



Dublin : 8th January 2021

Submission to the Future of Media in Ireland consultation

Dear Madam and Sir,

Please find below a few points constituting SciencePOD's submission to the Future of Media in Ireland consultation.

SciencePOD is a specialist content platform, which helps media organisations, science publishers and both the non-governmental and the corporates more effectively communicate accurately about the impact in their lives of the latest advances in science, medicine technology and innovation.

Although we operate globally and we have a lot of international experience and knowledge of good practice in the media across the world, we are a Dublin-based organisation. This means that we are taking a great interest in the quality of the Irish media landscape and how it can be improved in through many small but significant changes.

Public Service Duty to Increase Scientific Literacy

The context of our submission is the realisation, during the pandemic, that audiences for complex scientific and medical information are not as limited as most media organisations have, until now, assumed. Indeed, there was a clear interest for all matters connected to the SARS-Cov-2 virus and the prevention and potential treatments and models related to the spread of COVID-19 as well as the lessons learned from the history of previous pandemics.

Clearly, this newfound appetite provides an opportunity to combat misinformation. When looking to establish the priorities for the future of media in Ireland, combatting misinformation related to topics that can be clearly explaining by looking at available scientific evidence, should be one of the key priorities of media coverage.

Specifically, there is a need for public service media to increase the amount of coverage related to the impact in our day-to-day activities of knowledge brought by research, science, technology and innovation (this can be done by relying of sources of information, which essentially stem from the peer-reviewed literature emanating from research).



Ultimately, the goal of the public media should be to leverage people's curiosity, deepen their knowledge, their ability to recognise trustworthy sources of information (preferably connected to published research), and enhance their connection to the broader science and technology that impacts their day-to-day lives. This will, in turn, contribute to improving the health and scientific literacy of Irish society¹.

The resurgence of COVID-19 in multiple waves over the past few months, and particularly following the Christmas period, could arguably be attributed, in part, to the insufficient level of scientific literacy in Irish society—something that the public media organisation could help remedy. One could argue that people may have wrongfully considered that socialising with family is not a threat—since they are closely related beloved individuals—instead of considering that every single contact with anyone—regardless of how caring they are—counts as a possible threat.

The role of the public service media is thus to provide audiences the necessary information to critically assess the facts they are presented with by clearly explaining the source of the information, its limitations and where it fits in the wider societal context. In this case, there is also a role for the public media and their journalists to share the mechanisms underlying the analysis of available scientific or technological evidence to help people make their own risk assessment.

The truth is that we live in a technologically and scientifically advanced society and the current public media coverage does not currently reflect this state of affairs. In their future incarnation, Irish public media organisations, therefore, have a duty to devise programmes that include elements of education aimed at increasing the level of scientific literacy of the public.

This does not necessarily mean multiplying the number of programmes, solely focused on science, medicine, the environment or technology. The approach needs to be much more in-depth and systemic across the entire spectrum of content produced by public media.

One approach could include the introduction of binding guidelines that a percentage of the content of any TV, radio, online or print production include a balance of topics, including a minimum coverage of science/medicine/environment/tech related topics, in so far as they have an impact and relevance to the lives of the audiences of public media. This can translate in any of the media coverage. Please note, by way of international comparison, the French government famously imposed a quota of French artists to be played on radios to ensure that the French language and culture was being 'sheltered' from the invasion of

¹ A more extensive analysis of this topic has appeared in an article we published, last year, in a science publishing industry blog, called The Scholarly Kitchen: [Pandemic Reveals Broader Audiences for Science and Carves Out New All-digital Publishing Opportunities](#) .



English language artists. Although the kind of top down French approach may not be adapted to the Irish way of doing business, this kind of approaches has been successful. Please note, this kind of quota approach could also be used to support the Irish language and culture.

How would the proposed systemic approach work in practice? For example, in sport, it could include a coverage of how gaining a better understanding physiology, can enhance GAA players' chances of winning by adapting their training regimen. Another example would be the inclusion in Irish soaps of educational material designed to raise scientific literacy (e.g. having a GP stating the basic concepts about avoiding overuse of antibiotics, inclusion of main characters' comments designed to raise awareness of the impact of plastic littering in the oceans, etc...). Script writers can relatively easily develop fiction storylines that twist the plot to include elements of scientific literacy for a dramatic effect.

One thing that was quite surprising during the early stage of the pandemic was that the level of coverage of science increased in the news, but it did not seem to abate the level of coverage of sport, even when sport was not being actively played. Instead, the editors reverted to exploiting archive material. One could argue that more explanatory science coverage designed to alleviate anxiety related to the pandemic, among the public could have been a more relevant kind of coverage at the time. The main issue was indeed that sports journalists were still employed full time, but there were not enough science journalists employed full time across the media, to uncover the many amazing facets of the pandemics from a historical, epidemiological, sociological, and innovation stand point.

This brings on the question of the recruitment of a greater variety of science journalists among the public media landscape.

Human resources issues in the public service media

As an independent observer of the Irish Media scene, we can only note that there is a lack of variety in terms of profile and expertise among the journalists in the public media. Indeed, some high-profile journalists manage to combine, a TV show, a radio show, and often a column in one of the newspapers. Although this approach fulfils the needs of the audience to have recognisable and familiar faces to stimulate loyalty among audiences, it has by far many negative consequences for the media landscape as a whole.

Indeed, if a single journalist occupies three slots in public TV, radio and media, this means that there are two fewer opportunities for two different journalists who may bring different perspectives and skills to general audiences. Ultimately, increasing the variety of journalists with different background—including more scientists, doctors and engineers—will



contribute to bringing a greater level of independent editorial oversight and to delivering on public service aims.

Concerning the recruitment of talent, Ireland is not lacking in media talent. The public media system is just not fostering enough opportunities for new talent to share their professional views with audiences across the media landscape.

Our organisation, SciencePOD which hosts a global network of professional science, medical, environment and tech journalists, is in a unique position to judge of the availability of a small, but well-established community of talent, some of whom are members of the [Irish Science and Technology Journalist Association \(ISTJA\)](#), among professional science journalists both located in Ireland and belonging the Irish diaspora abroad.

Since the public media has a duty to its audiences to critically cover matters affecting their lives, it can no longer ignore the massive impact that the fruits of scientific and technological research (think COVID-19 vaccine, think Celtic Interconnector for electricity, think remediation of land polluted by overuse of fertilisers, think smart phone privacy, think food security in a post-Brexit scenario, think Internet of Things applications on farms, think social scientists' studies of mental health of the confined population, and the list goes on and on...).

It is essential that those setting the rules to shape the Irish medial landscape of the future deliberately include rules that give preference to the recruitment more seasoned science journalists, not just for the straight reporting, but also at key strategic editorial positions in Irish media organisations. Indeed, it is no longer possible to sustain a public media landscape where the highest level of editorial decision making process are not fully appraised of the importance in their lives of the impact of the latest development in scientific research, in technology, and in innovation and their societal implications.

Clearly, there is also a need to consider how the coverage is actually delivered.

In as much as most media organisations depend on their in-house staff, a growing number of media, cannot afford to keep enough journalists on the pay roll to meet all of their content need. Instead, they rely on freelance contributors for part of their coverage. One significant observation made by colleagues is that Irish pay rates are not on par with international standards. Hence, it is increasingly difficult for quality journalists to sustain a career as a freelance journalist by solely depending on Irish media, due to low freelance rates.



Quality independent journalism has a cost and it is something that public media organisations need to be aware of if they want to increase the quality and the breadth of their coverage for the benefits of their audiences.

There is also a case to be made to rely on existing talent pools, such as the one developed by our own organisation, SciencePOD, to ensure that there is always the right expert to cover science or tech related stories, even when there is no in-house expert journalist appointed on the topic in media organisations. (See more details on how this could work in practice, here: <https://www.sciencepod.net/journalism>). By relying on an extensive network of high-quality science journalists will contribute to ensuring that there is a much larger diversity of perspectives represented in public service media, and that new angles are being considered to best serve the interest of the wider public.

Tax relief for independent journalists, TV production companies and public media organisations could be put in place to stimulate public media organisations outsourcing coverage to independent specialist journalists, such as science journalists.

This delocalised and decentralised approach to sourcing journalists involved in content creation will guarantee a much broader diversity of journalistic perspectives, breaking away from the risk of institutionalisation of the messages—a kind of one-size fits all—too often portrayed in the public media which relies on generalists journalists instead of calling upon existing specialists to cover critical topics such as health, environment, science, society, technology and innovation.

Feel free to get in touch, should you wish further clarification on any aspect of the above submission.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sabine Louët".

Sabine Louët

CEO and Founder SciencePOD

<https://www.sciencepod.net/>