

Mr Michael McDowell, TD,
Progressive Democrats,
25 South Frederick Street,
Dublin 2.

14 May 2007

Re: Leaders' debates on RTÉ

Dear Tánaiste,

I write to you in your capacity as Leader of the Progressive Democrats, and therefore as a candidate to be Tánaiste in the incoming 30th Dáil, to ask for your public support for my request that Raidio Telefís Éireann promote and foster the widest possible dissemination of, and discussion about, the forthcoming leaders' debates on Wednesday and Thursday of this week (16 and 17 May 2007), by making coverage of those debates available online without restriction.

I have written to Cathal Goan, the Director General of RTÉ, to request that Raidio Telefís Éireann give content to its public service ethos and its commitment to freedom of expression in this very specific way during this election season; and I have written to the other party leaders asking them to support it as well.

In my letter to Mr Goan, I argued that, as a non-profit organisation owned by the Irish people, and as Ireland's cross-media leader, RTÉ is in a unique position to take a crucial step in the fostering of political debate in Ireland, in particular during this election, and especially online. As last week's web debate on communications policy on RTE.ie demonstrates, the Internet revolution has the potential to deepen democratic participation, to bring politicians closer to the people, and to make the government more accountable to the governed.

In my letter to Mr Goan, I commended RTÉ for its electronic and web initiatives, and in particular for last week's web debate. However, I argued that it was now time (with apologies to Fianna Fáil for appropriating one of its slogans) to take the next step. As it has recently been announced that there will be two leaders' television debates this week, I therefore requested of Mr Goan that all video footage from these debates would be able to be shared and re-used online (whether on video sites like YouTube, or on websites, blogs, or the like) without any uploader, user, downloader or commentator being deemed to have infringed copyright or otherwise to have acted unlawfully simply for having done so.

In other words, and for a change (with apologies to Fine Gael for appropriating this slogan), I wrote to ask RTÉ not to insist on its copyright in next week's debates, so as to encourage and enable the fullest possible discussion – especially online – about these very important debates. One way for RTÉ to do this would be to make the full video of the programme available via RTE.ie, making it clear that it is in public domain or at least available under an appropriately wide licence. Another would be to make it available via YouTube, as the BBC is beginning to do. I am sure that there are still other ways. The point is that it is an easy thing to do in technological terms; moreover, it is the right thing to do in democratic terms.

As Prof Lawrence Lessig of Stanford University wrote in various calls to US political parties and television networks to do something similar in the context of party debates among US presidential candidates:

... in the age of online video sharing, corporations retaining exclusive rights to debate footage is an obvious barrier to democratic participation. No concerned voter should ever be labeled a lawbreaker for wanting to share video of a presidential debate with others.

The point applies equally to the leaders' debates this week. Moreover, the main US political parties and most of the networks responded positively to his appeal. I would hope that RTÉ can do likewise to the similar request in my letter to Mr Goan. Moreover, as the US candidates gave their support to Prof Lessig's initiative, I would hope that you can publicly do likewise to mine.

The Progressive Democrats have made a significant impact online. With apologies for appropriating your own slogan, I would ask you not to throw that advantage away, but instead to press it home by supporting my request to RTÉ. I would be delighted to discuss this matter further with you at your convenience, and I look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Eoin O'Dell.
Fellow and Senior Lecturer in Law.

Mr Pat Rabbitte, TD,
Labour,
17 Ely Place,
Dublin 2.

14 May 2007

Re: Leaders' debates on RTÉ

Dear Mr Rabbitte,

I write to you in your capacity as Leader of the Labour Party, and therefore as a candidate to be Tánaiste in the incoming 30th Dáil, to ask for your public support for my request that Radio Telefís Éireann promote and foster the widest possible dissemination of, and discussion about, the forthcoming leaders' debates on Wednesday and Thursday of this week (16 and 17 May 2007), by making coverage of those debates available online without restriction.

I have written to Cathal Goan, the Director General of RTÉ, to request that Radio Telefís Éireann give content to its public service ethos and its commitment to freedom of expression in this very specific way during this election season; and I have written to the other party leaders asking them to support it as well.

In my letter to Mr Goan, I argued that, as a non-profit organisation owned by the Irish people, and as Ireland's cross-media leader, RTÉ is in a unique position to take a crucial step in the fostering of political debate in Ireland, in particular during this election, and especially online. As last week's web debate on communications policy on RTE.ie demonstrates, the Internet revolution has the potential to deepen democratic participation, to bring politicians closer to the people, and to make the government more accountable to the governed.

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RTÉ have a good web presence; in this respect, however, it is too restricted. But, (and with apologies for appropriating your slogan), are you happy with that? At a time when so much more is technologically possible, I think that the least RTÉ can do is to allow the coverage of the debates to be shared and re-used online. I would be delighted to discuss this matter further with you at your convenience, and I look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Eoin O'Dell.
Fellow and Senior Lecturer in Law.

Mr Trevor Sargent, TD,
The Green Party,
16/17 Suffolk Street,
Dublin 2.

14 May 2007

Re: Leaders' debates on RTÉ

Dear Mr Sargent,

I write to you in your capacity as Leader of the Green Party, to ask for your public support for my request that Radio Telefís Éireann promote and foster the widest possible dissemination of, and discussion about, the forthcoming leaders' debates on Wednesday and Thursday of this week (16 and 17 May 2007), by making coverage of those debates available online without restriction.

I have written to Cathal Goan, the Director General of RTÉ, to request that Radio Telefís Éireann give content to its public service ethos and its commitment to freedom of expression in this very specific way during this election season; and I have written to the other party leaders asking them to support it as well.

In my letter to Mr Goan, I argued that, as a non-profit organisation owned by the Irish people, and as Ireland's cross-media leader, RTÉ is in a unique position to take a crucial step in the fostering of political debate in Ireland, in particular during this election, and especially online. As last week's web debate on communications policy on RTE.ie demonstrates, the Internet revolution has the potential to deepen democratic participation, to bring politicians closer to the people, and to make the government more accountable to the governed.

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RTÉ have a good, if restrictive, web presence. It's time (with apologies for appropriating your slogan) that it was opened a little, in the interests of democratic participation. At a time when so much more is technologically possible, I think that the least RTÉ can do is to allow the coverage of the debates to be shared and re-used online. I would be delighted to discuss this matter further with you at your convenience, and I look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Eoin O'Dell.
Fellow and Senior Lecturer in Law.

Mr Gerry Adams,
Sinn Féin,
44 Parnell Square,
Dublin 1.

14 May 2007

Re: Leaders' debates on RTÉ

Dear Mr Adams,

I write to you in your capacity as Leader of Sinn Féin, to ask for your public support for my request that Radio Telefís Éireann promote and foster the widest possible dissemination of, and discussion about, the forthcoming leaders' debates on Wednesday and Thursday of this week (16 and 17 May 2007), by making coverage of those debates available online without restriction.

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RTÉ have a good, if restrictive, web presence, which should be opened a little in this case in the interests of democratic participation. At a time when so much more is technologically possible, I think that the least RTÉ can do is to allow the coverage of the debates to be shared and re-used online. I would be delighted to discuss this matter further with you at your convenience, and I look forward to your reply.

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