




Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



Shared Island
Initiative



Shared island Dialogue Series:

Media representation of the Island of Ireland

Introduction

Shared Island Dialogue series

Inclusive dialogue with all communities and political traditions is central to the Government's Shared Island initiative.

Over the last two years, the Shared Island Dialogue series has brought together more than 2,500 citizens and civic representatives to discuss how cooperation and interaction can help address challenges and take up opportunities that concern and connect the whole island.

The Dialogue series has sought to include as broad a range of experience and perspective as possible, including traditionally underrepresented voices in the Peace Process of women, young people and ethnic minority communities on the island.

Through the Dialogue series, the Government is listening to people's views on a range of common concerns, on how we can work across communities and borders for a shared future, in practical, meaningful ways.

Reports and highlights from the Shared Island Dialogue series are available online [here](#).

Media representation of the island of Ireland

A Shared Island Dialogue on *Media representation of the island of Ireland* was convened on 24 April 2023, held at the Convention Centre, Dublin.

Over 150 civil society representatives, including journalists, media organisations, academics, government and political representatives from North and South participated.

The Dialogue was moderated by Kevin Rafter, Full Professor of Political Communications at Dublin City University, and featured two panel discussions.

The first session explored the successes and shortcomings of media representation of the island of Ireland; how different communities, regions, and political and social issues are presented in media and social media; and how this influences political and public debates.

The second session looked at the media sector across the island, in particular the current position and the potential for development of deeper cross-border networks, organisation and collaboration in news and other media, looking both North/South and East/West.

This report sets out the main themes and issues raised at the Dialogue to help inform further development of the Government's Shared Island initiative and as a contribution to broader discussion on how we share the island of Ireland, today and into the future.

Report: Shared Island Dialogue on *Media representation of the island of Ireland*

Overview: *At the Dialogue a number of key themes emerged:*

- A strong theme in Panel 1 was the **clear scope for better representation of the experiences and perspectives of different communities** across both jurisdictions the island, in media discourse.
- Panel 1 highlighted how news coverage of the other jurisdiction on the island tends to be **strongly focused on politics**, and there could be more of a focus on other issues that affect people's lives and also that convey how society, North and South, has changed and become more diverse over recent decades. It was noted that often the most uncompromising, controversial, or polarising views are prominently presented in the media, when these are not broadly representative of the community as a whole in Northern Ireland.
- It was noted that **social media is altering the way younger generations receive news**, and disinformation and negative news travels faster. It can be difficult for young people to differentiate between noise and news, particularly in a contested context. The need for teaching of **media literacy** in schools both North and South was raised.
- The **move from traditional media to social media was seen to run a risk of 'ghettoization' of media consumption** with individuals or particularly communities predominantly accessing content with a particular viewpoint, which can compound mistrust of other groups and a sense of community conflict. This is a concern globally, particularly in divided societies.
- **Lack of diversity in the media** was also highlighted as a concern across both panel sessions, with emphasis on the need for more ethnic minority representation both in newsrooms and in media outputs. Research indicates that coverage that reflects more fully the diversity of the community, supports in the medium term in attracting and retaining audience share.
- **Funding constraints both North and South** were identified as an economic challenge for the media sector in terms of deepening cross border coverage, reporting and cooperation. **25 years ago**, at the time of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, **cross-border reporting and cooperation in news media was seen as more prevalent**. There were funding schemes to support, but these did not continue and some interactions fell away. Both panels highlighted that, broadly, there is an audience interest for more Southern and Northern coverage in each jurisdiction and some way to address the funding issue might be sought.
- Panel 2 highlighted the scope for **greater cross-border interaction and collaboration between young and student journalists**, which can provide a basis for career-long interactions. Often, young journalists don't look to career opportunities in the other jurisdiction. The suggestion of an island-wide conference for student journalists was made as a way to foster links.
- There is **some cross-border interaction cooperation on environmental reporting, however there scope for far more**, given the increasing significance of climate change actions and that this affects both parts of the island in comparable ways.

Panel 1: Media Representation of the island – successes and shortcomings

This panel was moderated by Kevin Rafter and had the following panellists

- Pat Leahy, Political Editor, Irish Times
- Susan McKay, Press Ombudsman
- Ben Lowry, Editor, Belfast News Letter
- Razan Ibraheem, Journalist & Activist
- Steven McCaffrey, Social Change Initiative

Key messages:

- The panel discussed how the structure of media in Ireland and Northern Ireland plays in to representation of political and social issues in cross-border terms. Divergences were seen to be greater in the media than other sectors, for instance in the Arts where there is greater interaction and exchange across the island. While there is some good practice by media around cross-border coverage, there isn't routine or in-depth media coverage of life across the two parts of the island.
- A traditional view was that 'the North' is a turn off for audiences and therefore for editors both Ireland and in Britain. However, the popularity of the Irish Times ARINS series on North South attitudes was evidence of a different trend now: There can be strong interest in Northern stories (and vice versa), reader interest depends on the approach.
- It can be more difficult to report on cross-border basis, due to the need to provide more context and background within limited word counts. Additionally, there remains a lack of appreciation in the South about way in which Northern Ireland is continuing to recover societally from conflict and the contested political and social contexts there.
- Regarding coverage of the South in Northern media, unionist perspectives were discussed. It was suggested that a unionist view tends to be uneasy about broad coverage of the South, seeing this as a 'Trojan horse' or 'slippery slope' towards a united Ireland. An alternative view was given that lack of coverage of stories Ireland, reflects a unionist view that unless there is an impact for Northern Ireland, it is not particularly relevant. This should not be construed as a hostility to the South or to coverage of events with cross-border interest.
- It was raised that there is a need to recognise that in media, often the most uncompromising, controversial, or polarising views are prominently presented in the media, when these are not broadly representative of the community as a whole in Northern Ireland. This can adversely impact political and community dynamics. Panelists were clear that journalism should not support particular political projects or automatically align with pre-determined news angles. It should however be informed by certain values and standards (transparency, truth, accuracy), regardless of what news angle is taken.
- In the context of the challenging economic position of news media, the question of reader interest is highly relevant. Also, given resource constraints for traditional media, there is more of a focus on commentary rather than on reporting and investigative journalism.

- The move from traditional media to social media was seen to run a risk of 'ghettoization' of media consumption with individuals or particularly communities predominantly accessing content with a particular viewpoint, which can compound mistrust of other groups and a sense of community conflict. This is a concern globally, particularly in divided societies.
- A lack of diversity in the media both in terms of representation in newsrooms and in news coverage was highlighted as a major concern leading to skewed presentations. Also, coverage tends to be strongly focused on political debates and divisions, which can obscure how society and communities are changing and becoming more diverse. There should be greater representation of non-'Irish' voices and accents. Moreover, research indicates that stories which reflect the diversity of society help newsrooms in attracting and keeping audiences.
- The panel also discussed media literacy, in relation to social media content particular. It was observed that journalists fundamentally want to get stories accurately presented; some panelists questioned the extent to which fake news is a major problem on the island.
- There was through a common view that media literacy is a vital skill for everyone, especially younger people who consume news content from a far wider array of sources, with more scope for curating their own news, and recognising that not all articles from online sources are fact checked or written by journalists.
- Although social media is an opportunity, there is a need to connect with young people on the platforms they use. Disinformation and negative news does travel faster, and it is difficult for young people in particular to differentiate between noise and news. It was said that social media companies are not doing enough to assist in the distinction, and there is a need for more education in schools on media literacy.

Panel 2: Developing deeper cross-border networks in media

This panel was moderated by Kevin Rafter and had the following panellists

- Rónán Ó Domhnaill, Media Development Commissioner
- Deirdre McCarthy, Director of News and Current Affairs, RTÉ
- Noel Doran, Editor, Irish News
- Kirsty King, Head of News, Queen's University Radio
- John Purcell, CEO, KCLR 96FM and Chairperson of the Independent Broadcasters of Ireland

Key messages:

- The panel discussed the dynamics of deeper cross-border collaboration in news media. It was noted that the media industry generally has been contracting which makes resourcing of cross-border operations or reporting more challenging, but there is a clear desire in the industry to maintain and expand these networks.
- News media want to maintain correspondents on the other side of the border but financial constraints often precludes them from doing so; it was suggested that some resourcing in this area would be beneficial for cooperation, and for more sustained and regular coverage.
- The lack of resourcing can lead to a focus on only the biggest or controversial stories from the other side of the border and missing of more regular presentation of life.
- In online media, artificial intelligence and algorithms can cut costs, however they can also serve to narrow the types of stories that audiences are exposed to, and increase representation in online and social media of more controversial or extreme views.
- There are economic incentives and opportunities for more cross-border collaboration on reporting, some areas like sports are particularly relevant, but tight deadlines can preclude collaboration in other more time-sensitive areas. The panel also noted that young journalists could be encouraged to look at job opportunities on both side of the border.
- The new Media Commission and its planned schemes to support journalism were noted and implementation of the recommendation on research on developing the all-island media economy and on maximising collaboration between Public Service Media and Public Service Content Providers on an all-island basis.
- Stories from the 'other' side of the border were seen to have become more popular over the last ten years, especially human-interest stories and those that connect communities. The impact of social media on the journalism landscape has also broadened the variety of stories that organisations are reporting on, "our audiences are not just readers and listeners, they are now followers too."
- The lack of connectivity across student journalism was highlighted, with opportunities for collaboration in this area, in particular considering the common problems that students are facing such as student accommodation, the cost of living and mental health. The suggestion of an island-wide conference for student journalists was made as a way to foster links.

- There is also a lack of diversity in journalism, especially in political journalism which discourages young journalists from diverse backgrounds from pursuing these careers. This extends across all minorities, genders, and ethnicities. There was a focus on the lack of Traveler voices in journalism and media and a call for under-represented voices to be more widely seen and heard, not just when it comes to issues regarding that specific minority, but mainstreamed across all areas of the media.
- In the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement cross-border cooperation and reporting was seen to have been more prevalent as there was an 'urgent imperative.' There were some schemes to support cross-border reporting and cooperation, however once the resourcing and the urgent imperative ended, so too did the collaboration, despite the appetite remaining.
- There is ongoing cooperation on environmental reporting, however there is an opportunity for further collaboration as the issue of climate change affects the island as a whole. Climate change is a challenging story to report on and an area in which best practice can be shared, therefore cooperation in this area would be valuable for all involved.

Panel 1 – Media representation of the island – successes and shortcomings



Pat Leahy, Irish Times

Pat Leahy is the political editor of The Irish Times. He is the author of two best-selling books about Irish politics and has made a number of television documentaries for RTE.

Previously, he was deputy editor and political editor of The Sunday Business Post. A graduate in law from UCD, he was a Reuters fellow at Oxford University.



Razan Ibraheem, Journalist & Activist

Razan Ibraheem is an Irish-Syrian journalist with expertise in media literacy and verifying social media content. She has worked with Kinzen and Storyful News Agency and provided research for The New York Times Pulitzer Prize-winning visual investigation in 2020. Razan is a regular contributor to Irish radio and TV programs, and her work has been featured in local and international media outlets. Razan was named International Woman of the Year by Irish Tatler in 2016.



Ben Lowry, Belfast News Letter

Ben Lowry is editor of the Belfast News Letter. He qualified as a barrister in the 1990s, then worked as a journalist at News International and the Belfast Telegraph before joining the News Letter in 2007, becoming deputy editor in 2013.



Susan McKay, Press Ombudsman

Susan McKay became Ireland's Press Ombudsman on 3 October 2022. From Derry, she is a writer and has worked for many years as a journalist.

Her books include "Northern Protestants – On Shifting Ground" (Blackstaff, 2021), "Bear In Mind These Dead" (Faber, 2007) and "Sophia's Story" (Blackstaff, 1998). Her essays have appeared in many anthologies including "Show Your Work – Essays from the Dublin Review" (2022) and "Impermanence" (No Alibis Press, 2022), and "Great Irish Reportage" (Penguin, 2015). Her journalism has been published in the New Yorker, the London Review of Books, the New York Times, Field Day Review, the Irish Times and the Guardian, for which she was a regular columnist before her appointment as PO. She was Northern Editor of the Sunday Tribune until 2004. She is one of the judges for the Ewart Biggs Award.

She has been a senior figure in the NGO sector – from 2009 to 2012 she was CEO of the National Women's Council of Ireland, and she was a founder of the Belfast Rape Crisis Centre in the 1980s. She was a member of the code committee for the British press regulator, Impress.



Steven McCaffrey, Social Change Initiative

Steven McCaffrey was a journalist for 25 years, holding a series of senior editorial posts in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. He is now Communications Strategy Executive for the Social Change Initiative, an international NGO based in Belfast, where his work includes examining the role of the media in deeply divided societies.

Panel 2 – Developing deeper cross – border networks in media



Rónán Ó Domhnaill, Media Development Commissioner

Rónán Ó Domhnaill was appointed as Media Development Commissioner with Coimisiún na Meán in March of this year. The Media Development Commissioner will have overall responsibility for the funding and development of the wider media sector and for the implementation of a number of the key recommendations of the Report of the Future of Media Commission, including maximising collaboration between Public Service Media and Public Service Content Providers on an all-island basis. The Media Development Commissioner will also oversee measures to drive equality, diversity, and inclusion in the media and to support environmental sustainability in the media sector. The Media Development Commissioner will have lead responsibility in overseeing a comprehensive review of the provision of Irish language services across the media system.



Deirdre McCarthy, Director of News and Current Affairs, RTÉ

Deirdre McCarthy has been Managing Director of RTÉ News & Current Affairs since December 2022, leading RTÉ's news coverage of national and international events. She is the first woman to hold this position. As part of the RTÉ Executive Board, Deirdre plays a leading role in continuing RTÉ's journey of transformation in responding to ongoing change. Previously, Deirdre held the role of Managing Editor of Regions and Radio News programmes at RTÉ, where she shaped and expanded the organisation's political and regional news coverage and strategy, particularly enhancing digital output. Before this, Deirdre was RTÉ's Political Coverage Editor at Leinster House, leading the reporting of political news stories as well as overseeing the live broadcasting of national events such as General Elections, election debates, Referenda including Marriage Equality and Abortion.



Noel Doran, Editor, Irish News

Noel Doran is the longest serving editor of a daily paper in Ireland and the UK, having been in his post at The Irish News since 1999. He joined The Irish News as deputy editor in 1993, having previously held staff roles with The Belfast Telegraph, The Ballymena Observer, The Antrim Guardian and Downtown Radio/Cool FM. The Irish News has won a number of awards during his term of office, including the Society of Editors UK regional newspaper of the year. In 2020, he was voted as UK regional editor of the 21st century by readers of the industry website Hold the Front Page.



Kirsty King, Queen's University Radio

Kirsty King is the current head of The Scoop news service at Queen's Radio, Northern Ireland's biggest student media site which produces broadcast, written and visual content on a regular basis. During her time at The Scoop, she has presented a podcast focusing on issues women face in Northern Ireland, won Best Irish Political Piece at the Student Publication Association Regional Awards in 2022 and 2023, and most recently hosted a panel discussion about women's role in the peace process as part of the Belfast Imagine Festival of Ideas & Politics. She recently graduated from Queen's University with a BA in English Literature and plans to start an MA in Journalism at Ulster University this coming September.



John Purcell, CEO, KCLR 96FM and Chairman of Independent Broadcasters of Ireland

John Purcell is Chairman of Independent Broadcasters of Ireland and is also a founding shareholder and director of KCLR 96fm where he is Chief Executive and presents a weekly business programme. Past radio experience includes chairing the application for the original license for NewsTalk in 1999 where he was a Director until 2021. He was also a founding investor and director of Beat 102 103. John is also the founding Chairman of Radiocentre Ireland, an organisation established jointly by RTE and IBI to promote the power of radio as a marketing medium. He is also a Director of IRS+ and Kilkenny Employment for Youth and a past Chairman of Kilkenny Arts Festival and a Past President of Kilkenny Chamber of Commerce and Industry. He holds a BA in Politics and History from UCD and an MA in Communications and Cultural Studies from DCU.

Moderator



Kevin Rafter, DCU

Kevin Rafter is Full Professor of Political Communication at Dublin City University. He is the author/editor of over a dozen books on Irish politics and media including *Taoisigh and the Arts* (2022) and *Resilient Reporting: Media Coverage of Irish Elections since 1969* (2020). His research focuses on political journalism, political advertising, the President of Ireland and media coverage of elections. His research has been published in over sixty book chapters and international academic journals. Since joining DCU in 2010, he has been Head of the School of Communications, Associate Dean for Research and Chair of the MA Political Communication programme. He worked previously as a political journalist and held senior positions with RTÉ News, the *Irish Times*, *Sunday Times* and *Sunday Tribune* as well as being editor of *Magill* magazine. A qualified Chartered Director at the Institute of Directors (London), he has been Chair of the Compliance Committee of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, and, since 2019, has been Chair of the Arts Council.

As part of the Shared Island Initiative
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