

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM TURASÓIREACHT, CULTÚR, EALAÍONA, SPÓRT AGUS NA MEÁIN

JOINT COMMITTEE ON TOURISM, CULTURE, ARTS, SPORT AND MEDIA

Dé Céadaoin, 14 Meán Fómhair 2022

Wednesday, 14 September 2022

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 1.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 1.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Alan Dillon,	Malcolm Byrne,
Imelda Munster,	Micheál Carrigy,
Johnny Mythen.	Shane Cassells,
	Fintan Warfield.

Teachta / Deputy Niamh Smyth sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Future of Media Commission Report: Discussion

Chairman: Members are all very welcome back after the summer recess. It is great to be back with no screens, masks or any of that. While it is good to be back to some degree of normality, I urge everybody to be careful and to look after themselves.

It is great to see many of my colleagues and I thank them for their attendance. Apologies have been received from Senator Malcolm Byrne and Deputy Johnny Mythen who are unable to attend today's public session.

This meeting has been convened to discuss the final report of the Future of Media Commission with the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin. I welcome the Minister and her officials and I remind her that her officials are not expected to speak in the public session. I advise that the opening statement and any other documentation submitted to the committee may be published on the committee website after the meeting.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person or entity outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I also remind members of the constitutional requirement that members be physically present within the confines of Leinster House in order to participate in a public meeting. I cannot permit a member to attend where he or she does not adhere to that constitutional requirement. I ask members who may be joining this meeting today via Microsoft Teams to identify themselves when contributing for the benefit of the Debates Office staff preparing the Official Report and also to mute their microphones when not contributing so as to reduce the background noise. I remind all those joining today's meeting to ensure their mobile phones are on silent or, better still, switched off.

I invite the Minister to make her opening statement.

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach agus le comhaltaí an choiste as cuireadh a thabhairt dom bualadh libh inniu chun plé a dhéanamh ar an tuarascáil um Choimisiún na Meán.

I again thank Professor Brian MacCraith and the other commission members for this insightful and detailed report. A diverse, vibrant and independent media sector is essential for wider society, democracy, cultural development and our social cohesion. Our media enlightens and educates us and facilitates discourse and debate. Its content is a reflection of our society. It is a showcase for our unique culture and heritage and it has the capacity to maintain community bonds. This has never been more clearly demonstrated, and needed, than it was in recent years. However, it is a sector that is undergoing profound change. The Government recognises this and it committed in the programme for Government to establish the Future of Media Commission with a remit to examine how media should serve Irish society, how well the current system meets these goals and what changes ought to be made to improve media in Ireland in the future. The commission's timely recommendations will inform the framework to help the Government to achieve this.

The insights the commission's report offers and its recommendations will feed into Government policy and directly impact the future of media in Ireland for the next ten years and beyond. The Government accepted in principle 49 of the commission's 50 recommendations, demonstrating how committed the Government is to supporting the media sector as it transitions to

new economic models. With regard to the recommendation to replace the TV licence with a fully Exchequer-funded model, the Government decided that in these challenging economic times, we must balance the needs of the country and economy as a whole. Our decision not to accept this recommendation was based on more than purely economic reasoning. We must also ensure the continued independence of media and it is vital that we maintain a link between the creation and consumption of media content.

The Government recognises the need to reform the current funding model to ensure it provides for the new realities the sector faces and, importantly, is sustainable. I have already set up a technical working group that will report to me in November with practical steps to improve the TV licence system to make it fairer and more efficient and sustainable. A cornerstone of the commission's report and recommendations is a regulator with a wider remit to address the shift in media consumption - a media commission. The Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill, which is progressing through the Oireachtas, provides for the establishment of such a new media regulator, Coimisiún na Meán. A media regulator must now go beyond broadcasting, and an coimisiún will replace the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, BAI, and have a broader role in relation to media as well as online safety. It will thereby provide the regulatory and developmental framework to implement the commission's report.

Two of the initial commissioner roles - the broadcasting commissioner and the media development commissioner - will play a significant role in delivering on the Government's implementation of the Future of Media Commission report. To help Coimisiún na Meán hit the ground running, I secured funding in budget 2022 to enable an early establishment of the new body and competitions to fill commissioner posts are in train.

Another key recommendation from the commission is that the broadcasting fund be replaced by a new media fund, with six proposed new schemes added to the existing sound and vision and archiving schemes. While the new fund will need to be underpinned by legislation, I have asked that two schemes be prioritised for development and roll-out in 2023 on a pilot basis. These are the local democracy scheme, which will aim to ensure local media can keep the public informed on areas such as regional health forums, joint policing committees and local authorities, and the courts reporting scheme, which will enable improved reporting from local, regional and national courts.

The reform of the licence fee, together with the implementation of the commission's accepted recommendations will enable RTÉ to build on its strengths as our national broadcaster. Through digital innovation and strategic planning, and with the support of NewERA and Coimisiún na Meán, RTÉ will further develop its mission to educate, entertain and enrich the lives of our people in a digital era.

Tugaim tú áite don Ghaeilge chomh maith ar leibhéal pearsanta agus gairmiúil. TG4 fulfils a vital role in supporting the Irish language, sport and culture in an innovative way and I was pleased to provide TG4 with additional funding of €4.2 million in budget 2022, building on a substantial increase in 2021, and leaving TG4 better funded than ever before. This has enabled TG4 to continue its innovative approach, extend its reach, support the development of quality content, and highlight key cultural and sporting events and festivals. I very much support the commission's recommendation that Coimisiún na Meán conduct a comprehensive review of the provision of Irish language services. Coimisiún na Meán will work with stakeholders to find synergies and build co-operation throughout the sector.

Coimisiún na Meán will continue and expand on BAI's sustainability network to further

promote sustainability in the wider media sector. I will also be asking an coimisiún to prioritise the development of new gender equality and equality, diversity and inclusion, EDI, standards for the sector to ensure greater representation and content that reflects Irish society today. The recommended diversity and inclusion strategy for sports broadcasting and reporting will help us showcase more diverse sports across multiple platforms.

I strongly welcome the commission's recommendation to develop a national counter disinformation strategy. My Department will lead on the strategy's development in the coming months. We will work with the Irish hub of the European Digital Media Observatory, industry stakeholders, and with the Tánaiste's Department, which is overseeing the Digital Services Act.

The commission was well briefed on the challenges facing the print sector. The expanded media fund will directly benefit the print sector, especially local media. The proposed local democracy and court reporting schemes I referred to will directly benefit the print sector, in particular local and regional outlets. The commission has also recommended a consideration of indirect taxation measures for the sector, and there will be engagement on this matter in the context of the implementation process. The commission's recommendations will also benefit the radio sector in the years ahead, both from the widening of the sound and vision scheme to support news content, and from new media fund schemes, such as the media access and training scheme, the community media scheme and digital transformation scheme.

The implementation group established by the Government has now commenced its work with the initial task of developing a detailed implementation strategy, which I intend to bring to the Government in November. I will also receive a report from the newly established technical working group on proposals to reform the TV licence system this November. Together with the establishment of Coimisiún na Meán, this will enable the Government to deliver on its commitment to develop a framework to support our media sector for the next decade and beyond.

Mar a dúirt mé cheana, aithníonn an Rialtas an gá atá le hathchomhaireamh a dhéanamh ar an múnla maoinithe reatha chun a chinntíú go ndéanfaidh sé soláthar d'earnáil na meán cumarsáide amach anseo. Chuir mé meitheal theicniúil ar bun cheana féin a thuairisceoidh dom i mí na Samhna. Beidh sainchomhartha níos leithne ag Coimisiún na Meán a bhunófar faoi fhorálacha an Bhille um Rialáil Sábháilteachta ar Líne agus na Meán atá ag dul tríd an Oireachtas faoi láthair. Soláthróidh sé ancreat chun moltaí an choimisiúin a chuir i bhfeidhm. I thank the committee for its invitation and I look forward to answering members' questions.

Chairman: I thank the Minister. I now open the floor to my colleagues, who will be aware of the speaking rota and will know when their slot is coming up. Members have six minutes each and we may have time for a second round of questions. I can show some latitude and extend that time to eight or ten minutes because there are not as many colleagues present as would ordinarily be.

I call Deputy Munster, who joins us via Microsoft Teams.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Thank you, Chair. I was not expecting to be called first.

Chairman: First up, best dressed.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I do not know about that.

I thank the Minister for her report. Given that the sole purpose and the cornerstone of commissioning the report in the first instance was to examine the long-term funding of public ser-

vice media, and I understand its remit was subsequently expanded, notwithstanding the reasons outlined by the Minister, I am curious as to why the central recommendation of the report was not accepted.

Deputy Catherine Martin: The Future of Media Commission identified a range of challenges in relation to retaining the TV licence system. The commission also considered potential challenges associated with other funding models. As I said, the Government believes that maintaining a direct link between broadcasters and the public is important and reforming the TV licence fee system to make it more equitable and sustainable is the right action to take. There are two reasons; it is about keeping a distance while also considering the context of where we are right now, in challenging times.

The Government is not ignoring the commission's recommendations; on the contrary, as Professor MacCraith said at the launch, we have agreed to accept and implement 49 of the 50 recommendations. We absolutely recognise the fundamental societal value of public service content. Irish media has served us extraordinarily well, which we have seen in recent years. However, all funding models are challenging, as the commissioner said, and I believe any new or reformed funding model should retain and build on existing revenues given our current situation, which is from the direct sale of TV licences. That provides an important, direct link between broadcasters and the public. It would also reduce the burden on the Exchequer compared with a model based fully on taxation.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The basis of my question still stands. I am aware the Minister referred to the economic crisis, but there were reports in the media in February, long before the current economic and energy crises, that the Government was set not to accept the commission's main recommendation in the report. The Minister also referred to the independence of media, but let us look at Nordic countries. The committee had recommended the Norwegian method of funding, in which they have maintained their media independence which is crucial.

Given that it was supposed to be a long-term plan for public service media and for the future, it seems bizarre that the one recommendation that was the cornerstone of commissioning the report in the first instance was not accepted.

Deputy Catherine Martin: The system needs to be more equitable, and it will involve a long-term plan. The technical working group is currently working on the reform of the TV licence, which is a long-term plan. The Government was of the view that to move to an Exchequer-based funding model would raise certain concerns in respect of the independence of media funding. We need to minimise the risk of actual or even perceived political interference in media independence that could arise in a system in which public service media is fully dependent on Exchequer funding, and that was our concern. The report of the commission states that there is no perfect funding model, and that all funding models are challenging, as I said. Any new or reformed funding model should retain and build on the existing revenue available. That is what the technical group is examining and it will report to me in November.

Deputy Imelda Munster: If things are to remain as they are in respect of a funding model, and there is to be no change whatsoever, RTÉ has said that evasion was an issue with the rate being more than 15%, and that if this was addressed RTÉ's funding woes would be sorted. If the model remains as it is and there is no long-term future plan to change the funding mechanism, what supports will be put in place? Does the Minister have an answer to this or is she waiting on the group to report in November in order to support An Post in dealing with the high percentage of evasion? Will things remain exactly as they are thereby nothing really changes?

Deputy Catherine Martin: There will be change because the technical group is examining a completely reformed model. The terms of reference look at liability, the database, collection, enforcement and implementation. That group is up and running and is due to report back to me by November. Any interim measures the Deputy is talking about outside of that will form part of the budgetary negotiations over the coming weeks. I have meetings set up and my officials have been engaging with officials in other Departments.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The Minister also said that 49 of the 50 recommendations were accepted in principle. However, given that the funding mechanism is not really going to change and will most likely remain as it is, will the funding of those recommendations be affected?

Deputy Catherine Martin: There is a parallel process as well. The technical group is up and running to look at reform of the TV licence but there is also an implementation group. This is exactly what the group will be looking at. It will examine what happens now, the actions that need to be taken and the stakeholder engagement and will come back to me with a plan. The implementation group will take all of that into consideration. That group will also report back to me in November.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Okay, grand. Can the committee get a copy of the recommendations and information on how they will be funded, the timelines and so on when the Minister has it?

Deputy Catherine Martin: Yes. Absolutely.

Deputy Imelda Munster: When can we expect the report on the individual complaints mechanism to be published?

Deputy Catherine Martin: That report is with me for consideration at the moment. I expect to bring it to Government very shortly. It is imminent. The Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill 2022 is coming before the Dáil next week. That will be followed by Committee Stage a few weeks later. I am aware of the urgency to get the report to the committee. It is with me now and I hope to bring it to my Cabinet colleagues very shortly.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Does the Minister reckon it will be a couple of weeks?

Deputy Catherine Martin: I will say “imminent”.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I have one final issue to raise, if I have time. It relates to the various implementation groups. I know there is a list of names on one of the documents we got but can we be furnished with information on the make-up, timelines and all of that sort of thing and with updates on the work as it progresses? Can we get that?

Deputy Catherine Martin: Would it help to send the committee the terms of reference for both groups?

Deputy Imelda Munster: Yes, please.

Deputy Catherine Martin: When I receive the reports in November, and once they are presented to Government, I am sure I can bring them to the committee. Would that help?

Deputy Imelda Munster: Yes. It is just so that we are aware of who is in charge of what, who is looking after given things, timeframes and all of that kind of thing.

Deputy Catherine Martin: Absolutely. I can arrange for officials to contact the committee on that.

Deputy Imelda Munster: That is great. I thank the Minister.

Senator Shane Cassells: I welcome the Minister and all of her officials. I join her in thanking all of the members of the Future of Media Commission who did such excellent work and who have been so engaging during the Covid pandemic and at other times in holding webinars and encouraging debate. They have been extremely helpful in formulating discourse on this very important topic.

With regard to the technical group the Minister has established, the basic principles of providing news have not changed substantially in hundreds of years. I refer to the work reporters do in ascertaining basic information, reporting on it and then conveying it to the public. What has changed is how we access that news not just in terms of broadcast media, but also print media. What all of the media organisations are struggling with is the revenue streams that underpin that or the lack thereof. Notwithstanding the work that is going on and which the technical group is doing, is the Minister worried about the future of media, both broadcast and print media - and national and regional newspaper editors are going to be in the audiovisual room tomorrow, which is something I will address in a moment - as a viable commercial enterprise? I ask her that in the context of the Government's decision that directly intervening, abolishing the TV licence fee and providing direct Exchequer funding might result in a perception of political interference in the media sector, whether such interference is real or not. There is a fear that, notwithstanding any reform of the TV licence fee, it will not meet the funding requirements of RTÉ. Is the Minister worried that the commercial viability of RTÉ is under threat?

Deputy Catherine Martin: There were one or two questions in there. On the broader context, I believe that the 49 recommendations that have been accepted in principle by Government and the work that has been done on the reform of the TV licence will put us in a good place. The establishment by the Government of the Future of Media Commission was a recognition that something had to change. As the Senator has said, it has to do with how people now access media. I will point to the media fund. The commission recommended additional funding of €15 million for the new media fund. The detail of that additional funding will be agreed in the context of the budgetary negotiations. I have already engaged with the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath's Department in that regard. The introduction of this new media fund will be a significant step towards the support that, as the Senator has said, is needed to allow the media to continue in their vital role, which we all recognise. This is also very true at local and regional levels as well. I refer to local radio and local newspapers. I have asked that priority be given to the roll-out of two of the schemes, the local democracy and court reporting schemes. All of us, and especially those of us who come from rural Ireland, know how important such reporting is, whether on radio or in print. I have asked that work be done on that. I expect that the new Coimisiún na Meán will be in a position to commence these schemes in 2023. The work will start with the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, BAI. That will ensure reporting on the joint policing committees, the regional health forums, our local authorities and so on. The existing-----

Senator Shane Cassells: I am still a member of the National Union of Journalists so I do want to get to and discuss that but I am specifically asking about RTÉ. In January of this year, RTÉ reappraised its losses from evasion from €50 million to €65 million, which is a very significant amount of money. It is continuing to go in one direction. On top of that, there is also the hit to its commercial revenue streams, which are being gobbled up by other platforms.

When RTÉ launched its autumn schedule this year, the point was made that, unless stability was brought to funding streams, the high quality of internal productions could not be guaranteed. By the way, the Future of Media Commission itself said that the system is broken. RTÉ has also said that. The funding system is broken. The Minister has established a technical group to see how to fix that. Notwithstanding that, entities sometimes die. Is there a fear that this particular model of news consumption, not just in Ireland but globally, is on its knees?

Deputy Catherine Martin: Like the commission, I am concerned that RTÉ's financial situation needs to be stabilised. The Government is absolutely committed to our national broadcaster and to helping it operate on a more secure financial footing. NewERA and my Department will continue to engage with RTÉ on its financial situation and the commitment to deliver savings and efficiencies under the revised strategy for 2020 to 2024. I support the commission's recommendation to designate RTÉ as a body to be supported by NewERA under the National Treasury Management Agency Act 1990. This will guarantee independent oversight of RTÉ's finances. The Future of Media Commission also saw an enhanced role for Coimisiún na Meán in setting targets for RTÉ and monitoring how well RTÉ achieves these targets. I also welcome the commission's recommendation that RTÉ institute a strategic capital asset management plan. This will help RTÉ focus on optimum use of available resources in the medium and long term.

Having carefully considered the commission's analysis and recommendations on reforming the public funding model, we agree with its conclusion that the funding model should be reformed. However, we are of the clear view that a move to fully Exchequer-based funding raises certain concerns. That is why we believe that any reformed funding model should retain and build on existing revenue from the direct sale of TV licences. It should minimise the risk of actual or perceived interference and should reduce the burden on the Exchequer. It should be future-proofed, such that revenues will increase-----

Senator Shane Cassells: Let us move on. The decision is made and the Minister will not change that. It is about reform. Let us talk about future-proofing because it has been identified that 282,000 homes in this country do not have a traditional TV set. If we start billing for access to this, how can we bill? Many young people are accessing an app to download their news through RTÉ News Now, Sky News or whatever, where they might be paying the provider but are paying nothing to the State. Is that the manner in which the Minister talks about future-proofing because that trend of 282,000 homes is only set to increase? That is what I talk about with regard to sustainability of the model that RTÉ has now.

I could get into a debate that we should support RTÉ through direct Exchequer funding to protect something that the State requires. I do not believe that the State interferes but that decision has been made. I accept that. What I do not accept is that future-proofing will address the fact that the trends are changing so rapidly. Will we really be able to get the revenues? Will there be a targeting of people in terms of accessing news here? There is also a suggestion that the local property tax, LPT, database will be used with regard to the evasion rate of 15%. We see LPT collection is at 97%. Will the LPT database be used to ensure that people are not evading the licence fee any more?

Deputy Catherine Martin: Much of this will be addressed when I forward the terms of reference of that technical group to the committee but liability in the terms of reference means the extension of liability beyond owning a non-portable television set. It takes into account public possession, burden of proof, enforcement challenges and legal issues. It includes the revenue-generation potential of different options and an assessment of those issues and any issues arising. It covers collection, enforcement and implementation.

No decisions have been taken on the database. The technical group is just up and running, is meeting and will come back to me in November. However, I asked for an examination of the data sets necessary to effectively implement that. That means legal obstacles to the sharing of data and potential solutions in this regard as well as the technical and cost requirements for the development and maintenance of an appropriate database and the timescale. I will forward the terms of reference to the committee. The points the Senator has raised there are exactly what we hope this technical group will forensically examine and report back to me.

Senator Shane Cassells: NewsBrands Ireland, Local Ireland will be in here with all of their editors and publishers tomorrow. They have particular calls to ensure that we have newspapers continuing into the future. There is a problem here. The model is broken by virtue of the fact that young people, in particular, but also people my own age are not buying news in the traditional fashion that they used to. I had the amazing experience of going into a local shop here in the city centre and asking for a newspaper only to be told they do not stock them any more. It is frightening. We have seen newsrooms be absolutely decimated by cuts. We saw the Irish edition of *The Sunday Times* release a huge number of journalists just before the summer. A number of them were exceptionally good journalists who worked in here and covered political events. I welcome the court reporting scheme and the local democracy scheme. I commend the Minister and the commission on seeking to implement them. This will be very significant.

However, I will go back to the commercial viability of newspapers. We can provide all the reporters we want but if there is no publication, they will not be reporting for anybody. One of the requests is to cut VAT on print and digital newspapers to 0%. We will have to have a serious conversation with publishers and newspapers about their commercial viability. We will be putting good money after bad if things are in trouble. I wish to hear the Minister's opinion on the propositions that are coming forward from newspapers and the seeking of the reduction to 0% VAT in the budget.

Deputy Catherine Martin: We also have a meeting scheduled with NewsBrands Ireland next week ahead of the budget. Ultimately, VAT is a matter for the Minister for Finance but I have raised it with him and ongoing budgetary negotiations are happening on those issues and others. We mentioned local democracy and we looked at the court reporting scheme but it is by supporting content we will be supporting print. We looked at the other schemes such as the support for digital transformation and running those schemes. The support for access and training is intended to develop bursaries, internships, diversity training and that presents opportunities for new and existing staff. I believe that will help. The reason this commission was set up was that I could see the crisis that was happening because of the change in access. What has been recommended here will make the difference.

Senator Shane Cassells: I agree with the Minister with the direction of funding to reporters rather than into the coffers of newspapers. That is the correct way to do it because it ensures that they will be taking that content. A point to note is that we used to have Oireachtas reporters here who provided local and regional newspapers and radio with content from what happened here and the Houses of the Oireachtas got rid of that. That was a retrograde step. I wish to put that on the record.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I welcome the Minister to the committee room. I commend the Future of Media Commission on its work and Professor MacCraith on a brilliant document. It would have been very helpful to have the document in advance of the passage of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill 2022 through the Seanad. I am obviously disappointed. It is a regret.

I will also come to the defence of the recommendation that has been made on general Exchequer funding. The issue of independence has been raised many times over the years when it comes to general funding of RTÉ or public service broadcasting through general taxation. The Department of Social Protection, through the household benefit package, already covers TV licences for 483,000 homes at a cost of €70 million. That is approximately 31% of TV licence revenues. There is no suggestion of interference when we take that into account. TG4 has always been funded by general taxation from the Exchequer. As there is never any suggestion of interference when we think about TG4, I do not accept the argument of interference a whole lot.

There is also the benefit general taxation would have in producing prosecutions. In 2020, there were 9,555 summons. Approximately 4,000 of those cases went to court. Those prosecutions - what a waste of everyone's time - would be done away with through general taxation. While I know An Post needs the money, those costs would probably not be in the mix through general taxation. It is important that we come to its defence that. Funding RTÉ through general taxation is a good suggestion.

The Minister has said that reform of the television licence together with the accepted recommendations will enable RTÉ to build on its strengths. How much of the gap will be filled? RTÉ reckons that the loss through no-television homes is €35 million along with an evasion loss of €30 million. The technical working group is due to report by November. How much of the gap will be filled by measures it might propose?

Deputy Catherine Martin: The Senator made the comparison of the current funding model of RTÉ and TG4. Both broadcasters receive a mix of public funding and commercially generated revenue. RTÉ receives 37% of its revenues from advertising but TG4 got 10% from this source. As the Senator said, RTÉ's funding comes mainly from the television licence, but TG4 is now funded directly by the Exchequer. TG4 gets its news content directly from RTÉ and that is a slight difference regarding his point about interference. The technical group is working on closing that gap as much as possible. That is its goal in reforming this model.

Senator Fintan Warfield: As Senator Cassells said, the report mentioned journalists and big tech. We have seen what happened in Australia and some EU member states with the Article 15 of the copyright directive. The report of the Future of Media Commission states:

There is a need to rebalance the relationship between media and Big Tech. The Commission sees strong potential for direct negotiations between media and Big Tech, in the context of the EU Copyright Directive, to achieve that rebalancing. However, should these negotiations prove insufficient, the Commission is of the view that the Government should then be prepared to move swiftly to pursue additional measures...

This relates to remuneration for journalists when their stories are used by social media platforms and shared online. If those negotiations prove insufficient, is the Government prepared to move swiftly to pursue additional measures, as Australia has pursued? That relates to Article 15 of the copyright directive.

Deputy Catherine Martin: That is a commercial matter outside the recommendations of the commission. I am aware of one broadcaster that is working on that issue with the big tech company. That is outside what we are discussing on the commission. The report recommends an assessment of the impact of the copyright directive. The second group, the implementation group, will look at that. That copyright directive comes under the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. It recommends that it be implemented as soon as possible.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I want to ask about public investment in RTÉ and TG4 to enable their capital investment in digital. The last time the Minister appeared before the committee, I asked about the RTÉ Player and Government supporting RTÉ in the digital transformation. I did not challenge her on it that day. She said there would be no top-ups to RTÉ. In the past we have seen top-ups to RTÉ in the last mandate prior to the election. The commission has called for targeted public investment to enable RTÉ and TG4 to undertake the capital investment necessary to support their digital transformation strategies. Ms Dee Forbes has told us how much she estimates the RTÉ Player will need but I am sure there are other issues. Will the Minister consider targeted public investment on that front?

Deputy Catherine Martin: I seem to recall the Senator raising the RTÉ Player last year. RTÉ has acknowledged publicly that there is room for improvement with that. RTÉ operates in a different environment. The growth of streaming services and on-demand content means that traditional broadcasters need to catch up quickly and meet viewers' expectations. The Future of Media Commission report acknowledged the requirement for increased investment in digital and technological innovation. I agree that RTÉ needs to complete its digital transformation by investing in and improving its technology, particularly streaming services such as the RTÉ Player. To support a number of key strategic initiatives, the organisation disposed of some land at its Donnybrook campus in 2017. The net proceeds of this are ring-fenced for specific purposes, including investment in digital. This will be progressed with RTÉ in the context of implementing the commission's report. Anything else will be met by whatever is already there from our point of view.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I welcome the report's suggestion that any new works should be archived. This committee frequently discusses archiving when representatives from the National Archives come in. The digital legal deposit is not mentioned in this report. Given how much archiving is mentioned in the report, I cannot let the opportunity pass to ask where we are with the digital legal deposit that would enable the systematic capturing of the ".ie" domain by the National Library, for example. The Minister of State, Deputy Calleary, is now in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and probably has responsibility for this. Has the Minister met him? I am blue in the face from raising this over the years as we lose our country's memory as it disappears from the web.

Deputy Catherine Martin: The existing archiving fund will remain. The other funds are being added to it. I have not yet met the Minister of State. Today is the first day of the Dáil term. I am sure we will meet; I will probably bump into him today. I can get officials from the arts side of the Department to follow up with the Senator on the other issues he has raised.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I will also raise it with him when I see him.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: The Minister is very welcome. I apologise for being late when she gave her introduction. Along with a number of my Fine Gael colleagues, we made a submission to the Future of Media Commission. We met representatives of many of the media organisations, regional newspapers, regional radio stations, etc. There is strong support for media content in Ireland. Page 39 shows the reported levels of trust in specific media and technology providers, including RTÉ, TG4, local radio stations, newspapers and Irish based websites. It is more than 70%, which is very high, whereas the new social media sources listed are down at 34%. It is quite telling that the support is there from the public to support the content across all those media. Like other colleagues, I feel that we hedged not making a decision on the television licence, which was a recommendation of the report. We need to go down the route of direct taxation if we are going to maintain all media sources. We must put enough funding in to make

sure we are able to maintain regional newspapers and radio stations and RTÉ, which has eaten up a chunk of the money. We need a significant fund. I do not see that we are going to reach the figure we need bar seeking funding directly from the Exchequer.

There are a number of positive proposals. Nearly everything we put forward in our proposal forms part of the recommendations. I concur with Senator Cassells, however, with regard to the re-establishing of reporters in the Houses of the Oireachtas Service, who were there up until four or five years ago. That would be important. I ask that this perhaps be taken on board. The direct comments of any of us who represent people and organisations throughout the country could then be sent to regional newspapers and radio stations. That was stopped approximately five or six years ago.

Chairman: It was not even that long ago; it was much more recent than that.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: Was it? I ask that this perhaps be looked at. It would be positive and would provide content for the regional and local newspapers. I also support the local democracy scheme and the court reporting scheme, which we also looked at. There is a model in the UK whereby they take it out of the licence fee and fund reporters who then supply that information from either the county council meetings or the courts. That information is then made available to all the local radio stations and newspapers. It is something we need to look at to make sure we maintain the viability of the regional newspapers.

I concur with comments saying that we need to look at the VAT. The Minister will meet with NewsBrands Ireland in the next week and it will bring that proposal. However, as a retailer with a small shop who sells newspapers, and I will say this when I meet with NewsBrands Ireland's representatives, I have witnessed the decline in newspaper sales over the past number of years. One little issue is that many of the newspapers are attached to different distribution networks. Some businesses do not carry certain newspapers because they have to pay two delivery charges. That is aside from this report. Newspaper owners need to consider that in order that all newspapers are supplied to all retailers who wish to sell the newspaper. They are reducing their sales by going down that route.

Significant funding goes into RTÉ every year. It is looking for more money yet we regularly get reports on the significant high wage levels within the structure in RTÉ. We recently saw a report on how something like 100-odd managers earn more than €100,000 per year in that organisation. That would not compare to any other business or organisation.

There was also a recommendation regarding sport, which is welcome. Since the 2020 campaign, which the committee has discussed previously, there has been more reporting on women's sport and reporting by women commentators in recent years, even the women's international soccer team. We are only starting to show these sports on various forms of media.

Other active sports out there get little coverage, however. We need to look at that. The report mentions sports such as swimming, running and cycling. We want to make a more active population who are invested in sport. We need to see more alternative sports on our media and not just concentrate on the three main national governing body sports. That is very positive. I do not have any further comments. I will listen to the Minister's comments and I might come back in again shortly.

Deputy Catherine Martin: The issue the Senator raised regarding the Houses of the Oireachtas reporters is a matter for the Houses of the Oireachtas Service. It may be something

he could ask a colleague on the commission to raise. I take his point on distribution, although that is probably for the businesses to engage on. He referred to salaries in RTÉ. That is an operational matter and, therefore, it would not be inappropriate for me to say anything on that. Has RTÉ not engaged with the committee on this issue?

The Senator raised the recommendation on sport, which I know he has a genuine interest in from our engagement in the Seanad. There are some fantastic recommendations to take away the traditional focus and exploit modern technology to showcase a greater variety of sports across multiple formats and feature people with disabilities or minority sports. Coimisiún na meán, when it is set up, will work with the media organisations, Sport Ireland and the Federation of Irish Sport to develop a strategy to promote diversity and gender equality, and examine making sport-related equality, diversity and inclusion, EDI, standards a condition of receiving grants from public funding. I strongly believe we need to create more opportunities to showcase greater diversity in sport in Ireland. I am in full agreement with the Senator on that. Again, this is something on which the commission has made recommendations. The setting up of coimisiún na meán will be the perfect enabler of that. The implementation group I have set up will hopefully come back to me in November with the plan for implementation and timeline on how it will be done.

Chairman: I thank the Minister very much. Is Senator Carrigy finished? Does he have more questions?

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I might come back in again later.

Chairman: I thank the Minister and her officials for coming here today. I feel strongly and passionately about all of this. I was that European Commission President von der Leyen make a strong speech this morning about where we are in terms of our democracy and the fragility of our democracy. This is our big opportunity to do something about that in this country, not just with the Future of Media Commission but also with the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill. We have to really take this seriously.

We have to make a big commitment to ensure that our media outlets are allowed to continue, that they are not weakened by running after advertisements all the time and that they are given the space to allow journalists to be journalists and report on what is important. They are the most important people we come across when we talk about democracy. We have voices here but we must have that outlet for the media and journalists. As discussed by Senator Cassells, *The Sunday Times* let 11 senior journalists go over the summer. That is frightening but it comes down to money and sustainability. Those types of outlets are trusted media outlets. They are the media outlets on which people depend and rely upon, and that they read and know as being objective and balanced. President Von der Leyen talked about outside influences. It has been happening for years. Europe has not taken that seriously. We have not taken that seriously as individual countries. I hope that not only by her recognition of that today but by talking about putting money into that now, we are beginning to wake up and smell the coffee about how we and the public are being influenced by fake news and so forth. We have a big opportunity. I encourage the Minister to continue the work she is doing in grasping that.

I thank commission members who made these 50 recommendations, all of which, as Senator Carrigy said, we came up with in our own reports. We concur with all of that. There is talk in the Minister's Department about the national counter-disinformation strategy. Could the Minister tease that out a little more for us? I am very passionate about that aspect of all of this.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I agree with the Chairman. As I said earlier, that diverse independent media sector is essential for the wider society and, as she said, our democracy, cultural development, well-being and social cohesion. Its content is a reflection of us as a society. Never have we felt that more than in the last few years. What the Chairman is really talking about is disinformation and I agree with her that it is one of the major challenges to democracy in our era.

Chairman: The strategy will be formulated but how will the methodology be put in place?

Deputy Catherine Martin: We have the national counter-disinformation strategy and we have a well of expertise and staff. That is why I welcome the commission's recommendations to develop the national counter-disinformation strategy. The implementation group will consider the strategy because it is examining all of the recommendations, the timelines and the action of that, and I await its report.

Chairman: I will extrapolate the point that I made at the beginning. Covid emphasised the critical importance and fragility of our good media outlets. Again, I concur with what my colleagues have said. As the Minister will know, we will have a delegation from NewsBrands Ireland in tomorrow. I encourage her and her officials to attend, if possible, as it is important.

NewsBrands Ireland has asked for a cut in VAT. I advocate for that because I have seen the critical role played by my local newspapers, *The Anglo-Celt* and *The Northern Standard*, in local communities. I know how difficult it is for local newspapers to have a section dedicated to chasing after advertisements and the fragile position of journalists so we should do anything that we can to provide support. NewsBrands Ireland has asked for a cut in VAT so it can fund the digitalisation of its outlets, and I support its call. I ask the Minister to please use her influence on the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and the Minister for Finance as we come up to the budget to secure a cut in VAT.

I wish to raise an issue with the Minister as it is important that we lead from the front. I agree with my colleagues here today that we had a very good department within the Oireachtas that reported on what was being talked about in committees, the Dáil and the Seanad, and reported with great forensic detail to *The Anglo-Celt*, the *Dundalk Democrat*, *The Northern Standard* and all other newspapers. That service provided fresh and hot-off-the-press news and content. Even though I know this matter is not part of the remit of the Minister's Department, I will ask the clerk to the committee to research how this decision was reached. We must lead by example and this is our opportunity to find out what happened to those journalists, where did they go and why was the decision made because it does not bode well for the fact that we are all saying here that journalism and the trusted outlets are so important. I do not believe that reporting happens in the same way that it did in the past. There is a media and communications outlet within the Oireachtas campus but I think we have missed an opportunity. I ask the clerk to conduct research on how we can tease out whether the right decision was made and analyse how we might move forward. Do my colleagues support my suggestion? Yes.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I second that.

Chairman: Everything has been really well covered and I thank the Minister, and her officials, for coming in today. I do not have further questions but perhaps others do.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I wonder how the Future of Media Commission's report will interact with the new media commission. Does it underpin the work of the new commission in

any way? Will it have to have regard to this document?

There are 50 recommendations. Are the 49 recommendations achievable without delivery on the one recommendation that the Minister has not accepted? I know that she is confident that the gap will be closed regarding no-TV households and the evasion rate. Is it possible to achieve the other recommendations without delivering on the one recommendation that we have not accepted?

Deputy Catherine Martin: In terms of how the two interact with each other, I perceive Coimisiún na Meán as being the body that will help drive the implementation of the recommendations. For example, one of the posts being advertised for Coimisiún na Meán is the media development officer, so he or she will drive the media funding and new initiatives.

Senator Fintan Warfield: Does the Minister think that the 49 recommendations that have been accepted can be delivered without the 50th?

Deputy Catherine Martin: Earlier the same question was asked and I said that that is exactly why we have the two working groups of the technical group and the implementation group. The implementation group has been set up in the full knowledge that the technical group is examining how to reform the model. It has taken on board the impact of reform and that decision that was made by Government. That work has been done and is ongoing.

Chairman: The Minister has said that she will give the terms of reference for both groups to the committee. Is it possible for her to give us a list of membership of both groups?

Deputy Catherine Martin: Yes, and it will be supplied with the terms of reference.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I welcome the inclusion in the report of the all-island media dimension. I refer to the collaboration between the public service media and public service content providers North and South. I will get back to the Minister about research. The shared island unit will be involved but I am interested in learning how much moneys will be put forward for that.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: First, I should preface what I say by declaring that I am a postmaster and I work with An Post. It seems to be the case that the Government is looking at a non-Exchequer funding instead of reforming the collection method. One of the reasons there is a high evasion rate is because you must have a television set. I believe that if every household was liable, there would be a far higher collection rate. Twenty years ago, you could purchase either a licence for a black and white television or a colour television. The vast majority of people opted to buy the licence for a black and white television because it was cheaper. The reason for a high evasion rate now is the fact that every individual household does not have to purchase a licence and I believe that Exchequer funding the scheme is the right way to go.

Deputy Catherine Martin: As I said, the terms of reference and liability are being examined by the technical group.

Chairman: I thank the Minister and her officials for their attendance. That concludes the public session. I propose that we suspend the meeting for half an hour and resume in private session. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Sitting suspended at 2.47 p.m. and resumed in private session at 3.25 p.m.

The joint committee adjourned at 4.46 p.m. *sine die..*

