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We welcome Minister Martin's appointment of the Future Of Media Commission. It is fair to say that the media sector has undergone unprecedented change over the past number of years, and that the negative impact of this has been exacerbated enormously by the COVID-19 crisis.

Magazines Ireland is the representative body for Irish Magazine Publishers who together produce over 185 magazine brands in Ireland, including both consumer and business-to-business titles, in print and online. Magazines Ireland has created a strong, united voice for magazines here in Ireland and internationally – working as it does with FIPP and EMMA on Global and European issues respectively.

We think it is also important to note at the outset that, in the main, magazines are published by a range of independent Irish-owned and locally-driven organisations. This fact alone does a huge amount to ensure the diversity & plurality of available media in Ireland, where other sectors (Broadcast Media & National Newspapers) tend to be dominated by a small number of consolidated operators.

In addition, Magazines Ireland collectively represents a significant employer; and our members, individually and together, help to support the publishing eco-system of both creatives (journalists, editors, designers, photographers, stylists etc) and the paper, print and distribution industry.

It is also important to note that, while the publishers of Irish Magazines and their digital products and social channels, may be best known for their flagship titles, they are also major event organisers; creative content producers; service providers; and publishers of many other periodicals, titles, spin-off publications, and more. Their overall contribution to the economy is very significant. So too is the public service element in what many magazine publishers do.

At the dawn of 2021, the magazine publishing sector is located at the heart of the exciting, and yet extremely challenging, cultural space where social media and digital innovation meet the traditional values and qualities of print. The magazine sector has been steadily evolving its multi-platform strategy to meet the challenges that will inevitably be presented by the decade ahead. As it carries out this process of transformation, it brings with it a vital professional heritage, built around editorial concepts of attribution, accountability and accuracy, all values that must be

integrated with the openness, interactivity, immediacy and new opportunities offered by the latest online developments.

The essentially global nature of the digital media giants – including social media platforms, search engines and more – means that the magazine sector has, and will continue, to provide an essential, if embattled, service in reflecting and promoting Irish creativity, nationally and regionally. Magazines have a vital role to play in ensuring that the rich diversity of stories from around the country – whether individual centred, community-based, business-orientated or artistically and culturally-driven – continue to be told and read, whether on a screen, in print or via other available means of dissemination.

Magazines occupy a unique niche within the public sphere in Ireland, with – characteristically – each magazine's readership representing a distinctive community of common interests. Fundamentally, magazines are about communities; and, at their best, they are at the very heart of those communities of interest, giving them a voice and a focus. If anything, that role has been expanded greatly over recent years. Magazines have evolved – and are evolving ever-more consciously – into multi-platform environments, in order to continue to perform their particular public service remit for these varied, and often vital, communities of common interests.

Thus, it is essential to understand that magazines are creative hubs, not only contributing to the education – and fostering the creative talent – of those who work within them and for them, but also helping to drive and amplify the creativity of those individuals and organisations who feature between their covers, as well as on their websites and podcasts. They are a vital component of a healthy public sphere; and of a strong and vibrant national culture and identity. In an era where the public sphere is increasingly dominated by global corporate voices, it is essential that independent, local voices are supported and encouraged.

Magazines Ireland have before proposed a State-supported National Paid Internship in Publishing, for creative talent in magazine publishing, co-funded by Government (75%) and the publishing industry (25%), and co-ordinated and managed by Magazines Ireland. The National Paid Internship Programme would be aimed at developing new, diverse, skilled talent for the magazine publishing sector in Ireland, some of which would flow on to other media sectors. The scheme would provide interns with paid work experience, job training, mentorship and networking opportunities.

The proposal is that the programme would offer participating publishers 75% funding of the salary and payroll benefit expenses for a full-time internship position of up to 12 months. This would be a small – but nonetheless welcome – support, aimed at encouraging new creative talent, while also providing a resource to the publisher with whom they are best placed via meaningful applied learning. This proposal was framed in 2019, before the media was under the brief of any one department, and therefore there was difficulty in establishing the appropriate 'home' for the scheme. Web will be happy to deliver a revised and updated iteration of this for the Commission's attention.

## **We look forward to further consultation with the Future Of Media Commission.**

We note the questions posed by the Future of Media Commission. We answer these questions below where we feel it is appropriate and relevant to our submission and, in particular, to the challenges and obstacles faced by the independent magazine sector.

### **Question 1.**

**How should Government develop and support the concept and role of public service media and what should its role in relation to public service content in the wider media be?**

Magazines publish a huge amount of public service material. There is currently no government support whatsoever for this. However, it is clear that, if and when Government support is being made available for public service media above and beyond RTÉ and TG4, magazines should be entitled to a just and significant proportion of it.

### **What can be learned from the evolution of public service media over the last decade?**

The public service element of all media is under increasing threat. This is all the more so at a time when the role of public service media, and the trust with which they can be viewed and read, is more important than ever, as a counter-balance to the spread of different forms of propaganda, conspiracy theories and disinformation. In addition, the rise of social media and its exploitation by unscrupulous people and forces, has created a new mob mentality, where social media can be used not just to promote inaccurate and often deliberately fake news and disinformation, but also to censor opinion and mobilise boycotts that run counter to the free and fair debate on issues of real social and political interest.

### **What systems may be required to support and sustain public service content, e.g. high quality, independent journalism, in an increasingly competitive and consolidated market?**

The experience of all publishers, and media owners, including magazine publishers, is that quality, independent journalism costs a significant amount of money to develop and to sustain. Very often, this is not the journalism which attracts readers or website traffic – or certainly not at a level commensurate with the input required in terms of staff, time, expenses and more. It falls very specifically into the area of public service.

Support via an appropriate form of central funding to magazine publishers would be a very positive step – although this needs to be done in a way which does not make individual publishers, magazines or articles dependent on the approval of the State or any branch of it.



There are precedents for how this might be achieved. It is worth pointing to the way this is approached in Canada, in the form of what is called the Canada Periodical Fund. Canada is a market with a number of obvious parallels to Ireland. It is clear that, in Canada, the State has very specifically recognised the importance of magazine media, as well as the particular difficulties that are created by having a much larger neighbour – in Canada, the USA; in Ireland, the UK – producing publications and content in close proximity, which have the potential to overwhelm local competition. It is worth stressing that, in Europe, this issue is almost completely unique to Ireland, and is a result of the fact that we share a common language with the UK.

In providing direct financial support to Publishers, Canada enables its print, paid-for magazines (free publications are excluded) to overcome the kind of market disadvantages similarly experienced by magazines here in Ireland; and helps them to continue to provide Canadian citizens and readers with quality, locally-sourced and locally-focussed editorial and cultural content.

The Canada Periodical Fund distributes CAD\$75million (approx €64million) to publishers on an annual basis, through a number of support schemes. If the Irish State matched this on a per-capita basis it would equate to funding of about €8 million for the magazine sector, which money would be extremely well spent, in supporting an important element in the Irish cultural mix, which is – and will be – otherwise under increasing stress and threat.

### **How might public service media be more effective in promoting the Irish language, sport and culture?**

Magazines have unique strengths in terms of the relationships they foster and support within the spheres of interest that they cover. With the right support from an effective mechanism, magazines are particularly well positioned to provide excellent opportunities for promoting the Irish elements and infrastructure within these cultural spaces. There is within the magazine sector, for example, the capacity to provide additional impetus to burgeoning talents within these areas of craft, business, cultural and creative activity – whether in food, fashion, design, music, film, literature, art, tech and more. Again, the parallels with Canada are important to note here. If Irish magazines are not supported, then the likelihood is that the communities of interest that they support here in Ireland will end up being dominated by cultural content produced by and for media located in the UK, with the effect that Irish culture will lose a vital element of its eco-system. It is worth noting here that it is simply not enough, under any circumstances, to think that these communities can be adequately supported by the combination of the current national broadcaster and the national newspapers. The plurality and independence which we mentioned earlier are vital, especially if the necessary avenues are to be created to bring through fresh, new voices, and ones that might otherwise be deemed to be outside the cosy consensus – whether this is creatively, socially or critically.

### **What can we learn from other jurisdictions?**

We have already pointed to the model in Canada as one that we feel would be of hugely significant benefit to Ireland. There is, in Canada, a very strong sense of the importance of local creative and media talent; local content production; local platforms; and local communities. We feel that an analogous emphasis is more vital here in Ireland than anywhere else in Europe, given the particular tensions and pressures caused by our proximity to the UK.

## **Question 2.**

### **How should public service media be financed sustainably?**

We believe that public service media – and the public service and cultural contribution of media, including, magazines – are of sufficient importance that they should be effectively supported, to a reasonable extent, by the State – whether by direct subvention or from a ‘licence fee’ style payment. We are of the view that a ‘license fee’ is unlikely to generate the total funding required and that direct subvention of the kind currently channelled through Screen Ireland and the Arts Council would be appropriate to this function. It is worth noting, in passing, that monies currently provided through both the Arts Council and Screen Ireland, and through schemes like the Sound & Vision scheme operated by the BAI can and do specifically create anti-competitive biases against magazines, and magazine publishers. Overall, there are many ways in which magazines are currently discriminated against, as a result – and there are none in which these anti-competitive tendencies are counter-balanced. Finally, the ideal of a levy on social media and other tech giants is, we understand, being discussed at European level. That is certainly another potential route by which revenue to support public service media might be raised, but the reality is that the issues concerning the dominant – or monopoly – market position exercised by social media require far more intervention than a levy.

### **How might content commissioning, including by RTÉ, TG4 and the BAI Sound and Vision scheme, be adjusted/improved/reformed to better achieve public service aims?**

As alluded to already, the Sound & Vision fund is currently aimed solely at ‘broadcast media’. This is a false distinction in the modern media world, as many magazine publishers broadcast items via the various internet channels and platforms. In this light, it is worth emphasising a very particular imbalance which militates specifically against the fair treatment of magazine publishers in the current market-place. There are very rigid regulatory restrictions in relation to who can enter the Broadcast Market. A magazine publisher cannot simply decide to start a radio station on the lucrative FM band where most radio is listened to and around which almost all radio advertising revenue clusters. In contrast, there are no restrictions on who can enter the ‘images and text’ market, whether in print or online. This creates an overall market with unfair competition, wherein the broadcast media is free to encroach in any way on what had traditionally been the newspaper and magazine sphere, and in doing so, to soak up advertising spend from ‘non-broadcast’ activities. Or to express it differently, all broadcast media is, to one degree or another, already subsidised and protected. Magazines have no objection in principle to this, but it is vital to ensure that the effect of the anti-competitive aspect of this is addressed in the future funding model for public service media overall.



### **How should public funding or tax reliefs be apportioned to Public Service Content providers?**

The view of Magazines Ireland is that direct subvention is the appropriate mechanism. We believe that the different sectors have to be accepted within their own frame of reference and that a balanced funding solution needs to be found which aims to redress anti-competitive aspects created by the overall legislative framework and to support the particular public service elements within the different spheres. To be clear, this includes a recognition that there is a very significant public service element in the work done within, for example, the independent broadcasting sector, which deserves the appropriate level of support from the State.

### **What does the shift in advertising revenues towards big tech firms mean for the future of print, online and broadcast media?**

This shift in advertising revenues to 'big tech' has hugely harmed the viability of individual media-based businesses. A huge proportion of the total advertising revenue spent in Ireland now goes to the big tech companies, with the effect that all Irish media are now battling for a slice, or slices, of a pie that is diminished by approximately 50%. The other very serious, related concern is the control these 'platforms' have over the capacity of media to reach an audience or community. To explain: as the channels of communication continue to develop – whether Facebook, Instagram, TikTok or other similar platforms – media brands frequently establish themselves within that platform and attract 'followers' within it, as a form of brand extension that the media brand or magazine title can use to interact and engage with their readers and users. However, without any form of consultation, or consideration, apart from their own bottom line – and the objective of crushing competition for advertising revenue – in the blink of an eye, or on a whim, the platform can change their algorithm to make it extremely difficult for a media brand to reach its own followers, readers and users.

The magazine or publisher has no control over this nor any capacity to challenge it, meaning that for arbitrary or even capricious reasons a social media platform can hugely damage a media brand's viability.

There is also a degree to which certain social media platform engage in the media equivalent of 'hello money' whereby content can only be seen when the publishers pay to 'promote' posts to appear within their own 'followers' feeds. The 'push' here, inevitably, is to force the magazine title or media brand to spend money accessing their own followers, in what has to be seen as an insidious form of bullying or a kind of shakedown.

It is also important to note that social media platforms (and other online based media, and gatekeepers) should be subject to the same legal & regulatory regime that existing publishers are subject to, as they derive revenue from the same advertising mechanic. By not being subject to this legal & regulatory regime, they are placed at a huge competitive advantage, which is completely unfair and wrong. It is worth adding here, to complete the understanding of the dynamic involved, that

social media get their content free from users. The material put on Facebook and Twitter is in effect the editorial material – provided free – which is used to attract advertisers. The effect of this has been to put downward pressure on the value of work done by journalists and to force downwards the rates paid by advertisers in a parallel movement. There are potentially ways of correcting this, for example: (a) by ensuring that social media and other online platforms are subject to the same legal framework as controls other media and publishers, including the laws of libel; and (b) by supporting media, including magazines, for the public service work that they do.

**What role is there for alternative funding models for Public Service Content providers – voluntary, cooperative, crowdsourcing, subscription?**

Magazine publishers already use a number of different models (including the above) in their endeavours. All of these mechanisms are daunting and sometimes very difficult with extraordinarily excessive postal charges being just one more obstacle – and they will certainly never be a panacea in relation to the ongoing challenges of funding quality journalism and producing Public Service Content.

**Question 3.**

**How should media be governed and regulated?**

There is a balance to be struck here between the vital importance of freedom of expression and freedom of speech and the need for some form of fair-minded regulation. In print journalism, the Press Council has been an effective forum for regulation. However, the most important element in this sphere is outside their control, and that of the BAI: that is, is the equalisation of the legal framework as suggested above. Allied to the effective support of locally driven, and locally focussed journalism, creative endeavours and media activity, that would go a long way towards protecting and encouraging quality public service editorial content in Irish media..

**What regulatory changes at EU or global level might impact on the governance of public service media in the period ahead?**

While it is vital that the Irish state should not abandon its responsibilities in relation to media regulation, especially in terms of social media, effectively negotiated EU-based regulations would be hugely beneficial. This has been demonstrated by the process that is in train with the EU Copyright Directive. However, speed is of the essence, as independent media in Ireland are under very significant, imminent threat.

**What challenges are posed to a vibrant, independent public service media by increasing consolidation / declining plurality of ownership in the Irish market?**

There is a real issue about increasing ‘consolidation’ in the media market, enabling particular media to exert more power and control, whether through cross-platform advertising deals or mutually self-serving editorial arrangements. We do not want to get into specifics here, but very often these cross-ownership arrangements work against magazines and other independent media outlets, which are not always given the recognition or on-air time that their status or editorial strength might otherwise warrant. While there is much more that might be said here, we do also want to make the specific point that magazines, and other independent media, are forced to

compete for advertising in digital media, against organisations that are either directly or indirectly subsidised. To take the most obvious example, RTE populates its web site with editorial material which is heavily subsidised through the licence fee. In a similar way, Irish radio license holders are offered a protected marketplace in which to operate, and therefore have a huge competitive advantage in their content creation. Afforded a more or less monopoly position in local broadcasting terms, they also run websites which are therefore effectively subsidised. All of these interests are afforded a very serious advantage over independent publishers, which is essentially anti-competitive. Even the BBC website – which is State subsidised from nose to tail in the UK – carries ads in Ireland (for Ireland only). In a similar vein, all of the big UK and US websites – the Times, the Guardian, the New York Times, the Daily Mail (UK), the LadBible etc. – carry Ireland-specific ads, thus encroaching more than their print titles ever did into the Irish advertising market. In all cases, they benefit hugely from the economies of scale that operate in the far bigger markets where they are based. The fact that Ireland is a small country, with a tiny population makes Government support for its indigenous media all the more vital.

**Are current legislative and regulatory controls for public service media adequate?**

The simplest answer in relation to editorial content is, by and large, yes. There is no need for more stringent regulation of the editorial functions in RTÉ, for example, nor would there be for other media that are deemed to be worthy of support from the State on the basis of their cultural contribution or the quality of their public service journalism. However, as already outlined, there are issues relating to commercial imbalances and competitive advantages that are conferred on the media currently financed either directly (or indirectly through provision of scarce resources) by the State. These issues can be effectively dealt with by the recognition of the Public Service work of the other media (like Magazine Publishers), as previously outlined here. Any new regime should ensure that no sector or organisation is conferred with unfair advantages; and that no inappropriate concentration of influence is allowed to operate to the detriment of others in the media space.

By way of conclusion, we strongly recommend to the Future of Media Commission that a version appropriate to Ireland of the Canadian support for magazines and periodicals – and with similar per capita funding targets – should be an essential part of any plan for the future of media in Ireland.

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