

NEEDS AND GAPS BRIEF NO. 2: IRELAND

Authored by Maria Francesca Rita



"I don't think there is enough knowledge about how threats and abuse on social media affect people mentally. [...] I think there is a level of acceptance, that we should just put up with it. That is something that needs to be tackled, because it's not acceptable."

Aoife Moore, Political correspondent - The Irish Examiner

"There's no journalists in the court today. And does that matter? It does matter. We need to have a journalist in every court every day there's a court on, and the same with the local authority meetings, and that is not happening."

Sheila Reilly, Head of editorial development - The Irish Examiner

Although freedoms of expression and information are strongly guaranteed by Constitutional provisions in Ireland, there are risks to market plurality due to the small scale of the domestic market. Journalists' precarity has been exacerbated by the pandemic. However, threats to journalists are not particularly worrying. The biggest concerns include the digital safety of journalists and the defamation law, for which amendments were expected to be adopted by the end of 2021. The need to regulate online content and platforms led to the proposal of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill with the aim of creating an Online Safety Commissioner.

Women are underrepresented in the media industry, accounting for only a third of media professionals. Covering gender-related topics is especially dangerous for women journalists. The abortion referendum in 2018 was one of the hardest topics to report about. One of the biggest threats that women journalists face in Ireland is online harassment. Social media brought a new threat to women journalists. Social media companies' unwillingness to back journalists in cases of online harassment and defamation is another very serious issue.

The local dimension of journalism is not extensively developed in Ireland. One of the biggest threats to the independence of the local media environment is the high level of ownership concentration. Local newspapers are more vulnerable to the destructive effects of defamation laws. The costs of a defamation case severely impact on its budget, thus threatening its survival. Local media have to be so cautious that they tend not to cover sensitive stories. Instead, they prefer to cover public meetings when particularly relevant and, when this direct coverage is not possible, they disseminate the press releases produced by the press offices of local authorities. As a result, local newsrooms carry on public relations but at the expense of investigations. The lack of investment in resources and people has put massive pressure on local journalists.

Local journalists are very well-known in their community, but have less visibility on social media. However, not being in the spotlight might be a risk for local journalists who are harassed online.

The decrease in the number of freelance journalists is another serious issue at the local level. The economic condition of national newsrooms makes it not profitable to have local correspondents. However, it is hard to find even a freelance reporter in some counties, and this means that if something happens in an area and the only journalist who covers that area does not know about it, it is like it never happened. Local freelancers almost entirely rely on national outlets that need a story from that area from time to time, but this makes their profession extremely unstable.

Facts

2



Alerts recorded on the Mapping Media Freedom Platform between 1 January and 31 December 2021 (0.45% of the EU27 total).

The news desert is a very serious issue in Ireland, where lack of resources led to the shutting down of numerous local newspapers.



Although this is in line with other EU countries, only 16% of Irish readers pay for online news. If we add the issue of detachment of local communities from local affairs, as pointed out by our interviewees, it appears difficult to convert local information to a model which is reader-supported.

There are very few independent outlets at the local level. Other than some hyperlocal websites, most are owned by either Iconic, Celtic Media, Independent, or the Irish Times.

7TH

Ireland ranks 7th in the EU on the Gender Equality Index 2021.



A look at heads of news and editors reveals that this position is occupied by women only in two out of eight of the largest television, radio, print, and online news media outlets (Media Pluralism Monitor 2021).



Women journalists in Ireland account for only a third of media professionals (Media Pluralism Monitor 2021).



A FOI request revealed in 2021 that one in five women inside RTÉ earns less than 40,000 Euros per year, compared to almost one in 10 men; 68% of media workers earning between 100,000 and 150,000 Euros a year are male. This picture reflects the fact that management positions are predominantly held by men.



39% of presenters are women. The percentage drops to 36% with regard to reporters, and to only 28% with regard to news subjects and sources (6th Global Media Monitoring Project).



Recommendations

For Irish media outlets

- Create occasions for meeting outside of business interests to talk about how to create an environment that is more attentive to journalists' needs.
 - Clearly express solidarity towards the journalist who is harassed, and provide practical support. Offering financial support for counselling, supporting the journalist in the decision to turn to the police, and in general creating an environment of understanding within the newsroom are necessary steps to avoid the journalist feeling isolated.
 - Set up a reporting system to establish a safe communication channel with employees.
 - Local newsrooms should move forward with digitalisation, attract investments, and reconnect with local communities.
-

For unions and national support centres

- Increase the provision of training opportunities related to safety issues, digital threats, and legal protection. Training is the most efficient way to switch from reactive to proactive solutions for journalists.
 - Unions should be more active at the local level, where there are fewer everyday problems, but there are long-standing issues (e.g. bad ownership models, economic hardship) that would need constant attention.
-

For international actors

- International media freedom organisations should advocate for the speeding up of the defamation law reform. Amendments need to be adopted in the shortest possible time.
- Although this issue will be tackled at the EU level in the forthcoming EU Digital Services Act, big tech companies should take responsibility for what happens on their platforms.