

BBC RADIO ULSTER'S *TALKBACK* PHONE-IN: PUBLIC FEEDBACK IN A DIVIDED PUBLIC SPACE

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Abstract

This article is based upon extensive research of the BBC Radio Ulster daily phone-in programme, *Talkback*. The wider research is investigating the role of phone-in programmes as a contemporary public sphere for democratic debate. This article places the *Talkback* phone-ins within the specific context of a contested society within which two "publics" seek to assert their separate identities. The relationship between on-air public talk and official political talks is considered. The socio-political functions of phone-in talk are considered empirically (within the confines of limited space) and it is argued theoretically that talk on *Talkback* is addressed to one of three publics: one's own public; the divided public; and the imagined consensual public (which is addressed mainly by the BBC).

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Publics and The Public

The BBC's aphorism that "Nation Shall Speak Peace Unto Nation" takes on a peculiar significance in the parochial world of Northern Irish (or northern Irish) politics. The unique function of radio as a technological means of compressing space and facilitating the global "parish pump" of discourse has been utilised in Northern Ireland as a means of allowing two publics, joint inhabitants of a contested territorial space, to rehearse their notions of national identity in the presence of one another. People who might never otherwise meet, even though they might co-exist within physical neighbourhoods, are enabled, or compelled, to hear one another within the context of the daily BBC Radio Ulster phone-in programme, *Talkback*.

Talk radio operates within the context of a liberal model of the deliberating public. The conventional media assumption of the public as a relatively homogeneous audience, receiving and not producing, atomised but essentially monolithic in its cultural behaviour, has been justifiably criticised in recent times by audience analysts (Livingstone and Lunt 1994). They have argued that the notion of a listening or viewing public "out there," open to singular address by the unifying voice of national or local media, has been a self-deceiving ideological assumption made in the interest of putting discrete publics through the blender of national unity. In reality, the public is an object of political convenience: inhabitants of an "imagined community" which is as strong as its sense of shared identity. In the early years of British radio this imagined public collapsed under the strain of manifest cultural/class differences. The distinctive styles of the Home and Forces Services were more than aesthetic responses to the social gulf between tranquil domesticity and regimented wage labour. It was a recognition that the production of talk would inevitably be very different for those who were talked with than for those who were talked at. Subsequent channel fragmentation has been even more explicit: compare the "easy listening" somnambulism of BBC Radio 2 with the engaged intensity of BBC Radio 3 which addresses its public as an exclusive cultural elite.

Advertisers have an even more explicit interest in investigating the complexities of the multiplicity of social publics. As commercial Classic FM in Britain has demonstrated, the audience for classical music, traditionally addressed by Radio 3, comprises many who prefer the middle-brow, non-elitist, easy-going style more usually associated with Radio 2. In Australia, commercial-TV station, Channel 9, has explored ways of addressing a politically-interested public attracted by less formal or deferential approaches to debating election issues than the more established ABC. Instead of the state channels imagining and then seeking to create a national public, the commercial stations have located their publics and then sought to build a mediating facility around them.

The plurality of publics fits well the commercial media's need for refined demographic strata within which to target advertising. Such pluralism becomes more problematical in the context of the liberal model of the public speaking with itself: Alan Bennett's richly-evocative ideal of public broadcasting as the nation having a conversation with itself. Rarely is this more conspicuous than in talk (or phone-in) radio, which operates in accordance with an implicit assumption that callers are somehow representative of the public out of which they emerge. This notion of inclusive representation implodes within the clearly biased and bigoted political talk shows in the USA, such as those presented daily by Rush Limbaugh and Gordon Liddy.

Not only do these shows fail to meet the criteria of liberal discussion and representative inclusion, preferring to attract the so-called ditto-heads whose role is to parrot the prejudices of the star bigots, but they explicitly deride the liberal agenda of open-minded discourse. So, rather than interact rationally with feminists, Limbaugh abuses them as “femi-nazis;” instead of inviting them to challenge his crudely-formulated right-wing agenda, Liddy recruits callers to join him in condemning such uninvited challengers as “pinkos” and “perverts.” Such radio talk is intentionally illiberal; it is America’s least articulate having a rant against an absent, but omnipresent subversive Other (Scott 1996, 64-74; Larson 1997, 189-202; Kurtz 1996, 228-255).

The popularity of the conservative fashion for uncritical rant disguised as public discussion has given rise to a smaller number of explicitly “liberal” US phone-in hosts, although one suspects that they too are conversing with the already-righteous rather than entering into dialogues with the reactionary public that they would rather deplore than engage with. A virtual civil war of the airwaves is played out, not in the military style of force against force, but of vociferous disengagement by each public from the other, each asserting that it is The Public. But it is only a virtual media war, not a veritable one. It is an indication of a conflict about national identity, but not an open conflict as such. At election time both publics embrace common national icons of US identity: Republican and Democrat calls upon god to bless America, as a rousing banality marking the conclusion of a speech. The black, gay, Californian woman who hates Rush Limbaugh may inhabit a different planet from the WASPish, born-again, gun-bearing Michigan anti-federalist, but they both know they live in the same country.

By all appearances, the Northern Irish Protestant Unionist from the Shankill Road, who is more British than the English, and the Catholic Nationalist Falls Road Irish person, are very similar. They live in the same neighbourhood of Belfast, a relatively small city; speak with almost identical accents; use the same local idioms; know the same local landmarks; believe (if they believe in anything) in the Christian God of the New Testament; and, when in England, are seen without distinction as strangers from Ireland — “We’re all Paddies over here,” as SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party) MP Seamus Mallon once told his Unionist opponents in a debate in the Westminster parliament. In smaller Northern Irish towns and villages the appearances of similarity and the barriers of cultural/tribal (ostensibly religious) detachment are even more marked. In the small town of Lurgan the main street is divided by the public toilets, on one side of which it is unsafe for Catholics to walk at night and on the other side for Protestants. A language of antagonism pervades the disputed territory: Is it Northern Ireland (Unionist) or the north of Ireland (Nationalist)? Is the second city Derry (Nationalist) or Londonderry (Unionist)? Each of these are secondary cultural disputations arising from the central one: Is one in Ireland (as geographically, one surely is) or the United Kingdom (as in terms of political legality, six out of the nine counties of Ulster which constitute Northern Ireland in accordance with the 1920 Treaty of Ireland Act, surely are)? Over this question thousands of lives have been lost; many more than that have been maimed, disfigured, beaten, tortured, incarcerated and exiled; a culture of political violence became the norm.

What of Habermas’s public sphere within the context of two such irreconcilably divided publics (Habermas 1962/1991)? Since the mid-1990s a political peace process has emerged and at times appeared to triumph against immense odds. But peace in such circumstances does not come from talks alone. Talks from above without talk at the grass roots are a limited exercise in community-building. It is for this reason that

talk radio in the context of a deeply divided society, of segregated communities and hostile publics largely devoid of a shared identity of nationhood, is of more than usual significance. If by talking on the radio publics can speak unto publics whom they would ignore if they lived in the next street, then phone-in programmes could be regarded as the basis of an authentic public sphere.

Peace Talks and Peace Talk

Northern Ireland has been a divided community at least since the partition of Ireland in 1920, when 26 of the 32 counties of Ireland became independent (first as the Irish Free State and then, in 1937, as the Republic of Ireland or Eire) and six of the nine Ulster counties became Northern Ireland, legally a province of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland was from the start, in the words of its first Unionist Prime Minister, “a Protestant state for a Protestant people.” The Catholic minority were discriminated against, economically, legally and culturally. The siege mentality of Ulster Unionism, forever fearing abandonment by the British “mainland” and committed obsessively to the slogan of “No Surrender” to the demonic powers emanating from Dublin and cultural Irishness, reduced issues of Northern Irish identity to a public mantra of self-definition in terms of what one was not. The non-Unionist minority who opted for the forbidden other — Catholics, Nationalists, the Northern Irish — were rejected as a potentially subversive, even treacherous, counter-public.

From its outset in 1925, BBC broadcasting in Northern Ireland was caught in the Unionist trap of affirming the Britishness of its public. Broadcasts recognising the Irishness of the province’s heritage (Ulster was, after all, the main Gaelic-speaking area before industrialisation) were a source of cultural embarrassment to Unionists. When BBC features characterising Ulster life depicted the inhabitants as speaking with Irish accents and singing Irish songs there was outrage in the Unionist press from listeners complaining that “there is too much of the Irish pipe, the Irish jig, and the Irish atmosphere in the BBC programmes from Belfast.” George Marshall, the staunchly Unionist head of the BBC in Northern Ireland, declared unequivocally that “There is no such thing today as an Irishman. One is either a citizen of the Irish Free State or a citizen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland” (Cathcart 1984, 5). It was to the former public that the BBC addressed itself.

As a public service broadcaster, the BBC’s political requirement to serve the tradition of only one of the two contesting publics was at odds with its usual strategy when faced with division: to seek at least the appearance of a liberal consensus. But how does one consensually address publics which cannot even agree as to which nation is their home? After the brief glimmer of hope for grass roots civic collectivity offered by the doomed Civil Rights Movement of the late 1960s, and the ensuing years of sectarian violence (in which, per capita, more Northern Irish people were killed than Americans who died in Vietnam), consensual representation by the media became a fruitless task. As Scannell and Cardiff (1991, 288) observe (writing of the early history, but still relevant today), “In an implacably divided community it was an impossible task to find acceptable symbols and images to invoke a shared sense of a common way of life.” McLoone poses the questions, “How should the BBC in Northern Ireland regard the Twelfth of July parades? How does broadcasting in Ireland today contribute, however unwittingly, to a climate that sustains horrific sectarian killings? How can it contribute to a climate of reconciliation?” (McLoone 1991, 5). Within the context of the liberal

public-service model these questions are seemingly resolved. A racist march through an area of London inhabited by ethnic minorities would be reported as a threat to stability and an offence against liberal values of common civic tolerance. There might be a debate about whether the event should have taken place or been reported at all, but the liberal commitment to serve the cultural sensitivities of the racially abused will be upheld. The comfortably liberal resolution ceases to be sustainable in a situation where the abusive and insensitive march is deemed by the majority culture — the politically-hegemonic public — as a harmless enactment of long-cherished tradition. That effigies of the Pope are burned and crudely anti-Catholic songs sung on the Twelfth of July (when Protestants celebrate their victory in the Battle of the Boyne of 1690) is clearly an affront to the minority public who seek to depict such occasions as rituals of insensitivity and intimidation, but, unlike the publicly discredited racism of the British National Front, the tribal marching of the Orange Order is enacted in the name of the public. It is within this contest to define the public that the mediating role of broadcasters becomes explicitly political; for, as McLoone has observed, “at the basis of intercommunal strife in Ireland, there lies a conflict over identity and for better or worse, communications play a central role in the formation of identity. Broadcasting, in particular, is crucial in mediating and sustaining a sense of collective consciousness” (McLoone 1991, 5). Within the monological model of broadcast talk such collective consciousness was inevitably exclusive of incongruent politico-cultural identities.

The Northern Irish press has addressed the conflict over public identities by having two main newspapers, each addressing different publics: the *Belfast Newsletter* speaking to the mainly Protestant, Unionist majority and the *Irish News* addressing the Catholic, Nationalist public who perceive themselves to be Irish. The public-service obligation in radio and TV broadcasting has allowed no such dichotomy of publics to be recognised — although Nationalists can tune into RTE, the network broadcast from the Republic, even though it addresses Northern Irish listeners and viewers as outsiders to its national public.

The rise of interactive, dialogical broadcast formats opened the Northern Irish media to the opportunity for cultural plurality to be recognised. Whereas a radio *Talks* tend to reflect the cultural bias of the dominant public, in talk radio, where citizens can call in and present their own views and experiences, a process of public self-definition is played out, with all of the complexities and nuances of a divided public being rehearsed in public. The exposed nature of this public discussion by the public about who comprises the public is not only an elegantly pragmatic way of giving recognition to incompatible public identities, but is also a powerful political channel for otherwise incommunicative factions to be forced to hear one another.

BBC Radio Ulster’s *Talkback* phone-in programme has been broadcast for one hour daily each weekday since 1986. It currently attracts an audience of 75,000 listeners each day: 30% of the Northern Irish radio audience, and more in the Republic — and further afield via the Internet. Since 1989 the programme has been presented by David Dunseith, himself something of a legendary figure in Northern Irish broadcasting. Addressing an audience which is characterised by deep sectarian divisions, often meaning that they co-exist in segregation and mutual fear, Dunseith’s role as a mediator between otherwise socially exclusive factions, is unique in broadcasting. Dunseith operates on the basis that all talk, even when it is manifestly prejudiced, is better than none, especially if it allows opinion to be tested within a public sphere in which people cannot only listen to the ranting of their own side:

For too many years in this community people have lived by the old cliché, whatever you say, say nothing. . . . The fact that people are actually addressing issues, talking about them, listening to other views is a good thing. . . . We simply provide a facility here which allows as many people as possible to express views, to acknowledge views and to engage in debate. (Irish News, 17.1.98).

The significance of *Talkback* as a public sounding board in a deeply divided community, which reaches a larger listening audience than any other European phone-in, is beyond question. The extent to which it fulfils its role as a non-sectarian public sphere, open to critical-rational discussion by all citizens, is best examined empirically. Two key historical moments in the programme's recent history have been selected for analysis: the weeks before and immediately after the Drumcree Orange parade in July 1997, when sectarian tensions were particularly high; and the week before the announcement of the Peace Agreement in April 1998, when both sides of the sectarian divide had reason to appeal for a peace agreement of advantage to them. Both periods were moments of high political drama, with "talks" taking place at the political apex which could only have any effect if they carried broad popular support. The majority of the population, detached from the "talks," were enabled to become expressive participants by contributing to the "talk." Phone-in talk became an informal, inclusive citizen-based version of "the talks." An editorial in *The Guardian* (UK newspaper) referred to *Talkback* as providing "a virtual alternative version of the peace talks." Indeed, on both occasions under consideration, the talks and the radio talk converged, with Dunseith inviting politicians from the talks to appear before his public to talk to and with what, at least for the duration of the programme, became *the* public: a single public; the *Talkback* public.

Quantitative and qualitative survey research about the effects of the programme on a random sample of listeners has been undertaken, but the results are still being examined and will not be used here. Neither is there any attempt to describe the methods adopted in producing the programme; this has been the subject of a separate research study of the BBC *Election Call* series (prior to the May 1997 UK election), but has yet to be completed as a study in relation to *Talkback*. The study here is based upon an analysis of the talk itself: its apparent purposes; its organisation within the programmes; its social functions.

The Political Context

Each July Protestants (Unionists/Loyalists/Orangemen) march in parades, led by flute bands, to commemorate their victory in the Battle of the Boyne. These parades often pass through Catholic/Nationalist areas where they are regarded as intimidatory. The first of these parades takes place in Drumcree. In 1996 the Orange Order at Drumcree was ordered by the police (the Royal Ulster Constabulary) to limit their march to the Protestant area of Drumcree, avoiding the Catholic Garvaghy Road. The Orange Order was indignant at this infringement of its "inalienable right to march" and thousands of Loyalists gathered at Drumcree to demand the freedom to march through the Catholic area. Residents of the Garvaghy Road prepared to prevent the parade from entering their area. Having decreed that the march should be limited, the Chief Constable of the RUC decided that there would be a danger to life if the parade was stopped. The parade marched through the Garvaghy Road and fighting took place. Nationalists saw the RUC's decision to give in to the force of loyalist

numbers as evidence that the police were hostage to bullying by the Protestant majority and unable or unwilling to protect the Nationalist minority. Unionists saw the initial attempt to limit their traditional parade as clear evidence of the beginning of the end of Protestant cultural hegemony. The sensitive peace process which was then in progress was severely damaged by this incident.

In 1997, with a new UK government in power professing a clear commitment to pursue the all-party peace process, much symbolic significance was attached to avoiding a repeat of the Drumcree confrontation, and subsequent confrontations about parade routes. The parades are, by their very nature, street events: they are close both culturally and geographically to real people, their homes and their passions. An inclusive phone-in programme therefore presented an ideal space for the people themselves to discuss the subject that was so literally close to them. In the week before the 1997 Drumcree parade 21,000 people called the *Talkback* switchboard; 11,500 called on the Tuesday before the march — this amounts to approximately 1% of the Northern Irish population calling a single radio phone-in on one day, and 1 in 50 calling in the course of a week.

Most people calling the programmes do not make it on to the air. As well as taking calls, Dunseith reads faxes and summarises points made by callers. Leading political figures are also invited on to the programme, so the time allowed for callers to express themselves is very limited. This time constraint diminishes the programme's status as an authentic public sphere — as is bound to be the case in any phone-in programme aiming to combine conventional political interviews and free public expression. On 7 July, after serious fighting had broken out, Dunseith began the programme by stating that "So many people have already rung that I would ask you to be as brief as possible. If you have something to say please try to get it into a sentence or two." There were approximately 30 live calls and read-outs per day in the week before the Drumcree parade.

The majority of callers on air spoke within the explicit framework of a sectarian position. Non-sectarian calls were exceptional. What was the apparent purpose of calling the programme? Both Unionists and Nationalists had two possible objectives: to call upon their leaders or their fellow Unionists/Nationalists to rally to the cause; or to explain themselves to Dunseith, who served as a political intermediary between them and the other public. So, callers often addressed themselves three ways: directly to the presenter; indirectly to the overhearing other side, via the presenter; to their own side whom they wished to transform from a passive to an active audience. In the case of the 1997 marching season, most callers appealed for greater understanding and sensitivity — but the appeal was made, via Dunseith, always to the other side. The organisation of the talk, once callers were selected, apparently randomly, to go on air, conformed to Butler's model of "balanced sectarianism," according to which an evenly-weighted degree of prejudice and ill-will was tolerated, with Dunseith serving as the exasperated guardian of liberal reason. To hard-line Unionists and Nationalists Dunseith would plead for tolerance, always maintaining a half-cynical, half-whimsical expression somewhat short of hope and despair. Dunseith moves easily from responding to callers to addressing the listening public, as if the social function of the calls was to serve as pieces in a social jigsaw out of which a cohesive public presence could be constructed.

In the week leading to the long-awaited and highly fragile peace agreement of April 11, 1998, itself the product of protracted inter-party and inter-government secret

talks, the functions of talk radio was even more pronounced. Unionists feared that their cause was being sold out by the UK government in collaboration with Dublin and the Official Unionist leadership. Nationalists were far less sceptical about the proposals, and this explains why considerably more Unionists were on the air. The Unionists used the opportunity to talk to express their fears and call upon fellow loyalists, including their leaders, to resist any peace that might threaten the future of the Union. Both sides also used the phone-in to seek understanding — and even reconciliation — from the other, and to assert their own minimum requirements for any peace deal. Dunseith's role was to calm the sectarian calls from those seeking to undermine the rare chance for a constitutional peace, while at the same time ensuring a liberal forum reflecting the reality of sectarian prejudice. As any peace agreement would necessarily have to be put to the people of Northern Ireland in a referendum, the social function of *Talkback* as a barometer of potential consensus was of considerable significance. Just as the phone-in talk was dependent upon the politicians' talks as an agenda source, so the peace talks were bound to open at least one ear to the talk on radio as a guide to the mood of the public/s. Without seeking to overstate the political significance of the *Talkback* phone-in, it is arguable that this was the first occasion in history that a radio phone-in programme provided a forum within which a civil conflict/war could be concluded with direct reference to the mood of the people rather than simply the detached negotiations of their leaders.

Talk on *Talkback*

The remainder of this article will examine, with reference to verbatim excerpts from the programme, specific functions of talk in the *Talkback* programme. The functions to be considered as:

- callers appealing to the sectarian sentiments of their own side;
- callers using the phone-in as a neutral zone within which to address the side which is not theirs;
- the presenter's role as a guardian of liberal reason and world-weary advocate of consensus.

The proposed re-routing of the Orange parades in 1997 led to numerous calls from indignant Unionists:

Caller: I think this is a message to the leadership of the Republican movement that this is a tremendous victory for them. And I feel it's the beginning of a long, long hard struggle for the Order ever to walk many of the streets again.

Dunseith: But lots of people look at it another way and say this is a victory for common sense. Do you not agree with that?

Caller: Well, as I said, I don't. . . I wouldn't have been on for any form of confrontation. . . . But the way I see it is that the Roman Catholic Church, and particularly the Jesuits, have such control of the situation in Northern Ireland at the moment that. . . I really feel that they're on a long slippery slope.

The caller moves from a subjective account of the political consequences of Orange/Protestant compromise to a declaration of (doubtlessly sincere) sectarian paranoia and bigotry. Challenged by Dunseith to explain why, as an Orangeman, he took it upon himself to offend Catholics, the caller is clearly oblivious to the offence:

Caller: By saying that I am not going about offending Catholics. I work with Roman Catholics. But, by the same token, I feel that the . . . particularly the Jesuit movement within the Roman Catholic Church, which is very subtle, very devious and very evil has an awful lot to answer for all the trouble in Northern Ireland.

The caller addresses Dunseith as if to convince him of a moral truth. But this discourse proceeds in a way that it would not were the caller intentionally addressing the Catholics with whom he worked. Catholics are perceived by the caller as being beyond his listening public. His address is to the sectarian prejudices of those within the majority (Unionist) public who share them and also to the mediating judgement of Dunseith.

This call is followed by another Orangeman from the staunchly Unionist Ballymena area, where the Orange Order leaders had just conceded to a compromise route for their march. He is angry. Dunseith asks him what the feeling is amongst his fellow Orangemen:

Caller: The buzz of conversation this morning is that they feel let down totally by the leadership of the Orange Order.

The programme is used momentarily for grass-roots Unionists to appeal directly to their own public, over the head of their leaders. This is a discussion within an exclusive public. The Catholic minority is not addressed and has no point of entry into the discussion.

A subsequent Unionist caller warns his fellow Protestants against the dangers of inertia:

Caller: If there was a referendum tomorrow in Northern Ireland about if the people wanted to go thirty-two counties or stay six-county, Sinn Fein would win if the Protestant people did the same as they done in the elections. . . that is sit on their arses and watch TV. Sinn Fein and the IRA turned out in their thousands for their opinions. . . the Protestant people are going to lose Northern Ireland because they're going to hand it over to Sinn Fein.

The call to action is directed at the majority public. The listening presence of the minority has no impact upon its form or content.

Occasions do occur, however, when callers from one side address Dunseith (the ear of BBC neutrality) to register or clarify a sectarian position:

Caller: David, I just want to point out to your listeners the sectarian nature of the Orange Order. Sectarian constitution. It was founded basically on sectarianism. It is violently anti-Catholic in its make-up, its symbols, its emblems, its history, everything. An Orangeman can't even. . . even marry a Catholic. For example. If a poor Orangeman falls in love with a Catholic and decides to marry her he's expelled from the Orange Order and most likely his own home and area he lives in.

Dunseith attempts to question the caller on his definition of sectarianism.

Caller: I'm a Catholic and I believe in my religion. And I believe it's the true religion, or part of the Church that Christ founded. But I also believe that the Protestant religion. . . is equally also as true a religion as mine. And I have an awful lot of respect for Protestant religion. But I have no respect for Orangeism. None whatsoever. I'm not a member of a political party. . . or involved in politics in any shape or form.

Dunseith's question prompts an interesting line of thinking: here is a caller who is not religiously bigoted, professes no political involvement and yet, by this very act of seeking to distinguish between the sectarian character of the Orange public in contrast with the potentially mutually-respecting Protestant-Catholic public, he has attempted to politically rupture his opponents' religious and tribal identities.

A Catholic caller from Belfast calls to discuss the Irish presidential election. It is worth noting that there are some subjects which attract self-selecting publics (Nationalist or Unionist): so only Catholics participated in *Talkback's* discussion of the Irish election (Unionists excluded themselves from consideration of such a "foreign" issue); likewise, only Unionists appeared to participate in a discussion in the same week about a news item concerning the British Royal Family. The Belfast caller argues that Ireland should consider electing a Northern Irish president, as this would affirm

its position as a 32-county community. Dunseith challenges this:

Dunseith: But do you see within ... you talk about the 32-county community, Jimmy ... just before you go. ... to refresh my memory on what you were saying. ... that you do accept the British element within Northern Ireland. That has got to be accommodated as well.

Caller: Certainly. ... I do. ...

Dunseith: In other words you've got, almost like the Hong Kong situation where you have two elements. ... I'll not call them states. ... call them what you will. ... two territories. ... within a single island. ... and that's got to be recognised.

Caller: Oh, I don't think. ... I mean, the whole problem will not be solved until that is recognised. But, at the same time, that cannot to be recognised to the extent that it ignores. ... you know. ... the existence of the Nationalist community in the way that it prefers to exist as a 32-county community.

Both caller and presenter are here rehearsing the dilemma that was to be addressed a year later in the peace talks. The caller recognises the separate identity of the Unionist public, and rather than denying its right to exist, simply seeks parity of recognition for his own identity as a Northern Irish member of the all-Irish public.

But still, in all of the above excerpts from the period of the Drumcree crisis, there has been no evidence of talk taking place across the sectarian divide. Such cross-talk did occasionally occur, such as on 10 July 1997. An Orangeman calls to point out that Protestants had never tried to disrupt Catholics' St Patrick's Day parades in Northern Ireland and then shifts from this descriptive account to a sectarian assertion:

Caller: Orangemen are mainly working men paying taxes. I believe that the majority of people on the Garvagh Road. ... a lot of them don't work.

Was this a mere statement of prejudice to be shared with the Unionist public? Was it intended to provoke Catholics whose sensitivities were an obstacle to the Drumcree parade? Whichever, the call prompted a direct response from a mother of eight children from the Garvagh Road:

Caller: I say to that previous caller, come and live in the Garvagh Road with us and you'll see that we are ordinary people just like himself. And I begrudge anybody saying that people on the Garvagh Road don't work. 99.9% of the people here want to work, and do work when they can get work. That man has done me a favour. I am very, very angry. I was a bit nervous but now I'm not. ... just angry. I'm not frightened like I was on Sunday morning. Anger has overcome fear. And I will not let that man, nor any of the Unionist politicians, run down this area.

The syntactical shift in the first sentence indicates the potential publics to whom this call is addressed. Through Dunseith, she invites the previous caller to come into her area and then *you'll* see that *we* are *ordinary people* just like *himself*. She addresses the Orangeman directly on behalf of a "we" (her own community) referred to by him as "them;" she invokes the ordinariness of this other public, i.e. it is part of a collective public no different from his own. It is also significant to hear the caller's perception of her own shift of consciousness as a result of hearing the opposing caller: from being nervous and frightened she has been spurred to verbal action (and, of course, talk is action) which is explicitly political.

It was clear during the programmes prior to the Peace Agreement that phone-in talk did change callers declared political positions. After an interview with a Unionist MP on 6 August, 1998 a caller phones to say that "*I have never voted Sinn Fein in my life, but after having listened to John Taylor I will now.*"

During the pre-Peace Agreement programmes there were many examples of sectarian appeals to their own publics. Fearing most from the Agreement, these came overwhelmingly from Unionists. For example, on 3 April 1998 a caller from Cherry Valley, Belfast:

Caller: It seems to me the Unionists are being asked to give up what is most precious to them, and it's all in pursuit of a myth. Because the only time Ireland was a united country was under the British. But the things they are being asked to give up are very precious: the Union Flag, allegiance to the Queen, and the "Royal" is to come out of the RUC. . . It just simply is not on.

A Nationalist caller responds, not to the points made, but to the ideological assumptions upon which they are predicated:

Caller: . . . Nationalists don't live in the Six Counties. They live in Ireland. There is nowhere as foreign as England.

The day before the deal was struck Unionists were calling to rally their side and berate their leaders for contemplating compromise:

Caller: My comment this morning is that the Ulster Unionists have no mandate to gamble the stability of the Union in a poker game with the Provos. . . .

Calls to that day's programme were largely between Unionists of different political persuasions, arguing how best to respond to what several of them saw as an impending betrayal of their sovereign interests. Significantly, Nationalists were relatively inconspicuous in the pre-Agreement debate; one assumes that the potential benefits emerging from the "talks" diminished the need for them to participate in phone-in "talk."¹

In the midst of these competing publics — sometimes talking to themselves, sometimes addressing the other public — is Dunseith as the public mediator, both detached from the sectarian prejudices of each public's identity, and yet sufficiently familiar with them to serve as a voice of a putatively singular public: the *Talkback* public which cannot, by the nature of its auditory invisibility, be divisible or segregated by faction.

Dunseith's most frequent role is to affect whimsical confusion:

Dunseith: How are we going to get people to agree? I don't know. I'm completely lost. Wouldn't it be better if we could all spend the day at the seaside rather than marching about?

Dunseith may well be speaking for the majority in making such war-weary statements. But he is criticised regularly by both sides. On 4 August 1997 a Unionist from East Belfast calls to complain:

Caller: It's about time you gave these provocative parades a rest. You are only stirring up the feelings of the people of both sides. If people deny the rights of ordinary citizens to lawfully march no heed should be given to them.

In short, Nationalist calls should not be taken. But there are several examples of Nationalist callers complaining about the orange tint of the programme. On one occasion a professed atheist calls and Dunseith responds "I have to say that I seldom get any abuse from atheists, agnostics or humanists, so you're very welcome on the programme."

Men and women often find themselves both the hapless subjects as well as the objective makers of history. In Northern Ireland history might be seen to moulded within the context of subjective perceptions of objective realities obscured by prejudice, both grass roots and state-driven. Dunseith's role within this historical situation is to express objective exasperation as an active force of resistance against the certainties of subjective self-delusion. Again and again, the presenter seems to assume the role of the carrier of the burden of history:

Dunseith: What are we going to do? I don't have any answers. And apparently neither do you (4.8.97).

Dunseith: I wish we could get away from all these things and get to grip with the real problems. . . . The

whole things is ridiculous. . . . Ach, the whole thing is a total load of bloody nonsense. . . . Sorry about that little outburst (4.8.97).

Dunseith: I mean, who are we? We're a tiny wee place. People in France or Germany, they couldn't care less. . . . You know, the world's not focusing in on us and watching what we do (6.4.98).

Dunseith: What. . . is. . . a. . . normal. . . society? Is this? Has this ever been a normal society? And what's the yardstick? Ach, I do not know (96.4.98).

Talkback as a Public Sphere?

The theory of the public sphere of open, critical and rational discourse, as elaborated by Habermas, has been the subject of much criticism from those who regard the eighteenth-century bourgeois model within which Habermas empirically rooted the concept as being far less actually inclusive than is compatible with his idealisation (Fraser 1962). The exclusion of women and the under-educated poor from the coffee-house culture invoked by Habermas reflects more complex class and gender inequalities than is suggested by the theoretical account. Nonetheless, the idea of an inclusive public sphere is theoretically valuable, especially when examining participative media phenomena, such as phone-in programmes, which profess to be open for allowing citizens to enter into public discussion on an open and equal basis.

The extent to which *Talkback* fulfils this function is not clear at this stage of research. There are still questions to be answered concerning the demographic composition of callers and listeners; the effects of the programmes upon audiences, as will become clear from forthcoming qualitative and quantitative survey data; the extent to which callers themselves perceive their talk to be a significant contribution to the political process; and the extent to which this view is shared by their political representatives. Once answered, these questions will provide us with information about the political value of talk on *Talkback*.²

Regardless of the political value of the talk, there is an observable socio-political function. It is that which is the main subject of this article. It is quite clear that in a social environment of sectarian hostilities, segregation and a distinct absence of basic consensus about cultural identity, any forum which enables rival publics to address themselves and each other performs the function of being an abnormally open public space. The production of talk within this space is not, however, governed by an idealised dynamic of common publicness, evolving or emerging as if inherent to the public sphere. Channels of communication reflect and do not determine the degree of public consensus or dissension. In the case of *Talkback*, various forms of talk for public consumption are produced in subtly different ways: sometimes by citizens seeking to solidify the communicative boundaries of their own sectarian public; sometimes by citizens seeking to address a wider, putatively inclusive public, in a bid to recognise that the public sphere is open to others than members of their own sectarian group; and sometimes by the presenter, adopting the role of objective historical spectator, while at the same time being the voice of an imagined community comprising its own already existing public. The paradox here is — and it is one that unfolds as peace cautiously breaks out in Northern Ireland — that the liberal media's imagined public of war-weary citizens, united by conflict fatigue and a general desire to co-exist peacefully, may well perform the socio-political function of nurturing a new consensual (or, at least, less divisive) reality.

Notes:

1. A considerably more detailed analysis of the programme's discourse in the lead-up to the Agreement and the subsequent May 22nd Referendum will be published at greater length elsewhere.
2. Such information will not necessarily be of comparative relevance to other phone-in programmes; this forum in Northern Ireland may well be politically exceptional.

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