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Ensuring Professional Integrity in a Crowded Media

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Chairperson, Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to thank you for inviting me here, to open today's event. It is nice for a politician to get an opportunity to deliver a lecture to the press although I am mindful of the maxim that one should not argue with someone who buys ink by the barrel.

Over the next two days, you will hear views from many eminent speakers on one of the cornerstones of the Fourth Estate: Professional Integrity. I am sure it will lead to some very engaging debate.

I want to start on this theme by telling you a story. Friday the Thirteenth of October was the day our Taoiseach came back from St Andrews in Scotland, having achieved what for many decades seemed impossible - agreement among the key parties in the North. It was an historic day. Literally. It was a day that created endless possibilities for generations yet to be born.

Now, on that day, one of my Cabinet colleagues was speaking to the producer of a weekend programme. Working out what topics would be dealt with during that programme. They went through a pretty comprehensive list. Then there was a small pause, while my colleague went through what he'd written down. "I assume," he said, "that we haven't mentioned St Andrews and the completion of the Northern talks because that'll be at the top of the programme." "Oh, no," the producer said. "We're not going near the North at all. Too boring." My colleague was too stunned to argue. (Which, given the personality of my colleague, was a rare occurrence.)

During the programme, because he's a man of independent mind, he brought up the St Andrews talks. And the oddest thing happened. He realised that the presenter – and, indeed, other people on the programme – believed he was bringing up something completely irrelevant, in order to distract from a topic of much more importance. They thought he was fudging. Avoiding. Blowing up a smokescreen. He had no choice but to abandon the issue.

When he told me about it, this one episode seemed to me to provide a microcosm - a case study, if you will – of journalism in Ireland at this time. If you think about it, journalism in this country is probably unique in the world, in that so many of its major outlets were

set up for non-commercial reasons. They didn't start out with the mission of delivering a provable number of readers or viewers or listeners to advertisers. That's where they are now. It isn't where they started.

Two examples. One of them now defunct, but its history is relevant. The Irish Press was set up, not, initially, as a commercial entity, but as a propaganda machine. That very phrase is bothersome: propaganda machine. The reality is that when the Irish Press was set up, the vast majority of the Irish people were not newspaper readers. They certainly weren't readers of The Irish Times, because they weren't coming from the same place The Irish Times was coming from. Not in attitude. Not in faith. Not in their concept of nationhood. Not in their day-to-day preoccupations and interests. The new newspaper was set up, essentially, to provide the missing conduit for information. To locate information other media mightn't want to locate, to present that information in a way they might not present it, to meet the needs of a section (a very large section) of the public in a way other media outlets didn't meet them. It was a non-commercial mission. The same was true of RTE when it was set up. It was set up to "inform, educate and entertain." Not to make money. Oh, the purity of those times...

Of course there were pressures on journalists and broadcasters. Perceived or real pressures. Journalists were under pressure to get the facts. They were under pressure to present those facts in a clear sequence. They were under pressure to get out and find stories. So it is true to say journalism in Ireland is subject to more commercial pressure than at any time in the past. In the past no individual journalist ever faced the public pressure faced, for example, by today's broadcasters.

Every quarter, the publication of the JNLR figures delivers a weeklong trauma to household name broadcasters. They live in dread of what the figures will reveal about them. Then the figures are published, and the newspapers run pictures of each of the presenters with big plus signs or subtraction signs beside them. Winners and losers. Winners and losers when it comes to delivering listeners to justify advertising spend. That's a recent development. With profound consequences.

One of the consequences is a different approach to story selection. The immediate and sexy replaces the long-term and important. My colleague's experience is a classic example of that in action. On the day he was interviewed, there were immediate sexy issues: the possibility of inter-party conflicts. The nitty-gritty of opinion polls. Ten years from now, neither will be interesting. Neither will matter. I'd go further. Ten years from now, the bulk of the material – all that sexy urgent stuff – will be no more than a mild curiosity it probably won't even be remembered.

What has been achieved in Northern Ireland, on the other hand, will continue to have major implications for the lives of every person on this island. Yet it was excluded. The exclusion of big, complex, significant, long-term issues is done at source. Someone reacts. They react by saying "this isn't sexy." That would be an acceptable response if media were simply consumers of a product called News. But media are immeasurably more than just consumers of a product called news.

- They are the conduit to understanding
- They are the mirror held up to life
- They are the storytellers helping us understand our context.

Media passionately – and rightly – defends to the death its freedoms. It passionately – and rightly - defends its independence, particularly in the face of external political pressure. It does not passionately defend its right to deliver a full and complex information service to its listeners. Instead, it selects at source what is easiest, when it comes to delivering ‘bums on seats’.

Just as importantly, it doesn’t look at a story and say, “this doesn’t look easy or obvious. But it is important. Therefore it’s our job to make it exciting and impelling. Increasingly, in recent years, the emphasis has been on the ready-made story, arriving pre-cut and pre-wrapped so the only thing required is to simply put it on the air.

The consequences of the primacy laid on “immediate and sexy” are enormous. First consequence is the removal, from the journalist, of the responsibility to make the uninteresting interesting. In its place is a growing perception of the journalist as the person who does lively interrogation of what has already been adjudged to be interesting.

That’s not a good thing. If media are the story-tellers, if media draw up the first draft of history, then, right now, they are choosing to eliminate at source whole strands of Irish and international life because those strands do not obviously and immediately deliver ratings.

When the full texture of our lives is not threaded through media, our understanding of our lives is impoverished. As it was in the past, only for different reasons: take the Ronnie Delaney story. Ronnie Delaney was Ireland’s Olympic Gold medal winner. Just like people remember where they were when John F. Kennedy was shot, Irish people remember where they were when he came through in Melbourne. The problem is: that’s all they remember. Let me quote him:

“I’m introduced as the Olympic gold medal winner. I’m also the guy who set the world indoor record three times, who was a contestant in every mile of that era. Nobody really focused on what an incredible runner I was... I feel slightly sad because there was no satellite.

There was very little Pathé news. No correspondent in New York to see me running...”

The incompleteness of the record – and the public understanding of the record – about Ronnie Delaney is a function of the dearth of media at the time.

The incompleteness of the record – the first draft of the history currently being laid down – at the moment is not due to the dearth of media. We’re up to our armpits in media.

Since this Conference's inception, we have seen the introduction of independent radio. The influx of international magazines and newspapers. The rapid emergence of digital and cable television. And looming over all of this change, the all-encompassing IT revolution. Modern media is in the midst of a technological and cultural revolution.

What are the implications for professional integrity in this new crowded Media? The duty of the media - to observe and comment upon the workings of society - is essential to a functioning democracy. Society requires media to keep it informed so that government and others in power can be held accountable. (I have a difficulty with the concept of a media that believes that politicians and the political system are accountable to them).

Society requires a media that will provide news that is clear, incisive and objective. A media that conveys facts and honest opinions - not speculation and rumour. In that kind of context therefore professional integrity in the media should not be simply an aim. It is an imperative. Due to the investigative nature of its role, a tension has always existed between the media and public figures. A tension that is both natural and necessary. President John F. Kennedy once remarked:

“There is a terrific disadvantage in not having the abrasive quality of the press applied to you daily. Even though we never like it, and even though we wish they didn't write it, and even though we disapprove, there isn't any doubt that we could not do the job at all in a free society without a very, very active press”.

A slightly more sceptical view was held by his successor, Lyndon Johnson, when he said:

“If one morning I walked on top of the water across the Potomac River, the headline that afternoon would read: ‘President Can't Swim’.”

The ‘abrasive quality of the press’ that Kennedy mentions, has served Ireland well.

Over the years, it has helped raise standards of governance and accountability. It has enlightened and informed our citizens. It has raised the level of public debate in our country. And it has helped shape contemporary Irish society. However in the past twenty years, we have seen radical changes to the Irish media landscape.

The presence of the new competition has led to increasingly intense battle for TAM ratings and advertising revenue. Equally fierce competition exists in the print media. Irish newspapers are now not only competing with Irish editions of British newspapers. They are also competing against the new phenomenon of ‘freesheets’, handed out at traffic lights, street corners and commuter stations.

However, it is the looming presence of the Internet - that slowly threatens to engulf both the print and broadcasting media. In the recent past, the Internet has successfully challenged the dominance of print media. A new report by Jupiter Research concluded that, on average, Europeans now spend more time online than reading newspapers and magazines.

Newspapers have reacted to this trend by providing online versions - and adding new features such as daily podcasts and discussion fora. The most palpable effect of the Internet has been to subject the press to the full force of globalisation. Not only can we now access the online Irish Times and Independent. The opinion pages of the Washington Post are also at our fingertips.

Reports from Le Monde can be accessed with a mouse-click and articles from Der Spiegel can be downloaded in seconds. The media, like trade and commerce before it, has embraced globalisation. Technology has also spawned new personalised media. Sites such as YouTube allow users to upload videos for public consumption – potentially creating millions of independent broadcasters.

Blogs too, have created a space for individuals to air their views publicly – leading many to the conclusion that, “We are all reporters now”. This is undoubtedly a new crowded and ultra-competitive media environment. In most sectors, greater competition is seen in a positive light. It raises efficiency, lowers prices and by and large, the consumer is the principal benefactor.

But the Media is not like most sectors. Its unique ability to influence public opinion - and its crucial role in the democratic process has always set it apart. And while this media revolution has brought new platforms and more choice to consumers, it has also brought added pressures and concerns. It has exerted a huge pressure on journalists to ruthlessly pursue the next sensational, headlining story. It has rapidly increased the rate at which information must be published – often forcing journalists into taking short cuts. It has pushed editors to print more attention-grabbing and shocking images. And it has led some to adopt the mantra of the former Sun editor Kelvin McKenzie “Shock and Amaze on Every Page.”

Let me balance this by saying that the standards and ethics held by the vast majority of journalists and editors I meet are unquestionable. I believe that the great majority have remained true to the nobler ideals of their profession.

But we can no longer ignore lowering standards in some aspects of our media because inevitably as standards slip in one section so too will it happen in others.

For example, I do not consider acceptable the current level of intrusion by the media upon the lives of ordinary people, often in times of deep grief and sadness. I struggle to think of a time in our history when photographs of a celebrity’s children, while at school, were considered newsworthy. And the publication of confidential information - often leading to an unfair trial by media. Is this now to be considered “ethical behaviour”?

Studies show that even in the upmarket newspapers in Britain, for example, the coverage of the complex has been reduced. Specifically, parliamentary coverage has changed. Changed radically. Instead of detailed accurate accounts of the totality of what was said

in any parliamentary debate, the emphasis now is on colour coverage by columnists and commentators.

At the same time, the interest in the sex lives of politicians is enormous. Media would claim – hypocritically, in my view – that this justified on the basis that the reader is entitled to understand the full truth about a man or woman who represents their interests in parliament. In practice, what the coverage does is reduce politics and politicians. The extraordinary level of coverage of David Blunkett, for example, culminates in the narrowing of public perception to a two-word summary of a human being: Blindness and Sex.

I am very conscious, as I talk, that I am speaking generally, with all of the implicit faults generalizations carry. It infuriates me when I hear palpably untruthful generalizations about politicians, like “You’re all the same.” Similarly, all media isn’t the same. All journalists are not alike. In relation to writing about places we know very little about, littered with unfamiliar names, a few journalists fight the good fight and keep trying to attract public attention to important overseas stories.

I have to hand it to Vincent Browne, for example, that his column in *The Irish Times* regularly addresses issues within Africa which simply don’t get covered at all by most of the other columnists who figure in our newspapers. Browne has the confidence (some would say arrogance) conviction and popularity to allow him, in effect, to say to the Irish public: This is important and you should care about it.

Equally other journalists covering stories and issues at home have the courage not to “follow the pack” and cause us to pause. I believe they’re right. I believe that’s a pivotal role for mass media. To stop the public in its tracks and tell it what really matters, as opposed to what it likes. We don’t have to agree but we sure as hell should be made to think.

However, one of the key factors preventing media from exercising that role in this decade is a self-induced pressure media shares with politics: a learned helplessness in the face of research commissioned by both.

The focus-group syndrome. Find out what the reader or the viewer or the listener or the voter wants, and then feed it to them in large platefuls.

Because of our addiction to public opinion, politicians and press people alike have effectively ceded our capacity to lead. We have almost abandoned one of our key imperatives. We don’t admit that, even to ourselves. We admit it about each other, certainly.

- Media will rubbish politicians as being driven by focus groups, not by ideas, not by dreams, not by ideology, not by policy.

- Politicians deride media as being driven by market research, rather than by story-gathering and investigative journalism.
- Media condemns politicians for pandering to local groups and short-term constituency interests as revealed by party polls.
- Politicians sneer at media for dumbing down their product in order to deliver what advertisers want, rather than what the public actually needs.

But each side, curiously, doesn't acknowledge the real constraint provided by excessive measurement of public opinion. Each side continues to believe in the sacredness of its calling, often on thin evidence. "Protecting your sources" is one of the mantras that convinces media it is essentially idealistic and non-commercial.

Protecting your source is a traditional and important value. But when I see it being stretched into being the defining virtue of journalism, I'm reminded of the young prostitute played by Julia Roberts in the film *Pretty Woman*. The sex-worker earned her living by selling her body. She did what the clients wanted. Except for one thing. She would never kiss them. Somehow, that little tiny restriction saved her self-respect. Somehow, in that tiny caveat lay her view of herself as not really a sex worker. I believe politics and media alike will regret becoming hooked on public opinion, as measured by fast phone call research or the opinions of one thousand and one people selected according to some mystical process which nonetheless leaves the results open to serious question.

A broadcaster named Ted Koppel sums this dilemma up better than I can. "How strange," he writes, "that we wouldn't dream of tolerating the captain of a cruise liner setting his course by surveying the passengers, but that we have become quite comfortable watching the ship of state being steered by polls."

Koppel may be over-stating the situation, but sometimes over-statement has a value. I may be over-stating the situation when I say that media, because of its own constant polling, is putting the national bloodstream on a permanent intravenous drip of sugary fast fixes. But the over-statement has a value.

The fast-fix approach by media who major on celebrities and the break-up of their relationships undoubtedly diminishes public understanding of some issues that are vital to everyday life. Like planning. I know. "Boring." Except that, when the public doesn't understand planning, doesn't understand how this bit of infrastructure is necessary for that development to take place, it doesn't get exercised about issues that, ten years later, will have festered into major problems.

The difficulty, of course, is making planning interesting. That – in newspaper terms – takes a skillful, even inspired journalist, an awful lot of work, lively graphics and a brilliant layout. It's a lot easier to go with a scandal-scéal about some celeb who's discovered their husband is up to something he shouldn't have been up to.

Someone recently said that taking your story to the media is the 21st century way of hurting someone you can't hurt in any other way. This decade has to be the first in history where people involved in domestic problems think first about issuing a press release. (Ironically, that press release, while seeking attention, invariably ends by asking media to "respect our privacy at this difficult time.")

What's happening is an inter-locking series of vicious circles. Each media outlet has to prove to advertisers that it's delivering the desired demographic. Each programme presenter (news or current affairs particularly) has to prove her or she can deliver a key section of that demographic. Each outlet does research which tells it what its audience likes – and that research is reinforced by texts and e-mails received.

That's on the media side. On the other side, people who, ten years ago, would have fiercely guarded their privacy now respond to a quite different cattle-prod: the invitation to "tell their side of the story." Staying silent is now a mortal sin. The assumption is that, no matter what issue you're involved in, you must and should talk. You owe it to the public.

Over here in the political wing, public representatives and aspirant public representatives know that having and maintaining a high profile is mandatory.

Walter Mondale may have been the first failed Presidential candidate to blame that failure on his not having to come to terms with the needs of mass media, but, since then, most politicians have got the message. Loud and clear.

We still, in this country, have a few TDs who rarely if ever appear on media and who get elected, time and again, because they're good at constituency work, but the number is dwindling. A media presence is now part of the political job spec. And that's just the beginning. Once you become a Minister of State or a Minister, media is an escapable constant, an aspect of your everyday functioning, a fantastically fertile entity whose demands breed like hamsters.

Forty years ago, you could serve and serve well as a Government Minister and never speak directly to media, never develop one-to-one relationships with journalists. That's simply not do-able, at this time.

Media is everywhere.

- Media is in your bed first thing in the morning. Media is outside your door at breakfast time. (Remember the picture of Cherie Blair in her slip?)
- Media is at the gates of Leinster House as your car pulls in. (With a reporter jotting down whether you looked cheerful or grim.)
- Media is in the Press Gallery of Leinster House as you speak
- Media gets on to your Private Secretary or Information Officer at lunchtime.
- Media hots up mid-afternoon, as Drivetime and The Last Word and The Right Hook outbid each other for your services.

- At night, there's prime time television, always an open maw for political speakers, ever ready for a dogfight.
- Finally, there's the replay. If you get up early enough, you can treat yourself to a recycling of appearances you made the previous day.

The omnipresence of media generates another inter-linking of vicious circles. On the one side are the radio and TV reporters, each egging for a story to break on their particular programme. On the other side are politicians, each conscious of the value of name and face recognition, each wary of allowing the other side a free run on a story. Too often, those interlinked vicious circles are unproductive. To anybody.

Yes, media get their story. But it may not be a story of great significance.

Yes, one outlet may get the story before others do – but getting a story an hour before everybody else is not the same as breaking a story nobody else had the wit to go after. Politicians, meanwhile, can become enslaved by the lure of the open mike. The flattery of attention, even if that attention takes the form of a journalist asking questions that cast doubt on your honesty or the honesty of your party, is insidious, and some politicians can't resist it.

But even when there isn't an urgent breaking story, politicians put themselves under media pressure. (Note, I say "put themselves" rather than "are put by media under pressure.")

It is arguable that politicians nowadays have to spend too much time on the media. I don't mean physically appearing, although that's obviously a part of it. I mean planning for media. I, personally, regard even 20% of a politician's time being devoted to media as excessive. It takes you away from the real work. More important, it takes you away from the real world.

Media and politics are inward-looking clans. They feed off each other. But the fresh insight offered by people outside that circle is essential, and where politicians pander (and I use the word advisedly) to media, that fresh insight gets lost, and with it a real sense of balance and priority on the part of the politician.

I mentioned, earlier, the way media outlets pat themselves on the back for scooping other media by breaking a particular story an hour or a day before everybody else. That's a collusive process. Politicians collude in it for their own benefit. They leak to favoured journalists. Tut, tut, I hear you say. Well, let me tell you something. Any disapproval you might have about politicians who leak is greatly outweighed – among media – by the disapproval of politicians who don't leak. They are regarded as rigid, po-faced and disobliging. Trust me on this...

The leaks issue is worth exploring a little further. I have a friend in media who maintains that the minute a TD becomes a Minister, they lose the run of themselves about leaks. If a leak happens in their department, they call in the Guards, the Special Branch, CAB,

Interpol and the FBI to find the leaker. Which never happens. This friend suggests that politicians should accept that leaks come with their territory, the way gardeners accept that dandelions come with lawns.

I have a reluctance to go with that laissez faire view of leaks. I don't believe leaks are without consequence. Some leaks make it impossible to do something which is demonstrably worth doing.

Some leaks soften up the ground for action which would otherwise be impossible. In what may be a journalistic variant of the Stockholm syndrome (whereby hostages become extremely loyal to their captors), journalists and their editors defend and protect the anonymity, and even the reliability, of their sources, even when they have been seriously misled. I'm not sure that breaching the boundaries of the political role and becoming close friends with journalists who may be useful to the politician, is a good thing.

It tends to lead to stories where the source isn't clear. Except to those in the know, who read the report and work it out for themselves: the source is likely to be the person who is most kindly treated in the coverage.

Of course, the issue of sources is a continuing challenge for media, as recently seen in the leak about the Taoiseach's testimony – private, confidential testimony – before the Mahon Tribunal. While that may be the one which springs most readily to mind, every day's coverage brings with it a raft of anonymous sources, credited as "sources close to" the Taoiseach, or a Minister, or a celebrity or even an opposition politician.

It's an easy device, protected, as it is, by media's determination to protect the people who give media stories. That determination, however, can undoubtedly and not infrequently protect sources who are making things up. Or planting a fact, surrounded (as Churchill put it) by "a bodyguard of lies" in order to damage someone.

It is not confined to politics, this issue. A decade or so ago, scans and other materials related to individual patients were leaked to media by a source within a Dublin hospital. The source explained the scans in a way which led the journalists to believe that surgeons in the hospital were killing and maiming patients. The authorities within the hospital were caught between a rock and a hard place. They could not sit down with the journalists and explain the truth of the scans, because the scans related to individual patients, to whom the hospital authorities had an absolute duty of care and confidentiality. The un-named source was protected in a way militating against the discovery of truth. Eventually, the truth did out. And one newspaper acknowledged that it had been sold a pup. But questions about the use of anonymous negative sources got lost in the wash.

The New York Times has recently, as I understand it, banned mentions of "anonymous pejorative sources". In other words, that paper will no longer carry stories damaging to one individual, the only source for which is another individual protected by anonymity. That's an interesting model of approach. I hope it spreads.

None of what I'm saying should be taken as anti-whistle-blower. Whistle-blowers have been enormously important in recent Irish history. Scandals involving major financial institutions would never have reached the public if it weren't for whistle-blowers. The characteristics distinguishing the whistle-blower from the personally-venomous anonymous source shouldn't be missed, however.

- The whistle-blower usually, although not always, sets out to expose a bad practice or fraudulent incident within a wider operation.
- The whistle-blower usually, although not always, has little to gain, personally, from blowing his or her whistle.
- The whistle-blower usually, although not always, presents data, documentation and detail, rather than unsupported rumour and prejudice.

I doubt, for example, that anybody will ever identify the whistle-blower who exposed the mutilation visited upon patients by a surgeon named Neary, and I can't figure that the whistle-blower gained in any way by revealing what was revealed. It was horrific. It went on for a long, long time. The women involved, ironically, were incredibly grateful to the man who had robbed them of so much. They were grateful; because he told them he had saved their lives. And then someone delivered enough documentation on what was going on to justify The Irish Times in publishing a big story. That story disassembled a reputation, led to the man being struck off by the Medical Council, and resulted in dozens of compensation cases taken by women whose lives had been changed – for the worse – by the surgeon involved.

Whoever the whistle-blower was, in that case, served the public good. No doubt about that. The surgeon was prevented from doing damage to any more patients. Patients learned the truth about what had happened to them. Inevitably, and particularly at the outset, that information was unwelcome to many of them. They believed their lives had been saved by a man they revered and trusted. It's always difficult to relinquish so fundamental a belief. Nonetheless, they were eventually able to get some compensation for the injustice done them. Thanks to whoever decided to shout stop. Every politician would applaud, not only the whistle-blower in that case, but the newspaper breaking the story.

The details compare starkly with the most recent example of a so-called “whistleblower” who anonymously leaked private and confidential information supplied voluntarily to a Tribunal to disprove scurrilous unfounded allegations of wrongdoing on his part. The justification that this was “in the public interest” implies that the newspaper concerned believes that the Tribunal could not be trusted to serve the “public interest”.

If the Tribunal eventually decided, as the newspaper apparently believes it would, that the allegations would not be dealt with by the Tribunal why not show respect to the Tribunal and to the individual concerned and wait until then to publish. Probably because of the fear of being scooped by another newspaper. The pressure of commercialism I referred to earlier.

While all of us should applaud the well motivated whistleblower what politicians cannot applaud is the common stereotype of politicians that often emerges from media.

That stereotype says all politicians:

- Are essentially crooked
- Pander to pollers
- Have no integrity
- Can be bribed
- And take long holidays every few months

It's handy, that stereotype. Like all stereotypes, it saves the trouble of thinking. It delivers instant recognition. It allows people who know nothing to feel – paradoxically – very knowing. And, best of all, it slides under the wire of laws preventing racist, sexist or ageist commentary.

Do gossiping, leaks and instances of frank venality on the part of politicians help it? Of course they do. Every one of those practices should be condemned. But condemnation may be too easy and shallow a response. When it comes to the dumbing down of political coverage, when it comes to the trivialization of politics through media, there's a real danger that politicians and media are engaged in a dance of death. The death of democracy.

Both sides need, not to get closer to each other, but to understand each other better and to inform each other's consciences. In this regard, I have to say that while media is pretty good and pretty constant in its attempts to influence the political conscience, media is less open to attempts by politicians to influence the media conscience.

Journalists have a greater obligation than ever before to lead by example, to make the complex simple, to explore masses of data and find the bit that is of significance. And, it's worth mentioning, that print journalists in Ireland have the same pressure on them, as do politicians: radio and TV programmes constantly want them to come on and comment on breaking news stories. This is very satisfying and boosts the bank account a bit, but it also takes up time that could be devoted to the investigative journalism sadly lacking in this country at this time.

Again, let me clearly position that last statement as one without blame attached. If, as the old saying has it, the public get the politicians they deserve, they also get the media they deserve. In Ireland, the pressures on media are enormous, not least because of the low-priced dumps of British newspapers, which in the past were not interested in the Irish market.

In that context, journalists spend more time looking over their shoulders at other journalists. Editors spend more time looking at other publications.

The collective focus is narrowed by the fear, on the part of media, that they'll miss whatever is the key story all other media go for.

The fact that we now have a twenty-four hour news cycle complicates that even further. The temptation – for media at this time – must always be to make the commercial choice, to go with the flow, to accept the victim story, to gang up on potential evildoers.

In real life – in commercial real life – temptation never appears the way it does in literature or drama, where the devil arrives on the end of Mephistopheles' bed with an offer for his soul that he can't refuse. In real life, temptation comes in tiny installments, and integrity leaks away in increments, little by little.

Arguably the best statement about this deadly sequence of small failures was made during the Second World War by Pastor Martin Neimoller. He summed up the incremental failings of a nation thus:

“In Germany, they first came for the communists and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a communist. Then they came for the Jews and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me – and by that time no one was left to speak....”

Today, media and politics operate in different times, under different pressures, different temptations. But the need to constantly and consistently make the small courageous decisions that add up to integrity is always the same. Always the same. And politicians and the media should recognize and encourage those small courageous decisions when taken by each other.

Ends

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