

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Birkbeck, University of London
Unit of Assessment: 27
Title of case study: <i>Rebellion</i> : Understanding Ireland's road to Independence.
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014-17
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015 – 31 July 2020
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Colin Teevan was the creator, writer and executive producer of <i>Rebellion</i>, a television series about the 1916 Easter Rising and subsequent War of Independence in Ireland. It was the most expensive drama ever made by Irish national broadcaster RTÉ and formed the centrepiece of their 1916 centenary commemorations. The show gained 41% of the available audience on release and gained a global audience for Irish television through Netflix. The show created employment for thousands of actors, crew and translators, impacted audiences and actors through its pluralistic portrayal of the events, especially the role of women, educated audiences about Irish history and inspired them to learn more.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Colin Teevan is an award-winning screenwriter, playwright and was Professor of Screenwriting at Birkbeck from 2008-19. He has an ongoing research interest in how to portray the experience of war from the ground-up, as attested to by his plays 'The Lion of Kabul' (2009) and 'How Many Miles to Basra', which won the Clarion Award for Best New Play in 2007.</p> <p>Teevan expanded this research interest from the stage to television when Irish national broadcaster RTÉ commissioned him to write a five-part drama, <i>Rebellion</i>, on which he also acted as executive producer. RTE commissioned <i>Rebellion</i> as part of its contribution to the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising. Teevan was subsequently commissioned to write a second season to mark the centenary of the 1919-21 War of Independence, which aired in Ireland as <i>Resistance</i> and as <i>Rebellion</i> internationally.</p> <p>Teevan undertook substantial research in libraries, archives and by consulting experts to develop the script. Rather than focus on leading figures in the independence movement, Teevan wanted to present a diversity of viewpoints, reflective of the variegated experiences of those who lived through and participated in these events, demonstrating the complexity of the society and the overlapping and conflicting loyalties to family, nation, organisation and vision for the future. His characters thus include upper-class Unionists, Irish soldiers in the British Army fighting in the First World War, as well as representatives of Irish nationalist organisations such as the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Citizen Army, and Cumann na mBan (a women's paramilitary organisation). Foremost was a desire to portray events through the eyes of women, from a range of backgrounds, as well as from the perspective of socialist and working-class men. This important aspect of the revolutionary period is often neglected in dramatic recreations, which tend to focus exclusively on the nationalist perspective, but Teevan sought to remind viewers that for many, the struggle was not just for independence but for equality in a new Ireland. The leading characters he created were fictional to allow for greater creative freedom, but occasionally interacted with real figures such as Michael Collins, James Connolly and Countess Markievicz. Though fictional, the characters were a realistic portrayal based on extensive research into the lived experience of real people.</p> <p>Teevan made use of the latest historiography by academics such as Fearghal McGarry, Diarmaid Ferriter, Sean Enright, Roy Foster, Charles Townshend, Linda Connolly and Mary</p>

McAuliffe, as well as published memoirs from the time. Teevan particularly used the [Bureau of Military History Witness Statements](#), a unique and detailed record of the experiences of over 1,700 people who participated in the revolutionary events from 1913-21, recorded from 1947-57, but only released to the public in 2003 and now online. This archive revealed a wealth of personal stories, motivations, and experience from a broad cross-section of society, enabling Teevan to create a nuanced, bottom-up portrayal of the events through fictional characters grounded in authentic experiences.

3. References to the research

Rebellion Series 1. Broadcast by RTÉ (Ireland) January 2016, Sundance TV (USA) April 2016, Yleisradio (Finland) June 2016, Netflix from April 2016. DVD distributed by Dazzler Media, 2016.

Rebellion Series 2. Broadcast by RTÉ as *Resistance* January-February 2019, Netflix from March 2019. DVD distributed by Dazzler Media, 2019.

Esteem: Teevan's script for *Rebellion* was nominated for an Irish Film and Television Award for Best Script in 2016.

Funding: *Rebellion* and *Resistance* were awarded grants of €400,000 and €200,000 respectively from the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland under the Sound & Vision 3 scheme.

4. Details of the impact

The 'decade of centenaries' marking the revolutionary events from 1912-23 on the road to independence in Ireland has been of central importance for the nation, and none more so than the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising. As the national broadcaster, RTÉ was a pillar of the commemorative efforts. As its Director-General commented, 'For Ireland, it was a special centenary milestone that allowed us to commemorate, celebrate and reflect on the events that shaped the birth of our independence. ... Few roles are more central to public service media than significant national commemorations.'¹.

Teevan's *Rebellion* was used to launch RTÉ's year of commemorative programming, and 'set the agenda' for the nation's commemoration². RTÉ's 2016 annual review featured *Rebellion* as a 'highlight' of its 'commitment to present ground-breaking, fresh content on screens and on the airwaves that considered the rebellion itself as well as its impact.'¹. The importance of the show and the impact of Teevan's script is demonstrated in the fact that, at €6 million, it was the most expensive Irish drama made to date³.

The second season aired as *Resistance* in Ireland but *Rebellion* internationally. *Resistance* was similarly central to RTÉ's 2019 programme to mark the centenary of Ireland's parliament, Dáil Éireann, and the beginning of the War of Independence.

Colin Teevan's drama series 'Rebellion' and its sequel 'Resistance' were notably different, and were applauded by general audiences and professional historians alike. Teevan astutely used recent research into the surprising nature of many of the revolutionaries (disproportionately female, socialist, socially and often sexually dissident) to craft a story that was both gripping as entertainment, interrogative of received pieties about *fin-de-siecle* Ireland, and suggestive regarding the unfinished nature of the revolution which was put in motion in 1916- as well as the often-forgotten story of those who identified with the British connection (for one reason or another) rather than the idea of a separatist state. These new emphases chimed with research that many people (myself included) had been carrying on in academe, but launched it into a new dimension, reaching a far wider audience while not compromising on historical verisimilitude. The impact in Ireland, and among Irish audiences abroad, was notable, giving rise to lively and engaged discussion and high-profile exposure; now available on Netflix, the programmes have clearly brought historical issues to a whole new audience in an effective way, provoking discussions that continue. They provide a rare example of dramatising past history in a way that extends understanding while sacrificing neither entertainment-value nor authenticity.⁴.

The first season aired in the US with SundanceTV, in Finland with Yleisradio, and both seasons globally with Netflix, which is available in 190 countries. This was a significant coup for an Irish drama and was highlighted for special mention in RTÉ's 2016 report as a success for their Programme Sales division¹. The production values improved the reputation of RTÉ with public comments including: '@rte have converted a self confessed @NetflixUK fanatic to watching linear TV'; 'this is the best thing RTE has done in years.' Netflix also gained new customers: 'The reason I subscribed to Netflix? Because that way I could see #Rebellion'⁵.

Various businesses used the show's popularity as an opportunity to advertise, with tie-in tweets by Blackrock Cellar pitching drinks; Irish Travel Key to promote Dublin as a tourist destination; Lainey K to market their print business; and BML Media to showcase the houses where it was filmed and consequently their business. It boosted Irish tourism, with one person tweeting they booked a trip to Ireland after watching it.⁵

Rebellion also had a marked impact on employment. As well as the basic cast of 79, the show employed more than 1,000 extras, 125 full-time crew and 60 daily crew, not including post-production teams in picture, sound and CGI^{6a}. It also provided jobs for voice artists and translators in languages including Polish, Brazilian Portuguese, French, Arabic, Chinese, Turkish, Greek, Italian, Danish, Japanese, Russian and Spanish^{6b}. *Rebellion* significantly raised the profile of many who worked on it. In 2016, *Rebellion* won one Irish Film and Television Award (IFTA) with Ruth Bradley for Actress in a Lead Role Drama, and received seven further nominations in Drama, Script Drama, Costume Design, Production Design, Michelle Fairley for Actress in a Supporting Role in Drama, Barry Ward for Actor in a Lead Role in Drama, Sarah Greene for Actress in a Lead Role Drama^{6c}. Brian Gleeson who played his first lead role in a TV series in *Rebellion* has since starred in the film *Logan Lucky*, TV series *Peaky Blinders* and *The Bisexual*, and in several theatre productions in London, Edinburgh, New York and Dublin^{6d}. Others who achieved prominence include Barry Keoghan who has since starred in *Dunkirk*, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, and *Chernobyl*^{6e}.

Content and Representation

Rebellion was one of the top shows in Ireland in 2016. Its first episode was watched live by 619,000 viewers, 41% of the available audience, with a further 45,000 catching up an hour later and 9,200 on RTÉ Player within 24 hours of its release^{7a}. Across the series, it achieved an average audience share of 38.3%² and was frequently covered in every major newspaper and radio channel^{7b}.

Teevan's pluralistic representation of the events had significant impact with audiences at home and abroad. The portrayal of LGBT identity in a period drama powerfully resonated: 'what you did at the end of rebellion means so much to the LGBT community'⁵. A member of the Progressive Unionist Party in Belfast was impressed as 'I thought that in parts it captured, respectfully, the pain and alienation of Dublin's Unionist community. Something I haven't seen any other such production even attempt.'⁵ The portrayal of the Irish independence struggle from the perspective of women was especially impactful, mentioned in almost every review, in hundreds of public comments, and by the actors themselves. Leads Sarah Greene, Michelle Fairley and Ruth Bradley all publicly commented that they were attracted because of this focus. As Bradley said, her character's script was 'refreshing', as it was 'about her own past and her own life', and 'not about being in love or being obsessed with somebody.'^{8a} Greene added that: 'We're not taught about the women in the Rising - they're not represented at all, so that was exciting and important for us.'^{8b} Public comments also reflected on the rarity of leading women in television: 'Really refreshing to see so many strong female characters in one programme'. For some, it had a more personal impact: 'This show is making me realise just how hard the struggle women like my great grandmother went through & just how strong they must of [sic] been to put up with the treatment and bullshit they dealt with!'⁵.

The opportunity to play characters in a leading episode of their nation's history had a powerful emotional impact on the cast, with Charlie Murphy, Paul Reid, Andrew Simpson, Michael Ford-Fitzgerald and Natasha O'Keefe all publicly commenting on their sense of

pride and privilege^{7b,8c}. As Murphy said, 'One of the main things that drew me to this is that it is a huge privilege to be able to recount something about your own heritage.'^{8d}. This was also reflected in audience comments, such as 'Thank you to Colin Teevan and to @rte for sharing the story of my great grandparents and their involvement in the Rebellion'; 'reminds me of my forebears who Fought for my #Freedom and that of my Children. PROUD to be an #Irish Woman.'⁵.

Dozens of public comments attest that viewers have gained new knowledge and perspective and been inspired to learn more after watching the show. One wrote: 'I'm English and this drama opened my eyes to Irish history. I have since studied the history of Ireland.' Another said 'As someone who's not particularly academic I've always struggled to learn about history the conventional way, through books, so am always grateful when TV teaches me something new. This series had my scurrying to the history books afterwards to find out more.' Yet another said: 'If they showed shows like this in school when I was younger ... it wouldn't have taken me to become an adult to appreciate & actually want to learn history'. A variety of teachers also recommended it as a teaching aid, both for History and for English-language literature, particularly 'For any English teacher teaching Yeats'.⁵ The focus on 'ordinary people' rather than big leaders was also a draw, providing a new perspective: 'Every Irish school kid already knows who the Rising's leaders were and what they stood for, but what makes "Rebellion" work is that it shows us just how many ordinary Irish people also had a dog in the race.'⁹ The public response was such that the Irish Sun on Sunday used the headline "Rebellion" with an image directly informed by the show for their 2016 election special issue, an image described by news analysis service newstalk.com as 'The Irish Sun on Sunday looks back towards Ireland's rebellious past after a historic general election'^{10a, 10b}.

Rebellion was also frequently recommended by viewers to help understand Brexit and the impasse over the border in Northern Ireland. When remarking on Theresa Villiers' lack of knowledge about the border in Ireland, one twitter user recommended she watch *Rebellion* as 'She needs a good short history of Ireland.' Another replying to Tim Farron's tweet about the border said: 'If anyone has Netflix and wants to understand the Southern Irish watch rebellion – I've learnt a lot from this series'. When Andrew Rosindell, MP for Romford, suggested that the border was a 'domestic issue' that could be solved by 'guarantees' and not the 'backstop', an Irish person said: 'That M.P. should watch "Rebellion" on Netflix. We only had to fight a war to win back our independence.' Other examples include: 'Every Brexiteer needs to watch to understand the roulette wheel they spin.' 'It should be obligatory viewing for members of the European Research Group and all those Old Etonian Brexiteers desperate to dump the backstop, none of whom really comprehend the powerful forces they may unleash.'⁵

The show elicited a notable response from national independence campaigners in Wales, Palestine, and Puerto Rico, but particularly resonated with Scottish and Catalan people. Many Catalans unfavourably compared their own leaders to the Irish and drew lessons for their own movement: 'How great are the Irish people and how grey are our leaders'; 'Lesson: National freedom is not given, it is taken and paid for'; 'Ireland's independence (like everyone else) wasn't done with crumbs and surrender. It was done with disobedience and courage'. Scottish people were struck by the parallels with their own country and the 'bravery' required to overcome the forces stacked against them: 'it does make me question why we in Scotland are so timid about fighting for independence.' In response to Westminster not facilitating a second independence referendum, one person recommended *Rebellion* to 'see how the Irish dealt with Brit colonialism!'⁵

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1: [RTÉ 'A Year in Review' Annual Report & Group Financial Statements, 2016](#)

2: [RTÉ Independent Productions Annual Report 2016](#)

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- 3: Laurence Mackin, '[Rebellion review: RTÉ fires first salvo in 1916 centenary schedule](#)' *The Irish Times*, 3 January 2016.
4. Written statement.
- 5: Collated public comments from Twitter, IMDB, and Facebook – selected examples.
- 6a: Catherine Magee, Producer, *Rebellion*, from interview video embedded in '[Behind the scenes of new RTE drama Rebellion](#)', *The Irish Times*, 1 January 2016.
- 6b: Screenshot of subtitle and audio options on Netflix.
- 6c: [IFTA 2016 Nominees and Winners](#)
- 6d: [Brian Gleeson](#) homepage at 'The Agency'.
- 6e: IMDB profile for [Barry Keoghan](#)
- 7a: Patsy McGarry, '[RTÉ's "Rebellion" seizes power in battle for viewers](#)', *The Irish Times*, 4 January 2016.
- 7b: Collection of reviews, interviews and assorted material in media.
- 8a: Siobhan O'Connor, '[Siobhan O'Connor interviews Ruth Bradley - star of new RTE drama Rebellion](#)', *Irish Mirror*, 8 January 2016.
- 8b: Aisling Scally, 'The €6m heroine haul: RTÉ series set during Rising gets massive budget and an all-star cast', *Irish Daily Mail*, 22 December 2015.
- 8c: Rebellion Press Notes.
- 8d: Ed Power, '[RTÉ's "Rebellion" features three of Ireland's most talented actresses](#)', *Irish Examiner*, 1 January 2016.
- 9: Cahir O'Doherty, '[What the author of TV drama Rebellion learned about the 1916 Easter Rising](#)', Irish Central, 15 February 2016.
- 10a: Copy of the Irish Sun cover and the original publicity shot for reference.
- 10b: [Sunday papers ask "is this the Enda the line?" | Newstalk](#)