

Special Issue Foreword: Audiovisual cultural policy in Ireland

Maria O'Brien

To cite this article:

O'Brien, Maria (2024). Special Issue Foreword: Audiovisual cultural policy in Ireland, *Irish Journal of Arts Management and Cultural Policy*, 10 (2), 1-7

Published online:

July 2024

Corresponding author:

Maria O'Brien	University of Galway	maria.m.obrien@universityofgalway.ie	https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7138-445X
---------------	----------------------	--	---

Abstract

The aim of this introduction is to provide a brief history of policy interventions in Ireland towards the audiovisual industries; to identify some key themes from the contents of this special issue, but also to think about why this special issue is timely. It interrogates issues of culture, of policy, definitions of the audiovisual, but primarily interrogations of how these questions and issues are framed by national, supranational and global policymakers.

Keywords: audiovisual policy; Irish film; history of film; film policy; media policy

Special Issue Foreword: Audiovisual cultural policy in Ireland

From the initial development of this special issue in 2022 to the final publication in 2024 there have been a number of significant developments in the Irish audiovisual industries landscape. It is tempting to focus primarily on such recent changes including the success of the Oscar nominated Irish-language film *An Cailín Ciúin* (2022), Irish-language feature film *Kneecap* (2024) winning an award at Sundance Film Festival (Screen Ireland, 2024), the increase in the maximum amount for Section 481 to €125M March 2024 (Department of Finance, 2024), the introduction of a tax credit for digital games (Section 481A; see O'Brien in this issue), and controversies shaping RTÉ, the public service broadcaster (Dalton, 2024). However, while these issues do inform some of the articles in this special issue, it is better to take a step back and think about the higher context of the policies that are shaping our engagement with the audiovisual industries. Policies are more than specific individual measures such as the tax credit or a change in funding for RTÉ. Instead, we need to take an overarching view of how and why policies that shape our engagement with audiovisual media forms such as film, TV and new media are developed and implemented.

The policies that shape the audiovisual industries can be categorised within a number of different academic discourses, including media industries policy, communications theory, or the field of cultural policy. Given the remit of the *Irish Journal of Arts Management and Cultural Policy* (IJAMCP), the tendency in this introduction is to consider interventions within the context of cultural policy. However, the various submissions take different approaches and thus framing policy analysis within the field of cultural policy only is overly narrow. A useful (if limiting) definition of cultural policy is 'the range of activities that governments undertake—or do not undertake—in the arena of culture' (Gray, 2010, p. 222). Instead, this introduction posits that it is important to recognise that cultural forms are deeply affected by public policies in other 'arenas' such as taxation, labour, education and health. Thus, a much broader understanding of cultural policies is used in this special issue to reflect the wide variety of media forms, policy interventions and theoretical underpinnings used throughout.

© Irish Journal of Arts Management & Cultural Policy 2024

ISSN: 2009-6208. <https://culturalpolicy.ie/>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

The primary focus of this special issue is what is understood as an audiovisual cultural policy. It is worth unpacking the meaning of this term. Here, a broad approach is taken to defining what is or is not an audiovisual cultural policy. The definition of the subject matter of this special issue is in some way a retroactive decision, defined and shaped by the submissions received. When drafting the call for papers, some thought was put into the framing of the areas of interest. To do so, a working definition of 'audiovisual cultural policy' was developed to encompass considerations of policies that shape film, TV, public service media, new media and digital games, to reflect the complexity of media as a form of creation and expression. The scope of the special issue reflects understandings of the audiovisual as an art form, but also simultaneously as an industrial form, and a form that reflects and constitutes identity.

The understanding of what constitutes policies is equally broad. The focus of this issue includes direct policies such as those that shape funding and regulation, but it also includes policies in adjacent areas such as education, inclusivity, labour laws, tax policies, and much more. In line with Gray's definition above, policy omissions are equally relevant. In an era of instrumentalist discourse around forms of culture, lack of policies towards certain aspects of the arts are also significant and require analysis.

Further, defining what is included in the concept of the audiovisual is equally complex. The audiovisual can be defined in different ways. It is possible to take a technological approach, a policy approach or an industry one. In the context of this special issue the audiovisual is understood as forms of expression that incorporate aspects of the visual. However, this special issue focuses on particular on those forms of audiovisual industries that are within area of cultural and creative expression and thus have social, representational and entertainment value.

We must remind ourselves that public policies are encapsulations of hope and aspiration. Policies are put in place to achieve specific objectives. However, these objectives may be undefined, opaque or misguided. Various policy theories have been developed to try and predict how policies might turn out (Cairney, 2019). Policy is understood here as the impact of the state's actions or inactions. The state is not a coherent entity however, with different institutions within it taking different approaches to cultural development, and at times with different agendas. For Flew, there are three main actors shaping audiovisual policy 'the state (the core executive), the market (private and business actors including the media) and civil society (voluntary and community sector actors)' (Flew et al., 2016, p.7). To this we can add the supranational entity that is the European Union and other global institutions such as UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization).

The intentions of policies driving development of the audiovisual in Ireland include both concrete and ideological imperatives. The current rhetoric of state intervention in Irish policy is one of economic stability, of job creation and of representing Irishness on the global stage. This outward focus is not only a culturally ideological soft power approach but is also a foreign direct investment (FDI) driven inward economic focus.

From an Irish perspective, the intervention of the state in the audiovisual cultural industries has been marked by a number of key drivers. These include:

1. Transnational or global flows of production and consumption;

© Irish Journal of Arts Management & Cultural Policy 2024

ISSN: 2009-6208. <https://culturalpolicy.ie/>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

2. Instrumentalised discourses;
3. The continued relevance of the local and national;
4. The role of and funding of traditional and new forms of media;
5. The importance of employment within media industries.

The policy context within which the Irish audiovisual industries operate has changed significantly over the past decades. Historically driven by a dominant religious ethos, Irish policy is now primarily shaped by global market forces. Ireland is a small nation on the edge of Europe with a primarily English-speaking population that is now resolutely framed as part of the globalised production landscape. From a policy perspective, many of the support and funding policies that shape Irish cultural output are dominated by a global outlook. It is taken for granted that isolationist policies may not serve the Irish cultural sector: the dominance of the English language because of 800 years+ of colonisation means that Irish audiovisual products are competing on a world stage primarily dominated by Hollywood output.

Flynn and Tracy's history of Irish film points to the invisibility of Ireland in early cinema, with dominance by nonresident producers such as the New York-based Kalem Company (Flynn and Tracy, 2019, p. 2). Policy interventions were driven by instrumentalised approaches, with Flynn and Tracy holding that '[u]ntil the 1990s, film was regarded by the Irish state as an industrial undertaking rather than a cultural one' (ibid, p. 4). The advent of cinema in Ireland roughly coincides with the founding of the Irish Free State during which time there was little economic or political desire to support a film industry (Flynn and Tracy, 2019). Rockett identifies a number of issues leading to lack of support for an early indigenous film industry, including the significant economic and logistic problems facing the new Irish state post-independence (Gibbons et al., 1988). Further, the world geopolitical situation brought about by two World Wars affected the cinema industries across Europe allowing for the rise in dominance of the Hollywood industry. This led to the establishment of subsidised local industries in some European countries, such as the Eady Levy in the United Kingdom (Hill, 2016) and a subsidy in Italy (Wagstaff, 1984). However, the recognition during the latter part of the twentieth century of the possible broader benefits of a film industry in Ireland led to a shift in policy on the part of the Irish government. The identification of potential instrumental value of production of film in Ireland, albeit mostly by overseas production companies, led to the establishment (and shaping of) the Ardmore Film Studios, and later to the introduction of an innovative taxation policy in the form of Section 35 of the Finance Act, 1987 (1987).

Post World War II, there is evidence of a focus on provision for infrastructure for Irish film, as opposed to an actual film industry, a nuance provided by Barton (2004, p. 64-65). The establishment of the Irish Film Board/Bord Scannán na hÉireann in 1980 (now known as Screen Ireland/Fís Éireann) provided a funding and support resource, initially for Irish film development and subsequently for TV production and, from 2023, for digital games.

In relation to the development of public service broadcasting, a useful perspective is given by Ramsey's work (Ramsey, 2018). The Irish public service broadcaster, Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) was launched in 1961 following the Broadcasting Authority Act, 1960 (1960) and has delivered

public service content since then. The recognition by the Irish regulators of the importance of Irish language broadcasting led to the establishment of a dedicated Irish language TV station, TG4, in 1996. Prior to the development of TG4, the Irish public service media sector was dominated by English language materials. Given Ireland's proximity to the UK, access to UK broadcasting material has long been a feature of the Irish cultural landscape. Further, the consumption of online platform material which can traverse geographical boundaries similarly offers a challenge to the consumption of Irish-grown materials. The reforms brought about following the *Future of Media Commission/An Coimisiún um Thodhchaí na Meán* report (2022), the dissolution of the former Broadcasting Authority of Ireland/Údarás Craolacháin na hÉireann (BAI), and the establishment of Coimisiún na Meán following the provisions of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act (2022) brings about significant changes for the regulation of media in Ireland, as covered in this special issue by Commission member Professor Gillian Doyle.

What this brief history shows is a complex maze of intentions to support cultural and creative expression in the context of industries that are both creative forms of expression but also economically valuable. Economic value has been primarily measured in terms of job creation, tax take and development of exploitable intellectual property. An interrogation of the trajectory of reports on media industries illustrates a similar complexity. There is insufficient space in this introduction to cover the entire body of reports on film, TV and digital media, but an analysis of some highlights is of interest. The *Huston Report* on the Irish film industries, published in 1968 by a committee headed by noted Hollywood director John Huston (Flynn, 2007) argued for the need to support indigenous film development as well as inward investment. A swathe of reports on Section 481 in 2022 were commissioned to save it from being scrapped under austerity measures. More recently, the development of the first national cultural policy framework in Ireland under *Culture 2025* (Hadley et al., 2020) was symbolically significant. Additionally, the recent launch of a *Roadmap for the Digital Creative industries* (Government of Ireland, 2024) similarly is important in its recognition of the importance of the cultural, social and economic aspects of digital creative industries, which were historically primarily valued for their economic potential. However, again, reports and roadmaps are wish lists or expressions of desire. It is only when they are put into action that they can be considered effective.

The articles all deal with different aspects of what the audiovisual is and push the boundaries of our understanding of policy interventions. The articles are varied in approach, topic and positionality. What they all share however is an understanding of the recognition within policy discourses of the importance of culture as both a form of soft power and as an economic driver, and a wish to extend our understanding of key issues in audiovisual policy.

Gillian Doyle's article covers the report of the Future of Media Commission, providing a unique perspective as a member of the committee and a media industries academic. A number of articles, including Noonan's article on screen agencies and Crosson's on Irish language film funding, cover what we might consider institutional insights. Murphy's coverage of labour issues and Rogers' insights into the structural aspects of music both illustrate the significance of a political economic approach to analysis of industrial factors, as do many of the other articles. Given the significance of tax incentive regimes to the Irish film and TV production landscape, a number cover Section 481, including Murphy and Brodie on Section 481 and O'Brien's on the new digital games tax credit (Section 481A). Finally, others address existing policies and gaps in such policies, including

© Irish Journal of Arts Management & Cultural Policy 2024

ISSN: 2009-6208. <https://culturalpolicy.ie/>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

McSherry's on disability policies and O'Connell's on archive policies. The addition of a book review by Ciara Murphy on women in the Irish screen industries offers astute insights into an important area of policy.

The entries in this special issue cover a wide range of cultural processes and products, relating to film, digital games, TV, screen-based media and music. While some definitions of the audiovisual are narrower than this broad range, and some theorists do not include games within the audiovisual, the joy of a special issue is that the remit can be flexible. The deliberate inclusion of games within this special issue reflects my own research interests but can also be defended because of the explicit and implicit links between film policy and games policy in the form of Section 481/481A. While games are very much a distinct and complex industry, there are links with film and animation that are usefully explored to enable us to understand the role of policy in shaping such industries.

The special issue looks at the intersection of state/market/society relations from an Irish context. It is a call to arms to continue to interrogate both the policies and the policy making processes that shape our culture. Academic research is driven by interest, curiosity and a desire to transmit knowledge. One common theme is how the research is driven by academics who straddle the world of practice and academia. This special issue is enriched by such perspectives, with the contributions of two different PhD candidates who are also practitioners in their respective fields. My own research is also informed by my board membership of Imirt, the Irish games representative body. Political economy is underpinned by praxis, as illustrated by many of these articles.

This brief overview of the broad themes informing Irish audiovisual policy has highlighted some key aspects shaping the production, distribution and consumption of media forms in Ireland. This historically informed introduction aims to identify points of commonality across the different submissions and provide a broader context for the issue. There are of course many gaps in this special issue. Space restrictions mean there are no submissions that solely focus on forms of new media regulation that shape cultural engagement. The intersection of platform policy and the creative industries is an area ripe for analysis and interrogation. A more explicit focus on cross-border and Northern Ireland policies for film and other media forms is long overdue as is more detailed interrogation of the significance of film festivals to the Irish cultural landscape. However, it is clear from the wide range of topics covered in this special issue that the academic field of audiovisual cultural and creative industries policy will continue to be interrogated and developed going forward by the current and new generations of scholars who bring fresh perspectives to this important subject.

References

An Cailín Ciúin (2022). Directed by Colm Bairéad. Ireland: Inscéal.

Cairney, Paul (2019). *Understanding Public Policy: Theories and Issues*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Dalton, Eoghan (2024). 'Powerful Oireachtas Committee Says RTÉ Should Be Brought under the Remit of the State's Auditor'. *Thejournal.ie* [online], 5 March. Available at: <https://www.thejournal.ie/rte-pac-report-6316516-Mar2024/> [Accessed 31 March 2024].

Department of Finance (2024). 'Ministers McGrath and Martin Welcome Increase in Film Tax Credit Project Cap'. Department of Finance [online] 29 March. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/0483a-ministers-mcgrath-and-martin-welcome-increase-in-film-tax-credit-project-cap/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20increase%20in%20the%20cap,high%20quality%20audio%2Dvisual%20production> [Accessed 31 March 2024].

Flew, Terry, Iosifidis, Petros and Steemers, Jeanette (2016). *Global Media and National Policies: The Return of the State*. New York: Springer.

Flynn, Roddy (2007). 'Raiders of the Lost Archive: The Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Film Industry 1942'. *Irish Communication Review*, 10(1), 30-49.

Flynn, Roddy and Tracy, Tony (2019). *Historical Dictionary of Irish Cinema*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Government of Ireland/Rialtas na hÉireann (1960). Broadcasting Authority Act 1960. Available at: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1960/act/10/enacted/en/index.html> [Accessed 31 March 2024].

Government of Ireland/Rialtas na hÉireann (1987). Finance Act, 1987. Available at <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1987/act/10/enacted/en/html> [Accessed 31 March 2024].

Government of Ireland/Rialtas na hÉireann (2019). *A National Cultural Policy Framework to 2025*. Dublin. Available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/62616d-culture-2025/> [Accessed 31 March 2024].

Government of Ireland/Rialtas na hÉireann (2022). *Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022*. Dublin. Available at <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/41/enacted> [Accessed 31 March 2024].

Government of Ireland/Rialtas na hÉireann (2024). *Digital Creative Industries Roadmap 2024–26*, Dublin. Available at: https://www.creativeireland.gov.ie/app/uploads/2024/01/CI_Creative_Industries_Roadmap_23_Screen_AW-3.pdf. [Accessed 31 March 2024].

© Irish Journal of Arts Management & Cultural Policy 2024

ISSN: 2009-6208. <https://culturalpolicy.ie/>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Gray, Clive (2010). Analysing Cultural Policy: Incurably Plural or Ontologically Incompatible? *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 16(2), 215–230.

Hadley, Steven, Collins, Patrick and O'Brien, Maria (2020). Culture 2025 a National Cultural Policy Framework for Ireland. *Cultural Trends*, 29(2), 145–159.

Hill, John (2016). Living with Hollywood: British Film Policy and the Definition of “Nationality”. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 22(5), 706–723.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2016.1223646>.

Kneecap (2024). Directed by Rich Peppiat. Ireland: Jack Tarling & Trevor Birney

Ramsey, Phil (2018). Ireland: In Search of Reform for Public Service Media Funding. In: Herzog, Christian, Hilker, Heiko, Novy, Leonard and Torun, Orkan (eds.) 2018. *Transparency and Funding of Public Service Media – Die deutsche Debatte im internationalen Kontext*. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden. 77–90. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-17997-7_7.

Screen Ireland. 2024. 'Kneecap Becomes First Irish Language Film to Win Sundance Film Festival Award'. Screen Ireland [online], 26 January. <https://www.screenireland.ie/news/kneecap-becomes-first-irish-language-film-to-win-sundance-film-festival-award>.

The Film Industry Committee (1968). *Report of the Film Industry Committee*. Dublin. Available at <https://exhibitions.library.universityofgalway.ie/s/huston/item/5241> [Accessed 31 March 2024].

The Future of Media Commission/An Coimisiún um Thodhchaí na Meán (2022). *Report of the Future of Media Commission*. Dublin. Available at <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/229731/2f2be30d-d987-40cd-9cfe-aaa885104bc1.pdf#page=null> [Accessed 31 March 2024].

Wagstaff, Christopher (1984). The Italian Cinema Industry during the Fascist Regime. *The Italianist*, 4(1), 160-174.