

Opening remarks by John Purcell

Chair of Independent Broadcasters of Ireland

To Meeting of Joint Oireachtas Committee on Media

Thursday May 6<sup>th</sup> 2021

Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill

Thank you for the invitation to take part in your deliberations here today

I am joined today by Chris Doyle who is a fellow Director and member of the Board of the IBI.

Together we represent 33 radio stations who collectively comprise over 70% of the Irish radio market.

As you know radio plays a crucial role in our communication ecosystem – it is universally available free to air, it is regulated and adheres to positive values.

We cover every community in the country and make an unrivalled contribution to society, democracy and everyday life

Thank you for the invitation to attend this important meeting and for the opportunity to speak with you about this important piece of legislation which will lay an important foundation as to how media in this country will be regulated into the future.

While the advent of online and social media has brought positive elements, these benefits risk being outweighed by the negative impacts.

These impacts are plain for all to see. It has dramatically undermined the viability and threatens the existence of traditional media operators particularly regulated entities such as radio stations.

But more critically they have caused untold harm to countless thousands of people and have corroded our democratic institutions.

The prevention of online harm is long overdue and of urgency and critical importance to our society and our media.

I last appeared before this committee in Autumn of last year.

I spoke then of the twin challenges that we faced as a sector

Firstly, the immediate challenges of the pandemic which have devastated our revenues

Secondly, I spoke about the frightening media landscape that lies in prospect if steps are not taken to ensure that media who are committed to balance, fairness, impartiality and quality output are not appropriately protected.

I spoke then about the threat this ultimately poses to our democracies and what we consider normal political discourse. Just a few months later we saw the Insurrection at the Capitol in Washington take place.

These events that have been attributed by multiple respected commentators to the coarsening and simplification of media debate enabled, fostered and indeed promoted by Social Media whose business model profits from such radicalisation.

The absence of local news across the United States is cited as one of the main reasons for the lack of perspective and increasing bitterness of political debate over there.

We are fortunate to still have a relatively healthy local media in this country.

At that time, I spoke to you about the need for ongoing support for our sector in ensuring we could survive the immediate threat posed by the pandemic and we were at the initial stages of engaging with Minister Martin and her officials.

I am glad to report that those engagements were positive and productive and have led to further extension of the Covid Sound and Vision Scheme – a ground breaking initiative which clearly demonstrates how public money can be used for public good on independent radio and which provides a blueprint for the future.

We hope that this template can be adopted into the future and have made this point in our submissions to the Future of Media Commission.

But I would like to take this opportunity to thank this Committee for your support to date in our endeavours in this regard and to use this opportunity to place on record our thanks to the Minister, her officials and the Broadcasting Authority for their work in bringing this valuable support about which is greatly valued by our members but most of all which has enabled the continuation of vital programming services during the pandemic.

Many challenges remain and we are mindful that we may have to return to this Committee and the Minister to seek further assistance before the hopefully positive findings of the Future of Media Commission are considered and recommended. However, these issues are for another day and our concentration today is on the establishment of the new media regulator and the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill.

Our submission seeks to make some general points which we believe are critical to ensuring that the overall framework for media whether currently regulated or like Social Media and the Internet operating in a space where it seems at times that anything goes and at best voluntary codes and commitments seem not to be worth the paper they are written on.

On general points as you will see in our submission we are calling for the new regulator to take an active role in ensuring that the overall framework in which we operate ensures viability for our precious indigenous media sector who provide local news, operate in line with concepts of fairness, balance, accountability and responsibility for what we publish

And specifically we are seeking the delivery of long standing commitments and undertakings to address the Broadcasting Levy as it applies to independent radio and some technical amendments with respect of advertising minutage.

In respect of the Broadcasting Levy, its abolition has long been an objective of ours and we have been given numerous commitments by all parties.

An initial reduction of 50% was included in the Broadcasting Amendment Bill of 2019 which unfortunately was not delivered by the previous Government. Then Minister Bruton wrote to me in January 2020 and committed to the implementation of this legislation by Summer 2020 if Fine Gael were returned to government. They were but Covid intervened.

In our subsequent meetings with Minister Bruton's successor Minister Catherine Martin, we were assured that the issue would be addressed in the current proposed piece of legislation.

We urgently need this commitment to be delivered and I suppose that this proposed piece of legislation represents a "moment of truth" in respect of this long standing commitment on the levy which has been made to us by all parties and none over the years.

Once again thank you for your invitation to join you here today and I look forward to engaging with you on the issues.