

# The Impact of Television | A1 sample answer

## What was the impact of RTE on Irish society (and exam year/ question where relevant)

Undoubtedly, television has had a major impact on Irish society just as it has had on other countries. In Ireland, particularly in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, television helped broaden the horizons of people who might never before have been outside the country. It also acted as a great democratize, bringing formerly removed and aloof politicians down to the level of the ordinary proletariat and bringing important, once tabooed questions of religion and morality into the realm of the laymen. It changed how people consumed information and brought in influences, wanted or unwanted, from far flung places. It strengthened some staple aspects of everyday life and culture, such as sports and the Irish language, while it impacted negatively on others including the age old tradition of house-visiting. For good or for bad, television had a dramatic impact on the social landscape.

Although television had existed in a crude form since the 1920s, TV had very little impact on Ireland until the establishment of 'Teilifís Éirinn' in 1961(Although some households on the east coast could receive signals from BBC transmitters at Sutton Coldfield). Irish Governments began considering the possibility of establishing a national broadcaster as early as 1950, but it was dismissed by Taoiseach John A. Costello as a "luxury service". However by the 1960s Lemass' government saw the necessity and possible advantages of a national broadcaster, and so passed the National Broadcasting Act establishing the 'Raidio Éireann Authority' under the auspices of the Department for Posts and Telegraphs. From the beginning of the service on

New Year's Eve 1961, the channel was an immediate success. By 1966, 380,000 homes had a television and this had increased to 536,000 by 1971.

For the first time, award winning documentary programmes, such as 'Radharc' presented by Fr. Joseph Dunne and Fr. Peter Lemass, opened people's eyes to the wider world and in particular to the plight of poor people in Africa. This series produced over 400 documentaries, focusing largely on the work of catholic missionaries abroad. This helped promote a wider sense of global responsibility, leading to the establishment of NGOs such as Trócaire (1973) and Goal (1977).

As well as getting an insight into how people lived in other parts of the globe, thanks to television people saw how others lived in Ireland. Diverse Cross-sections of Irish society were represented on RTE dramas. For example, city-dwellers could gain an insight into rural life by watching The Riordan's (which evolved into Glenroe), while people from the country could see what city-life was like by watching 'Tolka Row' (the forerunner of 'Fair City'). Soaps like these reflected the everyday experience of ordinary people. This trend of focusing on ordinary people was applied elsewhere on the fledgling station. For example, programmes like 'The Late Late Show' and 'School around the Corner' featured vox-pop segments. Overall, TV gave people a flavour of the diverse range of opinions that existed at the time and caused people to reflect on some facets of their own life.

Television also helped bring controversial social issues, such as contraception, abortion, divorce and corruption, into the everyday discussion. Debates were a key component of the flagship programme 'The Late Late Show'. For the first time, people who used to be 'beyond reproach', such as bishops, were questioned publicly. For example, in 1966, the Bishop of Galway Dr.

Michael Browne was criticised for spending exorbitant sums of money on a new “ghastly monstrosity” of a cathedral. Other members of the clergy objected to the discussion of previously tabooed subjects. For instance, the Bishop of Clonfert condemned the ‘Late Late Show’ as a promoter of ‘filth’ after it aired a mildly controversial Mr and Mrs segment. Television certainly facilitated social debate and may also have accelerated the introduction of divorce, legalisation of contraceptives etc.

Television also added a new dimension to the world of politics from its inception RTE placed a large emphasis on political coverage and current affairs with programmes such as ‘Newsbeat’ and ‘7 Days’ in the 1960s and later programmes like ‘Today Tonight’ in the 1980s. The Lémassera view was that TV was an extension of the government and should convey its point of view, but attitude evolved and presenters became more journalistic in nature. Presenters such as John Bowman, John O’Donoghue and Brian Farrell were not afraid to quiz politicians, but they were also tasked with ensuring coverage was ‘fair and balanced’. Television changed the world of politics irrevocably, old style mass meetings and church gate gatherings became less important and instead TV appearances became paramount.

Television also helped introduce new social trends in Ireland. For instance, renewed emphasis was placed on childhood. In the world of TV childhood was supposed to be a blissful, idyllic period in life. Therefore, RTE featured many programmes targeted at children in particular ‘Wanderly Wagon’ created by Eugene Lambert and later ‘Bosco’ and ‘Dempsey’s Den’. Another social standard reflected on TV was the changing status of women. Originally, women only served as continuity announcers (such as Kathleen Watkins). But later, women were given positions of more responsibility. For example, Geraldine McInearney became the first female

newsreader in 1975 and investigative journalists such as Mariane Finucane soon followed. This gave fuel to the broader feeling of female empowerment.

However, as well as instigating new trends, television helped reinforce some old ones. For instance, RTE had a role to play in reviving the Irish language. Broadcasters such as Brendan Ó hÉithir tried to popularise the language, while 'Bunús Cainte' presented by Máire O'Neill and Aileen Geoghean aimed to get more people actively speaking Irish. These measures were only partly successful in stemming the decline of the Irish language. TV buttressed the popularity of sport in Irish society. Not only players but commentators such as Mícheál Ó Hehir and Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh became household names. The first GAA match was broadcast in 1962 and it continued to retain high audience figures. TV also popularised other sports such as horse-racing and soccer, which were featured on the stations flagship sports programme 'Sports Stadium'

Television was one of the most significant inventions of the modern era and has transformed life in Ireland. It broadened peoples' horizons, educated the public on political affairs, brought controversial topics into the public arena and generally changed the lifestyles of ordinary people.