

## **Hollowing Out Public Service Media Harms Democracy: Why Ireland Must Protect RTÉ As Part of Its Democratic Infrastructure**

December 2025

As RTÉ appears before the Oireachtas and the Minister for Media signals that no further funding will be provided, it is important to recognise what is at stake. RTÉ is integral to the democratic infrastructure of the Irish state because it is the only media institution with a statutory mandate to serve the public interest across all of Irish society. That does not mean overlooking RTÉ's shortcomings, minimising the contributions of other media, abandoning value-for-money oversight, or pretending that consumption habits have not changed. It means democratically-minded politicians have a responsibility to safeguard RTÉ's mission as a public media institution.

Within democracies, public institutions exist not only to protect private interests, but also to counterbalance them. We need that balance more than ever. The entire economy of digital information is shaped by a small set of US-based tech oligarchs, many of whom have shown open contempt for democracy and accountability. In Ireland, a large portion of local and national news media is now owned by conglomerates headquartered in Belgium, the UK, and Germany. Without questioning the integrity of individual outlets, it is legitimate to ask how the Irish state intends to secure Ireland's information space in an age of foreign influence campaigns and shifting geopolitical alliances. On the cultural front, Irish creators and production companies are enjoying a golden age, but it is profoundly reckless to assume that Irish culture matters to global streamers.

In these overlapping contexts, the rationale for a public media institution that is obliged to serve the Irish public ought to be obvious. The central question for the government and the Oireachtas should be how RTÉ intends to fulfil its public service mandate in the digital era, not how far it can reduce its costs.

In his final address to the Dáil while stepping down as Minister of Finance, Paschal Donohoe rightly commended investment in public libraries, calling them “cradles of decency ... in a world in which things are changing so much”. Investing in RTÉ as a public media institution needs to be understood in the same way. Institutions like RTÉ deserve “recognition as a critical infrastructural asset” given the roles they play in “underpinning democracy and promoting social cohesion”<sup>1</sup>.

The international context should serve as a warning. In the United States, public broadcasters face coordinated defunding while major commercial media are increasingly bought out by billionaires aligned with President Trump. In the UK, decades of hostility from the right-wing press and political appointments by similarly hostile Conservative governments have undermined the BBC, which, for all its flaws, has long served as the world's most trusted media institution and, arguably, one of the UK's great contributions to the modern age.

---

<sup>1</sup> Doyle, G., Barr, K., & Boyle, R. (2025). Public service media as critical media infrastructure for the digital era. *Media, Culture & Society*, 47(6), 1132-1149.

Illiberal actors understand that weakening public service media makes societies more vulnerable to manipulation. Those who argue for diminishing RTÉ may not share these illiberal aims, but they are moving in a direction that aligns with them. RTÉ's democratic role has been steadily eroded through decades of political inaction and chronic underinvestment. Unfortunately, a set of myths continue to shape public debate about it. These flawed ideas now risk becoming the justification for decisions that would diminish Ireland's public media infrastructure. It is essential to challenge these ideas.

### **Myth 1: RTÉ is no longer necessary in our digital age**

Some argue that RTÉ is obsolete now that digital platforms provide the content people want and audiences for live broadcasting are in decline. It is true that consumption is shifting away from traditional broadcasting, but this shift strengthens the case for a national institution that can provide trusted information and culturally relevant content outside the influence of global corporations. The digital age needs a strong model of public service to counter the rage-bait, invasive advertising, and AI slop that dominate so many online spaces.

Consider the media world of young children. YouTube and Roblox are data-harvesting, highly monetised platforms with little regard for child welfare. RTÉ Jr, by contrast, is specifically curated for Irish children to enrich their minds rather than profit from them. RTÉ needs investment and vision to evolve these offerings. Unfortunately, children (and parents) have been regular victims of RTÉ cost cutting. In-house productions for children were cut in 2016. RTÉ Jr Radio, a relatively low-cost service that could have met parents' concerns about screen time, was shut down last year.

In terms of crisis communication, it would be self-defeating for the state to undermine the capacity of a public institution that can reach the entire population quickly and without paywalls, algorithms or commercial gatekeepers. During the Covid-19 pandemic, audiences in Ireland, as in many EU countries, turned to their public broadcasters in record numbers. In a moment of uncertainty people knew where to go for reliable information. The need for a national information infrastructure has only grown as electoral interference and digital security breaches are an imminent reality for every democracy. The means of communicating with the public cannot be left to a patchwork of subscription news sites, personality-driven podcasts or global platforms whose priorities lie elsewhere.

### **Myth 2: Younger audiences do not care about RTÉ or public service media**

Public service media are, in principle, designed to serve the entire public. This remit makes RTÉ unique among Irish media organisations. The fact that broadcast audiences, especially younger audiences, are declining is sometimes taken as evidence that RTÉ is no longer relevant. This misunderstands the nature of public goods. Public support for libraries, playgrounds, or swimming pools does not depend on every section of the public using them regularly.

In news, for example, research from the Oxford Reuters Institute<sup>2</sup> shows that public service audiences are ageing, but it also indicates that people can value a public good without

---

<sup>2</sup> Nielsen, R. & R. Fletcher (2023) The importance of public service media for individuals and for society. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

personally using it. In about 80 percent of the countries studied, a majority of respondents say public service media are important for society, and in all nineteen countries surveyed, more people say it is important than unimportant. Crucially, positive attitudes are linked to exposure, not age. Younger people who are familiar with public service media value them at similar rates to older audiences.

This matters. It shows that the challenge is not a generational rejection of public service media, but a lack of availability and visibility in the spaces where younger audiences spend their time. This challenge is amplified in Ireland, where young people consume content within a vast international English-language media sphere. The response should be vision and investment to reach young adults with a distinctively Irish public service ethos, not a retreat from public service capacity.

### **Myth 3: Irish media operates through a clear public–private sector split**

Many politicians, and some commentators, appear to misunderstand how Irish media is funded. Too often, they rely on tropes about a public-versus-private sector divide in which, to use the Minister’s word, the public sector needs to be “rationalised”. This caricature is a total distortion of reality.

Chronic underfunding means RTÉ has been forced to rely on revenue from commercial advertising and sponsorship. In small-population countries, it is not unusual for public media to have some commercial income, but the scale of RTÉ’s reliance is exceptional. For the 40 years prior to the 2008 economic crisis, RTÉ sourced 60-70% of its income from commercial sources. Post-crash, when advertising revenues dropped for all media, RTÉ’s commercial income lies in the range of 40%; more than twice the EU average (19%). Meanwhile, RTÉ’s public funding has plummeted in real terms: taking inflation into account, the €222.3m in public funding captured in RTÉ’s 2024 annual report represents a decline of 33% in public funding since 2008. In practice, successive governments have given Ireland a commercial broadcaster that is weakly supported with public money rather than a fully public institution.

The wider media landscape does not fit the public–private split either. Seven percent of licence fee receipts goes to the Sound and Vision production fund, benefitting radio stations and production companies. Twenty-five percent of the licence fee received by RTÉ must be spent on the independent production sector. Beyond that, state funds, tax breaks and public schemes are in place to support journalism and the creative industries.

The extent of public support for media ought to be discussed as an accountability issue, in the same way public funds for RTÉ are. When public money flows into the media system, it should be clear whether it is benefiting a public institution or a set of private companies. That distinction is ignored when debate is trapped in the simplistic public-versus-private frame.

It is also notable that while current policy channels more public funding into creative production by the independent sector, the Minister has intervened to block an EU-agreed content levy on streaming services. The levy, which already operates in other countries, aims to recover a small share of profits earned by companies like Netflix and Disney and reinvest it in national film and television production. The Minister has wrongly characterised it as a levy on

consumers. The result is that two of the world's largest media corporations continue to grow their profits in Ireland, while Irish media organisations are left to compete with each other for increasingly narrow streams of public support.

#### **Myth 4: Public-interest content from private media makes RTÉ unnecessary**

This argument rests on a categorical error. It collapses two very different things into one: individual pieces of public-interest content and the existence of a public service media institution. Words are in danger of losing all meaning when politicians and industry stakeholders treat these as interchangeable and label all media “public service”.

It is unquestionable that private companies deliver valuable public-interest journalism and outstanding cultural and entertainment programming. Ireland is fortunate to have committed journalists and talented creatives across a wide range of companies. But the existence of public-interest content from these companies does not substitute for a public service media institution. A public institution carries obligations that no private media organisation has: to serve the whole public, to remain universally accessible regardless of ability to pay, and to operate outside the incentives and pressures that shape commercial markets.

Ownership is central to this distinction. Private media are accountable to owners, investors and commercial strategies. A public institution is accountable to the public. Confusing the two obscures the fundamental democratic rationale for public service media and undermines the case for protecting RTÉ.

International evidence reinforces this point. A major ten-year review of media ownership across four countries found that “public media combine quality and accessibility as no other media can do”<sup>3</sup>. In countries without a robust public service institution, high-quality news tends to reach only those who can afford subscriptions. The majority are left with a news diet dominated by “celebrities, crime and disasters”. In such systems, the public sphere fragments and inequalities in access to relevant information widen.

A strong public service media institution does not replace private media, nor does it diminish them. It complements them, stabilises the wider system, and sets standards that commercial markets alone cannot guarantee.

#### **Myth 5: RTÉ does not need in-house production beyond news and current affairs**

There are some who believe that RTÉ should be reduced to a news service and that all other content should be outsourced to the independent sector. In the UK, Channel 4 operates this model. However, it exists alongside the BBC and Channel 4's heyday of innovation and public service was at a time when it received a guaranteed income and did not need to chase audiences for advertising. In Ireland, TG4 is an outstanding example of what a publisher-broadcaster can achieve. But it has a very specific cultural and linguistic remit and it exists alongside RTÉ, which is required to provide TG4 with 365 hours of Irish language programming annually for free.

---

<sup>3</sup> Benson, R. (2024) "How Media Ownership and Funding Matter for Democracy." In M.L. Young, A. Hermida, and C. Castaneda, eds., *Novel Directions in Media Innovation and Funding* (Vancouver: The Global Journalism Innovation Lab): 58-62

Anyone advocating that RTÉ become a publisher-broadcaster needs to be honest with the public about what it entails. Outsourcing almost all content means public funding would largely flow to private production companies. It would also mean that RTÉ could not meet its public obligations if it no longer had the capacity to make the content that defines its cultural and democratic role. The recent decision to close RTÉ's in-house documentary unit is already a step toward this model and it should serve as a warning of how easily core public functions can be hollowed out.

There is an important place for the independent production sector and for the talented people who work in it. But media systems require balance. Reducing RTÉ to news alone would remove that balance and undermine the only institution with a mandate to serve all of Irish society.

## Conclusion

Short-term thinking will not meet the challenges facing Ireland's information environment. The country needs a strong vision for how public service media can evolve to support a resilient democracy and a cohesive society. At the very least, those who advocate reducing RTÉ's capacity should be compelled to explain how Ireland is meant to safeguard its democratic life without a functioning public media institution.

*Prepared for the Institute for Media, Democracy and Society by*  
 Dr Eileen Culloty, School of Communications, Dublin City University

*Supported by (in alphabetical order)*

1. Dr Sinan Aşçı, Anti-Bullying Centre, Dublin City University
2. Dr Mary Ann Bolger, School of Media, Technological University Dublin
3. Dr. Stephen Boyd, Department of Humanities, Institute of Art, Design and Technology
4. Dr Edward Brennan, School of Media, Technological University Dublin
5. Prof. Emeritus Patrick Brereton, School of Communications, Dublin City University
6. Dr Ciara Chambers, Department of Film & Screen Media, University College Cork
7. Prof. Emeritus Farrell Corcoran, School of Communications, Dublin City University
8. Dr Rosemary Day, Dept. of Media and Communication Studies, Mary Immaculate College
9. Dr Cormac Deane, Department of Humanities, Institute of Art, Design and Technology
10. Ms Muireann de Barra, Limerick School of Art and Design, Technological University of the Shannon
11. Dr Finola Doyle O'Neill, School of History, University College Cork
12. Dr. Dan Dwyer, Acadamh na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge, University of Galway.
13. Mr. Nicky Fennell, Dept. of Media and Communication Studies, Mary Immaculate College.
14. Dr Roddy Flynn, School of Communications, Dublin City University
15. Dr. Marcus Free, Dept. of Media and Communication Studies, Mary Immaculate College
16. Dr Audrey Galvin, School of English, Irish and Communication, University of Limerick
17. Dr Simon Hewitt, Department of Media Studies, Maynooth University
18. Prof Anna Hickey-Moody, Arts and Humanities Institute, Maynooth University
19. Prof. Aphra Kerr, School of Information & Communication Studies, University College Dublin
20. Mr Tim Kovar, School of Media, Technological University Dublin.
21. Dr. Susan Liddy, Dept. of Media and Communication Studies, Mary Immaculate College
22. Dr Irene McCormick, Media Studies, South East Technological University
23. Dr Simon McGuire Limerick School of Art and Design, Technological University of the Shannon
24. Dr Anthony McIntyre, School of English, Drama and Film, University College Dublin
25. Mr. Paul McNamara, School of Communications, Dublin City University
26. Ms Eleanor McSherry, ACE & Dept. of Film and Screen Media, University College Cork

27. Dr Niall Meehan, Journalism & Media Faculty, Griffith College
28. Mr Tomás Mulcahy, Limerick School of Art and Design, Technological University of the Shannon
29. Prof Colleen Murrell, School of Communications, Dublin City University
30. Dr Andrew O'Baoill, School of English, Media and Creative Arts, University of Galway
31. Dr Neil O'Boyle, School of Communications, Dublin City University
32. Dr Anne O'Brien, Department of Media Studies, Maynooth University
33. Dr Maria O'Brien, School of Business and Economics, University of Galway
34. Mr Aodh Ó'Coileáin, Acadamh na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge, University of Galway
35. Dr Stefano Odorico, Limerick School of Art and Design, Technological University of the Shannon
36. Dr Aileen O'Driscoll, School of Communications, Dublin City University
37. Dr Vicky O'Rourke, School of Business, Atlantic Technological University, Donegal
38. Dr. Caroline O'Sullivan, School of Media, Technological University Dublin
39. Dr John O'Sullivan, School of Communications, Dublin City University
40. Dr Judith Pernin, Institute of Art, Design and Technology
41. Prof. Emeritus Paschal Preston, School of Communications, Dublin City University
42. Dr Fergal Quinn, School of English, Irish and Communication, University of Limerick
43. Dr Stephanie Rains, Department of Media Studies, Maynooth University
44. Professor Laura Rascaroli, Department of Film & Screen Media, University College Cork
45. Dr Jim Rogers, School of Communications, Dublin City University
46. Dr Ciarán Ryan, Dept of Media and Communication Studies, Mary Immaculate College
47. Prof. Emeritus Helena Sheehan, School of Communications, Dublin City University
48. Prof Eugenia Siapera, School of Information & Communication Studies, University College Dublin
49. Dr Henry Silke, School of English, Irish and Communication, University of Limerick
50. Dr Brendan Spillane, School of Information & Communication Studies, University College Dublin
51. Prof Jane Suiter, School of Communications, Dublin City University
52. Prof Gavan Titley, Department of Media Studies, Maynooth University
53. Dr Stefanie Van de Peer, Film Studies, School of Creative Arts, Trinity College Dublin
54. Dr Dawn Wheatley, School of Communications, Dublin City University