

News Journalism in an Internet Digital World

Institute for International and European Affairs

Remarks by Noel Curran - Director General, RTÉ

I spend much of my working day, particularly at the moment, wrestling with how best to reform and sustain the business side of RTÉ. The recession has been difficult on us, as with all media organisations. Recent editorial mistakes and rapid technological changes are posing even deeper questions. But despite all the apparent negatives, and nobody knows better than RTE difficult the environment is, but I would also have to say that the media industry at the moment is fascinating, uncertain and challenging yes, but also very exciting.

RTÉ is changing rapidly, particularly in the Digital arena. I'm not sure people fully realise just how quickly Irish consumption of media is changing. When I started in this job early in 2011, not that long ago, about 18% of total page impressions came from mobile. That figure passed the 50% mark last month.

What is becoming a little clearer is what will be required of news organisations and broadcasters in the future. I want to outline to you just some of those requirements and also give you an idea of how RTÉ is trying to adapt to meet them – certainly not to set us up as some perfect role model – but to give you an insight into the RTE of the future.

The first requirement will be constant innovation, particularly at this time. Streams from the RTE Player App are ten times what were initially predicted for them when we launched last year. Demand is constantly changing. In response we have launched RTE Digital, freed of content provision, to be innovation hub in RTE.

Another requirement will be for increased multi skilling. All production courses in RTE will now be multi-divisional and content responsibility has been pushed out to the various Divisions.

The News Cycles will have to change and speed and flexibility will be key. We recently launched a morning bulletin to partly service Television but mainly to service our online news updates.

We will have to share our content, particularly given our public funding model. RTE has been conservative in the past but has changed its approach radically.

Finally, we will have to find a way to monetise our Digital offerings. RTE will enter the premium space in the next twelve months with our international audiences.

But to be honest, I don't really want to come at today's topic from a business perspective, because long before I was a media executive and manager I was a journalist. I believe passionately in the inherent value and importance of the best parts of journalism.

Like many of you I am sure, I have read countless articles and been to numerous events on the future of journalism, the fall of traditional media organisations, etc. There is talk of little else at the moment among media executives. However it often seems like the predominant theme in much of this discussion is how to save the current vehicles of journalism – the newspapers, magazines, and broadcasters for their own sake rather than a really honest discussion about the value of journalism itself. What is it that people really want to save? What is the valuable or even indispensable thing that journalism can add to society? Perhaps if we are really honest about these questions – how to preserve, enhance and support what is truly valuable might become clearer?

In case we were in any doubt about that, RTÉ's editorial mistakes in the past year reinforced for us the importance of public trust. It is that critical bond with your audience or readership. It is the currency that allows you to take on the difficult subjects, ask the difficult questions, and pursue and hold to account those in positions of authority and power. What we have learned is that that currency is something which is earned over time – through the reporting and the thousands of editorial judgements made every day by editors, journalists and programme makers. It can be easily damaged.

You may say that this is a very old fashioned dowdy concept in a world where the public interest is constantly being served by social media, or by individual witnesses with smart phones, digital cameras and an internet connection.

There is no doubt that these technologies are adding a real immediacy, vibrancy and diversity to news content and that this is in itself hugely valuable.

But is it really displacing the need and demand for professional journalism or is it just a welcome addition, adding flavour, energy and new points of view?

New research in the US (conducted by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence

in Journalism) would seem to indicate that so far at least, these new types of social media are additive. The report finds that mobile devices are adding to people's news consumption, strengthening the lure of traditional news brands. Despite the proliferation of countless news aggregator services, blogs, social media giants like Facebook and twitter – 17 out of the top 25 main sources of online news in the US come from long-standing news brands – newspapers, network news and cable news channels. The difficulty, and it's not to be underestimated, is always monetizing these trends and also maintaining that position in an increasingly diverse market.

These US trends correlate with recent data for Ireland. The BBC recently presented to Irish advertisers analysis they conducted in the Irish market. This showed that consumption of online news in Ireland is also dominated by long-standing news brands. When the survey panel was asked about which websites they regularly use to keep up to date with news and current affairs – 73% said RTÉ.ie, 53.5% said the BBC.com, 41.4% said the Irishtimes.com, 34.9% said the Independent.ie and 28.4% said skynews.com. There certainly is also an appetite for new web only news services such as theJournal.ie which in this survey is at 23.6% or breakingnews.ie at 22.1%, but the appetite seems to be on local Irish services like this.

Our own research would also support the contention that trust is a key driver of online news consumption and it is somewhat reassuring for us that despite our recent serious editorial setbacks, our research shows that RTÉ remains the most trusted media organisation in the country. But we must earn that and repair whatever trust we did lose.

I cannot overestimate the importance of this trust factor, particularly for large news organizations. As if to emphasise this, the US research also shows that the habits of US news consumers using mobile connected devices – smart phones and tablets - seems at variance with how they use desktops and laptops. The research shows that the reputation or brand of a news organisation, a very traditional idea, is the most important factor in determining where consumers go for news, and that is even truer on mobile devices than on laptops or desktops. It seems people spend far more time with news apps on the smart phone and tablet, visit more pages at a sitting, and return more frequently than they do on conventional computers.

This is very encouraging for us when you consider in the case of RTÉ's online news services, mobile traffic accounts for over 65% of page impressions which is predominantly through the RTÉ News Now App which has now been downloaded over 600,000 times since its launch in

January 2010.

For me this reinforces a belief that I have long held about the challenge of technology and the internet for traditional media organisations. In a world where the barriers to entry are virtually nil, where technology is reducing the need for specialist production skills, and where anyone can publish anything – what will prosper are those sources of news that are consistently both relevant and trusted.

To come back to where I began, what does this mean for journalism, particularly journalism in RTÉ.

- It means that quality and trust will become increasingly important factors as the internet becomes more mobile and if online news consumption becomes increasingly channeled through dedicated applications rather than through browsers.
- It means we will have to invest in our journalists and our journalism to ensure that our editorial standards remain very high. We will have to be vigilant in maintaining our independence and impartiality.
- The responsibility of the licence fee means we must make our content more available on multiple platforms and through more content partnerships.
- And finally it means that we must embrace the opportunities of new technologies that allow us engage with new audiences, become more transparent about our editorial choices, and add externally generated content to our professional journalism.

I would argue that far from being diminished, professional high quality journalism, and public service journalism in particular, has rarely been more relevant or more necessary than it is today.

Amidst all the change, fragmentation and uncertainty, and given our economic vulnerability, given the emergence of global media players, social media and the consolidation of media ownership in Ireland, I strongly believe there is a place for a publicly-owned news and media service, like RTÉ, with a strong Irish I also believe that there will still be a place for quality, trusted journalism in whatever new environment emerges.