

**Press Council of Ireland/Office of the Press Ombudsman - Public Forum –
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Dr Michael Breen.



“It’s all the politicians’ fault: why don’t they do something.”

“It’s all the guards’ fault: they should sort it all out now.”

“It’s all the courts’ fault: they should lock them up for life.”

“It’s all the media’s fault: if they didn’t glamorize them, these gangs would be seen for the thugs they are.”

I suspect that most of you, like me, have heard those or similar comments trotted out ad nauseam on various radio chat shows and in conversations here and there. They are all nonsense, of course; we are dealing with an issue of very great complexity that does not have a simple solution.

Generally speaking, Ireland is well served by the high quality of journalism found in most broadsheet and regional newspapers, on radio and television, although some distinction is to be made between those radio and television programmes which actually allow genuine debate on the one hand and those which adopt a more ‘come one, come all’ approach, driven essentially by populist demand. These quality media are usually seen as reliable and trustworthy; their coverage of events is a measure of the significance and relative importance of those events to Irish society.

Despite what some might think, Limerick has in fact been well served by the media in their reporting serious crime in the city. For those of us who have a stake in the city, that is not a pleasant experience. That said, I believe that for some, there is more concern with the tarnishing of the city’s reputation than with the actual core problem of gang-related crime. The media have exposed a virulent horror within the city, the cause of which must be identified and rectified. The city owes the media a great deal but that does not mean that the coverage has been balanced or complete.

Many of you will be aware of the appellation of “stab city” to Limerick, a title most of us rightly deem offensive, ignorant and prejudiced. In fact, in the last 10 years, that term was only used 25 times in the national daily broadsheets in total; 20 of those uses were rejecting the term. By contrast the tabloid newspapers used the term 77 times in the same period, and most of the usages were derogatory. But the term has stuck.

Poor quality tabloid coverage, together with highly inflammatory language, disingenuous subheadings and misleadingly captioned images, continues to masquerade as journalism and has a large audience. It is these same tabloid sources that have been so negative about other areas in Irish life, and which appear to have no qualms about the consequences of sensational reportage. These same concerns have been documented about the tabloids in relation to other issues, most recently in terms of coverage of refugees and prisoners. I believe this is particularly true of tabloid radio, especially tabloid pirate radio.

Many of you will be familiar with the Regeneration Programmes that are beginning in Limerick. These have come about in no small measure due to the media coverage of certain horrific events in recent years in this city. But there is a reality behind life in the regeneration areas that is not covered in the media for the most part, a life that is shared in many of the deprived and poorest communities in this country.

What is that reality: the education system has failed to meet the needs of these communities; the social system has failed to meet the needs of these communities; the legal system has failed to meet the needs of these communities: and now we expect the penal system to be a solution? We need some joined up thinking here, to paraphrase the Fitzgerald Report.

To that list one can add the media: the media have failed to meet the needs of these communities. Why do

I say that: precisely because poverty, social deprivation and the reality of urban ghetto life are not hot news topics.

Bishop Donal Murray is worth quoting in this context:

“The huge majority of people and of families in the areas where the violence is centred are decent, law abiding people who have a pride in their own area but who have seen it blighted by the actions of the few. Violence has already “spilled over” in a way that subjects good and peaceful members of our community to heartbreak, fear and intimidation, to the destruction of the reputation of their neighbourhood, and to an environment marked by burnt out houses and burnt out cars and burnt out hopes.”

The bishop has stressed the notion of ‘our community’ in his recent statement. But these sections of ‘our community’ are all but invisible in the mass media.

The truth is that class actually matters, in spite of our common denial of it. If you are not the right class, you can’t easily get access to good education, easy loans, full mortgages or ready jobs. And you certainly can’t get easy access to media.

The media focus on crime has not been paralleled by an equal focus on the heartbreak, fear and intimidation of which the bishop speaks. The mass media generally do not provide any significant analysis of the causes of social deprivation, of homelessness, of poverty, of urban violence, of educational failure. It is in that context that one can rightly say that the media have failed to meet the needs of these communities.

Crime does matter and must be reported. So does poverty. But it rarely gets the same kind of reportage, let alone righteous indignation. It is to the great credit of the local press, including the free newspapers, that there is detailed reporting on the realities of life in deprived communities in Limerick. It is something from which the national media organisations could learn a great deal.

But it is not simply a matter of providing news stories and features about life in disadvantaged communities. Description is all very well but never leads to change. Until and unless the reality of life in deprived areas along with a solid understanding of the root causes of deprivation form part of the public agenda, change will be reactive, piecemeal and ultimately inadequate. In this respect the media have an enormous role to play.

I am not suggesting for one moment that the media can solve this problem. It is sad but true to say this: if people from the leafy suburbs of our cities were subjected to the same heartbreak, the same fear, the same intimidation, the same destruction and the same hopelessness as obtains in our deprived communities, we would hear and see a great deal more and a great deal more often, from the mass media, until the problem was solved. Why is it that these problems in deprived communities do not merit the same coverage as they would for the better off?

ENDS

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