



**Extract from address by Professor John Horgan, Press Ombudsman
at the launch of “Memoir” by Tim Pat Coogan.
The Writers’ Museum, Dublin
Tuesday 30 September 2008**

The launch of a memoir by one of the better known Irish newspaper editors of the twentieth century is, among other things, an occasion to reflect not only on the past of our newspapers, but on their future.

The events of the past few days and weeks have demonstrated that the day when newspapers were first with the news is long past. The speed of events in the global financial collapse is such that most newspapers are out of date between the time that they are printed and the time that they leave the printing works – at least in respect of that major story. Radio, and later television, have had a head start on breaking news for some time. Even these media are now continually challenged, in this area, by the web, and are in many cases trying to hitch themselves to its turbo-charged wagon.

And yet this is not the whole story. Newspapers and periodicals have long demonstrated their resilience in the face of rapidly changing social and economic circumstances. They have not always responded to the challenges quickly, but they have responded to them eventually – and, in the circumstances, have echoed Mark Twain’s famous riposte (directed, as it happens, at a newspaper which had prematurely published his obituary) that reports of his death had been greatly exaggerated.

(We had, of course, our own Irish equivalent of Mark Twain in this regard – but his reaction to the premature publication of his political obituary has, unaccountably, not been recorded for posterity.)

In the almost half a century since national television was established in Ireland, newspapers and periodicals have evidently suffered. There have been closures, weaknesses, crises. But they have survived, reinvented themselves to a degree, and many of them have prospered even in difficult times.

The challenge of the new media is one which they will also have to confront. They are at the moment confronting it, but in different ways and not always certain of the right path to take. This is inevitable. Times are tough as a result. 7,000 journalists have lost their jobs in the United States since the beginning of this year. Redundancies, packages, out-sourcing – these seem to be part of the grammar of survival everywhere as managements struggle to reduce costs in the face of soaring overheads, shrinking advertising, and the migration of readers to the new media.

And yet there is hope if print journalism, in its myriad forms, can learn not only how to trim unnecessary fat, but how to play to its strengths. Because these strengths are as essential to the well-being of our society and its institutions as those of many other systems, they need to be strengthened and developed so that the necessary process of re-invention can take place.

Perhaps re-discovery is a better word than re-invention. For the print media have always had huge strengths – strengths that even they themselves may have under-estimated. They may, as I have said, no longer be first with the news, but only in the sense that they are rarely if ever first with the big news story of the day. But they are often first with the detail that the electronic media simply cannot provide, and for which they still have enviable amounts of space. They can be first, too, with much other news for which the electronic media, again constrained by space, simply have no room, or in which it has no interest.

In short, even though the print media may no longer carry the cachet of being first with the news, they should never willingly surrender the claim of being best with the news – most detailed, most reliable, most authentic, most prepared to accept that social, economic and political reality has many sides, and most prepared to attempt to reflect as many of these as possible.

These are high ideals, and they are not inexpensive to put into practice. But if the print media invest in them to the best of their ability, I think that they will be pleasantly surprised by the loyalty, not only of their readers but of their advertisers and perhaps, even, of their critics, of whom there will always be a plentiful supply. In a fragmented media universe, quality and authenticity should not be put at risk simply because they do not come cheap.

And quality and authenticity are not only assets in themselves. They are the best arguments that anyone can put forward for the freedom of the press itself. And without that freedom, with its warts and all, we might as well pack up and go home.