to know that Rupert Murdoch does recognize that there are cultural and linguistic differences between India, China and Indonesia and he is already thinking about separate services for those parts of the world. But I am not at all convinced that Rupert Murdoch or any of the other would-be international media tycoons have really got to grips with the potential impact of what they are proposing to do. William Shawcross in his excellent book on Murdoch expressed the problem like this:

It is the democratic right of millions of Americans to enjoy American culture. But what democratic decision is that being imposed upon older cultures in Asia, the Middle East and elsewhere? Are people really being offered more choices than before?

The signs of influence are already there from the export of programmes by more traditional methods than satellite.

According to Murdoch the North African tribesmen, the Tuareg, postponed their annual camel caravan across the Sahara to watch an episode of *Dallas*. Less apocryphal perhaps is the definitive true story about another international broadcaster with the BBC. A BBC Asian reporter with a little time on his hands decided to do a story about Burmese rebels in a mountainous region of the country straddling the border with Thailand. He found the tribesman in a clearing in the jungle and was astonished to hear the opening titles from the BBC world television news. Other stories come back from obscure presenters who find they are household names in remote valleys in Pakistan. Apart from the most ferocious military dictatorships, I see little chance of stopping, even if you wanted to, the spread of more and more international channels. Interestingly the Chinese appear to be at least trying to hold back the tide by requiring licences for

his fortune was essentially founded on the naughty vicars and priests of the *News of the World* – expressed it rather well recently. Now separate major industries – computers, telecommunications, entertainment and television – are indeed converging into one giant industry which will be the third largest in the world.

The evidence of rapid and dramatic change is everywhere and we are not talking futurology here. We are talking very much about the present or at the very most next year. TCI, the world's largest cable television operators, has already ordered the black boxes capable of handling 500 channels. I have been to the cable company in the New York borough of Queen's where they are already offering 150 channels. In December, the Hughes aircraft company is launching the first of two satellites which will be broadcasting 150 channels of television over the entire continental United States. Next month, Filmnet, the subscription film company of the Low Countries, will begin using digital compression.

I hardly need to remind this audience of the enormous corporate forces now being unleashed. But if you have any residual doubt that the world of communications is changing in a dramatic way look at the battle for Paramount Studios and the \$22bn merger between Bell Atlantic, the US telephone company and TCI. It is however, a lot easier to point to the growing evidence of convergence, of the potential hundreds of television channels that could soon become available than to try to work out what, if anything, it all means. What on earth has any of this to do with *Glenroe*, or Gay Byrne and the *Late Late Show*?

I am not for a moment arguing that we are all inevitably heading for a homogenized international, Hollywood dominated culture and that public service broadcasters like the dinosaurs will pass away from the earth, no longer needed, no longer wanted. I most emphatically am saying, however, that traditional broadcasters will continue to face growing competition – videos and interactive games, virtual reality and CD ROMS as well as just television channels – as the television set in the corner becomes more and more sophisticated and eventually turns into a computer before our eyes. The days have long since gone when broadcasters could like Lord Reith, the founding director general of the BBC, offer the public what he thought they ought to have rather than what they actually want to watch. For broadcasters, the key will lie in creativity – shifting power and money from the bureaucrats to the producers and directors – the people who might just come up with the ideas that will keep viewers in a country like Ireland watching Irish-made programmes with Irish preoccupations.

In the end, however, I believe there is no escape from political decisions. Is broadcasting, and indeed the film industry, just a business like any other, subject to the free flow of market forces and minimum regulation on matters of taste and decency? Or is it something more important than that, an integral part of national culture and identity – the place where a nation talks to itself? To be more specific, what sort of broadcasting system can a country of the size of Ireland realistically have and most important of all, how should it be paid for?

Media at the turn of the century

As you have already gathered, in this area there are many more questions than answers and I'd like to add another even broader one. What sort of media, print as well as electronic, will Ireland be consuming at the turn of the century? Will much have changed? Having talked to many of the players involved I have no doubt at all that the scramble is on to create integrated production and distribution chains that start in Hollywood and end in the transmission of new channels to every nation on earth. And some of the same people are just as interested in newspapers and electronic information. The truly international premier league players will be well known to you and in most cases, although sometimes they talk of international understanding and sensitivities for local cultures, their overriding interest is money and/or power and