



Address by Professor John Horgan, Press Ombudsman
Opening of Journalism Student Newsroom
University of Limerick
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“Current Issues in Journalism”

The title “Current Issues in Journalism” carries certain implications. Are there issues in journalism today that were not issues yesterday and will not be issues tomorrow? Or are there some issues that will always be “current”. And of course there are some issues that disappear and reappear over time with varying degrees of intensity.

The most acute of the issues currently is that of survival. Journalism has often been supposed to be in terminal decline and yet it has continually re-invented itself. The challenges of the present day in this area, however, are possibly unique, at least in their suddenness and severity. There is cyclical change, as the engines of the global economy slow down with a grinding of gears and a squealing of brakes. One of the most established newspapers in the world, the New York Times, last week borrowed \$250 million from a Mexican millionaire so that it could make the repayments on a loan of over \$1 billion. As advertising shrinks and circulation stutters, nobody is entirely safe.

And then there is structural change, as technologies are born, flourish, coalesce or die as swiftly as butterflies. In the 1960s, when I had just started work as a journalist, the fax machine was one of the wonders of the age. Although a version of it had been in use for some time to transmit photographs, it was the first piece of new technology to hit the newsroom since the invention of the telephone. At that time, if the rumours that reached us were true, the officials of the Department of Posts and Telegraphs estimated that the foreseeable demand for these new-fangled devices across the entire country would not exceed 200. Nowadays, you will have that many fax machines in a couple of fair-sized office buildings, along with a bewildering array of technology beside which the fax machine resembles something from the stone age.

Today, the explosion of communications technology has been accompanied by a dramatic convergence. Newspapers still – and I think will for the foreseeable future – continue, in the words of one of their critics, to print stories on dead trees, but increasingly they are becoming multi-media hubs, 24/7 news operations, information hyperstores, and part of the blogosphere. And they are staffed by increasingly multi-talented, flexible and adaptable journalists.

The number of visitors to the top 10 US newspaper websites grew to 40.1 million in December, an increase of 16 percent over a year ago. The New York Times website was six percent from the previous December, USA Today posted a gain of 15 percent, The Washington Post 12 percent, and the Los Angeles Times had a rise of 73 percent. The Wall Street Journal saw the number of unique visitors grow by 34 percent year-on-year to 7.2 million while the Daily News a New York tabloid, notched up the most impressive growth, receiving 5.9 million unique visitors in December, an increase of 99 percent from a year earlier. All that newspaper managements now have to do is to find a way of turning these visitors into cash – easier said than done, I readily admit, in a world where so much information is free. The thing about it is, as journalists and their managements should be able to demonstrate when necessary, that all the information that is free is not necessarily accurate.

Journalism will survive, and indeed flourish, in this new situation of it doesn't lose its nerve, and if it remembers that it occupies a unique position as an indispensable intermediary between the increasingly complex and globalised world in which we live, and its citizens in every society. It will remain indispensable only if it remains credible. It will have to remember that just because the web cannibalises newspapers, there is no reason why newspapers should repay the compliment by cannibalising the web. Although the web sometimes performs a valuable function in relation to the print media – it can even operate as a sort of quality control mechanism on occasion – its very accessibility to users with no evidence for their assertions or their opinions, and frequently its anonymity, means that it will always be a secondary source as long as the print media are doing their job properly.

Journalism will prosper, I believe, if it also remembers some of the ancient truths about what is, it must be said, as much of a craft as a profession, a set of powerful skills at the service of individuals and communities everywhere. Here are a few of them.

Journalists are powerful, but should remember, as Lord Acton said, that all power tends to corrupt, and that absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely. Journalists should never believe their own press notices, and should remember that rubbing shoulders with celebrities does not make them celebrities themselves. The fascination with power is not, of course, confined to journalists, but it is certainly heightened in the members of our profession, particularly in relation to politics, where readers are daily taken on a giddy roller-coaster ride to view their political masters in one of the two positions journalists are happiest writing about: meteoric rise – or catastrophic fall.

Malcolm Muggeridge once summed it up pithily. “Journalists”, he said (and he was one himself), “follow authority like sharks follow a liner, feeding on the scraps that are thrown overboard. But every once in a while the whole ship goes down – and they have a feast!”

To that quotation I would add one other, not least as a reminder that politicians are not the only people in our society who wield power, and who should be held accountable. “The rich”, the great American economist J. K. Galbraith once mildly remarked, “are much noticed, but little studied.”

Journalists are in many cases, I believe, unconscious of the power they themselves wield, and that blessed ignorance can be a good thing. But I am also struck by the frequency with which people contact my office asking me to hurl a thunderbolt at some journalist or other, not only because they feel that the journalist has wronged them in some way, but because they have a real fear that if they engage personally with a journalist or a newspaper they will inevitably come off second best in a struggle between unequals.

Now, no journalist worth his or her salt should expect to be universally loved: but, if journalists evoke such fear, is that a good thing? Where is the dividing line between honest indignation and arrogant prescription? Does journalism sometimes take on, chameleon-like, some of the attributes of those in public life whom it decides to attack for being out of touch with the public, for dodging uncomfortable issues, for refusing to take responsibility when things go wrong?

Again, some people knock on my door not because they are afraid to deal with journalists but because their reasonable attempts to deal with them have been met with a deafening silence. My own dealings with newspapers and journalists are generally business-like and efficient: is there some reason why a small number of them cannot deal with the public – their ultimate paymasters – in the same way? I know that journalism is a high-pressure business, and dealing with the public is time-consuming and often unrewarding: but there are times when a little more humility and efficiency would go a long

way to restore the confidence of the public in print media that are under threat. In an ideal world, my office will be a last resort rather than first port of call; and journalists, while understandably proud of their many achievements, would do well to remember the marvellous description of a newspaper penned by David Broder of the Washington Post some 30 years ago:

“I would like to see us say over and over until the point has been made... that the newspaper that drops on your doorstep is a partial, hasty, incomplete, inevitably somewhat flawed and inaccurate rendering of some of the things we heard about in the past 24 hours... distorted despite our best efforts to eliminate gross bias by the very process of compression that makes it possible for you... to read it in about an hour. If we labelled the paper accurately then we would immediately add: But it’s the best we could do under the circumstances, and we will be back tomorrow with a corrected updated version.”

On another point, I would like to suggest that ethics, in journalism, begin where the writing ends. I know that sounds odd, coming from someone whose job it is to interpret and apply a Code of Professional Practice, but the point I am trying to make is that if we think that ethics reside only in codes and in the structures set up to enforce them, we are really picking up the wrong end of the stick. If recent events in the national and global economy prove anything, it is that reliance on written rules and regulatory structures, at the end of the day, is no substitute for personal responsibility, for a sense of what is right and what is wrong - no matter what the rules say.

Of course independent regulation is a good and useful thing in itself, whether in journalism or in banking. But if one profession after another turns into a cat-and-mouse game between the regulators and the regulated, we are well on the way to fulfilling George Bernard Shaw’s sharp-tongued observation that all professions are conspiracies against the laity. Of all the professions, journalism should set its face against such an outcome, and should continue to hold the feet to the fire of any other profession which looks like it is heading in that direction. But it will not do it with any credibility if it loses sight of its core function as a public service, or forgets that a sense of personal responsibility is as important for the youngest reporter as it is for the most seasoned editor. It is not always easy to remember it or even to identify it in the cacophony of a crowded newsroom, or if you are wondering anxiously when your next paid shift is going to materialise, but keep an ear cocked for it.

My next point follows on from the last. The prime responsibility of journalism, as a public service, is to the reader, viewer or listener. When margins are under pressure, when staffing is being cut, and when the information superhighway is available to everyone at the click of a mouse, journalists at all levels should ask themselves: am I adding anything here, or am I just re-packaging something that has already been engineered by someone else? And is this all that my audience deserves and is paying for?

There is a continual risk, especially in straitened times, that the pressures of time and money will convert journalists into drones, into residual processors of facts and opinions that have been generated elsewhere and which they will not have the time to evaluate or sift properly. The web is a huge research tool and should not be under-estimated. But remember that your fingers on the keyboard are not the only tools of your trade. So are your eyes and ears. And your legs. Turn the damn computer off, get out and explore the world on the other side of the laptop screen. It always repays a visit.

Next, remember that although, in journalism, crime always pays, it does not always pay in the right currency. Newspapers would be a lot less interesting if there were no news of crime, and indeed crime reporting is often very much in the public interest, as well as being something that the public is interested in. But it is important not to forget that we, the people, employ the Gardai to catch criminals, and judges to sentence them. If journalists don’t think that these institutions are doing their job properly, then criticism is in order: that is what a free press is for, and very important it is too. But there are a couple of reasons why journalism should stop short of operating on the basis of a belief that it could do a better job of either. Justice is, or should be, the currency of the courts and the Gardai. Synthetic anger, trials by media, and invitations to moral panic are no substitute. Worse, they run the risk of deadening the sensibilities of readers so that, when

the wolf is really at the door, they will be unable to distinguish the hype from the reality. Again, if we are being encouraged to believe that criminals are beyond redemption and have no human rights, what is the point of a probation service, and is rehabilitation a dirty word? Is inflicting collateral damage on the innocent families of those who have broken our laws something that is worth thinking about, or is it simply a question of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth? Is vengeance preferable to justice?

There are no easy answers to these questions: but if we do not address them even occasionally, if we persist in maintaining that although every saint has a past, no sinner has a future, do we not run the risk of coarsening public debate about serious issues, and perhaps at the end of the day wearying readers, listeners and viewers with a diet of fake outrage that begins by boosting circulation and ends by turning people off? Very little of this comes under the Code of Practice: but all of it invites reflection by journalists on what they are doing, and why.

Next, we should always remember that what must be true is more important than what might be true. What must be true is the hard currency of journalism; what might be true is its small change. Although comment is an essential part of journalism, and enjoys a wide measure of freedom under the Code of Practice, facts remain the gold standard. Like crime reporting, rumour and gossip are part of all journalism, and a dull world it would be without them. Sometimes, indeed, publishing rumours is the only way of bringing something important to the attention of the public. But – and the Code of Practice is clear about this – they should always be clearly labelled as such or appropriately attributed, so that readers can make up their own minds about the reliability of what they are being told.

This is going to assume increasing importance in an era of citizen journalism, and at a time when the media are increasingly opening their digital presences to reader participation, bloggers and commentary of all kind. In time, the print media will have to confront important issues in this area: to what extent will they edit contributions from readers to their websites? Will they edit them before allowing them onto the website, or after? Anonymity is the hallmark of the blogosphere: to what extent should it be allowed or even encouraged by newspaper websites? Quite apart from the legal implications, there are also enormous cost implications: the Guardian, which has one of the best newspaper websites in the world, employs a large number of full-time journalists solely to edit the comments posted to its web-based discussions, and frequently censors – it is not too strong a word – discussion threads that have simply lost their entitlement to be part of civilised discourse because they become too dangerously inflamed. Managing the web is not as cheap as accessing it.

I have no doubt that journalism will adapt itself to this new age with verve and courage. As long as it remembers that reliability, accuracy and authenticity are its core values, and as long as there are managements ready to invest in these expensive foundations of good journalism, the print and other media will continue to attract not only the audiences, but also the advertisers, without whom the future would be bleak indeed. Whatever the difficulties that lie ahead, those of you who have decided to study journalism and take it up as a career will discover, sooner rather than later, that there are few more satisfying occupations to follow, and few where there are such opportunities for principled, courageous, skilful and effective people to change our world for the better.

John Horgan
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