

From Health Crisis to Good News

A recovery plan for the news industry in Ireland

Introduction:

The Covid-19 Crisis has had a devastating impact on the Irish media industry.

As Ireland sets about meeting the enormous challenges of the Covid crisis the NUJ is calling for a Government led strategic initiative to rescue the media, so that it may continue the vital role it has played on a daily basis during this unprecedented period of social and economic uncertainty.

As the consequences of the Covid-19 emergency on the Irish media become more apparent there is an urgent need for a reimagining of the State's role in facilitating a diverse, vibrant and independent media, in enabling public interest journalism and in looking at imaginative solutions to secure employment in the industry.

The present crisis has shown just how vital it is to have a news media providing accurate information, how enthusiastic people are for trustworthy content and how essential it is that the government and authorities are held to account.

The crisis has also exposed the fragile state of the Irish media, the consequences of underinvestment by media organisations in editorial resources and the paucity of action by successive governments to protect public interest journalism.

Public service and commercial broadcasting organisations, national newspapers, the regional press, specialist titles and on-line/digital publications are tethering on the brink of ruin at a time when the role of the media was never more important to citizens.

The impact of the Covid-19 crisis is both macro and micro, national and local. The fundamental assumptions which have long underpinned government policies have been subject to intense scrutiny.

In Ireland we have witnessed a new acceptance that the values of the market do not hold the key to protecting the welfare of our nation. There has been a welcome shift in public policy in health, education and social protection.

In setting out our vision for the media in Ireland we believe that there must be recognition that public interest journalism is a public good which must be protected in a healthy democracy. That requires commitment from government and from all stakeholders in the media industry.

That means bold, imaginative policies, including specific measures to protect the regional press and specialist publications, across all platforms.

Targeted measures aimed at supporting jobs and quality journalism, and bolstering independent, diverse, ethically produced content are needed. Specific intervention is needed to protect and invest in hyperlocal and community enterprises.

Successive governments have ignored calls for a strategic approach to the future of the industry and have failed to address many of the issues which have contributed to the current existential crisis.

Journalism is not just business and a healthy democracy requires a healthy media industry.

On World Press Freedom Day 2020 the NUJ in Ireland calls on all parties engaged in government formation talks to commit to a media rescue plan and to the establishment of a Commission on the Future of the Media in Ireland.

Structural reform: By definition the establishment of a Commission on the Future of the Media would take time and must operate in an inclusive and transparent manner.

In the interim there is an urgent need for a government task force to implement short term and medium term policies to prevent the demise of the Irish media industry.

The transfer of all media policies to a new department, the Department of Arts, Culture and Media from the Department of Communications, Climate Change and Environment would mark a significant statement of commitment to the protection and development of the media.

The current department of Communications, Climate Change and the Environment has too broad a responsibility and is ill placed to deal with the vast range of issues in all three areas under its remit.

Broadcasting Commission: On December 10th 2019 the Government announced the establishment of a Commission on the Future of Irish Public Service Broadcasting "to consider how best to deliver and fund public service broadcasting into the future".

On January 14th the government announced the appointment of Professor Brian MacCaith as Chair of that Commission. No further announcements have been made and the Commission appears to have come to a standstill.

The NUJ believes that the terms of reference are far too restrictive and that a wider commission would be more appropriate, dealing with all media in Ireland.

In the context of the Covid 19 crisis the context of the MacCaith led commission has changed dramatically and the media landscape requires extensive scrutiny.

In the case of Public Service Broadcasting RTÉ and TG4 cannot await the work of a Commission and immediate steps must be taken to address the funding issues within RTÉ if the organisation is to maintain its existing vital services.

The manner in which the public service broadcasting commission has been established and the failure to engage with industry stakeholders, including the ICTU and the NUJ, is reflective of wider government failures and is an eloquent expression of the low priority given to media policy.

The short-term measures proposed by the NUJ include:

- A windfall tax of 6 per cent on the tech giants, using the UK Digital Services Tax model, towards funding a News Recovery Plan.
(The UK government committed to introduce a 2 per cent Digital Services Tax from

April 2020 on the revenues of large businesses providing internet search engines, social media platforms and online marketplaces to UK users. Tech giants play a significant role in the preservation of a sector that is vital to our democracy and the Irish government must not be afraid to follow the UK example.)

- Tax credits and interest free loans to support journalist's jobs, for frontline reporters covering the Covid-19 crisis and recovery.
- A review of Covid-19 payment schemes with a view to greater flexibility in assisting freelance media workers who have sustained income losses but may still be in receipt of low earnings in a manner which excludes them from benefits.
- No public money for firms making compulsory redundancies, cutting pay, giving executive bonuses or blocking trade union organisation. The NUJ is proposing the criteria already set out in competition legislation be used as a template for assessing applications for assistance.
- These criteria are set out in the Media Merger Guidelines, May 2015 and set out factors to be considered in the public interest in determining approval of media mergers, having regard to media plurality and diversity and include editorial independence and regard to regulatory compliance and engagement with the industrial relations machinery of the State.
- Companies receiving public funds are prohibited for five years from engaging in mergers and acquisition activity or leveraged buyouts that result in job losses or pay reductions
- Strategic investment in government advertising, including the hyperlocal sector, involving central and local governments and public bodies. The response of the media to the Covid-19 crisis and the increased engagement with readers reflects the relevance of the media as a reliable medium of news and public information.
- The establishment of an innovation fund to promote public interest journalism at local and national level, developing the model used in **the Simon Cumbers Media Fund** established by Irish Aid.
- Free vouchers for online or print subscriptions to all 18-and-19-year olds and tax credits for households with subscriptions.
- Free vouchers for online or print subscriptions to all over 70-year old, in line with the free TV licence scheme.
- Immediate steps to address the financial crisis in public service broadcasting.

The Medium-term measures include:

- Establishment of a government-funded Journalism Foundation to invest in local news and innovative journalistic projects.
- Confer "asset of community value" status on local newspapers ensuring that titles are preserved for potential community ownership. The concept of "community status" is new in the Republic of Ireland but is common in other jurisdictions.

- Also allow the establishment of charitable status to media outlets that want it.
- Employee representation of 25 per cent on executive boards in receipt of public funding.
- Independent sustainable funding of public service broadcasting that protects its universality and prevents government interference.
- Nationwide media literacy strategy to tackle disinformation and fake news.
- Reform of media ownership rules, with a strengthened public interest test.
- Training that opens up access to journalism, including apprentices for school-leavers. The absence of comprehensive in-service training is a regrettable feature of the Irish media industry.
- Grant aid to enable training for journalists to transition from print to digital publications and to acquire new skills.
- Protection for whistle-blowers and monitoring the potential impact of surveillance technologies being considered in response to Covid-19 challenge and easing of lockdowns.
- Support for a global framework to protect and promote journalism and improve press freedom.

Media Access: In addressing the role of the media it is important to reassert the importance of accountability and transparency in ensuring public trust and confidence.

Resisting the moves to clamp down on journalistic access and to evade scrutiny is vital. The NUJ, its sister unions and the International Federation of Journalists are intrinsic to safeguarding world-wide media freedom. We also need to recognise that quality local journalism plays a critical underpinning role reporting on public health, providing an early warning protection in public health emergencies.

The right and duty of journalists to question, to challenge and to interrogate information from public representatives and public officials must be recognised. The exercise of that right in the public interest has sometimes been misunderstood as being in some way unpatriotic.

Social solidarity can only be built on the foundations of trust and confidence. This is best achieved through openness and a culture of transparency.

The World Health Organisation, through the International Health Regulations, has previously urged countries to boost their disease surveillance efforts. Included in the mix of "event-based surveillance" are local news reports and social media.

Journalism underpins democratic societies – when those structures are under strain, it is public interest news that scrutinises decision making, bolsters public health messaging and provides accurate information as a vital counter to potentially deadly disinformation and scaremongering.

Aid packages for media are being introduced around the world; however a piecemeal approach will only go so far – the NUJ is calling for a global recalibration of the media

industry and renewed commitments to press freedom, spearheaded by the IFJ and other international partners.

A vibrant healthy media, working full square in the public interest, is critical in the uncertain, challenging times we live in. Press for public good – our media re-imagined: Journalism is a cornerstone of our democracy.

Séamus Dooley

Irish Secretary

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Editorial Note:

The Current terms of Reference of the Broadcasting Commission - which the NUJ regards as too limited:

The independent Commission is to:

- Identify what the Irish experience has been in delivering the above aims through public service broadcasters and other media outlets at a local, regional and national level and the challenges created for these media by new global platforms and changing audience preferences in relation to how content is delivered;
- Consider the extent to which the current model of delivery is the appropriate one for the next 10 years;
- Review best practice in other comparable jurisdictions across the European Economic Area in terms of providing a future-proofed model for meeting the above four public services in light of changing audience expectations, in particular the preferences and behaviours of younger audiences.

Arising from that work, the Commission is tasked with:

- proposing how those public service aims should be delivered in Ireland over the next ten years;
- how this should contribute to supporting Ireland's cultural and creative sectors
- how this work can be funded in a way that is sustainable, gives security of funding, ensures independent editorial oversight and delivers value for money to the public;
- making recommendations on RTÉ's role, financing and structure within this framework
- How this is overseen and regulated, having regard to our EU obligations including the requirements of the revised Audio-visual Media Services Directive.