

1. By way of introduction, I'm a journalist by trade and now operate two production companies in Belfast, Below The Radar and Fine Point Films. Below The Radar was founded in 2006 by Ruth O'Reilly and myself. Both of us had worked at UTV but aware of impending redundancies due to regulatory changes, decided to set up our own production company. Below The Radar produces television documentaries and programming for public service broadcasters in Ireland and the UK in both English and as gaeilge, operating its own Irish language platform, Meon Eile. Fine Point Films was established in 2013 to produce feature documentaries for the international market. The company has worked with the major streamers in the US including Netflix and Amazon as well as CNN Films, HBO, ESPN and Showtime. In 2011, Below The Radar launched "The Detail", an investigative journalism website. In the last 10-years The Detail has won numerous awards for its journalism. The platform has been funded by several organisations including Atlantic Philanthropies, The BIG Lottery in the UK and Google. The two companies and The Detail provide work for between 30-40 employees annually. Many of them come from a journalistic background and hold journalistic qualifications
2. My career and the companies I worked for prior to 2006 tell a story of the changing landscape of the media in the north of Ireland.
3. I began work at Enniskillen's "Impartial Reporter" newspaper in 1984, starting as an Apprentice Compositor. My employer was an incredible woman called Joan Trimble. The paper had been in her family since it was established in 1825. Joan's daughter, Joanna McVey was Managing Director when I started at the paper. In 1989, the paper funded me to go to college to train as a journalist and I returned to work at the Impartial Reporter for a further four years.
4. I then joined Downtown Radio, a station renowned for its ability to break stories. There I worked with some of the most talented journalists in the country.
5. In 1997, I moved to Ulster Television where in 2002, I became Editor, Current Affairs. When I joined UTV, there was a full team of investigative journalists in its Current Affairs team who complimented an incredibly talented pool of newsroom reporters.
6. All three companies have gone through incredible change since I worked for them.
7. The Impartial Reporter was sold to a Scottish group in 2006. It suffered serious losses in the economic crash of 2008 and was broken up. For a time, the paper was part-

owned by investment bank, Goldman Sachs. Now, having gone through several different owners, it is owned by Newsquest in the UK, whose parent company is Gannett, which is based in the US. Gannett and Newsquest have been subject to takeover bids by rival firms. When I was employed at the paper and for many years after, there was a full complement of journalists including a full-time court reporter and a sports editor.

8. Downtown Radio was locally owned in the 1990s. It first went live in 1976, with significant investment into its news output, the story being told that on its first day it scooped the BBC with news of the resignation of the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson. That set the standard for a station whose news reporters knew their competition was the BBC and their job was to beat it to the story. Now its owned by Bauer Media, which, according its website, “operates over 110 audio brands in seven countries, spanning the UK, Poland, Slovakia, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Norway.”
9. Ulster Television is now part of ITV Plc, having been sold in 2015. UTV was a breeding ground for local television talent, both on-screen and off. Many presenters learned their trade in its headquarters at Havelock House on Belfast’s Ormeau Road. Under local ownership, the company thrived and played a very significant role in the life of Northern Ireland for decades. Year after year, UTV would return greater viewing figures for its news programmes than BBC NI. For a period, its profits were invested into its newsroom as its local owners traded on the popularity of its journalism. However, when the British regulator, Ofcom, began to take a more relaxed view of the responsibilities of the UK’s Channel 3 licence holders, and particularly its current affairs and local programming output, UTV’s owners took the opportunity to make more money than programming. Beginning in the mid-noughties, UTV began to cut its output and reduce its number of reporters. Big shows such as Gerry Kelly on a Friday night were decommissioning and the current affairs department, which had produced some of the most important stories of the previous 30-years, was ran down with undue haste. Today, there is no longer a current affairs department at UTV.
10. Ofcom’s decisions, supported by the then British government, has left a distinct lack of plurality in investigative journalism in television in Northern Ireland. With ITV no longer investing in current affairs, BBC NI carries the burden. Its journalists have excelled in the past 10 years. However, with little or no challenge from their ITV rivals, their main competition is predominantly the other news departments of the BBC and the vast majority of BBC NI output now lacks any real cutting edge.
11. Of its £56m budget in 2019-2020, BBC NI spent £32m on programming of which £8.6m was spent on and current affairs. Its estimated that ITV spent less than 10% of the BBC’s annual budget on its output, despite producing the most watch news programme in Northern Ireland (its daily 6 pm news programme). Radio and newspapers are producing news for a fraction of the budget the BBC has access to.

*See ofcom annual report here: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/200501/media-nations-2020-northern-ireland-report.pdf

12. This provides the BBC with a dominant position in journalistic output in Northern Ireland. It has been claimed that the BBC employs more journalists in its digital division than the total number of journalists working in daily and weekly newspapers across Belfast.
13. This creates an unhealthy journalistic landscape in the north.
14. Newspapers already struggling commercially, see their stories picked up by the BBC and repackaged online or in their news programmes without attribution. The BBC NI online output undercuts the local and daily newspapers. With its unlimited resources, the BBC's output across television, radio and online is crushing its commercial competitors. The days of the journalistic minnows of Downtown Radio or even UTV being able to compete with the BBC are long gone.
15. All of this provides a shape to my own personal experience of working across newspapers and broadcasters and I hope some detail on my perspective on the contours of the media landscape in the north.
16. Since setting up Below The Radar, we've experienced working closely with all the Public Services Broadcasters on the island and in London, regularly producing over a dozen hours per annum for BBC, RTÉ and TG4.
17. We've partnered with Northern Ireland Screen in Belfast and Screen Ireland in Dublin. Our programming has benefitted from the funding support of the Irish Language Broadcast Fund and the Ulster Scots Broadcast Fund in the north and from the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland.
18. Northern Ireland Screen (NIS) has part-funded many of our documentary films. Indeed, it was a key partner in our Emmy-nominated and RTS award winning documentary, No Stone Unturned. Effectively, British government money funding a documentary examining the history of collusion in Northern Ireland. NIS provided finance but, again, took no editorial oversight.
19. There is significant and understandable competition between all the public service funders.
20. This is particularly true for Northern Ireland Screen and Screen Ireland, given their remit to attract inward investment.
21. There is little journalistic competition between BBC Northern Ireland and RTÉ, they guard their territory with the understanding that it's in their best interests to uphold and protect partition on the island, neither showing very much interest in the lives of those who live on the other side of the Border. RTÉ has run down its Belfast operation and the BBC has maintained a single reporter in Dublin for many years. At a time of immense change due to Brexit and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic,

both RTÉ and the BBC have struggled to report in-depth on events on the other side of the Border.

22. It is our experience that when PSBs are left to their own devices, they will invariably do what is best for them as an organisation, no matter about the empirical evidence that their commissioning and scheduling policies and strategies may not producing the type of programming their audience is seeking.
23. However, when a third-party funder is introduced, we find that the broadcasters are more responsive and more acutely aware of their PSB responsibilities.
24. We've worked extensively with the Irish Language Broadcast Fund in Belfast. It has funded several series and documentaries we've produced for BBC NI, TG4 and RTÉ. It has an annual budget of £3m with minimal administrative costs.
25. The Ulster Scots Broadcast Fund receives £1m annual funding.
26. For programme makers such as ourselves, the process of having a proposal successful supported is very straightforward.
27. We pitch to the broadcaster. If they support it, the proposition then goes forward to the broadcast fund committee which decides if it meets its criteria. If its successful, the broadcaster provides 25% of the funding with the broadcast fund providing 75%.
28. The checks and balances in this process are transparent and, critically, work to the advantage of the audience. Critically, the broadcaster is responsible for editorial oversight.
29. We find that when a fund is involved it brings clarity and transparency to the process of commissioning public service content.
30. At the time of Ofcom's review of Public Service Broadcasting in 2007, we proposed the establishment of a *Northern Ireland Broadcast Fund*. We later gave evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.
*<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmniaf/memo/television/ucrb1602.htm>
31. We believed at that time that the monies for public service programming, ranging from current affairs through to light entertainment, should be ring fenced in a separate fund from which broadcasters and producers could draw on. We based our proposal on the established model of the Irish Language Broadcast Fund.
32. Over ten years since we made those proposals, the predicted decline in the newspaper industry has become a horrible reality for many of our daily and weekly media.
33. We recognise the pressing need to support public service journalism on both sides of the Border.

OUR PROPOSAL: “THE PUBLIC SERVICE FUND”

34. In response to The Future of Media Commission consultation, we propose that a more broader form of the *Northern Ireland Broadcast Fund* be established to fund public service journalism and programming.
35. The challenges facing journalism are similar to the challenges facing our Public Service Broadcasters, most obviously financial sustainability.
36. We believe that a dynamic, ambitious and far-sighted response is urgently required to protect public purpose journalism and public service broadcasting.
37. By bringing both together, a much more robust funding mechanism can be established which will have the over-riding remit of the protection and sustainability of public service output.
38. We therefore propose that **“The Public Service Fund”** (TPSF) be established to provide funds for public service journalism and content.
39. Funds currently committed to the various established organisations for the production of public service programming would be committed to the one central fund.
40. Very significant funding would be required from government on top of that already allocated to these various organisations and funders.
41. RTÉ would retain responsibility for the production of news and current affairs, paid for through the licence fee. All other news organisations would be able to attract funding from the Public Service Fund.
42. TG4 would be supported and bolstered through the fund.
43. Newspapers, digital platforms, journalists, producers and radio and television broadcasters would apply to the fund for the development and production of content of a public service nature.
44. The fund would not have an editorial oversight responsibility, but its role would be to assess the public service benefit of the funding applications. Critically, editorial oversight would be retained by the applicant.
45. Those involved in the publication of journalism would continue to have diverse commercial financing and drawing funding from TPSF would not undermine their independence just as *Below The Radar’s* status is undiluted even though its programming is funded through government arms-length bodies.

46. The Californian tech tsunami of Google, Facebook and Netflix has swamped both the local newspaper and broadcasting industry. The fund would not be available to these overseas organisations but would be for indigenous companies only.
47. By ring fencing funding for public service content, we would ensure that whatever platform, business model or device is created in China or California, we would have protected our output.
48. Regulation would remain with the Press Council of Ireland but would be adapted to align with the new landscape created by the fund.
49. Funding streams would be established for the various forms of public service content from investigative journalism through to Irish language programming and high end entertainment programming
50. We believe that appropriately financed, **The Public Service Fund** has the ability to respond to the urgent and critical needs of public service journalism and programming which will continue to serve the best interests of readers and audiences no matter how they choose to access it.
51. We thank-you for allowing us to make this submission.

Trevor Birney
January 7th, 2021