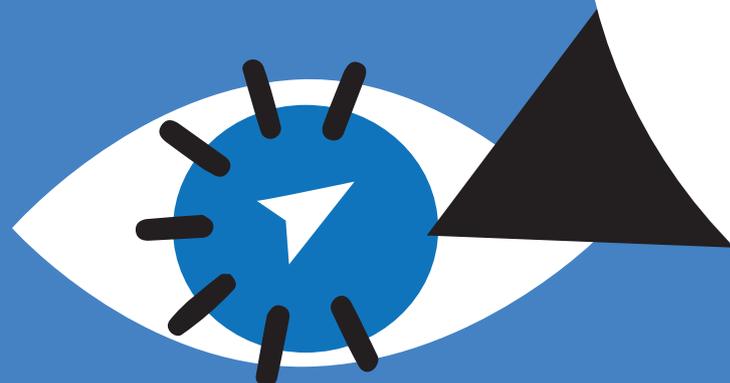


The future of media:

experience, models, practice

Report by rapporteur Dr Eileen Culloty
Foreword by Rónán Ó Muirthile

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Foreword

The international broadcast media landscape has changed and continues to evolve at a remarkable rate. The impact of technology on the business of broadcasting and how we interact with and consume content has been well documented. People have far more choice, but standards vary significantly. Society too is changing. Many people feel underrepresented by what they see, hear and read on their screens.

Our trust in the media has been shaken and it is constantly under threat. Yet, the COVID-19 global pandemic has shown the importance of clearly articulated, accurate information. Audiences too want authentic Irish stories to be told. However, if we are not prepared to pay for the content we consume then the quality will diminish. Finding a sustainable funding model for the future of the public service media is therefore crucial.

The Future of Media Commission (FOMC) has been set that task. To support its work, the Study of Languages, Literature, Culture and Communications Committee of the Royal Irish Academy hosted an online conference on Thursday 6 May 2021 entitled 'The future of media: experience, models, practice'. Three expert panels shared their knowledge and views and that information is summarised expertly in this report by Dr Eileen Culloty. Pauline McNamara, Vanessa Carswell and Karen Ayton were instrumental in organising and supporting the event. Sincere thanks is due to all the panellists and chairs for their time and contributions. We are also grateful to our sponsors, the Institute of Art, Design and Technology Dún Laoghaire (IADT) and FilmEU.

The level of engagement of all the panel members illustrates the importance of the media as a public good. It is hoped here that that passion is not missed by those in authority. There is an opportunity, presented by the work of the commission, to address the many issues raised during this conference. *Ní gá ach an deis a thapú.*

Rónán Ó Muirthile, Conference Convenor

Context

For the past century, public service media have been defined with the broad vision of informing, educating and entertaining the public. The core democratic and social functions of public service media are recognised by the Council of Europe, which calls on EU Member States to guarantee at least one comprehensive media service. In Ireland, RTÉ relies on a combination of licence-fee and commercial revenue to deliver its services. This model is not functioning, however, as licence-fee evasion is high and the advertising market is disrupted. Proposals to replace the licence-fee with a broadcasting charge have been discussed for many years, but not implemented. Similar financial difficulties are replicated across the media system as almost all media, in Ireland and internationally, are struggling to adapt to the digital environment. In this context, there are growing calls for state interventions to support the media sector while some have questioned whether public service media, as originally envisaged, remain relevant in the digital age.

To examine these issues, the Future of Media Commission (FOMC) was set up by the government in September 2020. It is investigating how public service aims in broadcast, print and online media can be delivered and sustainably funded over the next decade. A period of public consultation ran from 12 December 2020 to 8 January 2021. More than 800 submissions were received from stakeholder groups and the general public. Through a series of online ‘thematic dialogues’, stakeholders have offered their perspectives on key issues including: the nature of public service provisions, funding models, public-interest journalism and diversity and inclusion in the media sector. The commission is due to deliver a report and recommendations by Summer 2021.

The seminar ‘The future of media: experience, models, practice’ was organised by the Royal Irish Academy (RIA), the Institute of Art, Design and Technology Dún Laoghaire (IADT) and FilmEU. It aimed to reflect the three areas currently under review by the FOMC: the Irish experience, the current model and its appropriateness for the future, and international best practice. A [recording of the seminar](#) is available on the RIA website.

Key themes

A number of consistent themes emerged from the panel contributions and discussions. The commonality of themes is notable given the panellists' varied areas of interest (media, cultural production, journalism); funding focus (public media, commercial media); and regional experience (Ireland, EU, UK). The key themes may be summarised as follows:

Vision: Ireland needs a new vision for the role and purpose of public service media. Public consultation and participation is essential to shape this vision.

Political Will: The media sector has been neglected by the political system. Immediate action is required to implement measures that address the financial crises across the media sector.

Public Engagement: Ultimately, the public determine whether public service media are relevant. The long-term viability of public service media will depend on the development of new ways to serve public needs and demonstrate relevance to people's lives and communities.

Youth Engagement: Youth audiences are the future of media. To be relevant, public service media and news media must engage younger audiences on

the platforms they already use and provide opportunities to develop media skills and explore media careers.

Diversity: The media sector has a key role to play in reflecting the diversity of Irish society. Sustainable funding for the provision of training and development opportunities is key to promoting diversity in the media workforce.

Culture: Irish culture and cultural production need strong support to thrive in a highly competitive market that is dominated by international English-language content and digital platforms.

Partnerships: Current challenges present opportunities for media to develop innovative partnerships that bridge traditional divides between national, local and community media and between the commercial, public and non-profit sectors.



Introductory remarks

As Chair of the FOMC, Brian MacCraith MRIA opened the seminar and set the context. The FOMC was established by the government as an independent expert body to examine the future of the media in Ireland. It has a principal remit to examine the aims and funding of media over the next decade in light of fundamental structural change in the media sector, changing consumption patterns and new economic dynamics. In this context, the FOMC will make recommendations for the development of the proposed new media regulator. As part of this work, the FOMC has run public consultations and thematic dialogues to listen to stakeholders.

Professor MacCraith commended the Royal Irish Academy, IADT and FilmEU for their initiative in developing and hosting the seminar and commented on the timeliness of the event in the week of World Press Freedom Day. He welcomed the opportunity to listen to key perspectives from a distinguished line-up of panellists and observed that each thematic panel is germane to the goals of the FOMC.

Panel 1: The Irish Experience

Chaired by Hugh Linehan, the *Irish Times*, this panel provided key insights into different aspects of the Irish experience. The panel examined the relationship between (public service) media and national identity, the need for action on diversity and inclusion and the challenges facing the independent production sector and news media.

Dr Rosemary Day, Mary Immaculate College, drew a historical parallel between the development of Irish public broadcasting in the 1920s and current debates about the future of media. She observed that the newly independent state envisioned a clear role for media as a cultural space that could heal divisions, celebrate Irish culture and help Ireland take its place among other nations. In contrast, successive governments have engaged in ‘tinkering with mechanisms’ rather than rethinking the role of media. Without vision, she argued, Irish media will continue to struggle with inevitable changes in the media landscape.

She welcomed the FOMC as an opportunity for public debate about media and noted that the vast majority of submissions to the public consultation came from individual citizens rather than organisational stakeholders. She urged the FOMC to consider these submissions and critiqued the lack of citizen engagement in the Online Harms and Media Regulation Bill and the proposed establishment of a new media regulator.

Dr Bashir Otukoya, Dublin City University, also drew a historical parallel with the foundation of the Irish state. He quoted Article 3 of the constitution, which promises to ‘unite all the people who share the territory of the island of Ireland, in all the diversity of their identities’. Although conceived in the context of civil conflict, he argued that Article 3 has a new relevance given the diversity of contemporary Ireland and patterns of inward migration since the late 1990s.

Emphasising a democratic perspective, he noted that media have a key role to play in reflecting the diversity of Irish society. Diversity policies and diverse media representations are important because they encourage inclusiveness, tolerance, belonging, open-mindedness

and public deliberation. For underrepresented communities and second-generation Irish, diverse media representations are also important to demonstrate that these groups have a role in Irish society. He cited the adage 'you cannot be what you cannot see' and argued that diversity in Irish media means showing Irish people the variations of Irishness.

Larry Bass, ShinAwiL Productions, outlined the lack of funding and support for the independent production sector and the implications for Irish culture and identity. Noting that successive governments have failed to address the need for funding reform, he highlighted the EU's revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), which allows for the introduction of levies and investment obligations on international media services targeting Irish audiences. He criticised the government's decision to delay implementation while other EU countries have already applied the levy. Such inaction, he observed, is characteristic of a policy environment that privileges foreign direct investment at the expense of Irish culture and Irish enterprise.

He argued that the nature of the Irish market should be considered when setting a rate for the levy. Irish productions are forced to compete with highly resourced English-language content from other jurisdictions including the UK and the US. This is compounded by the growth of Subscription Video-On-Demand (SVOD) services. These services present a risk to Irish content if there is no regulatory obligation on them to invest in Irish production. Ultimately, he called for greater recognition of the value generated by Irish cultural content.

Professor Jane Suiter, Dublin City University, focused on current challenges facing journalism and news media. Describing public-interest journalism as a cornerstone of democracy, she highlighted the value of journalism during the COVID-19 pandemic when audiences for news surged. Yet, news media are struggling in the digital market as the advertising model favours Big Tech companies. In Ireland, Google and Facebook account for 80 percent of online advertising revenue. This financial crisis is creating accountability gaps as outlets are forced to cut staff and local court proceedings go unreported.

Noting that the journalism sector as a whole needs support, she defined the core issue in terms of finding models to properly fund public-interest journalism in ways that are underpinned by editorial independence. She cited regulatory developments in the EU and Australia, which are forcing Big Tech companies to negotiate with news media. Regarding more immediate action, she called for recognition of the public good derived from commercial news media as well as public service media and suggested that public funding schemes, such as Sound and Vision, should be opened up to news and current affairs content.

Discussion

In the discussion, the panel emphasised the consequences of political inaction and the danger of failing to redefine a vision for Irish media in the digital age. Three core priorities were underlined: protecting and promoting Irish content, increasing diversity and engaging public participation.

Regarding Irish content and culture, the establishment of the Irish Film Board (now Screen Ireland) in the 1980s was highlighted as an example of public investment that created a rich cultural legacy. Calling for a renewed vision and investment across the media sector, panellists discussed the need to address two interrelated problems: funding Irish content and ensuring Irish people can find and access Irish content in a digital environment.

Regarding diversity, the panel argued that change should not rely on the goodwill of media outlets. Diversity obligations and funding provisions need to be enshrined in legislation to improve access to media training and education and to encourage media producers to actively seek out under-represented communities.

Public engagement was discussed as a central driver of change. Historically, innovation in Irish media has been driven by audience frustration with the limitations of available media. As commercial and international media present a risk of drowning out Irish content, panellists identified a need to listen to citizens and to promote media literacy rather than assume that lofty, top-down arguments about public service and public-interest journalism are meaningful for audiences.

Panel 2: The Current Model and its Appropriateness for the Future

Chaired by Sonya Lennon, designer and social entrepreneur, this panel discussed the current funding models for journalism and public service media. The panel presented a critical review of these models and outlined the need for policy action as well as leadership from media companies.

Áine Kerr, Kinzen, outlined the confluence of factors that give rise to online ‘information disorder’. Social media platforms are designed for distraction and infinite scrolling while their algorithms prioritise low-quality information. In this environment, media producers are incentivised to chase audience clicks in the hope of generating advertising revenue while consumers must navigate an abundance of information sources. Although some news outlets have adjusted to new business models, such as subscriptions, there is a risk that many citizens will be left behind if high-quality news is increasingly restricted behind a paywall. In addition, the closure of local news outlets is creating ‘news deserts’ where there is no journalism coverage.

The ‘move fast and break things’ culture of Big Tech, she argued, has broken the connection between people and media. The challenge for news media is to communicate the message about why journalism matters while moving beyond the model of distraction to engage audiences in meaningful ways. She noted that while the COVID-19 pandemic heightened public awareness of low-quality and false information, there is much work to be done by a range of stakeholders to promote news literacy and build resilience to disinformation.

Professor Kevin Rafter, Dublin City University, noted that policymakers have been slow to respond to funding challenges and fundamental changes in the media environment. He argued there are obvious and immediate actions that could be implemented to support Irish media. These include addressing the VAT regime and revising

funding schemes to provide ongoing, rather than ad hoc, commitments to a wider range of media. More profound action requires tackling the ‘revenue stripping’ behaviour of Big Tech.

While acknowledging that commercial media do deliver public service and should have greater access to public funding, he argued that a public service entity has a central role to play within the national media sector. In particular, he characterised this role in terms of setting standards through editorial content as well as pay and working conditions. He called for action to address RTÉ’s financial crisis by revising the funding model. While RTÉ needs to be a leaner organisation, policymakers need to choose a funding model that is appropriate for Ireland. He noted that alternative regimes are already operating in other EU countries including dual-funding models.

Roberto Suárez Candel, international strategy consultant, also emphasised the need for policy action on public service media. He observed that the funding model is outdated because it cannot keep up with the speed of change in society, markets and technology. The inadequacy of the model, however, does not mean that public service media itself is outdated. The debate about funding public service media has focused on money and content at the expense of bigger questions about relevance and impact. He suggested that questions about relevance need to be answered by the public because the challenge of funding public media stems in part from the fact that its relevance and impact are not fully understood by the public.

He proposed three actions for public service media. First, reframe the role of public service media from content provision to value provision. Viewed in this way, measuring impact matters more than measuring market share. Second, investigate why citizens would be willing to pay and consider who is served by public service media in a multi-platform environment. Third, act as a driver of the national media industry by promoting content that is democratically, culturally and socially profitable. Ultimately, he argued that successful transformation of public service media is possible if politicians allow media and experts to craft a plan for a model based on relevance.

Discussion

In the discussion, the panel considered ways in which media can innovate to serve audiences and build connections with communities while also providing sustainable careers for media workers.

Panellists agreed that serving audiences is not about delivering wide-appeal content; it is about understanding the needs and concerns of different communities and applying resources and new technologies to meet those needs. Multiple innovations were proposed to achieve this. Various national media, such as RTÉ and the *Irish Times*, could be viewed as having an ‘infrastructural’ role that supports local media, community media and digital start-ups through partnerships. Public service media could be reenvisioned as a platform that connects different content producers to audiences and communities.

Ultimately, the discussion centred on the idea of a reimagined relationship between media and audiences whereby the aim of media is not to serve advertising by encouraging more consumption, but to offer people meaningful ways to engage with issues that concern them. Relatedly, media need to provide ways for citizens to be involved in the moderation and creation of content.

Regarding employment in journalism, the discussion highlighted the need to increase diversity to ensure that newsrooms look and feel like the communities they serve. However, sustainable funding models – whether from levies on tech companies or alternative business models – are needed to ensure that journalism can provide viable careers.

Panel 3: International Best Practice

Chaired by Sinead O'Carroll, the *Journal*, this panel examined best international practices in public service media with a particular focus on engaging youth audiences, providing opportunities to develop media careers and serving communities in an inclusive way.

Dr Sarah Arnold, Maynooth University, underscored the importance of young people as drivers of technology and media trends. Although young people are avid media consumers and a litmus test for future consumption, she noted there were few references to young people in submissions to the FOMC. In Ireland and elsewhere, public service media typically fail to engage young people on the platforms they already use while assuming that young people can be drawn back to traditional media.

She proposed three areas for action. First, media need to provide content that reflects the interests of young people. This requires research and engagement to understand the interests of young people. Second, content needs to be provided across the platforms young people use. Research indicates that young people do seek out information, but public service media have been slow to respond to their needs and consumption preferences. Third, media need to provide opportunities to participate in media production and to develop career opportunities. In Ireland, she noted, there are few opportunities for internships. As a result, young people interested in media careers move abroad or into media-adjacent sectors. She cited Channel 4 in the UK, which has a remit to engage young people and underrepresented groups. Media that fail to engage young people in these ways are likely to be viewed as remote and elitist.

Professor Ruth McElroy, University of South Wales, presented the Welsh experience. She noted that UK media is dominated by England and often fails to advance an inclusive understanding of different concerns and perspectives. At the same time, media are becoming more exclusionary as access to media careers is limited and there is a burden on

workers to upskill themselves. She argued that public service media should be an enabler of inclusion rather than a transmitter of messages. To advance inclusion, she emphasised the significance of serving audiences and building capacity for media careers. She noted that programme commissioners need to be part of the conversation because it is their recruitment practices that inhibit or enable new voices and new talent.

Focusing on the Welsh-language broadcaster SC4, she noted that co-productions with the BBC have been an effective way to build skills and capacity. Partnerships with theatre companies have improved diversity in casting because the theatre sector is ahead of the media sector in advancing inclusion. Finally, she observed that the ethos of minority-language providers is to go where the audience are. This requires a digital strategy where content is tailored for online media and not simply a digitised version of broadcast content.

Atte Jääskeläinen, Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, questioned whether public service media have the capacity for reinvention. In many countries, public service media have tried to imitate commercial media, but with fewer resources and less competence. Echoing previous contributions, he argued that public service media need to adopt a mission-based approach that is distinct from commercial media. In a media environment characterised by an oversupply of content and sources, public service media need to add value to people's lives.

Regarding funding, he observed that any model based on advertising incentivises a media culture that optimises revenue and a competitive alignment with commercial media. As a result, the value of public service media is not differentiated from commercial offerings. He observed a key tension whereby public service media need to innovate to serve younger audiences, but governments and politicians may not recognise the value of this innovation. Citing central banks as an infrastructural model, he called for constitutional recognition for public service media as a building block of democracy with protections for editorial independence.

Discussion

In the discussion, the panel highlighted practices to demonstrate the relevance of public service media, promote inclusion and engage young people.

They emphasised that the biggest threat to public service media is a loss of legitimacy and relevance. To counteract this, public service media need the courage to serve diverse audiences and to develop innovative practices that promote inclusion. Importantly, the panel noted that people can recognise the societal relevance of public service media even if they do not find all the offerings to be personally relevant. Moreover, they observed that advancing diversity and inclusion does not mean segmenting audiences because so many aspects of diversity cut across different groups.

Minority-language media were highlighted as models for innovative practices that serve communities. Panellists noted that, owing to their political history and origins in

campaigning, these media tend to be less risk averse and operate in a distinct environment. In contrast, public service media across Europe operate in a heightened political atmosphere, which makes it difficult to admit failures or to take risks.

Long term, panellists agreed that young people are the future of public service media. Small children start consuming media on smartphones and tablets while broadcast media lag behind. Engaging young people requires sustained funding and dedicated research and development. Examples included initiatives that involve young people in media production and provide training opportunities as well as partnerships between schools, higher-education and media. The benefit of these initiatives is that they engage young people with public service media while promoting skills and creativity for media careers. However, panellists noted that sustained, rather than ad hoc, funding is required to make these initiatives effective.



Conclusions

In responding to current debates about the future of media, the seminar broadened the discussion away from a narrow focus on individual outlets – whether public service or commercial – to the wider relevance of the media system. It highlighted the relational structures that connect the media system to questions about culture, identity, community, politics and the economy. A consistent theme across the contributions was the need to rethink how media serve public needs and reflect Irish society amid the inevitable social and technological changes that will continue to transform the sector.

As digital media offer audiences endless choice and as consumption habits are adapting to new devices and platforms, the viability of Irish media is undermined on many fronts. Yet, as Roberto Suárez Candel observed, the funding model and structures of public service media may be outdated, but the value of public service is not. A similar argument applies to Irish journalism and independent production. The challenge then is twofold: to find solutions for the funding crisis and to reimagine how media engage and demonstrate relevance to the public.

Both require action from policymakers who have a responsibility to provide a policy and regulatory environment in which Irish media can flourish. This is essential to maintaining a healthy, pluralistic and diverse public sphere. However, as many panellists argued, this also requires a commitment to rethinking how media can best serve the public interest. Simply tinkering with existing models will not be sufficient. For their part, media are challenged to find new ways to meet the needs of diverse audiences while adapting to the changing media habits of younger generations. Addressing these challenges is predicated on a willingness to innovate with new practices and partnerships that go beyond content provision.

Current discussions, in Ireland and elsewhere, typically present the media as a sector besieged by crises and in need of assistance. That is an accurate characterisation. However, in addressing immediate needs, it is important not to miss the bigger opportunity. This is a critical moment to put aside received ideas about how media operate and to set firm foundations for the future.

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