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Think tank: New ideas for the 21st century - throw out the media rulebook



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While the recession has hit the media hard, the real seismic change for broadcasting is the shift to the internet and the convergence of content. When the economic recovery happens, the ground will have shifted under media businesses. Audiences and revenue will have moved online.

A new regulator, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI), is to supervise both the commercial sector and public broadcasting (RTE and TG4). The challenges are enormous. They include the roll-out of digital terrestrial television and radio. The switch-over from analogue television is set for December 2011. Meanwhile, the lack of commercial or state revenue to implement digital terrestrial structural changes may mean that another digital platform, the internet, becomes more significant.

The focus of new broadcasting legislation and the regulator is to put the public centre-stage. There is now a public "right to reply" for both commercial and public broadcasting, which must establish and maintain audience councils. New projects, television or radio channels will need to be tested with the public and the market.

The BAI must review public funding and can recommend reductions as much as increases. It will review public broadcasting to ensure that the public is getting value for money. Meanwhile, the European commission has confirmed the need for public broadcasting to be "technology-neutral" and to provide its public services in all platforms, given that Europeans spend an average of 85 minutes a day online.

In the UK, the debate over public broadcasting is moving towards the idea of sharing the TV licence in order to create more diversity and competition in public content. A BBC initiative to

run a regional digital news service was stopped and an ITV alternative will be funded by the licence fee.

The idea of slicing the licence fee is well established here, with the Sound & Vision Scheme funding public content across all broadcasters. More than €60m has been spent from this fund to create programmes on RTE, TG4 and commercial operators such as Setanta, TV3 and Newstalk.

Sound & Vision's slice of the licence fee has been increased to 7%. The pool of broadcasters remains small and the commercial pressures on the private sector have reduced their willingness to participate. Newstalk 106 has been a big beneficiary of the fund but declined to participate in the last radio round as it could not support the internal work involved.

For RTE as an institution, the changes are painful, particularly with advertising revenue falling, but the long-term survival of public media is more secure under the BAI. While the focus is on content — and value for money — the need for big, brand-trusted public-sector broadcasting institutions will remain.

But it is difficult to see the idea of a TV licence fee continuing when people increasingly get content direct from their computer/laptop rather than a TV or radio set, and given that the cost of collecting a licence fee could instead benefit content creation. A universal content tax may be more palatable, although the concern remains across Europe that a direct tax leaves public broadcasters more vulnerable to state pressure and backlashes. Remember Ray Burke?

For both RTE and TG4, the opportunity that digital presents is to reinvent themselves, to become public media resource centres. Users now want content on demand: "What I want, when I want it, where I want it." Public content will increasingly have to be where audiences are — in social-media networks and in non-linear forms such as catch-up services and podcasting. Users will increasingly expect to have a participatory role in content — including news.

The missing link remains the internet, a platform where the BAI has no direct role. The missed opportunity in Ireland was not to create an integrated Media Authority, bringing together all forms of content creation and distribution. Other countries have grasped that nettle. The idea that regulation is medium-specific, when newspapers, radio and TV are all becoming multimedia, is out of date.

Combining the terrestrial and online spheres is complex, but as audiences and revenue shift online, the need to bring the two worlds closer and under the same regulatory roof will be compelling.

This is an edited version of a speech given by Helen Shaw of Athena Media at the recent Cleraun Media Forum