



Commentary on Future on Media in Ireland

For Future of Media
Commission January 2021

Background

The Irish Traveller Movement, “A Movement for Change” was founded in 1990 as a national membership organisation representing Travellers. Our membership consists of 40 local and national Traveller groups. A core principle is to challenge the racism that Travellers experience in Ireland. The Irish Traveller Movement welcomes the opportunity to submit to the Future of Media Commission.

In the last Census (2016), 30,987 Travellers were enumerated, a closer estimation of population is reflected in the Department of Housing Planning and Local Government (DHPLG) Annual Count of Traveller families 2019 (last available) which counts **10,809 families**. This would equate to approximately **57,000 individuals (using 5.3 as family size ratio Census 2016)**

Travellers are one of the most marginalised communities in Ireland. Long term exclusion, and experience of discrimination has had a detrimental effect on Traveller’s life chances, health status and is evidenced in poor outcomes from birth to death.

State recognition of Traveller’s ethnic minority status (March 1st, 2017) gave a greater opportunity to combat racism and discrimination, enhance integration and inclusion and elevate the community’s status both internally and within the State. It gave the potential to promote broader societal understanding and a renewed positive narrative, from which to improve Traveller’s participation, visibility and representation in national and local settings, in the articulation of public interest matters, in educational fora, in both private and public employment, in civil society, in public services and in the national narrative of culture, heritage and history which could help ensure a secure grounding to create conditions of parity and inclusion.

Context

Promotion of Traveller visibility and improved reporting on matters which reflect and impact Traveller life, is particularly important to how Travellers are publicly viewed. By and large Travellers are subject to interviews about being a Traveller, have no decision-making status in media and Traveller views on a wider range of subjects as expressed through the media, is non-existent.

The Irish Traveller Movement remain concerned about the sometimes unfair and unbalanced treatment of the Travellers in some media where hurt has been caused across sections of the media for decades in the articulation of views on the community, based on reliance on specific reporting styles and dominant themes.

In the last ten years improvements have been noted, especially across some broadcast outputs and in a section of print media. The greatest offences still prevail in commentary and opinion columns, radio programmes and in the lack of moderation of online media. The opportunity under the consultation of the Future of Media in Ireland makes possible a reflection of those outstanding areas of media which continue to cause concern and the matters raised here attempt to reflect on those concerns.

In consideration of the context outlined, the Irish Traveller Movement replies recognise the many changes faced by the media today in terms of resourcing and downsizing and changed media landscape generally. The proposals and comments are founded on an understanding of how the media work in Ireland and a long-time professional engagement in media relations coordination within the sector, over two decades.

The submission specifically looks at some and not all the issues of thematic focuses as framed in the Commission’s Questions. We refer also to the many reports widely available of the impact, role and duty of media in how it articulates and presents diversity both in structural areas and content matters, as recommended reference.

Commission's own Working Definitions

In relation to replies and general comments, we make proposals viewed towards the Commission's own Working Definitions as such: *"In terms of diversity and inclusivity, the public includes groups within society and classes of person that may require special provisions to ensure equity of access to, and treatment by, media. In this regard, the Employment Equality Acts, which define nine grounds of discrimination including Gender; Civil status; Family status; Sexual orientation; Religion; Age; Disability; Race and Membership of the Traveller community, may be instructive..."*

Specifically, we make replies under:

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?

We seek to address the following sub questions

- How might public service media be more effective in promoting the Irish language, sport and culture?
- How might public service media better respond to the needs and expectations of the public?

Question 2. Sub question: 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?

Question 3. How should media be governed and regulated?

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

The opportunity to support positive visibility of Travellers and to depict a much more diverse society, including Travellers, should be at the heart of what a Public Service Media would seek to achieve.

There is no doubt a considerable challenge to deliver media content to meet the common ground of a mass audience, where the checks and balances of success are predicated on market and audience share and success determined by advertising revenue and underpinned by a governing infrastructure which seeks to justify the licence fee.

Those competing and subjective interests have dominated, and the pervading media structure has prolonged an experience on unequal access for many groups in society, especially Travellers. This is compounded by a settled consensus dominating every facet of media determining what gets featured and broadcast, confirming and determining what we come to learn and therefore think we want to know.

Given the self-governing composition of how media is created, which consciously or unconsciously excludes minority interests and perpetuates a majority representation, oversight is required to address that. It must seek to proactively include, rather than accidentally exclude groups such as Travellers, not by tokenistic gesture but by quota-based targets, measured and evaluated at regular intervals.

Changing that pervading ideology is not underestimated, but there is scope to adapt to a more democratic and therefore inclusive design, especially in Public Service Media. The Irish Traveller Movement welcome future opportunities to contribute to any new designs and strategies.

Traveller media engagement

There are too many examples of bad practice in relation to the way in which some broadcast media engage with Travellers, on issues which are mostly decided by that media, as newsworthy.

Regardless of the discrepancies in newspapers' contextualisation of the discourse topics due to their ideological differences, these discourse fields carry the imprint of negativity. As Fairclough (1989, p. 54) states 'the effects of media power are cumulative, working through the repetition of particular ways of handling causality and agency, particular ways of positioning the readers, and so forth', the recurrent discourse themes surrounding Travellers reinforce the image of a 'problematic' minority group (Hayes, 2006 Social misfits or victims of exclusion? Contradictory representations of Irish Travellers in the Irish press ⁽¹⁾.

Historic and current media representation across various media has contributed to a negative public mindset. Hate Track found *'News articles about Muslims, Roma, and Travellers appear to elicit dehumanising racism, irrespective of the article's context. The way mainstream media frame and present news is likely to have an impact on the type of comments that are likely to appear, with sensationalist headlines attracting a large volume of hateful comments.'*⁽²⁾

- Despite protection within the Equal Status Legislation, no affirmative actions have been undertaken to increase Traveller participation and visibility into media infrastructure in explicit recognition of that protection, or to address and adequately monitor breeches of Codes and regulation, independent to a complaints process.

The public is not a homogenous audience

Travellers as consumers of media are undervalued by the media system, and statistically insignificant as a viewing cohort. Media content is consciously bias towards a majority lense and Traveller identity in presenting and articulating news, within features, drama and entertainment etc is largely invisible, which causes further isolation and reinforces Travellers as being "different" and unusual. Travellers therefore have no say in what they see / hear / read and little input into what is articulated about Traveller life and culture, with some few exceptions.

Broadcasting media have demonstrated some improvements in Traveller specific reporting and within some newspapers since the introduction of the Press Council.

The entrenched practice.

A turning point moment for Travellers and representative organisations in current affairs output came about in 2013 in a Traveller themed programme on RTE's Prime Time series. That programme became the subject of complaints to the BAI, the Gardai and to RTE itself. Those complaints were not sufficiently upheld. Travellers and representative interests felt that the complaints process was unduly stacked in favour of the broadcaster, and the burden of proof onerous on the complainant. In the intervening seven years formatting for these programmes has changed, reasons unknown, but might have been viewed as relevant in the context of the complaints made.

Unfortunately, the reliance by RTE to approach Traveller themed current affairs shows in a pitch fork style where Travellers were engaged on panels to refute claims against the community in a one size fits all approach, left many Traveller representatives unwilling to take part in future programmes. This subsequently also impacted on the availability of speakers on specific topics, more damaging for community visibility, and caused a chasm of mistrust for Travellers about media.

Already a sign of poor production standards, these shows regularly sought out with media coordinators, the need for the "ordinary Traveller" to participate in these shows and not a Traveller "spokesperson". What this possibly suggested was that less media savvy community members would "make for better viewing ", than their battle-hardened representative spokespeople, who had the

expertise and ability to articulate replies -on a topic determined in the first place by that show- to a mostly hostile counter spokesperson representing other sectors, such as vintners, housing authorities, councillors, public Vox pops, sociologists and journalists.

In 2010 a series of documentaries by TV3, which claimed to tell the Truth About Travellers, resulted in a heightened interest thereafter for others similar. Those programmes were commissioned and developed without input from the community and while they featured Travellers as subjects, the balance of power was firmly within the media's territory of deciding on what featured, was edited and therefore what it claimed to be, a homogenous account of Traveller life, rather than reflecting its diverse and many faceted parts. The programmer decided what it believed to be the truth. It too was the subject of complaints, and alienated Travellers from engaging in other media outputs, given the damage caused by misrepresentation, without sanction.

Unconscious bias

Doctor's Elaine Vaughan and Fergal Quinn in their research paper on language used to report on the tragic events in 2015 of Berkeley and Carrickmines found *"that language of the Carrickmines news coverage tends to be more oppositional in tone. This oppositional "othering" tendency is accentuated by the way in which the news reporting moves quickly from a story around a "tragic incident" to one which is driven by "conflict" between Traveller and settled communities over the relocation of families affected. By focusing on this element, while ignoring other angles on the story such as the lack of monitoring of safety and fire regulations on halting sites, it contributes to the marginalisation of the less dominant group.*

The power imbalance of this extraordinary tragedy in which 10 members of the Connors, Gilbert and Lynch families died was reinforced during the inquest in January 2019. The reporting was insensitive and inappropriate where alcohol levels of the deceased adults, who were said to have had between four and six drinks each, featured as unusually significant. That is based on a review by the Irish Traveller Movement at the time found of other fire tragedy reporting, the Stardust among them, where the media did not focus on the alcohol levels of the victims. This focus also subsequently featured in reporting of the deaths of a Traveller mother and three children in a fire at sheltered accommodation in March 2017. The tone and emphasis of these make clear a careless and othering approach to presenting on sensitive matters, where they related to Travellers.

There have been several more negative presenting examples which have wrongly perpetuated stereotypes of Travellers within the crime reporting area and insensitive coverage of events out of sync with normal standards of personal matters, brought to individual reporter's attention at the time.

Current strategies and regulations

The media has a hugely significant role in propagating stereotypes and bias or not, and it has a responsibility to deal with and address racism and prejudice. The reliance on a debating format both in news, current affairs and entertainment programmes where Travellers are often defending their community, as mentioned above, continues across regional radio programming, and specific concerns in the Cork area.

The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland have a significant role to play, but its guiding principles, functions and codes do not go far enough. The code of Programme Standards (BAI code) which states *"The way persons and groups in society are represented shall be appropriate and justifiable"* at 3.4.2 the code continues *"Programme material shall not support or condone discrimination against any person or section of the community in particular on the basis of...membership of the Traveller community"* was a welcome inclusion for Travellers. However, this provision does not provide adequate protection for Travellers. A number of radio stations, and programmes, profile Traveller related stories as part of ongoing programme content through a negative narrative citing listeners to

comment and engage in debate. These concerns have been raised with specific stations and programme producers to no avail.

People can often have an assumption of who we are and what our culture is based on media stereotypes. Media coverage also has a major effect on Travellers, especially our young people, who relate to media, particularly social media. Unfortunately, we have seen at first hand in Cork the local media using this type of feature to invite members of the public to phone in and air every gripe they can think of with sweeping negative statements against Travellers. Imagine this happening three or four times per year on a local radio station, which is usually playing in the local shops, garages, taxis and hairdressers. Imagine having to use those services with one's children. When this happens, Traveller projects are inundated with phone calls from distressed Travellers talking about the hurt and shame of being stereotyped and rejected in the communities they have lived all their lives.) **Brigid Carmody speaking at the Seanad Public Consultation hearing July 2019)**

It was an oversight for Travellers not to be named within the Broadcasting Act or within BAI's Code of Fairness. This and other related matters featured as a part of a submission made by ITM to the BAI under Public Consultation on a Draft Code of Fairness, Objectivity and Impartiality in News and Current Affairs in the Broadcast Media 2012.

In her further contribution to the Seanad hearing in 2019, Brigid Carmody said *"While we do not have the resources to monitor these fully, we have been informally recording some of the public comments that follow pretty much any mention of Travellers, good or bad. Following a story of a Traveller family in need of accommodation, there were comments like "Inbreeding does not make you a race, sweetheart", "Blacks are human, knackers are not", "Burn them out", "Just bring in a tank of slurry and start spraying", "Bring them to the shooting range - good target practice for our boys in green" and "A few litres of petrol and a match will sort them out". It is unrealistic to expect Travellers and Traveller projects to police and report every single racist comment on social media pages, in newspapers or on radio stations. This needs to be done by the newspapers and radio stations that also broadcast their news online and through social media. They must be obliged to pre-moderate comments on their pages and remove hate speech and racist comments."*

RTE's role as Public Service Broadcaster

Within the RTE Diversity and Inclusion vision and strategy; it is noted *"RTÉ is determined to create relevant content that reflects the diversity of an ever-evolving nation and explores the differing experiences and realities of Ireland's people. To do this effectively, we will ensure that there is fair and authentic representation of gender, age, social experience, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, disability, civil and family status, religious beliefs and membership of the Traveller community in our content and on our services.*

Within the related Diversity and Inclusion commitments of the 2018-2022 strategy the following are included: Represent and reflect the voice and diversity of Ireland, it proposes

- A 50/50 gender balance across RTÉ and, where possible, within key levels of management
- 5% rising to a minimum of 10% of persons from a non-Irish background
- 5% rising to a minimum of 8% of persons with a disability
- A minimum preliminary goal of 4% of persons who identify themselves as members of the LGBTIQI community

- The opportunity to include Travellers as a targeted quota was a failure to acknowledge fully, all groups protected under the Equal Status Act, to which RTE refer in their own strategy (as above) and demonstrated a poor understanding of diversity by aiming to increase a quota of “10% of persons from a non-Irish background”, in exclusion of other ethnic minorities.

The Irish Traveller Movement commend RTE’s other Diversity and Inclusion commitments 2018-2022 as such: - *Engage and educate our workforce, fully integrate D&I into our workplace policies and practices*, - *Act as a leader in championing D&I and promoting strategies to address inequities in the creative and media industries*. The associated Action Plan comprehensively addressed and provided for, though did not include by name, Traveller engagement and inclusion.

- We respectfully ask the outcomes achieved across the plans and targets outlined, and where they have a Traveller specific relativity.

In RTE’s general programming output

Travellers are invisible in media delivery in Public Service Media, in its structures and management, and are glimpsed only in features and drama content.

Overall there has been limited proactive engagement from the PS Broadcaster with the Traveller community organisational sector, in ways in which Traveller visibility, broad inclusion and representation can happen in a proactive and planned way.

The Irish Traveller Movement note some improvements over the last five years in the efforts of largely independent productions commissioned by RTE to make greater visibility of Travellers. These efforts mostly, but with limited exceptions, arose from well-intentioned individuals mostly in the documentary area and were tied with BAI funding streams.

The interaction of news media in representing Travellers and related topical matters, is driven by an active community sector, competing at the same level as other communications stakeholders. Some editors and presenters of shows have maintained interests in ongoing Traveller themes for example the Sean O’Rourke / Claire Byrne radio show in recent years. The consistent consideration of these items benefits from long time engagement and interest of reporters and are therefore subject to change as personnel change.

Some other programmes worth noting which have contributed greater efforts towards inclusion are News2day, and in the last 3/4 yrs. the Claire Byrne Show and those externally commissioned which have maintained engagement with the community such as Nora’s Traveller Academy, Operation Transformation, Traveller’s Guide, Blood of the Travellers and Prime Time Investigates.

Radio has presented opportunities also both in the formation of specific programmes via interested production and presenting personnel, for example Sunday with Miriam, Lyric music cultural programmes and other features, which are driven by community engagement with broadcasters in seeking visibility / exposure on those topics, and long-time media champions within the sector.

Recommendations

- That Travellers be named as a group to be included in RTE’s next Diversity and Inclusion strategy and Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan.

- That an ethnic identifier be imbedded across all structures within Public Service Media to capture diversity and inclusion outcomes and evaluate performance of related goals in the RTE Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan.
- RTE to make evident compliance with the Public Sector Duty 2014 as a public service to Travellers.
- Travellers should be named within the Broadcasting Act and within the BAI's Code of Fairness.
- Strengthen the functions of the BAI to monitor practice, with a view to eradicating media stereotyping and profiling of the community, where it is apparent.
- Enhance the functions of the BAI to monitor online hate crime where it is generated through mainstream and public service media output and strengthen the codes of the BAI to induce changes at delivery level.
- That a Traveller expert be appointed to The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, RTE and The Press Council of Ireland

Question 2. Sub question: 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?

The Irish Traveller Movement note the value and importance of the **Sound and Vision Scheme** both to broadcasters, and the public in Ireland. As such funding is supplied to new television and radio programmes which deal with the themes of:

- Irish culture, heritage and experience;
- Improving adult or media literacy;
- Raising public awareness and understanding of global issues impacting on the State and countries other than the State; and/or
- Any of the above in the Irish language

The Irish Traveller Movement has had an opportunity to support a small number of documentary makers, and production companies and independents who have sought to develop Traveller specific programmes, since the introduction of funding.

Of the four criteria for the scheme "*Irish culture, heritage and experience*", it provides much potential to produce Traveller related content. The value of Traveller's unique culture and heritage has a place in the national perspective but is mostly invisible and undervalued. Understanding Traveller history, culture and heritage in our Irish story is valuable for all its public, and part of a shared history of our island. It has not been focused on enough, with limited exceptions in the area of music documentaries.

The importance of promoting and understanding minority cultures, is featured under **Article 12** of the **Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities** of which Ireland is a party, it provides for "*The Parties shall, where appropriate, take measures in the fields of education and research to foster knowledge of the culture, history, language and religion of their national minorities and of the majority.*"

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), recognizes and protects a number of core economic, social and cultural rights, and the right of ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities to engage in their culture, practice their religion and use their language in Article 27.

Given that Public Service Media has a statutory remit to provide widely-accessible content which has a distinct public value and *one part of which is to inform, educate and entertain the Irish public with regard to matters of Irish culture, identity, sport, language and other matters inherent to Ireland and*

the Irish people, it is therefore incumbent on the PSM to ensure that it accurately and proportionately reflects content representative of all parts of Irish society and its diverse cultures. The scant perspective of Traveller culture as Ireland's indigenous minority, is a casualty of a broader undermining of the value of Traveller life.

- The Public Service Media PSM have a duty and a cause, to act as a protector of that culture as a public service.

Recommendations

- Embed quota-based targets within Public Service Media to ensure Traveller related content is provided in accordance with obligations.
- Engage Travellers and community organisations in the development of proposals and in consultation on planning for new strategies.
- Provide internships, learning schemes within PSM so Travellers can produce, deliver and present Traveller related content.
- Name and include Travellers under targets of all PSM Diversity and Inclusion Action Plans and ensure guidelines are developed to underpin a code of practice on producing and delivering Traveller related content, which is universally adopted.

Question 3. How should media be governed and regulated?

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

In our earlier recommendations, we refer to the difficulties encountered for Travellers in having fair access to and portrayal of, matters related to Traveller life. We referred to the lack of visibility in content, production and presentation of media and of the inadequate protection for Travellers within media reporting, despite the existence of the broadcasting regulator and the Press Council, which is without a regulatory function.

The greatest cause of concern in the last decade has been hate speech directed at Travellers in digital forums. The Irish Traveller Movement has campaigned for and now welcome, that the sharing of hate speech on social media is to become a criminal offence under Government proposals to combat racism. This will imply a greater duty and protection to Travellers and other minority groups across social media platforms.

The Irish Traveller Movement has observed that there is an inconsistent approach in how media including PSM, host and moderate online content. For example; concerns have been brought to the attention of an online news site where Traveller related articles appeared which have consistently provoked significant hate. Through engagement with Editors of the site, better moderating of articles was undertaken, and comments taken down. However, the problems persisted across all Traveller stories. Recently, in advance of these stories appearing editors agreed to close comments on their site however when they uploaded the same story on their Facebook site, it attracted hateful commentary there. The Editors in reply said *“Unfortunately, Facebook goes by its own rules when it comes to its comments platform it doesn't give us the option to turn off comments on a particular post. And we don't have the resources to monitor comments on public platforms like Facebook or Twitter - again, that lack of an 'off' button is a big problem for us all! “*
“Our only real solution to stopping people publishing negative comments is to not put up the post at all. But if we do that, it means that we don't get to highlight news stories and projects on the challenges facing the Traveller community.”

There is clearly an ambiguity and a need for a solution given a lack of consistency and direction for media broadly on their obligations towards hate speech online and without governance given the press ombudsman and the Press Council of Ireland do not have jurisdiction over online pages of their media members.

Recommendations

- Strengthen BAI governance procedures and codes of practice for media and include Travellers in proposals in online safety laws under the BAI remit and current proposals.
 - Introduce a regulatory function of the BAI to include a monitoring of PSM and broadcasting broadly, to ensure fair and balanced coverage of Travellers
 - Develop a regulator across all media, and not just broadcast services.
 - The establishment of an expert group or place on the Press Council on matters of equality and minority interest should be considered and monitoring of compliance, though the press council's current structures, should be applied as a matter of course given the self-regulation of the sector.
- (1) <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1282&context=ijass> Hayes, 2006 Social misfits or victims of exclusion? Contradictory representations of Irish Travellers in the Irish press
- (2) <https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2018/11/HateTrack-Tracking-and-Monitoring-Racist-Hate-Speech-Online.pdf>

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