

# Imagining and Addressing the Nation on Irish Talk Radio

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‘Those who share an interest share an identity’, W. J. M. Mackenzie

## **Introduction: the imagined community and Ireland**

The last twenty years have seen a sustained interest across media, literary and cultural studies around the problematic of ‘the nation’.<sup>1</sup> While some extremely accomplished work on the relationship between national identity and technologies of communication emerged in previous decades,<sup>2</sup> the debate’s current impetus has come from the 1983 synthesis of Ernest Gellner’s work in *Nations and Nationalism*, and publication of the first edition of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*. Benedict Anderson pointed out that the members of a nation are never likely to meet face-to-face, meaning that any relationship between them operates as an abstraction. Yet for all that it depends upon the imagination, this is a relationship that succeeds in excluding those outside of the national boundaries, while constructing an internal fraternity of citizens in a ‘horizontal relationship’ under the sovereign power of the state.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism* (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> For example, K. W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Nationality* (revised edn. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: The Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (revised edn. London: Verso, 1991), p. 7.

Since the publication of influential works by Anderson and Gellner, a number of books and articles have turned to how various literary and media forms may be instrumental in the reproduction of this shared sense of national belonging. Perhaps the most persuasive and certainly the most cited general account is given by Michael Billig in *Banal Nationalism*, in which he looks at the place of national belonging in the activities of everyday life.<sup>4</sup> In the particular case of Ireland, moreover, the international journal *Cultural Studies* issued a special edition on Irish culture in 2001.<sup>5</sup> This was in addition to collections of essays already available exploring the implications of Ireland for cultural theory<sup>6</sup> and examining Ireland from the perspective of media studies.<sup>7</sup>

In more recent years, this preoccupation with national identity has also begun to focus on the narratives and implicit assumptions that lie behind particular national characteristics. The question has been asked: if nations really are imagined, then what sort of things do they imagine of themselves? Ruth Wodak *et al* look at the case of Austria, and find a willingness there to exert considerable intellectual labour in unifying and giving narrative to what it means to be Austrian, and what distinguishes an Austrian from a German or anyone else: a greater community ethos and so on.<sup>8</sup> Others have focussed on the irregularities and the disjuncture of nationhood. A study of Scottish newspapers, for example, finds that national identity switches between Scotland and Britain to suit the

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<sup>4</sup> M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> See S. Thompson, 'Introduction: towards an Irish cultural studies', *Cultural Studies*, 15 (2001), 1-11.

<sup>6</sup> C. Graham and R. Kirkland (eds), *Ireland and Cultural Theory: The Mechanics of Authenticity* (London: Macmillan, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> M. J. Kelly and B. O'Connor (eds), *Media Audiences in Ireland: Power and Cultural Identity* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1997); D. Kiberd (ed.), *Media in Ireland: The Search for Diversity* (Dublin: Open Air, 1997); D. Kiberd (ed.), *Media in Ireland: Issues in Broadcasting* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> R. Wodak, R. and R. de Cillia et al., *The Discursive Construction of National Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

political expediencies of the issue under discussion, meaning that national belonging is bound up with and subject to forms of political identification.<sup>9</sup> Given Ireland's position in the midst of what Anderson identifies as the 'last wave' of nations to emerge after the First World War, its novelty alone would be consistent with a need to expend considerable effort in the construction of a national character.<sup>10</sup> And as Spurgeon Thompson recently noted, since the 1990s we have seen an increase both in the production of explicitly 'Irish' cultural forms and in an academic interest in their contribution to Ireland's sense of itself.<sup>11</sup>

### **The political and cultural influence of talk radio**

The particular take of this chapter will be the role of the radio talk show in contributing to this widespread sense of national belonging. Radio itself continues to be what Peter Lewis and Jerry Booth describe as a relatively 'invisible medium', having long suffered a relative neglect in media analysis.<sup>12</sup> This is in spite of the medium's ratings success in comparison to television, and the role of such technologies as the transistor, the Internet and the digital receiver in expanding its capacity and reach.<sup>13</sup> The lack of attention from other scholars is in spite, too, of the comprehensive introductions provided by Andrew

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<sup>9</sup> M. Higgins, 'The articulation of nation and politics in the Scottish press', *Journal of Language and Politics*, 3 (2004), 463-83.

<sup>10</sup> The outcome of the Balkans conflict has served to undermine Anderson's suggestion that the early twentieth century saw a 'last wave' of emergent nations, but the general point concerning Ireland's relative youthfulness still holds. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 119.

<sup>11</sup> S. Thompson, 'Introduction: towards an Irish cultural studies', *Cultural Studies*, 15 (2001), 1-11 (p. 1).

<sup>12</sup> P. M. Lewis and J. Booth, *The Invisible Medium: Public, Commercial and Community Radio* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> A. Crisell, 'Radio', in A. Briggs and P. Cobley (eds), *The Media: An Introduction* (Harlow: Longman, 2002), pp. 121-34.

Crisell and Lewis and Booth themselves.<sup>14</sup> Both of these volumes describe how the production and reception of radio differs considerably from other broadcast media, and show that the medium is well suited to changing contexts of consumption. In addition, there are a number of conceptually influential studies on radio talk, such as those by Martin Montgomery and Ian Hutchby, which have demonstrated a number of the techniques used to engender an illusion of intimacy between the radio presenter and the listeners.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from the conversational analyses of Montgomery and Hutchby, much of the research on the activities of talk radio in particular has emphasised its political dimension. This is especially true in America, where the popularity of right-wing talk show hosts, such as Rush Limbaugh, has prompted a series of studies into talk radio and political influence.<sup>16</sup> It need hardly be said that the findings of these studies have been varied. Some, such as Z. Pan and G.M. Kosicki, find that a greater than average level of audience engagement with talk radio tends to coincide with keener political interest, and suggest that the very least talk shows do is provide the means for political dialogue and participation.<sup>17</sup> Other studies such as that by D.A Jones, however, have been more dismissive of the political influence of talk radio, arguing that it makes little difference

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<sup>14</sup> A. Crisell, *Understanding Radio* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn. London: Routledge, 1994); Lewis and Booth, *The Invisible Medium*.

<sup>15</sup> M. Montgomery, 'DJ talk.' *Media, Culture and Society*, 8 (1986), 421-40; I. Hutchby, 'Power in discourse: the case of arguments on a British talk radio show,' *Discourse and Society*, 7 (1996), 81-97.

<sup>16</sup> The point of departure for a number of these studies is what is perceived to be the malign prejudice of Rush Limbaugh himself, and the apparent popularity of talk radio amongst right wing conservatives in particular. See B. A. Hollander, 'Fuel to the fire: talk radio and the Gamson Hypothesis', *Political Communication*, 14 (1997), 355-69; A. Hall and J. N. Cappella, 'The impact of political talk radio exposure on attributions about the outcome of the 1996 US Presidential Election.' *Journal of Communication*, 52 (2002), 332-50.

<sup>17</sup> Z. Pan and G. M. Kosicki, 'Talk show exposure as an opinion activity', *Political Communication*, 14 (1997), 371-88.

either way.<sup>18</sup> However, a third strand of research, including studies by Itzhak Yanovitzky and Joseph Cappella, and by Gang Heong Lee and Cappella, offers a useful insight for our purposes.<sup>19</sup> While these commentators agree that talk shows have a negligible effect in terms of inspiring political engagement, they find instead high and consistent level of agreement between the views of the talk show audience and those of its host. Talk shows may not inspire political activity in themselves, but they do encourage like-minded individuals to select and gather around their favoured programmes.

So, if the extent of political activity is all that is at stake, the findings of the available studies offer little reassurance to those seeking to extend democratic participation in Ireland. For example, while they concede that Ireland is in no worse a position than most other affluent democracies, Neil Collins and Patrick Butler point to a widespread concern that the Irish public ‘are increasingly disengaged from politics, frequently displaying low levels of knowledge about their democratic institutions, [and routinely expressing] a mistrust of government leaders’.<sup>20</sup> Yet, before extending this to dismiss media audiences as disengaged, we should consider the evidence for the role of talk radio in gathering communities of shared political interests and beliefs. In other words, at least in the political arena, talk radio operates on the basis of an implicit contract that the listeners will agree with what they hear. It is this chapter’s contribution to look at what Irish radio

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<sup>18</sup> D. A. Jones, ‘Political talk radio: the Limbaugh effect on primary voters’, *Political Communication*, 15 (1998), 367-81.

<sup>19</sup> I. Yanovitzky and J. N. Cappella, ‘Effect of call-in political talk radio shows on their audiences: evidence from a multi-wave panel analysis’, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 13 (2001), 377-97; G. Lee and J. N. Cappella, ‘The effects of political talk radio on political attitude formation: exposure versus knowledge’, *Political Communication*, 18 (2001), 369-94.

<sup>20</sup> N. Collins and P. Butler, ‘Political mediation in Ireland: campaigning between traditional and tabloid markets’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 57 (2004), 95-107 (p. 93).

may tell us about the maintenance of other forms of community, looking in particular at the imagined community of the nation.

### **Examples of talk radio in Ireland and the UK**

Radio is a popular medium in Ireland, with the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources (DCMNR) reporting that 86 per cent of the adult population tune in every day; one of the highest proportions in Europe.<sup>21</sup> Talk radio, in particular, provides a key element of the national radio schedules. Joe Duffy's *LiveLine* is broadcast each weekday on RTÉ (Radio Telefis Éireann) 1 and the similarly frequent *Gerry Ryan Show* on RTÉ 2 is cited as 'the most popular non-news programme on Irish radio'.<sup>22</sup> The purpose of this study is to explore whether, just as in the case of its political forms in America, this popularity of talk radio is rooted in an emphasis on commonality with and between the listeners, drawing in this case upon a particular sense of national belonging. Taking as its focus the packaging of RTÉ 2's *Gerry Ryan Show*, the chapter will examine the extent to which radio provides a space for public participation, while cloaking this contribution within a commonly-held tradition of Irishness.

For a British equivalent of the *Gerry Ryan Show* and its place on the RTÉ schedule, in terms both of market reach and format, it is useful to look at the *Victoria Derbyshire*<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> DCMNR, *Review of Radio Licensing in Ireland: Consultation Document* (Dublin: DCMNR, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> RTÉ, *Reaching our Audiences: Radio Telefis Éireann Annual Report and Consolidated Financial Statements 2004* (Dublin: RTÉ, 2004), p.16.

<sup>23</sup> While Victoria Derbyshire is also the name of the programme's presenter, in keeping with its designation in radio schedules and in the BBC's own literature, this description will hitherto be used to refer to the programme itself.

programme from BBC Radio 5 Live. Radio 5 Live is itself a relatively new and innovative member of the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) portfolio, having started to broadcast in 1990 and been devoted to the oddly matched causes of children and sport.<sup>24</sup> However, given an earlier undertaking by the BBC that it would offer ‘rolling news’ on one of its radio stations, it was hardly a surprise when Radio 5 Live was subsequently re-launched in 1994 to cater for sport and news within a talk format, leading, at least temporarily, to the ungenerous designation of ‘Radio Spews’.<sup>25</sup> Of course, while these new priorities are more compatible than the original twinning of children’s programming with football commentary, issues of relative prominence would remain, and other than on weekends the emphasis has tended to be with the coverage and discussion of news.<sup>26</sup>

What is perhaps most interesting about Radio 5 Live for our immediate purpose, is the manner in which the re-launch of 1994 brought with it a better definition of the target audience, based mainly on gender and class.<sup>27</sup> As Guy Starkey observes, the new target audience member was male, and had a clearly defined interest in the major spectator sports of ‘football, boxing, cricket and horseracing’.<sup>28</sup> In contrast to the middle-class audience of Radio 4, Radio 5 Live was also aimed at those ‘at the lower end of the socio-

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<sup>24</sup> G. Starkey, ‘Radio Five Live: extending choice through Radio Bloke?’, in A. Crisell (ed.), *More than a Music Box: Radio Cultures and Communities in a Multi-Media World* (London: Berghahn, 2004), pp. 21-7.

<sup>25</sup> B. Franklin, *Newszak and News Media* (London: Arnold, 1997), pp. 21-7.

<sup>26</sup> Starkey, ‘Radio Five Live: extending choice through Radio Bloke?’, p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Audience’ here is to be understood in its media industry sense as those deemed to be listening at a given time, and of interest primarily for extent and demographic composition. In a manner that will become clear, my idea of ‘audience’ differs from this, such that I suggest the mass audience should be approached as an essentially imagined form of community in the same way as the nation. Shaun Moores offers a wide-ranging account of the academic approaches to audience studies. See S. Moores, *Interpreting Audiences: The Ethnography of Media Consumption* (London: Sage, 1993).

<sup>28</sup> Starkey, ‘Radio Five Live: extending choice through Radio Bloke?’, p. 27.

economic scale' and ranging from their twenties to their forties.<sup>29</sup> The self-image of the station and its target audience had an influence on the tone of the news coverage, which became deliberately informal, as well as on the topics selected for coverage. In a manner that will become apparent later in the chapter and will provide a comparison with the *Gerry Ryan Show*, the Radio 5 Live audience were also assumed to be in some way representative of 'the nation' as a whole, and this would be articulated with the explicitly populist interpretation of what would be deemed to be newsworthy.

### **The discourses of Irish talk radio**

The most sustained analysis of the forms of talk and topics for discussion on the *Gerry Ryan Show* is provided by Sara O'Sullivan.<sup>30</sup> O'Sullivan is interested in how the *Gerry Ryan Show* works to straddle the divide between the public and the private realms.<sup>31</sup> The thrust of her argument is that the *Gerry Ryan Show* should not be seen as an element of the civil public sphere envisaged by Jürgen Habermas and defined as space for a rational debate on matters of public concern between informed, stake-holding individuals.<sup>32</sup>

While conceding that many of the necessary qualities of discussion and debate are present in the *Gerry Ryan Show*, O'Sullivan points out that the preferred outcome of many of these exchanges is not discursive resolution so much as the provision of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>30</sup> S. O'Sullivan, 'The Ryanline is now open: talk radio and the public sphere,' in M. J. Kelly and B. O'Connor (eds), *Media audiences in Ireland: power and cultural identity* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1997), pp. 167-90; see also S. O'Sullivan 'The whole nation is listening to you: the presentation of the self on a tabloid talk radio show', *Media, Culture & Society*, 27 (2005), 719-738.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>32</sup> J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

entertainment.<sup>33</sup> In the terms outlined by Franklin, therefore, the *Gerry Ryan Show* can be said to be complicit with much of the rest of the media in valuing amusement and distraction over matters of fact and policy.<sup>34</sup>

O'Sullivan arrives at these conclusions by means of a content based study of the show, in which she classifies listeners' calls into the four types of 'expressive calls', 'service encounters', 'exhibitionist calls' and 'trouble telling' exchanges. The latter two types are less common. One of these is the 'exhibitionist' call, which is where a listener uses the opportunity to engage in a performance, whether that is the recital of a poem or the relating of a story or anecdote. Even less common in frequency is what O'Sullivan calls the 'trouble telling' call. These calls operate either inside or outside of the main topic, and are where listeners use the show as a space in which to unburden themselves or discuss a matter of personal, emotional concern. In terms of the outcome of these exchanges, O'Sullivan argues that such encounters are more an exercise in 'emotional reciprocity' than they are an exchange of information.<sup>35</sup> Yet, to the extent that trouble telling calls have more in keeping with intimate forms of face-to-face interaction than conventional broadcast talk, they may be essential to the sense of 'community' developed by the overall framing of the show.

Far more common, however, are those calls that make up the 'expressive' category. This describes those occasions whereby callers outline and assert their own position on a given

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<sup>33</sup> O'Sullivan, 'The Ryanline is now open', p. 184.

<sup>34</sup> Franklin, *Newszak and News Media*.

<sup>35</sup> See also K. Atkinson and S. Moores, 'We all have bad days: attending to face in broadcast troubles-talk', *The Radio Journal*, 1 (2003), 129-46.

topic. Such callers may appear to be seeking to persuade others or, more commonly, want to use the opportunity to give vent to their thoughts on a given matter. During September 2005, expressive calls were turned to such diverse issues as the prospects and tactics for the Irish soccer team's forthcoming World Cup qualifying tie and whether wedding present lists are a good idea or not.<sup>36</sup> Almost as common are the calls that O'Sullivan describes as 'service encounters', when listeners call for help or advice, or answer such a call from earlier in the programme. Often, of course, the structure of the programme means that these calls are linked to and develop matters raised in the expressive calls.

We have already mentioned the overall popularity of talk radio, and this invitation to public participation is not limited to the *Gerry Ryan Show*. In April 2005, for example, RTÉ 1's *LiveLine* programme positioned itself as rallying point for a campaign to expose and remedy bed shortages in the accident and emergency department of a Dublin hospital.<sup>37</sup> Conventionally, presenter Joe Duffy is also positioned as speaking and acting on behalf of the listeners, in a manner that Charlotte Brunsdon and David Morley described as a 'populist ventriloquism'.<sup>38</sup> In keeping with this, Duffy frames his talk in terms of the listener's involvement as participant, claiming that 'if people have a story to tell they phone LiveLine . . . the topics come from the callers. They make the show what it is. And that could be anything from dodgy dealers to your favourite holiday reading.'<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> RTÉ, *The Show* [online]. See <http://www.rte.ie/2fm/ryanshow/todays.html>.

<sup>37</sup> RTÉ, *LiveLine's Portacabin Project* [online]. See <http://www.rte.ie/radio1/story/1029803.html>.

<sup>38</sup> C. Brunsdon and D. Morley, 'Everyday television: *Nationwide*', in T. Bennett and S. Boyd-Bowman et al. (eds.), *Popular Television and Film* (London: BFI, 1981), pp. 118-41 (p. 123).

<sup>39</sup> RTÉ, *About Joe Duffy* [online]. See <http://www.rte.ie/radio1/story/1021205.html>.

Returning the focus to the *Gerry Ryan Show* in particular, though, there are two main points that emerge. The first concerns the breadth and character of the topics that are covered, and the variety of styles employed by the callers and the host, both of which O’Sullivan sees as fundamentally reactionary. Even those ‘expressive’ calls that are cloaked in the rhetoric of engagement and debate tend to depart from a belief in ‘traditional norms or values’ rather than reason and sound evidence.<sup>40</sup> In other words, far from a public debate, O’Sullivan’s description positions the *Gerry Ryan Show* as a space for the rehearsal of what the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci called the ‘common sense’ of ideas that have succeeded in forming a ‘national-popular collective will’.<sup>41</sup> What is more, this populist character of the show extends beyond the choice of topics to its web-based invitation to callers, mixing an informal style with a direct mode of address. Promising that the production team are ‘fresh as paint and looking forward to hearing from you’, listeners are assured:

We’ve buckets of great calls, topics, interviews and the bizarre-est of stories lined up for discussion so stay tuned in . . . it’s all about you and your lives, you love to talk and we love to listen . . . you like to listen and Gerry likes to talk so we’ve a good thing going!<sup>42</sup>

Having emphasised the populist approach to audience participation, we can now turn to the second main point, which has to do with the manner in which the programme develops the very notion of ‘talk’ itself. While it is sensible that a talk show should place stress upon the opportunities it presents for discussion, it nonetheless seems that to a large extent the *Gerry Ryan Show* promotes talk as an end in itself. Moreover, in keeping

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<sup>40</sup> O’Sullivan, ‘The Ryanline is now open’, p. 174.

<sup>41</sup> A. Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings* (New York: International Publishers, 1957), p. 140.

<sup>42</sup> RTÉ, *The Show* [online]. See <http://www.rte.ie/2fm/ryanshow/todays.html>.

with Gramsci's idea of a determinedly 'national' popular will, the promotion of the show is also unequivocal in placing a love for chatter within the Irish context:

Gerry likes to talk. And so do the Irish. It was a match made in Broadcasting Heaven. From the very start of the show Gerry looked to his new audience for their thoughts and opinions on everything from unemployment to underpants. Nothing's too sacred. Not any more. If you need to talk about it, you need to talk to Gerry.<sup>43</sup>

There is an explicitly stated articulation between nation and practices of talk in this address to the listeners. As well as going on to illustrate the range of topics that may be discussed, the passage calls attention to a mythical Irish love of language for its own sake. At one level, this is a quite successful attempt at making fun of this stereotype of Irishness. It presents what Colin Graham describes as an emergent 'ironic authenticity' that draws upon the established 'old authenticity' of the Irish cultural canon and folk heritage.<sup>44</sup> Putting the plea to irony to one side, however, another reading may detect a potentially negative Anglicised version of Irishness that dwells upon a supposed national distraction with fast talk, or 'blarney', with little intention towards fulfilment or action. On the other hand, of course, this emphasis on the aesthetics of language also draws upon the imagining of Ireland as a modern literary nation, whose major figures, such as W.B. Yeats and James Joyce remain in living memory and are internationally renowned.<sup>45</sup> Overall, though, this sheer variety of subjects and forms of talk is the very stuff of the *Gerry Ryan Show*, and is presented as being a natural consequence of a peculiarly Irish predilection for the aesthetics of chatter. If the *Gerry Ryan Show* acts as the broadcast

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<sup>43</sup> RTÉ, *About the Gerry Ryan Show* [online]. See <http://www.rte.ie/2fm/ryanshow/index2.html>.

<sup>44</sup> C. Graham, '...Maybe that's just blarney: Irish culture and the persistence of authenticity,' in Graham and Kirkland (eds), *Ireland and Cultural Theory*, p. 22.

<sup>45</sup> See A. Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

equivalent of the ‘parish pump’, as O’Sullivan asserts, then it is a determinedly Irish form of parish pump.<sup>46</sup>

### **The discourses of UK talk radio**

As mentioned above, in order to provide a comparison of how another talk radio programme may be complicit in the construction of a national identity, we will also look at *Victoria Derbyshire* from the UK based BBC Radio 5 Live. This comparison is useful because the BBC is as central to the formation of national broadcasting in Britain as RTÉ has been in Ireland.<sup>47</sup> Both organisations have a breadth of interest that extends across broadcasting and the Internet.<sup>48</sup> Both were founded as instruments of cultural policy committed to ‘public service broadcasting’ at the level of the state, but have remained distinct from governmental control. While the public duty of the two organisations are constructed from their own complex histories and political circumstances, summarised in turn by John Horgan and Paddy Scannell, they are nonetheless entwined with and informed by notions of a national public.<sup>49</sup> Last, but by no means least in the list of similarities: the *Gerry Ryan Show* and the *Victoria Derbyshire* programme are also on air simultaneously, starting each week day at nine in the morning and running through until midday.

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<sup>46</sup> O’Sullivan, ‘The Ryanline is now open’, p. 167.

<sup>47</sup> J. Horgan, *Irish Media: A Critical History Since 1922* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 85-6; J. J. Lee, ‘Democracy and Public Service Broadcasting in Ireland’, in Kiberd (ed.), *Media in Ireland: The Search for Diversity*, pp. 10-23.

<sup>48</sup> DCMNR, *Public Service Broadcasting Charter* (Dublin: DCMNR, 2004), pp. 4-5.

<sup>49</sup> Horgan, *Irish Media: A Critical History Since 1922*; P. Scannell, ‘Public service broadcasting and modern public life’, in P. Scannell and P. Schlesinger (eds), *Culture and Power* (London: Sage, 1992), pp. 317-48.

In common with the *Gerry Ryan Show*, *Victoria Derbyshire* tends to mix discussion of the main news of that or the previous day with a number of selected issues. All topics in the *Victoria Derbyshire* programme meet a number of criteria. Firstly, they are timely, or otherwise dominant in current public discourse. Even then, the selection process remains central, as statements or reports on trends are as worthy of inclusion as an unexpected occurrence; the example, below, of the paper from *The Lancet* provides a typical example. Secondly, matters covered have to appeal to and be relevant to the audience in a fairly immediate way. Drawing upon a concern, shared by the *Gerry Ryan Show*, for generating interesting calls, issues are presented on *Victoria Derbyshire* in such a way that they are invested in the lives of the listeners, who are made to feel sufficiently empowered to make their own contribution. Thus, discussion of the attacks by suicide bombers on London in July 2005 was framed around whatever implications there may be for racial and religious relations amongst the listeners.

With the exception of significant news days such as the July 2005 bombings, each programme will also introduce a range of issues, and will switch between them over the course of the morning. On the last Friday of August 2005, for example, the main topic presented for discussion was the publication of a medical paper in *The Lancet* suggesting that homeopathic medicine had no more of a success rate than placebo (reformulated as ‘dummy drugs’), and contributors were chosen to represent both the expert and public realms. The discussion started with a telephone interview with one of the authors of the paper, where the presenter offered many of the relevant statistics and asked the scientist to clarify and expand upon the study’s findings. Phone calls were then taken from

listeners, who were encouraged to elaborate on their own experience of homeopathy, and many of whom claimed some expertise of their own, before the debate was finally reined in and summarised by the presenter.

Other issues offered for debate and taken up by listeners calling in included the establishment of a new elite Australian soccer league, as well as the thorny question of whether the London-based Notting Hill Carnival was in danger of becoming overly gentrified. However, perhaps the most illustrative item to appear on the programme that day, and certainly the one that generated the greatest number of calls, concerned a man's conviction and sentencing for racial abuse in addressing two individuals as 'boyos'. This section of the programme was incorporated within a wider debate, one that has much currency in Radio 5 Live talk and in the discourse of the right wing populist press, on the supposed imposition of 'political correctness'. Indeed, while the two matters are clearly unconnected, the same issue of political correctness also framed much of the debate on an acceptable reaction to the London bombings. Thus, we see how two very different issues draw upon a common well of dominant concerns and languages of popular criticism.

There are a number of general elements that *Victoria Derbyshire* has in common with the *Gerry Ryan Show*. For one, the rationale that guides *Victoria Derbyshire* is the popularising of the issues of the day, of making political and cultural policy a matter of public debate, and encouraging a range of listeners to offer their own contribution. The forms of talk on the *Victoria Derbyshire* programme also attract a range of call types of

the sort outlined by O’Sullivan,<sup>50</sup> in which the ‘expressive’ – the presentation of a particular viewpoint or argument – figures as the most prominent. Most importantly, however, the populism expressed through the *Victoria Derbyshire* programme has much in common with the reactionary default to ‘common sense’ that O’Sullivan found in the *Gerry Ryan Show*.

Even as there are similarities in content, there are subtle but important differences in the forms of national identity expressed in the two contexts, such that they draw upon national imagined communities formed of different complexes of narratives and practice. For its part, Radio 5 Live has preferred to market its ‘talk’ function in terms of a nation of differing viewpoints; a community of individuals in debate. Labouring this claim somewhat, *Victoria Derbyshire*’s predecessor on the morning talk slot, Nicky Campbell, styled his show ‘the nation’s conversation’, so presenting his listeners as symbolic of the nation as a whole. In general, Radio 5 Live has sought to emphasise the sincerity of this national contribution by offering itself as the place where the nation voices deeply-held opinions. The type of populism used to frame the *Gerry Ryan Show*, on the other hand, offers the show as the place where the nation comes together to talk and listen as an aesthetic and pleasurable experience in itself.

## **Conclusion**

As demonstrated above, RTÉ is the designated supplier of public service broadcasting in Ireland. The charter that outlines this role holds RTÉ to a fundamentally Reithian idea of

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<sup>50</sup> O’Sullivan, ‘The Ryanline is now open’.

PSB by naming the broadcaster as the provider of entertainment, information and education.<sup>51</sup> Less indebted to John Reith's heritage, however, is the requirement placed upon RTÉ to reflect the diversity of Ireland in individual, community and regional terms.<sup>52</sup> This responsibility of RTÉ towards the national culture is also embodied in other legislation. Until 1988, RTÉ was the source of all licensed broadcasting in Ireland. Yet, if anything, the Radio and Television Act of that year consolidated the broadcaster's position at the cultural heart of the nation by removing its obligation to provide local radio, and demanding instead concentration on four national stations.<sup>53</sup>

In a context in which RTÉ is so central to national cultural policy, it behoves us to ask what contribution is made to the nation's sense of itself. Collins and Butler, we will recall, warn of an emerging national indifference to politics which they argue ought to be checked.<sup>54</sup> While it may be argued that one of the means by which the *Gerry Ryan Show* retains its popularity is that it steps aside from the systems of formalised political debate advocated by N. Collins and P. Butler,<sup>55</sup> O'Sullivan stresses that elements of political discussion remain in the show as part of a relatively diverse mix of public engagement and dialogue.<sup>56</sup> What we have introduced here has been another 'national' dimension, where we have argued that the packaging and rhetoric that surrounds the *Gerry Ryan Show* draws upon elements of the 'imagined' characteristics of Ireland by foregrounding the aesthetics of 'chat' as an end in itself. Taken to its most pessimistic conclusion, if we

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<sup>51</sup> DCMNR, *Public Service Broadcasting Charter*, p. 6.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> DCMNR, *Review of Radio Licensing in Ireland*.

<sup>54</sup> Collins and Butler, 'Political mediation in Ireland', 93.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> O'Sullivan, 'The Ryanline is now open'.

are to continue to maintain that informed public opinion is best able to emerge from a mediated public sphere conducted on equitable and rational terms,<sup>57</sup> the form of ‘imagined community’ that is illustrated here seems likely to impede its development.<sup>58</sup>

Through all of this, however, an industry reading of this use of the national imagined community will see it as part of a commercial imperative. The *Gerry Ryan Show* has as much an eye on what it sees as its core audience as those American political talk shows discussed in the introduction. Programmes such as the Rush Limbaugh show appeared to thrive because they were successful in representing a particular political community of right-wing conservatives, giving that community an articulate and (to them) agreeable cheerleader. In this context, it is worth recalling the various accounts offered above of how listeners will seek out programmes that draw upon a similar political will to their own. Overall, it therefore seems that the *Gerry Ryan Show* is engaged in a similar activity of attracting and retaining the sympathy of listeners, based this time on a national imagined community rather than a political one. Importantly, the terms within which community is imagined draws upon a form of Irishness that articulates popular radio talk with what is offered, somewhat knowingly, as an inherent national predisposition for banter, rhetoric and anecdote as a celebration of the aesthetic qualities of chatter. The task for the future may be to reconcile the complex terms of this imagined community with a public service inspired necessity for a truly popular civil realm of public discussion.

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<sup>57</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

<sup>58</sup> This is in partial contrast to Garnham, who accentuates the positive role of the nation in the public sphere. Garnham’s focus, however, is on the national state as a legislative and governmental space, whereas mine is on the nation as it offers an imagined set of common norms and beliefs. Thus, Garnham’s account emphasises the nation as a means of establishing governmental answerability, and this account focuses on whether the means of identifying with that nation may be an impediment to rational discussion. See N. Garnham, ‘The media and the public sphere,’ in C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 359-76.