

Participatory cultures and democratic legitimisation in public service media: Ireland and the RTÉ Audience Council

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Abstract:

The project of public service broadcasting has long relegated its publics to the status of silent partner, with the democratic thrust of broadcasting tending to privilege mere access to services rather than the vindication of communication rights. With threats to the social legitimacy and future reproduction of public service broadcasting growing, the examination of participatory cultures in contemporary public service media institutions offers a productive means of interrogating the normative-democratic underpinnings of the public service project as its institutions respond to changing technological, competitive and democratic contexts. This article presents an empirical (participant-observational) inquiry into the democratic affordances and constraints of a structural public participative innovation within the governance of Irish public service media. It finds that the Audience Council structure has been subject to a range of delimiting forces that undercut its efficacy and public representational capacities. It is concluded that the Council's marginalisation is illustrative of long-term continuities in institutional aversions to the impingement of public power within the public service media project, a tendency which is deepening contemporary challenges of institutional legitimisation.

Keywords: Public service broadcasting, public service media, audience participation, participatory governance

Introduction

Since the emergence of broadcasters with 'public service' remits from under the shadow of their directly state-controlled predecessors in the mid-20th century, the normative status of

public service broadcasting's very *public* has retained ambiguities that continue to shape regimes of inclusion practiced within PSB institutions.

Media and communications scholars have long pointed out apparent discrepancies between the promise and reality of a publicly-owned media-institutional project funded directly by publics and which acts in their name, yet which have displayed an entrenched tendency to 'keep the people and civil society at a distance' (Bardoel, 2007: 50, see also Scannell, 1989). This may be seen as reflective of broader contingencies, ambiguities and even internal contradictions (Ang, 1991: 85) within the normative project of public service broadcasting *in toto* (Scannell, 1990: 11), further complicated by significant national variations in its theory and practice as its institutions are shaped by local political, social and cultural exigencies (Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

The overall purpose of this article is to contribute a theoretical and empirical exploration of conceptualisations and operationalisations of publics in public service broadcasting, aiming to shed light on the normative underpinnings of the public service broadcasting project as a whole and to assess their implications for the reproduction of the PSB institutions in the context of contemporary political, economic and technological change. This is accomplished firstly by means of an introductory review of changes and continuities over time in dominant conceptualisations of public service broadcasting's publics, as the places of PSB institutions in national polities, public spheres and economies evolved over the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Following this, the ways in which regimes of public inclusion are reconciled with dominant institutional and professional conceptions of public service within PSB institutions are explored through the analytical rubric of participation.

The Irish context of public service broadcasting and its overall participatory regime is then introduced as the empirical focus of the article, and justified with reference to its broader resonances as an example of a nation where the intersection of contemporary political and economic crisis has come to threaten the future of public service broadcasting.

The findings of a participant-observational case study of the main public service broadcaster's Audience Council public-participative structure in institutional governance are then reported in detail. This is followed by a theoretically-informed assessment of the participative affordances and constraints of the structure, and a series of conclusions on what the findings suggest about the present and future of public service broadcasting's place in the Irish public sphere and their broader resonances.

The public in public service broadcasting: a review

Syverson (1999: 5-6) notes that even by the dawn of the 21st century, 'no single understanding of 'public service' had crystallised' within the Western European heartland (Collins, 2005: 42) of public service broadcasting. Syverson (1999) nonetheless identifies three dominant meanings of the public service concept as institutionalised in European public service broadcasting in the 20th century.

These comprise, firstly, the idea of public service as a public utility, arising from the original 'technical-economic' justifications (ibid: 6) of state involvement in national media systems. Here, what made public service broadcasting distinctively public was, above all, an emphasis on delivering universal public access to receive quality broadcast signals (ibid: 6).

Later, as PSB institutions acquired greater independence from governments, their 'place in politics' (Blumler, 1992: 12) expanded and became reframed within a broader mediating role in national political and democratic life (Horsti, Hultén and Titley, 2014: 4). Syvertsen (1999: 7) characterises this as a shift in the dominant PSB self-legitimation toward 'broadcasting in the service of the public sphere', reflecting the Reithian belief that PSB institutions could powerfully contribute to the 'formation of an informed and reasoned public opinion as an essential part of the political process in a mass democratic society' (Scannell, 1990: 14).

Syvertsen (1999: 7) posits that recent decades have seen the ascendancy of a third interpretation of the public service concept- 'broadcasting in the service of the audience', in which the public responsibilities of PSB institutions were now seen to demand a greater emphasis on satisfying 'the interests and preferences of individual consumers' (Syvertson, 1999: 7). This most recent shift is closely associated with the 'commercial deluge' (Blumler, 1992: 7) in broadcasting and the neoliberal turn in public administration which saw the increasing subjection of public service broadcasting institutions to the vicissitudes of competitive pressures and market imperatives following the dissolution of national broadcasting monopolies in the 1970s and 1980s- developments that have engendered major challenges for the reproduction of public service broadcasting (Curran, 2002: 191, Lowe and Steemers, 2012).

Today, despite changing political-economic, socio-cultural and technological contexts, all three of these conceptions of the public service concept- with their varying approaches to publicness- may be said to co-exist. The universalism of public service broadcasting lives on not just in 'free-to-air' mandates but in the comprehensive remits of broadcasters and their self-declared emphasis on pluralism and diversity in programming (Blumler, 1992: 7-14). They still self-identify as indispensable players in the mediation of democratic life (Syverton, 1999: 7). They also continue to pursue ongoing relevance and institutional survival through ever greater attunement to audience tastes and desires as part of ongoing renegotiations of the balance between their 'informational, cultural and economic roles' (McCullagh, 2002: 83).

Such conceptions have also survived a diversification of public service broadcasting beyond the institutional context of the vertically-integrated public monopoly funded by license fee, with the regulatory remits of public service in the United Kingdom, for example, encompassing the non-profit 'publisher-broadcaster' model exemplified by Channel 4 as well as commercial broadcasters such as ITV. The endurance of varying conceptions of the public in public service broadcasting speaks to the extent to which its addressees of nation, public and audience are conceptually entangled (Livingstone, 2005). Livingstone (ibid: 19) thus cautions against a tendency in media scholarship to engage in a 'reductive polarisation

of public and audience', instead recognising that between the sharply defined normative dualism of audiences and publics lie 'ambiguous objects' (ibid: 17), befitting the 'fundamentally dual character' (McQuail, 1987: 215) of the audience.

These ambiguous objects reflect the constructed, overlapping and connected status of the 'imagined community' (Hartley, 2002: 189) addressed by public service broadcasting who are simultaneously constituted and interpellated as an 'audience-as-public' (Ang, 1991: 21)- the citizens, voters and taxpayers of a nationally-bound democratic polity; and the 'audience-as-market' (ibid) of media consumers, whether listeners, viewers or readers.

It is proposed here that the varying conceptions of public and audience immanent in public service broadcasting and the broader normative democratic horizons that animate them may be fruitfully explored through the theoretical and empirical analytic of *participation*. Whilst the idea of the participating citizen has become ubiquitous globally in recent decades, the 'polysemy of participation' (Dean, 2016: 2) has given rise to divergent rationales for its desirability, endorsed as readily by New Right challenges to the legitimacy of the bureaucratic post-war state as by leftist thought and new social movements influenced by the deliberative turn.

A cursory look at all three conceptions of publicness in Syvertson's (1999) scheme in terms of their participative affordances reveals a key continuity: the tendency to relegate publics to the status of 'silent partner' (Lowe, 2008: 11). This is the case whether viewed in Carpentier's (2011: 67-8) terms of participation *through* media ('the opportunities for mediated participation in public debate and for self-representation' or participation *in* media (participation in the production of media output and in organisational decision-making). Participatory regimes in public service broadcasters have long tended to evince a 'minimalist' (ibid: 69) character on both scores, in which participative processes (where they exist) tend to be restricted to mere access and interaction, remain under the tight control of media professionals, and conceived and deployed in ways that encourage instrumentalisation and de-politicisation of participative activities (ibid).

The origins of state intervention in broadcasting systems were rooted in part in the desires of states to protect their strategic interests, including avoiding the prospect of a new private radio broadcasting industry acquiring the same kind of influence as that enjoyed by newspapers (Honneth, 2014: 270). From the start, public service broadcasting was primarily concerned with transmission rather than communication (Bardoel and Lowe, 2007: 17) and publics were envisaged as service users rather than as participants.

Later, as public service broadcasters carved out an enhanced democratic role through the mediation of national political life, the obligations to the public enshrined in the 'social responsibility' (Nerone, 1995, McQuail, 1983: 90) model of the media in society did not extend to direct public involvement in governance or acceptance of a significant role in promoting or vindicating citizens' communication rights. With the public sphere imagined principally in terms of a 'support system for institutionalised politics' (Carpentier, 2011: 68), the core 'fourth estate' functions of 'gate-keeping, agenda-setting and acting as a watchdog' (Lowe, 2010: 12, Christians et al., 2009) under this rubric are seen as the preserve of

professional mediators of the public sphere, with public inclusion in mediated political communication mostly restricted to accredited representatives (Scannell, 1989: 163) and bearers of 'legitimated forms of public knowledge' (Curran, 2002: 211).

Nor has the increased attentiveness of public service broadcasters to the tastes and preferences of individual media consumers itself entailed a decisive shift in favour of public participation. Whilst the proliferation of new popular programme genres and formats like talk, 'reality' and 'lifestyle' shows linked to the ascent of individualism and consumerism deserve to be taken seriously as modern articulations of public service (Lunt, 2009) and have undoubtedly expanded the access of ordinary people to the means of mediated representation (Curran, 2002: 210), their overall participative impact is blunted by their tendency to be 'quarantined' (*ibid*) within limited programme categories.

Moreover, the democratising impact of any expansion of public service broadcasting's participative logics associated with the consumerist turn are arguably minor relative to the de-democratising effects of the increasing subjection of European PSB institutions to commercial logics following the loss of their monopoly positions. Competitive pressures have spurred the rise of what Beniger (1986) described as 'market feedback technologies', notably the ascendance of rationalised audience measurement tools and 'ratings discourse' (Ang, 1991: 84) as the dominant terms in which knowledge about PSB's audiences are discerned in the aggregate. Such data provides schedulers with 'objectifying and controlling knowledge which can be converted into an economic commodity' (Belanger, 1993) and whose collection now forms the pre-eminent basis of the relationships between a public broadcaster and its audience (Murray, 2011: 227).

The aversion to conceptualisations and operationalisations of publics that privilege their participation in the project of public service broadcasting is therefore not simply attributable to the technological constraints of the one-to-many communicative paradigm of analogue broadcasting (Lowe and Bardoel, 2007) but may be seen as constitutive of each phase of PSB as an evolving professional, administrative and institutional project. It is a continuity that may be attributed above all to its modest democratic-communicative aspirations. What Scannell (1989: 140) describes as the 'democratic thrust' of public service broadcasting upon its inception lay in the way that it opened access to 'virtually the whole spectrum of public life' to all, by 'placing political, religious, civic, cultural events and entertainments in a common domain' for the first time through establishing the 'right of the microphone' – and later the camera – to relay events to the public. This 'democracy as access' ideal continues to pervade the 'official canon' (Curran, 2002: 212) of PSB ideology today, in which 'access' remains principally defined in terms of the 'right to listen, rather than to be heard' and 'diversity' tending to be actualised as 'catering for different tastes rather than giving expression to different perspectives and cultures' (*ibid*).

Public participation at a time of media plenty and post-democracy

Today, as the original technological, regulatory and competitive justifications for public service broadcasting's existence have faded, the convergence of older and newer threats to

the social legitimacy (Lowe, 2010: 16) and future reproduction of public service broadcasting have increasingly focused critical attention on the adequacy and sustainability of its traditional regimes of inclusion and participation (Cammaerts and Carpentier, 2007, Jakubowicz, 2008).

Amid the globalisation of media markets and concerted lobbying of national and supranational authorities by opponents in the private media sector to arrest the evolution of public service broadcasting into the post-broadcast media age (Jakubowicz, 2007), public service media (PSM) organisations have fallen back on legitimisation strategies that emphasise their distinctiveness as public enterprises and their centrality to national democratic and cultural life (Syvertson, 1999: 7).

Yet, this task has been complicated on one hand by the broad failure to date of the PSB-to-PSM transition to embed radically new public participative opportunities commensurate with the technological affordances of the post-analogue era. In the context of the explosion of publics active in media (Lowe, 2009: 11), notably in online social networks which readily afford access to the means of 'mass self-communication' (Castells, 2009), the participative deficits of public media relative to many private counterparts in the internet age have grown wider. This is compounded by the increasing isomorphism of public media with private competitors in terms of 'style and ethos' (Steemers, 1999: 50) driven by the (often enforced) internalisation of commercial and competitive logics (Bardoel and d'Haenens, 2008: 340).

On the other hand, the democratic imaginary of public service broadcasting, forged in the political and economic contexts of post-war liberal democratic capitalism and on which its conceptions and operationalisations of publicness depend, must now contend with a series of contemporary pathologies in that order that threaten a central plank of its self-legitimation. A detailed account of this is well beyond the scope of this article, but a central dimension of this crisis lies in how the de-democratising tendencies of contemporary neoliberalised political and economic systems (Brown, 2006), entailing, *inter alia*, the increasing autonomy of capital from democratic control (Burns, 1999: 177, Gill, 1998, Streeck, 2014: 64) and the diminishing responsiveness of political systems from publics (Gearty, 2013) - have heralded a 'critical disjuncture' in representative democracy (Fenton and Titley (2015: 3). The loss of democratic agency (Gilbert, 2013) at both national and international levels have contributed to rising public disenchantment with the machinery of representative democratic systems (Streeck, 2011: 27, Mair, 2006: 25, Honneth, 2014: 325). The onset of 'post-democracy' (Crouch, 2000) places a strain on the credibility and relevance of public service broadcasting's foundational adherence to the 'established political mythology' (Burns, 1999: 180) of liberal democracy which underpins and delimits its model of pluralism and public participative capacities.

Such strains in the bases of legitimisation of public service broadcasting are not new. The studious distance maintained by public service broadcasters from their publics in terms of mediated representation and governance formed part of a broader critique of the democratic role of PSB institutions from the 1970s onwards. In the UK, cultural studies

pioneers like Stuart Hall and others inspired by neo-Marxist approaches, including the Glasgow University Media Group, collectively attacked the liberal pluralist conception of public service broadcasting as a 'neutral force in society' (Moe and Syvertson, 2009: 403) or as a 'disinterested source of information and balanced forum of public debate' (Curran, 2002: 109). They charged public service broadcasting with undue cultural elitism, aloofness from their broader publics, and colonisation by the dominant ideologies of commercial, political, professional and state power (see for example, Hall, 1977 and Garnham, 1978).

By the 1980s, the ascendance of twin threats to the future of public service broadcasting in the form of increasingly powerful commercial media interests, emboldened by the political elevation of the new right in Britain, prompted what Curran (2002: 124) describes as a 'headlong movement toward revalorizing public service broadcasting' on the part of some of its most prominent critics. These included Garnham (1986), Scannell (1989) and Curran (1991), who deployed a defence of public service broadcasting as an indispensable- if imperfect- venue of the democratic public sphere and bulwark against untrammelled communicative domination by commercial or state power (Lunt and Livingstone, 2013: 90). These defences, such as Garnham's (1986) view that public service broadcasting embodied a 'rational and universalistic politics' distinct from the market and state, reflected the increasing popularity of the Habermasian public sphere as a normative ideal against which actually existing media systems and institutions may be measured. Yet, reflecting changes in Habermas' own thinking beyond an initial emphasis on 'an ideal sovereign public based on a unitary public sphere creating social integration through consensus' (Lunt and Livingstone, 2013: 91) in favour of a recognition of the essentially 'contested nature of public life, the importance of recognition of diverse identities and the legitimacy of multiple forms and sites of deliberation' (ibid: 92), each identified the need for a renegotiation of the prevailing ideologies of pluralism and inclusion in public service broadcasting. So, despite Scannell's (1989: 164) view that PSB 'should be defended against its enemies', he called for the institution of 'more participatory forms of politics and broadcasting' that exceeded the representative logics of liberal pluralism, whilst Garnham (1986: 49-50) criticised an absence of professional and institutional accountability and advocated for an expansion and greater politicisation of the role of PSB institutions in providing a forum for public debate on the terms of participants themselves.

The unfinished nature of any such project of normative renewal of public service broadcasting in the face of today's radically pluralist societies is illustrated by Lowe (2010: 10) who, whilst pointing to some tentative developments in participatory practice in the areas of content development, collaborative production and off-air discursive fora, in an edited volume on civil society participation in European public service broadcasters notes that 'to date what people have been able to affect in PSB in most places and cases is largely confined to their role as audiences in traditional terms'.

Nor is it clear that public service broadcasters' general aversion to strong forms of public inclusion been meaningfully offset by public involvement in emerging external systems of accountability and regulation of the activities of PSB institutions. Blumler and

Hoffman-Riem (1992: 219) and Freedman (2015) have expressed pessimism about their efficacy and democratising capacities, arguing that their activities tend to be exclusionary, elite-driven and undertaken away from the public eye. Lunt and Livingstone's (2011) assessment of the capacity of British media regulation to articulate and uphold citizen interests in the British context suggests a more mixed picture, finding evidence of successes both in terms of its proactive solicitation of public opinion and subsequent deployment of regulatory power in favour of citizen interests, but also highlighting sharp limitations, including a tendency to unduly conflate consumer and citizen interests, the subjection of regulatory agencies to changing governmental priorities, and an apparently limited commitment to deliberative forms of engagement and transparency in decision-making. Hasebrink, Herzog and Eilders' (2007: 90) review of public involvement in media governance across Europe found a proliferation of initiatives and activities but concluded that overall, 'civil society actors do not play a substantial role in European media systems', attributed in part to the hegemony of a marketised, consumerist model of audiences and low public awareness of existing accountability systems and participative opportunities.

The crises of public service broadcasting: the Irish context

For a range of reasons, the Irish context of public service broadcasting represents a productive laboratory for exploring the evolution and adequacy of institutional participatory regimes in the context of these critical challenges to the authority and reproduction of the public service media project.

Reflecting Hallin and Mancini's (2004: 11) identification of Ireland as a broadly 'Liberal model' nation in their typology of national media systems, it is a country that retains a strongly institutionalised tradition of national public service broadcasting as part of a mixed economy of media. Both of its PSB institutions can be located within the 'professional model' (ibid: 52) of broadcast governance and regulation, entailing a 'formally autonomous' framework that is based on the 'separation of broadcasting both from the government and from parties and organised social forces' (Kelly, 1983: 166). The place in the democratic public sphere its institutions occupy is strongly influenced by a highly professionalised journalistic tradition which cleaves closely to the 'fourth estate' ideal of the media in democratic society (Chubb, 1984).

The larger and older of the two public service broadcasters and focus of this article's empirical analysis, the predominantly English-language Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) has its roots in the state radio station 2RN which began broadcasting in 1926. Partly motivated by the assumed need to 'create an integrating cultural force for the emergent state' (Golding and Elliot, 1979: 33), the new station, which remained under the direct ownership and day-to-day control of the Department of Posts and Telegraphs until 1953, was principally oriented toward supporting the state's policy of cultural nationalism. McLoone (1991: 15) described the nascent station as 'smothered under civil service control and expected to promote unquestioningly the dominant ethos of Catholic Ireland'.

Following a series of well-documented political and civil service debates about what form a state-supported television service should take and the 1960 establishment of the statutory Radio Éireann authority which would independently manage public broadcasting as a public trust, the eventual decision taken was to set up a public service broadcaster whose institutional structure, place in the state and programming ethos would broadly reflect that of its close neighbour, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (Horgan, 2001). The new Dublin-based national public service broadcaster, which began television broadcasts at the end of 1961, enjoyed significant levels of autonomy as an independent semi-state body established under statute. Its early years coinciding with the abandonment of isolationism as official state policy, the broadcaster has itself been described as a key 'part of the modernising process in Ireland' and even 'its primary source of mediation' (McLoone, 1991: 14). However, the limits of its newfound independence were frequently tested in its first decades. Murphy (2008: 67) describes RTÉ's identity as a public broadcaster as 'routinely under pressure for re-definition as a national broadcaster'. This is exemplified by the assertion in 1966 by the then Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Seán Lemass that the new television service was, despite its measure of institutional independence, nonetheless considered an 'instrument of public policy' (Horgan, 2001: 85). Whilst a gradual process of mutual acclimatisation and accommodation through experimentation and compromise led to the much more stable state-broadcaster relations that persist today, the state continues to retain and deploy a range of levers of formal and informal influence over the broadcaster's activities and development- not least of which pertain to its funding. A BBC-like licence fee was introduced upon RTÉ's inception, but the level of funding was subject to ongoing governmental control and only covered part of the costs of running the service. The decision to compel the broadcaster to supplement its income through advertising revenue imbued the organisation from the beginning with a commercial culture (MacConghail, 1984: 66), with the dual-funding regime exposing RTÉ, often highly consequentially, to the vagaries of fluctuating political and economic climates.

While it enjoyed a formal monopoly position until as late as 1989 when the Irish airwaves were liberalised, today RTÉ exists in an environment of media plenty- joined by commercial domestic radio and television in addition to the proliferation of multichannel cable and satellite television in the context of globalising media markets, with the subsequent advent of the internet age further multiplying the media options available to the Irish public.

By many measures, Irish public service broadcasting is weathering rather well the storm of competitive and technological change, retaining a position of prominence and prestige in the Irish public sphere whilst adapting to the new technological contexts of the post-analogue media environment. It has however been increasingly forced to enact increasingly drastic 'survival strategies' (Steemers, 1999: 50) in the face of pressures engendered by market deregulation, technological transformation and financial insecurity. This has included, for example, a gradual subjection to and internalisation of the orthodoxies of New Public Management, which as recounted by Murray (2011) has involved

the imposition of a quasi-commercial rationality on the organisation, shaping everything from organisational structure to schedule development and labour practices.

The onset and fallout of acute financial and economic crisis in Ireland in 2007 has crystallised the urgency of public service broadcasting's double crisis of solvency and legitimacy. Sharp declines in commercial revenue (PwC, 2013: 13) have already seen the implementation of swingeing cuts in staff and operating costs (Curran, 2014) and which may in the near term involve the closure of entire services (Linehan, 2017). Problems caused by the long-term recalcitrance of successive governments to increase the public subsidy to RTÉ to offset the funding gap left by the instability of its capacity to generate commercial income has now been deepened by contemporary democratic dislocations. Large-scale public opposition to the imposition of additional service charges as part of a suite of austerity measures in the wake of the economic collapse, notably the successful mass movement against water charges, has rendered it politically unfeasible in the short to medium term to secure parliamentary approval for changes to RTÉ's funding settlement that would increase the financial burden on households (Cullinane, 2017). In the context of high rates of license fee evasion (RTÉ, 2015: 9) and low levels of trust in media and political institutions alike (see for example O'Sullivan, Healy and Breen, 2014 and Suiter, 2015), the intractability of RTÉ's financial predicament illustrates the ready possibilities of overspill from the crises of representative democracy to those of public service media.

Participatory regimes in Irish public service broadcasting

Yet, while a full accounting of all the openings for public participation in the broadcaster is beyond the scope of this article (see Cullinane, 2016), Irish public service broadcasting's participatory regime has remained congruent with the 'minimalist' (Carpentier, 2011: 17) participatory tendencies of highly professionalised, formally autonomous PSB institutions on both Carpentier's overall dimensions of mediated self-representation and institutional participation. Despite the proliferation of digital platforms associated with the post-broadcast shift, regular opportunities for mediated participation have and continue to be restricted to the traditional formats of dedicated 'access' programming, mostly on radio, in which editorial control is retained by programme teams (see Doyle O'Neill, 2015 and O'Sullivan, 1997 for discussions).

It may be argued that participative opportunities in Irish public service broadcasting have been stagnant or even in decline for some time. The sole programming outlet focused on representing public opinion about the broadcaster itself was cancelled in the early 1990s after a fourteen-year run (A. Murphy, 2012), while rare experiments in collaborative programme production between RTÉ and communities (see for example, M. Murphy, 2012) have not taken root in the schedules. Elsewhere, public consultations organised by the broadcaster on specific areas of policy are infrequent, responses are strictly advisory and not published, and consequent policy development is undertaken wholly out of public view; and occasional regional public meetings convened to solicit public opinion on the broadcaster's performance (Corcoran, 2004: 42) have in general fallen into dormancy.

Rather, reflecting international trends discussed above, it is under the minimalist-participatory rubric of rationalised audience research that the viewing public, albeit reconceived as a ‘marketised aggregation of individual spectators’ (Lowe, 2010: 19), have come to exert their strongest influence on the broadcaster. RTÉ’s audience research activities are directed toward the functions of providing audience size and composition metrics critical to RTÉ’s commercial activities; underpinning modern scheduling practices (Murray, 2011); and playing a role in RTÉ’s self-legitimation in part through providing the broadcaster with data on how the public views the organisation (Fahy, 1992: 7).

Methodological and analytical approach

Notwithstanding the general stagnancy of participatory affordances of either a structural-institutional or mediated kind within Irish public service broadcasting, the relatively recent establishment of an ‘audience council’ within the governance structures of RTÉ represents a potentially significant structural-participative innovation. An initiative of this kind represents a particularly fruitful means of unearthing and examining the democratic-normative significance of the ‘ambiguous objects situated between public and audience’ (Livingstone, 2005: 17) as they are constituted through participatory practice and as they relate to administrative and professional power.

The remainder of this article comprises an empirical exploration of the Council’s development and activities, aiming to assess the extent to which the RTÉ Audience Council, as an experiment in participatory governance, represents a step change in Irish public service broadcasting’s conceptualisations and operationalisations of its publics. In particular, it seeks to establish the extent of the Council’s potential as a democratising force acting on and within the hierarchical and ‘control-oriented’ management practices associated with public service broadcasting companies (Lowe, 2010: 26), and relatedly, whether it represents a promising response to contemporary challenges of institutional legitimation.

To do this, it firstly explores in a brief fashion the establishment and evolution of its place and functions within the broadcaster’s governance structures, including its origins, institutional and legislative embedding. More substantially, it is accomplished through first-hand participant-observational accounts of the Council’s activities based on the author’s membership of the Council between September 2012 and December 2014, placing a focus not just on the Council’s programme of activities over that period but also on the Council’s internal governance and the character of its interactions with other parts of the organisation, the broader public, and government.

Four separate issues are explored, engaging with different aspects of the Council’s activities and efforts to assert a public voice within the organisation. These comprise the Council’s efforts to intervene in programme commissioning and production; to serve as a conduit of communication between public and public broadcaster; to bring to bear oversight and critique on RTÉ’s fulfilment of its public service objectives; and to reshape its own purpose and place within the broadcaster’s governance structures.

In order to generate overall conclusions to the research question, the findings are then assessed using an analytical framework that draws on a number of distinct but complementary approaches to evaluating participatory initiatives that address different aspects of the research aims. These comprise, firstly, Arnstein's (1969) influential and explicitly value-laden 'ladder of citizen participation' which focuses on assessing the extents to which participative structures represent venues for the exertion of meaningful civic power. Cognisant of the Audience Council's status as a venue of participatory governance, relevant literature exploring the varying rationales for and conditions of success of participatory innovations is used to appraise the Council's overall democratic character. In particular, this involves the utilisation of Dean's (2016: 4) theoretically-informed set of participative archetypes which aim to connect features of 'participatory practices to the broader constructions of participation from which they draw their meaning', including the underlying ideas of state functions and the role of citizens in democracy (ibid: 14).

Case study: RTÉ Audience Council

Council structure, purpose and constitution

The first incarnation of the RTÉ Audience Council was established voluntarily by the broadcaster in 2004 (Shaw, 2005) as part of a range of 'accountability and transparency measures' (DCMNR, 2002: 12-13) which were linked to RTÉ's successful application for a license fee increase in 2002. Its inauguration was justified by RTÉ in terms of the need to 'facilitate communication, and to enhance accountability' between broadcaster and audience (RTÉ, 2007).

Its place in the organisation and extent of its power was originally outlined in the broadcaster's 2002 Annual Report by then chairman Patrick J Wright who said that the new Audience Council initiative would not occupy an independent position in the RTÉ governance structures but that it would be an 'advisory subcommittee' of the broadcaster's governing authority, the RTÉ Board (then the RTÉ Authority) (RTÉ, 2003a: 3).

It was set up with an initial term of four years and comprising 22 members plus an RTÉ-supplied secretary. The group's membership was split between 'representatives of the major social partners and interest groups, as well as viewers and listeners from throughout the island of Ireland' (RTÉ, 2004: 3) and a member of the RTÉ Authority. A chairperson would be selected by Council members annually from within their number. The selection of the 'representative members' were invitees from nominated organisations that comprised the 'social partners' of Irish corporatism, including business and farming groups, trade unions, community and voluntary organisations, as well as invitees from a range of other (mainly state) bodies. The 'individual members' were selected on the basis of applications from the public solicited via advertisements on RTÉ platforms and publications and chosen with a view to attaining a geographic spread (RTÉ, 2003b).

The main business of the Council was to discuss matters pertaining to the 'public interest tests' (RTÉ, 2007) set by RTÉ for itself, which include, *inter alia*, 'fairness', 'accuracy',

‘independence from vested interests and freedom from political control or influence’ and a variety of stipulations on programming around thematic, regional, demographic and cultural diversity. RTÉ management were identified as the principle focus of the Council’s interactions (ibid), making clear that interactive engagement with the broader public was not envisaged as central to the Council’s remit.

Following its dissolution at the end of 2009, new broadcasting legislation (Government of Ireland, 2009: s.96) put the Audience Council on a statutory footing, and a new Council took its place in July 2010. The legislation identified the Council’s ‘principal function’ in the rather more open-ended terms as being ‘to represent to the board of its corporation the views and interests of the general public with regard to public service broadcasting by the corporation’ (s.96: 10). To enable this, the Act contained specific provisions allowing the Council to hold public meetings, survey younger and older people on their views of RTÉ, and also empowered the Council to require RTÉ to broadcast an hour of televisual and radio programming every year at a time agreed by both parties. In crucial structural and functional aspects, the legislative provisions relating to the Council reproduced that of its original instantiation, including the retention of RTÉ control over appointments and a reserved seat for a nominated member of the RTÉ Board. The tradition of reporting upwards was also continued through requirements for an annual report to both the relevant Minister and the Board of RTÉ.

In two respects, however, the autonomy and diversity of the Council deteriorated significantly. Under the new legislation, the Council itself would no longer annually appoint a Chair from within its own number but the Board would appoint one to it. And with RTÉ free to undertake appointments any way they wished, members were this time selected on a more ad hoc basis, with many- including the author- appointed on the basis of personal connections with Board members and RTÉ management. In my case, this arose from contacts made during an extended period of on-site presence on the RTÉ campus during which I was undertaking primary research elsewhere in the organisation for the purposes of my broader doctoral research.

When in September 2012 I first took my seat at the enormous table in a top-floor room of the RTÉ administration building adjacent to the Boardroom, I sat not only with the other handpicked ordinary members but also an RTÉ-appointed Chair, secretary, a member of the RTÉ Board and an additional Board secretary. Overwhelmingly middle-class, professional, urban, and white, RTE’s selection of public representatives immediately struck me as far from representative of the viewing and listening public. It also quickly became clear that despite its legislatively-mandated ability to write its own operating rules and a mode of decision-making in which each member had a nominally equal share of power, the Council had at an early stage adopted a set of standing orders (RTÉ Audience Council 2011) and a series of informal practices that together embedded a conservative, hierarchal orientation that ensured the group would be subject to significant measures of top-down control.

Confidentiality was established as the default status of nearly all Audience Council documentation save for the meeting ‘communiqués’ which were written by the secretary, often in collaboration with the Chairperson. Although these were eventually made publicly available online, their content betrayed little of the substance of meetings beyond formal decisions. More detailed minutes were not kept. The rules, although not granting general decision-making powers to the Chair, nevertheless vested in that role various ancillary powers, including those of determining the agenda, venue and duration of meetings, as well as the ability, along with the secretary, to speak publicly for the Council (ibid).

Conversations with colleagues and a review of internally-circulated documentation obtained prior to my appointment suggests that following an extended period of sensitisation to the work of various arms of broadcaster through addresses by senior executives, the Council had begun to advance and progress some practical proposals which would give effect to its core legislative duties. Some of these – which included the proposal of a media-themed radio programme and a public event – were beginning to come to fruition by the time I joined the group.

‘The Media Show’ and the limits of participation

When I joined the Council, the group was reflecting on what on appeared to be a significant achievement: the successful progression of a proposal for a media-themed radio series into an 8-part run transmitted earlier that year. This had been pursued by the Council in line with its legislative allotment of annual TV and radio broadcasting time, although the duration of the series was far in excess of the single hour mandated by legislation.

The original proposal had called for the series to deal with a broad range of media-related topics – including issues of media and democracy and the political-economic implications of media systems – in a format that facilitated direct dialogue between programme makers and listeners. It also explicitly noted the desirability of broadcasting the programme in a prominent slot that would help with attracting a significant audience.

Beyond the initial pitch however, no Council input was sought when it came to developing the series concept, the content of individual programmes, or the transmission time. The series that transpired bore little relation to the original proposal. Production of *The Media Show* was outsourced to an independent production company and transmitted on the main RTÉ Radio 1 station in a ‘graveyard’ Saturday evening slot.

Thematically, the series emphasised the emergence of new forms of media and how existing media organisations were adapting to new digital technologies and competitive environments – a focus reflected in the selection of interviewees, who were largely drawn from senior figures from RTÉ, its competitors and regulators. The idea of public involvement in the programme was retained, albeit via the restricted, non-dialogic form of a series of brief ‘radio essays’ contributed by listeners.

The Council were not involved in subsequently assessing the success or otherwise of the series or shaping future plans. Members were informed that while the programme ratings were poor even for its slot, station management had adjudged the programme at

least a partial success on the basis that it had generated a healthy amount of newspaper column inches based on the programme's headline-grabbing interviews with media insiders. This reflected a criterion of success indicative of a very different set of priorities from those motivating the original proposal.

Although disappointed at the poor scheduling and RTÉ's failure to consult with the Council, members expressed little interest in seeking to shape future series, a reticence reinforced by the Chair who argued against the Council seeking involvement on the basis of it being an undue encroachment on journalistic autonomy. This was reinforced by visiting RTÉ executives who drew a clear line in the sand about where our role ended and professional autonomy began, cautioning against the expectation of receiving detailed responses by programme-makers to any ideas we may have.

The Media Show was renewed in 2013 and 2015 for a second and third series, occupying similar, marginalised, weekend evening timeslots and again tending to focus on industry-centric themes. A sustained ambiguity over the extent of the Audience Council's entitlement to seek to shape the planning and content of the series was maintained, and contributed to an inertia that saw the Council make no firm proposals for additional radio programming or any television programming over the remainder of its term, in spite of its legislative mandate.

Opening the floor up to the public

Again guided by explicit legislative provision, the Council pursued the organisation of two public events in 2013 and 2014. The groundwork for the first event had already been laid prior to my appointment. A Council communiqué (RTÉ Audience Council, 2012) outlined initial plans for a 'public expert conference' on the topic of public service broadcasting involving a 'lecture/seminar' format. This proposal was made in direct response to the recommendation of an RTÉ-commissioned investigation into a recent controversy involving the libelling of Catholic priest Fr. Kevin Reynolds that RTÉ convene a public conference on investigative journalism (RTÉ, 2011: 8).

With planning in the early stages, I was concerned that the proposed lecture format would undercut the possibilities of dialogic participation by members of the public. I advocated instead for the event to be designed around participatory formats, to allow for attendees to generate discussion themes, and for an accessible venue to be selected to host the event. Colleagues responded negatively to these suggestions, urging 'realism' and expressing the view that strongly participative formats were difficult to organise.

In any event, most of the decisions around the event were taken out of the hands of Council members altogether. A keynote speaker, the President and CEO of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in the United States was selected and arranged without Council discussion. Discussions around format, location and theme were cut short by advice from RTÉ staff present to leave these matters to the 'pros' of RTÉ's communications apparatus.

The event's title ('Public Service Broadcasting: Innovating for the Needs of Tomorrow's Audiences') the selection of the venue (a lecture hall in a university a stone's

throw from RTÉ's campus in the heart of South Dublin) and the approach to event promotion were all decided by RTÉ Corporate Communications with no input solicited from the Audience Council. Each of these decisions served to restrict the accessibility and appeal of the event in the manner I had feared. It was made clear to members that the appearance of the PBS president was the main draw, and securing media interviews for the star speaker was identified as the corporate priority. Following my objections to the constrained lecture format, it was agreed, however, to append a panel discussion involving invited guests to the event. A modest audience attended on the night, including a significant number of figures from senior RTÉ management who politely listened to an hour-long address (RTÉ, 2013a) on the American experience of public broadcasting, followed by a brief but relatively energetic questions and answers session with the panel.

Following this, the event's Chair, the then Press Ombudsman John Horgan closed proceedings with the criticism that there was 'a touch of the 19th century' about the event's organisation and that the Audience Council should look to institute communication mechanisms that stretch 'participatory activity almost but not quite to the point of anarchy' (RTÉ, 2013b). Council members were unmoved by Horgan's criticism however, and despite my renewed efforts a year later to advocate a more open and participative format for the next public event, opposition from other Council members again cohered around concern that more open formats risked the dominance of 'malcontents' and 'activists' at such an event.

Nonetheless, the second event in early 2014 which focused on the topic of migrant representation and participation within RTÉ made some concessions to a more participative format. In an effort to reduce the formality of the previous occasion, there would be no lecture, and the whole event would comprise a discussion built around audience involvement, billed as a 'public conversation'. The participatory ambition was limited, however: proceedings would still be largely focused around a panel of invited speakers, including two from RTÉ itself, and the venue chosen- on the basis of expediency- was the RTÉ Radio Centre on the broadcaster's campus.

The more austere approach of the previous year's event had been lightened somewhat in favour of more frank and critical exchanges during the second half of the event when contributions were solicited from the floor. However, a subsequent Audience Council meeting discussion following the event revealed that this very dimension had perturbed a number of members. Several felt that poor moderation of the event meant that RTÉ staff on the panel had unfairly become a lightning rod for criticism by audience contributors. One member expressed a desire for the Audience Council to publicly distance itself from some of the more critical commentary directed at RTÉ simply because they did not agree with the critique. Others argued that the video of the event should not be published online because of what one described as the 'grandstanding' tone of some of the audience contributions.

The censorious mindset amongst a minority of the Council's membership suggested an ambivalence about the desirability of the Council facilitating any kind of discursive spaces for publics to engage on topics relating to Irish public service broadcasting.

Climate change and the diminution of public voices

Another instance which reflected the Council's reticence to either immerse itself in bottom-up public engagements or to seek to meaningfully effect an oversight role on programme output- as well demonstrating RTÉ's institutional discouragement of the latter- came in the form of a series of interventions to attenuate a project undertaken by two Council members (including the author) in exploring RTÉ's performance and responsibilities in its reporting and programming on the issue of climate change.

The project, one of several agreed and to be pursued by separate working groups within the Council, was planned to involve both a review of RTÉ's news and current affairs coverage of climate change and a process of engagement with RTÉ decision-makers and external groups and individuals on how communication of climate change and related issues may be improved.

The first component of the project entailed a small-scale quantitative and qualitative analysis of climate change coverage of RTÉ News platforms over a period of several years. This was undertaken and completed as planned. The second component was envisaged by the project subcommittee to involve dialogue between editorial figures in RTÉ and a combination of interested members of the public and experts on various dimensions of climate change. This proposal was vetoed by Council members. The familiar justification of logistical challenges was offered, alongside the view that seeking to convene and mediate dialogue between RTÉ editorial staff, programme-makers and expert and lay members of the public would be met with resistance elsewhere in the organisation and should therefore be abandoned.

In order to secure the support of the Council, the project subcommittee agreed to instead carry out an online survey, the results of which would be relayed to relevant personnel in RTÉ, including the RTÉ Board. Potential respondents were contacted, comprising a targeted sample of individuals and groups outside RTÉ with interest and/or expertise in climate change issues and complemented by a snowball approach to expanding the sample. They were asked a series of open-ended questions on their views on RTÉ's communication of climate change issues and their suggestions as to how coverage may be improved in the future. Almost one hundred survey responses, many of them quite detailed, were received to the dedicated email account set up by the project subcommittee, and included submissions from non-profits, climate scientists, activists, academics, political groups, and businesspeople. Concerns were immediately raised by several Council members that because some of the responses made criticisms of named RTÉ staff, questions of potential libel arose and that we should refrain from seeking to distribute the survey responses and instead supply the RTÉ Board with brief synopses of the survey responses in aggregate.

Having worked to gather and collate detailed survey responses, I was keen to secure agreement to distribute them in full to the Board. With the Council having agreed to consider the issue of the legality of their internal distribution, I sought to enlist the help of relevant departments within RTÉ to ascertain what if any changes might be necessary. These

efforts were met with opposition from the Chair on the basis that seeking to share survey responses with RTÉ was unnecessary and even counterproductive. Subsequently, the broadcaster's Audience Research unit and legal department both refused to offer assistance, in the latter's case justifying this on the basis that working with the Audience Council did not come under their remit.

In a final effort to secure agreement, the project subcommittee manually anonymised all criticisms of named individuals. However, the rationale for the Council's desire to withhold the survey responses from the Board shifted again, this time taking the position that survey responses should be excised simply because Board members would be unlikely to read them. When reminded that a commitment had been initially made to survey respondents that their views would be collated and sent to the Board, a proposal was made that responses would not be automatically sent to the Board but that they and other senior executives may request access to them. I called a vote to take place on the matter- the first time a vote had ever been used to resolve a disagreement during my tenure- in which I was the sole vote in favour of internal distribution of the survey responses. The holding of a vote was initially obscured by omission from the draft meeting minutes and only reluctantly rectified following repeated objection.

Following the submission of the Council's series of project reports, the institutional response was belated and delivered only in verbal form. This was partly attributable to Council acceptance of the Chair's proposal that formal, written responses to the projects by the Board would not be sought- again, in the ostensible interests of maintaining 'good relations' between Board and Council. Feedback, when it came in the second half of 2014, emphasised the sensitising function of the reports for RTÉ personnel rather than accepting or committing to act on any particular findings or recommendations. On the specific matter of the (abbreviated) climate change report, the Council was informed on one occasion that because editorial units in RTÉ operate 'independently', no cross-organisational approach could be taken to modify how climate change was covered by the broadcaster.

The reports' distribution would be further limited by the refusal of an explicit request to allow the Council to publish any of the reports on its website. It was disclosed to the Council by somebody familiar with the Board's thinking that that the very idea of the Council seeking to make its work publicly available had the effect of making the Board 'nervous'.

No request to view the unabridged survey responses was ever received by the project subcommittee, meaning that the views of those members of the public who had made submissions were never institutionally accessed- a vindication, in a way, of the Council members who had doubted the interest of RTÉ personnel in reading public survey responses.

Preserving power: democratisation foreclosed

Throughout my tenure on the Audience Council, it was apparent to me that there existed an uncertainty amongst many ordinary members about the group's status within the

organisation, what our core functions were and how they should be discharged, and even the representative legitimacy of members. These doubts tended to encourage a dynamic of uncertainty and purposelessness which dissuaded members from having the courage to see themselves as having the *locus standi* to assert a 'public' rather than merely private voice around the committee table. This paralysis manifested itself in lack of assertiveness in its dealings with other arms of the organisation and in a sustained lack of participation on the part of some members, leading to high levels of absenteeism and ultimately to a high turnover of Council membership.

If ordinary members were frequently doubtful about what the Council was for or why they were on it, these doubts did not appear to be shared by both chairpersons who served during my tenure. The first Chair supplied a straightforward answer to both these questions, arguing that by virtue of being selected to represent the public by RTÉ, our job did not necessitate ongoing communication with that public, and that as the public's legitimate representatives in RTÉ, our attention should instead be inexorably drawn to the Board, with whom we would engage in an advisory capacity.

This interpretation was bolstered by various signs, big and small, that a tightly-controlled and upward-looking Audience Council was preferable. These included the experiences of having *The Media Show* and the organisation of the first public event in particular taken largely out of the Council's hands; the lack of access to the Council's publicly-listed email account or any notification of receipt of incoming messages to same; the lack of any defined budget for activities; the low number of scheduled meetings per year; the rather secretive nature of Council meetings; and the selection by RTÉ of a Chair that tended to exert *de facto* executive authority and in a manner that in general accepted and legitimated the narrow operating parameters of Council activity.

Seeking to challenge this highly restrictive vision of the Council, over a series of meetings in early 2013, I proposed that we turn our focus towards developing permanent means to convene an externally-facilitated meeting to assist members in agreeing a path of two-way communication with the public, as well as democratising the means by which decisions are taken internally and the process by which new Council members are appointed. The unexpected resignation of the incumbent Chair not long after provided an unexpected opportunity to seriously consider such an agenda. Agreement was reached for the Council forward for the Council for the remainder of the term of the current membership, and to seek inclusion in the process of selecting a new chairperson. Members were informed that the Council would also be granted a small operating budget, albeit with the caveat that the money would be made available for 'appropriate projects', signalling that it would not be under our control. The first sign that any prospective process of self-examination and perhaps a measure of democratisation may not get off the ground came with the news that a new Chairperson had been appointed by the Board without any consultation of Council members.

The identity of the new Chair- a public relations professional, senior employee of a prestigious research institution, and an occasional presenter and contributor to RTÉ

programmes- seemed congruent with the approach of deploying an ‘authoritative’ individual who would guide the Council’s development in a manner amenable to the Board’s vision. The new Chair’s first action, an effort to veto the agreed panel for the forthcoming (first) public event, although successfully resisted by other members, suggested the likelihood of a swift return to an executive style of governance.

The organisation, processes and outcomes of the facilitated meeting, when it took place after the Council’s summer recess in 2013, were a disappointment from the point of view of progressing the broader issues which had precipitated its convening. The first half of the meeting involved a relatively robust discussion of a broad range of matters, both systemic and otherwise. However, with time running out, and Council members still outlining their views on the Council’s functions and operations, the Chair made a strong intervention to the effect that a concrete work plan needed to be agreed there and then. It was made clear that the proposed plan of activities would be undertaken at the expense of both discussing and progressing proposals for change around the Council’s role and decision-making processes.

The Chair’s position that the Council would wait until the end of its term, after having accrued ‘credibility’ with the Board before seeking structural changes was one that was never formally adopted. However, aided by the absence of a clear decision rule clarifying the criteria for agreements, and the tendency for Council members to passively acquiesce to the authority of the Chair, it proved impossible to challenge what the Chairman had deemed an emergent ‘consensus’ around the plan. The Chair’s control of agenda items was subsequently used on several occasions to prevent discussions on structural matters and on clarifying the Council’s decision-making procedures.

Other unilateral efforts to control the flow of Council communications further undercut the possibilities of change. For example, an effort by the Chair- quickly dropped- was made to end the practice of open email communication between Council members including the Chair. Given that several months would generally elapse between meetings, this would have further curtailed the already minimal communication and work undertaken between meetings. The tendency to undertake executive action was later underlined by the Chair’s tight control over the legislatively-mandated annual report of the Council to the relevant government minister in 2014, which was drafted without the Council’s knowledge or participation rather than through a collaborative process.

Finally, the process and outcome of the Council’s last-minute deliberations on its own procedures and structure, when they did occur, were also shaped by the exertion of executive activity. Despite having no formal power to do so, the Chair named another Council member with no prior discernible interest in the matter to lead a subcommittee charged with making recommendations on internal reform. I initially joined this subcommittee but shortly resigned having encountered a clear aversion amongst members to pursuing a democratising agenda.

The recommendations document that eventually emerged from that subcommittee’s work focused almost exclusively on formalising, codifying and copper-

fastening the existing subordinate status of the Council's relationship with the Board. Each of the document's four recommendations called on RTÉ to devise new protocols and arrangements for governing the Council. The one substantive recommendation of its own called for an open public competition for Audience Council appointments and rolling appointments to ensure a balance between change and continuity of membership. Its overall orientation toward legitimising pre-existing power relations and reluctance to assert the desirability of Audience Council participation in defining its own future reflected the document's conservative and deferential conclusion to the Audience Council's term of office.

No formal response to the document was made by RTÉ, but its sole substantive recommendation was entirely ignored: the Board allowed the Audience Council to fall into abeyance for half a year following the dissolution of our group at the end of our term at the end of 2014. Eventually, a new Council was appointed, once again headed by a public relations professional with prior ties to the broadcaster, and without any continuity with the previous Council membership.

The RTÉ Audience Council: a participative assessment

Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of citizen participation' focuses on the degree of power-sharing by administrative and professional elites as the key criterion for locating participatory mechanisms on rungs within the broader categories of 'non-participation', 'tokenism' and 'citizen power'. Different aspects of the Audience Council's participative affordances and constraints may be located within these three categories.

The foot of the ladder represents for Arnstein 'illusory' (ibid: 218) modes of participation. 'Non-participation', characterised by outright 'manipulation' or more subtle forms of 'therapy' is motivated by a desire on the part of power-holders to engineer consent by creating a 'public relations vehicle' (ibid) that has, for the benefit of participants and critical onlookers alike, the appearance of participation but without the substance which might threaten existing power relations.

These instrumental orientations may be identified in, for example, the apparent central motivation for the Council's original establishment as merely leverage to secure a license fee increase for the broadcaster. Annual and corporate responsibility reports (e.g. RTÉ, 2006: 12) have subsequently cited the Council as evidence of RTÉ's ongoing attentiveness to the public.

In addition, the extent to which Council members were exposed and sensitised to the perspectives and advice of institutional elites who routinely attended and addressed meetings since the Council's original inception (RTÉ, 2005: 9) reveals a 'therapeutic' function of the Council's participatory practice. Much of the time during my tenure, it was 'the officials who educated, persuaded, and advised the citizens, not the reverse' (Arnstein, 1969: 218).

Evidence of the success of manipulative and therapeutic interventions may be seen both in the Council's ultimate failure to propose democratising reforms and in the desire on

the part of some members for RTÉ to more fully instrumentalise the Council as a ‘focus group’.

Arnstein’s category of ‘tokenism’ (ibid: 217) at the centre of the ladder incorporates a range of activities- ‘informing’, ‘consultation’ and ‘placation’- that have as their defining characteristic the possibility of engagement with power-holders, but without the ‘muscle’ (ibid) to follow through with change.

A great deal of the experience of the Audience Council fits into this middle tier. RTÉ’s sharing of confidential internal information and a habit of merely informing the Council of decisions taken on its behalf represent notable examples of a tendency to inform rather than to involve. Similarly, the lecture format design of the first public event envisaged a one-way ‘informing’ flow of communication. In both events, the opportunities for public questions did not amount to meaningful ‘consultation’ (ibid: 219) simply because participants could not know if their contributions would be taken into account or not- they can be said to have merely ‘participated in participation’ (ibid).

Repeated failures to consult the Council were observed both on matters pertaining directly to its internal functioning as well as on broader organisational matters, including various statutory policymaking requirements which presented clear opportunities to solicit Council input. ‘Placation’ (ibid: 220) was occasionally deployed, notably in the commissioning of *The Media Show* and the belated decision to grant the Council a budget, but in both cases the limits of the Council’s influence quickly became apparent. Elsewhere, the accoutrements of status and influence, including the efficient reimbursement of travel expenses, secretarial support, separate annual meetings with the Board and Director General breakfast at a local five-star luxury hotel illustrate placatory functions of a different kind.

The category of ‘citizen power’ encompasses scenarios where the ‘decision-making clout’ (ibid: 217) of citizens is far more substantive. At the lower level of this part of the ladder, ‘partnership’, citizens ‘negotiate and engage in trade-offs’ (ibid) with power holders. At the top of the ladder, the levels of ‘delegated power’ and ‘citizen control’ denote situations where the distinction between ‘citizens’ and ‘powerholders’ (ibid) has blurred to the point that the citizens have become powerholders in their own right, and can assert decision-making authority in relation to substantive issues including the very structures in which they participate.

Owing to its *de facto* status as an advisory group subordinate to the Board, the Audience Council’s main means of exerting measures of ‘citizen power’ were restricted to a handful of specific legislative mandates noted above. However, the character of these mandates- including the ability to require RTÉ to undertake surveys with specific demographic groups, to require RTÉ to broadcast two hours of televisual and radio output annually, and to organise public events- conform to lower categories on the participative ladder, and whose discharge were in any event profoundly delimited- as described in detail above- by the cumulative effects of the manipulative and therapeutic tendencies described above and the Council’s overall subordinate status.

Overall, the participative qualities of the Audience Council reflect the dominance of a combination of the non-participative and tokenistic levels in Arnstein's typology.

Aiming to bring greater clarity to the ideological underpinnings of participatory structures, Dean's (2016) typology proposes four ideal types which order participative mechanisms on the intersecting axes of *negotiability* and *sociality*. The dimension of *negotiability* resonates with Arnstein's focus, at the upper end of her typology, on the extent to which participants can exert control over the conditions of their participation. For Dean, 'prescribed' participatory spaces, in contradistinction to 'negotiated' ones, are characterised by the retention of external control over key matters like who participates and about what (ibid: 5).

The sharp restrictions on Council agency detailed above suggest that it may be located comfortably on the 'prescribed' end of this axis. This is further justified and illustrated by the Council's lack of control or even influence over its own composition, with appointments of ordinary members, Chairs, and institutional support kept entirely out of its hands. Similarly, as per the relevant legislation governing the Council's constitution and operations, RTÉ retained the right to terminate at any time and for any reason the membership of any member. The negotiability of Audience Council activities was somewhat more open-ended, illustrated by its broad (albeit vague) general legislative remit and discretion over its own operating rules. However, as demonstrated, these freedoms were frequently attenuated by various forms of institutional steering from both within and without the Council and rendered inefficacious by the broader context of power relations in which the Council was embedded.

Dean's other dimension of *sociality* (ibid: 4-5) pertains to the manner in which participants engage with each other, particularly in relation to the definition of individual and collective ends. He distinguishes here between 'agonistic' participatory spaces, which recognise and foreground interest and value conflicts, and 'solidaristic' spaces, which stress the shared community membership of participants and conceive of participation as geared toward the realisation of shared and mutually-agreed ends.

Evidence of the Audience Council's construction as a formally solidaristic participatory space may be seen both in the practices of its members as well as in aspects of its legislative and institutional constitution. The Audience Council's composition can be seen as itself encouraging a solidaristic ethos. This is evident in the manner in which the Council membership skewed heavily toward white, middle-class Dublin-based professionals, some of whom were appointed on the basis of personal ties to senior RTÉ staff. This contrasts significantly with the previous non-statutory incarnation of the Council which explicitly incorporated organised social interests within the Council's ranks along similar representational lines to the neocorporatist structures of Irish social partnership.

The specification of consensual decision-making as the Council's standard operating practice in its Standing Orders (RTÉ Audience Council, 2011) is also suggestive of such an orientation, as is the absence of any reference to a decision rule in case of an inability to reach consensus. Council members' willingness to adhere to this was amply reflected in the fact

that just a single formal vote was taken during the author's tenure (and at his instigation). Specific provisions that mandate only decisions as eligible for publication in communiqués, and that Council members' names would not be recorded in them, implies an institutional preference for any contention within the Council to remain obscured from public view. Similarly, the negative responses to the author's efforts to prise open a space for more agonistic or potentially agonistic modes of engagement within the Council, in its intra-organisational relationships and through its public engagements were illustrative of the extent to which the Council wished to avoid and if necessary exclude even mild contention from every aspect of its activities.

The solidaristic aspects of the Council's mode of sociality appeared to be rooted far more in a collective aversion to internal or external contention than any substantive commitment to a set of shared overall goals, which did not crystallise over the period of the Council's term. This was partly due to a decisive intervention to foreclose internal discussion what those goals might be and the rapid agreement of a work plan that papered over the underlying ambiguities of the Council's functions and aims, including those around the representative status of members and the appropriate functions of members, Chairpersons and institutional support.

The statutory Audience Council's general conformity with the 'prescribed' and 'solidaristic' axes of Dean's dimensions of participatory spaces position it within the ambit of his overall 'knowledge transfer' (2016: 5) archetype of participation. This is a construction of participation that conceives of participatory spaces as 'opportunities for the public to transfer knowledge to public-spirited, expert decision-makers' (ibid). Participatory spaces of this kind allow for the ascertainment of public will and values and the gathering of 'experiential knowledge' (ibid: 6) that can increase the efficacy of policymaking for the 'common good' by decision-makers who set and control the conditions of participation and orient members towards the same shared goals.

Dean (ibid) associates this conception of participation with 'hierarchist' (Hood, 1998) approaches to government and public management which legitimates role stratification between the governors and the governed based on the Weberian concept of rational-legal authority, which as noted by Hallin and Mancini (2004: 246) 'specifically underpins the professional model of broadcast governance and regulation'.

Participation in this model is seen as *functional* for hierarchical systems of governance and administration rather than instituted in the service of, for example, realising communication rights or projects of organisational democratisation. Above all, it is in the clear construction of the Audience Council as a strictly advisory group to the RTÉ Board (RTÉ, 2007) that reflects an instrumental conception of participation as knowledge transfer.

This is illustrated by the original rationale proffered by RTÉ for the Council which outlined the perceived necessity of communication between broadcaster and audience in the co-ordinative terms of ensuring the 'ongoing development of a truly relevant service' (ibid). This sentiment was reiterated as recently as the broadcaster's 2015 annual report in which it is noted by the Board's Chair that internal policymaking would only be successful if

it was informed by ‘an acute understanding of the views and needs of the RTÉ audience’ (RTÉ, 2016: 4), pointing toward the Audience Council as a formal means through which such ‘listening’ (ibid) is channelled.

It was further evident in the Board’s close control over Council activities, illustrated by its subordinate position in the institutional governance structure; the manner in which the Board directed the Council’s gaze upward to it rather than inward to elsewhere in the organisation or outward to a broader public; and the regular reminders made by visiting senior personnel that our contributions were principally valued for their sensitising function for the benefit of decision-makers in the organisation. The extent to which even modest efforts to assert a role for the Council beyond a solely advisory function for the benefit of institutional elites were discouraged or blocked outright may be seen as reflective of the strength of a normative framework of public management that legitimised and policed the role stratification of the existing institutional hierarchy.

As described in the accounts above, this policing was exercised both within and without the Council, finding expression in the notionally consensus-driven decision-making process which masked strong measures of subtle and more explicit top-down steering; the executive styles of successive Chairs who traded on their authority in a manner which tended to reinforce status differentials and a restricted vision of Council autonomy and participative practice; and which was, when necessary, supplemented by more explicit interventions by the Board.

Even if assessed within the restricted participative ambition of the knowledge transfer model, the Council can be seen as evincing low levels of efficacy, owing to a demonstrably limited institutional commitment to even soliciting the experiential knowledge of Council members, let alone acting upon it. This was exemplified by the tendency for the knowledge transfer relationship to often proceed from professional and administrative elites to Council members rather than *vice versa*; the institutional failure to access the Council’s full report containing the public survey responses on climate change programming; and the decision to prevent any transfer of experience and memory to the next Audience Council cohort following its disbandment at the end of its term.

For similar reasons, the Council was similarly unable to fulfil its manifest purpose of enhancing accountability between the broadcaster and public (RTÉ, 2007), whether considered in Goetz and Jenkins’ (2005, cited in McGee and Gaventia, 2011: 11) terms of answerability (the ‘responsibility of duty bearers to provide information and justification about their actions’) or enforceability (‘the possibilities of penalties or consequences for failing to answer accountability claims’).

None of these actions or omissions suggest that the prescribed and solidaristic dimensions of the Council were constructed in the service of enhancing participative efficacy. Rather, they appear indicative of a strong desire to enculturate the Council into a pliant orientation towards existing institutional practices, mores and hierarchies and to prevent it from maturing into an autonomous or semi-autonomous source of civic power within the organisation. This resonates with Dean’s observation that public participation is

‘not necessarily in opposition to hierarchy and institutional power’ (Dean, 2016: 14) but may be organised in service of it.

Important conditions of effectiveness in participatory governance are not met in the case of the Audience Council. This is evident in the lack of congruence with key elements of institutional design principles and ‘supply-side’ (McGee and Gaventa, 2011: 21) capacities associated with effective participative spaces. These include, *inter alia*, the institution of inclusive and open programme designs that encourage broad participation; deliberate efforts to engage non-elite participants; the provision of training and technical support to assist participants to contribute fully; the willingness of authorities to relinquish some decision-making power to participants; the bureaucratic competence to organise and facilitate participative spaces; and the financial resources to establish them and support the decisions and projects that emerge from them (Altschuler and Corrales, 2013, Speer, 2012: 2384).

The Audience Council thus exemplifies what Warren (2009: 9) describes as the ‘anti-democratic dangers’ of ‘governance-driven democratisation’ initiatives where participation is substantially or entirely subject to elite discretion, succumbing here to restrictive constituency definition and agenda-setting practices which reflect the priorities and biases of institutional elites and consequently delimit the representational capacities and transformative possibilities of public participation. These characteristics render the Audience Council congruent both with the minimalist participatory qualities of other avenues of public inclusion in the broadcaster and the limitations in democratic qualities and efficacy attributed to participative structures in public service broadcasters in prior scholarship.

These include a tendency for such structures to be dominated by what Madge (1989: 100), writing about the BBC’s network of advisory councils, described as ‘the great and the good’; for civil society inclusion to favour the participation of entrenched and powerful social interests, as in Kleinsteuber’s (2010: 215) account of broadcasting councils in Germany; for participative fora to convene too infrequently to engage in sustained surveillance of PSB institutions (*ibid*: 220); for ambiguities of purpose and conflicts of interest engendered by the embedding of such structures as subordinate components of internal PSB governance structures, as in Switzerland (Holznagel and Jungfleisch, 2007: 64); and perhaps above all, to lack influence over the activities of broadcasters owing to a lack of concrete powers and distance from organisational chains of decision-making and accountability, as is the case in many countries including Denmark (Baldi, 2007: 21) and Austria (Holznagel and Jungfleisch, 2007: 64).

Conclusions

The foregoing empirical accounts and analysis of the Audience Council as a venue for public inclusion in institutional governance illuminates key aspects of the prevailing conceptualisations and operationalisations of publicness in Irish public service broadcasting,

as well as the navigation of contemporary threats to its future. On these, two main conclusions are offered.

The first is that the many impediments faced by the statutory Audience Council of 2010-2014 faced in asserting civic power within the broadcaster speak to a key continuity in the various constructions of publicness implied in public service broadcasting's normative democratic orientation over time- that is, the basic illegitimacy of a participating public claiming a partnership role within the very project of public service broadcasting.

On one hand, this is indicative of the continuing dominance of conceptions of the audience-as-public (Ang, 1991: 21) that align with liberal democratic imaginaries in which restrictive conceptions of democratic publicity and public inclusion are embedded (Cullinane, 2016: 282). The repudiation of stronger forms of structural participation is justified in part on the basis of hierarchist and technocratic logics and underpinned by a liberal pessimism about the political and deliberative capacities of ordinary citizens (O'Mahony, 2013: 121, Habermas, 1994: 7). As noted earlier and in Cullinane (2016: 274), this pessimism is similarly manifested in restricted internal regimes of mediated representation in news and current affairs broadcasting, which remain geared towards upholding the idea of a public sphere aimed at 'strengthening a system of formal representation through political parties' (Ferree et al., 2002: 290).

On the other, the Audience Council's greater overall congruence with the repertoires of conventional, instrumental and top-down audience research than those associated with initiatives of institutional democratisation offers a contemporary illustration of the pre-eminence of the consumerist 'audience-as-market' (Ang, 1991: 21) addressee of public service broadcasting. It also demonstrates the ready absorption of such conceptions of the audience into ostensibly democratising structures of public participation, deliberation and accountability. This reflects the association of such initiatives with the intellectual heritage of New Public Management (Joshi, 2011) and the impacts of neoliberalism on the democratic horizons of public service broadcasting.

The ongoing inadmissibility of the audience-as-public as an active partner in the project of Irish public service media allows for a second conclusion to be made: that in the face of the escalating threats to its institutional reproduction in the form of profound economic and political disjunctures, a dangerous institutional inattentiveness to a need to recuperate its social legitimacy may be discerned.

Adaptation to domestic and international political and economic exigencies since the onset of the financial crisis, as evidenced by the institutional survival plans initiated by successive Director Generals, have focused overwhelmingly on financial solvency, technological modernisation and repositioning RTÉ services in response to competitive pressures rather than normative renewal and experimentation with new means of public inclusion (Cullinane, 2013, 2016). Such responses elide a recognition that the causes and symptoms of contemporary democratic crisis seriously threaten the grounds of public service broadcasting's self-legitimation and that a commensurate re-democratising response is required to help secure its future.

The establishment of the 'right of the microphone' (Scannell, 1989: 140) to relay events to a nascent listening public may have represented a progressive expansion of mediated democracy in the early 20th century during the monopoly era of PSB institutions. But in today's contexts of a large and pluralised civil society, reduced deference to authority, the mass adoption of many-to-many networks of 'mass self-communication' (Castells, 2009), the exclusionary thrust of today's minimally-differentiated 'democracy as access' ideals of public service broadcasting may no longer be tenable. Indeed, at a time of widening legitimacy deficits between political systems and publics, the technocratic and hierarchist rationales for exclusion may be seen as actively reproducing broader democratic pathologies.

With public inclusion continuing to be conceived of in terms of access rather than voice, or as Rakow (1999: 80) puts it, 'the means to purchase, view and listen, not to speak and be heard', the audience-as-public is denuded of its own publicity through strategies of exclusion (Livingstone, 2005: 11) that mirror the contemporary hollowing out of democracy's popular component- what Mair (2006: 25) described as 'democracy without a demos'. Such strategies include the commodification of public opinion through rationalised audience measurement and articulations of public service that continue to stress 'trust' as the desirable basis of the relationship between RTÉ and the public (see for example RTÉ, 2014: 4).

Whilst providing enhanced opportunities for participation in governance is often seen as a salve for the 'democratic disenchantment' characteristic of contemporary strains in representative democracy (Skelcher and Torfing, 2010: 74), the experience of the RTÉ Audience Council illustrates how participatory initiatives merely 'bolted-on' to existing regimes of marketised audience inclusion, control-oriented institutional governance and traditional ideologies of pluralism are unlikely to realise any increase in social legitimisation capacity.

This is suggestive of the urgency of radical reinvention of conceptions and operationalisations of public service broadcasting's public and its broader democratic mission to avoid a return of the repressed in the form of the excluded demos. Lowe (2009: 30) suggests that a successful effort to recuperate the legitimacy of public media in the minds of publics 'requires first changing PSB minds about audiences' on which it is dependent, demanding above all that public service media institutions 'must accept the vulnerability created by such interdependence'. The experience of the Audience Council suggests that Irish public service broadcasting is not yet prepared to embrace this vulnerability. Yet, given the indispensability of public support to safeguard its future, bringing the public into the fold may not be a matter of institutional altruism but a condition of its survival (*ibid*).

The 'survival strategies' (Steemers, 1999: 50) of public service broadcasters, heretofore privileging adaptation to changing economic, technological and competitive contexts, must also encompass a response to democratic challenges, extending to a willingness to rethink the fundamentals of public service broadcasting's place in the public

sphere. Above all, this requires the renovation of its participatory cultures and representative logics beyond its liberal inheritance, in line with Curran's (2002: 237) view that pluralist democracy requires the embrace – rather than the elision and suppression – of conflict and difference.

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