

‘Media Diversity: why does it matter?’

6th February 2012, Raddison Blu, Dublin 8.

Nessa Childers MEP - Conference Report

Background to the Conference

In modern democracy, the media acts as a watch-dog of government and business and as a bulwark against corruption. More than that though, consciously or unconsciously the media play a key role in agenda-setting, opinion formation and the distribution of ideas necessary to create an active, informed citizenry.

The issue of journalistic independence is treated as an important part of the fabric of European democracy. Both the Commission and the European Parliament believe these are key elements for enabling the exercise of freedom of expression, one of the essential foundations of the European Union.

In 2009, shortly after the last European Parliament elections a resolution was tabled calling for action to protect media pluralism and ban monopolies. The debate focused on the crisis of media freedom in Italy, where Berlusconi’s ownership of Italy’s biggest private free TV company, publishers and advertising company raised serious questions for journalistic independence in a country where one owner with a strong personal agenda dominated.

Every country and system of governance in Europe – and indeed the world – has its own relationship with its press. In some countries more than others this relationship is fractious, few more so than in Hungary where a recent state crackdown on the media, judiciary and central bank independence represents what is probably the most serious attack on democratic institutions in the EU for a generation.

The European Commission set up a high-level group on media pluralism and freedom in October 2011 to see how the EU can enable freedom and pluralism

of the media, including independent media governance. Across Europe at a national level too, questions are being asked about media independence.

Trends in ownership of traditional media in nearly every country is that it is concentrating into the hands of the wealthy few. This gives rise to the important question - does the convergence of media ownership translate to control of the media, and is there room for pluralism of voices and opinion in a system of oligarchic ownership? In other words, can journalists do their work objectively and independently in an era of media moguls?

To consider these and other similar questions, Nessa Childers MEP, organised a conference on media diversity was held in Dublin in February 2012. The conference was timely, as Ireland will see the publication of a bill to regulate media mergers in 2012.

Monday 6th February – the Dublin conference

The Dublin conference was directed at political activists, students, journalists and academics and anyone interested in the role of media and society, and set out to address the issue of diversity in media ownership, reflecting work in the EU.

The conference theme examined the implications for traditional notions of democratic accountability and journalistic independence with the emergence and dominance of multi-national Media Corporations and was structured around the following sub-themes:

- the effectiveness of regulating for media diversity,
- media ownership in Ireland,
- media diversity as a condition of democracy,
- decline of the media moguls and
- voices in new media

Survey

To include journalists' voices in the process, a study was commissioned on journalists' perceptions of media ownership and media diversity and the influence of these on their work.

100 Irish journalists responded to a survey for the study, which was presented at the conference.

The vast majority of respondents agreed that they have control over their work, that being free to make independent judgement on how they work is important to them, and that the independence of the media is important to democratic life.

Opinion was more split on the question of whether Ireland has adequate diversity in its media mix. Only 3.2% agreed strongly and 16.1% agreed that Ireland has adequate diversity in its media mix while 36.6% disagreed and 20.4% disagreed strongly. 22.6% neither agreed nor disagreed.

77.5% of journalists believe that media diversity is at risk in Ireland due to trends in media ownership. 14% do not believe this.

The majority who disagree with this are journalists working in print media.

On the topic of online media 49.5% agreeing it is helping protect media diversity, 21.5% disagree.

48.4% of journalists do not agree that regulation to protect media diversity in Ireland's broadcast media is adequate.

18.3% of journalists believe that current regulation to protect diversity in Ireland's broadcast media is adequate.

61.3% of journalists feel that regulation to protect diversity in Ireland's print media is needed- 28% agreeing strongly with this sentiment.

11.8% disagreed that regulation was needed, with 5.4% disagreeing strongly. These responses reflect the opinion of journalist working in both print and online media.

A substantial 20.4% neither agreed nor disagreed. This reflected the opinion of 53% of the print media journalists, 26% of the broadcast journalists and 21% of the online journalists

40.2% agreed that the government's legislation on media mergers was welcome.

40.2% were unable to agree or disagree.

Furthermore 9.2% responded that they did not know if the proposed media mergers legislation is welcome

Regarding the importance of diversity of media ownership and of the economic viability of media, both were considered by journalists to be important though diversity of media ownership was rated relatively more important than the economic viability of media.

81.7% of journalists deemed diversity of media ownership to be very important.

A second set of questions were asked of journalists in full or part-time employment of a media company.

Most journalists know who the owners of the company they work for are, and 75% agreed they know what other investments their owners have in media. A considerably smaller percentage knows what other investments their owners have outside of media Overall, 40.9 % agreed they knew, encompassing 26.6% agreeing strongly and 14.3% agreeing. A much larger percentage disagreed that they knew what other investments their owners had outside media, with 27% disagreeing and another 6.3% disagreeing strongly It may be concluded that the issue of transparency or lack thereof is evident in the experience of these journalists

Illustrated versions of these results and more may be found in the complete report on the survey - available on www.nessachilders.ie.

Media ownership in the European Union: trends and regulation

Dr. Alison Harcourt spoke about the effectiveness of European and international policies for regulating the media. She spoke mainly discussed the degree of cross-border market consolidation in Europe and some trends within national markets. She gave an overview of national regulatory trends within Europe, discussed the European Commission approaches to regulating the sector and offered her thought on how ensuring plurality might proceed.

Dr. Harcourt's discussion focussed on broadcast and newspaper media. Broadcast media has been subject to greater convergence in the EU than newspapers have. The leading broadcast providers in Europe include Bertelsmann, the Modern Times Group, ProSiebenSat1 and News Corporation. Newspaper ownership is relatively diverse in larger member states though remains highly concentrated in smaller states and the states of Central and Eastern Europe have been dependent upon foreign investment from early on. News Corporation has considerable newspaper holding in the UK and Ireland.

Traditional regulation to govern media ownership has centred on instruments such as circulation limits turnover/ revenue limits and restrictions on share capital or voting rights. These have been removed in most EU member states and replaced with competition law even though sector specific rules are permitted under Article 21 (4) of the 2004 Merger Regulation which states that "Public security, plurality of the media and prudential rules shall be regarded as legitimate interests".

In the past, market share used to be limited to 15-20%, today most states limit market share to between 30% and 50%. Some specific sector rules remain in Austria, Germany, Ireland and the UK, such as audience share limits on television and lowered thresholds for competition decisions.

However parliaments are not providing legal clarity to industry. If plurality is considered to be salient, this needs to be made clear in statutory regulation.

In 2007, the Council of Europe recommended that its member states adopt rules governing ownership thresholds based on traditional instruments of audience share, circulation, turnover/revenue, the share capital or voting rights. However, as stated, most European states have now removed these instruments, which makes acting on convergence difficult. In December 2007, the UK Competition Commission encountered difficulties in mandating BSkyB

to reduce its 17.9% stake in ITV to 7.5% percent. The acquisition did not exceed limits set out in the 2003 Communications Act so eventually the decision was made on voting rights under competition law. Clearly though, questions of plurality were in the background. Since then, local ownership rules were removed in the UK under the 2011 Media Ownership (Radio and Cross-media) Order.

The Council of Europe recommendation conflicts with the European Commission's internal market aims. The Commission has historically supported media market consolidation. The view of the European Commission is to ensure that there are as few impediments to the internal market as possible. The Commission generally argues that member states' rules are outdated due to convergence and that other measures are needed to ensure pluralism to compensate for market concentration. It further states that "the development of strong European players in the global media landscape helps preserve media pluralism".

The Commission challenged the normative argument that greater concentration leads to less pluralism in its distinction between 'internal' and 'external' media pluralism. According to this view, countries with highly concentrated press and broadcasting markets such as the Netherlands, and Scandinavian states, would have a less pluralistic media than countries with a greater number of market players such as France, Spain and Italy. Hence, the Commission argued, assessing pluralism becomes much more complex and multiple indicators need to be delineated.

Accordingly, in 2009, the EC published a large scale independent study on media pluralism which identified indicators and develop monitoring tools for assessing media pluralism in EU member states. The European Commission had planned to release a Communication which will which would recommend that EU member states applied these indicators at the national level. However the Communication never came to fruition. Dr. Harcourt stated that there was in any case little enthusiasm for application of the indicators at a national level.

In October 2011, the Commission established a High Level Group to discuss freedom and pluralism of the media across the EU following European Parliament pressure. This group is to analyse political interference from state intervention which means that state broadcasters will be scrutinised, as will legal threats to the protection of journalists' rights and media accountability.

It is difficult to see however how the European Commission can legislate for media pluralism beyond a vague recommendation which in any case needs to be supported by Member States. The EU has no real treaty basis for regulation in this field. The only available article on which to base a Directive is Article 151(4) of the Treaty which is a weak instrument as it requires unanimity.

One area in which Dr. Harcourt felt the Commission could take action on is in transparency. Public disclosure of company accounts and management reports of all media firms operating within Europe would be useful as it would allow greater scrutiny of media company activities by citizens and interest groups.

Overall though, the core agenda of the European Commission is clearly the creation of strong European companies which favours market consolidation and the reduction of state aid.

Media Ownership in Ireland

A review of the extent to which the Irish media is diverse and a discussion on the balance that needs to be struck between diversity and economic viability in order to have a strong media to hold authority to account.

Dr. Roddy Flynn spoke on the topic of Media Ownership in Ireland. First he highlighted the difficulty of gathering statistics on media ownership in Ireland due to the "porousness" of our media market, and the difficulty disaggregating revenue generated in Ireland from that generated abroad.

The arrival of competition into Ireland's media markets brought with it a concomitant need to introduce regulation. Responsibility for the various media sectors is spread between a number of institutions: television and radio stations are licensed by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. However fixed and mobile telecommunications services (including cable and satellite television operators) are licensed by the Commission for Communications Regulation (COMREG). There is no specific body for licencing newspapers (although since 2006 Ireland has had a Press Council which offers a means of redress for individual and companies who feel they have been treated unfairly through press coverage.)

However, all media (including print media) in Ireland are also subject to the oversight of the Competition Authority. Until 2002, the Authority treated all

business enterprises alike: the approval of the Minister for Industry and Commerce was required in any instance where one enterprise proposed acquiring 30% or more of another organization and in 1992, for example, the Competition effectively blocked a move by Independent News and Media to increase its shareholding in The Sunday Tribune from 29.99% to 53.09%.

However, the Competition Act of 2002 included a new section dedicated to media ownership reflecting recommendations from a 1996 state Commission on the Newspaper Industry to the effect that the relevant Minister (now Enterprise and Employment) take into account the following issues in determining whether to permit a media merger to proceed:

- The strength and competitiveness of the indigenous industry in relation to UK titles
- The plurality of ownership
- The plurality of titles
- The diversity of views in Irish society
- The maintenance of cultural diversity.

The Minister for Enterprise and Employment may investigate any proposed merger where the “exigencies of the common good” demand it. In practice, however, activity is limited to mergers involving companies with annual turnovers of €40m or more.

The indigenous written press in Ireland consists of three/four national dailies, one national evening newspaper, five/six Sunday newspapers and approximately 40 regional/local or ‘provincial’ newspapers. There has been a decline in readership over the past four decades. Between 1971 and 2006, the population increased by 40% whilst total daily, Sunday and evening sales have declined 10%.

In the meantime, public concern relating to media mergers and concentration of ownership has tended to focus less on questions of plurality and more on the possibility that such media companies may abuse their market dominance for selfish ends.

Two names in particular stand out in this regard. The first is Tony O'Reilly, the second Denis O'Brien.

For several decades Tony O'Reilly was the richest man in Ireland, and possibly best known as the (now former) Chief Executive of Independent News and Media (INM), a corporation which was built around the acquisition of the Independent Group in 1973. INM is by far the largest print media group in Ireland and has been since the early 1970s. INM is also one of the largest print media owners in Australia and has significant holdings in South Africa. It also owned the London Independent Group until 2007. However, O'Reilly's media interests have also extended beyond print: INM was a partner in Prince's Holdings, which was the second largest cable television operator in the Republic from 1992 to 2004. Furthermore, from 2000 to 2004, O'Reilly was Chairman of the Valentia consortium which owned Eircom, the former PTT.

There have been a number of highly publicised incidents when it has been asserted that O'Reilly's dominant position in the Irish print media and his cross-media holdings have directly shaped the editorial content of the newspapers in the INM group. In 1995, it was alleged that a subsidiary of yet another O'Reilly-owned company, the Fitzwilton Group, had engaged in corrupt behaviour when one of its subsidiaries gave a cash cheque for £30,000 to the then Minister for Communications. When the allegation became public in the context of a state tribunal investigating planning corruption, newspapers within the INM group appeared to adopt an agreed editorial position, actively criticising the suggestion that either O'Reilly or one of his companies had engaged in illegal activity.

In 1997 on the day of a general election, the Irish Independent published an editorial calling for the electorate to vote against the incumbent administration. This was not remarkable in itself but was considered unusual because the incumbent coalition government included the Fine Gael party, which the Independent traditionally supported. The Independent's about-face was ascribed to the failure of the outgoing Fine Gael-led administration to adequately regulate the activities of "deflector" groups, groups based in rural communities not bypassed by cable television who were piggybacking their own television distribution systems on the back of legal cable operators. These cable operators included Prince's Holdings which INM jointly owned with Tele-Communications International (TCI).

Both incidents were taken as demonstrating that O'Reilly was exploiting his extensive media interests in the interests of himself or other elements of his corporate empire

In 2000, Denis O'Brien sold his stake in Esat to British Telecom, netting in the region of €320m. This allowed his Communicorp vehicle to go on something of a buying spree, extending his interests in radio in Eastern Europe and consolidating the activities of Digicell, now the largest mobile phone operator in the Caribbean. He also acquired two private national radio stations - Newstalk 106 and Today FM - in 2008. At around the same time, he began to build a stake in Independent News and Media: this was initially done through proxies to avoid alerting O'Reilly and his family to O'Brien's growing stake in the company.

It was not entirely clear what O'Brien's strategic intent was in acquiring such a large stake in the country's largest newspaper group, especially at a time when newspapers globally were experiencing falling circulations and falling ad revenues.

However in Spring 2011, a state tribunal investigating the circumstances under which Esat Digifone had secured its mobile phone licence in 1995, published an interim report suggesting that O'Brien had effectively bribed the Minister for Communications in a bid to secure the licence. O'Brien hotly denied these assertions. However, it was apparent that the manner in which the interim report was covered by different media was influenced by ownership. INM titles devoted less space to the story relative to other Irish papers and, in any case, framed it as a story about a corrupt politician. Both the national commercial broadcasters (which are also owned by O'Brien) also adopted a more sceptical attitude to the interim report than the public service broadcaster.

At this point a public perception emerged that O'Brien's acquisition of dominant stakes in the largest commercial radio stations and print media had been conducted in anticipation of a negative finding from the tribunal.

Regardless of how insubstantial such perceptions are, they have had an impact politically. As of

October 2011, the Minister for Communications, Pat Rabbitte announced plans for new draft legislation exclusively focused on media mergers. In so doing he stressed "the undesirability of allowing any one individual or undertaking to hold significant interests within a sector or across different sectors of media businesses".¹ However, Rabbitte has also acknowledged the inadequacy of conventional micro-economic competition analysis metrics for assessing media

mergers, stressing the need to include criteria relating to the impact on pluralism of such mergers.

The clearly dominant group is Independent News and Media (INM) which was launched in 1973 by entrepreneur Tony O'Reilly with the purchase of the Irish Independent. Thomas Crosbie Holdings are the second largest private media group in Ireland, but it is significantly smaller than INM: in fact its turnover is less than 6% of that of INM. The Irish Times, the daily with the second largest circulation is unusual in that it is owned by a trust, a legal status established in 1974 to defend the paper against corporate takeovers. Notwithstanding the trust status of the Irish Times, the indigenous newspaper market is entirely commercial in its organization.

The kind of state-subsidies found in Scandinavian countries are thus unheard of in Ireland. Indeed, if one looks only at the indigenous market today, the position of Independent News and Media within the Irish market appears remarkably dominant. Figures indicate that it accounts for nearly 85% of all Sunday paper sales and nearly 50% of daily sales. However this overstates the influence of the group because it fails to take account of sales for Irish editions of UK newspapers.

The presence of UK-based players is also evident in the regional press. Until the mid-1990s, the regional press was - with the exception of approximately 10 titles owned by Independent News and Media - in the hands of a myriad of small (often family) firms. However, since 1995 there has been a flurry of take-over activity. As a result, as of 2010 every regional newspaper with a circulation in excess of 20,000 per week is now in the hands of a media group, the majority of which are UK-based.

Michael O'Keefe of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland and Alan Crosbie - Chairman of Thomas Crosbie Holdings Ltd., and Examiner Publications also spoke on the topic of media ownership. Michael O'Keefe gave a review of legislative framework regarding public interest aspects of media mergers and on proposed reform of aspects of competition law including media mergers, while Alan Crosbie spoke about the importance of have quality reporting from professional reporters. He highlighted that quality media costs money, and that it is dependant largely on ad revenue for its income stream - not an ideal situation, especially in an era of declining ad revenue. He concluded by calling for some of the broadcasting fee to be earmarked for subsidising flagging local and national press.

An off-hand remark of Crosbie's, that new media represented a threat to humanity, was widely circulated on-line within minutes of his making the remark. He was speaking about the lack of quality check on reporting in new media, and opined that the riots in England were (at least partially) the result of a new media generated phenomenon; a product of "information going from pillar to post without mediation without being edited, without a quality check". The context of his remark - ironically - was lost in cyberspace and his comment blown out of proportion.

Media Diversity: a condition of democracy?

A discussion on how important, or otherwise, media diversity is to a thriving democracy.

Three speakers spoke on how important or otherwise media diversity is to a thriving democracy: John Lloyd, *Financial Times* Contributing Editor, and feature writer; co-founder of Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and author of "What the media are doing to our politics, Dr. Karin Wahl-Jorgensen from the Cardiff University School of Journalism, and Senator John Whelan - former editor of the *Leinster Leader*.

John Lloyd spoke of how pluralism is not enough to guarantee media freedom, and the importance of that freedom to the spread of ideas.

More important than formal pluralism is the culture of journalism which the country has managed to create. The culture of journalism is very largely dependent on the political culture and the dimension of political freedom;

- On the power of the owners of the media, including the power of the state when it is an owner;
- On the reasons why the owners own media rather than a food processing plant or a furniture factory
- Or on the reasons why they own media as well as other interests.
- On the explicit and implicit bargain the management and the journalists in a publicly owned medium, usually a broadcaster, have with the state and the politicians

It is argued that in the US and in Germany, the high quality of many of the newspapers and magazines- such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington*

Post - depends on the fact that they are family owned and the families have through successive generations passed down a duty of public service through journalism, such as the Arnotts of the Irish Times, and Crosbie Holdings.

But the Murdochs are also a family company, with now the third generation, led by James Murdoch. So are the Northcliffes in the UK who own the Daily Mail and the Mail on Sunday; and they have different reasons for being media owners, which may include public service - they would certainly argue it did - but might have other more salient reasons, as, of course, making a profit but also seeking to maintain a strong right of centre politics in the country.

High quality journalism comes from media owned by trusts - as The Guardian in the UK and the FAZ in Germany. Both, especially the first, have been hit like all others by declining circulations and loss of advertising. Trusts are very good at protecting newspapers from the need to make a profit every year. However they are less good at providing the necessary resources to see newspapers through hard times.

But as families can produce both good and bad media, so can trusts. It is perfectly possible for a Trust to be formed which had as its ideal not to produce media in which - as its long-time editor C P Scott put it for The Guardian, comment would be free but facts, sacred - but which wished to convert its readership to racist beliefs, or some other such anti-enlightenment view.

Mostly, private owners want something out of their media: doing a public service is not enough. What they want includes

- a profit
- political influence
- to further the interests of other holdings
- to acquire status
- further the interests of the ruling party and the state
- to promote the interests of an opposition party
- to educate an audience
- to practise journalism in the public interest.

These can co-exist with good journalism. There is good journalism in much of the Murdoch media.

There is good journalism in the tabloids. And there was good journalism, including good investigative journalism, in the News of the World, which was closed by Murdoch as being too toxic to retain because of the severity of the public and political backlash against the Murdoch titles. Private, or at least non-state, ownership of newspapers has produced some tremendous pieces of journalism. Privately owned papers and broadcast channels have, without necessarily wishing it, have funded journalists to tell us a great deal about our society and our world and have done at least some of what they profess - to hold power to account, and to make the significant interesting.

Pluralism is spreading in TV. The financial success of Fox and MSNBC in the US means that polemical, politically engaged broadcasting is now a fixture. The DG of the BBC Mark Thomson said a year or so ago that he was persuaded it should come to the UK - so long as the BBC remained strong, with a mandate to remain balanced neutral and objective in it's news and current affairs coverage. In the international sphere, more and more engaged voices are becoming strong - as Al Jazeera, the Russian, Chinese and French global TV broadcasters, the regional, anti-American channel Telesur, the Iranian Press TV and others. Most of these break, sometimes very sharply, with the BBC/CNN balanced and neutral model, and are at an extreme simply propaganda. But they are plural.

Pluralism works best where there is a strong social and journalistic ethic which underpins the business model. The US has a strong journalistic ethic, even as it tolerates the huge power which money has over politics of a kind which we in these islands have not. Lloyd speculated that the ethic remains because newspapers were so important to America's foundation, both as a revolutionary colony ridding itself of the distant rule of the United Kingdom and as a federation of different post-colonial states forming themselves into a nation state.

In his Creation of the Media, Paul Starr showed that when European states were banning new sheets and demanding that they paid high stamp duties to price them out of the reach of the dangerous classes, the US subsidised newspapers being sent through the mails to aid the free circulation of news and opinion. There is much presently wrong with the US media but at its best, it retains that faith in the old hope; that the truth will set you free.

How do you get that ethic? It has to be imbued in the journalists and in those who have the higher duty of guiding and legislating for the state, the

politicians. In these islands we have a good deal of that, but as the News of the world affair shows us, not enough. Journalists in the British tabloids allowed themselves to have their craft prostituted by being lent to the creations of fiction, based on evidence either wholly lacking, made up - or, ironically, being very good evidence because it came from bugging private conversations. They and their editors lorded it over politicians, who allowed that to happen, taking ruthless advantage of politicians' need to reach audiences which they could no longer do through parties or mass meetings or movements, as the labour or nationalist movements.

Ethics can be taught, but above all they have to be practised. There has to be a belief that the truth CAN set you free because it can help you be a citizen in a free society. So what we need as much as pluralism is that faith. We now have a machine- the Net - which allows that faith to work as it never has before. The Net gives the possibility of pluralism so plural it is unknowable; gives so many sources of knowledge, so many different opinions, so many narratives of fact that we cannot begin to comprehend a tiny part of it. It also gives us horrors, lies and bilious prejudice; but we have to put up with much of that for the sake of the rest. The rest is the chance to put the ability of those able and willing to bear true witness to the world against those who, in the old media, could use wealth and political power to dominate the interpretation of news and the nature of opinion.

The net is destroying many of the present forms of the journalist's profession: the Irish Times is reportedly losing some 1m euros a month. But rather than keen over it; Lloyd suggests journalists examine "the possibility it offers us for the expansion of freedom through understanding and knowledge should regenerate our trade, as long as we, the journalists, are active in making it so". Lloyd concluded that pluralism should still be the focus of legislation for the present media; but in the future, the most important thing legislators can do for the media is to emulate the 18th century American founding fathers: by helping the many flowers to bloom, and to get around.

Dr Karin Wahl-Jorgensen took a slightly different view of matters. She felt it vital to consider media diversity from the perspective of citizens – to consider what kind of media diversity is important for citizenship to thrive, and what some of the contemporary challenges to this kind of diversity might be.

Dr. Wahl-Jorgensen first outlined the importance of a broad, vigorous and diverse set of media organisations to enable citizen participation in politics and

ensure the health of the public sphere. As we increasingly live our lives in and through the mass media, we also rely on them to learn about unfolding news events, to discuss and form opinions, and to hold our representatives accountable. The degree of media diversity— in terms of a broad range of media institutions and forms of ownership – matters hugely to citizens because it has a significant impact on the information sources available to them. The increasing concentration of ownership and the decline of the newspaper industry represent significant challenges in this regard.

Dr. Wahl-Jorgensen also suggested that media diversity also matters in a second, albeit related sense: It is vitally important that citizens are actually exposed to a wide diversity of information sources and opinions through the media.

There is a set of emerging and unprecedented challenges to media diversity as a result of technological change. In particular, citizens are increasingly getting and discussing their news online, in part through the online platforms of the conventional media they've always followed, but also increasingly through social media like Twitter and Facebook, and through the search engines and news aggregators of internet giants like Google and Yahoo.

Among Americans under 30, more than a third use social networking sites as their primary news source and the internet is now the most important news source across the American population. In the UK, young people's online news consumption has skyrocketed, especially since 2009, while newspaper readership among young people has gone down from 53% in 2001 to 38% today.

Rather than exposing citizens to a wider diversity of sources, however, Dr. Wahl-Jorgensen suggests that the increase in online news consumption actually has an adverse impact on the diversity of information and opinions that people are exposed to. She backed her assertion by showing first, how the internet is not a free marketplace of ideas where people can and will seek out meaningful sources of information and opportunities, but rather that people are most likely to seek out political information that agrees with their existing ideological preconceptions, and to discuss politics with like-minded individuals. Further, research has consistently found that those who are most politically active – whether this comes in the form of writing letters to the editor, volunteering for political causes, participating in online discussions – are also

those who have the most polarised, strongly held and unchangeable political views

This is perhaps not surprising, because people participate in politics precisely because they care and feel passionately about an issue. But it means that having a wide range of opportunities for participation does not necessarily guarantee a more varied set of voices in the public sphere. Rather, in all likelihood it results in the proliferation of the same voices that would otherwise assert themselves to represent polarised points of views – what scholars have referred to as the “polarisation” of the public sphere.

Further, given the possibilities for pursuing one’s own very specific interests – whether they relate to Japanese stone gardening, Justin Bieber, sky-diving, ice-fishing, or white supremacy, there is also a clear tendency towards the fragmentation of the public sphere. Increasingly specialised public forums come to function as the gathering places for like-minded individuals who share particular interests and convictions, esoteric or otherwise, but do not necessarily have the incentive, interest or energy to move beyond the comfort zone represented by those interests and convictions.

Dr. Wahl-Jorgensen then spoke about the further limitations placed on the diversity of information available to citizens online due to the “increasing sophistication of personalised algorithms”. Personalisation means that content and advertising can be targeted very specifically and immediately based on the precise demographics and interests of individual service users. Personalisation is a hugely attractive answer to the question of how to make a profit online by monetising eyeballs and clicks. But what it means is that for those who decide what websites to visit based on the results of major search engines and their news aggregators, as well as from news updates and timelines on social media like Facebook, will only get a very partial view of the world and the events and debates unfolding in it, based in large part on the preferences garnered on the basis of previous behaviour. Personalisation means, for example, that if two different people enter the exact same search terms into google, they’ll get very different answers depending on how they’ve behaved in the past. We are increasingly exposed primarily to what personalisation algorithms calculate that we are interested in and agree with. Or, to use Facebook language, that we like.

Dr. Wahl-Jorgensen referred to the American writer and activist Eli Pariser, who suggested that as a result of personalisation, we are all increasingly living

inside our very own “filter bubble” – our own unique information universe, through which we “receive mainly news that is pleasant, familiar and confirms our beliefs.” Past interests will “determine what we are exposed to in the future, leaving less room for the unexpected encounters that spark creativity, innovation and the democratic exchange of ideas”

It is ironic, perhaps, that in an age of the proliferation of information online we are less likely than ever before to encounter opinions and news items that conflict with our world views. The decline in media diversity understood in this sense means that we’re in danger of isolating ourselves in ideological echo chambers which are comfortable because they don’t challenge us, but detrimental to our democratic conversation.

Dr. Wahl-Jorgensen is pessimistic about the possibilities of reversing personalisation as it is “far too lucrative for the major new media players to entirely abandon these practices”. She feels that new media are unlikely to be the sole solution to the problems of media diversity and rather what is needed is the protection of media diversity in the original sense discussed and advocated: a diversity of strong national, regional, and local media, both print and broadcast, which offer audiences a variety of news, and leaves decisions about what information is necessary for democracy to function in the hands of journalists and editors.

She concludes that strong traditional media are of vital importance for the public sphere because they expose us to information about those large and small stories that may or may not matter to us as citizens; and opinions that may agree with or, potentially more importantly, challenge our world views and enlarge our horizons.

Senator John Whelan gave a highly engaging speech on the topic of media diversity from the perspective of a law-maker and former journalist, at times critical of certain aspects of current media outlets.

He asked if the first casualty of war is the truth, is the corollary that in a peacetime democracy the first casualty or at least one of the consequences the loss of robust journalism? This is even more the danger in a democracy in a downturn as many people tend to be watching their back and even more significantly for journalists in a recession – their job.

Senator Whelan offered 3 examples of instances where media diversity was challenged by internal and external forces. First he offered a copy of the Evening Herald from Thursday, October 20th 2011. The first 5 pages featured a scrape between Kerry Footballer Paul Galvin and comic Oliver Callan, buried on page 6 a report on the death of Colonel Gadaffi.

Our democracy, according to Senator Whelan, "is surely safe and truly in safe hands. We can sleep safe in our beds with the Evening Herald keeping a sharp eye out not for the Tsar of Russia - as did the Skibbereen Eagle - but for Paul Galvin".

Senator Whelan then commented a report on RTE television main evening news on Saturday, January 7th. Reported by the veteran broadcaster Cathy Halloran, it outlined how the Shannon faced the risk of being "destroyed" by plans to abstract water from the river to supply water to the Leinster region.

Senator Whelan's issue with the report was mainly that the state broadcaster gave 3 interviews to people opposing the project, but did not seek to include a single alternative statement or view.

He remarked that it was "not only shoddy and lazy journalism but partisan and biased and all the more serious as it is coming from the best resourced newsroom in the country, a news organisation with a public service broadcasting remit which is highly subsidised by the State"

He posed questions concerning the State broadcaster, noting that the Licence Fee is currently running in excess of the combined cost of the Household Charge and the Septic Tank Registration Charge, and asking could the value "the standards of journalism and what constitutes public service broadcasting on a TV channel that is also riddled with advert breaks, cheap imports and a raft of so called reality TV shows" first be assessed.

The question was not intended in an "antagonistic way" but in defence of the high standards RTE has brought in news and current affairs for decades from 7 Days, Today-Tonight and Prime Time. Senator Whelan particularly commended RTE Radio for its high standards and programme quality produced to the highest international standards; programming of the highest standard and diversity. He did not feel the same could always be said of RTE news with its "well-worn paths from Ballsbridge, to Brussels, Berlin, Bethlehem and Boston added to a daily diet from the Dáil". He further remarked that "RTE remains a

largely a news led organisation, feeding from and into the homogenous headlines of the day, seldom setting its own news agenda and even more seldom breaking its own news stories, as one would expect from the State broadcaster".

The 3rd instance Senator Whelan referred to in which media diversity was challenged, was personal experience of internal censorship over remarks he made on the Pat Kenny Radio Show on the prospects for the country's regional press, particularly the pressures posed on the sector by the economic downturn and the loss of advertising across its four main pillars in property, motoring, recruitment and retail.

He contributed what he felt was fair and constructive comment in the public interest to the effect that companies such as Johnston Press had paid exorbitant and excessive prices for titles at the height of the boom in 2006 (a reputed €128m, a price way and above all industry forecasts to outbid its rivals to secure the six titles in the Leinster Leader Group. In the spring/summer of 2009 they could not fetch offers of a fraction of what had been paid for them in 2006. Today it estimated that they would not reach €20m).

Senator Whelan's comments on that programme were allegedly to cost him an Editor's job within the Johnston group. At first he was informed that he had successfully applied for an Editor's position but the offer was subsequently withdrawn. He was later informed through back channels that that his comments on the Pat Kenny radio show had been deemed to be disloyal, sending out the wrong signal and bad for morale. To be denied an editorial position on these grounds, he thought, reflected badly on the prospects for free speech, free expression and protecting our democracy.

Senator Whelan feels that, like economic sovereignty, Ireland's media sovereignty is also at stake. Due to wholesale consolidation within the Regional Press, many household titles are no longer Irish owned and no longer printed in Naas, Kilkenny, Limerick and Portlaoise and "reporters are being turned into robo-hacks, forced into page make-up and compositing instead of concentrating on their primary function of journalism". Papers are production led rather than content driven, leading to a proliferation of cut-and-paste journalism where press releases are being topped and tailed to pass as a "poor substitute for real news reporting". Reporting in the regions is reverting to "remote-control journalism" giving a convenient but one sided account of public meetings with no journalists present. Important markings such as Circuit

Courts and Inquests, once "the bread and butter of the local paper" are going uncovered, unreported and unrecorded as regional newsrooms either don't have the resources or requisite skills to reach on matters of such public import.

With esteemed and long established regional titles struggling to retain readers and market penetration, now is the time for them to reassert their local identity, Senator Whelan feels. Instead, the industry pushes for economies of scale; a one-size fits all templates and a marked deterioration in authoritative and distinctive local content. In its place we get the generic and everyone can be a journalist it seems.

Senator Whelan concluded that "we may have more media now but in my view less information; more media but less journalism". In the absence of the traditional forces and legacy titles holding the line and standing fast for high standards there is a rush and a race to the bottom; a propensity to please and appease the popular course of the day; an opium of propaganda to pander to the masses. Finally, he asked was journalism to be the latest casualty of a democracy taken for granted in an era of light touch regulation, or would it fall to a Facebook generation, an army of Bloggers to fill the void and take to the barricades to protect our democratic principles of free speech and freedom of expression.

Murdoch Unmasked: Are the Moguls in Decline?

Brian Cathcart - a professor of Journalism and founder of "Hacked Off" - offered a cautionary tale of why Rupert Murdoch accumulated media, of the monopolising of popular content by Murdoch's empire which could easily have happened had the hacking scandal not emerged, and of what happens when politicians develop an unhealthy dependence on keeping media moguls happy.

Murdoch's media empire arguably peaked last summer, with the instigation of the well-documented Leveson inquiry into the News of the World hacking scandal. At the end of the first phase of the Leveson process, in the autumn, is Britain's next Communications Bill. It will incorporate what the government accepts of the inquiry's recommendations about the regulation of the press, and it will also reshape the legal framework for broadcasting and for communications in Britain generally. Cathcart feels, however, that every day makes "the high-minded enthusiasm of 2011" seem less realistic, every day brings an election closer and every day gives the press a chance to remind MPs of its "vindictive power".

He expects that between now and the autumn, News International and News Corporation will do everything in their considerable power to get the outcomes they want. That in public we will hear "a lot in public about a contrite organisation drawing lines and turning over new leaves", but "a great deal more about free markets and open competition", which is "Murdoch code for dismembering the BBC and clearing the way for Sky".

He expects we won't hear, but the politicians will, nagging reminders that Cameron leads a coalition government, that he is in tough economic times, that he needs all the help he can get in selling himself to the public. He observes that Ed Milliband is "relentlessly caricatured as an idiot, just as Neil Kinnock was" and that Cameron does not want that treatment.

On the topic of diversity, Cathcart notes that when we speak of media diversity we tend to assume that it has intrinsic merit, that several news organisations are inevitably better than one because commercial and professional rivalry will ensure that there is variety of content. He suggests that the operation of the British tabloid market demonstrates something rather different. Four companies "contrive to produce remarkably similar newspapers with remarkably similar attitudes and agendas". They may differ on some things — the Mirror still supports Labour and makes some defence of trade unionism — but across the bulk of their output they are really remarkably similar. He says to ask a Muslim, or a defendant, or a judge, or a celebrity, or a traveller, or a refugee, or a student protester, or anybody in need of welfare benefits, or any celebrity with an injunction, or anyone at the BBC; the cast of bogey-men is more or less the same whatever paper you pick up, just as the editorial style is pretty well the same.

He finds this sameness to be most potent and most sinister, however, when it comes to what is not written about. We like to think the media, he says, helps to keep society healthy by scrutiny, by watching the courts, by watching parliament, by watching big business and the public service. And we might like to think that they keep themselves healthy by watching and writing about each other. Reason suggests that in what is supposed to be a highly competitive environment they have a commercial interest in exposing each other's shortcomings but that nothing of the sort happens in Britain. For example, witness the reporting of the phone hacking scandal. The Murdoch press itself was either "silent or grossly partisan" on the subject, but the Daily Mail, the Daily Mirror and the Daily Express were little different. He points out that from the arrest of the phone hacker Clive Goodman in August 2006 to the exposure

of the hacking of Milly Dowler's phone in July 2011 — five years — the newspaper groups which control well over 80 per cent of national sales in Britain "conspired to conceal the whole affair from their readers". And, as the Leveson inquiry unfolds, they continue to present a picture of the evidence that is "so rosy it would be funny, if it were not so depressing". He observes that consequently, diversity of media ownership is important, but it is useless when there is uniformity of media culture.

However, Cathcart is hopeful of a lasting outcome from the Leveson inquiry for a number of reasons. Firstly, because Justice Leveson is himself aware of the history of the case, and is determined to leave a lasting mark. Secondly, Cathcart is hopeful because of the unprecedented level of engagement on the part of more than just lawyers, politicians and editors. Academics, NGOs, victims of press abuse, bloggers and a whole range of other interested parties have given evidence and are following the process closely. The implication being that the interests of the public, of the readers, and of the ordinary citizen with concerns about his or her human rights, are represented. Thirdly, the Leveson inquiry is different in that this is the first among all of those inquiries in which the mass-circulation press itself has not had control of the message. When the third Royal Commission sat in the 1970s, the press was still the dominant medium. What the public could learn of the deliberations, the debates and the findings — and of their consequences in parliament — tended to be filtered through the press. Now, however, things are different. Through the internet and broadcast news, and through papers such as the Guardian, Independent and the Financial Times, which are disgusted by what has happened, more people than ever before are able to see the evidence for themselves rather than having to rely on the "ludicrously spun" reporting of the Mail and other tabloids. In the modern debate about inadequate press ethics, the public is kept informed, not by the tabloid press, but despite it, which Cathcart feels can only be for the good.

Cathcart concludes that he does not think Murdoch is in decline. He thinks he is wounded and sore, but he is also repositioning himself, that his monopolistic tendencies and desire for domination are surely unaltered, and that his dynastic ambitions, tangled and problematic as they inevitably are, only seem to grow.

New Media, New Voices?

A panel discussion on the extent to which new media presents an alternative forum to traditional media for new voices to emerge, or just an additional strand to the traditional media mix.

Four speakers addressed the conference on the topic of new media - Suzy Byrne (aka Maman Poulet), Christine Bohan (editor of thejournal.ie), David Cochrane (founder of politics.ie) and Dr. Aphra Kerr, from the Department of Sociology in NUI Maynooth.

Of the four, only one submitted notes for publication - Dr. Kerr, whose presentation is focussed on in this section.

In her address, Dr. Kerr focussed on the alternative spaces which can be created in the new media, and also some of the limitations on these spaces.

Dr. Kerr suggests that new media are providing many alternative spaces for social, economic and political activities and discourses to emerge and in some cases for real action and change to develop but new media are not necessarily more democratic in themselves, nor are they necessarily making our media system more democratic. That is still open to investigation and debate.

Media theorists disagree on the implications too. Manuel Castells believes that we are seeing the development of a network society and Bill Dutton argues that a new form of social accountability is emerging in what he calls the 'Fifth Estate'. Both are enabled by the growing use of the Internet and related information and communication technologies (ICTs). This is being achieved in ways that can support greater accountability not only in government and politics, but also in other sectors.

For other theorists though, we are seeing new forms of surveillance and dataveillance; even greater commodification of our everyday lives and information and the development of new forms of inequality

Dr. Kerr cautioned about drawing too big a distinction between old media and new media players. Old media players are significant in the new media space and they, like new media players, are looking to see what new business models and media practices can be developed.

She pointed to three main issues need consideration in relation to new media diversity:

Firstly, the development of new dominant intermediaries and platforms especially in search and social networking, and how the owners of these platforms are able to control user behaviour and what they do with user data. Questions must be asked of what new kinds of power are emerging here, how transparent are they?

The Irish Data Commissioner investigated Facebook just before Christmas and Google are currently changing their privacy policies. These are being publicly discussed but media scholars are also looking at how twitter manipulates its trending algorithms and asking what are the implications for the emergence of these new 'curators' of content, who gets to be visible and who does not? Is this where the new ownership issues are emerging? Dr.Kerr argued that we need to apply the same criteria to investigate the ownership and potential impact of ownership on content to new media players as we did to legacy players.

Secondly, Dr.Kerr pointed to the development of new inequalities, and new literacies. She asked who uses new media in Ireland, how do they use them, who are the followers, re-tweeters and readers of online media? Are new media still the realm of the young and well educated – what kinds of media literacy programmes are in place to ensure that everyone can actually engage?

What is the ability of users to actually engage in what Manuel Castells calls 'mass self-communication', in creative production, to be literate in these new technologies – going beyond access issues to critical use issues – A Eurobarometer survey last year (No 359) with (26,500 respondents) = distinguished between digital natives (15-24 + students) and digital initiates. Around 94% of the 15-24 are using the Internet (EU 66%). 84% of them are using social networking sites and 73% of them are using websites to share pictures, videos, movies (EU 44%).

Ireland ranks highest in the EU for divulging information about what we do, where we go and what we like. Irish people with social media accounts are also noticeably more contactable online than the average European. So we trust online media more than other Europeans. IIA/Eurobarometer 2011

Other notable statistics include the proportion of Irish people who download games or other media (20%), who create content for sharing online (14%), who seek information about health (27%), who interact with government services online (27%)

Startlingly, 27% of Irish people have never used the internet.

A recent paper by Boyd and Hargittai found that skill and experience were crucial when it came to confidence with privacy settings and SNS use. Consideration needs to be given to how 'critical' our new media use is, how competent people are at adjusting their privacy settings, identifying cookies and recognizing personalization. How do we move from active users to engaged and critical users of new media? How do we become what Henry Jenkins calls 'participative' audiences and what happens to those who don't, the non-users?

Thirdly, Dr.Kerr turned to the cultural diversity of our media content.

She noted there has been much discussion about the importance of diversity of content – of opinions, views. The diversity of main concern remains the actual information, language, and ideas communicated through the medium, and the cultural diversity of our media content.

A case which highlights the failure of standards in legacy media in relation to cultural diversity came to attention recently - the story of the Polish emigrant to Ireland 'Magda'. Her story appeared in the Irish Independent translated from a Polish newspaper. What appears to have happened is a case of poor translation, circulation in mainstream media and then of various senators and others commenting negatively on radio and twitter almost immediately. The story was untrue, or at least grossly exaggerated, but through it the ability of new media to amplify a story quickly, regardless of the accuracy of the original story is evident.

Such reporting of Polish people living in Ireland is not too common. Dr. Kerr noted that in focus groups with Polish migrants she conducted for a report on broadcasting and cultural diversity for the BAI in 2010, they found that Poles felt they were rarely reported on and when it happened it was generally fair and accurate. Nevertheless they recommended that there was a need to pay attention to basic questions of accuracy, fairness and the spectrum of mediated perspectives in programming for, and about, migrants.

For the same report they found in focus groups with migrants that they engaged with Irish media relationally and that Irish news and current affairs was evaluated in terms of other international news sources. The scope of Irish national and local news and current affairs coverage in particular was seen as limited by migrants and the dominant Anglo-American and Anglophone orientation of television in Ireland was remarked upon and criticized as well as its parochialism.

It also emerged that websites and new media presented an unexplored opportunity for increased contact, input and potentially targeted services for migrant audiences. They were extensive mobile phone and internet users, which they used to access national and international media content.

The report recommended that Irish media outlets work with and hire migrant/minority media expertise in making the idea of cultural diversity across content and in institutions meaningful.

Dr. Kerr concluded by saying that when discussing new media it is key to give consideration to the structure and power of new media intermediaries as 'curators' of content, to the profile, skills and competencies of new media users in Ireland (not forgetting non-users) and to the pressures and limits of/on old and new media workers – including skills, languages, technologies, working conditions, and whether or not they held a contract –when talking about media diversity.

Round-up of the event

Though many different and interesting perspectives on the topic of media diversity emerged during the course of the day, all contributors to the conference - including the Minister for Communications Pat Rabbitte - were agreed on the importance of media to a healthy functioning democracy.

Some contributors were optimistic about the future of print and broadcast media in Ireland, others less so. Most agreed that the sectors were facing unprecedented challenges - both cultural and existential.

Existential challenges included declining circulation, a collapse of revenue streams generated through advertising in pre-recessionary times, the porous

nature of the Irish media market, a lack of state-support and, arguably, the rise of social and new media which provides news and information for free.

Cultural challenges included a rise of "copy and paste" journalism, questions over ethics, questions of ethnocentrism, questions of the rising polemical style of journalism vs. the objective approach, the need to balance economic concerns with ones of public service, the need to retain one's job in recessionary times, the convergence of ownership and the personal agendas of the business people buying media outlets.

Equally, some contributors were optimistic about the contribution new media can bring to ensuring diversity, highlighting the role it plays in the Leveson inquiry by helping interested citizens by-pass potentially biased traditional media sources for their information, and the possibilities it offers to engage people on various topics. For his part, Minister Rabbitte referred to its democratised nature - devolving power to the level of the citizen.

Others raised legitimate concerns about access to new media and problems around literacy, its immediacy and lack of quality control, and problems around personalised algorithms or "filter bubbles" which, rather than widen the citizen's possibility of encountering a diversity of voices, would rather reflect their own personal preferences back to them. There was some lively disagreement over whether anyone with a smart phone could be a journalist, or whether something more was required to truly warrant the term.

On the topic of media ownership, as one observer rightly pointed out, ownership does not automatically equate to control of the media. In the case of Murdoch, Berlusconi and other media moguls, however, it may well equate to control of politicians. There were a number of detailed contributions on concern over media ownership warranted attempts to regulate for the convergence of media ownership, including discussions on developments in the European Parliament and Commission.

However, it was observed that while the Commission can sponsor studies and make recommendations, it is up to the member states to implement these. Previous recommendations have met a lukewarm welcome at best and there is little to suggest this will change anytime soon. It is important that these issues be addressed at national level too, and as such Minister Rabbitte's forthcoming legislation on media mergers is timely.