



**Submission to Coimisiún na Meán
on behalf of the
Public Relations Institute of Ireland (PRII)
regarding the reform of the broadcast
moratorium.**

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Submitted on behalf of the PRII by

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The Public Relations Institute of Ireland

Established in 1953, the Public Relations Institute of Ireland (PRII) is dedicated to promoting the highest professional practice of public relations and communication in Ireland.

The Institute works towards:

- wider recognition of the role of public relations in the Irish society and economy; and
- higher standards of professionalism among public relations and communications practitioners.

With nearly 1,200 members from both public and private sectors, PRII now represents approximately one-third of all professionals in the field—a record high in its 70-year history. Membership comprises of public relations and communication professionals drawn from consultancies, industry, Government, semi-state, voluntary and business organisations.

According to research released earlier this year there has been an increase of €200m in the contribution of the public relations and communications sector to the Irish economy over the past five years - which includes the years of pandemic lock-down. In 2019, the contribution was estimated at €1.2 billion and in 2024 it was estimated to have risen to €1.4 billion.

Relatedly, occupation data from the Central Statistics Office in Ireland shows the sector experienced a 20 per cent growth in jobs in that period and now employs over 3,300.

All PRII members subscribe to Codes of Practice and Ethics that promote professional integrity in the implementation of public relations programmes. Compliance is backed up by a rigorous Standards Management Procedure which includes independent external input.

This Submission

The PRII welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Coimisiún na Meán public consultation published on 7 August 2024 on the broadcast moratorium applied in advance of elections and referendums.

We believe that the current broadcast moratorium should be reformed. However, if this is not possible, abolition of the moratorium must be considered.

In the public consultation document, An Coimisiún set out five main options for consideration:

1. Keeping the moratorium as it is
2. Amending the duration of the moratorium
3. Changing the types of broadcast coverage included under the moratorium
4. Reframing the obligation on broadcasters as a positive obligation to exercise particular care on issues related to elections or referendums
5. Abolishing the moratorium entirely.

As representatives of the communications profession, the PRII see first-hand the shifting dynamics in media consumption and the evolving challenges posed by disinformation. The rapid developments in digital and social media, combined with the rise of artificial intelligence, have dramatically transformed the landscape in which elections and public discourse unfold.

Consequently, a rigid adherence to the existing moratorium risks undermining the very objectives it seeks to uphold. While options to amend the duration and scope of broadcast coverage included under the moratorium are worthy of investigation, changes to the moratorium must enable traditional media to counter organised and highly resourced disinformation campaigns.

It would also be advisable to assess the intention and scope of the policy objectives set out for the moratorium to ensure that they are deliverable and appropriate in the current media and political environment in which elections take place.

The Case for Reform and the PRII rationale for Option 2 and 3

Option 2. Amending the duration of the moratorium

Option 3. Changing the types of broadcast coverage included under the moratorium

An Outdated Regulatory Framework in a Post-Truth Era

The current moratorium was conceived in a pre-digital age, where traditional broadcast media was dominated by public service broadcasting holding significant influence over public opinion. However, the media ecosystem has evolved. Today, social media platforms and online content dominate, providing ample space for disinformation and divisive narratives to flourish, often unchecked by traditional regulatory frameworks. Given that these platforms remain outside the scope of the broadcast moratorium, the current restrictions unfairly curtail licensed and regulated broadcasters while leaving a vacuum that can be filled by less regulated, and often misleading, online content. Reform is urgently needed to ensure the moratorium remains relevant and fit for purpose in the digital age.

The Growing Threat of Disinformation

The rise of disinformation, particularly during electoral periods, cannot be overstated. We have seen foreign actors attempting to distort public discourse during Irish elections, as evidenced by data on the origins of social media activity during recent anti-migrant protests. Moreover, AI-generated content, such as deepfakes and fake audio, has been used internationally to undermine political leaders and manipulate voters. These developments make it clear that the current moratorium is insufficient in safeguarding electoral integrity. A reformed approach should take into account not only broadcast media but also the digital platforms where much of this harmful activity now occurs.

The Role of Professional Communicators

As communications professionals, we are acutely aware of the need for agility and expertise in addressing the challenges posed by disinformation. We believe that good communications – based on truth, integrity, and transparency – is essential to safeguarding public trust. Our profession is committed to combating disinformation, and we recognise that broadcasters play a key role in this effort. However, the current moratorium limits broadcasters' ability to respond to disinformation in real-time, leaving the public vulnerable to misleading information. Reforming the moratorium would allow broadcasters to continue fulfilling their role as trusted sources in the public discourse.

Suggested Reforms

The PRII suggest the following reforms to the broadcast moratorium:

Shortening or Modifying the Duration of the Moratorium

The current blackout period, from 2 pm on the day preceding the election until the close of polls, is overly restrictive given the pace of modern media cycles. Shortening this period or allowing for more nuanced guidelines that account for real-time developments would enable broadcasters to respond to evolving events without compromising the fairness of electoral coverage.

Inclusion of Digital and Social Media in the Regulatory Framework

While noting that this area is outside the scope of the current consultation, a comprehensive approach that includes digital platforms is necessary to address the significant role these mediums play in shaping public opinion. While regulating social media directly may fall outside the purview of this specific consultation, we urge Coimisiún na Meán to consider how the moratorium could be adapted to mitigate the spread of disinformation across digital channels, either through collaborative efforts with digital platforms or parallel regulatory measures.

We hope this is an area that can be returned to in due course.

Permitting Factual Reporting and Critical Response

While the spirit of the moratorium is to ensure fairness and objectivity, it should not impede factual reporting or critical responses to disinformation. Broadcasters should be allowed to continue providing balanced, fact-based coverage that counters false narratives, even during the moratorium period. This would ensure that the public is not left in an information void, which could be exploited by bad actors.

Conclusion

In an era where disinformation is increasingly sophisticated and pervasive, it is critical that regulatory frameworks evolve to meet these new challenges.

The PRII firmly believe that reforming the broadcast moratorium by amending the duration and scope of broadcast coverage is a necessary step in strengthening the integrity of our electoral processes and confronting the broader issue of disinformation.

If it is not possible to reform the moratorium to meet the needs set out above, it may be necessary to actively consider abolishing the current approach, setting guidelines to govern more responsible coverage of election issues and events.

Given the key role professional public relations and communications professionals play in communicating with the public, the Public Relations Institute of Ireland would be happy to assist Coimisiún na Meán in bringing different perspectives from the profession together to discuss the moratorium and the communications landscape in which it operates in more detail.

The PRII appreciate the Commission's attention to this important matter and are happy to provide further input or engage in discussions on this issue.

ENDS