

“MEDIA DIVERSITY AND WHY IT MATTERS”

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Freedom of speech, freedom of expression – we all approve of them.

We don't always remember that freedom to make up our own minds – each one of us individually – by hoovering up different streams of information, is key to needing freedom of speech.

Think about it. If there's general consensus and everybody believes what everybody else believes, and we're all literally singing off the same hymn sheet, then freedom of speech stops being so important. One can speak for all.

But if we want a diverse society, where you disagree with me but – like Voltaire – will defend to the death my right to articulate what you disagree with – then we need different strands of information reaching us.

Different ideas.

Data that's prioritised differently.

Different interpretations.

Different slants.

When we talk about diversity in media, we need to move away from talking about the vehicles that deliver the information, as if they constituted diversity.

In fact, what's important is the information itself, not what carries it.

If we want to achieve variety of opinion and action in a society, then that society needs lots of different streams of information. That's important.

But, just as important is the provenance of that information, the quality mark, where it comes from and how it stands up to scrutiny.

Right now, in this country and almost everywhere else in the world, people have more information coming at them than at any time in history. Someone told me recently that one edition of any of the major Sunday newspapers for example *The Sunday Business Post* would have more information in it than a scholar in the middle ages would have encountered in the entire course of his life. (And no, I'm not being sexist. As far as I can tell, scholars in the middle

ages were nearly all men.)

The key difference between the information the reader of one of those solid Sunday newspapers chews through, and many other sources of information, is that the newspaper stuff has been gathered by trained, professional reporters, filtered by trained, professional editors, considered, in some cases, by lawyers, sub-edited and double-checked before it arrives with the reader.

That's simply not true of all of the competing streams of information. Information coming from newspapers has a provenance. Information from radio and TV, although often, I have to say, picked up from the newspapers, also has a provenance. We know where it came from and we know that if it doesn't stand up, someone will be made to pay, either financially or through losing some of their individual or corporate reputation. That's not the case with all of new media.

The urgent question facing all of us is this:

What importance do we put on the reliability of the data we consume?

What value do we put on information that is professionally and properly gathered and professionally and properly edited, where there's an audit trail producing a provenance as against stuff that just appears – stuff that may be immediate and exciting - stuff that may or may not be good stuff?

Just because it doesn't have a provenance doesn't mean it's not good stuff. The problem is that we don't know.

If it was food would you eat it?

Mark Twain famously said that a lie could be halfway around the world before the truth got its boots on.
He was right. For his time.

These days, the lie can be three times around the world and being fought over on a hundred different blogs, long before the truth even wakes up.

If, as individuals and as a society, we want trustworthy information, then we should greatly value the people and organisations that produce good information. We should be clear on what is quality information and what isn't and that's not as easy as it sounds.

One of the problems newspapers have is that we're all tarred with the same black brush that Murdoch has created. We're much less trusted than we ought to be.

The fact is that, to generate good information carries a cost. It requires money. Unless you steal it like most new media companies do. And, if you bring that argument to its logical conclusion all you'll get on their news sites is a blank screen, because they eventually will have no one left to steal from.

But, every media organisation in the world, rely on advertising revenue for that money.

That's the reality.

It's a given.

It's part of the fabric I grew up in.

And I hate it.

Here's my question. Is it right that we should rely on something as fickle as advertising revenue to support something as important as good information?

The fact is that in the Western World now, very many of the organisations that do produce good information are really suffering because of lack of advertising revenue.

The standards and quality that they've always had are still there. We're one example of it. But we're only one of thousands.

We really do actually care what we do in terms of news. And relying on advertising revenue to support what is critical, is frankly irresponsible.

If you think about it, everyone who has an iPhone is potentially a publisher. I can publish something on this and nobody knows where it's come from.

So it's no big deal, necessarily, to be a publisher any more. But if you put a high value on good information, then the publisher is important.

I don't want to be the one that's shouting in support of newspapers, because newspapers are just one way of getting information across, but newspaper organisations are still the news agenda setters. There is a responsibility that comes with setting a news agenda.

If we lose that, we're in danger of being in a world where there's information flying all over the place, and we genuinely don't know whether it's good information or bad information, because we're not prepared to pay for it.

Newspapers make mistakes. Sometimes we're not as professional as we should be. For example, recently, it was found out using the FOI that Eamon Gilmore had a hundred letters sent to him about the closing of the Vatican embassy. 97% of them were against. This appeared in our newspaper, and in several other reputable newspapers, as a story to the effect that overwhelming numbers of people are against the Vatican closure. Which isn't necessarily true at all.

The people who are against it will write to him, the people who are not against it won't. The story was not handled well.

But you know something? Because I'm the fifth generation of a newspaper family proud of what

we do, I can stand up, put my hands up and say “Sorry. We got that wrong.” More to the point, I must stand up when we get things wrong in any of our papers or radio stations, because I – we – take terribly seriously the reality that people make life and death decisions based on the information we deliver. And reputations are gained or lost, based on the information we deliver.

It matters. It must have a provenance. It must stand up in court, although I’d obviously be happier if we never end up in court. Now, let’s be fair. (That’s another thing we in mainstream media strive for. Fairness.)

When it comes to views and opinions and different angles on different news stories, new media does deliver. There are great news websites out there that deliver solid data, some of them part of newspapers. The question is not if new media can deliver. It does. What’s missing is knowing whether what they deliver is good or bad, sourced or made-up.

New media does give huge opportunities to people to speak and to say what they want to say. But it can also give credibility to news that maybe shouldn’t have that credibility. And, in some cases, it can create the story.

Those English riots, for example, were a new media generated phenomenon, a product of information going from pillar to post without mediation without being edited, without a quality check.

You’re not going to stop that, but people need to be aware of what’s good information and what’s bad information.

Ireland is a wonderful example of everything to do with media. Why? Because in Ireland, we have got an awful lot right. But we also have a few things wrong.

What’s right is that:

We have a lot of press freedom

We have a lot of discourse

We have a lot of newspapers

We have a lot of radio stations

We have three TV stations.

Most of them do a good job, serving different markets.

On the negative side, we’re the only country in the world that has a large number of non-Irish newspapers being sold in here, thus we have no influence over the agenda-setting, if you accept that newspapers set the agenda.

We have a large number of overseas television stations beamed in here, but every country in the world has that, these days.

It’s politically almost impossible to up the license fee at present so that RTE becomes a BBC. But it’s actually what should be done. For Noel Curran running RTE must almost be an impossible job, because you’re supposed to be a commercial animal and a public servant at the same time.

Obviously, RTE should be funded properly, outside of the advertising market. It distorts the market for everybody, because if you're running a TV station and you have 150 million euro to kick start your year that means you can sell cheaper advertising. It gets back to the point that dissemination of information is too important to depend on the vagaries of advertising to support a cornerstone of democracy.

My first proposition, even before I get to the consolidation in the title of this talk, is this. That we as a society acknowledge that public service is not something RTE owns. It is a public service for any organisation to devote professional people to finding out, fact checking, and publishing information in the public good.

Therefore, there's an opportunity for Pat Rabbitte to step away from tradition and if he's going to have a tax to provide public service broadcasting, widen it so it acknowledges the contribution to public service of newspapers too. That would reduce this dangerous dependence on advertising.

We need to address the threat to humanity posed by the tsunami of unverifiable data, opinion, libel and vulgar abuse in new media. I know all the stuff about it being a tool of freedom and democracy, and I also know it has the capacity to destroy civil society and cause unimaginable suffering. Governments have a regulatory function in this regard, and they're walking away from it because they're afraid of appearing to be repressive.

In Ireland, the major newspaper institutions need to start to imagine a radically different future. If the public service contribution of *Irish Examiner*, *Irish Times*, *Irish Independent* was to be recognised in financial terms, readers would be served as they are now, but none of the three major newspapers would walk into the wall posed by debt and advertising erosion caused by recession.

Most of us live through history without noticing it at the time.

The fact is that – right now this minute – we're living through media history at a time of shocking and total change. We're at a point of choice.

Choice between retaining the best of what we are and do – our vital public service – or abandoning that most precious resource, information, to chaos.

Grim choice. But then, an opportunity often comes dressed up as a grim choice....
Thank you.