



Sport Ireland Submission on the Future of Media in Ireland

Submission made to The Future of Media Commission

January 2021

Introduction

Sport Ireland was established in 2015 under the Sport Ireland Act (2015) and is the statutory body with responsibility for the development of sport in Ireland.

As a statutory agency, Sport Ireland is a natural partner to our national broadcaster with a common public service focused values. Sport Ireland, and its predecessor The Irish Sports Council, has enjoyed a collaborative working relationship with RTÉ, and to a lesser extent TG4, over many years.

This includes work on specific projects, such as the RTÉ Sports Awards, OB Sports and major international championships, as well as practical support on other ventures such Olympic & Paralympic Games, public awareness campaigns and the provision of regular news content.

Sport Ireland continues to engage regularly with the national broadcaster and is open to future collaboration.

Sport Ireland also recognises the value of commercial media outlets to Irish society and the media landscape. Sport Ireland has collaborated with such outlets in the past and will continue to do so in the future.

The functions of Sport Ireland are prescribed in Section 8 of the Sport Ireland Act, and include powers to develop participation in sport and high performance sport; to eliminate doping in sport as the National Anti-Doping Agency, to develop coaching, to develop guidelines on the protection of children in sport and the development of the Sport Ireland Campus.

As the statutory agency for sport, Sport Ireland recognises over 60 National Governing Bodies of Sport and works closely with its network of 29 Local Sports Partnerships nationwide. Through ongoing

engagement with these organisations, Sport Ireland is well placed to provide constructive input to this consultation.

While the concept of Public Service Media and Broadcast spans all facets of society, for the purposes of this submission Sport Ireland will be addressing its response from the viewpoint of sport, with a particular focus on the area public service broadcasting.

From the outset, Sport Ireland wishes to lend its full support our Public Service broadcasters for the commendable work they have done over many years in providing quality sports programming, news and features to the Irish audience. The public ethos is clear from this programming and collaboration.

It is acknowledged that the demands placed on a Public Service broadcaster are many and varied. The challenging legal, commercial and financial environment in which a Public Service broadcaster operates is appreciated and understood. Therefore, in this submission, Sport Ireland will provide some constructive considerations, which may be taken on board as the future of Public Service Media in Ireland is shaped.

Current Landscape

RTÉ, and more recently TG4, have provided quality sports programming for Irish audiences, particularly across Gaelic Games, international and domestic football, and international and professional rugby. Olympic and Paralympic Games have been shown in varying formats over many years, while major national and international events in many other sports have also been given either live or delayed coverage on a once-off or annualised basis e.g. The Dublin Horse Show, Dublin City Marathon, National Athletics Championships etc.

There has been a strong commitment to carrying sports news across both radio and television, while the addition of the RTÉ website and news app has increased the visibility of Irish sport.

RTÉ and TG4 have also shown a strong commitment to sport and physical activity through the commissioning of sport specific educational, human interest and entertainment programming.

The focus has remained primarily on the field sports of Gaelic Games, Football and Rugby, which is understandable given the relative popularity and participation rates in these codes.

While previously RTÉ would have provided extensive coverage of major international boxing tournaments, basketball national championships and hockey national finals, among others, this is no longer the case. In recent years, there has been a move to cover certain international events, at times at short notice, where there has been particular Irish interest and a chance of Irish success e.g. rowing.

Sport on both RTÉ and TG4, whether television or radio, is almost exclusively broadcast via the traditional media of television and radio, while often being simulcast on the respective live internet players and across the suite of smartphone and tablet applications.

Innovation and Technology

The manner in which information and content is consumed is continually evolving and RTÉ, in particular, have embraced the move online in terms of its news content, with RTÉ.ie now firmly in place as Ireland's foremost source of news. The proliferation of apps produced by RTÉ has been welcome, while the ability to access specific pieces of replicated content through podcasting and social media clips has had a positive impact on news consumption.

From a sporting perspective, it is the view of Sport Ireland that opportunities may exist to utilise the existing technology to provide multiple channels through which live, delayed or abbreviated sporting content may be broadcast.

This is particularly relevant in the context of sporting content outside of the traditional field sports, where events of cultural significance, of significant public interest and of a developing nature. Such events may not justifiably warrant a slot on traditional media, but could provide non-traditional sports with a platform – thus enhancing the role of the Public Service broadcaster – and contain a knock-on commercial benefit to the broadcaster through traffic increases.

The use of social media as both an awareness platform, and even broadcast medium – such as the NFL on Twitter – should be explored in greater detail and consumption habits evolve.

It is appreciated that with finite resources, the sourcing, creation and resourcing of such an approach may be considered prohibitive. This is why innovate solutions in collaboration with rights holders are necessary and should be proactively pursued.

Areas to consider:

- Can the rights holder produce the content to a standard that can be broadcast online?
- Can the rights holder bring a sponsor on board to fund the content production and broadcast?
- Can the rights holder provide in broadcast commercial opportunities to the broadcaster?
- Is the broadcaster creating awareness that such an opportunity is available?
- Is the broadcaster open to receiving pitches from interested parties?

However, as addressed in detail later on, the role of relationships with rights holders, and the repositioning of these, is an important precursor for such obstacles to be overcome.

BBC and the BBC NI have successfully collaborated with sports bodies in the recent past to utilise technology to broadcast sporting fixtures on their website.

Relationship with Rights Holders

While the area of rights is becoming more and more complex in the international context, from a national perspective the manner in which rights are approached should be reset in conjunction with broadcasters.

To expand, the traditional model whereby rights for sporting events are sold by the holder to the broadcaster can be considered prohibitive outside traditional sporting arenas where such an approach makes logical sense.

For the rights holder where the broadcaster may not see significant commercial value, the rights holder should consider providing the rights to a broadcaster with a commercial model of mutual benefit being negotiated. The knock-on for the rights holder is the guarantee of broadcast, the opportunity to leverage sponsorship and market the sport; the knock on for the broadcaster is an opportunity to expand audience base, expand offering on alternate platform, entering into potentially long-term agreements with new partners and increased commercial opportunities.

The regrettable situation at present means that the current rights environment means that many great sporting events go under the radar due to the perceived lack of commerciality and rigidity of the approach to sale of rights.

It could be argued that the issue is also pervasive at an international level below the traditionally well supported sports. The national broadcaster's position with the European Broadcasting Union could be influential in igniting a conversation on the repositioning of international sporting rights.

The notion of relationships is important, particularly between the Public Service media and the sports sector. In order to cultivate a diverse and engaging sports output, it is incumbent upon the Public Service media to engage with those charged with delivering the sport on the ground.

It is recommended that the Public Service broadcasters work with and guide national and international federations on putting in place structures that would be appropriate for broadcast, outlining what would be required to get a sport to broadcast and opening two-way lines of ongoing communications in order to explore future opportunities.

Focus of Programming and News

When it comes to sport, it is the contention of Sport Ireland that appetite of the general public is not solely based on sporting success.

Equally of interest is the story, the journey, and ongoing cyclical narrative, which may not always culminate in victory or success. While one-offs and specials are understandable, particularly when success is likely or imminent, embracing the technology reference earlier may provide a level of continuity that can further engage and service a wider audience.

One of Sport Ireland is committed to increasing women's sustained involvement in sport as coaches, volunteers, club members, athletes, advocates, leaders, and participants from grassroots to the podium. In its Policy on Women's Participation in Sport, Sport Ireland has identified visibility as an area where there is opportunity for growth.

It is acknowledged that there has been much positive work in this area across the media, there is an opportunity for the national broadcaster to build on this and ensure that women's news, events and features from across the sporting spectrum are given adequate focus, attention and coverage. Sport Ireland can play a supporting role in this regard.

While it is appreciated that not every event may be ready for broadcast, Public Service Media can support the development of all sport in Ireland through the dissemination of news and/or features across popular show and new bulletins.

It is understood that there is a significant role for sports bodies and rights holders in terms of creating awareness and providing content. Sport Ireland could work in partnership with the national broadcaster in educating sports bodies on the value and undeniable reach of such an approach.

Broadcasting Authority of Ireland

Through its funding channels, there may be opportunities for the national broadcaster, Sport Ireland and sports bodies to work together on projects for submission to the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland.

A focus on innovative approaches to single events, multi-sport events or feature content, with the backing of two statutory bodies, may prove to be attractive propositions for the BAI.

Sport Ireland remains open to discussing further opportunities in this regard.

Protection of Events of Cultural Significance

The free-to-air broadcast list of sporting events is important and this should be protected, reviewed with regularity and the interpretation of the cultural significance of events protected as such should be constantly kept under consideration

It is welcome that a review of the list of sporting events protected for free-to-air broadcast was announced in December of 2020 and is currently underway.

Conclusion

Ireland is a changing nation, a proud sporting nation; sport is intrinsic in our culture. A vibrant and diverse public service offering of sport should reflect this.

Sport Ireland understands the role of our Public Service media, the importance of a partnership approach with regard to sport and is committed to developing a strong and vibrant sport sector in Ireland. As such, Sport Ireland sees many opportunities for our Public Service media to work collaboratively and innovatively to enhance Ireland's understanding and enjoyment of sport.

Sport Ireland is available to support the work of the Commission and further discuss any aspects of this submission or any other matter pertaining to sport in Ireland.