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*writing in a personal capacity*

THERE is a poignant typographical error in the text on the Commission’s [public consultation](#) webpage. The passage reads: ‘The media are important for our democracy and society. They inform public debate through independent, journalism.’

That stray comma between ‘independent’ and ‘journalism’ carries a hint of one or more adjectives discarded from earlier drafts. Without any inside knowledge, one can only speculate as to what else might have been thought to constitute valuable qualities for ‘our’ journalism. Vigorous? Authoritative? Challenging? Well-resourced? ‘Watchdog’? How about professional? There are other possible descriptions that might hark back to the cyberoptimism of past decades, or allude to continuing hopes for more equal societies, to be reflected in media: inclusive, democratic, pluralistic, accessible.

‘Independent’ is nonetheless a provocative and appropriate choice as the last adjective standing for journalism in its time of crisis, especially in the call for a consultation process about public service media. It would be easy, and not necessarily wrong, to reflect on how RTÉ’s standing has been burnished through the Covid-19 pandemic because of its connection to the State, rather than any independence it might enjoy. In a crisis that has seen a necessary focus on official national responses, audiences have turned to the national broadcaster as a favoured authority.

What are we to make, then, of ‘independence’ as a value beyond this moment, and how can State policy encourage it? This short submission is based on four imperatives that reflect principles and practices of media independence – ideas that I believe should guide policy on the future of media.

### **1. Complement RTÉ with democratically directed funding for not-for-profit (but not necessarily amateur) media.**

The national broadcaster’s position can and should be defended, and I have little doubt the Commission will hear many such defences. Public funding for independent media, however, must now go beyond historic limited support for community broadcasters and piecemeal payments for worthy programming. There is no question any longer of whether market mechanisms alone can provide informative and thorough journalism at every level, from hyperlocal to international: they cannot. The commercial local radio sector, for example, has fought to keep community radio initiatives in a tiny, underfunded box, where they may serve, at best, as amateur ‘testing grounds’ for would-be broadcasters; meanwhile, these

same commercial stations have all but abandoned any pretense of providing local news, with local newspapers close behind them in this regard. From local to national level, media must be understood as an area where public aid is vital and for-profit actors' complaints about market distortions can be safely ignored in the public interest.

At the same time, public aid should not be used by for-profit media to top up their advertising revenue.

The model of the 'Citizenship News Voucher' (CNV), developed in the United States by scholar Robert McChesney and journalist John Nichols, would be one way to direct such support, albeit not the only one. Limited only to not-for-profit enterprises that meet a minimal threshold of 'journalism', these vouchers would direct funds to media organisations according to individual taxpayers' annually declared preferences – not their websurfing or channel-hopping behaviour. For several years I have run experiments with students whereby each got control of a notional €100 and divided it among the media organisations of their choice. Invariably, the majority of the students' chosen funding has gone toward relatively niche, minority or local services with a clear public-service orientation. (They are allowed to choose from a long list of organisations, mostly popular and for-profit ones: under a CNV system such organisations would be encouraged to convert to non-profit status.) The students have always freely admitted that their favoured media outlets under the CNV were not actually the organisations they read or viewed most often, but rather the ones they saw as most socially and journalistically valuable.

Such an exercise repeated at national level would be a basis not only for democratic and pluralist funding of media, but also for media education, as organisations would seek to persuade members of the public to direct support in their direction. A public entrusted with such a responsibility is one that could rebuild its often-troubled relationship with plural, reinvigorated media. I also believe media that both employ and address the interests of the working class, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and others who are neglected at present would be encouraged by such a system.

Public media, especially in the digital age, must mean participatory and accessible media, not merely media that are state-connected. This and other ways of supporting independent media could help to achieve that aim, well beyond the largely technical questions about the best framing of licence fees.

## **2. Don't treat Big Tech as an inevitable fact of life, even a regrettable one – let alone as 'partners'.**

There is nothing natural or inescapable about the process that has seen the human desire for information and sociality commercialised to an unprecedented degree through digital surveillance. Such transactional surveillance at the level of the click, scroll and keystroke is not simply exploitative, not merely repugnant to individual and collective rights to privacy – but the processing power it involves constitutes an unacceptable drain on the planet's energy resources. Big Tech is killing us.

State policy and the State's position in transnational bodies such as the EU should be to limit, disrupt and ultimately destroy the tech monopolies, and to build publicly supported alternatives that do not repeat the ills of those companies.

In the meantime, the companies cannot and should not be regarded – even with due hesitation and caveats – as partners in society’s efforts to achieve desirable media-related goals. This insistence on antagonistic independence from Big Tech relates also to the next point.

### **3. Resist the temptation to censor, or to encourage censorship by media companies and platforms, in the name of countering disinformation.**

I submit this document in the aftermath of extraordinary scenes in Washington DC. Given the levels of conspiratorial thinking evidently present among the Trump-supporting protesters, it is understandable that a great deal of analysis has already focused on the ‘informational’ rather than material roots of these events. Misinformation and its deliberate subset ‘disinformation’ are real problems for our politics and societies.

However, a commitment to independence as a value in media and journalism must mean that governments and platforms are not empowered to render undemocratic judgments about what constitutes ‘correct’ information.

As Yale University’s [Jack Balkin told the New York Times](#): ‘The central problem we face today is not too much protection for free speech but the lack of new trustworthy and trusted intermediate institutions for knowledge production and dissemination.’ You do not build trustworthy institutions by censoring the untrustworthy ones, but rather by slow and principled processes like the one described under point 1, above.

In the meantime, we must reverse the trend that has seen Mark Zuckerberg and Jack Dorsey turned into the world’s unaccountable information czars, able to silence even the president of the United States. As desirable as that may feel, it is the opposite of a democratic, independent media.

### **4. Look gift horses in the mouth.**

Just as our policies must not accept a world in which the most important decisions about media production and dissemination are made by Facebook, Twitter and Google, we should cast a wary eye on assertions that journalistic independence is buttressed by various innovations ushered in by the market and/or philanthropy.

Gifts from billionaires to news media outlets are highly desirable if you’re the editor at one of those organisations – and as I have written elsewhere, journalism has never been pure and cannot afford to be choosy. Nonetheless, such beneficence encourages a form of dependence that is arguably more problematic than reliance on public monies. As scholarship in this area has suggested, it may also encourage approaches to journalism that are more aligned to elite interests rather than to the information needs of a broad public.

Similarly, exciting developments in the funding of journalism, especially the boom in subscription income flowing to writers and podcasters through platforms such as Patreon and Substack, should be examined carefully for how they may direct funds away from important day-to-day reportage and toward a small number of attention-getting celebrity commentators – like an OnlyFans for opinion-writers.

Unlike the views I outline above about addressing the tech monopolies, I do not suggest it the place of public media policy to disrupt and destroy such narrowcast subscription platforms, which may indeed make a valuable contribution to the media environment. However, the sorts of contributions they make, like those made by philanthropy, cannot compensate for the evident failings in contemporary media that better-directed public funding can address.