

Digital transformation and the challenge for Ireland's public service media

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Abstract

Irish story-telling and audiovisual content are successful and popular both at home and internationally and, at the same time, appetites for news content amongst Irish audiences are exceptionally high. However, in striving to provide audience access to impartial news and distinctive high quality content, public service media (PSM) in Ireland have been hampered, in recent years, by an ongoing crisis in funding. Financial pressures at RTÉ, in part at least, reflect a crisis of its own making triggered by disclosures in June 2023 of poor practices on reporting of payments to star talent. But, more fundamentally, the funding predicament reflects forces that have disrupted the economics of television worldwide over recent years. This article analyses the challenges faced by PSM in the digital era and how these are being addressed by policy-makers in Ireland. Drawing on the author's experience as member of the Future of Media Commission (FOMC)—a body set up by the Government in 2020 to consider and make recommendations on the future funding and sustainability of PSM and media more widely—this article considers how digital transformation is affecting PSM in Ireland and it asks to what extent PSM still delivers benefits that are valued by society. The main options for PSM funding are considered and, in the wake of publication of the FOMC Report, reflections are offered on the process of media and cultural policy-making in Ireland.

Keywords: public service media; PSB funding; digital disruption; media policy; Future of Media Commission

Digital transformation and the challenge for Ireland's public service media

The success and popularity of Irish story-telling and Irish audiovisual content both at home and internationally is widely evident and, at the same time, appetites for news content amongst Irish audiences are exceptionally high. However, in striving to provide audience access to impartial news and distinctive high quality content, public service media (PSM) in Ireland have been, in recent years, hampered by an ongoing crisis in funding. This article analyses the challenges faced by PSM in the digital era and how these are being addressed by policy-makers in Ireland.

Financial pressures suffered by PSB (public service broadcaster) provider RTÉ (Raidió Teilifís Éireann, Ireland), in some small part at least, reflect a crisis of its own making triggered by disclosures in June 2023 of poor practices on reporting of payments to star talent (Curran, 2023). More fundamentally however, the funding predicament afflicting PSM in Ireland reflects forces that in recent years have disrupted media systems worldwide. Across the globe, changes in distribution technologies have altered the economics of the television industry, fuelling consolidation and the rise of big tech platforms (Biggam, 2020; Doyle, Paterson and Barr, 2021; Ofcom, 2022; Poell, Nieborg and Duffy, 2022). The way we watch television has changed and, as audiences fragment and levels of distrust in social institutions rise, and in the face of growing competition from subscription video on demand services (SVoDs) such as Netflix and Disney+, PSM organisations

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have struggled to engage audiences - especially younger audiences (Donders, 2012). At the same time, many PSM organisations have faced serious financial pressures stemming, for example, from reductions in levels of television advertising and/or diminished levels of public funding (D'Arma, Raats and Steemers, 2021; Donders, 2012; Lotz, 2017; Martin, 2021; Túnuez-López et al 2020).

These challenges bear heavily on PSM in Ireland where, because of historic reliance on a dual funding system involving a licence fee plus advertising (O' Hagan and Jennings, 2003), recent funding pressures have been acute (Ramsey, 2018). While, theoretically, the licence fee must be paid by all households in Ireland where a television set is owned, in practice sales of licence fees have been in decline for many years and levels of evasion in Ireland are exceptionally high by international standards (Mediatique, 2019; FOMC, 2022, p. 106). Commercial advertising as the other source of PSM funding in Ireland has also been under strain because of the growing dominance of big tech competitors in advertising markets (FOMC, 2022, p. 95). Against this background, and in the face of numerous and recurrent expressions of concern about the state of RTÉ's finances and about challenges facing media in Ireland more generally, an independent body, the Future of Media Commission (FOMC), was set up by the Irish Government in 2020 in order to, in the words of the then Taoiseach Micheál Martin (Ireland's elected head of state):

... chart a pathway for public service broadcasting and independent media into the future ... [and] examine how public service objectives can be funded in a way that is sustainable, ensures independent editorial oversight and delivers value for money to the public... (Government Press Office (GPO), 2020).

Concerns about the sustainability of a device-based approach to funding of PSM are by no means confined to Ireland. That the television set is no longer necessarily central to how people consume media is widely recognised and a number of countries including Germany, Denmark and Norway have switched away from it in recent years. Others have signalled their intention to do so soon. In France for example, President Macron promised, as part of his bid for re-election as President, to reform the licence fee-based system of PSM funding (Chrisafis, 2022). In the UK, the then Culture Secretary in early 2022 stated that the BBC's current licence fee settlement will 'be the last' (Dorries, in Barker and Gray, 2022, p. 7) and in 2022 a House of Lords Select Committee enquiry examined the future of BBC funding.

The FOMC in Ireland, chaired by prominent physicist and former President of Dublin City University Professor Brian MacCraith and comprised of eight additional members with expertise across media, communications and/or inclusion, worked throughout the 2020–2021 period, engaging and consulting widely with audiences, citizens, industry stakeholders and international media experts. Its final report, which set out recommendations designed to ensure that media in Ireland remain viable, was published in July 2022 (FOMC, 2022). The analysis presented here, while drawing on the author's experience as a member of the FOMC, offers reflections that are personal.

This article builds on earlier studies that address the financing of public service content (Berg and Lund, 2012; Klimkiewicz, 2015; Schweizer and Puppis, 2018; Weeds 2016) and which have highlighted emerging pressures on PSM (D'Arma, Raats and Steemers, 2021), including for Irish state broadcaster RTÉ (Donders, 2019; Ramsey, 2018). It considers how digital transformation is affecting PSM in Ireland and, bearing in mind that how exactly PSM delivers societal value is a key point of reference in relation to the question of it should be funded (Donders and Raats, 2015; Lowe

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and Berg, 2013), it asks to what extent PSM still delivers benefits that are valued by society. The main options for PSM funding are considered and, in the wake of publication of the FOMC Report, reflections are offered on the process of media and cultural policy-making in Ireland.

PSM and the digital challenge

The terms ‘Public Service Broadcasting’ (PSB) and its more platform-agnostic digital successor ‘Public Service Media’ (PSM) are open to differing interpretations (Haenens, Sousa and Hulten, 2011; Lowe, Van den Bulke and Donders, 2018) and what they imply about the relationship between provider and state differs depending on national context (Tambini, 2015). In Ireland, the notion of PSM, while broadly rooted in Reithian aims of informing, educating and entertaining the public, generally denotes non-partisan provision of public service (PS) content by PSB¹ and other providers across multiple avenues. A distinction exists between PSM as ‘provision of PS content’ versus incumbent PSB/PSM organisations such as RTÉ and TG4. PS content provision by the latter in Ireland is augmented by ‘accessible programming that reflects Irish culture, history, language and diversity’ (BAI, 2020, p. 3) made by other commercial broadcasters and by independent producers, financed through a contestable fund which is paid for via an allocation of some 7.5% of the licence fee (Flynn, 2015).

Ireland’s PSM organisations—public broadcaster RTÉ and Irish language broadcaster TG4—are financed through a hybrid model involving public funding (i.e., income from sales of licence fees and direct grant-in-aid) plus commercial income (i.e., mainly advertising). In the years immediately prior to 2008 some 56% of RTÉ’s income came from commercial sources but recent declines in advertising have reversed this situation such that in 2019 licence fee income accounted for well over half (some 57%) of RTÉ’s income while advertising contributed the balance (FOMC, 2022, p. 111-114).

Successive reports from industry regulator the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland/Údarás Craolacháin na hÉireann (BAI) suggest that Ireland’s system of PSM has historically enjoyed general success in serving audiences and supporting the local creative economy (BAI, 2018). However, in recent years it has been battered by the ‘cataclysmic’ effects of the economic crisis of 2008 (Ramsey, 2018) and competition from big tech platforms (Mediatique, 2019) which have eroded commercial income from advertising. At the same time, PSM revenue from direct sales of licences has been in gradual decline with evasion rates in Ireland running well ahead of other European countries at some 13% in 2019 (FOMC, 2022, p. 107) compared with, for example, 7% in the UK. A scandal that erupted in June 2023, when RTÉ disclosed that it had under-stated payments to a leading presenter (RTÉ, 2023) in an apparent effort to ward off criticism about fat-cat salaries, caused a further notable drop in levels of sales of licences in Ireland (Riegel, 2024).

Even so, financial pressures are by no means unique to Ireland. Around the world, PSM organisations that are wholly or predominantly reliant on a compulsory licence fee model of funding are generally under financial strain (D’Arma, Raats and Steemers, 2021; Martin, 2021; Túnuez-López et al., 2020). The rise of digital distribution platforms, which has re-set the economics and competitive structure of the television industry internationally (Biggam, 2020; Poell, Nieborg and Duffy, 2022), is a considerable concern for PSM in Ireland as elsewhere. A particular challenge is engagement and retention of especially younger audiences in the face of changing consumption patterns and the

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growing popularity of online SVoD services. Radio remains popular in Ireland and levels of interest in news are relatively high, including for newspapers (Kirk et al, 2020). But, in line with trends elsewhere, the proportion of television viewing in Ireland which has shifted online to well-resourced globalised streaming services is high and growing (Mediatique, 2019, p. 2; FOMC, 2022, p. 80-81).

It may be argued that, despite these shifts, the rise of big tech globalised platforms should not, in itself, be viewed as a threat to PSM. On the contrary, it reinforces the case in favour of ensuring that PSM is sufficiently well-funded to fulfil its societal role of supplying news, current affairs and other forms of programming that reflect local interests and concerns. In the UK, the CEO of Channel 4 Alex Mahon has highlighted how, while streamers enjoy economic advantages through being able to spread costs across global audiences, this only strengthens the case for PSM who, by supplying distinctive locally-oriented public service content, counteract the effects of concentration of power in the hands of 'a few tech behemoths—mostly US-based—who increasingly want to decide what we read, watch and listen to' (Mahon, 2019, min. 17.23). In Ireland, Dee Forbes, the CEO of RTÉ from April 2016 to June 2023, in referring to the challenges posed by the rise of SVoD services, has likewise underlined the position that PSM occupies, through providing distinctive Irish programming, as an important counterweight to globalised streamers who invest relatively little in locally-relevant content:

For all the brilliance of the programming available on Netflix, Disney+, Amazon or Apple TV—beyond one or two one-offs, none of these services have shown any interest in commissioning programmes that reflect contemporary Irish life. ... Ireland needs a public media organisation that has the scale and resources to guarantee a strong and distinctive Irish voice ... that is independent, freely accessible, focused on Irish stories; and one that allows for national public debate and discussion (Forbes, 2022).

As Forbes has argued, while the growth strategies of SVoDs have involved investment in some high profile locally-relevant television content, it remains that PSBs like RTÉ and TG4 are responsible for commissioning and producing a far greater range and depth of original programming across all genres that reflect and resonate with the concerns, past and present, of local audiences in Ireland. It is well recognised that provision of diverse locally relevant television, radio and online content is important in terms of representation and social cohesion (Donders, 2012; Freedman and Goblet, 2018). As major investors in creative content PSBs also deliver enormous economic impact (Doyle, Paterson and Barr, 2021; Raats and Jensen, 2021). Through their frontline role in making and commissioning content, both mainstream and niche, RTÉ and TG4 have historically provided significant support for Irish creative talent, ideas and story-telling. Nonetheless, the 'profoundly disruptive challenges' facing media in Ireland were recognised by Government as being of such a serious order as to warrant a dedicated review to be undertaken in 2020-21 (FOMC, 2022, p. 11).

Is PSM still needed in Ireland?

The FOMC carried out its work at a time of heightened public awareness, due to the Covid 19 pandemic, of the consequences of rising levels of mis and dis-information in relation to public health, social cohesion and democracy. In line with rationalist norms in policy-making (de Marchi, Lucertini and Tsoukias, 2016; Hoefner, 2021), the approach adopted by the Commission entailed careful definition of the problem, widespread consultation with stakeholders, transparency, and (on the main

issue of funding models) comprehensive evaluation of alternatives leading to a clear proposal. Consultation involved numerous forms of engagement with audiences, the public and key stakeholders including industry participants, regulators and civil society groups.

Evidence gathered suggested that audiences in Ireland, while happily embracing SVoD and other online media services, are broadly in agreement with Forbes' (2022) assessment that PSM is still needed. Consultation brought forth a number of more critical themes concerning levels of efficacy of PSM in Ireland, including the need for greater strategic collaboration, innovation, ambition and accountability and for PSM institutions to be 'appropriately diverse, inclusive and representative of contemporary Ireland' (FOMC, 2022, p. 21), issues that were subsequently addressed in FOMC's recommendations for change. But it also uncovered plentiful evidence that, by and large, the public in Ireland recognises and values the ways in which a strong independent media in Ireland enhances and underpins civic life, culture and the democratic order.

Confirming earlier studies which demonstrate that levels of trust in news amongst Irish audiences are comparatively high (Kirk et al, 2020), fresh research carried for the FOMC by Core found that the trustworthiness ratings accorded to traditional media providers, including local and national newspapers, by Irish audiences are generally high and, while social media platforms fare poorly in respect of perceived reliability, RTÉ remains the most trusted supplier of news (Core, 2021). The importance of professional journalism for society and democracy, particularly at a time of ever-growing levels of 'fake news', was well recognised in submissions received by the Commission. Thus, albeit that in Ireland as elsewhere, traditional Habermasian notions of a territorially-bound national public sphere have naturally been eroded by the internet and growth in cross-border flows of media and cultural content (Iosifidis, 2011; Schlesinger 2020), PSM clearly still matters to the public in Ireland.

In addition, many of the 800 or so written submission received by the Commission confirmed that there is broad recognition across the public in Ireland of the benefits that stem from widespread availability of public service content, not only in terms of impartial news but also other distinctive Irish-originated programmes and output, including arts, music, Irish language and sport. The role of public service content both in bringing the nation together and also in reflecting diversity within and across differing segments of the Irish population was widely acknowledged (FOMC, 2022).

These findings are broadly in step with historic reports which have found that 'public service broadcasting continues to occupy a uniquely important place in the Irish broadcasting landscape' (Mercury Insights, 2019, p. 4) and that, despite an urgent need for Government to address problems of under-funding, PSM institutions 'deliver great value for Irish audiences' (BAI, 2018, p. 13). They also accord with the outcome of recent investigations into public PSM in other countries, such as the UK, which have found that, despite changing media consumption patterns, evidence that 'PSB is as important as ever to...democracy and culture' is 'overwhelming' (House of Lords, 2019, p. 3) and that PSM still delivers a wide range of societal, cultural and economic benefits (Chivers and Allen, 2022).

Having considered an abundance of evidence about the impact of PSM in an Irish context, the Commission took the view that public service (PS) content should be recognised as having 'merit good' qualities and, related to this, that systems of PSM provision should be treated as 'critical public infrastructure' (FOMC, 2022, p. 4). The idea that PS media content is a merit good, i.e., one which,

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when consumed, provides not just private benefits to the individual but also wider ‘external’ benefits to society, is not new (Davies, 1999; Doyle, 2013). For example, the availability of accurate news not only provides private benefits to the individuals that consume it, but it also confers wider external benefits through reinforcing truth and democracy. Education is another example. When people are educated it benefits not only the individual (through higher salary etc) but also society more widely (where knowledge is put to positive effect). Notably, independent research carried out for the FOMC by Core found that most Irish people recognise societal benefits and ascribe high value to provision of PS content, even in categories which they do not personally use (FOMC, 2022, p. 85-87). In other words, the positive externalities and merit good qualities of PS content—which underpin legitimisation of public funding—appear to be widely recognised by Irish audiences.

Underlying the FOMC’s position on public service media as ‘critical infrastructure’ is the idea that the systems of communication needed to support the functioning of daily life, government and national security are complex and interdependent and these include not just physical infrastructure but also the institution of public service (PS) content provision. While in Scandinavian countries such as Norway, media policy-making is already anchored explicitly in terms of ‘infrastructure’ provision (Enli, Syvertsen and Mjøs, 2018), the notion that media should be regarded in this way marks a new departure in thinking about the role and value of PSM in the context of media policy-making in Ireland, the UK or Western Europe. The Commission’s position reflects recognition that, at a time of increased threat posed by, for example, orchestrated campaigns of fake news as part of international conflicts, big tech disruptors and pandemics, and when ‘a healthy public sphere is under strain’ (Morgan, 2018, p. 39), the vital role of PSM as a counterweight that enables informed discourse and that promotes democracy and social integration is such that it can be seen as—and therefore ought to be funded as—a critical national priority.

Charting a Pathway

Against this background, and aware of the effects of digital transformation and the funding crisis affecting media in Ireland, the Commission put forward clear suggestions about how to stabilise PSM funding. In addition, since the FOMC’s remit involved not only PSB but media as a whole, more wide-ranging recommendations were put forward highlighting the need to encourage plurality by increasing the contestable funding component to support a wider array of PS content providers in Ireland; promote equality by requiring PS content providers to take appropriate steps on accessibility and inclusion; boost accountability and ensure value for money through targeted reforms at RTÉ including financial oversight by the National Treasury Management Agency’s NewEra unit; strengthen the role of PSM in supporting the Irish language and Ireland’s cultural and creative sectors; and promote the health of Ireland’s media systems through ensuring that regulatory oversight under the BAI and its successor Coimisiún na Meán (the Media Commission) pays more attention to governance in respect of social media, technology platforms and the digital public sphere.

On the key question of PSM funding, the Commission considered a range of alternatives including increased commercial funding, a household levy and switching to a taxation-based approach. Close attention was paid to the trade-offs between and likely funding implications of alternative models based around five key considerations: effectiveness, fairness, practicability, future-proofing and

public acceptability (FOMC, 2022, p. 134). In addition, financial modelling was carried out to assess the likely sustainability, for Ireland's system of PS content provision, of retaining the current licence fee system versus alternatives.

The option of adopting a public-only funding model (i.e., removing reliance on advertising) was considered but dismissed on the grounds that this would be less effective in raising the level of finance needed to support PS content provision (FOMC: 2022, p. 135). The option of a commercial-only funding model was also considered but similarly dismissed because it would not raise enough money (ibid, p.135). One argument of principle against even greater reliance on advertising—which currently accounts for the vast bulk of commercial income for PSM in Ireland—is that this would incentivise PSM suppliers 'to maximise not overall viewer welfare but, instead, the supply of whatever mix of programming yields the audiences that advertisers particularly want to reach' (Doyle, 2013, p. 96). But another purely practical concern was that, in view of the relentless migration of advertising to the internet (primarily to search and online display), switching to a commercial-only model would be economically unfeasible (FOMC, 2022, p. 123). So a hybrid approach continues to make sense in the context of Ireland.

With regard to the public component of PSM funding in Ireland, the possibility of retaining and reforming the TV licence fee was considered. The Commission noted the advantages this model offers in terms of maintaining a very visible 'social contract' between payer and provider (FOMC, 2022, p. 130). However, this option was dismissed on the grounds that the device-specific model is out of step with current media consumption patterns, doesn't raise enough money, is expensive to collect via *An Post* and suffers from high evasion rates which would be very difficult to reduce (ibid). The number of households and businesses in Ireland that do not own a television set is increasing (ibid, p. 117). Plus, the licence fee is unpopular with the public—an FOMC-commissioned survey found that 58% of respondents were of the view that responsibility for funding PSM should not be based solely on television set ownership (ibid, p. 117). These findings predate the 2023 RTÉ payments scandal which further hardened opposition to the compulsory fee, resulting in an upsurge in prosecutions for non-payment as 'one in five householders are now refusing to pay' (Riegel, 2024). The regressive nature of the licence fee is an additional problem (Weeds, 2016).

Another option considered was that of a household fee or a media charge levied on households and businesses instead of the licence fee, which is the approach that currently operates in Germany and Switzerland (Herzog and Karppinen, 2014; Steemers, 2020). The Commission considered the positive advantages of this model in spreading costs more widely, bringing in requisite levels of revenue and offering a sustainable and 'future-proofed' approach to PSM funding (FOMC, 2022, p. 125-131). However, concerns about lack of infrastructure in Ireland for the implementation of a household levy and about the 'strong likelihood of public opposition to such a system' meant that, despite its advantages over the licence fee approach, this model was dismissed as unviable (ibid, p. 135).

A further option considered was payment of the public funding component of PSM revenues from general taxation. A number of countries across Europe, including Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark have gotten rid of the licence fee in favour of a taxation-based approach in recent years (Herzog, Novy, Hilker and Torun, 2018; Ramsey and Herzog, 2018; Steemers, 2020). Variants of this approach include the explicit/hypothecated model versus the integrated one whereby PSM is

designated as a core expenditure item alongside other essentials and funded from general taxation accordingly. In theory, a key advantage of making this change would be that

like a household levy, government funding out of general taxation links payment for socially valuable programming to *all* beneficiaries rather than [just to] television viewers, in keeping with the social externalities rationale for PSB (Weeds, 2016, p. 11).

In practice, the taxation-based approach also offers major benefits in terms of stability, progressivity and sustainability. But a drawback is that government involvement in funding raises potential risks of political interference (House of Lords, 2022, p. 44). So, as noted by the Commission, any move towards a taxation-based model would need to be accompanied by appropriate procedures, as instigated in Norway and Finland for example, to ‘fully safeguard the editorial independence of media in receipt of public funds’ (FOMC, 2022, p. 134-135).

Based on a rounded analysis of trade-offs (ibid, p. 134-135), and bearing in mind the notion of PSM as critical infrastructure, the Commission concluded that a taxation-based approach would be preferable to the licence fee because it is fairer (drawing on Ireland’s highly progressive tax system), more effective in delivering revenue at requisite levels to support PSM, more stable and better future-proofed. The Commission recommended that, subject to finding ways to fully protect the future independence of PSM, ‘a taxation-based approach to funding PSM was the best and preferred option’ (ibid, p. 135).

Conclusions

Immediately upon publication of the FOMC Report in July 2022, the Taoiseach Micheál Martin declared that ‘the Government has now agreed in principle to adopt and implement the vast majority of the Commission’s recommendations’ (GPO, 2022) and he announced additional public investment in media in Ireland. The Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (TCAGSM) Catherine Martin also confirmed that, in line with the FOMC’s recommendations, a host of actions will be taken to transform Ireland’s PSM sector and promote inclusion and plurality, including the setting up of a new Media Fund which extends levels of contestable funding to encompass ‘media and journalism at local, regional and national levels’ (GPO, 2022). But on the thorny question of PSM funding models, rather than switching to a taxation-based approach as recommended by the FOMC, the Government decided instead to retain and reform the current TV licence fee.

This decision was described in some quarters as ‘disappointing and likely to delay once again an attempt to grasp this vital nettle’ (*Irish Times* Editorial, 2022) and, in some ways, could be interpreted as an example of what Freedman (2010, p. 344) calls media policy-making through ‘inaction’. However, in a contrary vein, the announcement of additional investment in media and the embrace of ‘49 of the 50 recommendations’ in the FOMC report (Catherine Martin in GPO, 2022) suggests a genuine determination, grounded on acceptance of the critical role played by PS content providers in the digital era, to now ‘do everything we can to ensure that Ireland’s media continues to deliver high quality public service content at local, regional and national levels’ (Micheál Martin in GPO, 2022). Further evidencing this determination, an Implementation Strategy and Action Plan detailing how exactly the FOMC’s recommendations are to be enacted was announced in January 2023 (DTCAGSM, 2023). Albeit that much depends on the level of public funding made available on an

ongoing basis for PSM via a reformed version of the licence fee plus public grants, the agenda for transformation embodied in the FOMC Report looks well set to shape and inform media policy-making in Ireland for many years to come.

The experience of participating in the FOMC brought many insights about Ireland's unique media sector, its enduring value to the public and the ways in which adjustment and innovation are needed to meet the challenges of the digital era. One possible wider lesson in relation to media policy-making may be that, when it comes to deciding which funding model for PSM is optimal, the forces most likely to impress themselves on the outcome include three distinct but highly interrelated 'Ps': Principles, Practicalities and Politics.

With regard to principles, the potential efficacy of differing models can be judged partly by reference to internationally recognised principles for the funding of PSBs which include adequacy, stability, perceived fairness, transparency etc (EBU, 2012; House of Lords, 2019). Central to the Commission's deliberations were such principles as, for example, 'fairness', 'effectiveness' and 'practicability' and these were formalised within the multi-criterion scheme used to weigh up alternative funding models (FOMC, 2022, p. 134).

With regard to practicalities, the relative merits of each model depend partly on how they might impact upon overall levels of PSM funding. One of the key criteria applied by the FOMC was how 'effective' each model would be 'in providing secure funding at a level commensurate with agreed PSM objectives', with a notional funding target set at €300 million per annum—some 20% higher than actual public funding levels in 2020, in order to future-proof and provide capacity for the enhancements in PSM provision recommended in the Report (ibid, p. 120). In other words, assessment was guided by practical analysis, published in the FOMC Report, of the financial implications for PSM funding of adopting alternative models, calculated under differing assumptions about such issues as likely levels of compliance or evasion.

Finally, politics. Even though the frailty of PSM in Ireland under its current licence-fee based model is a problem that has been brought to the attention of Government repeatedly over recent years, anxieties about the political acceptability and viability of alternatives to this model seem to have impeded any switch away from it. That the household levy approach—the model recommended by both a Joint Oireachtas Committee (2017) and an interdepartmental Working Group on the Future Funding of PSB (2019) as being preferable to the current TV licence fee—was regarded as too risky in terms of public acceptability cannot be disassociated from the political legacy of mass opposition to household water charges in Ireland in 2014-2015. In 2022, dismissal of a taxation-based approach (of which a number of well-functioning examples exist across Europe) again reflected political anxiety—this time based on uncertainties about preserving the future independence of PSM. The implication is that, in Ireland as in most other countries, politics is inescapable and intrinsic to media policy-making (Freedman, 2008; Psychogiopoulou, 2012).

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Endnotes

¹ While RTÉ summarises its mission as being ‘to enrich Irish life with content that challenges, educates and entertains’ (accessed at <https://www.rte.ie/strategy/pdf/Vision.pdf>), TG4’s stated mission is ‘to deliver entertaining and innovative media services that celebrate Irish language, creativity and connect with audiences at home and worldwide’ (TG4, 2022, p. 3)