SUBMISSION TO THE FUTURE OF THE MEDIA COMMISSION

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January, 2021

Submission to The Future of Media Commission

The media is in crisis. Many aspects of this crisis are widely acknowledges including a decline in importance of reliable and relied on institutions such that public discourse now takes place in 'a dynamic, changeable, and barely controllable system of interacting forces' (Bruns 2018, p 342). This is related to technological developments which, from the business models adopted. Instead of advertising supporting of public interested media, social media now supports the commodification and sale of behavioural manipulation by tech giants to the highest bidder (Zuboff, 2017). These technologies tend to facilitate context-collapse undermining cues that allow for discerning trustworthiness (Davis and Jurgenson, 2014), and aid in the creation of filter bubbles, echo chambers and dehumanization of interaction. Deprofessionalization and hectic work schedules, making it increasingly hard for journalists to remain critical and learn lessons from systemic biases elucidated by research (Casey, 2019; Graham & Silke, 2017; Mercille, 2015; O'Rourke & Hogan, 2013). These problems, and other often-discussed one, have created a crisis in media and in public service media in particular. They form an important context for the commission considerations, for the importance of its considerations and for the suggestions provided in this submission.

An often ignored and underestimated problem for the media is the long-term trend of increasing specialization and its acceleration to hyper-specialization (Milgram, 2015). The degree of specialization is now so great that the idea of a public discourse in which individuals can make their own independent assessments - without specialists' support -is shrinking, and a great endarkenment beckons (Milgram, 2015). The media has a key function in facilitating public discourse among increasingly distanced specialists (O'Rourke, 2021). While increasing education levels, especially if broad, can help, it also means journalists now face diversely

critical audiences with high expectations and busy lives. Most believe the media to be neither competent or ethical, with growing inequality corroding trust across the Western world including Ireland (Edelman, 2020). This hyperspecialization adds to the crises of media beset by the more acknowledged problems of a disconnection of media. It stresses the splintering of trust and trustworthiness the linking of which is so vital (O'Neill, 2018) and which must be addressed if a broken media system is to be repaired.

Question 1. How should Government develop and support the concept and role of public service media and what should its role be in relation to public service content in the wider media be?

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The government needs to

1. Fund public service media as a universal basic service.

2. Ensure that public service media organization are more independent of government and commercial interests.

3. Facilitate high involvement of the public in public service media organization.

4. Devise structures for democratic bottom-up governance of public service media

5. Support journalism as a profession

6. Support research on media

7. Promote cooperation with international and EU authorities in the regulation of media.

1.2 What can be learned from the evolution of public service media over the last decade?

Public Service Media is needed as a universal basic service

Public service media is in deep trouble and it is clear that market-based solutions are on their own not only inadequate but can be inherently injurious to public service content (Zuboff, 2015). As the rise of fake news, voter manipulation, economic misinformation and the popularity of COVID-19 falsehoods has shown this crisis of public media is causing tremendous harm to society, and urgently needs to be addressed.

These lessons imply a need to treat public service media as an essential universal basic service need. Unfortunately, this necessitates public funding and state action, with all the difficulty that implies, if society is avoid increasing costs of the ongoing media crisis

Need for greater independence of public service media organizations from both government and commercial interest

In addressing the crisis in public service media, the state must recognize the state too lacks the trust of the public and public service media content seen to be influenced directly by the state is not likely to increase public confidence in the media in the West. Public Service media organisations with greater independence are more used by the public (Kennedy & Prat, 2019). However, the state can support and facilitate public service media organizations independent from government (see sections below for specific suggestions).

Need for a high-public involvement in public service media organization

It is clear that media organizations need to embrace the greater involvement of their publics if the value of new technology is to be appropriately (Silva & Sanseverino, 2020). This is even more vital for a public media service as it needs some degree of active citizenship to maintain both content and creditability.

Need for a democratic bottom-up governance of public service media organization

Ireland's model of public services media governance, in common with the UK, has relied heavily on central government appointees who for the term of their appointment are required to act independently of government. This has worked surprisingly well but is unsuitable for a world in which populists have leveraged establishment connections to reduce the trust of the public in the media, where knowledge is so complex and distributed and where those who feel failed most by establishment are also most alienated from establishment-run media. Some other countries like the Netherlands have been able, for historical reasons, to develop public service media models based on more bottom-up civil society institutions which have been widely trusted. Germany and some other countries have been able to leverage both their more polycentric state structures and strong trusted social partnership models to ensure accountable government structures for public service media. Ireland does not have these resources and so must chart a new course – a state-facilitated but independent democratic bottom-up governance structure for its public service media.

Need for support of journalism as a profession

As has been acknowledged above, international experience has pointed to the need for greater involvement of the public in media, expert skills are needed to facilitate such involvement up to and including citizen journalism. The profession of journalism provides some protection against commercial pressures (Christin, 2020) and to provide skills and commitment for a critical approach necessary to insure inclusivity, awareness of the need for the diversity and provide a trusted public media service.

Need for support of research on the media

The massive rate of change in even predictable technological affordances (Kelly, 2016), in forces of sociological change (Millgram, 2015) and in business models (Silva & Sanseverino, 2020) are such that the media landscape is in vital need of further research.

We have learned for example, from international experience that those with less education are being reached less by public service media news organizations across Europe (Schulz, Levy & Nielsen, 2019). Research in this area seems urgently needed to ascertain if public service media in Ireland is failing to reach similar segments of the population and develop further policy options to overcome this, assuming Ireland follows other countries pattern in this area. It is clear there is a growing social divide in being served by trusted media (Edelman, 2020).

If society is not to be repeatedly ambushed in ways that have been hinted at by shocks such as the Cambridge Analytical scandal, the radicalization achieved by various terrorist groups thorough social media and the costs of COVID conspiracy theories, then research is desperately needed. It is clear that given the nature of the most profitable business models (Graham, 2017; Zuboff, 2015) that it would be silly to expect commercially driven companies   to provide the bulk of funding for such critical research and the state must take the lead in doing so.

Need for supranational regulation of media.

Ireland's economic dependence on technological firms and its economic openness makes obvious the need for Ireland to push for stronger and international accepted regulation of media companies. While national media remain important and need to be understood in their own terms, many studies make clear the increasing power of international media players (Shimpach,

2019). Perhaps the difficulty of the UK's parliament in being able to question Mark Zuckerberg shows most concisely the need for a supranational approach.

1.3 What systems may be required to support and sustain public service content, e.g. high quality, independent journalism, in an increasingly competitive and consolidated market?

RTÉ is to be commended for its openness relative to the BBC. For example, complete programs of *Morning Ireland* are available online for five years after broadcast compared to say the very limited access of the BBC Radio 4's Today program. This good practice needs to be extended, deepened and supported if RTÉ is going to continue to play a pivotal role in the national conversation. To that end the following moves towards further data openness should be considered:

1. Full free of charge online availability of RTÉ archive for personal and research use.
2. A platform by which members and researchers can create links, transcripts and commentary to the archive.

1.4 How might public service media be more effective in promoting the Irish language, sport and culture?

These matters fall outside the expertise of this submission.

1.5 How might public service media better respond to the needs and expectations of the public?

Both a higher involvement of the public in the organization of public services media and great bottom-up democratic control would facilitate this, as would greater support for research on the media. Public Service media role in providing business knowledge to Irish organizations is one area that needs to be further explored.

1.6 What can we learn from other jurisdictions?

Such lessons are incorporated into the remarks in other sections of this report.

Question 2. How should public service media be financed sustainably?

2.1 What is the best model for future funding of public service media in Ireland? What approach best supports independent editorial oversight while achieving value for money and delivering on public service aims?

While unpalatable, it is clear that public service media as a universal, diverse and inclusive essential service that is trusted and trustworthy can only be provided in the current circumstance and for the foreseeable, future by state funds. This represents an increased burden on the state and public funds and needs to be recognized and championed as such. The societal costs of pretending that such a universal basic service is not necessary are great.

2.2. How should public funding or tax reliefs be apportioned to Public Service Content providers?

Direct Public funding should be apportioned by a Public Media Services Authority (see Section 3.3. below) and only be provided for public media services purpose if content is freely available to the Irish public for individual and research use.

Tax reliefs should only be provided for particular media content, and judged primarily on its value for the development of Irish media industry capacity. Tax relief for media projects should subject recipients to transparency requirements that allow profiling of subsidies to public accountability.

2.3 What does the shift in advertising revenues towards big tech firms mean for the future of print, online and broadcast media?

The shift in advertising revenue means that public services media now, and for the foreseeable future needs to be financed from the public purpose. Avoiding this unpleasant truth will lead to higher costs in terms of societal damage.

2.4 What role is there for alternative funding models for Public Service Content providers – voluntary, cooperative, crowdsourcing, subscription?

A subscription-based funding model has the advantage of creating a deeper relationship between media and its audiences. However, a pure market-based subscription model is fundamentally damaging to addressing the inequality of access and trust in public service media, and so unable to bring the nation together as public service media should. A subscription-model can work if a subscription to and membership public service media service is provided to the public as a universal basic service. This universal essential service could be funded by a licence fee, as a specific item in the taxation/welfare or through general taxation.

Voluntary support, whether through philanthropy, crowding-funding for public service media should be confined to specific public media content so that that relationships between funding and content is transparent.

Cooperative public service media in terms of pre-existing civil society groups or specially formed groups should be encouraged but monitored in terms of diversity and dominance of such co-operatives.

Question 3. How should media be governed and regulated?

The governance arrangements of RTÉ should be altered so that a 12 member board

    i.   Includes six representatives elected directly from the public it aims to serve. In the short-term this might be from an electorate comprised of licence-holders but in the longer term should be an electorate dominated by resident adult citizens of the state.

    ii.   Increase the elected representatives elected from RTÉ's workforce to two, with RTÉ allocating, without further organizational incumbrances, at least 50% of the elected representatives RTÉ workloads.

    iii.   Include the Director-General of RTÉ as an ex-officio member

    iv.   Include three expert board members, at least one of whom is resident outside the state should be appointed by the other members of the board.

    v.   Elects from its own membership- excluding the three RTÉ members- its own chairperson.

    vi.   Election of board members should be organized to insure overlapping service between renewable service periods of three years.

Given that the board members should be obliged to act in the interest of public service media, and will have rare knowledge and expertise in this function the board meeting without its RTÉ Diretor-General and without its RTÉ elected representatives -should constitute the state's Public Services Media Authority with ultimate control of how public grants for public services media content are allocated. The Public Services Media Authority may well delegate all or part of its authority to pre-existing agencies or develop new implementation bodies for its grant giving activities.

3.1 What regulatory changes at EU or global level might impact on the governance of public service media in the period ahead?[1]

Rather than address this specifically as a separate matter such implications as this submission addresses have been dealt with throughout.

3.2 What challenges are posed to a vibrant, independent public service media by increasing consolidation / declining plurality of ownership in the Irish market?

Competition and diversity in Irish media are matters of concern and should be addressed (Flynn, 2017), as indeed are issues of competition and fair competition at the global level. However, the media crisis has be seen as a failure of the market, requiring active state publicly funded initiatives rather than mere market failures that can and should be addressed by better market regulation.

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3.3 Are current legislative and regulatory controls for public service media adequate?

Again, further improvement in regulation and controls are needed but a focus on such controls, particularly, if based on an imaginary of purely market consistent solutions, underestimates the problem. The media crisis demands a strong public purpose led initiative that establishes public media service as a universal basic service.

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