

Submission to

The Future of Media Commission

By

The Writers' Guild of Ireland

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*Writers'  
Guild  
of Ireland*

## Introduction

The Guild was founded in 1968 as the Society of Irish Playwrights but moved over the years to enfranchise screenwriters of film and TV works as well as those writing drama for radio and other media.

The Guild has 571 members (up from 520 in 2019) divided between full and Associate members (without a professional credit), 44% of whom are female.

It is a national organisation with members spread across the country. It is affiliated to the Federation of Screenwriters in Europe (FSE) and the International Affiliation of Screenwriting Guilds.

It advocates on behalf of its members to arts organisations, government and semi-state agencies as well as providing invaluable sectoral information. The Guild also organises a wide variety of events including networking opportunities, briefings from TV commissioners and training schemes to address skills gaps or redress inequality of opportunity for female writers.

## Support for PSB

### Radio Drama

The impact of radio drama in the overall cultural ecology is often overlooked though it has a small, devoted listenership. The PJ O Connor Award run by RTE has provided a validation that has spurred on many writers.

The BAI Sound and Vision fund has played a significant part since its inception in keeping drama on independent radio stations around the country and allowing new talent a valuable outlet while Raidió Na Gaeltachta has ensured that scripted content in the Irish language would have a home.

For a many writers, producing work for the ear alone is extremely worthwhile enterprise. Plays of ideas expressed through character and dialogue can be constructed without worrying about their commerciality and have often touched on controversial subjects with insight and compassion. We believe that radio drama must continue to be supported as part of the cultural remit of public service broadcasting.

### TV Drama

Indigenously-produced scripted content - whether that is continuing drama (which provides the only really stable source of income for professional screenwriters in Ireland as well providing opportunities for novice writers to learn their craft) or high-end serial drama that often shines an invaluable light on contemporary society - together with news, current affairs and sport define our culture.

What is essential is reform of existing broadcasting legislation to provide for a stable and realistic funding mechanism in the form of an index-linked digital services tax collected at source to replace the existing license model coupled with significant investment aimed at creating compelling content with a unique Irish voice. It is essential because the

fundamental model of linear terrestrial broadcasting that prevailed since the establishment of RTÉ in 1960 is crumbling.

Within the decade, RTE and TG4 will need to migrate from a traditional linear broadcasting model into a digital content-lead platform and that will require investment and imagination. The recent creation of a subscription platform - Britbox - that showcases the content of *all* the UK's broadcasters rather than one may be the natural Darwinian end point of the death of terrestrial in Ireland.

The 'flaw' in the on-demand model is that it will inevitably lead to the disappearance of the plurality of programming across all genres that we currently enjoy. It is for this reason, that WGI argues that such a development needs careful consideration and consultation before authorization and implementation of such a model.

### The Threats and Opportunities of The Global Streaming Market

The globalised content market - underpinned by the proliferation of streaming offerings - many transnational - provide a unique challenge to a small open economy like Ireland. UK pay-TV services and US-based streaming companies such as Netflix and Amazon have transformed the media landscape. They have cannibalised a significant proportion of the PSB's audience with extraordinary resources and slick on-demand platforms.

With Netflix and Amazon investing hugely in UK-based content production, there is a real threat that, without additional supports, drama developed in Ireland will fail to raise the essential international co-production finance to get made, killing the domestic creative economy.

Caution is needed here, however, as the increased emphasis by producers, broadcasters and state funders anxious to compete in this market for internationally focused content (set in fantasy worlds or environments which pass for somewhere else) if left unchecked may cause us to lose out on all those uniquely Irish stories that are meaningful within this country and closes off the possibility of examining matters historical, political and social in which we are invested.

### National Media Creative Content Fund

The WGI is part of a broad consortium of Screen Industries stakeholders that believe the Irish government should introduce a levy - a National Media Creative Content Fund (NMCCF) - that will protect jobs and our national culture, mitigating the disruptive impact of largely deregulated foreign streaming companies that operate transnationally with wildly asymmetrical spending power. The economic case for such a fund is set out in report prepared by independent consultants Indecon entitled 'Analysis to Inform Potential National Media Creative Content Fund in Ireland'.

The levy is provided for under the Audio-Visual Services Directive 2018 which allows EU member states introduce financial obligations on foreign Video-On-Demand (VOD) services that target their domestic audiences.

It's an essential action to enable Irish programme makers to create a new generation of content with additional capital to compete in the international TV and streaming markets.

The value of video streaming alone is estimated by one account at about \$38 bn dollars and is projected to rise exponentially to \$149 bn by 2027.<sup>1</sup>

It's an economic fund which will enable Irish content creators to work at the scale and creative ambition that international audiences now expect and ensures Irish culture will have a global platform. A failure to implement the levy will further damage the sustainability of public service broadcasters and the independent production sector.

### How Would It Work?

The NMCCF is conceived as an additional economic stimulus mechanism to allow writers, directors and producers develop material with a wide international appeal whether it is based on an established piece of IP (such as a book or play) or a newly commissioned work and to bring to the table a larger percentage of equity funding than is available with existing supports.

The levy would be targeted at creating scripted content with a specific provision to ring-fence a portion of the levy for content for young people who are particularly underserved at present in both the Irish and English languages.

Though a separate independent body might be set up to administer this new fund, it may be more economically efficient for it to be administered by an existing body such as Screen Ireland or the Media Commission. If so, Screen industry stakeholders believe that the fund's primary function is to provide structural support rather than to take an active participation in the creative development or execution of such works as seek funding which is already available in existing structures.

### Addressing Inequality

Our members tell us that they have difficulty making ends meet. Only about a third of our membership earn their living full time at screenwriting. In the bleak aftermath of the Covid crisis, our fear is that talented screenwriters will be driven out of the profession entirely unless meaningful changes are made which allow for radical expansion of development funding (either private or public) and the rates and conditions under which such work is offered.

The WGI believes that value of the underlying IP (the screenplay) and those that create it has been systemically eroded by the wrong-headed emphasis on producers as the primary driver of a drama's development.

The lack of volume in the domestic market drives producers to extract the maximum share from development funds by proffering contracts which compel writers to surrender their rights which they have uniquely created for token amounts of money, to write and rewrite drafts at rates which per hour are less than that offered to unskilled manual laborers and are then rushed to market before the script is at its best in a frantic effort to get a payday when and if the project gets into production.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Bloomberg (<https://www.bloomberg.com/press-releases/2019-12-05/video-streaming-market-to-reach-149-34-bn-globally-by-2026-at-18-3-cagr-allied-market-research>)

The WGI believes that a dedicated development funding mechanism (or corridor) must be essential part of National Media Creative Content Fund to ensure writers can find a way to market without compromising artistic control or financial independence.

## The Opportunity

The collapse of advertising revenue and the under-optimised licence fee collection system makes such growth impossible without further sectoral support that the National Media Creative Content Fund can bring.

We know that Ireland has the writing talent base that can create entertainment that will excite and delight international audiences.

The government must seize the legislative opportunity to protect jobs and our culture by creating the National Creative Media Content Fund without further delay.