

Learning Outcome 2.6 – Ownership and Control of Media

Irish Media Ownership - March 2021

How will Denis O’Brien’s departure change the Irish media landscape?

The era of moguls has run its course; European conglomerates have arrived

Hugh Linehan, *The Irish Times*, 7 March, 2021.

Source: <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio-web/how-will-denis-o-brien-s-departure-change-the-irish-media-landscape-1.4501293>

Not surprisingly, most of the reaction to the recent sale of the **Communicorp radio group** to the German-based **Bauer Media Audio** has focused on the fact that it marks the final exit of Denis O’Brien from the Irish media stage. Just five years ago, O’Brien dominated Irish media to a degree which some believed was unhealthy. The manner of his departure, and the hundreds of millions of euro he is estimated to have lost along the way, have contributed to the thinly veiled schadenfreude evident in much of the coverage in rival outlets.

But now that he’s gone, and setting aside the turbulent and sometimes controversial story of his relatively brief ascendancy, what does the Irish media landscape look like, and how is it likely to change in his wake?

Communicorp, whose assets include the country’s two privately owned national radio stations, Today FM and Newstalk, along with local music stations Spin 1038 and 98FM in Dublin and Spin Southwest in Limerick, was sold to Bauer, which already has a presence in seven other European countries, two years after O’Brien’s sale of his interest in Independent News & Media (INM) to **Belgian company Mediahuis**.

The new owners (who last year dispensed with the old INM corporate identity) have focused on belatedly turning the Independent ship towards the digital subscription model which nearly all newspapers now recognise is the only route to survival in a post-print age. Similarly, the expectation is that Bauer will follow a strategy of **consolidation** and cost-cutting which has been successful for it in the UK and elsewhere. In both cases, the business challenges are immense, but both Bauer and Mediahuis have **advantages of scale and expertise** which should stand to them.

It seems that the era of Irish media moguls like O’Brien and his predecessor **Tony O’Reilly** has run its course and the age of European conglomerates has arrived. Many observers may see this as a good thing. This country’s weak regulations on media monopolies were exposed when O’Brien added control of Ireland’s biggest newspaper company to his ownership of Ireland’s largest private radio company. The fact that the two groups are now no longer controlled by a single individual lessens **legitimate and longstanding concerns about over-concentration of ownership**.

It also begs the question of whether the **editorial voice** of these still large and powerful institutions will remain unchanged. Communicorp always denied suggestions made over the years (including by at least one former presenter) that O’Brien involved himself in day-to-day editorial decisions, but there’s no doubt the station was largely built in his image – differentiating itself from RTÉ with an unabashedly pro-business stance and building its schedule around Fine Gael-adjacent figures like George Hook and Ivan Yates. Equally, Tony O’Reilly, when he owned INM, was not averse to using its power on his own behalf (most obviously during the 1997 election campaign), and the group’s newspapers generally tended towards the centre-right.

Gap in the market

For very good reasons, media companies are always obsessed with how they’re going to catch the attention of the next generation. That question becomes more acute when print and radio are in apparently terminal decline. O’Brien told Trinity College students last week that his decision to sell had been influenced by the **changing listening habits of consumers**. “I just don’t know whether a 12-year-old today who is going to be 15 in

three years' time is going to be listening to Spin." Based on its track record, elsewhere, Bauer seems to have a strategy to address that question.

Whether it has a similar plan for a non-music station like Newstalk, which has leaked millions in losses over the last two decades, remains to be seen. But the future of music radio, while not unimportant, is less controversial and less contested than questions about news and current affairs.

Strangely, there is one glaring gap in the market which remains unaddressed. *Last week's Irish Times/Ipsos MRBI opinion poll showed more than 40 per cent of voters under 35 supported Sinn Féin.* It would be hard to argue that those voters' views are **proportionately reflected** in radio studios or on the opinion pages of national newspapers. Broadcasters, of course, are subject to strict **legislative requirements on fairness**, balance and impartiality. Yet that hasn't stopped Newstalk from carving out a particular identity for itself which is, at least in part, ideological. **And no such limits apply to newspapers.** Is it beyond the bounds of possibility that some media executive in Antwerp or Hamburg, poring over a spreadsheet, might come across this fact and suggest an editorial repositioning towards the party preferred by the young?

Before you begin: In your own notes, list and give brief definitions of the words and phrases highlights in **Bold**.

Questions

1. Briefly investigate the source of this article (both the journalist, Hugh Linehan, and the 'editorial line' of the paper he writes for – *The Irish Times*) How might this influence how this article is 'framed' and whether or not you should see it as a reliable source?
2. To understand how the Irish 'Media Ownership Landscape has changed in recent years, compare this article with an article from *The Village* magazine in 2013. (<https://villagemagazine.ie/media-ownership-concentrated-and-under-regulated/>) and assess to what degree the concerns of its author, Roderic Flynn, have been addressed.
3. Outline the specific ways in which Media Ownership in Ireland has changed since the arrival of the "European Conglomerates" (Mediahuis and Bauer). Develop a 'timeline' to show when these changes took place.
4. Business factors have a significant impact on how media operates. Investigate the terms **digital subscription model** and **post-print age**. Consider how this might have an impact on how journalists research and frame their writing.
5. Linehan describes the influence that Dennis O'Brien is alleged to have had over the ways in which the media outlets he owned were run. What ethical concerns might be raised by the phrase: "O'Brien involved himself in day-to-day editorial decisions, but there's no doubt the station was largely built in his image".
6. Given the results of the **Irish Times/Ipsos MRBI opinion poll** referred to at the end of the article, *speculate* as to what kinds of changes to the media landscape in Ireland that we might expect to see in the future. How might you identify such changes in how the media operates?
7. Investigate the most recent Press Freedom Index and consider how the changes outlined here might influence how Ireland ranks in that data set.

General Question:

Based on your prior knowledge of the ideas of **Noam Chomsky**, and on your broader reading in the areas of Politics and Society, do you think that the recent changes in Irish Media Ownership patterns are beneficial of Irish democracy. In your answer consider some of the following terms:

The Five Filters – The Power of those who Work in the Media - The Challenges for Regulators of Media – Concentration of Media Ownership – The Freedom of the Press