

CUI BONO, WHO DON'T?

Update / clarification — with thanks to @nwl for the data aggregation

When I wrote “*Why Whistleblowers Don’t Trust a State-Funded Press*”, I was describing an experience many whistleblowers recognise instinctively: doors don’t slam shut, they simply never open. Emails go unanswered. Documents sit unread. Stories that challenge the State itself never quite find oxygen.

Since then, new analysis by @nwl has added something crucial: *numbers*. Not vibes, not anecdotes — ownership-level aggregation of State journalism funding distributed via Coimisiún na Meán.

That matters, because the debate is often deflected at the wrong level. We’re told grants are “small”, “local”, “for court reporting”, or “for community radio”. Look closer, and a different picture emerges.

When funding is re-aggregated by **ultimate owner**, rather than by individual outlet or scheme, it becomes clear that Ireland’s major private media groups — Virgin, Mediahuis, Irish Times Group, Bauer, Murdoch-owned radio interests and others — are **recurring beneficiaries of discretionary, renewable State funding**. Not once. Not incidentally. Systematically.

To be clear (and this is important): this is not an accusation of bad faith against journalists. Most are doing serious work inside a narrowing space. This is about **structure**, not intent.

Funding doesn’t need to come with instructions to shape behaviour. It only needs three properties:

1. it is discretionary,
2. it is renewable, and
3. it is category-restricted.

Ireland’s journalism funding schemes have all three.

The categories sound reassuring — *local democracy, courts reporting, under-reported issues*. But whistleblowing about State wrongdoing doesn’t fit neatly into those boxes. Investigating administrative abuse, regulatory failure, or institutional cover-ups is slow, adversarial, legally risky, and politically inconvenient. It doesn’t generate tidy outputs or safe metrics.

And crucially: **it often targets the very State bodies that fund the schemes**.

That is not an accident. It’s design.

Some have pushed back by noting, for example, that Murdoch funding relates to local radio rather than national newspapers. That distinction doesn’t neutralise the issue. Editorial risk, legal exposure, compliance culture and strategic priorities are managed at **group level**, not station level. Local radio is also where many accountability stories *should* surface first. The conflict remains structural.

Another detail in @nwl's analysis is just as telling: opacity. Some grants are recorded as "multiple radio stations" with no station-level breakdown. Others flow through overlapping schemes. Transparency stops just short of allowing the public to clearly map who benefits, how often, and on what basis.

Opacity is only useful where clarity would be uncomfortable.

From the inside, this is how it feels: you watch media organisations accept public funding from the very State bodies you are asking them to scrutinise. You hear assurances about editorial independence. Yet your evidence goes nowhere. You realise the problem isn't disbelief. It's *risk*.

No editor needs to be told "don't run this". Incentives do the work. A press that relies on State support to stay afloat will hesitate before biting the hand that feeds it — even if no one ever explicitly asks them to.

This isn't censorship. It's more effective than that. It's **omission**.

Public funding *can* strengthen journalism. But only if it is designed to protect adversarial reporting — especially reporting that makes those in power uncomfortable. At present, Ireland's model does the opposite. It props up media markets while quietly steering journalism away from the most dangerous stories: those that expose systemic State failure from the inside.

That's why whistleblowers don't trust a State-funded press.