



Research on use of the Irish language on radio

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1. Introduction

The Irish language has had a role in broadcasting since the establishment of Ireland's first radio station 2RN in 1926. The founders of the state imagined that radio would play a key role in the development of Irish identity in nation-building (Watson, 2003; Pine, 2002; Day, 2012). Following the consolidation of the existing Dublin and Cork stations in 1933, a national audience could hear programmes in Irish for the first time, due to the introduction of a high-powered transmitter in Athlone. Although a separate service was promised for the Gaeltacht in 1926, a distinct station did not materialise until 1972, with the establishment of Raidió na Gaeltachta (Day, 2012). Some Irish is broadcast on RTÉ's other radio stations but as a full-time national broadcaster, RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta provides the majority of Irish language radio broadcasts in the country.

Following the introduction of the Radio and Television Act of 1988, the pirate stations that had proliferated during the 1970s and 1980s were put off the air and new commercial broadcasters were licensed. Irish was granted only limited recognition in the schedules of these stations that came on air from 1989 onwards. As a result of a campaign by language activists in Dublin, Raidió na Life was established in 1993 as a community of interest service to serve Irish speakers in the capital (Ó Drisceoil, 2007).

The purpose of this report is to provide a base-line study of the current provision of Irish language programming on all licensed AM/FM radio stations in the state, with the exception of stations that broadcast exclusively through Irish.¹ The report stems from the fact that, to our knowledge, no research has been conducted to date on the precise amount of Irish language output on Irish radio. We believe that this information gap needs to be addressed because the provision of services in Irish is among the statutory requirements placed on all Irish radio broadcasters, particularly RTÉ. There are specific provisions about Irish in the Broadcasting Act of 2009 (Oireachtas Éireann, 2009) and the Broadcasting Authority of

¹ RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta and Raidió na Life.

Ireland (BAI) includes the promotion of programmes in Irish among its strategic objectives (BAI, 2017).

This report begins by outlining the legislative and policy frameworks for Irish language broadcasting. It goes on to explain the methodology behind the current study and then presents the findings in both narrative and tabular form. This is the first phase of a longer-term study on radio broadcasting in Irish on services which operate almost entirely in English. The overall aim of the longer-term project is to understand the experience of radio managers with Irish language programming, to identify both positive initiatives and challenges associated with such programming and, ultimately, to influence the policy framework so that radio stations can be supported in providing additional material in Irish. As academics working in the fields of Irish language and of radio, we are committed to supporting the expansion of broadcasting in Irish.

2. Legislative framework

The BAI and its predecessor, the Independent Radio and Television Commission, have operated under various broadcasting acts since 1988. The Broadcasting Act of 2009 is the most relevant, over-arching legislation. It contains specific provisions on the Irish language both linked to the duties of the Authority itself and to the duties of broadcasters. The most significant requirements are placed on public broadcasters (RTÉ and TG4) but Irish is also listed among the criteria to be evaluated when assessing applications for an independent radio licence.

The composition of the BAI itself, its statutory committees and its objectives are covered in Articles 9 and 25 of the Act (Oireachtas Éireann, 2009). In article 9 (1), matters related to the development of the Irish language and Gaeltacht affairs are listed among the areas of expertise required of members of the Authority or its committees. In article 25 (2) (h) on the objectives of the BAI, it is stated that the Authority and its statutory committees ‘will promote and stimulate the development of Irish language programming and broadcasting services’. Article 154 (1) of the Act specifies that the Authority will submit a scheme to the Minister to support programmes in a number of areas including the Irish language. The current version of this scheme is entitled ‘Sound and Vision 3’. According to Article 155 (1), the objective of the scheme is to ‘develop high quality programmes based on Irish culture, heritage and experience’ including programmes in the Irish language. Under article 156 (2) it is provided that 7 per cent of net receipts from television licence fees will be paid through the scheme to be managed and developed by the BAI.

Independent broadcasters are covered by Articles 66, 67 and 69. Article 66 relates to the Irish language element of the licensing of radio services. Article 66 (2) (d) states that the BAI’s Contract Awards Committee will have regard to ‘the quantity, quality, range and type

of programmes in the Irish language’ when making a decision about a licence. Article 66 (3) specifies that the Committee ‘shall have particular regard to the continuance and advancement as a spoken language of the Irish language’ when making a decision on a licence for an area which includes a Gaeltacht district.

Any breaches of the contractual obligations are the concern of a statutory committee of the BAI known as the Compliance Committee. Article 28 relates to the duties of the Compliance Committee to ensure that a broadcaster complies with the terms of its licence. Article 28 (1) (a) refers to the obligation of the Compliance Committee to monitor the fulfilment of the terms and conditions of the licence and under sub-section (b) the Committee is charged with ensuring that the terms and conditions of the licence are implemented. The amount of programming in Irish that was agreed in the station’s contract is included in those provisions. There is a significant difference between such general monitoring and the specific duty outlined in article 29 (1) (c) which obliges a broadcaster to ensure that news and current affairs comprise 20 per cent or two hours of programming between 07.00 and 19.00, peak broadcasting hours. Nonetheless, the provision of programmes in Irish, however loosely defined, remains a statutory requirement that applies to all licensed stations included in this study.

The Act deals separately with Ireland’s public service broadcasters, RTÉ and TG4. In article 82 (1) ‘matters pertaining to the development of the Irish language’ and ‘Gaeltacht affairs’ are listed as areas of expertise required when members of the RTÉ board are being appointed. In article 102 (2) (b) it is provided that the RTÉ annual report ‘about performance commitments’ will address Irish language programming, among other matters. The Act places significant duties on RTÉ regarding Irish language programming. Article 111 (2) (a) commits RTÉ to ensuring that its programmes reflect the various traits which make up Irish culture and that it will ‘have special regard for the elements which distinguish that culture and in particular for the Irish language’. Article 114 (3) states that RTÉ will broadcast a comprehensive range of programmes in Irish and English, including news and current affairs programmes (Oireachtas Éireann, 2009).

3. Policy framework

3.1 Independent broadcasters

Currently the BAI has no specific strategy statement or code of practice dealing with Irish language broadcasting but its most recent Strategy Statement contains the objective to ‘[f]oster and promote quality programming in the Irish Language’ (BAI, 2017: 2). The following reference to Irish was contained in advice on applying for community radio licences which was available online up to 2016: ‘[Programme Policy] Statements will be expected to include clear commitments in relation to areas such as speech/music ratio, Irish

language programming, music policy and externally-produced programmes' (BAI, 2009: 11). When applicants apply for a licence, they are asked to make a statement about the amount and type of programmes they intend to broadcast (a) in Irish and (b) bilingually. Similar guidance is published with each licensing call for commercial stations.

3.2 RTÉ

In 2015, RTÉ published a five-year action plan, *Meáin Ghaeilge RTÉ*, to boost its Irish language output. The plan's first aim is to extend Irish throughout the schedules of all RTÉ services:

We will increase the amount of Irish heard on radio, with more Irish language and bilingual programming on RTÉ Radio 1, RTÉ 2fm and RTÉ lyric fm. RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta will have a particular focus on growing its audience through inclusively [sic], and on ensuring relevancy as media consumption patterns change (RTÉ, 2015: 4).

Specific aims regarding the development of Irish on all radio services are outlined in the plan and RTÉ also commits itself to developing a new youth radio service in Irish (RTÉ, 2015: 10).

4. Methodology

The research began in January 2017 and involved all full-time analogue radio stations operated by RTÉ or licensed by the BAI to broadcast on AM/FM. As the aim of the survey was to ascertain the level of Irish language output on radio, stations which broadcast entirely in Irish were not surveyed.² Stations operating online or on DAB only,³ stations awarded content provision contracts,⁴ part-time stations and stations outside the state⁵ were not included. It was also decided to omit hospital (institutional) stations due to their very small size and specific licensing agreements with the BAI.⁶ This left a total of 59 radio stations in the survey.

4.1 Analysis of schedules

The first phase of the study was to analyse the stations' schedules as advertised on their websites. Based on this information, in January 2017, a database was constructed to capture the following information:

² These include three stations broadcasting entirely in Irish, Raidió Rí-Rá (Dublin), Raidió Fáilte (Belfast) and Raidió na dTreabh (Galway).

³ For instance, RTÉ's six digital stations: RTÉ Radio One Extra, RTÉ 2XM, RTÉ Gold, RTÉ Junior and RTÉ Pulse.

⁴ The DAB/online-only stations Radio Maria and UCB Ireland.

⁵ Raidió Fáilte.

⁶ Institutional stations are exempt from most of the content requirements applied to commercial and community broadcasters. See Section 68 of the Broadcasting Act 2009.

- a) type of station
- b) hours and minutes per week broadcast in Irish
- c) programme title
- d) language content (entirely in Irish, bilingual, only a few phrases of Irish)
- e) time of broadcast
- f) information about occasional broadcasts in Irish for Seachtain na Gaeilge etc.

Screenshots of station websites were stored, particularly if they contained further information about the station's Irish language programming.

4.2 Analysis of existing information

The *Cogar* scheme, which operated until 2014, aimed to support the use of Irish across the independent radio sector. Its successor scheme, *Aerthonnta*, is operated by Raidió na Life in association with the BAI.⁷ Documentation related to both schemes was reviewed and the researchers met Judy-Meg Ní Chinnéide, co-ordinator of *Aerthonnta*, to further verify information about schedules.

4.3 Correspondence with stations

Based on the initial survey and other background documentation, from February to July 2017 all radio stations surveyed were contacted by letter and asked to confirm or correct our initial findings. Stations were also asked if they would be willing to provide a representative to be interviewed in the next phase of the research. The researchers also met Lisa Ní Choistealbha of the Independent Broadcasters of Ireland and Martina O'Brien of CRAOL (the Community Radio Forum of Ireland) so that sectoral representatives were aware of the project.

Where there was no response from stations after two weeks, follow-up telephone calls were made or emails sent to station managers. During the course of telephone communication, some managers provided further information about initiatives and challenges related to providing Irish language programming and such responses were documented. Because of the delayed responses of several stations, this period of the research took much longer than anticipated. After repeated contact with non-responsive stations, the eventual response rate was 53/59 or just under 90% of the total.

4.4 Presentation of data

Programmes reported as being entirely in Irish were weighted at 1.0. Due to lack of resources, it was not possible to listen to every Irish language programme identified. If a station reported a programme as 'bilingual', it is included in the hours and minutes of Irish language content but weighted at 0.5. This may not be an entirely accurate reflection of Irish language content but we believe that it is the best possible estimate in the

⁷ Information about the scheme is available here: <http://www.raidionalife.ie/en/aerthonnta-2/>

circumstances. If programmes were reported to contain only a few words or phrases in Irish ('a dash of Gaeilge', as one station put it), they were similarly discounted as it was impossible to assess how much actual Irish was spoken. Similarly, although most stations reported broadcasting extra material in Irish in March during *Seachtain na Gaeilge*, this information was also discounted due to a lack of clarity and because the aim of the survey was to estimate regular rather than occasional output.

If no answer was received from a station, this is recorded in the table. In such cases, the results are based on the unverified online schedules only, where these were available. It became clear during the research that station websites often provided inaccurate or incomplete information about Irish language programming.

4.5 Feedback from stations

In November 2017, a summary of this survey along with the relevant data in tabular form was sent to every radio station individually, giving them an opportunity to correct any inaccuracy or provide updated information. A number of stations requested that amendments be made to the entries about their programming.

4.6 Next stages of research

The next stage of research will be to conduct interviews with a representative sample of station managers ranging from stations that broadcast a comparatively high percentage of output in Irish to those whose Irish language output is weak. This will provide a richer investigation of stations' understanding of their commitment to Irish, their experience of developing and broadcasting Irish language programming and their future plans in this regard. An additional stage of research will be to compare stations' successful license applications to the BAI with their Irish language output, in order to ascertain if their contractual aims are being met.

5. Findings

The following is a summary of the main findings of the survey.⁸ See the accompanying Table for full information.

5.1 Broadcasting hours in Irish

The number of weekly hours broadcast in Irish or bilingually is very low compared to the stations' overall outputs. The average weekly output in Irish is 3:30 hours (including repeats). For the most part, programmes in Irish are broadcast outside peak hours (after 7pm, overnight or early on Sunday morning). Of the commercial stations, by far the highest

⁸ This report was compiled by Dr John Walsh and Dr Rosemary Day in their capacities as academics working in NUI Galway and Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick. This work is independent of John Walsh's involvement in Flirt FM as a volunteer on programmes not broadcast in Irish. It is similarly independent of Rosemary Day's service on the board of the BAI and on its Compliance Committee.

weekly Irish language output is from the youth stations iRadio (44:30 hours on both the Northeast/Midlands and Northwest station, or 26% of its total output).⁹ However, the majority of these hours are broadcast overnight when listenership is negligible. Removing the iRadio hours would decrease the average output to less than two hours per week per station. The next highest output of any station is on the Spin youth stations (6 hours on both the Southwest and 103.8 stations, or 3.6% of their output). Flirt FM (Galway) is the leader in the community sector with 8 hours (10% of its output).

5.2 Original programming

A majority of stations (about two-thirds or 40/59) produce their own original Irish language or bilingual programming, or share it with another station to which they are linked, for instance the Spin and iRadio regional stations, Northern Sound FM and Shannonside FM, 4FM and Sunshine 106.8, and the RTÉ stations.

5.3 Rebroadcast of Irish language programming

Five stations, or 8.5% of the total (BEAT 102-103, Claremorris Community Radio, Community Radio Youghal, Dublin South FM and Dundalk FM), rebroadcast only external programming in Irish and do not generate their own material. These comprise five community stations which rely on material from the Dublin-based Raidió na Life¹⁰ and the commercial regional station BEAT 102-103 which rebroadcasts a programme from the Spin group. Apart from news bulletins in Irish, the remainder of Irish language output on RTÉ Radio One is repackaged from RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta (see table).

Community stations Liffey Sound, Phoenix FM and Wired FM supplement their own programmes with additional material from Raidió na Life (see table).

5.4 No Irish language programming

The research revealed that four stations, three commercial (Galway Bay FM, KCLR FM and Today FM¹¹) and one community (Ros FM), broadcast no Irish at all in their schedules.

5.5 Irish language inserts

Four commercial stations (98FM, C103, Cork's 96FM and Q102), have no dedicated Irish language or bilingual programme and broadcast only Irish language or bilingual inserts three or four times per day. These last on average 60-90 seconds or less than half an hour a week in total.

⁹ Total output equals the amount of hours daily the station is on the air, in this case 24 hours. Smaller community stations tend to have more limited schedules.

¹⁰ Mostly 'Scoth na Seachtaine', a weekly compilation of highlights from Raidió na Life.

¹¹ Today FM did not respond to repeated attempts to contact the station. However the researchers have themselves heard short Irish language inserts on air.

Stations broadcasting no Irish at all or only inserts in Irish amount to 15.2% of the total (9/59 stations).

Seven commercial stations (4FM, BEAT 102-103, East Coast FM, Limerick's Live 95FM, LMF, Tipp FM and Red FM) broadcast inserts in addition to full Irish language programmes. These inserts are sometimes shared between stations.

5.6 Gaeltacht counties

There are Gaeltacht districts in seven counties (Cork, Kerry, Galway, Mayo, Donegal, Meath and Waterford) and these are served by a mixture of local and regional commercial stations. Some of these stations broadcast no Irish language programme despite having a Gaeltacht district in their franchise area.

- a) *Cork*: None of the local Cork stations (C103, Cork's 96FM, Red FM) broadcast full programmes in Irish. Spin Southwest (which covers the Cork Gaeltacht) provides 6 hours weekly (3.6%).
- b) *Kerry*: Radio Kerry broadcasts 3 hours in Irish per week (approximately 2 per cent of output). Spin Southwest (see above) also covers the Kerry Gaeltacht.
- c) *Galway*: Despite a large Gaeltacht area in Galway, no Irish language material is broadcast on Galway Bay FM. Regional station iRadio Northwest provides a high percentage of Irish language programming (see 5.1 above).
- d) *Mayo*: Midwest Radio broadcasts 3:15 hours in Irish per week (approximately 2 per cent of output).¹² Mayo is also served by iRadio Northwest.
- e) *Donegal*: Highland Radio broadcasts 3:37 hours per week in Irish (approximately 2 per cent of output), despite the existence of a large Gaeltacht area in Donegal. Donegal is also served by iRadio Northwest.
- f) *Meath*: LMF, the station whose franchise area includes the Meath Gaeltacht, broadcasts 2:35 per week or almost 1.5% of output. Meath is also served by regional station iRadio (Midlands and Northeast) which provides a high percentage of Irish language output (see above).
- g) *Waterford*: Local station WLR broadcasts half an hour a week in Irish (approximately 0.25% of output). Regional station BEAT 102-103 broadcasts 4:25 per week in Irish (almost 2.7% of output).

The absence of Irish language programming on local stations is significant due to their high listenership within their franchise areas, as successive JNLR surveys indicate.

5.7 Style of programmes and inserts

As stated above, it has not been possible to listen to more than a sample of Irish language output. However the titles of programmes provide clues about content, such as *Ceol agus*

¹² Our thanks to Tommy Marren of Midwest Radio for his correction to the original version.

Caint, Craic agus Ceol, Craic an Lae and *Aon Chraic*? These give the impression that Irish language content is viewed as light-hearted and entertainment-based. Other Irish language programmes are linked to traditional music. The exceptions to these are the youth-based stations which provide short links in Irish between contemporary music, just as they do in their English-language programming. While there are limited examples of magazine-type programmes on stations' schedules, no current affairs-type programming in Irish is clearly identifiable. This would suggest that Irish is not usually seen by stations as a vernacular language but either as a hobby for those who remember some Irish from school or a sop to vague licensing requirements.

Further more detailed research is required to ascertain what proportion of output is aimed at Irish speakers rather than at the general population who have limited knowledge of the language.

5.8 Irish language news service

The provision of regular news bulletins in Irish can be considered a fundamental service occupying a prestigious place in a radio station's schedule. RTÉ broadcasts daily news bulletins in Irish on RTÉ Radio 1 and RTÉ lyric fm and from Monday to Friday on RTÉ 2fm. No commercial or community station provides a daily news service in Irish although this was the case in the past.¹³ Two stations (Highland Radio in Donegal and Liffey Sound in Dublin) provide news in Irish on certain days.

5.9 Programmes in other languages

In addition to output in Irish, six community stations (Claremorris Community Radio, Dublin City FM, Dublin South FM, Liffey Sound FM, NEAR FM and Phoenix FM) also broadcast programmes in the languages of some immigrant communities. In the case of NEAR FM and Dublin South FM, these programmes collectively account for more hours per week than their programmes in Irish.

5.10 Online information

Few stations provide any online information about Irish language programming. Where published, there are several errors in titles of programmes, names of presenters and other basic information. In the accompanying Table, errors have been corrected.

6. Conclusions and policy proposals

6.1 Conclusions

¹³ The national commercial station Today FM provided news headlines in Irish in the past. Its predecessor Century Radio (1989-1991) broadcast news bulletins in Irish four times daily and these were syndicated to many local stations.

Thirty years after the legalisation of independent radio in Ireland, the Irish language has only a marginal role on radio stations other than those broadcasting in Irish. This is in spite of statutory provisions regarding Irish in the licensing process that oblige all stations to include it in their programming. With a small number of exceptions, stations broadcast only minimal amounts of Irish and almost invariably outside peak hours. The lack of Irish language programming during primetime across most schedules is a cause of concern as it represents the marginalisation of the language to times when listenership is lowest. Although youth stations broadcast the highest number of hours, the majority of them are comprised of mostly chart music and only short links in Irish.

Apart from RTÉ, no station broadcasts a daily news service in Irish and the output tends towards the trivial ('let's make Irish fun') or culturally stereotypical (traditional music). Although a majority of stations generate their own material, several community stations only rebroadcast programmes from Raidió na Life. While we recognise the restraints under which such stations operate, we question if such an approach is in keeping with the aims of the legislation or indeed with their own aims and ethos, i.e. to provide relevant programming for the varied communities that they serve. Some stations broadcast no Irish at all, including those serving Gaeltacht areas.

The legislation is weak and imprecise regarding the Irish language. It does not lay down specific targets or percentages in relation to Irish language output by comparison, for example, with detailed provisions on news and current affairs. Instead, the relevant committee of the BAI, the Contract Awards Committee, is obliged only to 'have regard' to Irish when making a decision on awarding a licence. This leaves open the possibility that only a minimal amount of Irish may be offered by the stations and accepted by the BAI when the contract is being negotiated. The Compliance Committee deals primarily with breaches of regulations as a result of complaints from listeners. The BAI executive's monitoring of stations' output is scant at best and does not appear to prioritise the use of the Irish language on air.

The provisions regarding stations whose franchise areas include the Gaeltacht are more stringent, as the Contract Awards Committee is required to 'have particular regard to the continuance and advancement as a spoken language of the Irish language'. This has potentially far-reaching implications for such stations but the survey indicates that several of them appear to fall far short of that provision. Broadcasting no Irish at all or only minimal amounts cannot be understood to be in accordance with advancing Irish as a spoken language in the Gaeltacht.

Music-based programmes with links in Irish, such as those broadcast by the iRadio and Spin stations, have a place in radio broadcasting and may encourage a youth audience to engage with Irish. However this falls far short of serving the communicative needs of Irish speakers both inside and outside the Gaeltacht.

Although further research is required, we conclude tentatively that the Irish language requirement is often understood by stations as involving minimal amounts of Irish aimed at general listeners who have passive knowledge of Irish from school, and not at active and fluent speakers of Irish. This is a reflection of a wider social dynamic which prioritises symbolic recognition for Irish over its active promotion as a spoken language.

6.2 Proposals

For legislators

- We urge that the Broadcasting Act 2009 be strengthened in order to enable the BAI to pursue a more pro-active Irish language policy in tandem with radio stations.
- We propose the revision of Article 66 (2) (d) of the Act in order to ensure greater provision of Irish language programming across all stations.
- We recommend that Article 66 (3) of the Act be amended to strengthen obligations on stations covering Gaeltacht areas.

For the regulator

- We encourage the BAI and radio stations to develop a greater awareness of the types of listeners who are to be served by Irish language programmes. Such programmes need to be targeted at two specific groups:
 - (a) those who speak Irish fluently and regularly, including those in the Gaeltacht and
 - (b) those who know some Irish, are well-disposed towards it and would like to hear more of it on their radio station.

To this end, the BAI needs to re-introduce an Irish Language Advisory Committee and Irish Language Officer with adequate resources to

- (a) promote awareness and understanding about the Irish language in the sector and
- (b) develop and implement a pro-active Irish language policy.
- A key objective of any new policy must be to ensure the provision of Irish language programming for young listeners.
- We recommend that Irish be carefully considered in periodic reviews of all stations regulated by the BAI.

For the broadcasters

- We propose that all stations work towards producing their own Irish language programming of relevance to their listeners. Stations should commit to gradually increasing the amount of Irish broadcast during peak listening hours.
- Stations with Gaeltacht districts in their franchise areas should deliver significantly more programmes in Irish than other stations. This could be ensured through the introduction of a quota in contracts for such stations.
- Youth stations should continue to develop Irish language programming, given the importance of empowering and supporting future speakers of the language.

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¹⁴ The Broadcasting Commission of Ireland (BCI) became the BAI in 2009. This document was published by the BAI in 2009 as an interim policy pending review and hence the reference to BCI in the title.