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Irish pirate radio 1978-1988: how political stasis allowed unlicensed radio to flourish and innovate

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Abstract

The history of pirate radio in Ireland remains understudied by comparison with other countries with histories of unlicensed broadcasting. This is surprising given the extent and longevity of a large pirate radio scene which was at its zenith between 1978 and 1988.

Drawing on our own archive of Irish pirate radio recordings, interviews with those involved and pirate paraphernalia, we contend that the cultural, social, political, economic and technological influence of Irish pirate radio was far-reaching. However, although the pirates were influential and left a lasting legacy, they ultimately lost out in the new licensed regime rolled out from 1989.

Introduction

The history of pirate radio in Ireland remains understudied by comparison with other countries with histories of unlicensed broadcasting. This is surprising given the extent and longevity of a large and influential pirate radio scene which was at its zenith between 1978 and 1988. In this article, we contend that the cultural, social, political, technological and economic influence of Irish pirate radio was far-reaching and led to shifts in the ‘mass media communication triangle’ of (a) media agency and production, (b) media audiences and consumption and (c) media content and convergence or divergence of media forms (Cronqvist & Hilgert, 2017). Scholarship in fields such as media studies, media history and culture and communication has not paid adequate attention to the Irish-based version of the pirate radio phenomenon. Our intention is to analyse the phenomenon by drawing on concepts such as mediatisation, alternative/community media and the political economy of pirate radio. We contend that although the pirates were influential, they ultimately lost out in the new licensed radio regime introduced in 1989.

The catalyst for this research was the 31st of December 2018, the thirtieth anniversary of the supposedly definitive silencing of Irish pirate radio to allow for legalisation. We are both former pirate broadcasters ourselves – 1980s teenage operators from makeshift studios in bedrooms and sheds – but as the years passed we came to reflect more critically on our own involvement and on the historical significance of the sector in which we played a small part. With that in mind, we decided to develop an open digital archive (www.pirate.ie) as a repository for historical recordings of pirates and interviews with those involved in them. The archive has developed significantly and has received several large donations in audio and print form. This paper will not consider the methodology of the archive itself but will rather show how it and other transmedial sources can be used to study the broader role of pirate radio in Irish society at the peak of the phenomenon.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Because of its whiff of illegality and the perceived romance of ships bobbing on the ocean, pirate radio has generated a large popular literature of its own particularly in relation to British stations of the 1960s (e.g. Harris, 1968 and 1971; Henry & van Joel, 1984, Hind & Mosco, 1985, Noakes, 1984, Rusling, 1984, Clark, 2014 and Hebditch, 2015). The comedy film *The Boat that Rocked* (*Pirate Radio* in North America) was based very loosely on the Radio Caroline story (Curtis, 2009).

Pirate radio in general has been analysed from a variety of scholarly perspectives including radio studies, media history, cultural studies and communications. Chapman's monograph (1992) sets British pirate radio in its social and cultural context. Relevant articles analyse the phenomenon in the UK (Boyd, 1986; Mitchell, 2000; Peters, 2013; Scholsberg, 2011 and Wilson & Linfoot, 2018), the US (Jones, 1988; Coopman, 1999; Phipps, 1990; Dick & McDowell, 2000; Anderson, 2016), Lebanon (Boyd, 1991); the Netherlands (Dolfsma, 2004; van der Hoeven, 2012); Spain and Mexico (O'Connor, 2014); Taiwan (Ke, 2000); Greece (Theodosiadou, 2010); Finland (Kemppainen, 2009); Portugal (Santos, 2014) and Zimbabwe (Moyo, 2010; Mhiripiri, 2010). There is no detailed academic study about pirate radio in Ireland, although the phenomenon is mentioned by Barbrook (1992), Moore (2008) and Morash (2010). Although Mulryan (1988) and Bohan (2019) discuss Irish pirate radio in depth, they were writing for non-specialist audiences.

Following McChesney, we conceive the political economy of Irish pirate radio in the 1980s as 'how radio broadcasting is owned, controlled and subsidized' and 'how radio broadcasting relates to the social and class structure of society' (1998: 17). McChesney writes: 'As a rule of thumb, if certain forces thoroughly dominate a society's political economy they will thoroughly dominate its communication system, and the fundamental questions of how the

communication system should be organized and for what purposes are not even subject to debate' (ibid). Our analysis of Irish pirate radio throws up some unexpected findings in this regard: while those wielding large amounts of capital undoubtedly did well from the pirate era, the political economy of the sector was far more complex than that, particularly after legalisation in 1989. In fact, following Anderson in his analysis of US pirate radio, the Irish pirates have a great deal to 'teach us about alternative conceptions of what "the public airwaves" and "the public interest" might mean' (Anderson, 2016: 246).

Our analysis of community pirate stations is also influenced by the work of Rodríguez et al (2014) which employs a perspective of 'communication for social change' and urges researchers in the field to anchor their historical analysis in a framework of the political economy of communication. Furthermore, we are indebted to the work of scholars in the 'Entangled Media Histories' research group and their attention to transnational and transmedial approaches in the historical analysis of media (Cronqvist & Hilgert, 2017; Föllmer and Badenoch, 2018; Hilgert et al, 2020), which we have employed. We have also been influenced by the concept of 'mediatisation' of culture and society (Hjarvard, 2008; 2013; see also Hepp et al, 2015) and following Kortti (2017), we apply its 'weak' form over the historical frame.

Methodology

It is recognised that there are issues with access to radio archives in general (de Leeuw, 2018: 172) and the archives of community media are seen as particularly vulnerable because of a lack of organisational and financial resources (van Beek, 2018: 224). Given the illegality of pirate radio, the archives are even more fractured and more often than not are based on recordings or collections made by enthusiasts. We follow Ekström et al (2016) in drawing on

historicity, specificity and measurability in our approach while acknowledging the challenges and limitations involved in researching the fragmented nature of pirate radio history. We use a transmedial approach to sources by drawing on original audio as well as materials in other media formats: recordings from Pirate.ie and elsewhere; merchandise and paraphernalia produced by pirate radio such as advertising rates cards, flyers and promotional literature; advertisements by pirate radio in the printed press; newspaper coverage of pirate radio in the period in question; tribute websites to various stations and our own interviews with those involved. Having assembled or studied this material over a number of years, we identified five main strands of relevance to the phenomenon: politics, economics, society, culture and technology and we examine them in turn below.

Our positionality as former pirate radio broadcasters in the period in question plays a role in how we frame the issues. We set up or worked in part-time hobby stations before the end of 1988. After 1989 John Walsh entered the new independent radio sector and became a journalist and Brian Greene continued broadcasting in the second wave of the pirates. Currently we are both involved in the licensed community radio sector in Dublin and Galway respectively. Our direct involvement in the period in question gives us insider knowledge and unparalleled access to sources but we have also critically reflected on the risk of overstating the importance of a sector which shaped our youth so decisively.

Background

Broadcasting in newly-independent Ireland was regulated by the Wireless Telegraphy Act of 1926 but two loopholes allowed illegal stations to gain a foothold. Section 2 of the Act defined a transmitter but qualified the definition by stating that it must ‘not [be] capable of being conveniently used for any other purpose’, a loophole exploited by the pirates who could legitimately claim, for instance, that their transmitters were being used to heat a

premises (Mulryan, 1988: 10). Section 3 of the Act stated that it was an offence to broadcast without a licence and that offenders would be liable on conviction to a fine of £10, a significant amount in 1926 but a pittance by the 1970s (ibid: 10; see also *Wireless Telegraphy Act, 1926*). Pirate broadcasting evolved significantly in the period in question from informal and amateur hobby-style stations to a large sector of about 100 AM and FM stations by 1988 in a country of just 3.5 million.¹ An attempt by the state broadcaster RTÉ to stem the rise of the pirates by setting up its own pop music service, Radio 2, in 1979 was not successful and political instability throughout the 1980s allowed the pirates to flourish. By the end of 1988, the complex and diverse unlicensed media landscape included profitable local or regional commercial broadcasters, community stations and niche operators serving genres of music or political or minority groups. We now analyse examples of the influence of pirate radio in the fields of politics, economy, society, culture and technology during the period 1978-1988.

Discussion

Politics

On the wrong side of the law, pirates attracted constant attention from the authorities and are intertwined with the politics of the era. We argue that the political economy of Irish radio from the mid-1970s to 1988 went through three phases. The initial stage (c. 1975-1979) was characterised by the public service broadcasting monopoly clinging to the remnants of the ideology of national identity which held that broadcasting should promote Irish culture and language (Watson, 2003). Pirate stations emerged and snapped at the heels of RTÉ but were too small to cause excessive trouble. By 1977 this began to change, as some Dublin pirates moved to 24-hour broadcasting and ventured onto FM. A concerned RTÉ responded by

¹ The figure of 100 is an estimate based on 1988 listings by pirate radio groups Anoraks Ireland and Anoraks UK which are in our possession. 1,218 Irish pirate radio stations have been noted for the period 1916 to 2000 (Bohan, 2020).

establishing Radio 2 in 1979, which would supposedly attract the youth audience away from the pirates.

The second stage (1980-1987) was marked by the exponential growth of pirate radio due to political stasis as successive governments grappled with the rise of the unlicensed sector. Although bigger stations such as Sunshine Radio in Dublin and ERI in Cork represented a threat to RTÉ, government was unable to respond coherently because of ideological differences and political instability, with three general elections held in 18 months in 1981 and 1982. There was a fraught relationship between the pirates and the political system throughout this period. Politicians were not supposed to be interviewed on unlicensed stations but many could not resist the lure of local publicity and defied orders from party headquarters (RTÉ, 2017). The government could not be seen to endorse them but in fact several semi-state bodies bought advertising on the pirates, there were symbiotic relationships between individual politicians or parties and stations and many pirates attempted to curry political favour with an eye to the licensing process. In the general election of February 1982, the main opposition centre-right party Fianna Fáil set up its own pirate station Election Radio 1982, evidence of how farcical the 1926 legislation had become (Mulryan, 1988: 93). Pirate radio became a campaign issue because Fianna Fáil had produced a local radio bill during a previous short-lived administration and some in the pirate world wanted to see it passed, with the Dublin ‘super-pirate’² Sunshine Radio going as far as endorsing Fianna Fáil (ibid: 92; *Independent Local Radio Authority Bill*, 1981). Ideological differences over broadcasting policy between the centre-left Labour Party and the centre-right Fine Gael in the 1982-1987

² The term ‘super-pirate’ refers to the larger stations in urban areas with considerable financial backing and professional staff and broadcasting equipment. Stations included Radio Nova, Sunshine Radio and Q102 in Dublin, ERI in Cork and ABC in Waterford. The label is not without its issues, however, and is not generally applied to stations outside the cities such even though some were very large in their own right, such as the midlands station Radio West which claimed to be broadcasting nationwide by 1988.

government created a vacuum which allowed the pirates to flourish and transformed the ownership and control of the radio market. It is arguable that the current licensed model of community radio would not have come to pass in the present form, i.e. under community ownership, if RTÉ had developed community radio as was proposed (*Local Radio Bill*, 1985). However, progress was stalled by the tensions between what were ultimately market-led and state-led approaches to local radio. In 1983, the Department of Posts and Telegraphs raided Radio Nova and Sunshine Radio, and RTÉ jammed both stations' signals (Mulryan, 1988: 101-108). However, these tactics backfired, leading to public discontent and as politicians squabbled, by 1984 the pirates were more or less left alone unless they were being overtly irresponsible or subversive. Another Dublin super-pirate Q102 (1985-1988) provides a glimpse into the political economy of the sector and the pirates' deep connections with politicians at the highest levels. Q102 manager Mike Hogan was a supporter of Fianna Fáil, then the main opposition party and knew its leader and future taoiseach (prime minister) Charles Haughey (Collins, 1999; *The Irish Times*, 2000). In 1986 the station launched 'Eye in the Sky', a morning traffic report presented live by Hogan from a helicopter flying over the city. The service was sponsored by Fiat Ireland, the helicopter was piloted by Ciaran Haughey, son of the Fianna Fáil leader, and Hogan and Haughey Jnr often had breakfast together afterwards at Haughey's plush residence north of Dublin (Collins, 1999; *The Irish Times*, 2000). No such service was offered by RTÉ until 1989, giving motorists on their morning commute good reason to tune to Q102 four years earlier.

The third phase (from 1987 into the following decade) was a shift to a neoliberal ideology by the new centre-right Fianna Fáil government which came to power in 1987. When the state finally acted in relation to unlicensed broadcasting its influence was decisive: at the end of 1988 the pirate radio sector was mortally wounded and would never regain the power it wielded at its peak. The new government prioritised the needs of commercial radio, punished

RTÉ and ignored the community radio sector (*Broadcasting and Wireless Telegraphy Act, 1988; Radio and Television Act, 1988*; for an analysis see Barbrook, 1992). The pirates were given until the 31st of December 1988 to wind up but despite their attempts at respectability with forays into corporate social responsibility and current affairs programming, many lost out badly in the brave new world of licensed radio from 1989 regulated by the Independent Radio and Television Commission (IRTC). 25 local licences were awarded, attracting applications from 85 groups, many of them former pirates (Ring, 1989). However only a small number of pirates were successful and many of those awarded licences were businessmen who happened to be supporters of Fianna Fáil, often in alliances with pillars of local society such as the Gaelic Athletic Association, the local press or the Catholic Church (Barbrook, 1992: 215). The new model of radio was firmly neoliberal in outlook and market-focused and it seemed that, with a few exceptions, the pirates who applied would be punished. Sunshine Radio was tipped to get one of the two Dublin licences but failed to do so, leading Sunshine's owner Robbie Robinson to complain that 'the IRTC was handpicked by the party in power, publicly announced by Minister Ray Burke' (Miller, 2016). Sunshine alleged irregularities in the licensing process and sought a judicial review in the High Court, but the IRTC was exonerated by the presiding judge (Irish Times, 1989). Another issue related to the scope of the process: no licences specifically aimed at community radio were awarded, as the IRTC prioritised the commercial sector. Community groups who had previously run pirates were awarded three of the 25 licences but some ultimately failed because the licensing structure was not suited to the non-profit nature of community radio. It would be 1995 until licensed community radio as a separate tier was belatedly established, following a change of ideology ushered in by a more left-wing government.

The 1989 arrangements drew a critique from radio activist Margaretta D'Arcy, who ran the anarchic Women's Scéal Radio and later Radio Pirate Woman in Galway. She memorably

described the consortium awarded the Galway licence as ‘the patriarchal triumvirate – church, sport, education’ (D’Arcy, 1990, 182; see also D’Arcy, 1996). Corruption in the roll-out of the new radio landscape was exposed when Oliver Barry, a businessman centrally involved in the new national station Century Radio (1989-1991) was found by a tribunal of inquiry in 2002 to have made a corrupt payment of £35,000 to Fianna Fáil Minister for Communications Ray Burke in order to serve the interests of Century (Planning Tribunal, 2002: 30-54). The diverse pirate radio scene – widely listened to across the country for a decade and powerful enough to pose a threat to the establishment – had been shattered. A large part of that threat was linked to the economic power of the pirates, and we turn to that aspect now.

Economy

Despite the recession in Ireland in the 1980s, unlicensed radio boomed and although impossible to quantify the pirate economy, the entirety of it was illicit. Localism was a big factor in the pirates’ success, given that RTÉ operated mostly out of Dublin at the time, with just a skeletal local service in Cork. The plethora of pirates covering towns, cities and regions was attractive to local advertisers in a way that RTÉ could never have been. By 1987, revenue of pirate radio in Dublin alone was estimated between £2.25 and £2.5 million each year (Mulryan, 1988: 133), the equivalent of between €5.5 and €6 million today. Excluded from official research on radio listenership, the larger stations commissioned their own surveys and although disputed, the results can be considered a barometer of their success at the time. The Dublin super-pirate Radio Nova was owned by British businessman Chris Cary and pioneered an American-style format which amounted to an earthquake in the staid Irish broadcasting landscape. In 1982 Cary commissioned a reputable research agency to survey people on the streets of Dublin, 41 percent of whom reported listening to Nova compared to

24 percent for RTÉ Radio 2. The results were disputed because Nova was running a promotional campaign on the streets at the time and RTÉ conducted its own survey which produced wildly different results. Whatever the truth, RTÉ was spooked and began jamming Nova's signal, a campaign that continued for months and was extended to other powerful stations in Dublin and Cork (Mulryan, 1988: 94-95). Nova and Sunshine Radio were both raided by officials from the Department of Posts and Telegraphs in May 1983 leading to temporary closures and a public outcry. The fact that both the government and the public broadcaster attempted to silence the pirates is evidence of the economic threat posed by them.

Bigger stations had no problems with advertising revenue, generating eye-watering figures despite the recessionary climate, for instance over £250,000 for Sunshine Radio in 1983 (Evening Herald, 1983; Mulryan, 1988: 10) and over £1m for Nova in 1982, expected to rise to £2m in 1983 (ibid: 102; Magill, 1982; Evening Herald, 1983). Some contracts were highly lucrative, such as the state-owned national airline Aer Lingus which controversially bought advertising on Sunshine in 1980 (Sunshine Radio, 1985). With no restrictions on advertisements per hour, stations could include as much as they thought listeners would tolerate or in the case of larger stations, create a second channel to mop up the additional revenue. Several stations such as Boyneside Radio and Radio Carousel in Co. Louth and Breffni Radio in Co. Cavan expanded into regional radio networks thereby allowing them to target local advertisers and broadcast only local advertisements in that coverage area.

Analysis of advertising rate cards can help substantiate reported profits and allow us estimate the potential income of stations on a sliding scale ranging from large to small (e.g. Radio Nova, 1984a; KLAS, 1987; KISS FM, 1988; Liberty 104, 1988).

Pirates also advertised extensively in print media ranging from local or national newspapers to magazines read by their listeners, emphasising a transmedial aspect of this research (e.g. Radio Annabel, 1985). Some of this advertising was based on contra deals but it is likely that

money exchanged hands regularly also. The weekly tabloids *Sunday Journal* and *Sunday World* advertised heavily on pirate radio throughout the country and in turn carried advertisements or even listings for the pirates (e.g. *Sunday Journal*, 1982).

Information on salaries paid by pirate radio is more difficult to unearth. Smaller stations operated in the grey economy and paid daytime presenters in cash per show while relying on a larger pool of volunteers. Many operated almost entirely on a voluntary basis, sometimes positioning themselves within the nascent model of community radio based on AMARC principles, but larger stations were more regularised and sometimes tax-compliant with paid staff (Mulryan, 1988: 123). However, there were also allegations of exploitation and poor pay and the sackings of journalists who were members of the NUJ led to a bitter strike at Radio Nova in 1984 and 1985, contributing eventually to the demise of the broadcasting giant in 1986 (ibid: 116). Because of the nature of illegal broadcasting, it will never be possible to quantify average pay in Irish pirate radio in the 1980s but it is clear that it provided income for many people at a time when work was scarce. One engineer remembered queues of people looking for work at a pirate he set up in Donegal in 1986 (O'Reilly, 2018). While the pirates generated plenty of economic activity, their inherent localism also generated a social legacy with community stations in particular putting down roots in their own area.

Society

One aspect at variance with clichés of early pirates as criminals on rusty ships in the North Sea was the corporate social responsibility practised by many stations throughout the 1980s in an attempt to enhance their legitimacy in the eyes of the public, the authorities and the political class (see also Chapman, 1992). Although firmly commercial, Sunshine Radio stressed how community involvement was important to it and how it had always supported community and charity causes (Sunshine Radio, 1985). Stations sometimes pooled resources

to fundraise, as in the case of a 250-mile ‘maxi-marathon’ between Dublin, Cork and Waterford stations in 1986 (Pirate.ie, 2019). Despite the severe economic recession, Christmas toy appeals for children were common among stations big and small. These included Radio Dublin whose director Eamon Cooke would later be convicted of child abuse (Irish Times, 2007), a situation which had resonances with similar issues in British radio at the time, such as the Jimmy Savile case. While Radio Dublin will forever be associated with those crimes, in its heyday the station served working class communities and less-privileged groups who were overlooked by mainstream media. The station was popular in factories, broadcast information about social welfare benefits and welcomed letters from prisoners (Sunday Journal, 1982).

Stations also fostered social networks in a pre-social media age with the aim of bringing listeners together and raising the profile of the station in their midst. While many of these were money-making ventures they also fostered a sense of group identity around individual stations. There were large protest marches in favour of the pirates in 1978 (Kerrigan, 1982: 27) and 1983 (Mulryan, 1988: 107), underlining their public support. Some programmes had large followings, such as ‘Dusty’s Trail’ on Radio Dublin, an on-air club where in the show’s heyday up to 300 young people were writing to the station each week to make new friends (Pirate.ie, 2018a). The indie station Capitol-Nitesky 96 held an ‘alternative night’ every week in a Dublin nightclub and showcased new bands on the lively local music scene (Pirate.ie, 2020a). Radio Nova hosted ‘Disco Nova’, regularly did outside broadcasts or sponsored roadshows and also had its own fan club (Radio Nova, 1984b). Rural stations recorded local traditional music sessions or broadcast from local pubs (e.g. Kandy Radio, n.d.; Community Radio Youghal, 2019).

Many pirates claimed to be community stations in an effort to appear more reputable. Not all lived up to the ideal of community broadcasting but eleven stations were firmly committed to

the ethos of AMARC and formed the National Association of Community Broadcasters (NACB) (Byrne, 2020). RTÉ unwittingly sowed the seed of many unlicensed community pirates by setting up temporary stations in small towns, thereby training a core local group in the basics of community radio who would continue with an unlicensed transmitter, an irony commented upon by several former pirates (e.g. Community Radio Youghal, 2019; Leydon & Leydon, 2018). NACB stations such as Bray Local Broadcasting (BLB), North Dublin Community Radio (NDCR), Community Radio Youghal (CRY) and Kilkenny Community Radio (KCR) prided themselves on their open programming model and social engagement with community and minority groups (Community Radio Youghal, 1981; Kilkenny Community Radio, 1981; Bray Local Broadcasting, 1986).³ While their commercial counterparts could be dismissive of community radio (e.g. Cary, 1984), there is no doubt that such stations put down deep roots into their communities and involved groups which would otherwise have been denied access to the airwaves.

Many of those who were interviewed for Pirate.ie characterise the decade from 1978-1988 as one of major social and cultural change and see the pirates as being linked to that:

I think it was probably a stimulus and a reaction to changing times in Ireland. The UK had its commercial radio since '73 yet at the time the pretty conservative Irish establishment had not even really considered it and it was RTÉ and there was a token [provision for youth] and then pirates were springing up through the 70s so I think it was that change of social attitudes during the 1970s and early 1980s, as I say pirate radio was both a symptom and a stimulus so I think that's perhaps a contribution that's overlooked. It did set a blueprint I think for how pop radio sounded for many years (Hardy, 2018).

Some pirates gave voices to marginalised groups, and a gay rights programme presented by the veteran broadcaster Tony Allan on Big D in the late 1970s stands out as an example of a brave countercultural stance more than a decade before the decriminalisation of

³ Stations such as BLB led the campaign for licensed community radio, sending taped messages to other likeminded stations around the country (e.g. Concord Community Radio, 1983).

homosexuality (Murray, 2018; see also Wilson & Linfoot, 2018). Alternative Radio Dublin (ARD) broadcast a women's programme several years before RTÉ (Kerrigan, 1982: 27) and there was also Galway's radical feminist station, Women's Scéal Radio/Radio Pirate Woman (D'Arcy, 1996, 2005: 307-313). However, as we build Pirate.ie, we are struck by the overwhelming dominance of male presenters, with women relegated to news or the occasional voice-over. Community radio had a better gender balance and consciously pushed back against the dominance of men who seemed attracted to broadcasting, as Byrne explains:

In the mid to the late 70s there were a lot of young men in Dublin, FM transmitters were becoming available so a lot of them were setting up small commercial radio stations basically playing music and selling a few ads to local shops [...] Initially we got a lot of young men particularly with medallions and big boxes of discs you know and an attitude. We had to beat a lot of them away with a stick, we got through many of them. We had enough but it was still very much a music driven station, I mean the amount of talk, the amount of community development talk was light in comparison to the overall content but that was the model of radio that particularly young men, young women maybe had more sense they didn't seem to be as attracted [to it], but young men found radio a lure and wanted to talk to the world and play their favourite music (Byrne, 2018).

In general, women were very under-represented in the pirates but this was a broader trend in broadcasting in general and continues to be a problem (Walsh et al, 2015). In Galway, Margaretta D'Arcy used pirate radio as a tool to give women a voice to speak out against censorship. The aim was:

To let each woman speak freely without being controlled by another woman – so you wouldn't interrupt a woman – to speak freely on all subjects in the spirit of Article 19 of the UN Charter of Human Rights, Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Expression, Freedom to Impart Information. This meant defiance of the Irish censorship regulations, Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act, the prohibition of information on abortion, and the banning of certain books and magazines dealing with sexuality. To promote the concept that a woman has as much right in her own space to have her voice heard – the low-powered radio transmitter – as she has to listen to the voice of someone else on a radio receiver. So Women's Scéal Radio began as part of Galway's Women's Entertainment which was set up in '82 to celebrate women's culture to make links and to build solidarity networks with women in the struggle everywhere against the patriarchal, military, industrial complex (D'Arcy, 2020).

There were also pirates opposed to the social changes afoot such as the conservative Christian Community Radio in Dublin which broadcast from 1985 to 1987 (Pirate.ie, 2020b).

Reflecting the cultural strength of Catholicism in Ireland at the time, the Catholic Church was itself involved in some pirates, as in the example of KCR above. The high-profile priest Fr. Michael Cleary had a show on Radio Dublin and rural stations broadcast prayers or Mass (Ronayne, 2018) or pioneered the tradition of announcing local death notices (Raidió Luimní, 1983). There were also dedicated religious stations such as the Irish Christian Broadcasting Service and Hope FM. As well as contributing to social change, the pirates also brought new cultural offerings to the listener, based on Irish and international influences.

Culture

The Irish pirates are a good example of ‘cultural transfer and national adaptation’ (Hilgert et al, 2020) in that they relied heavily on transnational influences, but their content also drew on Irish cultural identity. Since its inception in 1926, Irish radio was seen as a bulwark against external influences on Irish culture and identity. The early decades of the state broadcaster Radio Éireann (later RTÉ) were characterised by rhetoric about how the service should contribute to a sense of national identity and promote traditional Irish culture and the Irish language (Watson, 2003). The Irish pirates were heavily influenced by the ethos of offshore stations in the North Sea and many former offshore presenters came to Ireland as opportunities opened up there. Most notable among these were ex-Caroline DJs Robbie Robinson and Chris Cary who went on to establish Sunshine Radio and Radio Nova in the early 1980s. Nova in particular was renowned for its American sound, a style deliberately cultivated by Cary who flew DJs to Los Angeles just to listen to KIIS FM, a model station there, and bring their impressions back to Ireland. One presenter, Declan Meehan, recalls a conversation with Cary in 1982:

He said: “I’ve got a condominium in Orange County, McArthur Avenue or some place, Santa Ana, you’re going over there”, he said. “Have you got a girlfriend?” I said yeah. He said “yeah, the two of you go over there, but it’s not a holiday”. Eh, what is it? He says “There’s a station over there called KIIS FM. You’ll find a radio in the condominium and basically you listen to it all the time”. And he says “you can sit out in the sun in the afternoon in the jacuzzi but have that radio beside you”, he says. “And there’s a car as well for you to drive around”. So we’d a great time listening to KIIS FM driving around Los Angeles and the whole thing was to pick up the sort of feeling of the radio station (Meehan, 2019).

Nova’s news bulletins ended with a weather forecast for the ‘Bay Area’ which was a very Californian way of describing the far less exotic Dublin Bay. With DJ small-talk about pop star lifestyles, the cosmopolitan outlook of pop music lyrics and the general non-conformity of pirate radio, there was more than a whiff of cultural change in the air (see also Chapman, 1992).

Ireland has long been heavily influenced culturally by Britain and the United States (Morash, 2010: 153-159) so it was perhaps unsurprising that the pirates were full of British and American accents or imitations of them in what was pejoratively labelled the ‘mid-Atlantic’ style. US or regional British accents were exotic on Irish radio until the 1970s but by the 1980s, one radio critic complained of a creeping Americanisation across all stations (Kennedy, 1986: 27).⁴ Research on the use of US voices on UK radio has shown that they are seen as distinctive and glamorous, can be used to bypass class distinctions inherent in regional British accents, are closely associated with the early British pirates and index youth, modernity and contemporary culture (Morris, 1999). We can draw similar conclusions about British and American varieties of English on Irish pirate radio; they were an attempt at sophistication by stations and they distinguished the big stations in particular from RTÉ.

⁴ One Scottish broadcaster who spent several years working on Irish pirate stations said he never felt hindered by his accent (Biggar, 2019) and indeed the large variety of non-Irish voices to be heard on successful stations was proof that listeners were not bothered by them. Despite political sensitivities between Ireland and the UK at the time, the larger stations featured many British accents, apparently without a problem.

Similarly, smaller less commercially-oriented stations did not hesitate to use the regional or class-based accents of their own communities in order to index their localness.

If Irish pirate radio was influenced by British and American models, it also promoted Irish music, culture and language. An Irish language pirate, Saor-Raidió Chonamara, was inspired by Free Radio Derry (Moore, 2008) and took to the air in 1970 in the Irish-speaking Gaeltacht area of Connemara, a good example of the salience of localism at the time. This led eventually to the establishment of Raidió na Gaeltachta, an all-Irish service under the auspices of RTÉ (Ó Glaisne, 1982). Irish speakers in Dublin, feeling underserved by Raidió na Gaeltachta, set up their own station Raidió an Phobail from the headquarters of an Irish language organisation in 1979 (Conradh na Gaeilge Collection, G60/36/10, NUI Galway). The commercial stations ignored Irish for the most part as it was not deemed conducive to attracting advertisers and listeners, although there were exceptions (Irish Independent, 1983). However, NACB stations all broadcast regular programmes in Irish and this established a model continued after 1989. Some stations even followed the RTÉ's policy of offering discounts to traders advertising in Irish (e.g. Radio West, 1986). While never forming a central plank of pirate radio in the 1980s, traditional music and Irish language programming were established as niches and maintain a marginal presence on licensed stations today. Quantifying the precise linguistic influence of media is notoriously difficult (Tagliamonte, 2014), but we argue that the pirates opened up greater linguistic diversity in the use of English by Irish broadcasters than had previously been the case and introduced a wider range of cultural styles than were previously available to Irish listeners.

There was wide variety in the music broadcast despite the cliché that the pirates were essentially pop juke-boxes (see also Chapman, 1992). While the larger city stations promoted the Top 40 relentlessly, American country music and its Irish counterpart was popularised by rural stations such as Radio West in Westmeath and Big M in Monaghan and the growth of

Irish country music in this period was due in no small part to the pirates. Other stations such as Radio Leinster and KLAS 98 opted for ‘easy listening’ formats mixed with talk and features. Stations specialising in rock or alternative music also gained a foothold, mostly in Dublin, paving the way for future licensed stations featuring those musical styles. One of those involved with several stations from the late 1970s credits the pirates both with shifts in cultural consumption and social values:

There was a great contribution made from pirate radio to the Irish popular cultural scene and that’s its legacy, it certainly helped change a lot of things in Ireland. If you look at the period, and that period I’m talking about the late 70s through, well the decade 78-88, that decade, look at what was happening in terms of popular music, bands like The Radiators, U2, you know, and so on, all these bands, and a move away from ballrooms I suppose and a move away from the mores, sexual mores that existed before that. So there was a lot of change, what I call popular cultural change and I think that there was a huge contribution made there (Murray, 2018).

As well as the more obvious cultural manifestations of the pirates, there is also a cultural aspect to the technology of radio. Listening is a sensory, cultural experience and is shaped by the technology of transmission and the materiality of receivers.

Technology

Pirate radio also contributed to major technological changes in terms of media production and transmission, some of which have an important transnational dimension. Technological innovation in the period 1978-1988 is a good example of the realisation of mediatisation in the history of the Irish media (Kortti, 2017) in that it transformed the media itself and consumption of it. Super-pirates like ABC in Waterford and Coast 103 in Galway introduced the concept of formatting, bringing structure and professionalism to the on-air sound if sometimes resented by presenters who wanted more freedom (Murray, 2018). There was still plenty of flexibility in smaller stations but formats and playlists would become the backbone of large-scale commercial broadcasters chasing mass audiences. Innovative use of technology involving separate frequencies or splitting into distinctive evening or weekend services

increased the offerings to listeners. Technology also allowed sister stations to share certain programmes, sometimes by clunky methods such as vulnerable low-power FM links, but in stretching the technical possibilities they created more diversity for listeners.

The pirate era also heralded major changes in the use of broadcast technology. Ironically, many of transmitters of the early stations in the 1970s were supposed to have been built by ‘The Engineer’, an employee of the Department of Posts and Telegraphs who liked pirate radio despite his employer’s attempts to quell the pirates (Kerrigan, 1982: 26). The homemade transmitters of the early years could be highly dangerous (Ebrill, 2018) but gave way to state-of-the-art transmission equipment ranging from the commercially-built 50 kW Radio Nova AM rig with Optimod audio processors to high-powered stereo FM transmitters. Stereo FM was rare before the late 1970s but was pushed by the super-pirates in the early 1980s, beginning the shift from AM to the superior quality band. The art of transmission itself was also professionalised by the super-pirates who used their large income to buy the best equipment available abroad. Installed by engineers who learned swiftly on the job, the new technical regime ensured high quality and avoided interference.

It was a swift transition from the home-built chassis-less AM transmitters laid out on bedroom floors in the late 1970s to the best of FM transmission equipment by 1983 and it is doubtful that the shift to FM in Ireland would have been so rapid had it not been for pirate radio. RTÉ Radio 1, as it was renamed after the launch of Radio 2, was essentially an AM service well into the 1980s, with limited FM coverage because it shared frequencies with Raidió na Gaeltachta and schools programming. The tardiness of RTÉ in developing FM for its main radio station is underlined in a number of examples. An answer to a Dáil (parliamentary) question to the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs about poor reception of RTÉ Radio 1 on AM in Dublin made a vague reference to putting Radio 1 on ‘VHF’ without depriving listeners of reception from Radio 2, evidence that RTÉ’s emphasis on FM was

restricted to the new pop music station (Houses of the Oireachtas, 1979). The second example was the installation of a new higher power infill AM transmitter for Radio 2 in Dublin in 1980 (The Irish Times, 1980). Therefore, AM was RTÉ's focus, not FM, because if they wanted listeners to shift to the superior quality band, then adequate or weak AM would be their driver. One of the defining characteristics of the super-pirates was their investment in high quality FM and their decision to simulcast their services on FM and AM. RTÉ, with its enormous resources and expertise, did that also but in the early years of the decade, only for Radio 2 and not without boosting infill AM in Dublin. A third example is provided by the imaging and marketing of Radio 2. As the super-pirates pushed 'FM stereo' on air and in their promotional material, the early Radio 2 jingles and logos all emphasised their AM frequencies first, in metres, and then referenced VHF. At the same time, the more agile pirates were shifting to the newer terms 'kilohertz' on AM and 'FM' instead of VHF, in line with change internationally. The fact that Radio 2 was not renamed '2FM' until 1988 is further evidence of the sluggishness of RTÉ's response to the innovations brought about by the pirates. As the state broadcaster with sixty years of history, RTÉ had vastly superior resources to all of the pirates combined, but the unlicensed stations were more audacious in pushing the envelope of technology within their local areas. Unfettered by EBU frequency allocations or unionised work practices, there were few obstacles to innovation. An article by two engineers from 1984 showcases Radio Nova's technical prowess which encapsulated the rapid progress made by the large pirates in a few short years (Robinson and Johnston, 1984).

There was a transnational dimension to the phenomenon of Irish pirate radio due to spillover, either accidental or deliberate, from high powered transmitters on the east coast or along the border with Northern Ireland. By 1984 Nova's 50 kW AM transmitter could be heard throughout the east of Ireland and along the northwest coast of Britain and the station opened an advertising office in Liverpool (Radio Nova, 1984). Up to 20 pirate stations along the

border deliberately aimed their signals at Northern Ireland (Ebrill, 2018; see also Pirate.ie, 2018b). The most audacious example was KISS FM set up in Monaghan in 1988 with the explicit aim of capturing the lucrative Northern youth market. With significant altitude and the help of various directional beams, KISS created the most powerful FM signal in Ireland and the UK at the time (Johnston, 1989), to the consternation of the ILR (independent local radio) station Downtown Radio in Belfast. Unfettered by the constraints of broadcasting policy, at a local level the pirates leapfrogged RTÉ and ILR stations technically and reaped the rewards in terms of listenership. The powerful signals emanating from Ireland caused more than a little concern for British authorities and broadcasters. In 1983, the High Court heard that the Home Office had complained to the Irish government about alleged interference caused by Radio Nova in parts of the UK (The Irish Times, 1983).⁵ Following the arrival of offshore pirate Laser 558 on the scene in 1984, ILR stations met in Liverpool to discuss the threat from the new competitor. However, the host Radio City was more concerned about competition from Radio Nova in Dublin, then operating on 50 kW (Meehan, 2019).

Conclusion

Because of the lax legislation, Irish pirate radio did not need to operate from boats but it certainly rocked the radio sector and left its mark on all aspects of Irish life. Increasingly enmeshed with politics throughout the decade, many pirates attempted to be responsible broadcasters with an eye to the nascent licensing regime, while political parties big and small

⁵ There were complaints from Ireland about British pirates also. Former Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald blamed Radio Caroline for interference to reception of the BBC in central London as he made his way to the Irish embassy following sensitive Anglo-Irish talks between the Irish government and Margaret Thatcher at Downing Street in 1984. FitzGerald, speaking decades after the event, may have confused the detail: the US-owned offshore pirate Laser 558 was broadcasting at the time on 558 kHz, blocking out reception of RTÉ Radio 1 on 567 kHz in London. In no way would the British government have tolerated a situation where Radio Caroline was interfering with reception of the BBC (FitzGerald, 2015).

set up their own stations to push their messages. However, despite the effort to suck up to the authorities, the pirates lost out badly in the shake-up that rolled out licensed independent radio in 1989. Although some former pirates were re-employed by the new licensed stations, given the drastic reduction in the number of outlets it was inevitable that many capable broadcasters would have to leave the field. Pirate radio generated plenty of economic activity in a recession, making large profits from advertising revenue but also providing a certain amount of paid employment. The pirates disrupted the balance of economic power in Irish broadcasting, shaking up the staid landscape dominated for sixty years by RTÉ. Drawing heavily on localism, they created their own communities of listeners ranging from teenage fans of pop music bored with RTÉ, to punks and Goths with their own niche stations, to rural devotees of the growing country music scene. Each of these groups plugged into their own scene and attended roadshows, joined fan clubs, bought t-shirts or made new pen-pals over the radio. Despite a gender imbalance in pirate radio, community stations brought marginalised groups in from the cold, giving shows to women's groups and gay activists despite the socially conservative context. The pirates intensified the influence of British and American culture on Irish life but also supported local identity in the form of the Irish language and traditional music. They forced change in the technology of radio, spearheading the move from AM to FM, constantly enhancing broadcast standards and aiming brazenly at the British market.

The pirates invented, reinvented, copied, stole, competed, won, lost, were reborn, grew, went international and brought the world outside to our ghettoblaster radio-cassette recorders. The more daring stations persisted after 1989 despite stringent new regulations and Irish pirate radio continues to exist in an attenuated form to this day, but the pirates of the 1980s – despite all the change they brought about – failed politically. Arguably too long a thorn in the authorities' side, they were frozen out by the new regime which desired a clean slate, even if

it retained many of the pirate innovations in terms of content. Further research is required into the licensing period and the ultimate winners and losers, but long after their demise the changes brought about by the pirates left their mark on the mass media communication triangle.

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