

News Journalism in the Internet World

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TAKE that Satellite picture of the world....you all know the one which is graphic indication of accelerating urbanisation, the lights of encroaching cities across the planet. Apply that focus to global broadband/Internet penetration and it is a much more reassuring scenario...a positive indicator of an Open World, awesome content generation, truly massive engagement, and a catalyst for democratisation where the web is allowed operate freely.

Then adjust the focus to ensure a deeper look and closer identification of multinational digital 'controllers'. You also see how some governments censor online content, how others stand idly by as many operate oblivious to issues of balance, libel, privacy and copyright...Not so comforting now.

Factor in the dominance of a tiny number of all-powerful brands, and there is less of a sense of warm empowerment...The agents of healthy democracy are diluted and diminished. Looking at the picture within the framework of News in the Internet Age and there are many additional worrying issues.

That said, increasingly, I'm a digital consumer enthused by the web's ability to inform, to facilitate often great debate and to be in tune with modern lifestyles. Significantly from the perspective of The Irish Times, there is a place in that world for multimedia companies born out of traditional, quality newspapers - provided they embrace a mix of incessant change and innovation.

Through our various digital platforms we are in the process of transforming operations to serve a growing, discerning online audience. The old hierarchical model of 'we will tell you the news' is over.

We are becoming a telling presence within the realm of social networking - acknowledging the new power of individuals and 'the new plasticity of info'.

The starting point for us is understanding the everyday needs of today's consumers and how a brand such as The Irish Times can act as enabler in their lives. As noted by the FT editor

recently, we are "fighting for time and attention with a range of often interconnected media outlets, technology platforms and an 'always on' stream of information and gossip".

We believe there is a place for quality journalism, underpinned by a strong degree of trust, in that space. We aim to distinguish ourselves from the white noise with insight, context, explanation, clarity and a unique take on Ireland and on the world through Irish eyes.

It requires, in my view, being a genuine, responsive multimedia company while using the platform of an outstanding newspaper, reinforced by its strong news base and record of content generation. Equally, it necessitates embracing genuine innovation and the latest in content management technology.

The Business Side:

Business models are emerging including a clearer picture of how media, particularly newspapers, can sustain their journalism through digital revenues though no one is quite there yet. The Irish landscape is even more arduous because of the scale of our recession.

That is why there is a need to look at competitive forces in our market, across print, broadcasting and online...There is need to look at what is fair against the background of a reduced advertising cake for all Irish media interests.

Opening up RTE broadcast content to other media interests is one way of redressing the imbalance. But does it diminish the diversity of content too much? Will it lead to increased commoditisation of Irish news; a trend which proved fatal for many American newspapers who cut content in favour of wire services?

In my view, a more sophisticated over-arching arrangement incorporating native Irish media including RTE is necessary.

Pragmatic supports in the interest of fair competition while acknowledging the importance of vigorous media in strong democracies have been introduced elsewhere in Europe; notably, measures not linked in any way to government policy or influence.

With declining revenue streams from traditional sources, there is likely to be more co-operation between like-minded Irish media interests. Philanthropic support of good journalism, particularly from non-profit organisations, is also likely to increase.

Despite the turbulence and imbalances in the marketplace, I'm optimistic about a digital future for those capable of adapting quickly.

In our case, readers/listeners/viewers are participating in stories like never before. Our online audience is at an unprecedented level.

It's no longer a case of last minute at night putting up newspaper articles online and believing all will be grand in serving a digital audience over the following 24 hours...

That aside, uncertainty is forcing change and at a quicker pace than ever before – the emergence of constantly changing devices and new consumption patterns is almost overwhelming. There are worrying indications that some outlets are losing out in the 'Time War Zone'; which is based on how much time consumers spend in front of a screen, touching a tablet, Facebooking, twittering, texting, reading a newspaper or thumbing a hand-held console.

News as we know is under threat from an inferior product where one eye is always trained on traffic numbers. Yet if you are in the news business today you have to know how your content is being consumed armed with sophisticated metrics.

Technology too has changed the pace of news production. Time pressures require more decisive decisions...there are more opportunities to get it wrong.

Above all, for traditional media businesses it's change or die. That said, there is evidence the Internet is maturing in the sense of an improved collective understanding of how it operates most effectively, so there's good opportunity for those who know their audience intimately.

Some big players, however, may be taking ownership of key infrastructure including the Googles, the Apples, the Facebooks and giant Telecoms. The real/controlling world is seeking a greater foothold and return. Governments have the precarious task of having to get the balance right.

Equally in today's world, notions of copyright vary wildly. Again this is a nightmare for the regulators.

We are acutely aware of the realities of a networked world in terms of linking and aggregation. I'm not advocating a police state...just fair acknowledgment and sourcing... and payment where content is the product of substantial investment by way of journalistic resources.

In The Irish Times, we are on a track of accelerating change, notably in channelling content to a broad range of devices. Our standards of independence, accuracy, and fairness will be to the fore across all forms of content. Noble aspirations not always achieved as we conduct the imperfect practice of news gathering...but of value in the face of so much content elsewhere of questionable provenance.

Our mantra is: 'We aspire to being the trusted source of information whether it's in print, on web, mobile, iphone, iPad or tablet device.' That doesn't mean being staid and predictable or being locked in a 'paper of record' mode or way of thinking. I have to say, however, that those who value strong journalism are worried. Eamon has articulated those concerns ably. The fear is that the pace of change and financial pressures will inevitably lead to lower quality. The cost too will be paid in a less rigorous examination of the workings, successes and failures of our democracy.

What would Ireland be like without our native newspapers? The British presence in the medium term would fill the void, in my view.

What impact would that have? Equally, what would the broadcast landscape be like without RTE embracing a meaningful public service role?

Would, for example, our democracy be diminished by the absence of our collective coverage of the political landscape? In my opinion, the answer to that is a firm 'Yes'.

For traditional media, newspapers and broadcasters like RTE, the changed landscape means our news values are not followed by many operating in the digital space... Sometimes the digital cauldron is marked by menacing commentary. It's not a pretty picture. Eamon's suggestion that we must 'make the conversation civil' is pertinent...if not, there is a risk that those big players will curb content in response to over-rigorous regulation. That will impair the web's openness and beautiful functionality.

We have to fight to secure a place for quality journalism in that turbulent mix. I believe Irish Times content will stand out if we remain faithful to our approach; to our creative intuition, and to our value system. It also requires the input of sharp editors to help people navigate information overload; to filter the "blog fog".

The new competitors for newspapers are perhaps not the bogeymen; Google, Facebook and

Twitter. "The competition is not telling good stories," noted Juan Señor of Innovation Media recently. He makes the case for brilliant newspapers. Content-driven innovation is the way to success. But some newspapers are blinded by the latest technology. "We see lots of companies inject digital Botox into products that have become moribund," he added.

Newspaper companies must have confidence in print. "We have to stop talking about the death of print. It has never happened in human history. No medium has ever replaced another medium, but the medium will change," Señor observed.

Clearly this is not a 'wait and see' recipe. Newspapers in print will become a premium product, more magazine-like in his view. Mobile and tablets will become more in realm of mass media.

For its part, The Irish Times will serve each platform with its distinct content mix. It will continue to be a newspaper in the broadest sense. The tablet is not a threat but an opportunity if our rich vein of content blends well with the usability of those devices...

We have changed over the past 12 months...this year will see the digital relationship with our readers enhanced even more.

We are acquiring a new CMS but conscious of the rapid scale of digital development, we are pursuing a programme of incremental enhancement in the meantime under the direction of Hugh Linehan with Johnny Ryan driving innovation and John O'Shea evaluating revenue opportunities. Our comment system is being transformed.

We are enhancing video content, providing a social reader, embedding content in stories, increasing use of data journalism and interactive graphics with the added functionality of tools like DocumentCloud.

But the most significant strategic change is moving beyond what is largely a 'breaking news' approach online. We are enriching and deepening our content across key headings of politics, health, culture, business etc. And the key metric will be 'engaged hours'; building the relationship with our unprecedented, combined online audience and print readership. It means moving beyond the pre-occupation with traffic volumes...

Innovation has peppered much of our 150-year history. We were one of the first newspapers in the world to have a digital edition. Yes we made mistakes... but significantly today we are not for moving aside as others acting in their own self-interest dismiss us as "a legacy" player". We are

becoming a more dynamic, digitally-driven media company...we are 'digital first' in the sense of digital being core to every conversation on content ...and that is most true in terms of our news in this exciting, chaotic, and occasionally exasperating digital age.