

Responses by 8th Jan 2021 to Future of Media

[*Proposed draft Response to be submitted by Prof Pat Brereton as chair of ScreenGreening and School of Communications, DCU.

<https://futureofmediacommission.ie/public-consultation/>

Requested to address three specific questions:

- 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?
- 2) How should public service media be financed sustainably
- 3) How should media be governed and regulated.

Overview: A Greening of Public Service Broadcasting (Some General Observations)

From a GreenScreening and environmental perspective, Public Service Broadcasting and RTE in particular has a major role to play in setting the benchmark and standard towards reducing the carbon footprint of all new Irish media productions, as part of a Government and Industry sustainability strategy, to meet our Low Carbon Footprint budgets over the coming years and decades. Furthermore, RTE alongside other broadcasters and media producers also have a major role to play in developing and promoting new programming, which explicitly addresses all aspects of the global challenge of our century; namely reducing excessive carbon emissions and dealing with climate change.

This green focus needs to be a dominant theme, not only across documentary, news and current affairs programming, but also surface across fictional narratives as well as magazine programmes, including soaps and reality television shows for instance. Basically, all aspects of the schedule needs to be actively re-purposed – if only tangentially – towards promoting environmental low-carbon sustainability, while also dealing with a related range of issues from biodiversity to food security, just transitions (inter-generational; Third World inequities; as well as Racist and Gender tensions), and at the same time dealing with aspects of environmental and ethical values, alongside cultural, social and political forms of green identity. Painting Ireland truly ‘green’ in a more sustainable manner has to be the number one strategic agenda for media, as well as politics. Such a radical transformation can draw on the EU’s Green New Deal and ‘building back better’, following the radical transformations brought about as part of the ‘war strategy’ adopted in fighting the current global pandemic.

Because of the relatively small media ecology landscape in Ireland, Public Service Broadcasters cannot I believe or should not function in isolation, much less single-handedly defending so called legacy (‘quality’) media, compared with the huge growth over the last few decades of new digital media outlets for alternative modes of ‘broadcast’ media. All of which feeds off the ongoing development of new aesthetics and innovative categories of media production, using an ever-increasing variety of digital platforms and devices. All the while, audiences (and citizens) still demand and require the roots of good story arks, which can be harnessed by calling on the benefits of adopting more popular/populist lifestyle media for instance to get across sometimes tangential but topical climate crisis concerns for citizens not fully aware or cogniscent of the broader implications of climate change.

For instance, the huge growth of online of stories focused music, lifestyle-living, cookery, clothing and fashion preoccupations, among many other 'soft' news and entertainment formats, appear to cross-over Public Service Broadcasting values and its sometimes-limited (even elitist) template of possibilities. [It is a long time for instance since BBC management 'worried' about taking on the production of a soap like *EastEnders* as not fitting into its prescribed quality values, not to mention Channel Four's purchasing of Endemol's reality televisual show *Big Brother*, which became a commercial mega-success, selling the franchise across the world.] Coincidentally, as noted by one expert on a webinar cited below, 'cake' is mentioned on the digital-ether more than the 'climate' story, outside of news broadcasts. Yet, for instance, an innocuous but very popular franchise like *I'm a Celebrity Get me out of here* - because of Covid restrictions - can in some ways help call attention to, if not promote, environmental concerns, while being filmed in a castle in Wales, rather than its more exotic usual setting. There can always be a climate angle to every media show if you focus hard enough! But the key is in making it real, while reaching greater levels of audiences and helping to build broad engagement and appeal beyond the environmental-activist community.

Question 1

Public Service Media remains an essential democratic component of active Irish citizenship. As evident most recently with fears around the current pandemic, citizens of all persuasions have heavily relied on the quality journalism and leadership of RTE (and other Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) outlets) towards understanding, trusting and coping with the major changes to personal life and behaviour, we have all had to undergo over the last year. Hence Governments can rely on (PSB) to support effective crisis management in extreme circumstances and know such media and public service broadcasters remains invaluable during such crisis periods. Furthermore, speaking 'truth to power' and maintaining the core role of broadcast media as a robust 'Public Watchdog' or 'Fourth Estate' towards evaluating political rectitude, while ensuring 'best practice' and quality control, across all aspects of social and economic life in particular, remains an essential function of good public service broadcasting.

Worries about the growth of 'fake news' and appealing to the lowest common denominator, while being driven by the 'commercial imperative' has to be constantly negotiated and protected to ensure all citizens are treated equally and no elitist grouping with deep pockets or other resources – buying advertising or even editorial favour – can be heard more loudly than other sections of society.

This tension remains particularly pertinent with regards to threats around *greenwashing* and every company and organisation currently wishing to get on the 'green bandwagon', as they try to gain credit for their local pro-environmental activities. But rather than simply dismissing commercial business, as always being suspect in supporting their bottom line, a robust Public Service Broadcasting model ought to be both transparent and robust in drawing on and dealing with such pervasive tensions, as broadcast media actively report on how governmental agencies strive to road test effective policy and behavioural change solutions to our climate change problems.

Question 2 – Sustainable Finance

This is always a major dilemma for all types of Public Service Broadcasting. Unlike the ‘purer’ model at the BBC, which draws on 100% public financing and thereby is sometimes accused of being more open to Governmental interference, Ireland has a more ‘complex’ model of funding with around 50% of revenue coming from advertising and a large percentage of production being ‘farmed out’ to independent producers and companies. Such commercial influences and arrangements produce constant tensions between the ‘commercial imperative’ of securing high audience figures and appealing to advertisers, as against protecting citizen’s rights and representing various minorities across all aspects of our national community.

Foregrounding the essential importance of the environmental agenda; [I] would tend to support a general ‘household media charge’ to support (PSB), alongside a ‘green levy’ being raised to ensure more environmental productions are made, which in turn could be further linked to related educational approaches to all aspects of climate change, as Higher Education in particular take on the need for more specific engagement with environmental concerns (see for instance the curriculum of a new Climate Change Master’s program in DCU and other initiatives.) Furthermore, business communities and companies of all hues using active marketing strategies can and should be called on to support and sponsor an increasing range of such innovative environmental programming.

Media industry viability and sustainability remains a core preoccupation and an ongoing core focus that needs to be urgently addressed, while bringing the whole industry together towards striving to secure effective solutions. As in all businesses and organisations, we all need to clearly identify the problems and look to ways to solve these, while adding all aspect of ‘accountability’ to ensure best practice solutions are rolled out and continued into the future. By all accounts, the (climate) science needs to be set up as an essential benchmark for such approaches; drawing on aspects of education and training (see in particular the roll out of the Carbon Calculator and BAFTA in UK and in Ireland in appendix below) required to apply best practice solutions across the creative industries. Such initiatives need to be mainstreamed and effectively funded so that they can be mainstreamed across the Irish broadcast and general media sector.

Q 3 Governing and Regulation

Again some regulation mechanism is needed to ensure a comprehensive environmental approach to both programming and sustainable production methods. Such a strategy can be assisted for instance, by ensuring the Carbon Calculator – currently adapted by RTE as well as all other broadcasting and audio-visual media and funding organisations - becomes mandatory for use by all media productions into the future. On a broader level, I would suggest that various aspects of media/environmental literacy should be applied to all facets of media production and broadcasting (see Pat Brereton *‘Environmental Literacy and New Digital Audiences’* 2019, together with his forthcoming *‘Essential Concepts for Environmental Communication’* (Routledge 2021).

References:

- Broadcasters Green Production and New Modes of Storytelling – case study of Futerra webinar (16th November ‘Harnessing the Power of Creativity for the Climate Movement’)*
- Muldoon, A. Gormley, J. & Brereton P. ‘Greening media industry: a short case study of Ireland’ chapter for forthcoming Palgrave reader on Global Broadcasting responses to climate change edited by Pietari Kaapa and Hunter Vaughan.
- Victory, Jonathan ‘Green Shoots: the role of the eco-manager in sustainable film production’ Masters Dissertation for Staffordshire University 2014
http://www.screengreening.com/uploads/7/9/0/8/79084908/jonathan_thesis.pdf

APPENDIX [extracts from short chapter to be published in 2021]

Greening media industry: a short case study of Ireland

Anthony Muldoon, John Gormley and Pat Brereton

Abstract

The primary aim of this case study is to examine how Irish media had adapted the ALBERT Carbon Calculator to help green media production across the sector. This study will outline how RTE, TG4, Virgin Media Television together with independent film producers and funders, as well as regulators, have helped to seed these innovative models of greening production over the last few years

The resultant ‘GreenScreening’ Irish initiative will help towards developing best practice around sustainable media production into the future, and hopefully help create collaborations between industry and academia in order to submit research proposals developing the media industry’s capacity to mitigate climate impacts. Especially, having faced into a difficult post-COVID world, we have opportunities to develop and uncover new ways of creating environmentally sustainable media products and sow the seeds of more effective green storylines.

Overview

ScreenGreening, the national umbrella group for Irish environmental sustainability in the screen industries is made up of the major film and broadcasting organisations in Ireland. As such, it is the only such national body – as far as we are aware – encompassing all of the relevant organisations in any country. Set up in 2018 to act as umbrella organisation for all Irish media organisations, on signing a Memorandum of Understanding, it became affiliated to the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) organisation in the UK, with the main purpose to secure its carbon calculator called Albert from January 2019, and forming part of its international consortium.

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Concluding Remarks

With the pandemic causing almost a complete stand-still for much of 2020, it has been particularly difficult to roll out a carbon calculator, much less secure buy-in across so many sectors of the media industry in Ireland. Nonetheless, such a shock to the system has surprisingly produced some very positive results regarding reducing overall carbon footprint and calling attention to the need to do more. The Irish media organisations have responded to such a crisis with a very comprehensive series of protocols (see endnote) which facilitated re-constituting the processes of media production from top to bottom. Such initiatives can most certainly help towards ensuring that the Irish media industries ‘build back better’ toward

a more environmentally sustainable future. Of course there will be several bumps in the road, but at least a broad plan of action has been established and can be extended as we hopefully move out of the grip of the pandemic in 2021. Driven by the possibility of more sustainable budgets and costings, at the same time as evident across other case studies in this volume, the use of the carbon calculator can have a positive knock-on effect across ongoing issues around all aspects of sustainability that in turn evidences how good practice can get rewarded and therefore promote better practice.

... As further affirmed by several of our case studies, much of the official green production analysis in the literature is drawn from big studio films, or films with large budgets and dedicated eco-departments. Meanwhile Ireland has some very small – even micro-budgeted productions - which needs more flexible models of engagement with regards to use and adaptation of the carbon calculator and always finding champions or experts to teach and build green cultural capital and learning in the area for future freelance productions. Such productions often simply cannot afford to hire eco-specialists and like our early student example, it falls on creatives on the ground to work through some best practice protocols.

Certainly educational and training organisations, as well as funders and regulators, have a major role to play in structuring and following protocols and processes that secure good green results and help to reduce the overall carbon footprint on all productions. Nonetheless, with adequate training and the appropriate leadership and active engagement all crew can become skilled in adapting a broad range of green protocols while learning from using the carbon calculator and re-using in future productions.

