



Ireland: TG4

Dr Colum Kenny

Emeritus Professor of Communications at Dublin City University

Gracias por la invitación a la Universidad de Navarra. Es un placer estar aquí.

De hecho, uno de mis hijos está trabajando en España, es profesor de inglés en Sevilla. Después de la conferencia voy a viajar a Andalucía para verlo.

Disculpad pero no hablo muy bien español por lo que voy a continuar en inglés.

Ireland (which is also known as Éire in the Irish language) is an island with a small population. It is divided into two parts politically. These are Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom and has a population of 1.8 million people, and the Republic of Ireland, with a population of 4.6 million people.

The Republic of Ireland has four digital terrestrial television stations. These are, RTE1 (English language), RTE2 (English language), TV3 (English language) and TG4 (60% the Irish language). There is a new private channel UTV Ireland which I shall not include here for various reasons. I shall be speaking today mainly about TG4.

Hundreds of years ago most Irish people spoke Gaelic, a Celtic language. Today, the great majority of Irish people now speak English as their daily language. There is probably nobody alive now who speaks only Irish and not English as well. Exact figures on proficiency....

Exact figures on proficiency in the Irish language are not readily available. This is partly because the national census asks a soft question ("Can you speak Irish?") that tends to elicit a high response. Two in every five people more than three years old SAY that they speak it, but the census also shows that that figure includes children who are obliged to learn it at school, and that only two in every eight people ACTUALLY speak it weekly or more often.

After most of Ireland became independent of Britain there were attempts to revive Irish as a widely spoken language, first by brutal compulsion and later by persuasion, but both methods failed. Today, following very big migration from Poland to Ireland



since the year 2000, it appears now that more households in Ireland may speak Polish on a daily basis than speak Irish daily.

Before looking at the role of Irish television stations it should definitely be noted that up to 90% of Irish homes can and do also receive freely the main UK television channels, including BBC1 and BBC2 and Channel 4. Many people also pay to receive sports and film channels from Britain. All of these foreign channels are of course in English, which is the main language that is spoken in Ireland.

Therefore, in a certain way, even the Republic of Ireland's own channels in the English language are in practice regional channels.

The three Irish channels in English consist of the main state-owned channels, RTE1 and RTE2 and the sole privately owned terrestrial channel TV3. And the good news is that between them these still win the largest TV audiences in Ireland. They do so in the face of strong foreign competition by providing a broad range of Irish-made programmes mainly about Irish affairs, including news and entertainment.

During the 1990s the Irish government decided to set up a fourth terrestrial television channel, this time to be mainly but not exclusively in the Irish language. Although only a small number of people now speak Irish as their daily language, a much larger number like to speak Irish *sometimes* and to watch programmes in the Irish language. The new channel is named TG4. The letter "G" there refers to "Gaeilge", the Gaelic Irish word for the Irish language.

TG4 has only a 2% share of the audience at any time on average. But, nevertheless, it is still the 8th most popular channel in Ireland. At any time (on average) one in every fifty actual television viewers on the island of Ireland is tuned into and watching TG4.

TG4 says that, "This is a very creditable performance in what is one of Europe's most competitive national television markets, with a very high percentage of homes subscribing to satellite, cable or IP platforms that make available scores of TV channels and players that offer a wide choice of content."

TG4 attracts some of its viewers by showing some programmes in the English-language, especially films, and by displaying subtitles in the English-language



automatically on its Irish-language programming. About 60% of its programmes are in the Irish language.

So how are TG4 and RTE funded? Every Irish household pays an annual television licence fee of €160.00 each year. Approximately 80% of this is given to RTE for its radio and television services, amounting to a total income for RTE from the licence fee last year of almost €179m.

All TV channels are also allowed to broadcast some commercials. RTE's advertising revenue, along with commercial revenue from other sources such as programme sponsorship, boosts its income considerably.

In addition to €180m from the household licence and €150m from selling advertising space last year, RTE also earned about another €7m from sponsorship of its programmes.

Out of all this income it must run two TV channels, three radio services and two orchestras.

When it comes to financing TG4, the Irish government firstly provides direct funding each year, with that funding in 2014 being €32.24m. The government also insists that RTE produces for TG4 one hour of TV programming every day, principally a news programme, and RTE says that this hour per day costs it up seven million euros annually,

TG4 also derives a small amount of extra revenue from selling commercial air-time and programme sponsorship. It makes about two million euros annually from selling ad space. Many of the advertisements that it screens are in English, which is an anomaly or paradox given the overall nature of the station.

So in practice, altogether, TG4 receives about €40m in public monies, or about 20% of the total public money spent directly on broadcasting services in the Republic of Ireland. This share of the cash going to TG4 is much greater than its share of the audience relative to RTE's two English-language TV channels.



Thus, where approximately two in every 100 viewers at any given moment are watching TG4, twenty in every 100 are watching RTE's first TV channel and almost eight in every 100 are watching RTE's second TV channel.

The only privately-owned national channel in Ireland, TV3, is watched by 11 in every hundred viewers.

You may notice from these figures that between them all, the four Irish digital terrestrial channels still attract a total of more than 40 in every hundred viewers at any given time on average, despite the wide availability of many high-quality channels in the English language.

In fact the biggest share that any British station attracts in Ireland is 4% for BBC1, which is only about twice that for the Irish channel TG4.

TG4's signal covers the island of Ireland. Thus it is not confined to the areas where the Irish language is still spoken most frequently, although its headquarters is located in the remoter west of Ireland. Thus its region is all of Ireland.

TG4 employs a dedicated core staff of 80 people. It invests over €20m annually in original Irish programming from the independent production sector in Ireland.

Its chairman and board of management are appointed for five years at a time by the government, although a parliamentary committee has some say in who may serve on its board.

TG4's use of technology includes a full online website, with an iPlayer that allows its home-made programmes to be watched in Ireland and abroad. It has also developed a small numbers of apps, mainly connected with its weather forecasts and with programmes intended to help viewers learn the Irish language. It believes that such technology is essential if it is to continue to appeal to younger viewers.

Its website and iPlayer address is www.tg4.ie.

So what is the official objective of TG4 and why does the government fund it? It has never been entirely clear if the principal purpose of TG4 is (a) to increase the number of people watching programmes in the Irish language, or (b) increase the number of people speaking Irish or (c) provide an alternative service in the Irish language



regardless of how many people watch it or speak Irish. The relevant legislation establishing TG4 is quite broad and therefore somewhat vague, as are the station's stated objectives.

Programmes made by TG4 have won many awards, and some of its programmes are highly-regarded by the Irish public. Many Irish people who virtually never watch TG4 tell researchers that they like it, and many believe that it is a good idea for the station to exist and be funded as it is.

Thank you. Or, as we say in Irish, 'Go raibh míle maith agaibh'. Gratias.