

NUJ DUBLIN BROADCASTING BRANCH SUBMISSION TO THE COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF THE MEDIA

The NUJ's Dublin Broadcasting Branch represents journalists working in RTÉ news, current affairs, and other content areas across TV, radio and online platforms including Irish language journalists working for Nuacht/TG4.

While the substantial majority of our members work for the national broadcaster, the branch also represents journalists working in commercial Radio and TV stations in the capital.

Given the fact that our membership comprises in the main of journalists, this submission will focus on the vital importance of public service journalism as provided by RTÉ, as well as the public service journalistic content provided by commercial stations.

INTRODUCTION

Members of the branch are gravely concerned for the future of public service broadcasting in Ireland. These are not new concerns. It has long been apparent to us and others that the current funding model – based largely on the TV Licence Fee system – is completely outmoded. We have seen over the years how technological transformations, not least the advent of the smart phone, have revolutionised how Irish people access news, information and video content.

It is now only a relatively small segment of the population - and a shrinking one at that – that is reliant for its news content on the television in the corner of the sitting room.

This has resulted in approximately 12% of households becoming 'no TV' households. When added to average TV license evasion rates over the past decade, it means approximately one in four or 25% of households do not contribute to the funding model for public service broadcasting.

The model is broken and needs to be reformed.

RTÉ's funding crisis would be erased and a significant surplus created for other public service journalism if this failure in public policy were to be addressed.

In parallel with this technological revolution and the proliferation of global social media platforms, we have watched the rise of 'fake news', attempts both at home and internationally to undermine quality, independent journalism, including sometimes sinister moves to scaremonger and spread disinformation aimed at undermining democracy. Against this backdrop the need for quality public service broadcasting – independent of Government or commercial or any other interests - has never been greater.

This was our position a year ago, before the coronavirus crisis hit. The impact of the crisis has bolstered our concerns. It has shown just how important it is to have a trusted news media providing accurate information and countering the destabilising rumour and scaremongering that can gain ground unchecked on social media.

PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING/RTÉ

Covid has also left no one in any doubt as to the extent to which the Irish public values and trusts RTÉ when it comes to the provision of news and information. At a time of unprecedented crisis and personal and social upheaval, the Irish public at home and abroad has turned to RTÉ news and current affairs content in unprecedented numbers, trusting in RTÉ and its journalists to deliver accurate, thorough, and trustworthy reporting and analysis to them.

That public includes the country's youngest citizens. Since September, the journalists behind RTÉ'S dedicated news programme for children, News2day, have striven to explain, educate and reassure their audience at a very frightening time.

In December, News2day's annual art competition, received an unprecedented 10,000 entries - more than double the number in previous years. Virtually every submission focused on how Covid has impacted the lives of our young people. This is just one indication of the hugely important role that this programme has played in the lives of the nation's children, at a time of great stress and uncertainty for many of them. Children and young people are a vital part of any public service broadcaster's audience. But RTÉ will not be able to continue to provide quality and accurate news and information to these children as they grow into young adults, or to future generations of children, without a sustainable funding model for public service broadcasting.

IRISH LANGUAGE

A media communication service *as Gaeilge* is essential to public service broadcasting. For native speakers it is a basic right to be communicated to with programming in one's own language. The more normalisation that viewers and listeners experience, the less isolation they feel. It is also imperative that essential information such as Covid guidelines, election results, and weather reports are available *as Gaeilge*. There is a growing cohort of children growing up with their education *as Gaeilge*. In tandem with the growth of Gaelscoileanna Irish language broadcasting is vital for securing the future of the language.

Nuacht TG4 works alongside RTÉ and this partnership works, as does the ongoing relationship with Raidió na Gaeltachta. But to develop and progress with the language these services need investment. The will and expertise are there but without continuous funding and continuous assessment on funding the living language could disappear from the airwaves.

Oibríonn Nuacht TG4 le RTÉ agus oibríonn an phairtnéireacht seo, mar a oibríonn an caidreamh leanúnach le Raidió na Gaeltachta, ach teastaíonn infheistíocht sna seirbhísí seo leis an teanga a fhorbairt. Tá ceist mhór éagothromaíocht le plé, sin an ceist pá, tá ar gcomhleacaithe I Raidió na Gaeltachta ar phá níos ísle I gcomapraid le na comhleacaithe I RTE Raidió 1, cé go gcuireann said seirbhís Naisiúnta ar fáil. Tá an toil agus an saineolas ann ach muna bhfuil maoiniú leanúnach agus meastóireacht leanúnach ar an chóras maoinithe sin, thiocfadh leis go n-imeodh an teanga bheo ó na aerthonnta. Tá RTÉ diongbháilte dá pholasaí ar an Ghaeilge ach braitheann sé ar mhaoiniú i réimse ina bhfuil iomaíocht do mhaoiniú d'ardáin iomaíocha, agus go minic is iad na mionlaigh a bhíonn thíos leis.

SPORT

Public Service Media should continue to broadcast sporting events of cultural importance and, given the increasing commercialisation of the sector, traditional rights ring-fencing should be expanded and strengthened.

PSM should cover all sports, including so-called “minority” sports that don’t normally generate enough revenue for coverage by commercial media; continue to increase coverage of female sports and continue to redress the gender sporting imbalances in our society; and continue to increase coverage of sports involving people with different levels of physical and mental ability - for the purposes of informing, entertaining, and inspiring our audience, as well as promoting inclusion, and the physical and mental health that comes through participation in sport.

PUBLIC SERVICE CONTENT/COMMERCIAL STATIONS

Journalists working in commercial radio stations in Dublin have also encountered significant obstacles to providing quality news. At a time when the appetite and demand for accurate and reliable information was at an all-time high, a number of stations cut back staff numbers in their newsroom, while expecting more and more output. This is unsustainable.

For too long the BAI’s news and current affairs quota has been viewed by commercial radio stations as something to be tolerated and endured. One member was told bluntly that there would be no news on their station if management had their way. If we are to inform and educate all sections of society, that view needs to change. Otherwise, we are facing a culture of ‘churnalism’, where news is a three or five minute slot to be filled.

The Commission should consider examining the fact that two major players dominate the commercial radio scene in Dublin. Simulcast news across a number of stations erodes local news. Members of the Commission may be surprised at how many news bulletins are pre-recorded in commercial radio. One outlet has eight pre-recorded bulletins between 6am and 10am each morning, while broadcasting live bulletins on the other station. Such work practices, approved by the BAI, will not encourage young journalists into radio, something we are already witnessing.

FUNDING

In terms of developing a sustainable funding model for public service media we welcome the commission’s intention to examine best practice internationally.

The NUJ has called for a windfall tax of 6% to be placed on the big tech giants, using the UK digital services tax model. Other countries, including France, are imposing similar levies. We believe it is logical, fair and right to tax the multinational companies that are frequently the conduits for ‘fake news’ and disinformation, in order to fund public service media, which fosters a well-informed citizenry.

We welcome the exploration of other potential funding models. While not wishing to be prescriptive our bottom line is that any new model must be sustainable and equitable.

Since March 2020, our members have demonstrated as never before their unwavering commitment to providing quality journalism to the Irish public. In many cases we have risked our own health in the interests of keeping others safe and informed.

The past year has reinforced the message that public-service journalism is vital for a healthy democracy. But long before the pandemic RTÉ provided unparalleled and trusted coverage of news and current affairs across television and radio, as well as exposés from its specialised investigative journalism unit, RTÉ Investigates. The service is a public good, but it will wither unless it is adequately funded and supported.

Our submission should be read in conjunction with submissions coming from RTÉ's Trade Union Group, and the NUJ centrally.

Our members wish the Commission well in its deliberations and will be happy to assist its work in any way possible.

ENDS

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