

Submission to the Future of Media Commission from the Catholic Communications Office of the Irish Bishops' Conference – 8 January 2021

- Submission by Martin Long on behalf of the Catholic Communications Office of the Irish Bishops' Conference

Background information on the Future of Media Commission:

The Commission's remit is to examine how public service aims can be delivered and sustainably funded through the broadcasting, print and online media in Ireland over the next 10 years, while ensuring that independent editorial oversight is maintained and Ireland's creative and cultural sectors are supported.

Question 1. How should Government develop and support the concept and role of public service media and what should its role in relation to public service content in the wider media be?

Response to Question 1

Communication is central to the mission of the Catholic Church which, in turn, has always been very supportive of the values underpinning public service broadcasting, and of RTE since its inception. The ground-breaking Radharc documentaries, which focused on addressing concerns around social justice in Ireland and abroad, exemplified this support from the 1960s up to the 1990s. The ongoing provision of resources by the Church for broadcast of religious services, which involves the expertise of priests, religious and parish choirs, is another example of the importance of this partnership between Church and broadcaster.

The focus of our submission is on the future of public service broadcasting, and in this regard how it can best serve local communities on the island of Ireland.

There exists an imbalance in terms of how effective RTE is when it comes to listening to its audience, which comprises an ever growing number of segments. Irish society is much more complex and diverse than heretofore. To address this imbalance, and to obtain accurate feedback, RTE should consider establishing permanent standing committees to provide specialised input from interested audience sectors, including faith groups. This in turn would offer an opportunity for the public service broadcaster to benefit from the lived experiences of faith representatives in society. Such committees would differ from the RTE Audience Council in that these would not be appointed by RTE and so would be an independent forum to exchange views on a regular rather than an ad-hoc basis.

Another consequence of the imbalance in public service broadcasting manifests itself as a lack of editorial accountability in RTE. The concept of "groupthink" was identified in the 2012 BAI report, which was commissioned after the RTE *Mission to Prey* programme defamed Father Kevin Reynolds, as a contributing factor in the station's damaging broadcast of May 2011. Another serious failure of editorial standards was the blasphemous broadcast of 31 December 2020, on the *NYE Countdown Show*, which also made a sinister mockery of the Christian mystery of the Annunciation.

A properly serviced committee of faith representatives could provide the public service broadcaster with a forum for feedback in terms of values and standards.

In addition, the representation of faith and cultural minorities needs to be greatly enhanced. The content of public service broadcasting should reflect the lives, cultures, traditions and beliefs of the audience which it serves. Ireland's diversity should be reflected in terms of the content, voice and face of RTE. Why are there not more persons with disabilities, Travellers, minority faith backgrounds, nationalities, holding presenting roles on TV and Radio?

Northern Ireland: why is there such a dearth of voices and faces on RTE from Northern Ireland in particular? Following on from the launch of the Government's recent 'Shared Island Initiative', to what extent are RTE transmissions clearly received in the North?

Long Wave Radio: this important service is of value to Irish people living in remote areas of the island, as well as overseas, particularly the London Irish. But in terms of funding, how sustainable is this service for our diaspora?

Religious programming: as Ireland is now a more secular society, there is a particular responsibility on contemporary public service broadcasting to produce content which reflects quality religious programmes covering worship, news and analysis, which is accurate, always respectful, can engender trust, as well as demonstrate a competence and knowledge of faith values and tradition.

But such fundamental standards, as just outlined, can hardly achieve a critical mass when, for example, religious programming in RTE:

- is mostly broadcast at off-peak times. For example, *Leap of Faith* at 10.00pm on a Friday;
- its production of ten and a half hours of documentaries a year in 2008 has been reduced to three hours in 2021;
- regarding worship, RTÉ Radio 1 used to deliver a Mass and a Service every week, from various church locations, it can now only replicate on radio the output of its mainly studio-based TV Worship, ie a Mass or a Service, not both;
- whereas, in 2008, RTÉ commissioned 15 religious outside broadcasts a year, in 2021 it is expected to only manage one which includes the major feast days of Saint Patrick's Day, Easter and Christmas.

This reduction in output of faith broadcasting is very worrying especially when one takes into account the high level of public interest in faith practice. Has funding for faith broadcasting been disproportionately cut in relation to output in other areas like current affairs, sports, business and entertainment?

Ireland's public service broadcaster needs a consistent source of public funding to sustain its objective to serve our diverse society with quality programming which educates and enriches our culture, and to arrest the reduction in investment in religious worship and faith coverage. This point is addressed below.

Question 2. How should public service media be financed sustainably?

Response to Question 2:

We believe that direct taxation should be the source of funding for public service broadcasting, and that the television licence fee should be rebranded as a generic Broadcasting Fee. In the last ten years we can see how the successful implementation of the local property tax presents as a model for the application of a broadcasting fee.

On occasion, with a view to serving the common good, quality newspapers around the world share breaking news stories of public interest. Similarly, in terms of cost sharing, RTE might consider regular partnerships with other public service broadcasters. For example, a simultaneous transmission of *Sunday Sequence* on BBC Radio Ulster, which is a high quality programme dealing with questions of faith and ethics on the island of Ireland and around the world. It is broadcast on Sunday mornings from 8.30am to 10.15am. Might consideration be given to a dual broadcast at the same time on RTE Radio FM and on digital?

There are a number of other niche organisations on the island which produce high definition content for both TV and Radio. This content, although not commissioned by RTE, could be considered as cost-effective and quality content for broadcast on the RTE Player. This would offer additional programming for sharing with a wider audience, such as content produced by www.icatholic.ie.

Question 3. How should media be governed and regulated?

Response to Question 3:

The reality is that, in terms of TV and Radio broadcasting in Ireland, RTE holds a quasi-monopolistic position in the media market place. Unfortunately this dominance can work to the detriment of the audience. Regular and wide ranging consultation would serve the broadcaster and the audience in terms of good governance and regulation.

It was telling that, in terms of its planning and representation, this commission did not involve faith groups. This omission reflects a side-lining of a large section in our society from the important debate on the future of media in Ireland.

ENDS