

Unchecked biases

An unscientific look at how RTÉ treats radical views



By Suzie Mélange

The fact that two of the four panellists on RTÉ's conservative 'Brendan' radio programme in early January were PR heads sparked memories of an excellent article in 2016 by Ronan Lynch in this magazine which outlined how the Marian Finucane radio programme pulled its contributing panel largely from conservative, and always from predictable, sources.

Unusually he supported his thesis with analysis of the provenance of contributors over the preceding year, definitively pinpointing bias. From roughly 255 guests over the year up to 2014, only around 90, or slightly over one third, were women. Journalists and broadcasters (74) were the most frequent guests, followed by politicians (36), PR professionals (28), and legal professionals (26), academics (25), and businesspeople (18), with smaller groups of less than ten people from the charity sector (8), security analysts (5), doctors (5), economists (4). Creative writers (5), and actors (5), made up the rest. The headline revealed the bias: "Formulaic and incestuous – promoting journalists and politicians along with a strange number of PR and legal voices". Following up on the piece, Lynch was told that RTÉ reserves absolute discretion to choose such panels without accountability or explanation, less still documented criteria. Though the data need to be updated, the policy has not changed.

This piece is about systemic biases in the State broadcaster — centring not so much on how it treats the mainstream old-party stalwarts but on how it treats radical voices. Its political journalists are clever enough to keep their views to themselves. I thought it would be interesting to see if there are any insights into the mentality of RTÉ's most powerful insiders. So this piece



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focuses on broadcasters who're not from the political corps and on some who've retired and are less careful than when they were in their pomp. It is about the unguarded RTÉ grandee's view on radicals. It is not science.

RTÉ is an ideas-free oasis and as a rule avoids challenging or subversive reporting or analysis. This is most clearly and disappointingly evidenced by the self-consciously banal daytime gabfest of Radio 1.

It ignores poverty and inequality, working-class voices and even unions.

It has been horribly slow to recognise the reality of climate change, typically covering the environment in contrived and inflammatory rows.

In general it too often recycles its own talentlessness on its jaded chat and politics shows.

It has paid its stars too much, though it is now addressing that with cuts.

RTÉ shies away from serious allegations of corruption against the government.

Somewhat contrariwise it settles defamation actions too easily.

If the goal is to be 'the Nation on the Airwaves', on the contrary it always appears like a clique.

Focusing on the late Marian Finucane, she — once a firebrand — was for decades a reactionary, indulgent of the civil war parties, of developer types, of thumb-twiddling government lackeys, fronting a magazine programme over-comfortable with flaccid luvvies, PR-types, ex-politicians, vested-interests and establishment lawyers. Even Mick Heaney in the clubby *Irish Times* described her show as "clubby". The 2018 *Village* article confirms this. We got insights when she tried to destroy Eamon Ryan in 2004 for weed-smoking, and for example from the following exchange in 2014 —

Marian Finucane to Richard Boyd Barrett's mother, Sinéad Cusack: "Well, I mean, it's well known now, that your son is People Before Profit and all of that. And you found him years..."

Sinead Cusack: "My son is not just People Before Profit. My son is Richard".

I thought it might be useful to try to infer an RTÉ mentality. I'll do this from a combination of on-air performance and insights into the real views of key RTÉ managers and personalities, more often let slip or encapsulated in uncontrolled post-retirement social media accounts.

Hilary McGouran, one-time series editor of 'Morning Ireland' and managing director of RTÉ television news let slip one part of the mentality in a talk she gave. According to website anfocal.ie, McGouran dispensed the following wisdom to journalism students at the University of Limerick in 2015: "Ms McGouran warned young journalists that 'the fundamentals of journalism shouldn't change. It's about telling stories and stories that are engaging'".

That's not what it's about, it's about truth.

Only with that untruthed vision of journalism could you have the following sign-off from Miriam Ó Callaghan on flagship TV current affairs

programme, Prime Time on 25 November 2008. Confusing debate and storytelling with journalism she concluded a discussion on climate change, the issue of our time which threatens human civilisation, with: “This debate will go on and on. It’s been an interesting discussion and hopefully we’ll come back to it again”. It was very RTÉ. Very Miriam.

Later in the programme there was an insight into how beyond debate, she sees the story: “There is a perception that environmentalists care more about fish eggs than children and the lives of children. That doesn’t mean the science is wrong”. But there is an implication that the science was not central, to RTÉ.

Donagh Diamond registered the same truth-deprecation in RTÉ’s submission to the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland defending — against a complaint — “Prime Time’s obligation to air the views of those who do not believe in the scientific consensus on the impact of climate change”. Diamond is now Editor of Prime Time. Ken O’Shea, RTÉ Editor of Current Affairs defended RTÉ’s decision to challenge the scientific consensus on the basis that “dissenting voices...feed and inform the debate”, allowing “people to make up their own minds”.

More interestingly in view of the anal lack of diversity of her contributors I did note during the Varadkar Leak controversy, that RTÉ was exceptionally slow to cover, that one of the Twitter lurkers who was most vituperative was the under-the-radar ex-editor of Marian’s unpassionfest, Carol Louthe.

A jump into her twitter feed shows lots of nice pro-Ukrainian stuff, hostility to Mick and Claire, anti SFery — especially on question marks about its finances, and a bit of contempt for Paddy Cosgrave.

So far, so...moderate.

Certainly she has a tendency to retweet right-wing Fine Gael troll, FG social media team man Paul Duggan, aka Tull McAdoo, slagging-off, for example, Richard Boyd Barrett’s travel expenses, she retweeted someone in February who wrote of Paul Murphy: “Imagine this child trying to run a govt dept?” and styled the Le Chéile anti-racism marchers “a rabble”. But what attracted my attention to her was the vehemence of her antagonism to the Leak story: “Village are really dragging the arse out of this with little to show after coat-trailing, nudging and winking for over a week”...Freezing hot story”. The pro-establishment instinct is egregious.

Some of these are bit players. Let’s look at the big beasts.

Ryan Tubridy, though purportedly bookish, keeps it showbiz on the soon-to-be-rehosted Late Late Show. The intellectual peasantry will never tire of free holidays and tickets for the consumerist but maudlin Toy Show. He gave the game away when attacking Paul Murphy in 2015 in what broadsheet.ie described as “an unusually hostile, poorly researched and unpleasant piece

of political chat showing”. Tubridy introduced the TD thus: “My next guest is a man of numbers. He spent three years as a member of the European Parliament, he’s been a member of Dáil Éireann for just four months but in his campaigning history, he’s been arrested five times. Would you welcome please, Paul Murphy, TD”.

The interview included exchanges like the following –

Tubridy: just looking at the things that you’re

anti. And I’m curious to know what you’re pro because you’re anti water charges and anti property tax and you’re anti bin charges and you’re anti bailout and you’re anti college fees and you’re anti austerity. So where’s the pro in the Paul Murphy?”.

Murphy: “I’m pro-Socialism....”.

And the following –

Tubridy: “So what are you doing [in Leinster House] then?”.

Confirmation bias
Favoring or seeking information that affirms your pre-existing beliefs.
Politically related topics: Polarization, Filter bubbles

Coverage bias
The extent to which different issues are reported on and discussed.
Politically related topics: "horse race" style coverage, Appeal to emotion

Concision bias
Selectively focusing on information, losing nuance.
Politically related topics: Talking points, Sound bites

Authority bias
We're more likely to trust and be influenced by ideas that come from authority figures.
Example: "Our CEO says the state might tax disposable cups?" "Hey, I told you that last week and you said it would never happen."

Dunning-Kruger effect
The less you know, the more confident you are.
Example: "I don't see why we can't just print more money to pay the debt down."

Availability cascade
An idea accumulates more credibility as it spreads.
Example: "I've heard from a bunch of people that he's going to raise taxes, there must be some truth to it."

Halo effect
Our overall impression of a person influences how we feel and think about his or her character.
Example: "I think she's too nice to be a good commander in chief."

Declinism
We romanticize the past and believe that society and institutions are in decline.
Example: "That latest Supreme Court decision is just another example of how our country is falling apart these days."

Framing effect
We draw different conclusions based on how an idea is presented to us.
Anchor A: "Government increases military spending in renewed commitment to veterans"
Anchor B: "Amid record levels of debt, military spending balloons yet again"

Groupthink
Conforming to a widely held world view in order to fit in and minimize conflict.
Example: "I don't like the person running for Congress, but I can't really vote for the other party. My family would disown me."

False consensus
Overestimating the proportion of people who agree with an idea.
Example: "I think the majority of people agree that this policy makes sense. Everyone I know thinks so."



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Murphy: “Well, because I’m a Socialist activist”.

Tubridy: “Right”.

Murphy: “Right. And I think we can fight for fundamental change in society”.

Tubridy: “Right”.

Claire Byrne is a safe and competent pair of hands and has never for a second had an on-air idea or felt that a challenge to orthodoxy might have a place on an airwave. Some insight was when her format was assailed last year on Claire Byrne Live by a rampant Tony Groves of the left-wing Tortoise Shack podcast. Her reaction was an uptight and offended attempt to deny him even his name: “Tony, isn’t it?”, she deigned in one of the least professional moments of national television in recent years. She’ll need to be more adroit when the Late Late falls into her lap.

Áine Lawlor, hosting on ‘the Week in Politics’, recently closed down Paul Murphy, that radical man again, as if he was a late-night brothel. She twice contradicted his accurate view that his (since then resurrected) complaint to SIPO about Leo Varadkar had been rejected on (dubious) legal grounds not investigated and dismissed. This was extraordinary. When he was forced twice to assert the truth she did not have the manners to apologise to him.

A good insight into the ethos of the most central political journalists in RTÉ is provided by David Davin Power’s Twitter account. Davin-Power was one of the first presenters of Morning Ireland, and served from 2001 as RTÉ’s Political Correspondent. His immortally open-ended Twitter bio states: Journalist; commentator: Public Affairs: available as speaker, conference chair and much besides”.

His is the smuggest and tamest account on Irish Twitter: full of rugby, nostalgia (for Ronan Collins but mostly for the dead); and appeals to political moderation, and extraordinarily often to alleviate opprobrium on right-wing pariahs like Enoch Burke, Kevin Myers and Jeremy Clarkson. He triumphantly shared that Elon Musk had managed to sack three quarters of Twitter’s workforce with no service downside, but around to defend himself when it turned out Twitter has been subject to outages because of these layoffs.

DDP specialises in views like “Well worth a read” for articles by David Quinn, whose move to the *Sindo* he commends, and “must read it” for articles recommended by Mary Kenny.

He engages with John McGuirk though he’d draw the line at Gemma O’Doherty.

On the other hand he is left-sceptical. A typical posting from the former arbiter of RTÉ’s political line reads: “People before Profit policy would create more homelessness: we need apartments and houses now”.

That’s a not-insignificant ideological judgement, an implicit criticism of the former Social Democrat leadership. His non-ideological political frustrations, when revealed, seem to lean against the anti-establishment parties:



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“Sinn Fein deploring online abuse. Well well”.

His appetite for investigation is betrayed by the following: “How about this for a real scandal. False claims by minor opposition party could cost taxpayers 60 million euro when bills for Siteserve tribunal come in”.

Perhaps more clearcut are the histories of Sean Dúignan who presented *The Week in Politics* in 1995, the same year as he finished after four years of being Government Press Secretary and of George Lee who left RTÉ and became a Fine Gael TD for the Dublin South constituency in June 2009, winning a by-election with a 53.4% majority and who was referred to as a “celebrity TD”. Eight months later he announced his resignation both from Fine Gael and from the Dáil, having spent nine months in politics. RTÉ’s politics doyen, Lee has provided farmer-friendly agricultural pieces and often farmer-friendly or conservative pieces on the environment for the last decade. This is not to dispute the integrity of

the journalism but to note its, small c, conservative roots.

Not all RTÉ journalists are conservative by any means. Philip Bouchier Hayes is strong on climate. Charlie Bird was a stickie and a communist. Vincent Browne worked for RTÉ. Mary Regan worked for *Village* magazine. Joe Duffy was a students union leader. Not surprisingly there are prejudices of all sorts, but many of them seem to be against radicalism and in particular the radical parties of the left. It is not too much to expect that there should be a system to deal with this.

In 2021 the BBC published an impartiality plan which included:

- “Thematic reviews” covering output in key areas of public debate to ensure a breadth of voices and viewpoints are reflected, with the first to cover UK public spending and taxation
- Increased responsibility for the BBC’s Editorial Policy team, with reviews to content by internal management to assess how much it meets the corporation’s editorial standards
- Monitoring of such “impartiality metrics” as editorial complaints, staff training, audience perception and demographic data
- Making the BBC’s editorial guidelines “more prominent and easy to use” for all BBC staff
- Putting two experts with non-BBC experience on its Editorial Guidelines and Standards Committee.

Commissioned by the BBC’s board, and arising from the impartiality plan a report published in January reviewed the BBC’s coverage of government financial policy. As part of the process it reviewed 11,000 pieces of BBC online, TV and radio content plus social media posts from October 2021 to March 2022, and spoke to more than 100 people inside and outside the BBC.

We need something similar for RTÉ for there are some indications that some of its journalists are biased, particularly against radicalism on the left. **L**