



**Mr Conor Brady, former Editor of *The Irish Times* and former member, Garda Ombudsman Commission launches 2012 Annual Report of the Press Council of Ireland and the Office of the Press Ombudsman - 27 May 2013**

I am greatly honoured to have been asked to launch the 5th Annual Report of the Press Council of Ireland.

I would like congratulate the Council and the Ombudsman, along with his staff, on a year's work well done. One can only be struck, reading through the case reports, by the sense of thoroughness, fairness and diplomacy that they bring to bear upon their task.

Half a decade is something of a landmark. And the Council and the office of the Press Ombudsman are now an established and effective part of the media landscape.

Not all of us believed it would actually happen, even though many had been seeking something like it, along with reform of the defamation laws, for many years.

I had the task as far back as 1987 of presenting the first NNI report, arguing the case for reform and proposing the establishment of a system of "readers' representatives" to the then Minister for Industry and Commerce, Albert Reynolds.

Nobody anticipated that when he got to be Taoiseach he would turn into one of the great serial litigants of the age!

Not all editors and journalists down the years who urged transparency and accountability on others were keen to acknowledge that there was a serious lack of them in our own, immensely powerful, avocation.

So there is some irony – not to say poignancy – that with the concept of press accountability finally and fully embedded here, the print media should find themselves under pressure as never before, to maintain their very existence.

INM is grappling with debt but, thankfully, making progress. TCH has gone through receivership in the hope of emerging safely in its new incorporation as Landmark Media. The Irish Times is trimming costs and product to balance the books. The Irish Press is gone. The provincial press is pedalling harder and harder, like the man on the bicycle, trying to stay perpendicular.

Newspapers have to contend not only with the most sustained economic dip since the Great Depression; their traditional revenues, as we know, are being taken away by internet-based competitors who can produce inexpensive content and operate on a minimal cost structure.

It is now very clear that the newspaper companies that do survive into the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be those that can sustain the pace of innovation; that can adapt, innovate and use the internet, in conjunction with their traditional output, to find new audiences, new products and new markets.

We have to live in our time and adapt to its realities. The newspapers were an unstoppable force in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They swept away the duopoly of influence represented by religion and a particular social order. Broadcasting, in turn, was an unstoppable influence in social change in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We have to recognise that the development and evolution of information technology is unstoppable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I am not seeking to stop the clock of history. Nor am I expressing a generalised criticism of on-line newspapers and news sites. Many are excellent. Social media can generate news that is fast, authentic and that may not, in some circumstances, emerge through traditional news channels. But there is also a vast amount of unverifiable trivia, a lot of manipulation and distortion and abuse, masquerading as analysis.

I don't think there are many editors or journalists now who don't recognise both the merits and the perils on internet-based content. And I don't think there are many who worry whether their own output is presented on pulped fir trees or on a screen.

The core of good newspapers is not plant or machinery. It is a commitment to truth, accuracy and verification. It reposes in skills and values that have been accumulated and honed over more than two centuries. In commercial terms, this is what gives value to our "brands." These qualities have to be protected and not diluted.

It would be nice if I were able to say something reassuring here; that Irish newspapers have risen successfully to the challenge; that the native genius has triumphed on an island that is home to 9 out of 10 of the world's top IT companies, and that employs a higher proportion of its workforce in IT than any other European country.

I think they're trying. Some are trying a great deal harder and with a great deal more imagination than others. But they haven't done as well as their counterparts in some other countries.

Nor have they held their traditional markets as well. The drop in sales of metropolitan newspapers in some US cities has been greatly slowed. Some Canadian and Scandinavian newspapers have either stabilised their sales or in some cases slowed the drop to a fraction of what is being experienced here.

They've achieved this by organisational agility, by imaginative commercial strategy and by editorial development and innovation. Reducing cost base and identifying efficiencies are essential. But on their own they will slim an organisation to extinction.

The old business model of the newspaper industry is gone - like the magnetic videotape and the horse and buggy. A new model has yet to be found, not just here in Ireland but particularly in other small countries which do not have the economies of scale that apply in larger markets.

In the meantime, you have a struggle on your hands. And I fear that without much more radical thinking and without support in that struggle, not all of you will actually still be around when the new business model emerges.

Those who monitor these things tell us that there is now emerging a renewed appreciation of what newspapers – at their best - do well; authority, accuracy, consistency, fairness and balance.

The world still needs some means of knowing what's really happening; of sorting assertion and supposition from researched facts and authentication. In simple terms, there is still a market there for what good newspapers do.

So, is it the case that all you have to do is stick to your principles and sit it out? "Old" media, we are told, are reasserting themselves.

Report the news fully, objectively, fairly; deploy your reporters and your photographers and your analysts wherever important things are happening ; at parliament, in the courts, in the war zones, in the money markets, where the natural disasters occur.

The values and the virtues of good journalism will win out – and we will all settle into a stable future.

I dearly wish that it could be so.

Because the problem, as we await the new dawn, is that dwindling revenues are forcing the attenuation of resources, the elimination of services and the shrinking of the space and time within which journalists are asked to do their jobs.

There are fewer journalists and they're working longer hours, discharging more tasks and spreading themselves across a wider range of duties than ever before.

Not only this; many of them are being poorly paid; there are very few new entrants now with the security of staff jobs; there are probably none who can look to the prospect of a pension unless they can somehow fund it themselves out of their diminished pay-packets.

I can remember, in my early days as a young freelancer, bringing in my copy at *The Irish Press* or *The Irish Times*, seeing the last of the unpensioned, unprovided-for journalists of a generation or two ahead of me. In their late 60s and '70s, they shuffled in to do their shifts – because they had no option but to work until they dropped.

Ironically, if we were to visit any of the newsrooms now, we would see the first of the new generation of unpensioned, unprovided-for journalists.

I don't think good journalism can flourish if those who seek to make a career of it cannot be reasonably well-provided for; as well provided for example, as a teacher or a civil servant or a guard. If we are to have journalists with commitment, determination and energy, there must be the prospect of a reasonable living, the wherewithal, in time, to make a home, form a relationship, perhaps provide for children and so on.

I am not necessarily blaming the newspaper companies or the commercial managers. They have to try to balance outgoings against income. They can't write cheques if there is no money in the current account. The press that cannot pay its own way is not a free press.

But what worries me is that by the time the new business model is identified and by the time it is up and working, the reductions in resources and the screwing down of costs will have gone so far that there may be very little good journalism left.

If there isn't the money to pay journalists reasonably well, to fund them when they go out on the road or into the conflict zone, how can qualities of accuracy, authenticity or comprehensiveness in news coverage be assured?

It costs money to train them, equip them, support them and keep them safe.

If there were to be another Beef Tribunal Inquiry tomorrow, I doubt very much if most of the news media could simply afford to cover it and to analyse it on a daily basis as was done in the 1990s.

If the news media were asked to cover a conflict on the scale of the Northern Troubles today, I think most of them could not afford the resources that were put in on the ground over the years of violence and in the evolution of the Peace Process.

Our nearest neighbours, who are also our biggest trading partners, are going to have a referendum on whether they will stay within the European Union. There can be few possible developments that would have such profound implications for this country. The story has to be reported. But I believe *The Irish Times* is now the only Irish news medium that maintains a staff presence in London.

The reality is that as revenues shrink, editors and programmers are under pressure to develop content that costs less. Celebrity news and trivia around TV stars and footballers cost a lot less than reporting real news.

I am not against newspapers or broadcasters entertaining people. I can say that in my time as an editor I initiated or expanded, along with my colleagues, many of the sections dealing with film, drama, books - entertainment in general. But it should never be at the expense of core news.

So how are we going to fund newsrooms?

There are some possibilities that I think we have to consider.

There could be a role for philanthropic support for serious project journalism.

Over the past year, for example, the Mary Raftery Journalism Fund, honouring her memory, in conjunction with the One Foundation, has disbursed funds to more than 20 journalists and programme makers to cover specific issues in relation to disability, racism and immigration.

The result has been that some serious issues have been covered, in print, on air, the web and in combination of all of these, that might not been covered otherwise. There are many draws on the world's philanthropic funds but there is a possibility here that I think could be and should be further explored.

It may be time to take a fresh look, almost in an experimental way, at sponsored content. It's been there *de facto* for many years. The EU has long supported coverage of its institutions. The Houses of the Oireachtas effectively sponsor the broadcast coverage of their proceedings. Some of the non governmental aid agencies have long operated a policy of subvention for journalists to cover their activities in the third world.

There are dangers and pitfalls, of course. There would have to be strict safeguards and guidelines. But some newspapers abroad, including for example, *The Guardian*, have begun cautiously to edge into this area.

It may also be possible, if the political will exists, to bring some money back into traditional news media from the huge, internet-based organisations that make fortunes out of their content.

There may be something else that can be done if we are to find an answer to the question; how do we fund newsrooms?

The question, in those succinct terms, is not mine originally. It was put a couple of years back by the then Minister for Communications, Eamonn Ryan.

He had brought together a small working party to consider the possibility of articulating a national media policy that could provide a broad framework within which all media, from internet to broadcasting to print might operate.

The idea would be to create a broad framework which could at once facilitate the development of IT enterprises while, at the same time, provide a reasonable funding mechanism for serious news media. Regrettably, the working party had not really got to grips with issues before the general election and Eamonn Ryan left office.

Now, it might be said that this was an impossible project anyway. Market forces have to be allowed to operate. Industries sometimes die.

But the news industry is not like coalmining, or car assembly, or turning out plastic buckets. It is an indispensable part of the democratic process.

We have seen the French doing something quite similar to what Eamonn Ryan was moving towards, and with positive results.

A dialogue between the French government and the big internet players, started under President Nicholas Sarkozy and brought to fruition under President Hollande, will see €60 million go back this year into the funding of traditional news media.

I would urge the current Minister, Pat Rabbitte to consider some such initiative. He is one of the most committed people in public life, with long parliamentary experience and with very good reason, over the course of his political career, to appreciate the importance of a well-resourced, robust and questioning media.

Let us not underestimate the challenge that would lie in any attempt to have internet companies return something of the money they make, in part, out of what is generated by traditional media. These companies represent one of the few bright spots in the economic gloom. Anything that might make their presence here less profitable or less comfortable would indeed be problematic.

But our democracy will be impoverished if news media are so reduced in their fortunes that they cannot actually report the news.

There are not a few, including some of the politicians, who will delight in the prospect of seeing the pernicious influence of the newspapers being curbed by the laws of economics. I would remind them of the ancient Chinese curse; that you may get what you say you desire. Because if the traditional news media go, what will come to take its place, to fill the vacuum, will be abhorrent.

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