

Crown affair simply a judgment call by RTÉ

Broadcasting professionals trying to do their best decided not to have John Crown on the Late Late, not some dark and sinister force of Government, writes **Helen Shaw**

The blogosphere drums are beating with the so-called John Crown Affair and the idea that RTÉ, our national broadcaster, capitulated to its political masters and "banned" a troublesome voice of dissent. To some it appears to make sense that the head of TV, or even the director general, would quietly pull guests because it might disturb the TV licence fee review. And because a Minister told them to do it.

It's a nice, neat conspiracy tale which has managed to shift the health story from one focused on the future of cancer services and the HSE to one about media manipulation and dark forces censoring information. It feeds old stereotypes about political control of RTÉ and allows lots of high-minded platforms about free speech and State media to appear.

The problem is it is a lovely shiny red herring - and bears little relation to either the future of cancer services or the nature of editorial decision-making in RTÉ.

Making TV and radio programmes is an imperfect, sometimes messy science. Daily and weekly shows are run by producers who compete madly to get the best material on air. In RTÉ that competitive and creative urge has to work hand in hand with clear editorial lines of command and RTÉ's editorial guidelines. (They're online on www.rte.ie - see RTÉ Programme Standards and Guidelines 2007).

Ultimately the director general is the editor-in-chief of that chain of editorial command but each broadcast division - TV, radio and news - has a divisional head who is charged with ensuring that his or her output every day conforms with both Irish broadcasting law and RTÉ's own editorial guidelines.

Balance, fairness and impartiality feature high in the editorial framework of those decisions, and while you may not like the results as you hear them and see them every day on RTÉ television and radio, in reality they are decisions made by editors attempting to walk the thin line between creating informed debate and being fair, balanced and impartial.

And it can be a very thin line - particularly in the midst of a controversial running current affairs story, an election or civil unrest. In the end someone has to make the call. And with the best information available that is what editors do - and naturally accept the flack.

So what RTÉ, like every other public broadcaster has had to do, is to manage an editorial process which defends the public interest, within a highly politicised

environment where politicians and lobby groups of all shades try to influence and affect those decisions.

It was the norm, in my past life as both a programme maker and a former division head of RTÉ Radio, that politicians and vested interests attempted to influence your editorial decisions and yet it was the absolute inclination of the organisation to both recognise and resist such lobbying and find its own editorial path.

In any running national story, programme makers are used to getting calls, and even extremely animated calls, from government, departmental and ministerial press offices alleging one thing and demanding another. That is as much a part of the day-to-day as are calls from opposition parties and lobby groups alleging another thing and demanding something else.

What RTÉ attempts to do, within its own editorial lines, is to protect individual programme-makers by ensuring that balance on running stories is monitored across all output, both radio and television.

One of the routines of RTÉ's editorial process is a collation of all projected running orders for daily and weekly programmes for the coming week, which is done every Friday morning at the corporate editorial board. If nothing else, it allows the division heads to review and discuss how balance is being achieved across output on a running story.

The Late Late Show's forward plans for that evening's show are always tabled and reviewed, just like the other key weekend news and current affairs show. For TV - no more than any of the other output divisions - the challenge is to get the best show on air and yet be fresh on a running story.

Prof Crown has provided insight on many RTÉ radio and TV shows and will, I am sure, do so again. Whether the division head or programme team on the Late Late thought the panel was unbalanced with Prof Crown on it was a judgment call.

That's all it was - an editorial judgment call. Whether you liked or hated the Late Late Show debate on Friday was one thing, whether you felt it added to your sum knowledge about the future of cancer services in Ireland was another.

In the end only RTÉ is responsible for that and not some dark, sinister forces. Just who is responsible for the debacle in breast cancer services is a different matter.

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