2. What the next Programme for Government can learn from newsrooms

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For a long time, Ireland has followed the model that growth is automatically good. If the economy is growing then it can be said that all is well. This approach is replicated across other governments but also across other institutions: in 2007, when Facebook was plateauing at a mere 70 million users, it set up a dedicated Growth Team aimed at increasing the number of users. Today, it has more than 2 billion, more than any country in the world, and more akin to the size of a religion than anything else.

But with size comes problems. In the same way that many other institutions have seen a crisis in trust, so too has Facebook. Just one third of Irish people (33%) say that they trust social media platforms and search engines, according to this year's Edelman Trust Barometer, while 35% say that they trust the government.

This is the central problem with using growth as your key metric. It erodes trust. Focusing on quantitative measures is good for business, but by ignoring qualitative metrics, you gloss over people's lived experiences, whether that is their use of a social network or living in a society. Numbers are subjective: you choose the metrics you want to pay attention to. As a country, we've decided to put a focus on GDP, but why that? And at the expense of what?

In Ireland, the problem with relying on growth as a metric was highlighted by the Keep the Recovery Going slogan during the 2016 general election, which showed the gulf between how the government saw the country and how the people living in it saw it. Fine Gael pointed to the metrics which showed that the country was getting back on track after the recession; the electorate pointed to their quality of life.

In my own experience at The Journal, we learned a long time ago that we can't just look at the number of people who come to the site every day as a metric for whether we're succeeding or not. The site is the biggest news website in the country, with more readers every day than any of our competitors, but we also have to look at the more meaningful measures to ensure that we're still going to be successful in five, ten, twenty years: do our readers trust us as a news source? Would they recommend us to a friend? Are we doing our job and serving them strong, original articles? And if the answers aren't what we want them to be, what are we going to do about it?

So more than anything, I would suggest that this is a time when institutions - countries, social media publishers, newsrooms - should not just be focusing on growth as a metric, but instead of more qualitative metrics. For Ireland, this would be questions like is this a fair country? Is this an equal country? Are people getting the opportunities that they need to build a life? Are they happy?

I have used what I have learned about metrics from working in newsrooms over the past decade and applied it to the way that Ireland currently looks at its own metrics, particularly its economic growth. I write this as a journalist and an editor, as a woman in her 30s, and as someone who thinks Ireland is generally a good country in which to live - but which could do with some tweaking around the edges. For that reason, in looking at what I think the next Programme for Government should include, I've started by taking a step back and looking at what exactly it's trying to achieve and working from there. As Joseph Stiglitz wrote in 2009, "If we have the wrong metrics, we will strive for the wrong things."

Wait, qualitative metrics? Don't online journalists just care about clicks?

For a long time, there was a perception that online journalism was all about how many readers would click into an article to read it. It was a perception and for a lot of news websites, it was also the reality. Page views and unique views - i.e. the number of readers - were an established way of looking at success in part because of the advertising industry. Commercial partners generally are happy with these straightforward, replicable metrics. In some ways, it was a replication of the business model of newspapers: count how

many people are buying your paper and seeing the ads in order to determine whether it was a success or not.

Some websites began rebelling against this confining approach in the last five years or so, arguing that they didn't take into account the experience that readers were having when they read the news from a modern newsroom. Some readers may subscribe and read newsletters from a news website, for example, or listen to a podcast by its journalists, or follow its stories on Instagram or YouTube. In other words, as media has become more distributed, it began requiring an equally distributed solution for measuring its influence.

The other problem though was that just counting the number of readers was a purely quantitative measure and it ignored any kind of qualitative metric. In this era where distrust of the media has become far more prevalent with the spread of misinformation, understanding the experience that readers value when reading their news online has become much more important.

The shift towards qualitative metrics means that newsrooms will still look at how many people read the website every day and week and month, but increasingly they'll also look at how long readers are spending reading articles, whether they're sharing them on Facebook or WhatsApp or Twitter, and how much of each article they actually read (rather than just skim). It's a move away from the idea that online audiences only want short, snappy, fast food when it comes to getting their news online and towards a more engaged approach.

No news website wants someone clicking into a story once, whether they come from social media, a search engine or somewhere else, and never returning. That's not sustainable as a business model. Instead, you want to engage your audience: you want someone who clicks in to your news website for the first time and is given a reason to stay, to return, and to engage with the site through some other action, such as liking it on social media or downloading the app.

The problem with these qualitative measures is that, much as with some of the alternatives to GDP, it can make it difficult to compare news organisations. For example, the Irish Times does a number of excellent podcasts, while The Journal has just started dipping its toe into the world

of podcasts. The Journal does a number of email newsletter, which other media outlets don't. So how do you compare these newsrooms when the output is so different?

The answer for us, at least, has been to continue to use replicable metrics that will allow us to compare us to competitors, mainly for commercial reasons, but to also come up with metrics that are important to us and to make sure that we're achieving them. For example, our team was widely praised on social media for its information-led coverage of the Eighth Amendment. Our news editor wrote a brilliant piece about Tom Humphreys on the day he was sentenced which was shared widely and was at the centre of the discussion around his sentence. We sent an email newsletter to subscribers for every one of the 99 days that the Disclosures Tribunal sat, and received a large number of emails from readers about how invaluable they found them to be. Some of these things are more measurable than others, but we keep track of them and they're important to what we consider to be our growth as a news website. They show where our priorities are. Metrics should reflect what a company cares about, and so each media company should be looking at the data points that are relevant to its workings.

And that brings us to the problem with GDP. In the same way that relying solely on views has been a problem for websites because it doesn't reflect the nuances of whether they're succeeding or not, solely relying on GDP is a similar problem for countries.

The problems with using economic growth as the most important metric

At a recent Press Council event to discuss how the media covers minority communities, Mike Allen of Focus Ireland was (rightly) critical of journalists and sub-editors for using photographs of rough sleepers to illustrate stories about homelessness in Ireland. Rough sleepers, he pointed out, make up just over 100 out of the 10,000 homeless people in Ireland. By using images of rough sleepers, readers will conceptualise homelessness in that way, and as a result, see the solution as being about that too. So the answer to homelessness becomes about providing emergency shelter for these rough sleepers instead of building and providing homes for the people forced to live in emergency accommodation and homeless hubs, Allen said. One

might also add that it leads to a greater ‘othering’ of homeless people if this is the only image used.

It is the same myopic issue with GDP: by focusing on this one metric, a government will automatically work towards solutions that increase economic growth and eschew others which don’t.

GDP was pioneered in the 1930s by economist Simon Kuznets, who cautioned against it being used as a measure of welfare in a country - it merely provides a measure of the final goods and services produced in an economy over a given period, without any attention to what is produced, how it’s produced or who is producing it. If Ireland was a major weapons manufacturer, for example, this would led to an increase in GDP, but would also have a questionable effect on social good. However, GDP’s replicability and measurability has led to it being used widely for precisely the purpose of measuring welfare in a society.

That is the main advantage offered by using GDP. It offers a clean way to compare one country to another to give an idea of the strength of each country’s economy. It has been compared to a speedometer: it can tell you whether your economy is going faster or slower, but nothing about whether your car is overheating, about to run out of fuel, or going in the right direction. Because it only measures production, like farmers’ harvests, retail sales and manufacturers’ shipments, it doesn’t capture increasing obesity rates, collapsing fish stocks, or increases in mortality. When people choose to work part-time in order to have a better work-life balance, GDP actually goes down.

The figure can be notoriously skewed. The most obvious example of this came in July 2016 when the Irish economy grew by 26.3% in one year, more than three times the expected rate, after a number of large multinationals switched their base to Ireland. Economist Paul Krugman described it as ‘leprechaun economics’ while the Irish Times pragmatically noted that these changes “were widely recognised as not reflecting changes to the real economy”.

It has other flaws. It doesn’t take into account the environmental costs of some activities and like so many things, it overlooks the value of the work done by people - mainly women - who work in the home. If you hire

a cleaner to work in your house once a week and a window cleaner to come once a month, you will pay them and these payments will factor into GDP. If you do your own cleaning, these activities will not contribute to GDP. Additionally, it doesn't include the way that digital activities have changed the economy.

Economist Diane Coyle has noted that statistics such as GDP "guide policy and allow citizens to hold politicians to account". Reliable, independent statistics "are a public good in democratic, information-based economies," she wrote. "The pace of change in the OECD countries is making the existing statistical framework decreasingly appropriate for measuring the economy and it is therefore hindering the development of policies for high productivity and growth. Different statistics will not change the current reality... but they will help shape the future."

This is not to lay the blame on economists. They merely come up with the figure. Economist Michael Porter, who has come up with an alternative to using GDP as a metric, has said that GDP is not bad - it just measures what it measures, and like page views, what it measures is limited. It is politicians who decide the importance that is put on it, and the policies that are put in place as a result of it.

However it is worth looking at the questions that GDP overlooks, as proposed by economist Jennifer Blanke, which highlights the gaps which could be provided for by focusing on other metrics.

Firstly, is economic growth fair? It is not just how much is produced that matters, but how these gains are distributed. Does this growth translate into improvements in living standards across the society for the many, not the few? Secondly, is economic growth green? Again, it is not just about how much we produce and grow, but how we do it, and the pressure that this puts on our natural environment.

And thirdly, is the economic growth improving our lives? As mentioned above, consumers increasingly make use of businesses such as Airbnb, Spotify and in some countries, Uber, where they can make more use of what already exists rather than simply producing more "stuff". These business models add economic and consumer value, rather than quantity.

The CSO has begun phasing in a new metric called the gross national income (GNI) measure, which excludes companies moving capital assets to Ireland. But it is also worth looking at the other alternatives which could fill the gaps left by GDP and GNI that the next government should be considering when it comes to helping shape its direction over the coming years.

Ok, so what are the alternatives?

Earlier this year, Chris Moran, the former Audience Editor at The Guardian, came up with five characteristics for what makes a good metric. Moran was talking about metrics for a newsroom, but they can be equally applied to ones used by a country too. The five were:

- Relevant - does it align with core goals?
- Measurable - is it objective? Can it be defined?
- Actionable - can you do something positive and impactful with the data?
- Reliable - is the metric technically robust? Will it be relevant in a year?
- Readable - can it be easily misunderstood? Does it require a lot of context?

By this measure, GDP ticks at least three out of the five boxes. Whether or not is it actionable and relevant depends on the ideology of the government at any given time. Similarly, the New Economics Foundation in the UK has argued that indicators on how a country is doing need to matter to people, be clear and easy to communicate, and be far reaching.

There are a number of metrics other than GDP which could tick most, if not all, of these boxes and fill the gaps left by GDP. Here are three of them.

In 2014, Harvard economist Michael Porter unveiled what he called the Social Progress Index, which is intended to act as a complement to GDP - it measures everything *except* economic growth. The SPI looks at 51 social and environmental indicators that measure outcomes, such as life expectancy, literacy, and freedom of choice, rather than inputs, such as the size of government spending. Porter has said that it aims to capture the breadth of issues that constitute well-being and identify priority areas for improvement.

In its 2018 report, Ireland is ranked 12 out of 146 countries. Norway comes first, followed by Iceland and Switzerland, with Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Japan and New Zealand also in the top ten. Afghanistan, Chad and the Central African Republic are the three lowest-ranking countries on the index. Ireland scores highest on opportunity indicators, such as access to advanced education, inclusiveness and personal rights, ranking first of the 146 countries. It scores less well on health, environmental and infrastructural issues, such as wastewater treatment and access to quality healthcare. That the healthcare system is problematic will not come as a surprise to the public or politicians in Ireland, but using an index like the SPI would allow the government to benchmark achievement - or lack of - in solving the healthcare system.

On a different scale, the New Economics Foundation in Britain has proposed looking at just five key indicators as a better indicator than GDP: good jobs, well-being, the environment, fairness and health. These factors, they argue, will tell if an economy is going in the right direction. On the issue of good jobs, for example, the indicator says that everyone should be able to find secure, stable employment that pays at least enough to provide a decent standard of living. It found that 61% of the UK labour force had a secure job that paid at least the living wage. The figures were designed for the United Kingdom and there is no index showing how other countries would compare. However the indicators are, in principle, just as meaningful for other countries.

In the middle of the economic crisis, then-French president Nicolas Sarkozy asked economists Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean Paul Fitoussi to identify the limits of GDP and come up with a better measure than GDP to assess an economy's performance. In their report published in 2009, they recommended that income and consumption should be looked at, rather than production, to evaluate material well-being in a country, with an emphasis on the household perspective rather than the national one. The report also calls for more prominence to be given to the distribution of income, consumption and wealth.

There is one thing that these three suggestions, and others like them, have in common. They have not - yet? - captured the public imagination and become used as everyday indicators. It is hard to usurp a metric that has been around for almost 100 years. And yet, Ireland has been at the forefront

of a number of social changes in recent years. There is no reason why it can not also lead when it come to implementing a change in how it measures success.

The only qualitative index that has succeeded in entering the lexicon has been the Human Development Index, the 28-year-old metric which rolls together a country's GDP, the health of its citizens, based on their life expectancy, and the health of the citizens, based on literacy and school-enrolment data. Ireland currently ranks 4th, behind Norway, Switzerland and Australia. If this is to be used as the sole alternative to GDP, the Government might happily say all is well. This highlights the potential importance of the other measures identified in the Social Progress Index in helping guide Government decisions.

What kind of government policies could we expect to see if the metrics were changed?

So theoretically, if the government were to change its focus away from economic growth and prioritises more qualitative measures, such as the ones mentioned above, what kind of policies could we expect to see stemming from that which don't currently exist? Let's speculate here.

Firstly, Ireland might consider a trial of basic income. Giving the commencement speech at Harvard in May 2017, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg spoke out in support of basic income. "Every generation expands its definition of equality," Zuckerberg said. "Now it's time for our generation to define a new social contract. We should have a society that measures progress not by economic metrics like GDP but by how many of us have a role we find meaningful. We should explore ideas like universal basic income to make sure everyone has a cushion to try new ideas."

With his speech, Zuckerberg became the most high-profile of the band of tech entrepreneurs who have spoken out in favour of basic income. Unlikely allies of a massive social policy shift, perhaps, but they are keenly aware that job insecurity is inescapable as many jobs become automated.

It is one perspective on a policy that has appeal across the political spectrum: for those on the left, it is a way to alleviate poverty and provide a support system for people in low-paid employment. For those on the right,

including even Charles Murray, it is seen as a way to slash bureaucracy and replace it with a leaner welfare state. For those in between, it is a way of reshaping the relationship that people have with the State. The idea has been picking up traction in recent years; a 2016 EU-wide poll by Dalia Research found that 64% of people were in favour of basic income.

Basic income is repeatedly described as an idea whose time has come, but it is teetering on the brink of a breakthrough. Basic Income Ireland says that a basic income in which people would receive, for example, a payment of €198 per week, in line with existing payments, would "reach people who drop through the net of the current social welfare system, it drastically reduces bureaucracy, it frees claimants from intrusive scrutiny, it supports care work and creative work, it gives young people more security, it provides a financial incentive to take up any paid work that is on offer, and it provides a platform for entrepreneurship". This has major benefits for people who are self-employed, on short-term contracts, or in precarious employment, in particular.

Given all this, the question would be why a trial hasn't been run already in Ireland, especially given that it has been discussed here since the 1970s and got a far as a government green paper in 2002. One answer can be seen in a fairly damning OECD report earlier this year into a basic income trial in Finland suggested that introducing basic income would require an income tax hike of almost 30%, would increase income inequality, and would raise the poverty rate of Finland from 11.4% to 14.1%. The OECD instead suggested a universal credit system, which would replace some benefit payments with a single monthly payment.

The report highlighted the two great unknowns: How much would it actually cost, compared to the existing social welfare system, and what would the outcomes be? Here, Ireland could look to what other trials have learned.

Secondly, Ireland might look at increasing its carbon tax. Two big things happened on 8th October 2018. A landmark report published by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change found that the immediate consequences of climate change are worse than previously thought, and that the world has just 12 years to act in order to limit the most devastating consequences. On the same day, American economist William Nordhaus

was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics in part for coming up with the idea of carbon tax.

The very next day, the Irish government did not include an increase in carbon tax in its announcement of Budget 2019, despite having flagged in advance that it *would* be included. “We will have to grasp the nettle in increasing the carbon tax,” Taoiseach Leo Varadkar had told journalists at a pre-Budget briefing in August.

When asked why it had not been included in the Budget, Finance Minister Paschal Donohoe said that he had put a lot of thought into the implementation of a successful carbon tax, and come to the conclusion that given the “significant” impact it would have on living standards - if, as expected, it had increase from somewhere between €20 and €100 per tonne - that he would not address it in this year’s Budget.

Green Party leader Eamon Ryan described the lack of carbon tax increase as ‘shameful’. “Their argument that more research had to be done on what a carbon tax increase would deliver was just ridiculous,” he wrote in a column on The Journal on the day the Budget was published. “That move has been studied more than any of the other measures introduced today.”

He pointed to political expediency as an explanation: “The truth is it was scrapped because both Fine Gael and the Independent Alliance want to gain seats in rural Ireland at the next election. They calculated that binning the tax increase would make them look good to that constituency.”

Ireland first introduced a charge on the burning of carbon-based solid fuels like turf, coal and other fossil fuels which emit carbon dioxide on 1 May 2013. It is currently charged at €20 per tonne of CO2 emitted and is applied at the point of sale. One estimate suggests that the average household spends €58 per year on carbon tax.

Ireland is already falling far short of achieving its climate change targets for 2020, 2030 and 2050. In a scathing annual report, the Climate Change Advisory Council said that Ireland is in an “even worse position” compared to the previous year as greenhouse gas emissions increase again. Chair John Fitzgerald recently warned TDs and Senators that Ireland risked “going

backwards” in its efforts, and that Ireland’s carbon tax levels are too low and need to be increase.

Scientists and economists have said that a carbon tax is the most powerful and effective way to stem greenhouse gas emissions. William Nordhaus, who won the Nobel Economic Prize on the day that the IPCC report was published, has described it as the social cost of carbon: an economic model which looks at the amount of damage caused by emissions and extracts a price from it. If one tonne of carbon causes, for example, €50 of damage, which is quantified in rising sea levels which could damage a home, raise insurance costs and decrease property value, then that cost should be baked in to the cost of the carbon. By making polluters pay the same amount that they’re damaging the environment to pollute, the market is given a clear signal about the effect of using carbon.

A carbon tax creates a market incentive to solve climate change, which any economist will tell you is more powerful than expecting corporations and consumers to act out of a sense of altruism or moral/social responsibility. It does not contribute to economic growth - on the contrary, it is more likely to penalise producers - but it creates a qualitatively better country in which to live.

Thirdly, successive governments have failed to make meaningful reform in the area of childcare. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions summed up the problems with childcare thus: “It now appears that the net result of official policy to date has been to deliver working families the worst of both worlds: some of the most expensive childcare in the European Union, staffed by workers who are among the worst paid. By any definition, that represents policy failure on a major scale.”

Childcare is expensive in Ireland. The country has some of the highest-costing childcare across the OECD: couples with a 3-year-old child spend an average of 12% of their disposable income on childcare, while lone parents spend 16% and people on low incomes spend 20%, according to a recent report by Pobal published in September 2018 using data from the ESRI’s Growing Up In Ireland research.

The study found that the high cost of childcare is shutting women out of the workforce. The current employment rate for mothers who have a child

aged three to five is 54.5%, according to the OECD, which found that the average rate is 68.8%. Anecdotally, I've found in visiting other workplaces and going to conferences and events that women in their 30s and 40s are just not present at the levels that you would expect.

Katherine Zappone has noted that investment in childcare has increased by 80% since 2016 but that it will take a number of Budgets to correct "decades of under-investment". This may become a priority for this government and future governments, but focusing on quality of life metrics would ensure that it would rank more highly than it currently does.

While the problems with the health and housing sectors would obviously be major goals under these qualitative metrics, not every idea involves a massive change to the system. By having quality of life indicators at the core of its goals, a government could also look at smaller changes which could either have a long-term impact or which would increase the level of trust that people feel towards the State. For example, policies like making sanitary products available in State-owned buildings, expanding restorative justice programmes across the country, teaching financial literacy at school, investing in cycling infrastructure and reforming the defamation laws would all go some way towards achieving this.

Simply by changing the goalposts and saying that economic growth is no longer the focus, the government opens up a broad range of options.

Conclusion

It has become a feature in some newsrooms nowadays to display a screen showing important traffic statistics: how many users are reading an article at any given time, for example, or what the most-read articles on the site are. Whether it is explicit or not, the figures are a motivating force. Journalists are given the message that success will be recognised by having their work appear on the screen and this may motivate the stories that they choose to write and how they write them.

In much the same way, the Irish government focuses on economic growth. The Central Bank issues quarterly figures on it. The Minister for Finance frequently refers to it. He called it the "baseline scenario" that underpins the Budget for next year. In a report in September of this year, he warned that

the biggest potential problem of shifting demographics in coming decades as the population ages was that it "could lead to a slower pace of economic growth". At an ESRI conference in July, he noted that the challenge Ireland now faces is how to use budgetary policy to deal with Ireland's changing economic growth rates.

If that is a choice that the government has actively made then so be it. But if it is done merely because it is the way that things have always been done, then it is ripe for change. In the same way that newsrooms are striving to build trust and engage their readers, the next Programme for Government could do worse than examining what metrics it wants to focus on and then working on its priorities based on that.