
PRO LIFE CAMPAIGN SUBMISSION TO THE
'FUTURE OF MEDIA COMMISSION' PUBLIC CONSULTATION
JANUARY 2021



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campaign

PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA

Most of the media analysis and commentary surrounding issues like abortion are premised on the idea that before any major public policy changes take place in this area, a thorough and exhaustive media debate happens where the public are given every reasonable opportunity to weigh the arguments from both sides before forming an opinion on how things should proceed.

This has not been our experience neither with our public service broadcaster nor more generally.

In the lead-up to the abortion referendum in 2018, the case for Repeal was amplified and aided at every turn by large sections of the mainstream media, most particularly RTÉ, while arguments presented by the pro-life side were repeatedly ignored or treated with suspicion.

It is expected that campaigning groups would level such charges of bias but on this particular issue the evidence to support the claim is overwhelming.

For example, in one single month, randomly chosen at the time, in the build up to the referendum, RTÉ Radio 1 (the taxpayer funded national broadcasting station) afforded 81 minutes to the pro-repeal side and just 4 minutes to the pro-life side.¹

The one-sided coverage by RTÉ remained pronounced right through the campaign.

Take another example. Before the referendum campaign got underway in 2018, RTÉ's Prime Time held six studio discussions on the issue where the pro-life side was repeatedly put on the defensive, while those promoting Repeal were given preferred treatment.

The issue with biased coverage is not exclusively an RTÉ problem. It is across the board and continues to this day.

On 10th December 2020, Newstalk radio featured several interviews on Repeal of the Eighth Amendment as part of its series '20 Most Influential Moments of the Last 20 Years'.

They devoted 28.5 minutes over the course of the day to interviewing supporters of abortion and gave just under 5 minutes to the pro-life side.

Since Repeal happened, there has been an over 60 per cent increase in the number of abortions and as a recent UCC study revealed, babies that survive late-term abortions are being left to die unaided without receiving any medical or palliative care. Despite all these shocking but also clearly newsworthy developments, Newstalk devoted an entire day to propagandising about Repeal while glossing over the horrors happening under the new abortion regime.

The examples above are just a small glimpse at the extent of the problem and how the debate surrounding news coverage and public broadcasting in Ireland suffers from a deep-seated bias.

There is a pervasive problem with media groupthink in Ireland which is rarely talked about in public debate. This needs to change. It may suit the media not to talk about it, but the result is that there is effectively no recourse at present for those seeking to challenge the unfair and entirely skewed coverage regarding matters of huge public importance.

¹During this one-month period (July 2016), RTÉ Radio 1 gave the Pro-Repeal side 81 minutes on-air and just 4 minutes to the Pro-Life side



COMPLETE LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Given the power and influence RTÉ wields on a daily basis in deciding the news and current affairs that the public is presented with, it is completely unacceptable that there is no obligation on RTÉ to intersperse its coverage with short prominent segments from time to time that question, challenge and shed light on how editorial decisions are made regarding the news stories they choose to run with or ignore.

Being open and transparent to viewers and facilitating robust and challenging debate about how decisions at RTÉ are taken is the way any responsible and accountable national broadcasting station should operate. It is the only way to establish trust with the public and taxpayers who fund the station, and it would help in some way to safeguard against the kind of groupthink that exists at present.

As a broadcaster funded by the people of Ireland, this lack of accountability cannot continue.

It is impossible to saure their recent “The Truth Matters” campaign - that portrayed RTÉ as the protectors of honest and reliable journalism, while warning against ‘fake news’ - with the reality.

For those who have experienced close-up the wholly biased way RTÉ treats certain issues, trust in the national broadcaster has been shattered. RTÉ is fully aware of this problem and that a significant section of the Irish public no longer believes that RTÉ is committed to fair and impartial broadcasting. Instead of proactively seeking to reassure people and responding to their concerns, RTÉ have continually looked the other way and refused to meaningfully engage with people, with a view to addressing the problem.




RECOMMENDATIONS TO ‘FUTURE OF MEDIA COMMISSION’


- There is an urgent need for a more robust mechanism than the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) for dealing with complaints against organisations like RTÉ
- RTÉ should be obliged to feature regular prime time discussions on both radio and TV that question, challenge and shed light on how editorial decisions are made when picking one news story over another.
- As the country’s national broadcasting station, RTÉ should be obliged to commission an annual independent review of its programming, where submissions from the public are received and reflected in the report.
- There needs to be a much more thorough public debate on the proposed new broadcasting charge and the issue of ensuring a truly impartial public broadcasting service.


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