



SENATOR RÓNÁN MULLEN

Future of Media Commission,
Birmingham Tower West,
Dublin Castle,
Dublin 2.

8th January, 2021

Submission to Future of Media Commission

Senator Rónán Mullen

Reflecting the views of those with religious faith, and greater respect for diversity of social outlook, in broadcasting media, especially public service broadcasting

Dear Prof MacCraith,

This brief submission relates most specifically to the first of the three areas on which the Commission has sought input, and to some of its subcategories, specifically:-

"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?

- 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?*
- What can be learned from the evolution of public service media over the last decade?*
- How might public service media better respond to the needs and expectations of the public?"*

As you know, Bunreacht na hÉireann in Article 44.2.1 recognises and protects the freedom to profess and practice religion. More generally it specifies that religious faith be accorded a particular respect in Irish public life. Article 40.6.1(i) also provides strong protection for freedom of expression.

Two issues flow from these Constitutional protections, and, I believe, need to be factored into your work:-

Seanad Éireann	Seanad Éireann
Teach Laghair	Leinster House
Sráid Chail Dara	Kildare Street
Baile Átha Cliath 2	Dublin 2
Fón: 01 618 3930	Tel: 01 618 0300
Faisc: 01 618 4174	Fax: 01 618 4174
Riomphost: ronan.mullen@oireachtas.ie	

1. Respect for religious faith and religious practice across broadcasting generally, but most emphatically across public service and publicly funded broadcasting;
2. Respect for the diversity of public opinion on social and cultural issues, and especially for minority views and dissenting viewpoints regardless of whether these have their origin in religious or non-religious personal or group philosophies.

In my experience, there is considerable evidence of weakness in both these areas within Irish broadcasting and I believe that there is a particular responsibility within public service and publicly funded broadcasting to remedy deficits here.

While it can be difficult to measure objectively the existence of deficits or otherwise in these areas, and opinions will vary, the sensitivity and importance of this matter requires that there be efforts to measure and monitor the performance of broadcasting organisations on a continuing basis. At a time of increasing fragmentation and polarisation within western societies it need hardly be emphasised that any perception that social groups are 'outside the pale' or made to suffer cultural disadvantage is damaging to society as a whole.

While most references below are to the context of public-service or publicly funded broadcasting, the issues arising need to be considered in the context of broadcasting generally.

1. Respect for religious faith and religious practice

In recent decades, there has been a noticeable pattern of marginalisation of the voices of religious faith and religious practice within public service broadcasting. While this to some extent reflects a greater diversity of religious and social outlook within the country, public service broadcasting has tended to lead, rather than to follow, this cultural change. It is submitted that there is a resulting tone-deafness to the inner lives and social outlook of a considerable proportion of the population. Broadcasting organisations, including and especially RTE, do not appear to be aware of this or interested in reflecting on the possibility of this, and of its implications.

Apart from programming and coverage which – though excellent and welcome – is traditional and somewhat formulaic (such as the broadcasting of public mass, or documentary programmes such as "Would You Believe"), the religious beliefs and values of a huge proportion of the Irish people are not well reflected or indeed fully respected within RTE's content – perhaps not even so in the aforementioned broadcasts. For example, it is not apparent that there is full freedom for those participating in broadcast Sunday liturgies to preach and teach in line with the precepts of their Church. Further, religious programming or general 'philosophising' on religious, current affairs or light entertainment content tends to favour the celebrity, the dissenter and the doubter over the holder of views which could be described as orthodox or representative of tradition. Indeed, while conflict and dissent make for good debate, very often there is no debate because those with views that might be regarded as traditional are excluded completely.

The repeated expression of personal religious (non-belief as well as belief) or of social and political views connected with religious belief by individual broadcasters working for publicly funded media is questionable in itself. The situation is more problematic if there is a predictable bias on particular sides of various issues, with a greater imbalance, even, than that which surveys of public opinion would indicate.

Some years ago, the issue of 'groupthink' arose in the context of a false allegation against a priest on RTÉ - leading to a considerable pay-out at taxpayers' expense. It is a question whether there remains a disconnect between the diversity of opinions within journalism and broadcasting generally and a greater diversity of opinion among the public.

To the extent that media figures engage in 'cultural influencing' over time, the disconnect between the broadcasting consensus and the diversity of opinion among the public may appear to diminish. But that would be a problem, an injustice rather than a benefit to be procured. While a high degree of consensus is necessary for the smooth functioning of society, an attempt at homogenisation of public opinion through conscious or unconscious control of the resources of broadcasting by a self-selecting and self-perpetuating cultural elite is unjust in itself and will lead to problems. The result will not be homogenisation of public opinion, even if that were considered desirable, but a perception by a sector or sectors within society that a crude and intolerant majoritarianism is in play and operating to their disadvantage.

As a minimum, public service broadcasting should at all times work for civility towards people of all faiths and none, and to that end must continue to reflect on, and act towards, the achievement of this.

The provisions of the Constitution, mentioned above, suggest that there must be a presumption, at least in favour of this goal, with due regard to freedom of speech and the rights to be accorded to comedians, satirists etc.

91% of the Irish population professes a religious faith of one kind or another, of which over 83% are Christians. A study conducted in 2017 found that 36% of the Irish public attends a religious service on a weekly basis.

When such huge numbers of Irish people subscribe to a religious faith, it should be expected that the worldview associated with that faith would come through frequently and regularly in the content and context of much programming, yet it seems clear that this is not the case.

Among the fastest-growing Christian communities in Ireland are the Eastern Orthodox, Pentecostal, and Evangelical Christians, largely driven by immigration to our country from Eastern Europe and Africa. Our public service broadcasters would not attack these new Irish communities out of sensitivity to their race or country of origin. Yet, as a recent incident shows, there was little compunction about attacking their religion. The eventual, reluctant, apology came only after an unprecedented number of complaints.

RTE Broadcast – December 2020

As members of the Commission will be aware, RTE One television broadcast a sketch on 31 December 2020 which was grossly offensive to people of a Christian faith in Ireland by including an offensive characterisation of the Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary leading to the birth of Jesus Christ.

The piece was a clear violation of Section 9 of RTE's *Journalism and Content Guidelines* which precludes any coverage which causes undue or gratuitous offence to those who hold religious views, and states, inter alia, that

"Whilst Ireland no longer has a blasphemy law, common decency demands informed sensitivity in the way RTE covers and refers to people's religious beliefs, histories, practices, festivals, symbols, language and rituals"

Despite this, RTE initially issued a highly qualified apology in which they apologised for any offence caused, but not for the sketch itself or its contents. The piece remained available on the station's streaming platform, RTE Player, for several days.

4,000 complaints were made by members of the public, on foot of which RTE's Editorial Standards Board met and issued a full apology and an instruction to remove the piece from the RTE Player. The Board also referred RTE to the Broadcasting Authority for a further investigation.

This is just one incident, but it serves as a sharp recent example of a major problem which has developed in the media in recent years.

While the eventual apology and removal of the offending sequence were welcome, what is to prevent this happening again? What processes will examine the contextual background that contributed to the normalisation of such disrespect and what processes will seek to educate those participating in broadcasting matters to better understand the rights and needs of religious believers?

I would urge the Commission to examine some fundamental questions: How could a piece which was so grossly offensive to those of a Christian faith, and which was in clear breach of RTE guidelines, find its way through editorial processes and onto our screens? What does this say about how the views of those with a religious faith are treated within public service broadcasting? And what can be done to remedy this situation?

2. Marginalisation of minority and dissenting viewpoints

A broader pattern has emerged in the last decade, whereby a pronounced prejudice has been in evidence against people who hold minority and dissenting viewpoints as well as a restriction of the right of these people to the share of access to public service broadcasting which their proportion of the population would indicate. The problem has been particularly evident during the charged coverage of controversial social issues.

These marginalised views are frequently, but not exclusively, grounded in traditional religious belief. The views in question were held, in the past, by the majority in the country. Important examples are cultural norms and laws in relation to human sexuality and marriage, and in relation to the protection of human life, both the subject of referenda in recent years.

While it must be emphasised that these minority social and political views can be grounded in either religious and non-religious philosophies, very often religion is viewed as the 'problem' underlying certain values and attitudes which are now considered to be atavistic by many cultural influencers within and outside of broadcasting. This issue is therefore connected with the earlier consideration of respect for religious belief. Religious faith, as a core philosophical worldview, has slipped into the minority, and this is therefore viewed by some as a reason to silence a range of what are perceived to be associated social and cultural viewpoints.

This was seen in particular during the 2018 referendum on abortion. One afternoon show on RTÉ Radio 1 was the subject of several BAI rulings which criticised the lack of balance on the abortion issue. While RTÉ noted the decisions, the problem recurred during later coverage on the same programme. This suggests a lack of awareness of a systemic problem, and no effective system in place to ensure that all sides of an issue are fairly covered, within the State broadcaster. BAI regulation of coverage appears to be a box-ticking exercise.

The fact that some of these now minority views were held by the majority in the past, may contribute to a perception among some broadcasters that these ideas are institutionally bulwarked, and that it is therefore somehow legitimate to privilege those who oppose them.

On the other hand, a different perspective and tendency may be in evidence. It would be that, since certain views are now minority perspectives (as evidenced by opinion polls, surveys and referendum results), it is somehow legitimate to push them to the margins completely. This later approach, if the case, would be dangerously unjust, totalitarian and counter-productive. It would differ too from the treatment of what are now majority-held positions by broadcasters back when those views were in the minority.

It should hardly need to be said that, aside from speech that endangers or humiliates other people, there should always be a presumption in favour of hearing from the widest possible diversity of cultural and social outlooks. Where a considerable number of people subscribe to certain views these must be frequently heard and fully facilitated in their expression during normal debate. Efforts should also be made to ensure that they are represented within the broadcasting structure so that there is no bias of cultural influencing. It should not require a recognition of the Constitutional situation to provide the basis for such an approach, but where such minority views are rooted in, or can be associated with, a religious perspective, the case seems all the more clear.

In summary, I submit that there needs to be close and sustained examination of how the views of those with minority and dissenting viewpoints are reflected across public service broadcasting.

Populism and disenchantment with the media

Having regard to all of the above, the Commission should pay particular attention to the extent to which the exclusion or demonisation of the views of minorities contributes to polarisation within society. As we have seen in the United States, the real or perceived failure to reflect the values and opinions of sections of society has led to many people becoming disenchanted and suspicious of traditional media (on which all should depend) and perhaps more seriously, with democratic structures themselves.

There has been a growth in anger and a drift towards populism and violent protest, including acts of violence against journalists and the property of media organisations.

It is possible that we are not as far as we might think from the emergence of such problems in Ireland. We should do everything we can to head off such a development at the pass by ensuring that the broadest possible diversity of views and opinions is reflected in public service broadcasting. This is both desirable in itself and necessary for the prevention of other evils.

3. The British Experience

While there are many examples internationally of how religious faith and minority views are reflected in public service broadcasting, for the purposes of this submission it may suffice to mention recent experience in the United Kingdom.

In 2017, the BBC conducted a review of its religious content on its channels, on foot of new guidelines set down by Ofcom, the broadcasting regulator in the UK, which mandated a greater degree of religious content. The review consulted with a range of experts and faith leaders, as well as humanist groups.

The review concluded that people of faith were “*often absent, poorly presented or satirised*” in BBC programming. It recommended that there should be more religious themes in the BBC’s drama output, and more coverage of religious and ethical issues in its current affairs output.

The then Director General of the BBC said that the changes

“...will ensure the BBC better reflects the UK, the world and the role that religion plays in everyday life. They will also raise understanding of the impact religion has on decisions made at home and abroad.”

The review found that much of the existing BBC religious content consisted of traditional shows such as Songs of Praise, rather than religious experience being reflected on primetime TV or radio.

4. Conclusion

In Irish society where over 80% of people subscribe to a religious faith, and over a third of people practice their faith on a weekly basis, it is extraordinary that so much lived experience is so poorly represented across the entire output of our public service broadcasting.

It is also not acceptable that in a free, open and democratic society such as Ireland, minority and dissenting viewpoints held by large numbers of people are consistently marginalised.


I submit to the Commission that a review along the lines of that conducted by the BBC is necessary across all public service broadcasting in Ireland, from current affairs to entertainment.

Towards that, I would urge the Commission to examine the representation of the views and lived experiences of those who hold a religious faith.

Towards the examination of the situation of minority viewpoints generally, particularly as regards social and cultural issues of recent controversy, I encourage the Commission to engage in further consultation, reflection and study with a view to making recommendations in this area also.

I would be happy to discuss these matters with the Commission at any point.

Yours sincerely,



Senator Ronán Mullen