

Submission to Public Consultation on the Future of Media in Ireland

Introduction

The Dublin City Interfaith Forum (DCIF)ⁱ is a network of people from a wide variety of faith communities in Dublin city. It is the de facto national interfaith forum. It seeks to raise awareness of the diversity of faith and culture through deep interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

We envisage a society based on mutual respect, cooperation and understanding, driven by progressive pluralism and unity.

All the major world faith traditions are represented on the forum by nominated leaders from their respective communities. The DCIF is the 'go to' body for state agencies, and others, who require an insight into the full, diverse spectrum of religion and faith in Irish public life, and the important role that it plays.

Survey Findings to Inform this Submission

In a recent surveyⁱⁱ conducted of DCIF members, the following question was asked: 'Is the Religious Diversity of Ireland Reflected in National Media Coverage?' The results showed that 80% of respondents did not feel that the actual diversity of Irish religious life was reflected in national media coverage here.

Of those surveyed, 70% said that their major religious festivals were not regularly marked in national media. Marking the religious literacy of journalists out of 100, those surveyed gave Irish journalists a fail when it came to religious literacy: just 38 out of 100.

Half of respondents felt their religion was often represented inaccurately.

When asked if their religion was represented as 'foreign' or 'other', 70% said it that it was - and this despite the fact that a growing and significant number of Irish citizens come from religious and belief traditions other than the mainstream and established Christian traditions in contemporary Ireland, according to most recent census figures available.

Finally, 70% of respondents said that they were unhappy with how their religion was covered in the national Irish media.

It is important to realize that the respondents were surveyed on behalf of their communities, therefore each respondent represented a whole community in their response. Also, a fully representative sample is not required in soliciting feedback and opinion in a matter such as this.

The context which this survey offers is that the present of Irish media coverage is wholly unsatisfactory when it comes to its coverage of faith and religion. It reflects an Ireland of the past and does not reflect the well-established diversity of the Irish population as it is now constituted.

With such a poor present evident in national Irish media in relation to this area, one can only hope that the future of Irish media will be better with regard to reflecting our nation's diversity with regard to matters of faith, belief and religion.

How Does the Media Need to Change in its Coverage of Religion?

At the moment, national media coverage of religion is dominated by coverage of Christian, particularly Catholic only religious stories and events. This context raises challenges as to how space is created and how change happens to allow for expansion of diversity, understanding and acceptance. If you are in a position of power and privilege what makes you question that position? Equality legislation in Ireland recognizes that there should be equal access to goods and services on nine grounds (including religion) for Irish citizens. The lack of equality in service with regard to religion by our national media is highly problematic in light of this Equality legislation - particularly when it comes to state supported media.

It is imperative that the DCIF participates in any process that stems from this initial consultation, so that it can represent the full diversity of Irish religious life in this debate and any policy or legislation that results from this.

There should, indeed, be an Oireachtas Committee to examine the findings of this consultative process; and the DCIF should have a voice at that Oireachtas Committee.

Any legislation that results; any new Broadcasting or Media Act that might stem from this process, should reflect the concerns of the DCIF when it comes to adequate coverage of religion and faith by the national media, especially with regard to a genuine reflection of our true diversity.

With these principles and this context in mind, the DCIF would submit that:

- Irish media in the future should recognize the importance of belief, faith and religion in citizen's and Irish residents' lives, and protect as an important principle that there should be an ongoing commitment to covering and serving this dimension of Irish life in the broad spectrum of media that is produced and consumed in Ireland.
- Media in Ireland, going forward, should begin to truly reflect the actual diversity of belief, religion and faith in Ireland; no longer serving one faith community disproportionately in its coverage. In this, it will address the nation's media's shortcomings in living up to the legal requirements under Equality legislation in the state, especially with regard to equal service provision on the grounds of religion.
- There should be some proportionality with regard to the coverage of belief, faith and religion in Ireland; as current coverage is disproportionate in favour of one group, and does not truly reflect our religious diversity.
- That the media recognizes that it has an important role in furthering religious literacy, tolerance and understanding in Ireland through its coverage of religious affairs; that it has an educating role in this regard, and an important function in countering intolerance and racism with regard to religious belief.
- That there should be a requirement for national media to fully reflect the diversity of the belief, faith and religious traditions (both old and new) in Ireland. This means an ongoing commitment to offering coverage to religious rites and festivals in our national media; and with an emphasis on diversity and inclusion in doing so.
- That a respectful balance be required of our national media when it comes to the sometimes competing demands of respect for belief and the principle of freedom of expression. That these competing demands be met with a nuanced approach, rather than absolute positions: a full ban on satire and criticism on the one hand, and the absolute position of freedom of expression on the other. Media coverage should acknowledge in practice that a reasonable position exists somewhere in between these competing poles.
- National media should not offer a privileged position to one faith tradition only in its coverage of religion, and should seek an interfaith dimension where possible -

especially when it comes to coverage of state functions, national and communal celebrations or commemorations on the national and international stage, and in its marking of significant moments of collective celebration or grief in our nation's media.

- That these requirements be written into any future legislation, recognizing that covering belief, faith and religion are as important as an ongoing commitment to covering culture, politics or society by our national media.
- That the values of a genuinely pluralistic Republic be evident in the coverage of belief, faith and religion in our national media.

Conclusion

These principles and points we submit as part of this process of consultation. In particular, we stress the importance of good communication and consultation by the Future of Media Commission with as wide a range of groups as possible, so that real dialogue can take place on relevant proposals before they are cast in new legislation. In addition, we indicate our availability and willingness to be consulted as part of the processes the Commission puts in place following from this initial consultation - be that at the Committee stage in the Oireachtas, in the process of framing any further Bills or Acts of the Oireachtas, or in any other forum that feeds into this most important question.

ⁱ Dublin City Interfaith Forum (DCIF) is a network of people from a wide variety of faith communities in Dublin. It seeks to raise awareness of the diversity of faith and culture through deep interfaith dialogue and co-operation. We envisage a society based on mutual respect, co-operation and understanding driven by progressive pluralism and unity, diverse and vibrant, throughout Ireland and the World. The participating faiths are Baha'i, Buddhism, Christian, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. We would stress that this project is not about interfaith dialogue, but rather about active collaboration between the communities represented by the various faiths in the context of the integration agenda of Dublin and Ireland. Faith communities are an integral group in Irish society, and are at work in every community. A significant percentage of Ireland's population identifies as having some kind of religious faith or link to a religious tradition. The concentration of faith communities varies. In some areas, most faiths are represented (e.g. Dublin City Centre) while in other areas the faith may be predominantly Christian with little representation from others. This shows that we are now more and more multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious. DCIF maintains that this diversity is a source of strength and vitality for us. More information at www.dcif.ie

ⁱⁱ <https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-VCRZNRJG7/>