



SUBMISSION FOR THE FUTURE OF MEDIA COMMISSION

THIS submission has been prepared by [Social Change Initiative](#) a non-governmental organisation and a registered charity based in Belfast which works locally and internationally with donors and organisations involved in creating fairer and more equal societies.

Our work concentrates on three themes – peacebuilding, migration and equality & human rights. We have had a particular focus on working with groups across the island of Ireland on peacebuilding, human rights and equality.

Our interest in supporting peace led us to examine the particular impact that the decline of traditional media and the rise of social media is having on societies which already face deep divisions or conflict. SCI's work on the media is led by [Steven McCaffery](#), a journalist who held senior editorial posts in news organisations across Ireland.

In November 2019 we held a two day international media conference in Belfast looking at The Role and Responsibilities of the Media in Deeply Divided Societies.

The event featured prominent journalists from South Africa, Colombia, Myanmar, Rwanda, Turkey, the Middle East, the Balkans, Kashmir, Syria and Nepal. The conference was chaired by former RTÉ journalist Charlie Bird and the programme featured a special section on Northern Ireland. Speakers included senior representatives of BBC Northern Ireland, the UK regulator Ofcom, plus representatives from Northern Ireland's newspaper market, as well as experts on the impact of social media.

The event also heard from prominent figures in Northern Ireland working in the fields of peacebuilding, victim support, anti-poverty campaigning and race relations who raised a series of significant concerns about the media here.

The conclusion was that the region's media industry has suffered a major decline, threatening the future of independent journalism, causing damage to the quality of public discourse, doing little to enhance relationships across communities and undermining mutual understanding between the main unionist and nationalist communities, while failing to fully reflect the place of minority communities.

Northern Ireland, in common with other deeply divided societies, needs to have a vibrant media landscape which sheds more light than heat and enhances cross community understanding rather than fuelling division. Failures on the part of the media to live up to their responsibilities have consequences for future relationships across the island as a whole. We believe this should be a particular concern and priority for the Commission to consider.

MEDIA DECLINE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The 1998 Good Friday/Belfast peace agreement brought an end to the large-scale violence of the Troubles. The conflict lasted for 30 years, with more than 3,500 killed, 50,000 injured, an estimated 200,000 bereaved and 200,000 traumatised. While many lives were lost across the island, in Britain and beyond, the major impact was felt in Northern Ireland, a region with a population of only 1.8 million.

In the 1990s Northern Ireland had a thriving media industry, which played an important role in helping communities navigate the difficult compromises required to broker the peace deal.

In addition to helping to ensure that communities were well informed and had access to a variety of reliable news sources and expert opinion, multiple local media outlets collaborated in initiatives to actively promote positive debate and oppose violence at times when an end to the conflict seemed beyond reach.

During that period Belfast was also the base for staffed offices and correspondents drawn from news organisations from the Republic of Ireland, Britain and around the world. They provided a valuable external perspective.

But that thriving media landscape, which played such an important role in navigating the journey to peace, no longer exists.

The national and international media focus on Northern Ireland has inevitably declined, notwithstanding the recent interest caused by Brexit

The absence of international perspectives on post-conflict Northern Ireland has arguably contributed to a more introverted news agenda.

But the most profound change since the 1990s has been the decline of the media based in Northern Ireland, leading to a narrowing of debate, the loss of plurality and the domination of the news agenda by one outlet, the BBC.

The newspaper market has experienced a rapid fall. Commercial broadcaster UTV has lost the dedicated investigative programming it once had. BBC Northern Ireland (BBC NI), on the other hand, has expanded and now dominates the news agenda.

Regarding the decline of newspapers:

- Around the time of the Good Friday Agreement it has been reported that The Belfast Telegraph daily sales were 124,530, The Irish News 50,334 and The News Letter 33,853. These are the three main, locally produced daily newspapers in Northern Ireland with a long history, close connections to communities and traditionally they have had a strong influence over public discourse.
- But data gathered in June 2019 by the website [Hold The Front Page](#) for single paid-for copies put The Irish News at 31,814, The Belfast Telegraph at 23,547 and The News Letter at 11,704.

The newspaper titles would likely contend that these figures fail to reflect the full breadth of their circulation or their online news operations, but the trend in the market is obvious and is consistent with declines around the globe.

Meanwhile, information from the UK regulator Ofcom also sheds light on the state of the main players in broadcast media. Ofcom's 2020 [report](#) showed spending on TV programming by BBC NI was £27.1m, while UTV was 'down by 6% and dropping below £6m.'

BBC across the UK faces cuts. Ofcom reported that BBC NI has to 'make savings of £3.6m from its annual Northern Ireland budget of £56m by the end of March 2021.' BBC employs around 650 staff in Northern Ireland and says it plans to cut some 30-40 posts. The BBC had already 'paused' plans to redevelop and extend Broadcasting House in Belfast. Funding for the £77m scheme approved in 2018 for that purpose is now under review.

But despite the threat of cuts, BBC NI's annual budget and the large numbers it employs overshadows all other Northern Ireland daily outlets.

At a time when the once dominant newspapers are in decline, BBC NI now dominates the news market in Northern Ireland and therefore public discourse.

THE IMPACT ON COMMUNITIES

Media decline in Northern Ireland has huge implications for this deeply divided society.

The two main communities here still largely live apart (a project mapping 40 years of government data showing where Protestants and Catholics live confirms the continuing degree of separation, plus the growing size of the Catholic population: [Data mapping highlights Northern Ireland's divisions ahead of Brexit - Investigations & Analysis - Northern Ireland from The Detail](#)).

The Protestant and Catholic communities are also largely educated apart, while the education system is also deeply segregated along social lines due the continuing use of academic selection to stream children into secondary education, a system shown to disadvantage children from more economically deprived backgrounds. There is even division over how history is taught, with a recent study revealing that Catholic-maintained schools appear more likely to study the history of the Troubles than predominantly

Protestant State-run schools ([Is the curriculum dividing Northern Ireland's schools along Troubles lines? | History | The Guardian](#)).

Despite the end of large scale violence, smaller numbers of paramilitaries still remain actively involved in violence, intimidation and wider criminality. This is particularly felt in deprived communities.

Northern Ireland society remains prone to clashes over political identity, which can still boil over into street disturbances. Division over identity and over the painful legacy of the conflict have also contributed to instability in the political institutions formed after 1998.

In such circumstances deeply divided societies rely on the media to build mutual understanding between communities. Commercial print outlets have historically predominantly drawn readers from within particular communities, placing an additional onus on publicly funded broadcasters to give the widest possible coverage.

SCI's conference heard a number of concerns raised by a panel of prominent community voices. These included concerns over the absence of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities in NI media staffing and output, the absence of economically deprived communities in coverage, concerns at the treatment of the victims of the Troubles, the use of controversy to attract audiences despite the impact on community relations in a divided society, plus poor coverage of the Republic of Ireland and therefore the Irish dimension to Northern Ireland life.

You can listen to a short audio & video clip which captures key interviews on NI: <https://vimeo.com/435054341>

Given the commission's interest in the future of public service broadcasting, there are other aspects which warrant consideration.

BBC NI, RTÉ AND INFORMING AUDIENCES ACROSS THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

The collapse of advertising revenue for commercial news outlets has created circumstances that demand new approaches to revenue raising by media organisations but which may also necessitate government intervention.

Public service broadcasting has been somewhat shielded from pressure thanks to public funding, even though both RTÉ and BBC NI face budget restraints.

But in addition to examining the future funding of media, it is also vital to examine how best practice can be promoted if we are to create a positive and plural media eco-system in the future.

There is a particular onus on publicly funded news organisations to be seen to follow the highest editorial standards. This applies to BBC NI and RTÉ, while the broadcasters must also be alert to the special circumstances we face on this island.

In Northern Ireland, there are concerns over the level of coverage of economically deprived communities by BBC NI and of its representation of BAME communities in its output and its staffing. BBC provides UK-wide figures for the representation of BAME communities in its staff. It does not give a breakdown for regions such as Northern Ireland, though in its latest report Ofcom has asked that the BBC begin to do so.

More broadly, questions have often been raised about the lack of sufficient north-south coverage on the island. Are the various communities in each jurisdiction kept sufficiently well informed of life on either side of the border?

RTÉ retains a small but valuable presence in Northern Ireland, employing two news correspondents, with an office and support staff. BBC NI has a single correspondent covering the Republic of Ireland, despite it being a larger and more diverse news arena.

BBC NI subscribes to the Press Association news wire feed for Northern Ireland but does not subscribe to the Press Association news feed from the Republic of Ireland, which other outlets see as standard news gathering infrastructure.

There are concerns at the lack of significant daily coverage of the Republic of Ireland by BBC NI.

Given the disproportionate influence that BBC NI now holds over public debate in Northern Ireland, its reporting of both the Irish and British dimensions to Northern Ireland society are vital to ensuring mutual understanding between the divided communities.

In light of the commitment of both the BBC and RTÉ to fair and accurate reporting, there is a duty on both to ensure they are keeping audiences fully informed of the lived experience of communities on the island and of the lived connections that exist across both jurisdictions on the island.

All-island ties include family links, vital business links (as highlighted by Brexit), plus cultural and sporting links. These all-island connections were reflected in the Good Friday/Belfast agreement and find expression in the formal governmental structures created between Belfast and Dublin after 1998. This vision of identity on the island was endorsed by referenda, though it does not seem to have prompted any change in the news operations of the two state broadcasters. Failing to reflect these daily lived connections fails to provide a fair and accurate account of life on the island and damages mutual understanding.

It would have been in keeping with the ethos of the Good Friday/Belfast agreement if the state broadcasters had adjusted to address the new era for the benefit of all communities.

But despite the best endeavours of individual correspondents, north-south coverage is arguably not given sufficient prominence by RTÉ and BBC NI. There is also very little public sign of collaboration between the two broadcasters' news & current affairs coverage.

This siloed approach fails to reflect the many ties that exist between both parts of the island and is likely to have a particular impact on mutual understanding in Northern Ireland.

In addition to the public service need to nurture mutual understanding on the island, there is also a journalistic imperative to reflect societies in their fullest sense.

The duty to report fairly and accurately, the duty to reflect the lived experience of communities and to inform audiences takes on an even deeper significance within Northern Ireland's divided society.

CONCLUSIONS

The global trends of media decline are playing out on the island of Ireland.

But any attempt to strengthen the industry must recognise the particular circumstances of life here and must be allied to a promotion of best practice.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) has said that: 'For media to be most effective in serving their communities, the range of broadcasters, print and online platforms must reflect the diversity and range of opinions of their audiences.'

The International Federation of Journalists' Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists says 'Journalists shall ensure that the dissemination of information or opinion does not contribute to hatred or prejudice and shall do their utmost to avoid facilitating the spread of discrimination on grounds such as geographical, social or ethnic origin, race, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, disability, political and other opinions.'

The UK regulator Ofcom has said diversity must be reflected 'in front of and behind the camera' and its broadcasting code sets out the need: 'To ensure that news, in whatever form, is reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality.'

These key components of journalism – the reflection of diversity inside media organisations and in their output, plus the duty to avoid misinforming audiences – are some of the key challenges faced in Northern Ireland as a result of media decline and the dominance of one outlet.

The Good Friday/Belfast agreement, enshrined the importance of the three relationships between Ireland and Britain, between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland and between the unionist and nationalist traditions in Northern Ireland.

The agreement says: 'The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all. We are committed to partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between these islands.'

News organisations need to respond to the specific circumstances of life on the island of Ireland. They must also implement best practice and truly reflect the diversity of the societies they operate within, in their media output, in media staffing and among media decision-makers.

SCI's bid to draw on international best practice has highlighted further recommendations of particular significance for media operating in a deeply divided society.

These include:

- A need for plurality of news outlets, with regulatory safeguards on standards.
- Staff in newsrooms and the management of news organisations should reflect the make-up of the society they represent, including in terms of race and ethnicity, social mix, and in societies as divided as Northern Ireland, they should reflect the diversity of identity.
- News content should reflect the lived experience of the societies they are reporting on. The SCI conference heard one example of how this was handled at a major South African newspaper following the fall of apartheid: <https://vimeo.com/390009735>
- Media should be aware of the sources of information and the voices it uses, ie extreme voices may be useful in fuelling controversy and arguments – and therefore attracting audiences - but may not be representative of broader opinion. Here Milica Pesic of the Media Diversity Institute outlines key issues: <https://vimeo.com/431810389>
- Courting controversy to attract audiences risks exacerbating divisions in society, a major concern in societies experiencing conflict or with a history of conflict.
- A culture of reflection and self-criticism should be fostered within media organisations.
- News organisations should have regard for how they are perceived by audiences, if they want to build confidence and foster trust. The traditional tenets of journalism – accuracy and impartiality - had to be allied to an accurate reflection of diversity. Trust is built when people 'see themselves' in the news they consume.
- Investment in investigative journalism is vital in an era dominated by 'hot takes' and comment.
- News organisations have to consider new ways of financing their work. This was addressed by Mohamed Nanabhay of the Media Development Investment Fund: <https://vimeo.com/390007934>
- News organisations should be innovative in how they reach audiences, rather than surrendering ground to misinformation on social media. In Colombia one news organisation is offering journalists to engage with families via their WhatsApp groups: <https://vimeo.com/431838762>
- Government, which has often provided indirect support to media, should explore established international models for direct support to bolster the Fourth Estate and its role in democratic accountability

You can access advice from other international experts on some of these issues here: [Media decline is damaging deeply divided societies - can we 'build back better' after Covid 19? | Social Change Initiative](#)

If these and other approaches are to be adopted and implemented, it demands a comprehensive and imaginative response from government.

There have been calls for a media fund for Northern Ireland, given the particular challenges faced here, due to this society's deep divisions and due to the need to support peace and reconciliation in a society emerging from conflict. Such a fund could, for example, be supported by a range of sources including the British and Irish governments, the European Union and philanthropic support.

Such a fund could prove to be a vital support to commercial media, struggling to attract new revenues.

Access to such a fund could be allied to the promotion of best practice, so that we not only protect the media, but encourage quality journalism which is reflective of issues faced by the diversity of the society being served.

The commission could advance this debate by holding a discussion on Northern Ireland with key stakeholders from the media and civic society. The commission's work is beginning at the same time as an all-party group on the media is being set-up by the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The discussion on the future of the media must take place within the context of the news industry but also in terms of the broader challenges faced by society here. While great progress has been made towards ending violence on the island, Brexit has reignited tensions which may build. There is a growing debate about constitutional change within the UK and on the island of Ireland. There are calls for Scottish independence and there is also a renewed focus on the Good Friday/Belfast agreement's provision for a poll on Irish reunification. Any effort to future-proof the media must bear in mind the potential for significant political and cultural change.

Media can either fuel tensions, prejudices and misunderstandings in the time ahead or it can contribute to a healthier and more informed debate.

At this point in our history it is vital that our public service broadcasters, in particular, contribute to addressing this challenge and work together to make a positive contribution.