

Protecting the news Civil society and the media

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About the Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland

The Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society was established to explore how civil society could be strengthened in the UK and Ireland. The Inquiry Commission was chaired by Geoff Mulgan and was also informed by an International Advisory Group.

The objectives of the Inquiry were to:

- explore the possible threats to and opportunities for civil society, looking out to 2025;
- identify how policy and practice can be enhanced to help strengthen civil society;
- enhance the ability of civil society associations to shape the future.

The Inquiry Commission's work began with an extensive futures exercise to explore possible futures for civil society. Drawing on the findings of the futures work, which are documented in two reports, *The Shape of Civil Society to Come* and *Scenarios for Civil Society*, the Inquiry Commission agreed to explore the current and possible future roles of civil society associations in relation to the following themes:

- **Growing a more civil economy**
- **A rapid and just transition to a low carbon economy**
- **Democratising media ownership and content**
- **Growing participatory and deliberative democracy**

This paper was commissioned to inform the Inquiry's work on the roles of civil society associations in growing a more civil economy.

The final report of the Inquiry Commission, *Making good society*, was published in March 2010.

For further information about the Inquiry and to download related reports go to www.futuresforcivilsociety.org

Published on behalf of the Commission by the Carnegie UK Trust

www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk

March 2010

ISBN 978-0-900259-64-7

Design by Falconbury

Front cover image: Dublin Community Television

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Box 6: The Republic of Ireland

In Ireland, a set of partnership agreements for economic recovery and development has been negotiated between successive governments, trade unions and employers since the late 1980s. In 2002, a voluntary and civil society sector pillar was added to the partnership structure. This has not been without difficulties, with the balance between the opportunities of sustained political engagement and the dangers of co-option being a topic of intense debate among civil society actors since the pillar's inception.

The recent collapse of partnership in the wake of recession, and a sustained crisis of political legitimacy in the Republic of Ireland, has had a major impact on civil society. The relationship of (mainstream) civil society with the state has been disrupted by a series of fiscal cuts which unequivocally target vulnerable groups represented by partnership associations; by the closure or fatal budget reduction of a range of advisory bodies or statutory independent agencies that mediated – or engaged in gatekeeping – between civil society actors and the state; by the enormously significant revelations concerning an older form of partnership, that is, the relationship between Catholic Church institutions and the state in the provision of health and education; and by a very real crisis in the legitimacy of trade unions. Many civil society associations are now faced with the prospect of reconfiguring their public roles in a political context of increased dissent.

The mainstream media sector in the Republic of Ireland faces similar critical issues: falling and migrating advertising revenues and fundamental changes to the nature of journalism, as noted in the body of this report, apply equally here. The creative cannibalisation and threat of increased reliance on cheaper forms of news gathering are also features of journalism in Ireland. Interviewees noted that an increase in overall news production, and a decrease in the number of employed journalists, affected their ability to gain meaningful coverage for their issues and campaigns. However, there are some important caveats to this general picture. *The Irish Times*, and, increasingly, the *Irish Examiner* employ specialist correspondents on social affairs who work hard to develop and maintain connections with civil society. In a media landscape the size of Ireland's, such consolidated

channels should not be regarded as unimportant; *The Irish Times* (newspaper of record) and RTÉ television and radio (public service broadcasters) remain enormously influential mediators of public debate. However, both the availability of these specialists, and the cultural gravitation towards the established channels of national debate, have the inevitable consequence of increasing competition for coverage, and favour well-connected and well-resourced civil society associations.

The clearest threat to freedom comes from attempts by the state to manage civil society association dissent in the aftermath of the collapse of partnership. Two high-profile figures in the third sector have recently gone on public record concerning what they see as strategies of containment and disempowerment of civil society associations. One of these, Hugh Fraser, former director of the Combat Poverty Agency, in an article entitled 'Stifling Dissent' (*Irish Examiner*, 7 July, 2009) notes:

'Indeed there is now much evidence of a systematic effort to close down, control or emasculate and control authoritative and independent voices on issues of social justice and thus to marginalise dissent... Community groups receiving Government funding have been instructed not to network with other community groups and thus build up a collective voice on issues. Cutting funding to organisations who cause embarrassment or who challenge the status quo — and including clauses in funding contracts, or employment contracts, which prevent organisations or individuals from speaking out is on the increase. The Charities Act won't allow new organisations which state that one of their aims is to advocate in relation to human rights to be registered as a charity. All in all there is a consistent effort to suppress the voices of those who advocate on behalf of the marginalised. Thus it is hard not to interpret the silencing of the CPA as part of this wider effort at political control.'

This system of formal and informal constraint and coercion has implications for the nature, content and style of story circulated by civil society associations.

Irish responses to the themes identified in this report bear a striking similarity to the interim conclusions on the UK. The shift to professionalised communications operations within NGOs is in its infancy in comparison to the UK, though it nevertheless works to exacerbate the differences between resource-rich and poor

Box 6: Continued

organisations. It should be noted here that, while many NGOs have press officers with some form of PR /advocacy training, the real division is between the small minority that employ professional journalists and the rest. Professional journalists bring with them a substantial range of predictable advantages enhanced, in a country the size of Ireland, by the relative importance of contacts and networked professional capital.

All of the interviewees discussed at length the failure of civil society associations to properly engage existing mainstream media, particularly since constituting a responsive and reliable source is a considerable advantage in a context of desk-bound journalism and pressurised routines. However, in contradistinction to the forms of homogenisation associated with reliance on press agencies, the Independent Network News (INN) was regarded as open to civil society associations, and it was also held that the cultural centrality of *The Irish Times* and RTÉ lead civil society associations to neglect other mainstream sources. The interviewees argued that sectoral media training – in which they were heavily involved – was crucial for all of these reasons, but also to lessen dependence on professional journalists in advocacy roles. Engaging professional journalists in civil society association communications may increase the quantity and accuracy of stories,

but it does little to increase the plurality of civil society associations contributing to the dimensions of complex issues in the public sphere. Moreover, professional complicity is unlikely to drive sustained challenges to the requirements of pre-established agendas and routines, nor will it necessarily offer support in ‘explaining complex issues in detail in the hope of shifting news agendas’. In other words, as more press officers learn to service mainstream media requirements and frameworks, the possibility of challenging dominant perspectives recedes even further.

Community media, however, offers the best opportunities for pluralism, deliberation and dissent. Community radio – and, increasingly, television – in Ireland has its roots in adult education, anti-poverty networks and local activist groups. An independent, facilitative and often dissenting/countervailing ethos permeates this sector, and in the case of some of the larger, well-resourced operations, they see themselves as increasingly important spaces for alternative voices, politics and issues. Internet television and the cable/digital spectrum in Ireland have allowed the sustainable development of community television: Dublin CTV has been broadcasting and webcasting for a year. Cork CTV commenced in Autumn 2009.

Dr Gavan Titley, National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

Appendix 1: Methodology

This report draws upon the analysis of data from an extensive empirical research project funded by the Leverhulme Trust entitled 'Spaces of News' and undertaken at Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media Research Centre: Spaces, Connections, Control from January 2007 to June 2009. The research team was led by Natalie Fenton and included James Curran, Nick Couldry, Aeron Davis, Des Freedman, Peter Lee-Wright, Angela Phillips, Joanna Redden and Tamara Witschge. Research for this report has also involved a number of additional interviews and expert workshops, as well as a critique of other relevant reports in the field.

Although the Spaces of News study focuses particularly on news and journalism, this is interpreted broadly and includes both mainstream and alternative news sites (Current TV; Indymedia network and openDemocracy), search engines (Google and Yahoo!) and social networking sites (Facebook, MySpace, YouTube), as well as non-professional writers/journalists contributing to debates online. Through interviews, ethnography and qualitative content analysis, it investigates the processes of news production in a representative sample of media, combining macro-social critique with micro-organisational analysis to gain a complex, critical understanding of the nature of journalism and democracy in the digital age. The central concern in this endeavour was to subject to empirical scrutiny the ways in which new media, news and journalism contribute to democratic practice and feed the public interest.

Towards this aim we were particularly concerned to address the range of voices included in news media and the types of news content that results. The Spaces of News research involved over 170 interviews with a range of professionals from a cross-section of media – categorised by type, geographic reach, professional roles (generalists, specialist correspondents, dedicated new media staff, production and editorial staff, managerial and business personnel) – from the commercial and public sectors, all relating to news and current affairs. To explore the relative access and credibility attributed to news sources, we also interviewed those traditionally privileged and authoritative voices, such as Members of Parliament, and those with traditionally less news authority, such as NGOs and a range of other civil society associations. Included in the latter were new news sources such as bloggers, 'citizen-

journalists' and producers on alternative news/current affairs platforms. As well as their relations with news media, interviews with civil society associations explored other means of engaging online with public debate.

In order to flesh out the interviews and add contextual depth, the second strand of research in the Spaces of News project included mini-ethnographies in three places of news production: the BBC, *Manchester Evening News* and *The Guardian*, plus a detailed case study of OpenDemocracy, a civil society association that functions as an online news and current affairs magazine. To further critique findings, a qualitative analysis of online news content was undertaken which included coverage on UK national newspaper sites, as well as a number of independent media and social media online.

This report also builds on Des Freedman's Economic and Social Research Council-funded research into the dynamics of media policy-making (RES-000-22-0422). This was a comprehensive account of the key contexts, institutions and interests that shape contemporary media policy-making, and was a response, in particular, to the emergence of new actors (including civil society organisations) and new paradigms (of self-regulation and global governance) that may be helping to shift the balance of power in the policy-making process. It focused on the arguments mobilised, and interests represented, in a range of policy areas including those of media ownership, content regulation, the future of public service broadcasting and the development of intellectual property legislation.

As the Spaces of News research focused on England and, in order to broaden where necessary the research base to civil society and public service content beyond news, we held expert workshops and conducted an additional ten interviews. The expert workshops were held in Edinburgh and Cardiff, with Scottish and Welsh media and civil society experts respectively. These workshops focused on the future relationship between media and civil society, and addressed the concerns and influence of the specific national contexts. The interviews were held with a range of participants from the media and civil society spheres, particularly those at the forefront of media regulation, or of innovative initiatives. Dr Gavan Titley (National University of Ireland, Maynooth) has advised on the situation in Ireland and undertaken further interviews to supplement this work.

About the Carnegie UK Trust

The Carnegie UK Trust was established in 1913. Through its programmes, the Trust seeks to address some of the changing needs of the people in the UK and Ireland, in particular those of the less powerful in society. The Trust supports independent commissions of inquiry into areas of public concern, together with funding action and research programmes. There are currently two active programmes: the Democracy and Civil Society Programme and the Rural Programme.

The Democracy and Civil Society Programme has two elements to its work. The main focus of the programme is the Trust's Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland. The second focus of the programme is the Democracy Initiative, which aims to strengthen democracy and increase the ability of citizens and civil society organisations to collectively influence public decision-making.

The Rural Programme helps rural communities across the UK and Ireland to respond to and influence social, environmental and economic change. The programme works to ensure that rural priorities are fully recognised by decision-makers. This is done through: securing the practical demonstration of asset-based rural development; testing Carnegie UK Trust's Petal Model of Sustainable Rural Communities; and hosting a Community of Practice for rural activists and professionals.



About Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media Research Centre: Spaces, Connections, Control (University of London)

Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media Research Centre: Spaces, Connections, Control, is an interdisciplinary research centre that currently has five active research projects all designed to: evaluate the significance of new media economies and cultures in relation to broader economic, social and cultural transformations; interrogate issues of power and control, freedom and diversity over ways of seeing, ways of telling and ways of thinking; understand the processes of greater media fragmentation and individualisation, in terms of both production and consumption; ascertain the shift in media cultures and politics from the paradigm of imagined community to the significance of networked connectivity; and establish what all this means for the public sphere and public culture – through local, national and transnational spaces.

The research team was led by Dr Natalie Fenton, Reader and Co-Director of Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media Research Centre; and included Professor James Curran, Dr Des Freedman, Dr Tamara Witschge (Goldsmiths, University of London) and Dr Gavan Titley (National University of Ireland, Maynooth, as a consultant), each of whom come with a wealth of expertise in areas critical to this project.

For further information see: www.gold.ac.uk/media-research-centre or email: n.fenton@gold.ac.uk.



The production and circulation of independent, quality news is a hallmark of democratic societies. The demise of the existing business model of the local and regional press and of broadcast news in the UK and Ireland, together with the struggle for survival of many national newspapers, demands a critical consideration of what the public wants news for and how it can be delivered. The digital age has provided a growing plethora of media outlets, and people can publish content more easily than ever, but the domination of a limited number of international news organisations that controls the flow of news and the contours of public debate is a significant threat to pluralism in the media.

The role of civil society associations in bringing diversity of viewpoints, and challenging normative understandings, has never been more important. Protecting and enhancing this diversity is becoming ever more vital. This report provides a series of recommendations for civil society associations, media industries and policy-makers to help achieve this goal.

Published on behalf of the Commission by
the Carnegie UK Trust

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Scottish charity SC 012799 operating in the
UK and Ireland

ISBN 978-0-900259-64-7

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www.futuresforcivilsociety.org

Related reports on this theme:

*Making the connection: Civil society and social
media*, Charman-Anderson, S. (2010)

