

Submission to the Future of Media Commission

Irish Congress of Trade Unions

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Introduction

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions is the largest civil society body on the island of Ireland, representing some 750,000 workers in both jurisdictions and across all sectors of both economies. Congress welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this key debate on the future of the media at this critical juncture in the history and evolution of the sector.

Congress strongly believes that the process currently being undertaken by the Future of Media Commission can play a key role in the development of a strong, diverse, media sector with a dynamic and democratically accountable public service media at its core.

In this context, Congress full shares the concerns and views put forward as part of this process by the NUJ and the RTE Trade Union Group, along with those of affiliates with members in the sector, such as Siptu and Connect.

A Perfect Storm

The public health emergency sparked by the Covid 19 outbreak served merely to highlight and exacerbate the already existing frailties of the print and broadcast media sector.

Globally, the sector has been in serious difficulty for some years, suffering initially from the rise of digital and new media platforms and latterly from the impact of the 2008 crash and recession, which saw advertising revenues plummet.

In truth, this 'perfect storm' has effectively brought about the demise of the traditional and somewhat dated advertising-led funding model that originated in the 19th Century with the birth of mass media.

In the United States - once a global leader in respect of its veritable wealth of local, regional and national newspapers - some 1800 titles have been lost since 2014 alone, both dailies and weeklies. According to Pew Research, newsroom employment in the US has fallen by half since 2008.

While there have been a 'modest' number of jobs created as a result of digital technology, these are small in comparison to the jobs that have been lost.

In the UK, some 245 local titles were lost up to 2018 - with a commensurate loss in employment - according to the UK's Press Gazette.

Here, print outlets have seen sales and circulation steadily decline over the last decade and the sector has lost a considerable number of jobs. Again, opportunities arising from new technology have markedly failed to come anywhere near replacing or compensating for the jobs that have been lost.

In some respects, the surprise is that the old advertising led-model lasted as long as it did considering the vast profits and the remarkable power that accrued to media corporations and the 'press barons' of the last century.

But that power and those vast profits have not simply vanished. Instead, both have found new owners - the 'digital barons' of the modern age - who have proven far more adept at concentrating this power and wealth in an ever smaller number of hands.

While the devastation wrought on the traditional media sector has been a by-product of that process, it is nonetheless very real for the huge swathe of media outlets that have been forced to close and for the tens of thousands who have lost jobs as a result.

For those employed in media today, the sector has changed beyond all recognition, as has the job that they are now required to carry out, in both print and broadcast.

However, as this process across the globe has been driven almost entirely by the demands of private profit and the needs of private corporations it has not prioritised either the needs of those working in the sector, or the wider public interest.

This in turn has severely undermined standards of employment for both print and broadcast and has served to harm editorial standards and output.

This is reflected in the exponential growth of insecure and precarious work across the entire media sector, something that has been repeatedly highlighted by the National Union of Journalists most recently in reference to the prevalence of precarious work in the broadcasting sector.

In that context, the findings of a 2012 International Labour Organisation (ILO) report on the impact of digital technology on the media sector ring particularly true today, almost a decade later:

“Everywhere, there are significant changes in the structure of work – particularly in journalism and content creation. This has fuelled demands for ‘flexibility of work’ and for people who can provide editorial and creative input across an increasingly integrated range of information platforms.

“Flexibility and fragmentation of work has led to an increase in precarious employment. Employees are often unable to be represented by unions and this has weakened the scope for collective bargaining and social dialogue. There is uneven distribution of labour rights and access to decent work across the media labour market.”¹

More Outlets, Fewer Owners

At the close of 2020, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) set out the scale of the challenge facing the sector in its *White Paper on Global Journalism*. Thus, in 2005, there were 20 print journalists for every digital journalist. By 2019 that ratio had shifted dramatically, with three print journalists for every one digital journalist.²

¹ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---sector/documents/publication/wcms_241457.pdf

² https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/IFJ_White_Book_compressed.pdf

And new technology does not equate with new, quality jobs, as the IFJ points out: “The vast majority of the new jobs being created are poorly paid, more precarious and with fewer benefits than the jobs they seek to replace.”

The *White Paper on Global Journalism* cites surveys showing how this new army of digital journalists “work longer hours, have an overwhelming workload, are expected to have more skills than their colleagues but receive less training, have more health and safety problems, face a massive increase in ethical and professional issues, work with smaller budgets and fewer resources and earn less.

“The result is a growing army of self- employed, contract and casual workers - who are harder to reach and more vulnerable for journalists' unions and associations.”

Along with the decline in job quality there is an attendant fall in the quality of media output.

As traditional revenue sources fall foul of the digital advance, there is less investment in training and fewer resources devoted to developing and investigating stories.

“With fewer journalists and financial pressure to adapt to low advertising rates, newspapers and digital media are being pushed to focus on shorter stories that take less time and money to produce,” the IFJ points out.

“Journalists are under more pressure to write articles that generate clicks - some media outlets in the United States even use metrics to determine how much they are paid.”

Jill Abramson, the former editor of the *New York Times*, recalled in her recent memoir *Merchants of Truth* how the newsroom of the *Washington Post* - the paper that broke Watergate - is today dominated by huge flatscreens that display in real time the numbers of readers currently ‘interacting’ with each story on the paper’s news site.

The *Washington Post* is now owned by Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon. But as the IFJ points out, media workers and their unions have no argument with technology and have keenly embraced new, advanced means of creating news and telling stories.

Rather the argument lies with how that technology is deployed and the business model which underpins it. In particular, it is “how employers take advantage of these technologies not to improve journalism, but to reduce costs, undermine decent work and increase profits.”

As problems of low pay and precarious work continue to grow in the sector, here at home and globally, and as workers continue to encounter difficulties in securing union representation, media work will cease to become a career or choice, further undermining the overall sustainability of the sector.

In addition, the paradox at the heart of new media means that while there are more channels and outlets and the *illusion* of greater diversity, these are concentrated in far fewer hands.

“Google, Facebook, Microsoft and Apple control 95% of the world's operating systems, 95% of the world's search engines and 85% of the world's social media.”

And this power continues to grow and concentrate. Thus, in the United States - the world's largest single advertising market - the advertising revenue that accrues to social media platforms has now formally surpassed that of more traditional outlets.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, digital advertising now accounts for 51% of all advertising spend in the United States with that figure expected to rise to 54% in 2021.

That spend is largely focused on “several tech giants at the expense of other platforms, including newspapers, local television and magazines.”

Just three years ago digital advertising spend in the US was approximately one third of the overall advertising spend, the same as that expended on newspapers, radio, magazines and local TV combined.

Today, the impact of both digital technology and Covid 19 means the spend on newspapers, radio, magazines and local TV has fallen to just 21%, while the digital share continues to grow inexorably.³

This has had direct consequences for jobs and incomes in the media sector. An IFJ survey of some 1300 media workers in 77 countries on the immediate impact of Covid 19 revealed that two-thirds - both staff and freelance journalists - have suffered pay cuts, lost revenue and work commissions and have experienced worsening work conditions or job losses, as result.

Such is the crisis facing media organisations across the world that the IFJ has now called for the urgent establishment of a Global Platform for Quality Journalism that aims to save and protect media jobs and promote a “sustainable, ethical and publicly supported information economy.”

Central to their call is the demand to ensure that information “remains a public good” and does not become the sole preserve of those with the greater financial resources.

Given the trends apparent within the digital sector over recent years, the rapid advances in technology and a seeming reticence on the part of policymakers to take action – although this may be slowly changing - there is no certainty at this point that retaining information as a public good can be guaranteed into the future.

Yet, as the public health emergency has clearly demonstrated on a global scale maintaining free and open access to information is now an absolute imperative.

Indeed, the current health emergency has clearly demonstrated that ensuring key channels of public communication remain open and in public ownership can in fact be a matter of life and death.

³ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/google-facebook-and-amazon-gain-as-coronavirus-reshapes-ad-spending-11606831201>

Inadequate Funding Model

In Ireland, the inadequacy of the funding model that underpins public service broadcasting has been cruelly exposed.

The fall in advertising revenue that afflicted the sector prior to the pandemic meant that RTE was already hugely exposed and without the resources necessary to fulfil its role and remit.

In 2019, well before Covid 19 was even a consideration, RTE had announced a major programme of job losses and budget cuts, which targeted savings of the order of €60 million.

The public health emergency then simply exacerbated what was an already serious problem for the industry.

The direct impact of the pandemic is seen in the fact that overall advertising spend fell by almost one third in 2020, including a catastrophic fall of some 60% in the months of May and June alone.⁴

In response, RTE announced in April 2020 that it would be availing of official pandemic support measures in order to offset the impact of Covid 19 and said it expected to see combined revenue from both advertising and the license fee decrease by up to 35%.

Clearly, the crisis in public service broadcasting is one that has been long foretold.

However, if there is one positive to emerge from the public health emergency it is the renewed awareness of the utterly vital role that public service media plays in times of crisis and crucially a strong reaffirmation of its status as an essential public good.

By extension, the pandemic has also exposed the limitations of the free market model in terms of the provision of such essential services and reinforced the urgent need to develop a bigger vision for the media sector and for public service broadcasting, in particular.

Indeed, the National Union of Journalists has repeatedly drawn attention to the crisis affecting the sector and has called for the establishment of a forum to help fashion a new wider strategic vision for media in Ireland.

It is to be hoped that the Commission will ensure that this long overdue process gets underway as we look to rebuild the sector with the end of the public health emergency now apparently in view.

Public Service Media

The Programme for Government has already highlighted the necessity for a “vibrant, diverse and independent media at local, regional and national level.”

⁴ <https://www.independent.ie/business/media/pressing-issue-covid-19-effect-means-the-media-crisis-is-now-deadly-real-39149909.html>

In addition, it recognises the “important role of Irish public service broadcasting in Irish life and the ongoing restructuring efforts at RTÉ in the context of a changing media environment.”

However, as has been seen the desire for vibrant, diverse and independent media at local and national level may well prove no more than wishful thinking unless there is clear, concerted action from government in a number of key areas.

Critically, there is now a clear onus on the State to fundamentally rethink its role in respect of the media sector generally, in respect of public interest journalism and its very specific role and responsibility with regard to public service broadcasting.

Such a rethink must also take account of the then State’s key role in respect of employment standards across the sector and a clear recognition that a revitalised media cannot be built on the back of precarious and insecure work practices as, over time, these will serve simply to undermine quality of output and a gradual erosion of public trust.

It must also comprehend that journalism and media in general is not just a business and cannot operate within that narrow framework.

Arguably, the fact that media owners and previous administrations over many years have tended to view media in strictly commercial terms helps in large part to explain the current crisis afflicting the sector.

More fundamentally, it is an absolute prerequisite that public service media should fully reflect and represent all aspects, facets and perspectives within Irish society.

Of necessity, this must include the world of work. In that context, it should strive to ensure that the views and perspectives of working people are fully represented in overall coverage of business, enterprise and the workings of the wider economy.

Editorial balance must apply to all aspects of reporting, including critical issues impacting the economic life and health of the country.

Critically, the key role and insights of workers in the running of business and the generation of profits is too often overlooked in coverage of enterprise and the economy.

Public service media therefore has a clear duty to faithfully represent such perspectives and should not succumb to the pressures of becoming ‘cheerleaders with keyboards’ or mere ciphers for vested interest celebrity culture and cultivated media personalities.

Key Measures Needed

As already noted, Congress shares the concerns and views put forward as part of this process by the NUJ, the RTE Trade Union Group and affiliates with members in the sector, such as Siptu and Connect.

It is essential that this process helps to establish a strong, diverse, media sector with a dynamic and democratically accountable public service media at its core.

That means assisting the sector over the short and medium term and helping to secure the longer-term future of public service broadcasting, on a sustainable basis. In that context, Congress calls for:

- In terms of funding for the sector, Congress supports the introduction of a ‘windfall tax’ on the major digital platforms to help support public interest and public service media. The NUJ has suggested a rate of 6% for such a tax. The UK is to introduce its own Digital Services Tax in April 2020.
- To encourage the take up of online or print subscriptions, tax credits could be provided for all households who avail of such offers, with discounts or vouchers for students, younger people and over 70s.
- There should be no State aid or public money made available to companies that refuse to recognise trade unions, fail to uphold Decent Work practices, insist on paying executive bonuses or engage in compulsory redundancies.
- In order to ensure the longer-term sustainability of the sector, issues of low pay, casual work and difficulties in securing union representation must be tackled. A failure to do so will mean media work will no longer be a career of choice and will fail to attract new talent.
- Companies or media organisations in receipt of public monies would be required to have up to 25% employee representation on their boards and would be prohibited from engaging in merger/ buyout activity for a defined period, as set out in the Media Merger Guidelines (2015).
- Provide media organisations with the option of acquiring charitable status.
- Explore granting local news outlets with ‘asset of community status’ to ensure they can be maintained within the local community. According to the NUJ, the concept of ‘community status’ for news outlets is common in other jurisdictions.
- Establish a system of multi-annual funding for public service broadcasting, with possible five or even 10 year structured funding packages put in place, along with improved and independent system of oversight and accountability to ensure adherence to public service remit and the public interest ethos. This should not be seen as a vehicle for increased political interference.
- Ensure that media organisations make training and upskilling a priority for all employees and establish a national apprenticeship type journalism scheme for school leavers and aspiring journalists.
- Support for a new global framework that would protect and promote journalism , improve press freedom and crucially ensure the retention of information as a ‘public good’. Detailed proposals on such a framework have been set out by the IFJ and should be considered as part of this process.

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