

## **Opening Statement from Jeremy Godfrey, Executive Chairperson at Coimisiún na Meán**

Thank you to the Committee for the invitation to meet with you today. I am Jeremy Godfrey, Executive Chairperson at Coimisiún na Meán and I am joined here today by Anne Marie Pollock, our Director of Policy for Democracy and Fundamental Rights and Stephanie Comey, Director of Media Literacy and User Education.

2024 has been called the ‘Year of Democracy’, with over half of the world’s population expected to vote in elections this year. In Ireland, as well as European elections, we have local elections, an election for the Directly Elected Mayor of Limerick, and at least three referendums.

Coimisiún na Meán’s purpose is to ensure a thriving, diverse, creative, trusted and safe media landscape. In the context of elections, this means a media landscape that enables a variety of voices and opinions to be heard, and which supports the agency of voters to make a free and informed choice.

Disinformation and misinformation are significant societal challenges, and a risk to the democratic process. While societal challenges require cross-societal responses, Coimisiún na Meán has several levers across our remit which can help to address disinformation and misinformation.

I will start with a brief overview of Coimisiún na Meán, and then describe three aspects of our role in relation to combatting disinformation;

- Our role – together with the European Commission and our counterparts in other Member States – in combatting online misinformation and disinformation;
- Our role in promoting Media Literacy;
- Our role in promoting the provision of impartial, fair and objective information through broadcast news and current affairs and through support for local journalism.

Coimisiún na Meán was established just over a year ago, in March 2023, taking on the functions and staff of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. Our remit covers broadcasting and on-demand regulation, media development and online safety.

Broadcasting and on-demand regulation and media development are governed by the relevant sections of the Broadcasting Act 2009.

Our online safety framework has three main components:

- the EU Terrorist Content Online Regulation;
- the EU Digital Services Act (DSA);
- the Online Safety Code, which we are developing following public consultation.

Coimisiún na Meán had about 40 staff when we were established. We aim to reach about 160 staff by the middle of the year and have sought approval to increase staff numbers to around 250.

Last month, we opened our user contact centre. We advise members of the public who have concerns about online or broadcast content about their rights and how to raise their concerns with the platform or broadcaster concerned. We also accept formal complaints if a user considers that a platform or broadcaster is in breach of a regulatory obligation.

The contact centre will play a crucial role in gathering information on the types of illegal and harmful content people are encountering online, which will allow us to better combat systemic issues relating to online platforms.

It is important to stress that our role is to supervise how platforms comply with their obligations at a systemic level. These obligations include acting on reports of illegal content and diligently enforcing their own rules about what they do or do not allow on their own services.

It is also worth setting out what we do *not* do. We do not act as a content moderator and we do not resolve disputes about whether particular items of content are illegal or represent misinformation. We are not a censor. We do not consider complaints about individuals; nor do we take action against them.

The DSA places an obligation on Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) and Very Large Online Search Engines (VLOSEs) to assess a number of risks that activity on their platforms can pose, and to take steps to mitigate those risks. This specifically includes risks to electoral integrity and civic discourse.

VLOPs are platforms with more than 45 million average monthly users in the EU. They include major social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, X and YouTube – all of which have their EU headquarters in Ireland.

The European Commission is responsible for enforcing the risk assessment and mitigation obligations of VLOPs and VLOSEs. As the Digital Services Coordinator (DSC) where they are established, we work closely with the European Commission in this task.

The European Commission has recently consulted on guidelines about the mitigation measures that these services are recommended to take in regard to electoral integrity. These guidelines are expected to be finalised by Easter. The aim is to establish an electoral integrity ecosystem involving the platforms, civil society groups and electoral authorities, with DSCs playing a coordinating role in each Member State and the European Commission as the ultimate enforcer.

While the guidelines are intended to apply to all elections across the EU, the forthcoming European Parliament election will be the first time they are applied.

The draft guidelines are very comprehensive and it might be helpful if I give a flavour of some of the actions that VLOPs and VLOSEs are expected to take. For instance, platforms are recommended to:

- Stand up an internal team before each electoral period, that includes country-specific expertise;
- Point users to official sources of information about the electoral process (in Ireland, this is the Electoral Commission);
- Collaborate with independent fact-checking organisations that identify disinformation, add labels to information provided by fact-checkers and integrate their content into user feeds to increase their impact;
- Provide tools to help users assess the trustworthiness of information sources;
- Demonetise disinformation content and limit its virality by adding warning labels and deprioritising it in recommender system algorithms;
- Label political advertising and maintain a public repository of political ads; ensure that influencers declare if their content is paid political advertising;

- Have and enforce rules against impersonation of candidates;
- Act against content that incites violence or hatred and thus discourages members of particular groups from participating in political activity;
- Ensure that AI and manipulated content such as deepfakes are distinguishable for users; monitor the performance of AI provided information;
- Collaborate with researchers and conduct reviews of the effectiveness of mitigation measures after each election.

The guidelines are careful to stress that the aim is to protect the integrity of the electoral process from disinformation and manipulation, and to support the exercise of liberty of expression and robust political debate.

We are currently working with the European Commission and our counterparts in other member states about how DSCs will operationalise their coordination role. We have already engaged with the Electoral Commission in this regard and will reach out to other stakeholders once the guidelines are finalised.

Media literacy can play a significant role in the context of elections, by ensuring that people can critically understand and interact with media and make informed choices about what they see, read and share online. We see media literacy as a longer-term effort that can help mitigate the impact of disinformation and misinformation, with our efforts continuing outside of election times.

Coimisiún na Meán is the main facilitator of Media Literacy Ireland. Last year, we supported the Be Media Smart campaign which encourages people to stop, think and check – that the information they are getting is accurate and reliable. We are proud to support this campaign and to encourage people to critically assess media content, whether online or off-line, which we believe will help to reduce the impact of disinformation and misinformation.

Currently, in line with our role under the DSA, we are running a Spot It. Flag It. Stop It. public awareness campaign to inform people of their rights under the DSA and to encourage online users to report content that they believe is illegal directly to the platforms where they saw it.

Coimisiún na Meán is also a member of the European Platform of Regulatory Authorities, which is aimed at exchanging ideas and best practices regarding media literacy on a pan-European basis. Separately, Coimisiún na Meán is represented on the European Commission's Media Literacy Expert Group which meets quarterly to identify, document and extend good practices in the field of media literacy.

Beyond combatting misinformation and disinformation, we believe that delivering media literacy initiatives in Ireland is crucial to ensuring that prospective voters know their rights and can understand the issues at play during elections and referendums.

Coimisiún na Meán has assumed the former BAI's role in broadcast regulation. This includes our guidelines for the broadcast coverage of elections and referendums. The guidelines underline the importance of fairness, objectivity and impartiality in news and current affairs. High-quality public service media also acts as an effective bulwark against the spread of disinformation, particularly through the provision of impartial and high-quality news.

These rules apply both to the public service media organisations – RTÉ and TG4 – and to licensed TV and radio broadcasters.

Within the coming weeks, we will launch a consultation on the design of two schemes to support local journalism – one focused on local democracy, including the activities of local

councils, and one on local court reporting. These schemes should expand information available that will be of use to voters, particularly in local elections.

Finally, since 2023, Coimisiún na Meán has served on the National Counter Disinformation Strategy (NCDS) Working Group, established by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. The development of a National Counter Disinformation Strategy was a key recommendation of the Future of Media Commission.

In the context of the upcoming European Elections, we have an important role in regulating broadcasters, ensuring that online platforms live up to their obligations and in promoting media literacy for the public. We are committed to a diverse, safe and thriving media landscape in Ireland, during the European elections and beyond.