

## OPENING REMARKS TO THE JOINT OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE ON MEDIA

John Purcell, Chair of the IBI

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[Check against delivery]

Thank you for the invitation to be here today to talk on behalf of the Independent Broadcasters of Ireland on the challenges facing the broadcasting sector as a result of Covid-19.

In doing so I am here with a sense of pride as to the positive contribution that has been made by Irish radio during the months of dire emergency for our society, our economy and our way of life.

I also want to speak of opportunities for the future and the power of our medium for positive change in relation to the other major challenge for our country and our planet namely, climate change. A huge amount of positive action can be unlocked with some simple actions to assist our sector. Your help in this is essential.

But first some context.

Over many years, before any of us heard of Covid-19, representatives of IBI have appeared at this Committee to warn of the fundamental threat to the broadcast media caused by untrammelled digital disruption and the consequent threats to democracy and society.

We are a highly regulated industry trying to compete with a totally unregulated online ecosystem.

We have spoken of the value of what is provided by Irish radio and warned of what is at risk.

We have spoken of the need for legislation to address the unchecked power of the social media and online platforms; for the establishment of a fund to support genuine public service broadcasting content on independent stations

Into this reality Covid-19 landed and posed fundamental questions for our businesses but more importantly for our society.

It completely disrupted society in general and of particular relevance to today's discussion it totally upended our businesses at a time when the importance of what we do has never been greater.

Covid – 19 devastated our revenues and caused us to work in ways that we would have thought unimaginable just 2 years ago.

The prospect of having to cease operations at the time of greatest need of our audiences stared the Chief Executives of most Irish radio stations in the face.

But we rose to the challenge and had what many consider to be radio's finest hours.

This was made possible by imaginative Government support in the form of the special Covid 19 Sound and Vision Scheme which ensured the survival of all stations and underpinned the continuation of local coverage that was accurate, relevant, reliable and trusted.

This fund was introduced quickly, it was practical and fit for purpose. It made a huge difference and it delivered value for money and was instrumental in helping us perform a vital public service role which could not be performed by any other sector

Without this, the damage caused to Irish society by the online conspiracy theorists, the peddlers of mis-information and the numerous bad actors who continue to be provided with a channel for their views by the social media and online platforms, would have been far worse.

Frankly I shudder to imagine the consequences for local areas without the work of the dedicated men and women on stations all over the country had the misinformation gone unchallenged.

The €5 million invested by the Government on behalf of our listeners underpinned programming that was on the frontline of making sure people had accurate and up to date local information.

And millions of Irish people turned to radio during the pandemic and the stations of IBI, along with RTE, for reliable and trustworthy news and information; as a point of shared contact across communities – outside the

narrow silos of online echo chambers as companionship and as friendly, positive and comforting voice during their darkest hours.

Research published in August which I have circulated to you in advance of this presentation here today, shows that listenership to Irish radio is in great health. Radio the original and best social media in Ireland is here to stay but has many challenges.

The research also confirms that the investment made by the Government through Sound and Vision funding was spent effectively, as outlined in their applications for funding, by the stations to sustain and grow their audiences.

This is proof positive that this system works for all sides.

But Covid has not gone away and our stations continue to provide trusted and reliable information as an important antidote to misinformation and bad actors.

And while appreciation of radio as a power for good, wellbeing, inclusivity, diversity an unrivalled communication tool and something which is available free of charge to every person in this country, regardless of demographics, paywalls or other factors, the fundamental challenges to our business model posed by Social Media Giants and Internet Platforms continue.

On a commercial basis this year has seen some recovery and at times even buoyancy for radio in some segments of the market. However the lingering effects of the Covid shock remain with many of our clients, particularly impacting local businesses and this impacts stations. Currently as we speak the future is uncertain as cases spike and uncertainty grows.

And so our sector faces ongoing pressure on viability with consequent pressure on maintaining services.

But beyond our sectoral challenges, you do not need me to tell you of the critical threat we all face from Climate Change.

It is a crisis even greater than Covid. It can only be reversed by concerted action by our citizens and our society.

It is acknowledged by experts that local radio is hugely important.

Just last week at a BAI event for the broadcasting sector, Dr Dave Robbins, Director of the Centre for Climate and Society and DCU who has studied the role of media in bringing about change in behaviour in relation to the climate emergency, highlighted the valuable role already performed by local and regional radio in terms of raising awareness of issues and necessary solutions.

But there is far more to be done and he highlighted how we can play a key role in accelerating the necessary changes. We are a powerful medium for taking climate change out of the abstract, localising its impacts and making the challenges “relatable and relevant”, highlighting real people who are leading from the front in their communities and making the changes that are needed real and local.

There is huge appetite will in our sector to do even more of this. We have shown what we can achieve and contribute with the Covid Sound and Vision Fund.

To contribute similarly in the area of climate change we will require assistance in order to mobilise the necessary levels of action among our audiences through our stations.

The Covid Sound and Vision Fund provides a blueprint of how such a fund could be operated where in return for relatively modest investment of public funds in clearly targeted programme initiatives we can provide fantastic programming that makes a positive difference to peoples lives.

**Today I wish to urge you to use the good offices of this Committee to help us work with the Minister and the Department to progress the establishment of such a multi annual fund specifically geared towards the necessary public communication action required to combat the climate emergency.**

This is our number one challenge. We believe that such an investment will be practical, effective and an efficient use of public resources.

Of course there are other challenges?

However pressure of time means I cannot go into detail here though I will willingly answer questions later if you wish.

In summary these include:

The delay in the enactment of the Online Safety and Media Regulation bill. This is putting off the day when the damage being caused online can be addressed. It is creating uncertainty over regulation of our industry and this has introduced uncertainty over time scales for renewal of broadcasting licenses. This is negatively impacting investment in our sector.

Another is the delay in the publication of the report of the Future of Media Commission. Promised last July, hopes had been high that this would chart a sustainable way forward to ensure the survival and viability of the precious public services especially provided by broadcasters such as our members.

Related to both of these - the delay in the progress of the OSMR legislation and the Future of Media Commission report – is the continued uneven playing pitch in relation to regulation of so called “legacy” media like radio alongside the unlimited freedom granted to online and social. This is something which is steadily eroding our ability to prosper fairly and invest in increasing our services.

And like many sectors, our members are reporting ongoing difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff caused by the fundamental uncertainties surrounding the long term futures of our services and in attracting new entrants into the industry.

But ultimately it will all come back to the environment. While we await the mapping out of long term structural changes to the Irish broadcasting landscape which will hopefully emanate eventually from the FOMC, the climate emergency cannot wait.

If we postpone action until the outcome of the Future of Media Commission process to ensure the proper funding and support of quality news and current affairs on independent radio in combating climate change, it will be too late.

There can be no delay. We urge you to build on the success of the support given to us during the Covid 19 pandemic by doing something similar to help us harness our power even more to address the Climate Change emergency. In the wake of Cop 26, you hardly need me to tell you – time is of the essence.

Thank you.