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ELECTION '89 - A STUDY OF IRISH POLITICAL TELEVISION

By Daniel Ciaran Swan

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Introduction

The object of this thesis is to provide an analysis of the role and form of the television coverage given by Radio Telefis Eireann of the 1989 Irish General Election. The underlying question is whether the political process becomes subordinated to the needs of the television medium or vice versa and whether television is a suitable medium for political discourse in the first place.

To adequately consider the form and function of Irish Election coverage specific examples of news, the Today Tonight current affairs programme and the Election Results programme will be analysed. Party political broadcasts will not be addressed, firstly since they are not produced by RTE and also since they represent a form of advertising rather than a form of "coverage".

In many respects television is the most impressionistic branch of the media. With television one does not by the nature of the medium receive the "rounded picture". The camera can only point in one direction and much depends on where it is pointed and who is deciding upon the pointing. For this reason one is left to interpret the meaning of any particular example of television, the disparity or parity between the intended and the accidental image. This obviously leaves television open to manipulation by those who broadcast it and to some extent by those whom it portrays.

There is considerable disagreement as to the effects of television on society. It is painted by some as a radical element cutting a great swathe through contemporary society and by others

as a force for stability and a break on change. The political role of television is addressed at some length by those such as John Fiske who have analysed the solid grounding of much entertainment programming in the Western value system (1).

Yet it is not with this ideology of entertainment that television assumes an overtly political role, but rather in the political combat of a multi party democratic elections where in some ways political choices appear to assume the role of products directed at the voter/consumer.

It is reasonable to see in society broad agreement on the organisation of political, judicial and social processes. This consensus is important since to some extent it will be reflected in the overall approach of the media and especially those media run by the state. Certainly observers of Irish television have in the past perceived a center-left tendency in aspects of broadcasting, one example being Helena Sheehan in her study of television drama (2).

What is the consensus then in election coverage where political parties appear on screen relative to their Dail representation, and is this coverage sufficient.

The phenomenon of television coverage of such an election is worthy of consideration then, for if television is seen as a force in society broadly favouring the consensus it is important to study the manner in which it allows or disallows views coming from beyond that consensus. If viewed as a basically radical and oppositional force in society then the question is how does television adapt to mainstream opinion?

Neil Postman argues that television of its nature, "...redefines the meaning of public discourse." (3). It is not an extension of the literary tradition, it is in fact subversive to this tradition. If so the political processes that are rooted in a literary tradition of rational discourse must inevitably be changed by television.

As shall be seen political television coverage was to evolve over the years from a basis of factual reporting to a more considered analytical role. The challenge and opportunity that television presents has been regulated from the establishment of RTE in 1961. Under the then Minister of Posts and Telegraphs Mr. Hilliard, the Seanad was presented with and ratified the Broadcasting Authority Act, 1960.

A five person council was established to oversee the workings of the indigenous radio and television media and to provide a distancing effect from the government of the day.

This legislation governed certain controversial aspects of radio and television broadcasting and with special reference that coverage,

"...be presented objectively and impartially and without any expression of its own views."

This was to have far reaching effects. However the Act allowed for some governmental input into material that was broadcast with a clause specifically allowing the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs to be allowed to write to the Authority requesting that it,

"...refrain from broadcasting any particular matter...and the

Authority shall comply with the direction."

In comparison with the foreign experience, especially that of the continent, this legislation was a triumph of liberalism modelled as it was on the BBC Charter. On the other hand the opportunity for some government manipulation remained. Remarkably this was not evident in the first decade of broadcasting where criticism of RTE centered on the efficacy of the station in broadcasting aspects of Irish society.

While implicitly recognising some political role for television, political discussion came relatively late to RTE. Current Affairs were initially handled in a "talking heads" style where government and opposition speakers gave their views with no mutual interaction and little analytical criticism from the presenters. Such indeed was the stasis in current affairs that in 1966 the Minister for Agriculture Charles Haughey complained when a statement of his was broadcast in the context of a statement of protest by the National Farmers Association. Such was the influence of the Act that the broadcast was amended in his favour. Of course this situation did not continue indefinitely. New current affairs programming like 7 Days began to stretch the capabilities of television as a means for public political discourse, but their effect was to be noticed with surprising slowness.

Indeed television remained relatively untainted by overt political considerations until the 1970's when the Northern Ireland situation reached a peak. In 1972 the Broadcasting Authority was dismissed after screening an interview with the head of the Provisional IRA. This was following a request by the

then Minister Gerry Collins that they refrain from such interviews, a request put under Section 31. Collins's successor, Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien was to take matters further in 1976 by adding an amendment that extended Section 31 to allow for the banning from the broadcasting media of those,

"...likely to promote, or incite to, crime or would tend to undermine the authority of the State."

It was for the Houses of the Oireachtas to determine who was covered by this legislation in a vote. Immediately Provisional Sinn Fein was banned as were various Loyalist paramilitaries. A further aspect of the amendment to the Act was the new status given to the Authority which could only be dismissed by the Oireachtas. As Basil Chubb has stated this saw a reclarification of the relationship between the broadcasting media and the state with the perceived national interest given priority over the interests of the state media, (4).

Interestingly while this application was not extended to cover the various print media it has resurfaced in relation to the independent radio stations who have apparently taken their cues from the Broadcasting Authority Act Amendment.

The bearing this has on RTE political coverage is quite fundamental. It was on a precursor of the Today Tonight documentary programme, 7 Days in 1972 that interviews were given to the chiefs of staff of the two wings of Sinn Fein, as a consequence of which the wheels were set in motion for the dismissal of the Authority. While the Act states that it should be, "...fair to all interests concerned." it has in practice been

an instrument that has produced tension between broadcasters and the Authority and indeed the Authority and the Government. Much of this tension has remained hidden due to political pressure.

Modern television electioneering really began in 1977 with the General Election of that year. Prior to this while there was of course television coverage most electioneering on a national scale was conducted through the pages of the national press and the inevitable meetings throughout the country. Local politicians canvassed on a local basis but the leaders, ministers and other worthies travelled from place to place to address sometimes quite large crowds. A similar system had evolved in the United Kingdom and was superseded by television coverage only in the early Sixties.

The change in approach was partly as a result of the Fianna Fail Election Manager, Seamus Brennan, who imported much of the razzmatazz of American elections into the Irish body politic. Features of this were properly organised press conferences which were suitable for television coverage. There were break-neck helicopter trips around the country by Jack Lynch, the candidate for Taoiseach, all carefully planned with the press notified in advance of his location at any given time and most importantly an awareness that television was superseding the role of the print media as the instrument of mass communication in the state.

For Fianna Fail anything that made television coverage easier made their task of convincing the electorate to vote for them easier. It was no surprise therefore that they were elected with their greatest majority ever. Furthermore it was no surprise when other political parties made note of this and while certainly not

an Irish invention, the term "media circus" is quite applicable.

There is little doubt that Garrett FitzGerald was elected leader of Fine Gael soon after the 1977 election due in part to his amiable and seemingly well versed media presence. Certainly Fine Gael in the following years adopted the American style of electioneering with no problems whatsoever. Another party that was influenced quite directly by media considerations was the Workers Party which underwent no less than three name changes in the space of ten years, from Official Sinn Fein to Sinn Fein - The Workers Party in 1977 to The Workers Party in 1982 (Contesting the February Election of that year under the old name and the November Election under the new one.). The consideration here was the close, and mainly negative, identification the public made between the two wings of Sinn Fein, a consideration that politically was borne out by their increasing vote following the name changes.

The politicians realising that they were faced with a relatively new medium saw the need for new ways of dealing with it. Due to this a number of communications consultants appeared offering courses on how to deal with television interviews. The role of these consultants will be further discussed in this thesis, but that they have an effect is testified by the numbers of politicians who over the past two decades have attended these courses.

Consciousness of the power of the medium by the political parties was mirrored by the attitudes within the media. Programmes such as Today Tonight which was first shown in the early 1980's began

to take a more aggressive approach, even than those of the 1970's. Reporters such as Brian Farrell and Olivia O'Leary became more than just presenters and took on the role of commentators.

This then is the history of current affairs and political broadcasting in Ireland, from a base of almost mundane impartiality to a situation where increasingly the thrust of broadcasting was taking on at least a semi-critical approach to the received wisdom of the Irish state.

In the following sections each aspect of RTE Election broadcasting will be considered. In the first the political and media background to the 1989 General Election will be detailed. The following section will then be devoted to an individual programme, a Six-One news, a Today Tonight special and finally the Election Results special. Each section will analyse the form and content of these programmes and point towards the conclusion.

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Section One - The Political and Media Background to Election '89

The political background to Election '89

From the dissolution of the 25th Dail on the 25th of May 1989 no one was under any illusion that this election was crucial for the Fianna Fail party, attempting for the fourth time in the decade to achieve an overall majority. It had been long anticipated that the government would hold the General Election on the same date as the European Elections, June 15th. When Charles Haughey announced that that was indeed to be the case there was an almost anticlimatic air and a realisation on the part of other political parties that Fianna Fail had somehow managed to pull a fast one in only leaving twenty days for campaigning as well as having a highly suspect European Election advertising campaign with the slogan,

"Home and away the best team."

Obviously the various political parties had already had European Election campaigns planned and in some cases implemented but the General Election was to put a further strain on their resources.

In relation to issues the major ones of the campaign were already prominent. The Government had gone to the electorate seeking a mandate for their economic policies, standing on their record and claiming that the opposition could no longer be trusted to continue support for these policies.

The opposition parties went forward with the view that the government was not implementing the correct policies in a number of areas. These areas were soon defined as unemployment, taxation

and most importantly the running of the state health service, which it was claimed was in a state of severe underfunding. The phrase which was to come back time and again as we shall see was taken from the previous Fianna Fail election campaign of 1987, "Health cuts hurt the old, the sick and the handicapped."

An interesting aspect of the campaign and perhaps an indication of the political volatility of the period were the candidates put forward under the general heading of Army Wives. These were a particular protest by relatives of members of the armed forces who sought improved wages and conditions for their spouses. With little coverage and finance they nonetheless added to the air of protest soon to envelop the campaign.

Major points in the campaigns were the launch of the individual party campaigns, the launch of manifestos by each of the parties and later on the announcement on May 27th that the Progressive Democrats and Fine Gael had entered an Alliance for the election and could credibly form, so it was claimed, an alternative government. Each of these was accompanied by considerable press and television coverage, as indeed they were designed to. The reason for a separate launching of campaigns and manifestos was to maximise publicity, two media events it was reasoned being better than one. Unfortunately some of the smaller parties combined both in one and consequently had less exposure. Fianna Fail hoping to stagger their coverage kept their manifesto back until June 6th, a mere nine days before the election.

Press conferences were held by the parties, sometimes on a daily basis at which they would further outline their policies or counter those of their opponents. These recieved somewhat sparse

coverage, usually only making a real impact when combined with that other mainstay of Irish General Elections, the opinion poll.

These were released by the newspapers, and conducted by independent polling organisations such as MRBI, the IMS and Lansdowne Market. They came out on average once every four days during the campaign and the last was taken just four days before the vote.

Their credibility is not in issue, rather the manner in which they helped the political parties receive coverage on television. For instance on June 1st an Irish Times/MRBI poll was released revealing a drop in 6% for Fianna Fail core support, a finding which was immediately seized upon by the media and became "news".

So at the dissolution of the Dail the strength of the political parties stood as follows,

Fianna Fail 81

Fine Gael 51

Progressive Democrats 14

Labour 12

Workers Party 4

Independents 3

It was from this position that coverage was to be determined, that issues and approaches were to be decided and ultimately put before the Irish people.

RTE and Election '89

For RTE the election had in fact started some time earlier, some two years earlier in fact following the last election. At that

time RTE had given the task of collecting and processing election results data to Queens University Belfast. A large number of computers were linked together for this project and then linked directly to the RTE election studios at Montrose in Dublin. On the night however the entire system fell apart resulting in what was little short of a fiasco for all concerned. It was decided after this to do as much of the work in house.

Computer units were hired or purchased from computer companies and basic design decisions were taken at around this time, for instance, the graphic representation of political parties was carried on from the previous election so that the primary colours used in each parties logo were used when their support was indicated on bar charts.

A steering committee was also set up to coordinate election coverage. This was not an abstract decision taken on the off chance of an election being called, the primary function was coverage of the European election called for June 15th. There was of course considerable interest and speculation on the possibility of an 1989 election and according to those involved the probability of a June General Election was thought to be very high.

The steering committee was composed of individuals from all areas responsible for the production of RTE programming over the pre - election period. Eugene Murray, executive producer of Today Tonight was one of those on the committee and had overall responsibility for election coverage. Others involved were representatives from production, computing and graphic design. Prior to the announcement of the General Election and the start

of the European election countdown this committee met on a fairly regular basis, following those points in time the committee met on a daily basis, usually early in the morning to assess coverage and if necessary redirect as well as monitoring the progress of preparations for election programmes and specials.

Certain decisions on the nature of coverage were taken by the steering committee in light of the Broadcasting Act. Generally these decisions can be seen as relating to the overall thrust of coverage rather than the detail. As an example, it was decided in the light of longstanding practice to allocate coverage to parties on the basis of their representation in the Dail. This was seen as a general rule rather than a specific one. According to Eugene Murray this meant that in the light of newsworthiness a party might be allocated more coverage in a specific context, say on the release of their manifesto (1).

Newsworthiness was seen to relate more or less completely to policy and hardly at all to publicity stunts and such like. Photo opportunities were not of themselves seen as interesting unless promoting a specific event such as the announcement of the Fine Gael, Progressive Democrat Alliance. During the election decisions relating to coverage were made by editors.

Other decisions taken were made in relation to resources available. Total national coverage was impossible due to lack of staff so it was decided in the run up to the election to concentrate exclusively on marginal constituencies to give some indication of how election campaigns were progressing.

In many respects RTE was fortunate in that it was able to incorporate election coverage into the context of its flagship programme, Today Tonight, and into the usual news programmes. While these were considered "special" they were not seen as different in nature from other examples of current affairs programming. As shall be seen they were different in many fundamental ways.

It is important to realise that election coverage is a two way process, just as RTE was gearing up to meet the needs of the election so too were politicians preparing to be interviewed. As stated in the introduction in the last two decades it has become popular for politicians to be "schooled" to appear on television by various private communication consultants.

Terry Prone of Carr Communications, probably the most widely known of such organisations, said that at election time the services of the media consultants are at a premium (2).

These services include priming or "bulletproofing" party representatives for major interviews and programmes. Such bulletproofing takes the shape of mock interview situations specifically tailored to meet the demands of the presenters putting the questions. The RTE presenters are analysed to expose their interviewing styles and the questions that they are most likely to ask are considered and used in order that the politicians are not caught unawares. Prone claimed that in RTE interviews following such priming the politicians were not asked any question that was not already put by herself or her colleagues. She also went on to say that unlike the American experience of such consultancy Carr Communications and similar

companies concentrated on tapping the capabilities of individual politicians to deliver information. Politicians were not taught to smile or to rein in their gestures but to act in as natural and comfortable a way as was possible. Carr Communications was founded in 1975 and has been working in this area for well over a decade now. In that time representatives of all the political parties have visited it for initial and refresher courses and it has served that market impartially. As shall be seen the impact of such consultancy has been considerable.

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Section Two - Election News

In many respects this must be seen as one of the most important areas of RTE election coverage. Certainly it would be the single most widely viewed forum for election information by the general public. For this reason the approach by RTE to the news coverage of the election is revealing.

The Six O'Clock News is the main news of the day, combining as it does international and domestic news with reports from around the country, often of great depth. It is usually forty five minutes long and divided into two parts by a commercial break.

There are two presenters in the studio who introduce news items and lead into film reports. These film reports have their own presenters who are taken from one or other area of speciality in the news department. In general RTE news only has two reporters on political affairs, during an election this number can rise to encompass almost all their reporters.

The format of the news rarely varies. This is of course to provide continuity and a sense of the information received during the programme fitting into a context similar to the print media. The analytical aspects of the news are more severely curtailed than on other documentary programming due to limitations of time. It is not possible in a three minute segment to cover every aspect of a story, from the historic background to the future ramifications. That task is left to other productions. Instead the philosophy behind RTE news is to provide an update on events with, if possible, a brief analysis.

Taking as an example a typical news broadcast from the election

period the Six One news of the 7th of June provides us with a number of areas quite suitable for analysis. Editorial policy during the election was responsible for the decision to host brief interviews with each of the main party leaders. On this programme Des O'Malley, leader of the Progressive Democrats agreed to appear. Some of the programmes had analysis of marginal constituencies or those in which extra seats could be won or lost by the main parties. Carlow Kilkenny was one such and it is featured here. This was the day Provisional Sinn Fein launched their manifesto and in view of the limitations of the Broadcasting Act the treatment of that launch is revealing. Yet it is the lead election story which gives the best flavour of the election dealing as it does with the Fianna Fail response to criticism by the Fine Gael/Progressive Democrat Alliance of their health policies.

The programme opened as usual with a brief graphic of the globe encircled by four or five orbiting bands of colour, a neutral image of the sort often favoured by news programmes, conveying impartiality and objectivity.

Superimposed on the globe in a picture frame in rapid succession were the three leading stories, panic in Beijing following the military crackdown, the Minister of Health Rory O'Hanlon and the Fine Gael spokesperson on Health Ivan Yates clash on Health policies and then a report on Shorts of Belfast being bought up by a Canadian company.

The presenter Sean Duignan then introduced the programme referring exclusively to election stories such as the launch of the Sinn Fein policy manifesto, an interview with Progressive

Democrat leader Des O'Malley and a report from the marginal constituency of Carlow Kilkenny. Since the news from Beijing was the leading item it came first and after some three minutes of that Duignan introduced a report on the health issue from Charlie Bird saying.

"Here it is clear that the state of the health services has become one of the dominant issues in the election."

Bird reiterated this in the introduction to his report.

His report outlined the various aspects of the issue, closure of wards, queues for treatment to the accompaniment of various images of hospitals, the party representatives on a radio debate on the issue and contentious advertising by both FF and FG over the issue with a shot of a current FG newspaper advertisement dealing with FF '87 Election campaign slogan about health cuts hurting the old, the sick and the handicapped.

Two graphics were shown, one of the FG/PD Alliance proposals on the issue and then the FF proposal. These graphics outlined in two sentences the main thrust of the proposals with Bird only slightly embellishing them.

Then there were two short statements by Rory O'Hanlon and Ivan Yates on the issue both taken in the grounds of RTE. There is no analysis of the merit of either politician's claims or any independent voice on the issue.

Interestingly no-one from the medical profession itself is consulted. Granted it succeeds in terms of the news brief. The parties have issued statement and counter statement and these are reported faithfully but in no sense are they analysed. When it is

remembered that this is the second most important news issue of the day it is strikingly sparse.

The politicians are not in any sense "interviewed". They have been asked for a statement and that is what they give. One interesting facet of their appearance is that the Minister is shown indoors from relatively close range with only his shoulders and head in view whereas the FG spokesperson is filmed outdoors from further away. John Fiske in his book Television Culture makes the observation that close ups are mostly reserved in drama and entertainment programmes for hostile figures (1).

Since the report is at least implicitly taking a slightly critical view of government policy, one camera pan zooms out from a close up of the FG advertisement knocking FF health policy, this is quite a logical camera device, however unconscious it may be. Yet on the verbal level the report is a model of impartiality.

This apparent dichotomy between the verbal and the visual is taken to greater heights in the following item. a report on the Sinn Fein manifesto launch. Sean Duignan again introduced the report with a few sentences on the Sinn Fein campaign. Liam Cahill then took over, outlining the various policy areas of the manifesto. The first image however was a zoom out from the conference table where cards with the word CENSORED in block capitals were placed in front of every speaker. The camera moved from face to face and then across the banners behind the speakers until it returned to Gerry Adams' face as Cahill said, "...The manifesto reiterates its support for the IRA campaign of violence. Gerry Adams claimed today that IRA killings and

bombings had not featured on his canvass."

The camera returned to the cards while Cahill continued, "Under an order made by the Minister of Communication RTE is forbidden to broadcast interviews or reports of interviews with spokesmen or women for the organisation styling itself Sinn Fein. In the Ministers opinion such broadcasts would be likely to promote or incite crime or tend to undermine the authority of the state."

Despite the restrictions on broadcasting the report is not unlike those of any party, with shots of the speakers and a voice over by the presenter. One does not actually hear Adams but in any event in terms of information the broadcast manages to convey the outline of the Sinn Fein document, a new housing policy, a reversal of government spending cuts in health and education and indeed the Sinn Fein "Six point" Northern Ireland Peace Plan.

Strangely, in view of the Minister's injunction on RTE to refrain from reporting "...reports of interviews..." sandwiched between Sinn Fein's expression of support for the IRA and the Minister's statement is a report of Gerry Adams saying that if SF TDs were elected they might give support to a Fianna Fail minority government.

Certainly analysis of the Sinn Fein proposals is missing. Once again we are getting information and in some respects more than that in the report on the health service, but there is no criticism other than that imposed by Section 31.

This item was followed by various domestic stories unconcerned with the election and a commercial break.

After this Sean Duignan welcomed the viewer back with a brief one line roundup of the main stories. There followed an interview with Des O'Malley, leader of the Progressive Democrats conducted by Duignan himself.

The first view of O'Malley was when Duignan turned to him with his first question. For the rest of the interview Duignan who had been looking directly at the camera devotes his attention to O'Malley. They were seated about two metres from each other and O'Malley conformed to the convention of looking at Duignan. Until now the viewer had been addressed on a one to one basis, talked to (or perhaps at), from here the viewer becomes a spectator. Duignan may well have asked the questions one wants to ask but it is he who is asking them and he who is being given the replies.

His tone was not hectoring but was nonetheless firm as he questioned O'Malley on the apparent change of heart in PD policy concerning public expenditure faced with the health issue, an issue which O'Malley persisted in evading despite Duignan's repeated attempts to phrase and rephrase the question. Duignan had one main point, that increased funds from the Lottery were still part of Exchequer resources and that however the PD/FG Alliance dressed up the figures, they constituted an increased government expenditure at odds with previous policy. O'Malley eventually relented to the point where he shifted the discussion onto a different point, the suffering caused by the health cuts yet it is obvious that his answers were evasive.

Duignan had done all he could under the circumstances to politely indicate the discrepancy between past and present PD

policy. As Janet Martin, a news editor in RTE said, the use of leading questions is bad journalism since it pushes the participants into entrenched positions and prevents the subtleties of meaning from being uncovered (2). Duignan avoided using leading questions but at the same time his point was clear.

In the rest of the interview he questioned O'Malleys views on the poor showing of the Alliance in the polls and his possible support for a FF minority government. In all the interview lasted four minutes.

The camera work was revealing, as already stated Duignan led us into the interview. The camera remained on O'Malley when he was speaking other than when Duignan was making his points or attempting to. Mostly the camera remained close to O'Malley and only pulled away to show both men every minute or so.

Remembering that many politicians and most of the more prominent ones are primed for such interviews it is very likely that O'Malley went for such help before this interview. Unfortunately it did not completely work. O'Malley appeared to be ill at ease and unable to answer the questions directly. His single mindedness in relation to certain points which were not those put to him appear to be evasion rather than illumination. In fact the repetition of particular points is one aspect of communications training as underlined by Terry Prone, since it ensures that a message will be received (3). As shown here, repetition can shade easily into single minded obstinacy.

Certainly this is more revealing television than a straight news item. On the other hand since the politician is dodging questions

and so much time is being taken up in trying to pin him down the informational side is losing out and, one suspects, so is the analytical. Obviously a four minute interview can do little to address the problem, as indeed Ed Mulhall of news editing admitted, but it is illuminating as a contrast between information and analysis (4).

The interview, over Duignans co-presenter Eileen Magnier introduced an item on the marginal General election constituency of Carlow Kilkenny.

This was actually a quite detailed if somewhat confusing account of the intricacies of the political party campaigns in the constituency. It showed every candidate on the campaign trail and detailed their support. It carried interviews with two of the Fianna Fail Directors of Election and one each from the Progressive Democrats and Fine Gael. Each spoke relatively openly about their candidates and much was made of the way in which different areas of the constituency had been targetted by the party candidates. No real effort was made to convey the policies of the parties. All here was tactics and campaigns. It was assumed that the viewer knew enough about the policies to make his or her mind up. The report was candid about those it considered vulnerable in the upcoming election and certainly the function of the report was fulfilled in that the marginal aspects of the constituency were well shown.

It is interesting to see the manner in which the proportionality of coverage works for the parties here. Fianna Fail with two seats and Fine Gael and the Progressive Democrats with one apiece had more coverage than Labour which also had one.

On the other hand, it was becoming obvious that both FF and the PD candidates were in trouble and hence these candidates were inherently more "interesting" than the Labour man who it transpired came in second and was elected on the first count. The Workers Party with a mere 2% support in the constituency recieved no more than a brief mention. With no Independents there was no coverage of them, but had there been any, steering committee policy would have not allowed them any coverage, indeed the only one who recieved any was Neil Blaney due to his European Parliament seat. Certainly one could say that in this respect the news coverage is weighted towards the status quo. It is difficult to break in and once there, there is no guarantee of notice.

Overall we see that the news broadcast is labouring under almost impossible demands. It has to be impartial, objective and also factual. It cannot in such a confined format offer more than a minor and cursory analysis of the realities of the election.

There are forty one constituencies and it is impossible for RTE to cover each of those with any justice in a mere three weeks.

The decision to cover only a few marginals appears to be realistic and reasonable, although this coverage is flawed. The day-to-day reporting of election news seems to fall down, even on a factual basis, due to the limitations on time. The interview seems to have similar problems. Indeed ironically the most successful report in terms of information content appears to be the report on the Sinn Fein manifesto. However it has no analytical content whatsoever.

One glaring omission from the programme is the general public.

There is no vox populi, although in other news broadcasts where politicians were shown canvassing, bystanders were asked for their opinions. This lack of input means that of course the presenter must assume the role of the public with varying degrees of success.

It is obviously impossible for the news programme as constituted to do other than impart information and one is not surprised that this information is non-critical in its stance towards the legitimacy of the democratic process occurring. There is no analysis as to whether the process is effective or indeed just. That is not an issue in terms of the reporting. Due in no small part to this, it is also unsurprising that the question of policy is subordinated especially in the Carlow/Kilkenny constituency report to tactical aspects of the campaign there. The viewer is not merely receiving the news, although information is there, the news is in itself a complete package of values which are completely taken for granted. That they work on one more fundamental level, that of the legitimacy of the election process, allows the inference that at a less fundamental level, that of party political policies, they will likewise work, and the viewer does not need to be reminded of the ideological aspects of the campaign. Mary J. Kelly in her paper, "Who Controls the Domestic News Agenda?" makes the point that news media are unlikely to be vehicles exhorting radical change, primarily due to commercial reasons but also since they serve a consensus of the "elite" in society (5). Their legitimising function in the political process can be seen as adding to an "elite" consensus, but one suspects that the nature of television

prevents informational news from escaping to a more analytical level.

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Section Three - Today Tonight Election Specials

Part of the election steering committee's decision concerning coverage was to run a number of specials using the Today Tonight name which would be broadcast over the three weeks prior to the vote. Eugene Murray, who produced these programmes, revealed that the day the election was called the Today Tonight team actually had twenty minutes of film shot on the health situation in Cork (1).

There were six specials in all, each dealing with an area that was perceived to be decisive for the campaign. These programmes dealt in forty minutes with health, taxation, social welfare, unemployment, emigration and the economy.

Presented by the main reporters with Today Tonight, each was an attempt to cover the way in which these issues had become issues, the response of the voters involved with them and the response of the political parties to them and to each other's proposals.

Taking as an example the programme of the 30th of June which dealt with the Health cuts one can readily see the formula used. The presenter this night was Olivia O'Leary. There was a studio panel consisting of the Minister Rory O'Hanlon, Ivan Yates for Fine Gael and Brenden Howlin for Labour.

The programme opened with O'Leary intoning over a picture of Charles Haughey,

"No more money for the health service, but will election fever change his mind?"

Referring to "...controversial government cuts..." and the fact that the opposition had targetted health cuts, she outlined the

main opposition proposals in this area, a 60M injection by the FG/PD alliance over two years and a restructuring of the Health Boards.

Mary Harney was shown making a speech about the suffering caused by waiting lists and the closure of hospital wards.

This was counterposed with a radio interview with Haughey on the issue where he stated that there was no more money from the government.

She also briefly mentioned the claim by Labour and the Workers Party that neither FG nor the PDs had a clear record on this issue. She then introduced a piece by Paul Blanchfield on the background to the debate.

It started with shots of the launch of the Fine Gael manifesto on the subject. Then it cut to Blanchfield interviewing Dukes at the launch and asking him whether FG had not in fact implicitly supported FF health policy for the previous two years.

Dukes denied this vehemently, and disagreed with Blanchfields contention that there was a case for cutting back health expenditure.

Then the item cut to the Workers Party statement at their launch of their health policy. The spokesperson challenged the creation of a health service divided on "class" lines and then went on to ask FG/PD to make their stance on support for a FF minority government clear.

This lead back into the Dukes interview where Blanchfield made the point that FGs Tallaght strategy appeared to be moribund to which Dukes replied that Health policy was only a part of the Tallaght strategy and he expected that health issues would

predominate on the canvass.

O'Leary came back on screen to link this general report with a follow up based on the "bizarre funding crisis" as she termed it, occurring in the Southern Health Board. A graphic outlining the problem, that the SHB had an over run of 2.5M and was unable to continue in operation was shown and then compared to a further graphic showing that new money had been discovered, 2M in total from European Social Fund and insurance sources which had not previously been there.

O'Leary then handed over to a report from Brendan O'Brien in Cork on the Southern Health Board.

His report began at what he called the "cutting edge" of the health cuts, a primary school in Cork where numerous children were unable to receive medical treatment at the SHB hospitals due to waiting lists. He then outlined the background to the crisis, with workers receiving notices that they could not be paid due to a lack of finance. The secretary of the Ministers department flew down and in a meeting at Cork airport dismissed certain officials in the SHB. The chairperson of the SHB expressed his bemusement at the discovery of the extra finance.

O'Brien gave some social background to the cuts, how those most affected were unemployed and unable to consider private treatment and in a series of interviews with parents outlined some examples of the way the cuts actually affected children.

He interviewed social workers who spoke of 1500 children at risk, and also indicated the dangers to the elderly in an interview with voluntary workers in that area. The fears of

psychiatric staff were voiced and those of the unions involved.

Following this, the camera returned to the panel. O'Leary immediately took an aggressive stance questioning the Minister at length about the source of the new finance for the Southern Health Board and expressing open incredulity at his answer that it was money from ESF funds and that his department had no responsibility for it.

He made clear what he called his "resentment" at being thought to have anything to do with it. O'Leary then turned to Howlin who quoted the story about the FF Minister who put down trees in one of the more depressed areas of his constituency just prior to an election and had them uprooted as soon as the votes were in. He made the point that the money had not previously existed and that only for the election campaign it would not have been "found".

Ivan Yates was asked by O'Leary if the waiting lists constituted a crisis, to which he replied that they did and outlined the FG proposals. She put the question to O'Hanlon who said that it was not a crisis although he accepted that waiting lists were not acceptable.

He also reiterated that there would not as he put it be a "dutch auction" in relation to the election and that no extra money would be distributed.

Returning her attention to Yates, O'Leary pointed out that Fine Gael had supported two budgets which had previously cut health expenditure and queried the change of heart in Fine Gael.

Yates made much of the crisis that had occurred, that it was an election situation and that Fine Gael had coherent policies on the issue. Seeing no apparent answer to the question O'Leary

persisted in her line of reasoning and put it to him that the logic of what he was saying was that if no election had been called Fine Gael would have supported a budget based on these proposals. Yates denied this.

Bringing in the issue of FG support for a minority FF government following the election O'Leary questioned Yates as to whether FG would vote against health estimates in a budget. He replied that Alan Dukes would consider the position after an election.

Turning to Howlin, O'Leary asked him whether there was a two tier health system in this country? To his reply of yes she then put it that it was the Labour Minister of Health Barry Desmond who had instituted health cuts. Howlin replied that he had not and that expenditure had remained level under Desmond's tenure. He then threw out an attack at Fine Gael saying that as late as two days before the programme the Labour senators in the Senate had proposed a vote on the cuts and FG had refused to participate in it.

Ivan Yates cut in saying that this was not true but that he would look into it.

O'Leary finished up with the Minister questioning the two tier aspect of the problem. He replied firstly that there was a constitutional right to "private" health care and that he was addressing the problem.

That is in essence the content of the programme. As we can see it has a formal structure, consisting of an introduction by O'Leary, a film referring in general terms to the Health issue, a more specific investigation of a local aspect of the cuts with

wide reference to many different groups involved (voluntary workers, health administrators, unions and of course the public.) and concludes with a debate arising from, but not centered on, the filmed reports. There are obvious reasons for this structure. It is more interesting both logically and visually since the viewer can assimilate the information collected by the reporters and then compare it to the comments of the politicians.

It is wide ranging and appears to be objective since most or all of the parties to the debate are addressed. However in some respects it is subjective in its analysis. It addresses the questions from a non-critical stance. Essentially it takes for granted the fact that we have health service and that the presumed status quo prior to the health cuts was the best of all possible situations. There is no consideration of alternative types of health service, which is perhaps justified in that it is a political programme addressing the issues in the terms by which they are presented by the political parties. Unfortunately since it is precisely because the agenda is in many ways set by the politicians the question of dissenting voices is neatly set aside. A consensus of opinion is found, ie. that the health services are immutable, not from principle but for political reasons, hence the political parties use such an issue as a stick to beat each other with. On these terms O'Leary is providing a service by detailing the twists and turns of the parties in relation to the issue, for O'Leary takes a line of questioning which does not relate to the issue of the health service as such but rather the public pronouncements of the parties involved, hence she can equally berate Yates for Fine Gael's past policies,

O'Hanlon for Fianna Fail's present policy and Labour for a hypothetical future policy in terms of their previous actions. It has been said by commentators like Helena Sheehan that the general RTE view was a liberal middle class one (2).

In fact it does have traces of such a view in the filmed reports which are presented on this programme in that they betray an unease with the breakdown of the operation of the health service in relation to the poorer sections of the population. Yet O'Leary puts that behind for the most part with the exception of her questions on the development of the two-tiered system, by sticking closely to an analysis of the purely political aspects of the question and how this question will be resolved by the parties.

Terry Prone made the interesting point that women need to be more aggressive on television and more emphatic in their gesture to be noticed, certainly O'Leary has brought her interviews to the level of an art form (3). At one stage Ivan Yates asks rather plaintively of O'Leary whether he can make "...one remark." to which O'Leary replies "No."

Prone herself has said she can do a more than passable imitation of O'Leary's style, which must indeed be useful for those who face O'Leary. In fact Yates also takes an aggressive and forceful approach, but he is not the one asking the questions which puts him at quite a disadvantage pointed up at the end of the interview where O'Hanlon sums up and both Yates and Howlin are disagreeing quite vocally off camera with the Minister. They have had their say but have not been able in the context of the

interview to directly confront their political opponents. O'Leary acting as referee has prevented the discussion from becoming a matter of sloganeering, much to the chagrin of the others.

As a programme addressing the health cuts it works well, as a means of understanding the response of the political parties it also provides an insight and it is quite entertaining. Politically it is relatively well balanced. Since RTE gives coverage proportionate to the representation of the parties in the Dail, all the political parties are given an opportunity on film and in interview to put their case. Of course there is the issue as to whether real alternatives are being presented to the public since policies are presented not on an ideological basis but on a party basis and since parties have similar views, the choice presented is not an ideological choice but rather a party political choice. This is reflected by Today Tonight, and not subverted by it. For instance Labour and the Workers Party have a radically different interpretation of the issue from that of Fianna Fail, Fine Gael or the Progressive Democrats, but this does not come out in the course of the programme. This is perhaps due to the presentation of the filmed reports which take a critical approach to government policy but ignore the party political response and then the O'Leary debate which concentrates on the party political aspects. For instance the politically charged question as to whether it is or is not a two tiered system is brought up but not really addressed. For many the two tiered system is responsible in part for the situation in the health service as a whole. The prominence which the health cuts

are given while the tiered system is relatively ignored, is a cause of unease. With regard to the fundamental issues the approach of this programme is to remain in the context of the given and to address cursorily if at all, other viewpoints. Is this democratic? The answer can only be yes and no, depending on the subjective viewpoint. It does not perhaps make for compelling debate since the area for debate is curtailed by the parties themselves. On the other hand it is difficult to see how other viewpoints can be accommodated within the framework presently extant or indeed whether they should. In this respect the function of this television is hardly subversive. It is a commentary on political brand X or Y. If brand Z has not made a major impact in terms of representation then it must in future do so if it is to be given any great degree of coverage. Cynical voices might say that without coverage or the implicit legitimacy of coverage brand Z is unlikely to increase representation and is therefore in a Catch 22 situation. It is difficult to disagree with such a view and yet it is obvious that an impasse has been reached.

Remember too, that Independents did not feature at all in this programme or in other pre election programmes. In fact Tom Foxe was elected as an independant candidate directly due to his opposition to health cuts in Roscommon and other candidates also stood on that broad platform. It is difficult to see a justification for ignoring such candidates other than ones based on considerations of time, and indeed this is the excuse usually used.

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Section Four - Election '89 Results Coverage

The night of the election results was a carefully planned and highly organised tour de force for RTE. The bulk of the programming was broadcast from the 16th to the 19th of June. In fact the studios had been prepared almost a month in advance and in the case of the computer network recording and analysing results work had started up to six months previously.

In a sense this was the most important piece of election programming, ensured of a large audience who would depend on the television for the results as they came in from the nationwide counts rather than wait for the following day's papers. It was also the greatest legitimising aspect of the election. As the forum in which the results were assessed and their implications considered it had a significance not dissimilar to active elements of the election such as voting. In a real sense the election results programme was a fundamental element of Election '89. The reasons for this are many and varied and will become apparent in analysis of the programme itself.

The basic format of the programme is relatively simple. RTE set up two studios to accomodate it. One contained the computer equipment and was shown only in passing. The other was the main focus of the coverage. A decision was taken by the steering committee to keep all the presenters in the same studio, as much a matter of practicality and visual unity as any other reason. To this end, the platform the presenters sat as was a large semi-circle. There were three presenters, Brian Farrell had the role of main presenter and interviewer and hosted a rotating panel of

politicians up to six in number who sat on his right. Between him and his panel was a large monitor into which were fed incoming reports from outside broadcasting units at count centers. These OBU's also conducted interviews on the ground and occasionally were brought into the debate with the studio panel.

Further along the semi circle was seated Pat Kenny whose main task was reading out with the help of graphic computer displays the incoming results. Only once in a while did he leave his position to show the studio with the computer network.

Finally John Bowman sat at the end of the semi-circle and his job was to provide a political analysis of the main trends evident from the incoming figures. He was assisted by two guests, usually journalists or political commentators and these two were on a rotating basis.

There was also a Gaelic service which was broadcast every hour with a brief five-minute long item including interviews and analysis. In fact it mainly dealt with the Udaras na Gaeltachta elections which were also held on the 15th.

The outside broadcasting units were located in seven towns and cities, Dublin, Dundalk, Cork, Tralee, Limerick, Galway and Sligo. As can be seen each was located with a specific geographic spread in mind in order to allow for truly national coverage. All were located in or beside marginals since this was where the election was to be won or lost. One other aspect was that reporters in other areas could make their report on video, bring it to these points where it would then be transmitted to Dublin. To this purpose RTE studios in Athlone and Waterford were also in operation on the night. One interesting aspect of the coverage

pointed out by Eugene Murray who had overall editorial responsibility was that many reports were sent in live and unedited to the studios (1). Since there was not always two way communications this made for interesting if somewhat unpredictable television.

The basic philosophy guiding the coverage on the night of the 16th was as the director John Blackman put it, pure information (2).

This was the priority, to transmit the results as they came in as quickly as possible and in a readily intelligible manner. This meant that as seen, Pat Kennys role was the most important and both John Bowman and Brian Farrell had lesser functions. Of course in reality Brian Farrell had somewhat more airtime than Kenny, due in part to the staggered way in which counts were announced and the need to fill up the remaining time with discussion and analysis.

Not all counts were announced, usually the first count was shown in all 41 constituencies but after that only actual election of candidates or significant vote transfers were broadcast. One device was the use of captions when interviews with major political figures were being conducted.

In overall charge was the Executive Producer Michael Heney and he would quite regularly interrupt interviews in order to cut into incoming results or vice versa.

One point worth bearing in mind is that there was no in studio extrapolation on the European Elections due to the differing constituencies. Indeed there was almost no reference to those

elections during the night.

To further consider the coverage it is instructive to take a half hour segment of the programme from 10.00 P.M. to 10.30 P.M. In this period of time many of the main features occur and there is an interesting and in some ways quite useful example of the panels discussion.

The hour kicked off at the end of a panel discussion and some results. Commercial breaks were loosely timed for every twenty minutes or so, but due to the vagaries of interviews there was no set schedule. Brian Farrell moved away from the discussion to the results with the revealing comment,

"...We do want to give people as much information as we have..."

With this the camera moved onto Kenny who gave a succinct rundown of the counts in Dublin South West, Laois Offaly and Sligo-Leitrim. For each constituency a graphic would appear for some twenty seconds; this listed the candidates, votes received and by means of colour coding whether the candidate was elected or not. Also shown was the overall state of the parties on a dark blue background with a faint grey picture of the Dail on it. This was a bar chart with a marker indicating the number at which a party would achieve an overall majority. Certainly in terms of legibility these graphics were ideal and lacked only a map showing where the specific constituency was. According to Joe Levey of RTE Computer Graphics Programming such a map was discussed as a possible feature of each graphic but was dropped as being too unwieldy and time consuming (3).

Certainly as a means of discerning the national situation it would have been most helpful to the viewer in order to determine

the difference between urban and rural voting patterns and so on.

Kenny did not elaborate on the results to any great degree apart from slight throwaway lines about who was most likely next to be elected or eliminated in a constituency, but he did introduce a brief item showing a humorous cartoon drawn by an RTE artist dealing with the Progressive Democrats poor showing. Farrell lead into a commercial break with the words,

"At this stage we had better earn our keep, Lets go over to a commercial break."

In itself an interesting acknowledgement of the realities of commercial public broadcasting. The commercial break lasted just over three minutes, and the programme continued with a recap of the national state of the parties. There was a five minute Gaelic language item on the Udaras elections in which a member of the Green party was interviewed and asked for his response to the imminent election of their first TD and what the Green Party policy on Gaelic was. Then Farrell introduced an outside broadcast from the RDS featuring an interview with Garrett FitzGerald who had just been re-elected for Fine Gael.

The reporter and FitzGerald were filmed from the side and both are in view with a crowd of onlookers, mostly party political workers, in the background.

The reporter on the spot introduced the item with the obligatory congratulations and commented that FitzGerald's vote getting tactics had paid off.

FitzGerald replied that his tactics had worked out in this election unlike some others. At this Farrell cut into the

discussion and asked FitzGerald how he felt about an alliance with a basically right wing party such as the PDs.

FitzGerald neatly dodged the question by saying that his preoccupations during the election had been firmly within his constituency. Ivan Yates and Michael McDowell of the PDs, both on the studio panel were brought in to the discussion to congratulate FitzGerald on his success.

Bowman cut in with questions about a dirty tricks campaign in the constituency which FitzGerald professed to know nothing about. At this point Farrell cut in over Bowman, but Bowman continued with his questions.

Eventually Farrell brought Pat Rabbitte of the Workers Party in to the conversation. Rabbitte after the customary congratulations asked whether the civil war parties should now get together.

FitzGerald said he had never heard the civil war mentioned once in all his years in the Dail and that the PDs, FG and FF were not right wing parties and it was not true that there were no differences between them.

Seamus Brennan of Fianna Fail agreed with FitzGerald on this issue saying that it was important that there was an alternative of the center and Michael McDowell made the point that if there was a right-left divide in Ireland it would be similar to Japan where there was one large center right party and a small and impotent left wing party.

FitzGerald cut in with the interesting but unclarified point that it was a "self-defined" left in Ireland, with which McDowell agreed.

Tony Gregory. the independent left TD for Dublin North Central

agreed with Pat Rabitte that a left/right divide was a good thing and hoped for a left realignment and unity.

Ivan Yates then said that "we" did not want class politics.

Following this Farrell handed over to Pat Kenny who took the viewer on a tour of the studio containing the computer equipment and gave a brief demonstration of how it worked. He also showed a few more results.

One aspect of coverage which was not evident in this particular segment of the programme were reports from count centers around the country where the returning officers gave the results. These were filmed sometimes with only a verbal explanation of which parties the candidates were in, presumably to give some element of suspense. There was no particular order to the counts which were covered thus, it all depended very much on how they could be slotted neatly into the programmes. Of all aspects of the programme they were least successful since the delays in waiting for the counts to come in and the idiosyncratic delivery of some of the returning officers served to disrupt the flow of the programme.

In fact editing was something of a problem on the night. Due to the fluid nature of the subject being covered often a camera would remain on a presenter too long or he would mistime a cue. This was amusing and added to rather than detracted from the overall atmosphere of the production.

Terry Prone made the comment that there is a "cut-off point" for politicians regarding interviews before election day and after (4). When the votes are in that is that and they are considerably

less interested in the effect their words will have. Hence the large numbers of politicians interviewed on the night had a somewhat different and perhaps less guarded approach in comparison to the manner they approached pre-election programmes.

Similarly Pat Rabitte, who appeared on the programme, made the observation that it would not have been right to appear too sectarian (5). The function of this programme was not that of the pre-election specials, to uncover the policies of the parties. Rather it was informational, in reference to results, and entertaining. That discussions such as the above had an element of seriousness and political sophistication that it can be said was missing from other programming can be seen best in the context of Terry Prones words. The election was over, the dissection of the results had begun and for a change, especially in the light of the substantial swing to the left which was then apparent, the implications of the vote could be discussed in a more relaxed and informative way than previously possible.

The actual members of the panels were selected well in advance. According to Tony Heffernan, Press Officer of the Workers Party, he was usually contacted three to four days prior to a programme and asked to provide a representative (6). In the case of the Election Results Special he was asked for a number of representatives since there was a revolving panel. His perception of this programme, and indeed most of the election programming, was that for a small party the WP got a reasonable amount of coverage and considerably more than they had recieved at the last election. He also made the point that RTE coverage was better than that of the news media, possibly due to it being

a public service station and the statutory obligation on it to be impartial.

In the studio Pat Rabbitte felt that the discussion was fairly spontaneous under the guidance of Brian Farrell (5a). Overall there was no particular weighting of questions to the larger parties and he thought that the coverage was suitable in the context of the programme, and that the programme was successful in terms of what it did.

He also made the observation that for the duration of the four week election campaign television had presented the issues whereas the results night programme was firmly rooted in personalities.

Certainly the concentration was on individual stories, Garrett FitzGerald successfully bringing in a second FG candidate in his constituency, Mary Harney barely making it back into the Dail in the face of a strong left challenge in Dublin South-West and indeed the rise of the left parties and the surprise victory for Roger Garland for the Green Party in Dublin. The national framework was a canvas for the little victories and tragedies in the individual constituencies. That some of the panel of politicians included the losers such as Michael McDowell was a telling reflection on the programme.

Yet as has been seen the framework of the programme was flexible enough to allow serious questions and debates to arise on the political life of the nation. For instance, no individual programme before the election dealt with the swing to the left, although mention was made of it in news programmes. If one had

been made and broadcast it is likely that there would have been considerable protest from the larger parties, yet this swing was as much an "issue" in political terms as health. Polls had predicted through the election campaign that Labour and the Workers Party would do much better than originally thought, so it was not in any sense a surprise on the night. Far from it for Charles Haughey had made much of "Red scare" tactics in the last few days before the vote as the polls made clear the lefts increasingly good position.

It was for the Results Special to analyse this, as has been seen, with some success. Throughout the night it was one of the key questions. In this sense the programme was very effective for it allowed a level of political debate not seen during the rest of the election coverage. It is significant that this occurred on a very long programme and when the participants had little to lose in political terms.

The presenters had a very clear function, to reiterate; in Farrell's case information for the public was the primary task. Yet it is also true that they managed to ask questions that were quite fundamental to the campaign and the aftermath.

So it was clear that in questioning the politicians about the effect of the health issue, the rise of the left and the various commitments given by the parties on support or non support for Fianna Fail, in the event that they were in a minority, the presenters set the tone for the subsequent political debate.

Pat Rabittle also made the point that it was a "spectator sport" or an entertainment (5b). This is self evident. The format, being personality orientated, made this inevitable. The way in

which Pat Kenny guided the viewer around the computers was also significant. He stopped beside one and had the operator put up the colourful and effective displays, commenting on the technical wizardry behind the operation.

That the graphics were developed in a similar way to those for sport is not to say that politics is debased, but rather that television of its nature shapes the material it transmits.

The constant, even frenetic pace of change served, to hold the attention, and the continual updating of the national situation in certain key constituencies added to the atmosphere.

In almost every respect this programme was successful on its own terms and with regard to criticism that has been levelled at other election programming, it provides an important third element to the election coverage and significant indicators towards a conclusion.

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Conclusion

The main thrust of this thesis has been to consider the role and function of the RTE coverage of the 1989 General Election.

The historical framework, and the statutory obligations on RTE are clear. Since the inception of the national television service in the 1960's the course of political broadcasting has been an evolving path from where the station acted as little more than a mouthpiece for the status quo to a situation where one could say that the station acts as an arbiter for many voices. At one stage only government representatives were shown, and their pronouncements were never given any analysis or criticism, now almost all have their say although this say is strictly governed by their political representation in the Dail. Of course those considered beyond the political pale such as Sinn Fein are given no voice whatsoever and only cursory attention. However the important point here is that RTE have become arbiters of debate.

The proof of this is in the manner in which they covered the Election. In their programming they assumed the roles of information-givers and analysers of the debates that arose. In practice these roles were divided between the news broadcasts such as those we have seen and the more comprehensive Today Tonight specials. The news broadcasts performed their task well. In relatively short items they managed to outline the developments of the day in the campaign and provide an insight into local conflicts. However the interviews with party leaders fitted uneasily into this context, basically due to a lack of time for real analysis. The shortened format allowed those

interviewed to evade the questions, put and prevented more than a superficial appraisal of the issues.

The Today Tonight specials were somewhat different in that they had the scope for quite extensive coverage of an issue. In the sense that they provided a forum for all parties involved to air their grievances they worked well. The viewer was introduced to all the significant players and the link between the party political aspect of the health issue and the election was pointed up by O'Learys incisive questioning of the parties previous statements. Time was not really an issue here. the issue as presented was adequately dealt with. Yet one obvious criticism is that the differences in approach and indeed ideology between parties were almost ignored. O'Leary took a confrontational stance in regard to all those she interviewed, not in itself a bad thing, leaving the viewer with the impression that a Labour government would be similar to a Progressive Democrat government in their approach to health. This is hardly illuminating, and so while the opportunism of all parties was shown in her interview, it gave the impression that she and by extension the viewer too, was more interested in tactical rather than ideological considerations. So for instance the issue of a two-tier health service was brushed aside while great attention was given to the party politics of the situation. The criticism is not that the latter is not important but rather that it is equally important in political programming to include the former.

The Election Results Broadcast suffered from none of these problems to any great degree. Here television was allowed to devote considerable time and effort to a political topic, and

while treating it on some levels as has been noted as a spectator sport it managed to rise to a level of discussion more analytical and informative than anything that preceded it. It is a testimony to the limits fundamental to the nature of television, in that it of all programmes, succeeded with almost no constraint on broadcasting time, whereas the news and to an extent Today Tonight did not. Neither was it coy when discussing the implications of the election results, and not merely repeating the ritual cant of party politics. It would be foolish to blind one self to the entertainment aspect of this programme however, it provides an example of political television at its best.

In a discussion on the nature of all-news radio and television Arthur Berger saw these media as serving a significant role for the middle classes in society (1). He considered that the upper and lower classes in society had little interest in such media, the former due to their power and influence and the latter due to their interest in sheer survival. The middle classes however, lacking power but seeking it, saw the news media as a tool by which they could make sense of an increasingly chaotic world and perhaps increase their influence over those around them. The fact is that news in Irish society is very popular, a typical six o'clock broadcast rarely dips below 45% of recorded viewers (2). In view of Berger's proposition, it is hardly surprising that the Election Results Special is one of the most widely viewed of all RTE productions (3). Again returning to the legitimising theme this programme provides the viewers with an assurance of order from the political chaos of the election

campaign. The viewer having cast his or her vote may not be in a position to run the government, but at least the viewer knows that there is a government in the offing, and power is being transferred in an orderly and peaceful manner.

The fundamental question is the suitability of television as a medium for political discourse. As seen above the answer is that television can under certain circumstances be a useful, informative, and entertaining means of transmitting and receiving political information. Unfortunately for the most part it is not, due to considerations of time and the limited range of the analysis. The major reason for the limited analysis would seem to tie in with the role of television as arbiter. Television must be neutral in political coverage, which is a reasonable request. However the fact of that neutrality has meant that television has decided firstly that it will not align with any of the political parties, again a reasonable proposition, and secondly that television will analyse the issues relative to the consensus of political opinion which in effect is vaguely centrist. While it is no bad thing to be centrist, it does mean that truly alternative approaches to issues are mostly ignored while the bitter rancour of opposing parties with similar approaches, monopolise the screen. So the concept of television as a truly neutral social arbiter is seen to be distorted to that of television as arbiter of the given consensus.

This is not in any way strange. In a very real sense television is a part of the political process. The results programme can be seen as a legitimising instrument with the winners and losers sitting down together to discuss the way the dice have fallen.

The viewer can see this and switch off thankful that here at least political processes proceed in a peaceful manner. Again, this is not a negative reflection on the role of television. However if one sees television as providing a critique of society and to some extent it should if only to give a more rounded picture of reality. then it must of necessity allow dissenting voices access to political programmes. This could be done by allowing those parties not in agreement with overall political and economic policy more access to broadcasting, it could also and more fundamentally, allow a greater input by the general public who are almost never represented in this sort of programming. We have seen a division between representatives and represented in television broadcasting, one particularly poignant image is that of the bystanders on the street and at the election counts attempting to get into camera range. This division is disturbing in that it fosters the idea that politics is for politicians and that the general public are secondary to the process, an inherently undemocratic point of view.

That this division is not necessarily inevitable is highlighted by the approach Granada TV took to the 1974 UK General Election where they took a large panel of voters, allowed them to question non partisan experts on government and opposition policies, and then followed their voting intentions over the course of the election (4). This form of voter participation would open up the political process.

Eugene Murray has said that the future of television election coverage is essentially to be more of the same (5). The same is

fairly good, but is it good enough? Without alternative and dissenting voices from the general public and from politicians it is hard to see how television can be termed a true medium of political discourse, and that will not merely be a disservice to the public but equally a disservice to democracy.

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Appendix

In view of the topic of proportionality of representation and the role of political coverage by RTE it is interesting to note that this is an ongoing debate. Reproduced below in full is an article from The Irish Times of February 5th 1990 which covers many of the issues addressed in this thesis.

LABOUR AND WP REJECT RTE PLAN TO CUT COVERAGE

By Mark Brennock.

Political Reporter

The Workers Party and the Labour Party have rejected proposals from RTE that would effectively reduce the amount of live coverage of their annual conferences, and the Workers Party leader, Mr Prionsias De Rossa has written to RTE in protest.

The new proposals would for the first time introduce an element of proportionality into the amount of live coverage given to each party leaders speech to their conference. Thus as the largest party, Fianna Fail's leader would broadcast live for an hour, Fine Gaels' for 52 minutes, Labour for 40 minutes, while the Workers Party and the Progressive Democrats would receive 30 minutes each.

Up to this year, each party with an electoral support of over five per cent was given an hour of live coverage of its leaders speech. In addition there was live coverage on Saturday morning, but it is proposed to drop this and to drop party political

broadcasts during by-elections.

Mr De Rossa said yesterday that since live coverage of ard-fheiseanna had started the practice was that all qualifying parties receive the same amount each. "We consider it extraordinary that this issue should have arisen only when the Workers Party qualifies. "The Workers Party electoral support went above five per cent for the first time in last June's election.

He said that other changes seemed to be part of a systematic programme to reduce political coverage by RTE. The station he said has "an obligation to foster democratic participation by providing adequate coverage of political affairs."

A Labour Party spokesman said last night that his party rejected any attempt by RTE to unilaterally change its coverage of political events. "We would be happy to sit down and discuss with them how to make these events more attractive to their viewers," he said.