Many thanks to Jane Suiter, and DCU, for inviting me here today to speak with you.

Today, I plan to touch on a number of themes related to media and broadcasting in Ireland, after which I am happy to take some questions and elaborate further on specific issues.

I’m also going to talk again about Broadcasting Policy in Ireland – a subject I’ve spoken about at every available opportunity for the last five years in an effort to get some engagement, and push through some change – I still live in hope!

I am not going to map out a future for RTÉ – that is the role of the new Director-General and it’s a challenge I’m sure she’ll relish. I did that in a speech here in DCU five years ago. I set out my thoughts on what RTÉ’s role should be in the digital age, and how RTÉ needed to evolve and change to meet the challenges and public expectations at that time. There is therefore a symmetry in that I am here today, just a few weeks away from finishing at RTÉ.

I must say up until quite recently I haven’t thought too much about leaving. General Elections and 1916 commemorations leave little time for anything else. But in the last couple of weeks, I have begun to reflect on what has been an incredibly busy and challenging period for RTÉ, and what a huge privilege it has been for me to lead the organisation over these past five years.

Deep and long recessions are tough on almost everyone. They are very tough on people, families and communities. They are very tough on businesses of all sizes and types. They are tough on those delivering public services with significantly reduced resources and growing demands. And, although we don’t like to acknowledge it, they are tough on politicians – having to make impossible choices between competing and valid demands.

Now that Ireland is emerging from this very difficult period, many are scarred, tired and angry. Public debate and discussion has hardened and become more polarised - not just here in Ireland but right across Europe and beyond. In this environment, a broader spectrum of views gain new traction among many who are disillusioned with the
institutions and political parties they hold responsible for the stresses and hardships of their own lives.

Leading RTÉ through all of this has been, and continues to be, challenging. Maintaining fairness, and respecting and giving space to a new political diversity, requires constant attention. I have been closely involved in or lead RTÉ’s election coverage for twenty years, but I can’t remember a campaign as complicated and tricky to navigate as the one we’ve just had. That is our job and I believe RTÉ has done it well, but times of political and societal stress inevitably leads to more friction with all sides, including whoever is in government. It is a difficult climate for policy change, unless that policy change is driven independently.

RTÉ itself also had to manage and adjust to sudden and substantial falls in its own resources. Job losses, pay cuts and widespread cutbacks have been a dominant feature in RTÉ as they have been in many businesses and organisations around the country.

In parallel to all of this of course the media itself is undergoing a period of profound change. The digital age has brought enormous opportunities for RTÉ and for media and journalism generally, but technology and changing media consumption habits are also challenging (and indeed undermining) long established business models and norms. Social media has created an immediate feedback loop, comment and opinion has proliferated, while at the same time the resources for essential reporting, investigative journalism and high-quality programming have diminished.

Quality, breadth and depth all cost money, money that media organisations are increasingly finding it difficult to generate. Facebook and Twitter are fantastic organizations. They are great for distributing news and media content, but they have no interest in frontline reporting or backing up stories, maintaining balance and fairness, offering divergent perspectives or engaging in any real editorial oversight of their services.

What those organizations don’t do is precisely what RTÉ and others engaged in quality journalism do.

For my part, I will miss those special days when our reporting or programming caught the public attention, challenged the consensus or bore witness to extraordinary events. It was, and is, on those days that RTÉ is doing its job in telling Ireland’s story.

Sometimes it has been a difficult and upsetting story, such as the investigation we undertook in the Áras Attracta facility in Mayc; other times it has been the stories central to our democracy and way of life, such as an election or referendum; and on other days was the stories that brought us all together – sporting occasions or national events, such as the 1916 commemorations, or The Late Late Toy Show, a significant radio interview, or a finale of Operation Transformation.
I will also miss wrestling with the strategic challenges facing RTÉ, and indeed many Irish media organisations. I have worked in RTÉ as a journalist, editor, senior manager and as Director-General. During this time I have watched and done my best to meet the huge and varied challenges facing media and journalism here in Ireland and beyond. That RTÉ has evolved its offering, developed new services and continues to retain the trust of the public, amid all the changes in media, technology and society over that period, is a testament to the talent, commitment and creativity of everyone in RTÉ, our partners in the independent sector, and beyond.

It is also testament to the enduring value, in the eyes of the public, of public service media, both its principles and in practice.

Public service values and principles matter and they underpin RTÉ’s future and its ongoing legitimacy. The very significant public funding that RTÉ receives each year comes with real responsibilities. And while these responsibilities have been laid down in statute for over 50 years, the context in which they must now be met has changed beyond all recognition.

Now the internet makes it easy to find information, but much harder to know if you can trust it.

It’s easy to find people and media outlets that you agree with, and easy to avoid and ignore those that you don’t.

It is easy to find small communities of interest, but much harder to reach the country as a whole at one time.

It is easy to publish and comment, but much harder to find the financial support for high-quality programming and content.

The information age has been great for those that can afford and access broadband – but those that can’t risk being left on the margins of society.

In a world increasingly dominated by international media and content, how are we to support and preserve vibrant local culture and distinctive local identity?

At its best, I believe that RTÉ offers a compelling response to these challenges. And while of course RTÉ will have to continue to change, enhance and refresh its offering over the coming years, I am very confident that RTÉ has the capability, ambition and legitimacy to remain essential to Irish daily life. I also believe this is very much in Ireland’s interest.

So where does RTÉ stand now and how strong is public service media in Ireland? Let’s start with the good news, before we get to the bad.

Much has been achieved. In radio staff and management have radically changed the schedules of a reinvigorated RTÉ Radio 1. If it’s resurgence continues, Radio 1 will very
soon have a 25% share nationally and a 33% share in Dublin, a significant turnaround after years of falling share. Radio staff and management are also successfully re-focusing 2fm on a younger audience.

Our digital offerings have also been radically reshaped; new ventures like GAAGO are proving successful, and an innovative new iteration of RTÉ.ie and the RTÉ Player are due this year. The launch of Saorview Connect in a few months is another innovation that offers huge potential for RTÉ and all on the platform.

The introduction of a digital newsroom has ensured that the RTÉ News Now app is the most downloaded in the country. The main Six One and Nine O’Clock television news bulletins remain at the heart of the schedule and more importantly at the heart of Irish lives. As indeed does Morning Ireland on Radio 1. We saw the growing importance of our digital services during the recent election campaign.

RTÉ Current Affairs is back producing top-quality investigative programming after some challenging years.

RTÉ has re-focused its television services around a new channel strategy and has added RTÉjr, Ireland’s only channel just for kids, successfully to its suite. We saw this new channel strategy at its best during the 1916 commemoration. The range and depth of 1916-related programming commissioned and produced across the genres of drama, documentary, comedy, arts, history, live outside broadcast and musical entertainment, on RTÉ One and RTÉ2, was really special and unique.

Our overall 1916 coverage, as part of RTÉ 1916, demonstrated an organization that I believe has re-found its confidence, much shaken in recent years.

RTÉ’s new Irish-language action plan is working, and our soon to be announced diversity strategy and report will hopefully go some way towards addressing some gaps we have in this critical area. The bad news is that, while our financial situation has stabilised, substantial challenges remain. I’d love to be standing up here telling you that all RTÉ’s funding challenges are over and we can all just look ahead and concentrate on programming.

Until our public funding model is changed, that will not be the case. Independent consultants appointed by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland have recognized the strides we’ve taken in recent years, the efficiencies we’ve pushed through, the reductions in costs we’ve implementec, and the service we continue to provide. But without change at policy level, those services may face further reductions and restructuring in the immediate years ahead.

The other storm cloud for all content producers in Ireland is that audience fragmentation shows no sign of abating. Our experience in the first three months of this year shows some of the dilemmas we, and others face, when confronted with a mobile, digital audience.
On television now audiences are watching different types of programming in dramatically different ways. Live viewing remains dominant for most programmes at about 90% of total viewing. It’s important to make that point. The vast majority of people still watch Television in a linear fashion.

But if you look at a programme from the recent series of *Homeland* for example, of the total audience of 165,000 only 46% watched it live as scheduled on RTÉ2. Over 50% of the audience chose to watch the programme over the course of a week using their PVR, or the RTÉ Player on multiple devices.

*Fair City*, Ireland’s most popular soap has also experienced real changes in viewing patterns over the past ten years. The overall viewing figure has actually risen slightly during that time which is quite an important achievement. But in 2005 452,000 watched live with a further 76,000 watched the afternoon repeat. In 2015, 367,000 people watched *Fair City* live, with 168,000 watching later using a combination of channels and services across different devices.

Recent research we conducted on audience interaction with General Election coverage was fascinating. When asked how they followed the count results, a whopping 79% of those surveyed said they followed it on television. This figure was down only slightly on the 2011 figure; so much for the view that traditional linear television is a declining medium!

But of those surveyed, 34% said they followed coverage online, and 15% said they followed on mobile. The mobile figure has nearly trebled since 2011. So our audiences are still watching mainstream television coverage in very large numbers, but they are also accessing a lot of other mediums as well to get their news.

Yet the conundrum for us and all media providers is that commercial income from digital remains a fraction of our overall commercial income.

That income is also getting more complicated. It’s early days, but it’s worth noting that in Ireland generally it would seem that income from Video on Demand has fallen in the first three months of this year – compared to a rise in television advertising spend. The proliferation of channels has driven television prices down to such a level that they may be hitting digital revenues again. That’s how complicated the market has evolved, and navigating it is even trickier than last year. I firmly believe though that it is possible to still navigate through this maze and to take the hugely positive opportunities that it gives media organizations like RTÉ in delivering their content. I could have written the whole speech about this area as I find it completely fascinating but there are other themes I want to touch on and I’m happy to take questions on it.

These themes are about the persistent and structural problems facing RTÉ, ones that it cannot solve on its own.
Broken Regulatory and Licence Fee Systems Firstly, the regulatory system governing public service broadcasting is broken. While the 2009 Broadcasting Act established the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland and a complex system of regulation and review, the BAI’s recommendations have been consistently ignored. Every year, RTÉ publishes a set of commitments on output and other areas. These are assessed for the BAI by independent consultants and recommendations are made on public funding as a result. This process is legally outlined in the Broadcasting Act.

The BAI have made three consecutive recommendations to increase public funding to RTÉ and furthermore stated in the annual review of 2014 that the level of public funding was inadequate for RTÉ to meet its objectives. These were ignored, and public funding was cut by over €15m since 2010.

The BAI is not at fault. It is doing its job. But, either the BAI has to be listened to, or the legislation has to be changed. Anything else makes the process invalid. That is now the reality. Key policy decision making in broadcasting needs an independent view. It is very difficult to see how a public media organisation like RTÉ, doing its job in an election campaign, is not going to ruffle some political feathers. How then is that same organization going to then persuade the same body politic that it needs broadcasting policy changes?

RTÉ is about to head into a new five-year planning cycle without any meaningful response to the first one. The whole process is now increasingly lacking in credibility or substantive purpose.

RTÉ is not seeking to increase the burden on individual households, but rather reform of the Licence Fee, which is no longer fit for purpose or reflective of the consumption of public service media and programming and content. Evasion alone results in over €40m in lost funding for public service media every year.

RTÉ is also not looking for a free ride. We fully accept the added responsibilities that such funding would bring. I have suggested over the years that in return we would re-examine our commercial footprint, that we would share more of our content, that we would spend a minimum of 50% of any additional income in the independent sector, that we would accept new output targets, new commitments on content and new targets on types of content provision. Still nothing has changed. Now I say, let’s engage the entire content production industry, including local commercial radio, to try to find a joint way forward.

Retransmission Fees Similarly the current situation in law that exempts satellite and cable providers, such as SKY and UPC, from paying fair compensation for access to the channels and Irish broadcasters is unacceptable. Across a number of countries now, such retransmission fees comprise a significant commercial income stream for broadcasters at a time when advertising revenue is increasingly under threat from new technology and services – much of which is, ironically, being introduced by the same
satellite and cable providers. A rebalancing of the legislation to enable negotiation of fair value for their content and channels could be of significant help to all Irish broadcasters, not just RTÉ.

**Impact of UK “content dumping”** Another growing storm cloud for all content producers in Ireland is the fact that UK channels selling Irish advertising are now taking close to €50 million out of the Irish television market each year; that’s over 20% of the market. These same channels, some 47 of them, invest little or nothing in Irish programming, Irish production companies or in the creation of Irish jobs. Not only are they taking significant direct revenue out of the market, but by selling advertising at an enormous discount they are also depressing the price advertising here well below comparable UK rates. This is now affecting all Irish media organizations, including newspapers.

While RTÉ has invested heavily in Saorview as a means to defend against such channel and content dumping, to date the Government, who are fully aware of the impact of this distortion on the market, have not found a way to meaningfully respond.

**Industry Cooperation** All of these are issues for the whole Irish content industry, not just RTÉ. Given the pressure that all domestic media organisations are under, I understand why the prevailing atmosphere between us is one of competition and threat. However I am convinced that we have much in common, and that we should work together to address these challenges. RTÉ have been open to discussions on all of these issues and more over the past few years.

I have had a number of meetings with the IBI (Independent Broadcasters of Ireland) to see could we agree a joint-funding platform. That wasn’t possible before the General Election, but the fact that the meetings took place at all was a step forward from all sides. There is potential here for an Irish content producers approach, not just a narrow organizational one. RTÉ has also developed a much better relationship with Screen Producers Ireland, and the chairs of both organizations have for the first time jointly pressed ministers for reforms that will increase support for the sector.

The reason I mention these four areas is that these are areas that RTÉ cannot reform or fix on its own, but they have a huge impact on RTÉ’s capacity to deliver on its remit and continue to invest in Irish programming, Irish journalism and the creative sector in Ireland. With imagination, political will and broader and deeper cooperation, much can be achieved. I believe the prize of a strong, vibrant and secure RTÉ is worth it.

Finally I would like to finish by reading you parts of a letter I received last December. As you might imagine I receive many letters, but few have moved me more that this one. It is quite long so I won’t read it all and the person who wrote it has given permission for it to be quoted:
Dear Director General

It is approximately one year now since the Prime Time Investigation Team screened the programme entitled "Inside Bungalow 3". My sister Mary Garvin was one of the people who featured in it.

The reason I am writing to you now is to thank you and everybody involved in the Prime Time Investigation Team for their excellent wonderful investigative journalism. The shocking scenes shown on that programme shocked and distressed my family and the entire nation. None of us who had a loved one in care ever dreamt for one minute that this abuse was taking place under our noses. Dealing with the trauma of abuse and coming to terms with what my sister endured is yet another reason why I am only contacting you now to show my appreciation for the programme.

Some months following the screening of that programme, my sister (and the 5 other residents who shared Bungalow 3 with her) moved to a newly refurbished Bungalow, entitled ‘Shalom’. It is lovely and she is very happy and content now. Her care and the general quality of her life and has greatly improved.

All of these improvements would never have been possible if it were not for the dedication, hard work, commitment to public service, compassion and humanity of the wonderful investigation team who were the architects and makers of that programme.

(Their) contribution has forever changed for the better the care and well being of people with intellectual disabilities all over the country. They have made the world and lives of people with disabilities brighter, better, happier, safer and healthier. The Garvin family is forever in your debt, thank you and long may this wonderful work continue.

Go raibh mile, mile maith agaibh go leir.

Sheila Garvin Ryan

At the end of my time in RTÉ, a letter like this has made me realise, more than anything, that what truly matters is the programmes we make and the stories that we tell.

It is easy to get blinded by the challenges of funding, technology and distribution. These are all real and difficult, but are only relevant if audiences want to watch, listen and engage with what we produce or commission.

In my time in RTÉ I have always believed this. I have always felt that every extra cent of commercial income we chased aggressively was about more money for content. Every time we pressed on public funding, it was about more money for content. Every time we
had to cut costs, and this was the most difficult dilemma, it was about protecting the future of content provision in financially difficult times.

RTÉ must and will continue to find and tell stories of consequence and relevance, stories that touch and move people, stories that demand a response, and stories that seek to enrich and add to public debate and the vitality of our culture. Because a society that makes the courageous and proper choice of funding public service media deserves to have that decision rewarded with the best that that funding can provide.

Thank you.