



## **The Importance of Local.**

***Submission to The Future of Media Commission by Radio Kerry***

***January 2021***

“We represent a people” then Kerry Football Manager, Pat O Shea explained when asked by reporters following Kerry’s All Ireland win in 2007 why it is that football is so important in Kerry.

“We represent a very proud county, a tradition” he said. “Every time we put on a Kerry jersey we are conscious of that. We uphold what’s gone before, and we pass a torch on to the people who will come after”.

He could have been talking about local radio.

We too represent a people, a place.

For the last 30 years Radio Kerry has been the proud keeper of the story of Kerry, a living archive. As the Government looks to the future of media we hope that local radio will continue to be a valued part of the media landscape in Ireland.

Public service broadcasting is no longer the remit of just the state broadcaster and we hope that local stations such as Radio Kerry have proven this.

Daily news, current affairs and talk programmes, specialist speech programmes and a huge commitment to local, national and international sports and Irish language programming have been part of the daily schedule on Radio Kerry from its establishment in 1990.

Despite the absence of license fee support, Radio Kerry, our sister stations Shannonside and Northern Sound and multiple other local radio stations, have been committed to bringing high quality independent journalism to our listeners.

We have brought listeners live coverage from General and Local Election Counts, from regular court and council meetings, from protests and public meetings, from the scenes of tragedies and celebrations, from Listowel Writers Week, The Rose of Tralee, An tOireachtas and from multiple local news and sporting events, music and Irish language events.

Radio Kerry brought listeners live un-interrupted coverage of the 1916 Commemoration from Banna Strand in 2016, dropping all ad breaks to do so. This was the only official 1916 state event outside

Dublin and Radio Kerry did not receive any of the assistance RTE did to cover similar events in Dublin.

Radio Kerry has also shown innovation in supporting public service content. As the Voice of the Kingdom we are aware of the importance of including all voices. We are committed to providing a broadcast platform to those whose opinions aren't always heard in mainstream media or in society in general. In the last 2 years our *Speak Up* series invited minority groups to spend a week in the station learning media literacy skills and presenting and producing their own two hour radio shows.

An earlier *Access Series* provided a €10,000 fund for community groups interested in making a radio programme.

Our recent *Be the Voice* series offered over 50 well known individuals and organisations in Kerry the opportunity to record free of charge a public service message in relation to Covid-19 re-enforcing official COVID-19 advice but also giving reassurance.

Participants included Kerry footballers, Jigsaw Kerry, the Kerry Diocesan Youth Service, the St Vincent de Paul, Adapt Women's Refuge, local Tidy Towns and Men's Sheds groups amongst others.

The messages were also recorded in several languages.

Radio, like no other medium, has the power to allow the human voice tell its own story, in its own words, conveying its own emotion.

In recent years a Causeway teenager Christine Meehan told us that she felt society was out of sync with teenagers after a series of suicides in North Kerry. She asked why teenagers could express their feelings on social media or in status updates, but couldn't verbalise their feelings in person to adults or sometimes even to each other. After her interview a mother bereaved by suicide Pauline rang in to thank her for her courage.

With 88,000 people listening to Radio Kerry on a weekly basis both these interviews probably did more to raise awareness and change perceptions about suicide in Kerry than any organized campaign could ever have.

Equally when a Kerry team is in full flight there is no greater poetry than to have that story told by a Kerry voice.

In a changing, increasingly global world, local radio plays a unique role in celebrating and protecting localness and individuality – it re-enforces a sense of place with local voices, accents, stories.

But there can be a misconception that local means parochial, that rural people aren't interested in the world beyond the county bounds, can't be trusted to discuss the big, national or international stories of the day. That local radio is just about death notices. Nothing is further from the truth, on any given day on local radio you will hear the national and international stories of the day also covered comprehensively, and debated intensely and intelligently.

Equally in a globalised world the definition of local has changed, all the world is local to us now. Because of tourism Kerry has always had a cosmopolitan population passing through, and many have also made Kerry their home. Kerry natives abroad still share the same thirst for news from home.

Audience interaction through text, phone calls, comment line callers, contributors and outside broadcasts are central to the stations relationship with its listeners. New media provides exciting

ways for all of us to develop that relationship. Because it is instant and operates in real time radio can interact with social media.

Comments to our talk and sports shows now frequently come from abroad too.

It also brings new challenges and new responsibilities – technology and social media experts should hopefully be in addition to and not at the expense of journalists, the story gatherers, the human contact in a media organization, the facts checkers. There are obvious strengths to the ways in which online and social media can facilitate access, and give a voice in new ways, but it must be used in a responsible way, and watched over by people with a knowledge of libel and defamation laws.

Why should local journalism – print and broadcast - be protected? Reporting on something from a much closer distance requires accuracy and sometimes courage in confronting issues that might for previous generations have been hidden or untouchable.

Radio Kerry wasn't long on air when the Bishop Eamon Casey story broke and was covered extensively, in a county where he had been revered and in which many people didn't want to hear anything negative about him. In a county still raw from the Kerry Babies Tribunal, stories had to be covered on the discoveries on the bodies of infant babies in Waterville and Listowel in the 1990s. Martin Ferris was released from prison, initially restricted from being interviewed under Section 31, and went on to become a Sinn Fein TD for Kerry North.

Referenda on divorce, abortion and same sex marriage were influenced by local contributors who people could relate to.

National media by definition can't provide the same coverage of local issues and must juggle a multitude of demands for space and time, and sometimes there is a perception of bias towards Dublin/Leinster based issues whether inadvertent or not. That national media descend on a local area for a big issue, but disappear again too quickly to fully evaluate any fallout or repercussions. That coverage of rural Ireland can be side-lined into specialized programmes rather than form part of everyday programming. That vox pops and reactions to stories can sometimes be of older flat capped rural dwellers, which is fine - but areas outside cities are also well populated by articulate opinionated teenagers, 20, 30 and 40 somethings too.

Rural Ireland must also have the same mentality of competing as equals, or disadvantage will become self creating. Of course there are inequalities, we would all prefer that we would have better roads, better broadband, better facilities but as we continue to fight for those we must not minimize or devalue what we do have- educated and motivated people, a great place to live, and maybe more so than our urban neighbours a willingness to work together.

We can only become marginalized if we allow ourselves to be.

Businessman Jerry Kennelly developed a Young Entrepreneur Programme throughout schools in Kerry, partly because of a belief that if we cannot rely on external industries to come to Kerry we must develop our own generation of entrepreneurs who will continue to live and work from Kerry and create jobs. These students learn to think differently, to rely on themselves, to develop ideas and businesses, to believe that they can do anything, and they get the support of mentors from businesses in Kerry. I defy anyone who has any concerns for the future of our country to attend the annual final of this event, where hundreds of students come together in a political rally type frenzy with a confidence that is inspiring, and a voice that is loud and clear. Even if these students don't ultimately set up their own businesses, they will think differently and independently, and they will know business leaders from their county on a first name basis.

Radio Kerry has been centrally involved from the beginning and it is a programme that is now replicated in every county in Ireland. It gives a belief in a future not just in Ireland, but in your home place.

The media must give young people a belief that their home place has value, and that they can have a viable future there.

All voices must be heard and included from an early age. Radio can become interactive for a generation more familiar to texting and using the internet. School children in Kerry got to talk first hand to an explorer when Pat Falvey came in to studio on his return from a South Pole expedition.

The programme was broadcast live to primary school classrooms throughout Kerry, and children in those classrooms got to put questions directly to Pat. Among the schools taking part were children from Annascaul National School, home of famous Kerry explorer Tom Crean.

In the 1930s the Folklore Commission asked schoolchildren in Shrone National School in Kerry to write details of stories and customs in their areas. We went back to the same school and direct descendants of those children and asked them to make their own programme on the content of those annals, updating them with their own thoughts.

Maybe the way a story is told can shape an audience, can shape a county, can change perceptions, can motivate, and can give confidence.

Ever before COVID -19, during previous times of recession, we became conscious that many of our news bulletins, because of the reality of the changing economy in Ireland, contained multiple stories of bad news and had the potential to create an atmosphere of despair and disillusionment for listeners. And while we can't censor the reality of the difficulties we are going through as a country and they are covered comprehensively, we wanted to balance it with a reminder of the great sense of community that exists in Kerry, the tradition of being there for each other, or overcoming adversity together.

We asked listeners to share with us their words of advice, and the Wise Words series was sprinkled throughout our schedule.

For this reason the Kerry sense of humour is also core to what we do and something we give a voice to every day. We created several humorous imaging packages to run across different programming. For example in one we speculated as to how major Hollywood films might have been changed had the lead roles involved a Kerry person.

When the first lockdown was announced last year we created a series called *My 2k Kingdom* with the aim of making restrictions feel less restrictive. Listeners outdid each other to tell us what they could see and the stories and history from their daily 2k walks.

Communities in rural Ireland in particular still have a can do attitude too. The bad weather of the recent years proved this when communities came together to help each other out and solve problems, and during which time local stations provided a vital information service giving regular localized updates.

The public service commitment of independent local radio should be recognized and supported. The definition is no longer exclusive to state broadcasters. Many local stations show the same commitment and do so without license fee support.

Documentaries, radio dramas, programmes that archive the stories and songs of a county, specialist speech programmes, history, literary, and nature programmes are all part of a local stations output.

The 2020 Reuters Digital News Report showed 87% of those questioned in Ireland expressed an interest in local news. The UK figure was 79%, with 85% for the EU in general and 81% for the US.

Of those who described themselves as news lovers, 92% expressed an interest in local news. Even among passive news consumers, interest in local news is high, with 71 per cent saying they were interested. 82% said they would miss their local radio, or local radio website, if it went out of business.

The protection of local news is not just about journalism, it is about democracy. How many thousands of stories would go untold, not making the cut for national media because of its many competing demands? How many voices might never be heard?

Local radio provides an easily accessible forum for people to challenge and probe, to hold national and local bodies to account, to ask questions, to get answers.

Ireland has always had a proud tradition in journalism both national and local. Journalists in local newsrooms live the same lives as their listeners or readers. This closeness to our audience means all the pillars of good journalism are an inherent part of what we do each day – we are reliable and informative, we fact check, we are answerable and accessible, and we are relevant. If you announce a local industry has cut 50 jobs, but it is really 52, someone will stop you in the supermarket to correct you.

Newsrooms have played a more vital role since the outbreak of COVID- 19, constantly disseminating advice and information, encouraging collective responsibility and hopefully, leading the discussion on rebuilding.

It was a time when there was never a greater need for information that was trustworthy, accurate, relevant and up to date. Local newsrooms became a touchpoint for those with concerns and questions. We took it as a compliment that there was an expectation we would have the answers, and be able to provide the reassurance people needed.

Hopefully, trust is a currency more and more brands will want to associate with. What is at stake is broader than revenue alone. It is about valuing the truth, and how society and individuals learn and share information responsibly.

Radio Kerry would welcome the creation of any fund or financial support, ring fenced for original news, local journalism and public service content.

Whether this is from a state supported fund or through a fairer commercial playing field. Then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar has already referenced tech companies like Google, Facebook and Twitter benefitting from content produced by others saying “They are sort of free riders on costs incurred by other people” There have been calls for a levy on their profits to be used to protect traditional journalism, or there is the Australian model which would require them to pay media outlets for news content displayed on their services.

Music content is a lot cheaper to produce than speech radio, you just need a DJ and a music library. But Irish people love to talk and are intelligent and articulate communicators. The Board of Radio Kerry has had a strong commitment to quality programming from the start. Radio Kerry has two daily current affairs and speech programmes, strong news and sports departments, weekend talk shows, specialist music and speech programmes, weekly business, agriculture and Irish language

shows. We regularly produce radio documentaries and dramas, and have a huge commitment to live sports coverage in Kerry or involving Kerry teams.

Media organisations that commit to quality journalism and public service content will need to be supported, protected and rewarded for doing so. The jobs of those journalists working in generating local and original content must be valued and protected or they will always be vulnerable to commercial pressures.

The existing BAI Sound and Vision Fund does not allow for projects that relate to news and current affairs, and can be bureaucratic and time consuming for media organisations with limited staff.

Story tellers must be given as many platforms as possible, stories must be encouraged and generated, not just copied and pasted. People must be allowed to think and express, not just be told what others think.

I hope journalism students will always have the opportunity to be curious and to create - not just curate. For this reason original journalism and public service content must be supported and protected. COVID-19 has brought unprecedented challenges for local news with several local media organisations in Ireland and the UK already announcing their closure. But through adversity and necessity it could also herald a new era of journalism and discovery, with traditional media and social media giants leveraging each other's strengths and experience. To co-exist, and even support each other, with vision and financial security for both.

Social media companies have technologies, audience insights and resources local media can only dream of, but could learn from. Local media organisations have credibility, and the ability to create unique content from instant and reliable sources in their communities, hugely loyal audiences and the trust that will be increasingly expected of, and demanded of, social media

Radio Kerry has a Market Share in Kerry of 54% of all radio listeners in Kerry, higher than all other available radio stations combined, and a Weekly Reach of 72%. (\*November 2020 JNLRs)

The station has been named Local Radio Station of the Year on 5 occasions, and has received over 100 PPI/IMRO nominations across all areas of output as well as multiple other news and programming awards.

We want to be able tell the story of Kerry for a long time to come.

Fiona Stack  
General Manager  
Radio Kerry