

Harry Potter and the Wizards of Baile na hAbhann:  
Translation, subtitling and dubbing policies in Ireland's TG4, from the  
start of broadcasting in 1996 to the present day

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### **Introduction**

I will begin this paper with a brief description of the social and linguistic context in which the Irish-language TV station began broadcasting, before moving on to deal with some aspects of its translation, subtitling and dubbing policies.

TnaG – now called TG4 – began broadcasting in 1996 in what the chairman of the main public service broadcaster in Ireland described as a “hostile ideological environment, policed by a small number of commentators struggling to be heard above the message from opinion polls showing broad public support for government expenditure on broadcasting in Irish”.<sup>1</sup> The project was derided as ‘Teilifís de Lorean’ by one commentator, in a reference to a car manufacturer who went bust in Belfast, having wasted millions of pounds of exchequer funding.<sup>2</sup> This hostility persisted: when TnaG was rebranded and relaunched as TG4 in 1999, the largest-selling daily broadsheet in Ireland warned that the new name would not halt the demise of what it termed the ‘Gaelic white elephant’.<sup>3</sup>

The context for such hostility can partly be explained in terms of post-colonialism, but also as a result of decades of poorly-planned and implemented language policies. It may also be that commercial interests in an increasingly competitive media market was a factor. The linguistic context is that although Irish is the first official language, and well over a million people claim some knowledge of it, fewer than 20,000 live in bilingual communities where Irish is the dominant language.<sup>4</sup>

Minority language television stations funded by the taxpayer are typically constrained by tight budgets and a lack of resources. TG4 is no exception. It was initially funded for just two hours of programming a day and in 2003 funding for TG4 was a good deal less than that available to the main public service radio station in Ireland, while funding for the Welsh channel S4C was over 5 times higher.<sup>5</sup> Because of its controversial birth, the station was perhaps more acutely aware than others of the need to justify its existence in the kind of economic, reductionist terms which now dominate public discourse in the Anglophone world. This justification centred around viewing figures, as the main argument against the station was on the lines of 'no one will watch it'. From the start it was innovative, energetic, creative and youthful, but during the first two years its average share of peak viewing stayed under 1% of the national audience,<sup>6</sup> and the attacks in the media continued.

### **The 'blocked' schedule**

During the first two years (1996 -1998), TnaG had a policy of separating its Irish-language content into a distinct block of programming from 8-10.30 p.m. each night, with a further hour of broadcasting in Irish for children between 5-6 p.m. The station's Director of Television, Alan Esslemont, described this in a recent personal interview with me as being based on 'a linguistic logic rather than a television logic' and as working against normal television viewing patterns.<sup>7</sup> With the low audience figures came pressure for change, both from within the station and from independent producers.

The first sign of change came in the autumn of 1998, when the two-and-a-half-hour block was reduced to two hours, from 8-10 p.m. Further experimentation with the schedule showed that some Irish programmes broadcast in a late evening slot, after a programme in English, could achieve a bigger audience than when the same programmes were broadcast in peak times as part of the Irish-language block.<sup>8</sup> From this discovery the station gradually adopted a version of the Reithian theory of 'hammocking'. In other words, by broadcasting a 'less

popular' (i.e. Irish-language) programme between two 'popular' (i.e. English-language) programmes, the station could boost the number of viewers of the Irish programme and increase its overall audience.<sup>9</sup>

TnaG was relaunched as TG4 on September 27, 1999. Rather than being a niche broadcaster for a niche audience, it sought to reposition itself as a mainstream broadcaster for a niche audience, differentiating itself from the 'digital jungle' of cable and satellite channels and aiming to compete with the two other mainstream niche broadcasters available in Ireland, the UK channels BBC2 and Channel Four. In this way the station hoped to build its audience and achieve the 'national resonance' that had eluded it until then.

With the rebranding came a decisive shift in scheduling. Instead of being determined by language, the schedule became audience-driven, catering for different demographic groups at different times. The programmes in Irish would no longer be shown as one block, but rather dispersed according to the kind of audience being targeted on any particular night. The main rationale for the change was to increase the audience, and in this it was remarkably successful in a short period. During the three months from November 1999 to January 2000 audience share practically doubled, from just over 1% to just under 2%.<sup>10</sup> The growth in audience has continued: the average share for the first half of 2005 was 3.4%, above Sky One and within shouting distance of BBC2 and Channel 4.

### **Subtitling on TG4**

So what's the relevance of all this? The relevance is this: if the need to drive audience figures upwards from a desperately low level had such a profound impact on the schedule, the same appears to be the case for the station's translation, subtitling and dubbing policies.

When TnaG came on air it devised a nuanced or dual approach to subtitling in which the first broadcast of most programmes in Irish would carry closed subtitles

(i.e. subtitles available via teletext) in English. The programme would be rebroadcast later in the week with open (i.e. on-screen) subtitles in English. With the poor audience figures, however, pressure to change this subtitling policy soon came on the station from independent producers and especially from the producers of the flagship soap opera, *Ros na Rún*. They argued that viewers were confused by seeing the soap sometimes with open subtitles and at other times without any subtitles visible on screen but available via teletext. A further complication was that only 47% of the main television sets used in households had access to teletext in 1997<sup>11</sup>. As a result of this pressure, it was decided to allow *Ros na Rún* to carry open (i.e. on-screen) subtitles in English on every edition of the programme. This created a precedent that was used by other producers to argue that a similar exception should be made for their particular programme, i.e. that all broadcasts of the programme should carry open subtitles.<sup>12</sup>

The overall subtitling policy is described in a 1998 TnaG policy document as, and I quote, “based on the understanding that subtitles will attract an audience who has little or no Irish” (my translation)<sup>13</sup>. The policy states that in “exceptional cases where the programme is of strategic importance in building and developing TnaG’s audience” the first broadcast of a programme will carry open subtitles. It also gives three examples of cases where producers had specifically requested open subtitles on the first broadcast. These were: *1798 agus ó shin, I gCillín an Bháis* and *Navigatio Atlantean II*. It added that most of the programmes in the Christmas and summer schedules would be broadcast with open subtitles.<sup>14</sup>

Our colleague Eithne O’Connell has done much valuable work in the area of translation and subtitling in a minority language context. O’Connell argues that where open subtitles are broadcast they will generally be read, regardless of whether or not they are needed, effectively transforming a monolingual (Irish) programme into a bilingual (Irish/English) programme, with potentially serious implications for the language.<sup>15</sup> The TnaG policy document refers to O’Connell’s

view and acknowledges that (and again I quote in translation) “it is certain that English subtitles interfere with the monolingual relationship between programmes in Irish and Irish speakers. As was said in the context of [Scottish] Gaelic, there is a danger that ‘the Gaels will watch Gaelic programmes in an English mirror’.” This is given as the reason for the dual subtitling policy referred to above.

The document says there is “no doubt” but that the use of closed subtitles on teletext would be the best subtitling arrangement for TnaG, if teletext was available to between 80% and 95% of viewers, and if teletext was in regular use as a means of accessing subtitles. It adds, and again I translate:

“Aontaíonn TnaG le hainilís Eithne O’Connell sa mhéid ‘s go léirítear inti an teannas atá i gceist le bheith ag freastal ar phobal le réimse an-éagsúil cumais teangan. Ní dóigh le TnaG áfach gur moladh fiúntach é a bheith ag braith go hiomlán ar an gcóras teileteacs mar bhealach dáilithe fotheideal. Is dóigh le TnaG go bhfuil cothromaíocht mhaith ann faoi láthair, tús áite tugtha don chainteoir líofa agus freastal maith déanta ar dhaoine ar bheagán Gaeilge. Tá croí na conspóide ag baint leis na fotheidil oscailte a bhíonn ar an gcéad chraoladh de Ros na Rún, ach mar a míníodh thuas, is cinneadh stráitéiseach é sin a bhaineann le lucht féachana a mhéadú.”

(“TnaG agrees with Eithne O’Connell’s analysis to the degree that it shows the tension that exists when catering to a community with widely-differing linguistic competences. TnaG does not feel however that depending completely on the teletext system as a means of distributing subtitles is a worthwhile proposal. TnaG feels that the present arrangement is well balanced, with first place given to the fluent speaker while those who have little Irish are also well served. At the heart of the controversy are the open subtitles on the first broadcast of Ros na Rún, but as was explained above that is a strategic decision which relates to increasing the audience.”)<sup>16</sup>

The dual subtitling policy led to some confusion among producers and the audience. By the time of the 1999 relaunch it had collapsed into what Alan Esslemont described as “a hotchpotch, there were more and more exceptions”<sup>17</sup>. Following further representations from within the station’s management, in the autumn of 2000 it was decided to apply a uniform policy of putting open subtitles

in English on all Irish-language programmes, apart from a small number of music programmes with little dialogue, where it was decided to dispense with subtitles altogether. This remains the case today.<sup>18</sup> Given the rationale behind the relaunch, it seems reasonable to conclude that the decision to jettison what the station had itself described as a “well balanced” dual subtitling policy was a strategic one, influenced by the need to drive viewing figures upwards and deflect hostile media attacks.

The change in policy met with strong criticism from Irish-language organisations and advocates. However, TG4 argues that audience research commissioned by it in 2000, and subsequently in 2002 and 2005, shows broad acceptance of subtitling among Irish speakers as a whole.

An example of this is the survey carried out by the market research company MRBI for TG4 between February and April 2002, using a representative spread of 500 fluent Irish speakers in Gaeltacht areas and 200 fluent Irish speakers outside the Gaeltacht. The survey showed that 5% of the Gaeltacht sample and 3% of the non-Gaeltacht sample agreed strongly with the statement, ‘The subtitles on screen are off-putting’.

A closer look at a cohort of 442 adult speakers in the Gaeltacht gives a more nuanced picture. It shows that while 5% strongly agreed with the statement, a further 21% of them agreed with the statement, making a total of 26%, or just over a quarter of Gaeltacht respondents. On the other hand, 56% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the subtitles were off-putting, while 19% chose ‘neither’.<sup>19</sup>

Asked to choose key influences which would boost TG4 viewing, just 7% of the Gaeltacht sample and 10% of the non-Gaeltacht sample chose ‘subtitles in Irish’.

Another survey commissioned by TG4 was carried out by MRBI during the same period three years later, i.e. during the spring of 2005. It was based on a similar number and spread of Irish speakers and showed that 9% of the Gaeltacht sample and 4% of the non-Gaeltacht sample strongly agreed with the statement, 'The subtitles on screen are off-putting'. Although this shows a rise in anti-subtitle sentiment in the Gaeltacht, it does not appear to be a major influence on viewing.<sup>20</sup>

### **Subtitling for children**

A common view is that young children are unable to read subtitles and therefore there is no sense in carrying subtitles on their programmes. The TnaG policy document cited above disputes this analysis, pointing out that television is frequently not just an individual experience and that at times one person in the room (whose first language is not Irish) will use the subtitles to explain the programme to the others. Here is the relevant quote from the document:

“Nuair a thosaigh TnaG ag craoladh, bhí roinnt fadhbanna again leis an trealamh tarchuir agus chuaigh roinnt cláracha as an tsraith *Boisíní* amach gan fotheidil theilethéacs. Ghearáin roinnt tuismitheoirí láithreach go raibh siad ag úsáid na bhfotheideal leis an gclár a thuiscint agus gur ar an gcaoi seo a bhí siad in ann imeachtaí an chláir a mhíniú dá bpáistí.”

(“When TnaG began broadcasting, we had some problems with the broadcasting equipment and some programmes in the series *Boisíní* went out without teletext subtitles. Some parents complained immediately that they had been using the subtitles in order to understand the programme and that this was the way they had been able to explain the events in the programme to their children.”)<sup>21</sup>

### **Subtitling in Irish**

As part of its drama provision in the first two years, TnaG broadcast *Machair*, a soap in Scottish Gaelic set in a third-level educational institute and aimed at teenagers or young adults. As the two languages are closely related, it was decided to broadcast *Machair* in Scottish Gaelic with subtitles in Irish. Some of

the omnibus editions of the soap opera *Ros na Rún* have also been broadcast with closed subtitles in Irish, as an aid to learners, but by and large only a tiny amount of subtitling on TG4 is in Irish.

### **Future developments in subtitling**

The current situation is complicated by new subtitling requirements from the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, in line with an EU directive aimed at improving television access for people with hearing difficulties. By 2010 something like 80% of TG4's broadcasts will have to carry either open or closed subtitles. The impact of these changes has yet to be seen, but as TG4 currently broadcasts a significant amount of programming in English it is reasonable to assume that in the future significant resources will be devoted to carrying subtitles in English on programmes in English. The option of putting subtitles in Irish on programmes in English is not being seriously considered, although there is a precedent. RTE broadcasts the bilingual regional news programme *Seachtain* with open subtitles in English when either the narration or the dialogue is in Irish, and with open subtitles in Irish when they are in English.

The advent of terrestrial digital television, when it eventually arrives, may lead to greater flexibility and freedom in subtitling choices. One possibility under consideration is to carry on-screen subtitles by default, but allow viewers to opt out of watching them by pressing a button on their remote controls. This would allow TG4 to better serve its numerically small but vital core audience of native and fluent Irish speakers, without alienating the broader audience the station needs to attract in order to survive and prosper. In the meantime, it seems likely that TG4's current policy of carrying open subtitles in English on virtually all Irish-language programmes will continue.

### **Dubbing on TG4**

One of the earliest ventures into live-action lip-sync dubbing into Irish was the Welsh teenage soap *Jabas*, which was first broadcast on RTE and then shown on TnaG during 1996/97. Around the same time the French pre-school cartoon Bouli was dubbed into Irish and broadcast on the new station. Building on this, TnaG commissioned the dubbing of a Welsh soap opera set in a rural farming community, called *Pris y Farchnad* or *An Craiceann is a Luach* in Irish. The poor audience figures for this and other dubbed programming led TnaG to conclude that there was a resistance to dubbing in the bilingual Irish-speaking audience, in common with other bilingual communities in northern Europe. Since then very little programming aimed at adults has been dubbed into Irish.

### **Dubbing for children**

The amount of children's programming dubbed into Irish increased significantly with the 1999 relaunch. Until then about 70 hours of such programming per year was dubbed into Irish. It was decided to increase this to a target of 200 hours a year (it stands at present at about 175 hours a year).<sup>22</sup> With a few notable exceptions, TG4 opted not to dub live action, even for children, focusing instead on dubbing animation into Irish. Exceptions include a *Scooby Doo* movie and the forthcoming Irish version of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, which will be broadcast this Hallowe'en. These are regarded as spectacular one-off events designed to boost the station's profile. By and large, however, subtitling is the preferred option for live-action programming in languages other than English (including Irish). Given the station's difficult financial position, this is perhaps not surprising, as subtitling is of course much cheaper than dubbing. Although the dubbed animation includes many programmes originally in English, most live action programmes in English are simply broadcast as they are in English. The teenage soap *Lizzie McGuire* is a case in point (and here I again quote Alan Esslemont):

*"Lizzie McGuire: thóg mé na cearta le haghaidh Gaeilge agus Béarla ach nuair a bhreathnaigh mé ar an rud dúirt mé, 'no, níl aon chiall leis sin, é a dubbáil'. Más é an aidhm atá le Lizzie McGuire ná an rud a bheith cool ceapaim, ó thaobh an taithí atá agam*

féin le cúigear gasúr, go mbreathnaíonn siad ar an rud dubbáilte go Gaeilge mar rud nach bhfuil *cool* is cuma cé chomh *cool* is atá an clár, mar go bhfuil sé dubbáilte.”

(“*Lizzie McGuire*: I took the rights for both English and Irish [versions] but when I watched it I said, ‘no, there’s no point in that, in dubbing it’. If the aim of having *Lizzie McGuire* is to have something cool [for teenagers] then I think, speaking from my own experience, with five children, that they look on dubbed [live-action] programmes as something that is not cool, no matter how cool the programme itself is.”)<sup>23</sup>

The move to significantly increase the amount of dubbed children’s programming led to a decision to focus more on some of the larger branded products from the United States, although TG4 continues to broadcast some European-made cartoons not commonly available on mainstream broadcasters in anglophone areas. The policy shift can be interpreted as a conscious attempt to capitalise on the growing influence of globalisation on television production:

“D’éirigh linn *Spongebob Squarepants* a fháil, d’éirigh linn rudaí ar nós *Clifford* a fháil, so d’éirigh linn cuid de na brandaí móra a fháil agus go hiondúil bhíodh na brandaí móra sin ag dul go RTÉ [...] So d’éirigh linn dul isteach sa margadh sin agus cuid den mhargadh sin a fháil agus bhí Tionchar an-mhór aige sin ar an dearcadh a bhí ag páistí orainn. Is maith leo na brandaí móra agus aisteach go leor tá siad an-sásta bheith ag breathnú ar na brandaí móra i nGaeilge. Fuair muid amach gur oibrigh an dá rud le chéile, cuir i gcás *Muppets* nó *Dora* [...] an rud a tharlaíonn ansin ná tá a fhios agat go bhfuil Nickelodeon amuig ansin, go bhfuil siad ag déanamh poiblíochta agus go bhfuil daoine eile ag déanamh poiblíochta ar an gclár agus amuigh ansin sa saol taobh amuigh atá timpeall ar dhaoine go bhfuil *Dora* le feiceáil. Mar stáisiún beag níl muid in ann mórán de sin a dhéanamh ach má tá maisín amuigh ansin atá ag cur ar aghaidh *Dora* agus má tá tusa ag cur ar aghaidh *Dora* i nGaeilge gheobhaidh tú pósadh maith go leor ar do chuid iarrachtaí.”

(“We succeeded in getting *Spongebob Squarepants*, we succeeded in getting things like *Clifford*, so we succeeded in getting some of the big brands and [until then] usually those big brands would go to RTE [...] So we succeeded in going into that market and that had a great influence on the attitude of children towards us. They like the big brands and

strangely enough they are very happy to watch the big brands in Irish. We found out that the two worked together, take for example the *Muppets* or *Dora* [...] what happens there is you know that Nickelodeon is out there publicising it and that others are publicising the programme and that *Dora* is seen out there in the world around us. As a small station we are not able to do much of that, but if you have a machine out there promoting *Dora*, and you are promoting *Dora* in Irish, you can get a fairly good match for your efforts.”<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to offer a point of reflection. Psychologists argue that the nurturing, nutrition and emotional support infants experience during the first two years of life – or indeed the lack of such support – have a profound impact on personality, development and general outlook. In a similar fashion, it seems to me that the circumstances of the Irish station’s difficult birth and traumatic infancy have had a profound impact on its translation, subtitling and dubbing policies, and indeed on the character of the station as a whole. Further investigation is needed to develop this point. It is worth considering, however, whether TG4’s underfunded and controversial birth has led the station’s managers to be more sensitive both to audience figures and to criticism in the media – and all that that entails in terms of policy and programming choices – than they might otherwise have been.

Despite all these difficulties, it is a cause of some personal celebration to me that this Hallowe’en my own children will be able to watch a full-length live-action film in their first language. Not only that, but it will be one of the coolest kids’ movies around: *Harry Potter agus an Seomra Diamhair*, or *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*.

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<sup>1</sup> The chairman of the RTE Authority, Farrel Corcoran, in a letter to the *Irish Times*, November 24, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> This term was coined by *Irish Times* columnist Kevin Myers, and used by him in his column *Irishman's Diary* on a number of occasions. These included May 22, 1996; December 6, 1996; January 17, 1997; April 19, 1997; May 28, 1998; September 18, 1999; and April 25, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Editorial in the *Irish Independent*, September 27, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> According to an analysis of census figures by Donncha Ó hÉallaithe published in *Foinse* in 2004.

<sup>5</sup> According to a TG4 presentation to the government department responsible for broadcasting, *Cur i Láthair don Roinn Cumarsáide, Mara agus Acmhainní Nádirtha*, May 2005.

<sup>6</sup> According to a presentation by Alan Esslemont, TG4's Director of Television, *A Gaelic Channel: The Irish Experience* at the annual Media Seminar on Gaelic Broadcasting organised by Comataidh Craolaidh Gàidhlig and Léirsinn Research Centre, Inverness, Scotland, 24 May 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Esslemont, in a personal interview with the author in October 2005, (my translation).

<sup>8</sup> Alan Esslemont, *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Alan Esslemont, *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Alan Esslemont, *A Gaelic Channel: The Irish Experience*, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> A Nielsen survey in 1997 cited in *TnaG agus Fotheidil: Cúlra ar an bpolasaí reatha*, May 1998, TnaG (unpublished, my translation).

<sup>12</sup> Alan Esslemont interview, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> *TnaG agus Fotheidil: Cúlra ar an bpolasaí reatha*, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> *TnaG agus Fotheidil: Cúlra ar an bpolasaí reatha*, *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Eithne O'Connell, 1999. 'Subtitles on screen: Something for everyone in the audience?' *Teanga*, 18, lch 85-9.

<sup>16</sup> *TnaG agus Fotheidil: Cúlra ar an bpolasaí reatha*, *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> Alan Esslemont interview, *op. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Alan Esslemont interview, *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> *TG4 Viewing Survey, a presentation to TG4 by MRBI*, May 2002.

<sup>20</sup> *TG4 Audience Research Survey*, MRBI, May 2005.

<sup>21</sup> *TnaG agus Fotheidil: Cúlra ar an bpolasaí reatha*, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> Alan Esslemont interview, *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Alan Esslemont interview, *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> Alan Esslemont interview, *op. cit.*