



Transforming Ireland's Public Service Media: Dawning of a Turnaround Journey for RTÉ

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Abstract. This case study examines the change underway at RTÉ, Ireland's public service media organisation in their drive for sustainability. RTÉ relentlessly embraces the need to re-invigorate themselves in a digitally enabled world where information is delivered on increasingly diverse platforms and from increasingly diverse sources. RTÉ is tasked with providing media services to the Irish public as well as surviving in a constantly changing and increasingly competitive environment. Against a difficult financial backdrop, RTÉ faces significant challenges, primarily to set direction and renew the organisation towards satisfying the diverse range of customer needs in a sustainable manner.

Keywords: broadcast, digitalisation, public service media, sustainability, technology, transformation, turnaround.

1. History of RTÉ

Humble Beginnings

On the 1st January 1926, 2RN² began broadcasting radio from a studio office situated at 36 Little Denmark Street in Dublin³. Ireland was one of the first countries to adopt radio transmission, making Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) one of the oldest operating public service broadcasters⁴ (PSBs) in the world today⁵. The early content was comprised mainly of live music, with little emphasis placed on speech-based programming. A second studio was opened in 1927, located in County Cork, to provide broadcasting services to the South West region of Ireland. 2RN's coverage of the International Eucharistic Congress in 1932, with

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 2. 2RN is understood to mean 'To Erin' or 'To Ireland'.
 3. See Reference: RTÉ Archives (2020a)
 4. Public service broadcasting involves television, radio and other electronic media.
 5. See Reference: RTÉ Archives (2020b)

help from the then new 60-kilowatt transmitter installed in the town of Athlone⁶, a centre point in Ireland's geographical topography, was the largest event in the formative years of Irish radio. Although the 1940s were showcased with many technological advancements, it was a testing time for RTÉ. Censorship initiatives were rigorously enforced under the Emergency Powers act during World War II⁷.

Progression to TV

Ireland was slow in comparison to neighbouring countries to establish a television service due to government constraints and it was not until the late 1950s that preparations began for the introduction of a television service⁸. On the 3rd October 1960, the Radio Éireann Authority signed a contract for the construction of a television centre on a 25-acre site in Donnybrook⁹, a district of Dublin, and this remains the home of RTÉ today. Teilifís Éireann first broadcast on New Year's Eve in 1961, and in 1966 Radio Éireann and Teilifís Éireann were given a new corporate identity that would encompass the combined radio and television entities that are better known today as RTÉ¹⁰.

Irish Public Broadcasting

RTÉ, along with the media industry more generally, continued growing through the next few decades especially with the introduction of colour broadcasting in 1969¹¹. The first external event broadcasts were transmitted in colour¹² for the 1971 Eurovision Song Contest¹³ and the 1971 Railway Cup Finals¹⁴. The 1970s also saw the launch of two new radio stations¹⁵ coupled with the introduction of frequency modulation¹⁶. RTÉ's coverage of major public events such as the Papal visit of 1979 highlighted the significance of RTÉ within Irish culture.

Recent Developments

Throughout the 1990s, RTÉ began to look beyond the two traditional broadcasting platforms of television and radio to reach a larger audience. The rise of the internet and development of computing capabilities enabled RTÉ to provide online services to reach audiences outside of Ireland. The new

6. See Reference: RTÉ Archives (2020c)

7. See Reference: RTÉ Archives (2020d)

8. See Reference: RTÉ Archives (2020e)

9. See Reference: Bowman (2011)

10. See Reference: RTÉ Archives (2020f)

11. See Reference: RTÉ Archives (2012)

12. See Reference: Bowman (2011)

13. An annual international song competition, with participants representing primarily European countries.

14. The GAA Interprovincial Championship or Railway Cup is the name of two annual Gaelic football and hurling competitions held between the provinces of Ireland.

15. See Reference: RTÉ Archives (2020g)

16. In telecommunications and signal processing, frequency modulation (FM) is the encoding of information in a carrier wave by varying the instantaneous frequency of the wave.

millennium saw the closure of the last medium wave transmitter¹⁷ and the introduction of High Definition Television¹⁸. On 21st April 2009, RTÉ launched their catch-up web TV¹⁹ service called the 'RTÉ Player'²⁰. The year 2012 marked the cessation of analogue television across Europe which had served for generations²¹. This welcomed the implementation of digital television. Rather fittingly, 2012 also marked the 50th anniversary of Irish television²² which saw the launch of TV50 in recognition of the occasion.

Funding RTÉ

RTÉ operations are funded by two key sources of income, the television (TV) licence fee and commercial revenue stemming mainly from advertising activities. The TV licence fee is collected on behalf of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment by An Post (Irish postal service). TV licence fee receipts are distributed by the Department which pays An Post commission in respect of the TV Licence collection activities undertaken in its role as the government department's collection agent. In addition, 7% of the total revenue net of An Post's commission is paid to the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland for the operation of the Broadcasting Funding Scheme. All remaining TV license revenues are directed to RTÉ. The sum of €221M was collected by An Post in TV licence fee income in 2018. Of this, 86.1% or €189.1M was directed to part fund RTÉ operational costs²³. The activities associated with the provision of TV and radio services by RTÉ are primarily of a public service nature. However, the associated costs for providing these services exceed the income received by RTÉ from the TV licence fee alone. Therefore, it is necessary for RTÉ to generate additional revenue streams, mainly in the form of commercial advertising and sponsorship, in order to cover the funding gap between TV licence fee income and the higher cost of operational activities. Effectively, the TV licence fee is legislated for by the Irish Government under the Broadcasting Act 2009. An Post is required by law to provide certain services in relation to TV licenses on behalf of the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment including the collection of TV licence fee income²⁴.

17. See Reference: RTÉ Archives (2020h)

18. A television broadcasting system that provides a higher resolution resulting in better image quality.

19. See Reference: RTÉ Entertainment (2009)

20. RTÉ Player is an on-demand video service provided by RTÉ. The service provides content which had previously aired across RTÉ Television, the service also offers content exclusive to the player and content from other international broadcasters.

21. See Reference: Pope (2012)

22. See Reference: RTÉ Entertainment (2011)

23. See Reference: RTÉ (2020)

24. See Reference: Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (2009)

2. An Ever-Changing Industry

Importance of Public Service Broadcasters

Since public service broadcasting was introduced in 1926, radio and television have become an essential part of Irish life and RTÉ is the cornerstone of Irish Public Broadcasting. RTÉ have a long and proud history of delivering trusted news, Irish cultural programmes and distinctive content. Having a strong and diverse PSB is essential to the well-being of Irish society and Europe as a whole²⁵. It ensures that Irish people have access to political and social commentary, entertainment and indigenous home-grown content. PSBs are the lifeblood of not just the elderly, but also the young as they serve to inform society, to communicate news and to act as a tool for education. RTÉ captures the essence of Ireland's cultural heritage and features strongly in many of the nation's homes. Due to technological advancements, the role that PSBs play within society is presently under threat. The European Broadcasting Union (EBU) have launched a campaign called 'KEEP MEDIA GOOD'²⁶ which unites PSBs across Europe to demonstrate the positive impact that public service media has on societies²⁷. RTÉ has supported this campaign since its launch in November 2017.

Ireland's Media Climate Today

A strong media sector is integral to a thriving and creative economy both in Ireland and globally. Today's media sector is comprised of a broad ecosystem of Public Service Media Organisations, Pay-TV providers (Virgin Media, BT, and Sky, etc.) and online global services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. Digitalisation has affected the media landscape in recent years. Television seems to be on the verge of both decline and rebirth (reengineered lifecycle) and a vast range of services are now being offered to consumers in Ireland. This, combined with convergence on a global scale, has led to increased market segmentation and competitiveness²⁸. With the PSB having been originally founded in the more stable cultural and political conditions of the 20th century, they are facing a range of pressures due to the rampant technological developments that have significantly disrupted the value chain²⁹. These developments have opened up new markets and have given more power to the consumer. Consequently, existing PSBs are fundamentally challenged. Television is no longer an autonomous industry. The most significant development in the media value chain is the emergence of over-the-top (OTT) distribution which has given rise to direct-to-consumer (DTC) services³⁰.

25. See Reference: European Broadcasting Union (2019)

26. KEEP MEDIA GOOD | A European Broadcasting Union initiative in association with RTÉ, TG4 (Ireland), RAI (Italy), France Télévisions, RTP (Portugal), RTBF (Belgium), TVE (Spain), LTV (Latvia), RTVSLO (Slovenia).

27. See Reference: European Broadcasting Union (2017)

28. See Reference: RTÉ (2017a)

29. See Reference: Dáil Éireann Debate (2018)

With the proliferation of platforms such as Amazon Prime, Netflix, Apple TV and YouTube, one could take the view that televisions are now simply audio-visual retail outlets that engage with and respond to consumer tastes and demands³¹. Today, content is undeniably of critical importance and control is moving almost entirely towards the consumer. The individual has less of a stake in broadcaster loyalty than ever before as a result of being faced with more content choice that is specific to individual interest. In a sense, the industry is moving towards ‘narrowcasting’³² rather than broadcasting.

Due to increased broadband connectivity, OTT services provide new ways to distribute and monetise content³³. In 2008 just 63% of homes had access to broadband, in 2014 that percentage had increased to 82% and broadband is expected to be available to 90% of the population by 2024³⁴. The increased connectivity offers new distribution opportunities and provides the consumer with more choice and greater access to content.

Role of RTÉ in New Digital Media Climate

Despite RTÉ’s strong connection with the public and the entertaining and informative role that it plays within Irish life, its sustainability is being challenged like never before. Journalism is at the heart of Irish media and according to Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018, RTÉ TV news is still showing its dominance by being the most consumed offline news brand by far³⁵. Also, RTÉ News online portal is the second most consumed online news brand, trailing the thejournal.ie by only 1%³⁶.

The need for a strong, impartial, independent and credible national broadcaster is of the utmost importance in today’s world of misinformation³⁷ and ‘fake news’³⁸. This is mirrored in the statistics for 2018 where RTÉ has the highest credibility rating in Ireland amongst news sources with a score of 7.39/10. The statistics also show that the use of social media and messaging for news is decreasing³⁹.

Although the traditional patterns of media consumption remain very strong, consumer behaviour is undoubtedly shifting⁴⁰. The increased broadband

30. See Reference: RTÉ (2017a)

31. See Reference: Fry (2011)

32. Also referred to as ‘niche marketing’ or ‘target marketing’, narrowcasting entails directing media messages at specific segments of the public defined by values, preferences, and demographic attributes. Narrowcasting is based on the postmodern idea that mass audiences do not exist.

33. See Reference: RTÉ (2017a)

34. See Reference: Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (2020)

35. See Reference: Newman et al (2019)

36. Ibid.

37. See Reference: Dáil Éireann debate (2018)

38. Fake news is a form of news consisting of intentional disinformation or hoaxes distributed via traditional news media or online social media. Digital news has increased the usage of fake news, sometimes referred to as ‘yellow journalism’.

39. See Reference: Newman et al (2019)

availability and the continuous developments in digital devices indicates that the pace of change for RTÉ must surely increase. It was found that that adults aged 55+ were responsible for most of the TV viewing in Ireland in 2018⁴¹. Adults aged between 15–24-years made up the least number of minutes per day with children following closely behind.

RTÉ is now regarded as a Public Service Media Organisation⁴², as opposed to the outdated term of Public Service Broadcaster⁴³. To keep up with the ever-changing industry, RTÉ is beginning to prioritise the transformational challenges it will face in the future in order to renew themselves towards a viable and in-demand media organisation suited to serving all generational needs. RTÉ aims to build a sustainable model for the future by continuing to produce original content targeted towards new distribution channels driven by a deep understanding of customer needs⁴⁴.

3. RTÉ

Need for Change

In 2016, RTÉ found themselves facing the pivotal dilemma of reimagining the appropriate mix of structure and financing to effectively provide and deliver public service media. RTÉ wanted to capitalise on its strong reputation held within society. RTÉ had recognised the need for change and it started with the appointment of a new Director-General⁴⁵, Dee Forbes, who secured the pivotal role with complete responsibility for leading RTÉ's transformation⁴⁶.

Up to 2016, a County Cork⁴⁷ native named Dee Forbes had amassed 27 years of experience working within the broadcasting industry. At that time, she was the President and Managing Director of Discovery Networks Northern Europe and based in London⁴⁸. There, Forbes led a region that broadcast to over 276 million households each month. Before Discovery, she led the Turner Broadcasting business responsible for the UK and Ireland region, which comprised of seven entertainment channels, including TCM and the Cartoon Network.

40. See Reference: RTÉ (2017a)

41. See Reference: TAM Ireland (2019)

42. Public Service Media Broadcasters are most often established by law but remain non-partisan. They are usually an independent entity that is operated for the benefit of society as a whole.

43. See Reference: RTÉ (2018a)

44. See Reference: RTÉ (2017b)

45. Director-General is a senior executive officer. In a corporate sense, the equivalent position is often that of Chief Executive Officer. The position of Director-General is more commonly associated with Government, Public Sector, Statutory, Non-Government (NGO) or Not-for-Profit organisations.

46. See Reference: RTÉ (2016)

47. County Cork is a county in Ireland; it is the largest and southernmost county of Ireland.

48. See Reference: Linehan (2016)

Before 2016, RTÉ had not appointed an external Director-General in almost 50 years and had never appointed a female to the role in its entire history. It seemed that by appointing Forbes to the position, this matched with RTÉ's renewed ambition of capitalising on their wealth of experience and complementing this with proven executive talent and ability leading at the helm.

‘One RTÉ’

In the midst of a challenging financial situation, Forbes and RTÉ introduced a radically different organisational structure. The strategic initiative, named ‘One RTÉ’, was launched in March 2017⁴⁹. It was designed to increase efficiency within RTÉ towards having a greater impact with its audiences. Part of the structural change included the introduction of new members to the executive team⁵⁰: Adrian Lynch as the Director of Audience, Channels, and Marketing; Eimear Cusack as the Director of Human Resources; and Jon Williams as the Director of News and Current Affairs. The introduction of Adrian Lynch's role and a content division were the first steps in RTÉ's new strategic vision of prioritising their audience and positioning consumers at the centre of all future planning. In terms of strategic planning and setting future direction, in 2019 Rory Coveney became director of strategy and was appointed to the board.

This change to the organisational structure at RTÉ has marked the beginning of a cost-cutting era⁵¹ which included the introduction of a voluntary exit programme. In December 2017, 84 staff members left during the first round of departures from this scheme. This resulted in a 5% reduction in RTÉ's overall employee headcount when compared to 2016⁵². Overall, RTÉ aim to reduce the employee levels by 200 – 300 in an effort to become more economically sustainable⁵³.

RTÉ made a strategic choice to release economic value from underutilised property. In March 2017, RTÉ sold 8.64 acres of underutilised land in Donnybrook for €107.5M. Overall, RTÉ reduced their operating costs by 2.5% in 2017⁵⁴. A provision of €29.6M was put in place for the overall restructuring of RTÉ, this included mainly the provisions made for retirement and early redundancy options.

The Transpersonal Leader

RTÉ were aware that digital transformation was necessary in order to achieve sustainability. Recruiting an external Director-General was deemed appropriately suitable. Forbes' many years of experience within the industry and a fresh outlook

49. See Reference: RTÉ (2018a)

50. See Reference: RTÉ (2019)

51. See Reference: Slattery (2017)

52. See Reference: RTÉ (2018a)

53. See Reference: Slattery (2018a)

54. See Reference: RTÉ (2018a)

has allowed her to implement significant change since her arrival at RTÉ. The challenges to be addressed can be summarised as follows: global challenges, changing audiences, real transformation, real challenges and government responsibility. Since Forbes was appointed to the role, she immediately altered the mission and vision of RTÉ and transformed the organisational culture of the company. Both the organisation's mission and vision were changed to orientate a strong consumer focus⁵⁵. Forbes has placed significant emphasis on creating value for the customer as it is part of RTÉ's duty to do so as the primary public service media organisation in Ireland. Essentially, the organisation strongly aspires to evolve, enhance, and modify all aspects of structure along with transforming the style, design and distribution of media content by embracing an outward-looking orientation and to act creatively in approach⁵⁶.

There are many and varied challenges related to digitally transforming an organisation. Forbes believed that if RTÉ acted with the customer in mind, many of the obstacles could be overcome. RTÉ had to become highly adaptive and responsive to change. Forbes is hoping to establish a reciprocal relationship between the public and RTÉ, as this features strongly under the 'One' strategy and forms part of the organisation's remit to provide and deliver reciprocal value.

Operating in a financially testing environment, Forbes managed to free up capital by selling underutilised land in order to make significant investments in new technology and key digital production and distribution infrastructure. Drawing on the words of Paul Polman, Forbes has made it her purpose by way of leadership enactment whereby "doing these harder right things [rather than] the easier wrong"⁵⁷ things. This was evident with Forbes recognising that voluntary staff redundancy was a preferable option for RTÉ to cut costs, as staff related costs represented a large proportion of RTÉ's total expenditure. Forbes' introduction of a new Audience, Channels and Marketing division and a new Content division had again been designed to prioritise the consumers of RTÉ entertainment. Along-side, Forbes integrated all operational units in an attempt to streamline RTÉ's production processes.

Although Forbes has a lot of experience within the broadcasting sector, she does not have such experience within the public sector. Strategic fit is not purely based on whether or not RTÉ's strategy fits the opportunities and threats of the media industry, but also partially depends upon whether RTÉ's strategic aims attract the support and financial resources of the Irish government⁵⁸.

Director-General Forbes' approach to leading change strongly emphasised the need to place the customer first vis-à-vis strategic change. Forbes recognised the importance of the customer to RTÉ and is attempting to capitalise on RTÉ's history and good connection with Irish society at large.

55. See Reference: RTÉ (2018a)

56. Ibid.

57. See Reference: Johnson et al (2017)

58. See Reference: Alford (2001)

Forbes is aware that the support of the government is vital to RTÉ, especially regarding funding. She understands that the government can strongly influence RTÉ's strategy. She believes that a positive and strong relationship with the Irish public will have an impact on how the government looks to support RTÉ financially. As each government tends to be short-term focused and changes every 4-5 years, Forbes has tried to instil the potential long-term impacts that a lack of funding would lead to. To offset this, Forbes has constantly sought opportunities to make financial improvements and has highlighted the critical need for this to continue.

4. Financial Situation

At a Crossroads

In the words of Dee Forbes, RTÉ must “re-imagine public service media so that it works for everyone, and engages everyone, wherever they are and however they consume”⁵⁹. In order to achieve this RTÉ must continue to do what they have always been charged to do – produce quality content. They have prioritised a move towards digitalisation to achieve sustainability in this highly competitive industry. Thus, their financial situation has an extremely important role to play as it can act as either an enabler or constraint in delivering on its strategic goals and aims. In 2018, RTÉ advised the government of their worrying financial position⁶⁰. Forbes also added that although “it may appear to some that RTÉ has plenty of money”, the organisation is in desperate need of a modern source of funding that encompasses non-traditional media⁶¹.

RTÉ's Funding Model

RTÉ is a dual-funded organisation, meaning that they are reliant on both public funding and commercial revenue in order to deliver effectively well on its purpose and strategic aims⁶². However, the cost of RTÉ's public service activities is significantly in excess of the amount of public funding it receives from licensing fee revenue, which has put significant pressure on RTÉ to produce commercial revenue in recent years.

RTÉ reported an operating deficit of €6.4M in 2017 (excluding exceptional items)⁶³. This was a substantial reduction when compared to the previous year with a deficit of €19.4M reported in 2016⁶⁴. RTÉ have reported a financial deficit in six of the last nine years⁶⁵. Commercial revenue has fallen by €7M from 2016

59. See Reference: RTÉ (2018a)

60. See Reference: Bardon (2018)

61. See Reference: Ni Aodha (2018)

62. See Reference: RTÉ (2018b)

63. See Reference: Bardon (2018)

64. See Reference: RTÉ (2018a)

65. See Reference: Slattery (2018b)

to 2017. TV advertising and sponsorship remained the largest source of commercial income for RTÉ in 2017. This represented 57% of RTÉ's total commercial revenue⁶⁶. However, this shows a 12% decrease when compared to 2016, highlighting a potential shift away from traditional television advertising. Some of the shortfall in commercial revenues were attributed to the ongoing uncertainty associated with BREXIT⁶⁷ negotiations.

The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) acts as the independent regulator of broadcasting in Ireland. One of their functions is to review the performance of RTÉ "on the adequacy or otherwise of the public funding available to PSBs to meet their public services objectives"⁶⁸. Based on the BAI's review of RTÉ's 5-year strategic plan for 2018-2022⁶⁹, they have suggested that for RTÉ to achieve sustainability in the future they will need to generate (by way of receipt) an additional €30M per annum. The BAI also highlighted the urgency of this funding. RTÉ have requested extra funding from Government in the past but to no avail. However, under Forbes, RTÉ was allocated a 4% increase in funding for 2019⁷⁰. This included additional funding of €8.6M as a result of the Government Budget 2019. Forbes stipulated that without this funding, it would be a struggle to deliver upon RTÉ's strategic plan and organisational goals⁷¹.

TV Licencing Fee Payment and Evasion

RTÉ receive ca. 85% of all monies generated from television licence income collected in Ireland. A serious issue for RTÉ is licence fee evasion. For 2018 it was estimated that the TV licence fee evasion rate in Ireland was 14%, which has significant implications for RTÉ's survival⁷². Consequently, the loss of revenue vis-à-vis licence fee evasion is estimated to stand at ca. €32M annually. Ireland currently has the highest evasion rate in Europe with the next highest being the United Kingdom at 7%, with the likes of Germany being only 2%⁷³.

The possibility of new revenue streams are options that could be investigated as many households are rapidly moving towards online streaming via smart phones, laptops or personal computers which do not incur the annual TV licence fee. The TV licence fee mechanism is becoming a weaker index of those who consume public service media. It is for this reason that the mechanism is being changed in other countries to a media content charge, rather than being service dependent⁷⁴. Ireland aims to introduce a media content charge in 2024 to replace

66. See Reference: RTÉ (2018a)

67. Brexit is the withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU). Following a June 2016 referendum, in which 51.9% voted to leave, the UK government formally announced the country's withdrawal in March 2017, starting a process that is currently *due* to conclude with the UK withdrawing no later than 31 January 2020.

68. See Reference: Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (2019)

69. See Reference: Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (2018)

70. See Reference: Slattery (2018c)

71. See Reference: Slattery (2018b)

72. See Reference: Ni Aodha (2019)

73. See Reference: European Broadcasting Union (2018)

the traditional licence fee mechanism albeit some level of public resistance is anticipated⁷⁵.

The TV licence fee in Ireland currently costs €160, and 1,027,596 TV licence fees were purchased in 2017⁷⁶. If you take €31 from each of these licences bought you get a total of ca. €31.8M – the estimated amount lost annually to RTÉ's funding. Therefore, one could argue that every citizen who pays their licence fee in Ireland is essentially paying €31 to subsidise those who do not. This is a surprising statistic, alluding to the fact that for every 4 licences bought, a fifth is subsidised.

Over some years, the Irish TV licence fee has not increased to account for inflation rises⁷⁷. To consider the UK in comparison, the licence fee was increased in 2018 in line with inflation by £3.50. Furthermore, this follows a £1.50 increase in 2017. If the Irish licensing system had increased in line with inflation, today it would cost €175 according to Forbes⁷⁸, and would generate an extra €15M for funding public media content development and distribution.

5. RTÉ's Plan for the Future

Looking Ahead

RTÉ has long had dominant control over the Irish market. In order to continue to be a dominant force, RTÉ need a detailed strategic vision and plan that they can implement over the coming years. Director-General Forbes' first strategic report outlined the need "to ensure public service content and values remain central to the lives of Irish people as they adapt to new media technologies"⁷⁹. RTÉ's primary focus is concerned with providing quality content to Irish citizens. Therefore, technological advancements should be capitalised on in support of future growth and development. In the modern era, a focus on digitalisation will allow content to be provided for Irish citizens not just in Ireland, but also to the vast number of Irish people living overseas. The sale of land in Donnybrook has allowed for more investment in technology and infrastructure, but this is merely the beginning of a new strategic direction implemented by RTÉ's executive team. Part of this investment goes towards a Digital Lab, a short-term production unit, which according to Forbes "will create fresh new online content for a newly designed RTÉ player and other online and social media services"⁸⁰. This Digital Lab will allow RTÉ to create a variety of content through long form digital series, bite size videos and facilitate future work on Virtual Reality experiences. The

74. Ibid.

75. See Reference: Horgan-Jones (2019)

76. See Reference: Finn (2018)

77. See Reference: Slattery (2018d)

78. Ibid.

79. See Reference: RTÉ (2017b)

80. See Reference: RTÉ (2017b)

importance of digitalisation is reflected in RTÉ's statement of strategy as they aim to "become a truly multi-media organisation that embraces new technologies to provide new and better services and reach out to new audiences"⁸¹.

The improvements made by way of communications infrastructure and the decrease in data costs have provided consumers with more options in the way they consume content. This is reflected in the way the average Irish user consumes RTÉ media in a digitalised world, with mobile phones being the most used device for internet usage. It has even been reported that Irish people are the biggest phone internet users in the western world⁸². This places higher emphasis on the need for RTÉ to further enhance their online services to keep up with this dynamic landscape.

Social media usage in Ireland also ranks among the highest in the world⁸³. Therefore, creating an online presence will have to encapsulate not just the RTÉ Player, but also various social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Audience reach is considered a key metric for success by RTÉ's leadership team. Thus, developing well run social media platforms could serve to increase audience reach drastically.

The switch from analogue to digital transmission only marked the beginning of RTÉ's transformation in the digital era. The way people consume media has changed drastically and will continue to do so. To further complicate matters, current data on Irish TV viewing indicates that live (i.e. real-time viewing of broadcast programming) viewing – which is critical for advertising revenue – remains very strong with 86% of TV in Ireland being watched in real-time (versus recorded broadcasting for later viewing) in 2018⁸⁴, mostly among the older demographic. This creates a complicated dynamic whereby Irish adults still consume a vast amount of TV, while the younger audience has moved to different platforms. For RTÉ, this means that they will need to expand their online presence while continuing to deliver quality content for TV and radio if they wish to interact with all audience segments in Ireland and beyond.

Uncertain Future

Given RTÉ's somewhat challenging financial situation, they will face sizable obstacles to sustain the business into the future if there is no change to the public funding model. RTÉ have vowed to place their customers at the heart of their strategy going forward and continue to urge the government to provide more funding in order to continue to serve the Irish people effectively well in a fast-changing media landscape.

If innovative, cutting edge, new and home-grown programming is not sufficiently funded, the nation's population will suffer as a consequence. The

81. Ibid.

82. See Reference: Weckler (2015)

83. Ibid.

84. See Reference: TAM Ireland (2019)

cost-cutting has indeed started at RTÉ but unlike some mass production industries, the organisation cannot simply scale up the machinery and produce good quality content in perpetuity. All content needs to be developed, tested, relationships need to be formed and some failure is expected. The majority of Irish programming is made or commissioned by RTÉ, and they play a vital role in growing Irish talent and supporting the independent production sector too.

Director-General Forbes has initiated RTÉ's transformation towards a more digitalised organisation but there remains a long way to go. RTÉ may have achieved a profit in 2017 due to the sale of property, but this was an isolated event. Only so much cost-cutting can be enacted by RTÉ when strong emphasis is being placed upon creating quality content available for distribution via new channels. Funding, and putting the public audience first, are vital for RTÉ to continue to serve the needs of its national and international customer base.

A quote from Stephen Fry when talking about the importance of the BBC⁸⁵ is very relevant today with respect to the future of RTÉ⁸⁶:

"You know when you visit another country and you see that it spends more money on flowers for its roundabouts than we do, and you think why don't we do that? How pretty. How pleasing. What a difference it makes. To spend money for the public good in a way that enriches, gives pleasure, improves the quality of life that is something. That is a real achievement. It's only flowers in a roundabout, but how wonderful. Well, we have the equivalent of flowers in the roundabout times a million: [RTÉ] enriches the country in ways we will only discover when it has gone and it is too late to build it up again. We actually can afford [RTÉ], because we can't afford not to."

RTÉ enriches the country but it must overcome the structural and financial challenges it faces. Without it, the potential of a post-truth dystopia is something Irish society could face⁸⁷. The 'past is alive in the present'⁸⁸ and the present will shape what the future becomes.

85. BBC is an abbreviation for the British Broadcasting Corporation, a British public service broadcaster.

86. See Reference: Fry (2011)

87. See Reference: Freedland (2020)

88. See Reference: Pettigrew (1997)

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89. To maintain validity and consistency, all URL links were checked and verified on 24 January 2020 to ensure access was available.

90. Membership required to access report.

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