**Public Interest Journalism: Bulwark of Democracy or a Lost Cause?**

**Liam Cahill Memorial Lecture 2024**

**Address by Séamus Dooley, Assistant General Secretary,**

**National Union of Journalists**

**It is a great honour to have been asked to deliver the second annual Liam Cahill memorial lecture.**

**Liam was a man of many arts and parts, a gentleman and a scholar, a person of ideas whose words and actions were informed by a strong social conscience.**

**A proud son of Waterford, Liam was a disciple of James Larkin. Sean O’Casey’s description of Larkin as a man who would put a rose in a vase and bread on the table could equally be applied to Liam.**

**He believed in bread and roses, in the value of arts, language, culture, literature and sport.**

**It is fitting that we are gathered in Kells as part of the Hinterland Festival to reflect on the challenges facing contemporary journalism.**

**Liam was also enthusiastic about politics, about making time and space within the public realm for diverse views and opinions.**

**He had strong opinions and was never slow to share his views. He did so with civility and respect, in his language, in his demeanour, in his deportment.**

**Liam was the very personification of public service journalism and of public service. In his multiple roles, his belief in the public good shone through.**

**He was a life member of the National Union of Journalists, and I knew him for all his time as a union member. He retained his loyal membership throughout his multiple careers.**

He was proud of our union’s history. The National Union of Journalists, UK and Ireland is the union of George Bernard Shaw, George Orwell, Tony Benn, Brendan Behan, Sam McAughtry, Maeve Binchy, Mary Maher, and of generations of famous and forgotten reporters, photographers, production editors, press officers, columnists who have worked in print, in broadcasting and on contemporary digital platforms in an industry where change is the only constant.

**I first met Liam 1979 when I did a placement in RTÉ as a Communications student at the College of Commerce, Rathmines.**

**Liam had changed career from being an official of the FWUI and was on an induction course along with Charlie Bird, Joe O’Brien, Yvonne Murphy, Feargus Ó Raghallaigh and a host of other up and coming reporters.**

**As a young Communications student, I was allowed to take part in the new training programme and so gained valuable insights into the operation of RTÉ which have stood me in good stead.**

**My abiding memory is Liam, ever generous, regularly buying lunch, discussing the news of the day and even giving me a lift to my tiny Rathmines bedsit at the end of his shift.**

**I remember on one occasion Liam introduced me to Sean McBride in RTÉ discussing a UNESCO report on the future of media and made a point of explaining who I was amid a busy newsroom. That encounter struck me as apt when I reflect on the near impossible theme, I have been gifted to discuss in this reflection on the role of public interest journalism.**

**Near the NUJ’s head office in King’s Cross stands the Charles Dickens Museum.**

**48 Doughty Street.**

The museum provided a remarkable insight the domestic and professional life of Dickens even though he only lived there for a short time.

He took a three-year lease on the property at £80 a year as Queen Victoria ascended to the throne. He stayed until 1839 when he moved on to a series of grander homes as his wealth – and family continued to grow.

There is a real sense of Dickens in every room.

You can see the desk where he began his life as a law clerk.

There is the portrait of Dickens known as Dickens's Dream by R. W. Buss, an original and stylish illustrator of The Pickwick Papers.

A personal favourite is the grandfather clock in the hall, with Dicken’s note demanding the urgent attention of the repair man to awaken the pendulum from its slumber.

There too is the fine walking stick which he carried everywhere.

It is the stick rather than the desk or the author’s chair which perhaps captures the spirit of Dickens. Held on the early morning stroll of the streets around Bloomsbury, Gray’s Inn Road and King’s Cross witnessing first hand grinding poverty, homelessness and depravation.

In his essay Night Walks, published in 1859 Dickens writes of what he saw as he strolled through the city at a time where there were 70,000 rough sleepers in the capital.

What Dickens saw in the mean streets at midnight moved him to social activism as well as journalism. His journalism is testimony to the value of good old-fashioned reporting.

Incidentally, Dicken’s attitude to the poor divided opinion. NUJ member, author and critic G.K. Chesterton characterized Dickens as “the spokesman of the poor”—a label that was strongly contested by another NUJ member and admirer of Dickens, George Orwell.

Few could doubt that one of his greatest achievements was to bring the problem of poverty to the attention of his readers by conveying his first-hand experience of the poor.

**Even at a literary festival it may seem odd to hark back to Dickens to frame this reflection on the challenges facing public interest media, but Dickens remains sadly relevant.**

Dickens was a journalist and editor who believed in what Professor John Horgan has called “fresh air journalism. In an era where the shadow of generative artificial Intelligence (AI) looms so large it is worth celebrating the creative human spirit.

It would be easy, in speaking of AI, to sound like the blacksmith bemoaning the emergence of the motor car. More than most industrials the media has undergone several transformations and NUJ members have had to embrace several technological revolutions.

But AI has profound implications, not just for how we do our work but what we do and how our work is presented and misrepresented.

AI has potential to enhance medicine, science and technology but there are also legitimate concerns about the use of artificially generated material to mislead voters in upcoming elections, as well as the potential loss of millions of jobs when AI takes on tasks previously performed by humans.

Generative AI is not an emerging threat – it has arrived and any discussion on the future of public interest journalism must be predicated on the implications of that powerful technology.

The NUJ believes that the deployment of technology like generative AI must be subject to safeguards, transparency, and meaningful regulation in order that public trust is not further eroded, and the rights of creators are respected and protected – now and in the future.

AI cannot be used as an opportunity to further cut jobs and frontline newsgathering resources in newsrooms that are already hollowed out.

Journalism is a human endeavour and whilst generative AI affords many positive opportunities, its use must be harnessed with human oversight, with full transparency and deployed squarely in the public good.

We require a global response to unbridled technological advances, recognising that Tech giants have little regard for national governments, as evidenced by their refusal to tackle the toxic behaviour enabled on social media platforms such as X/Twitter and Facebook.

The venomous nature of what passes for debate across social media platforms poses a serious threat to our participative democracy. Journalists and commentators, like those who hold or seek public office, are frequently subject to abuse. Women journalists have been targeted.

The establishment of the Media Engagement Group chaired by Assistant Garda Commissioner Paula Hilman has provided an opportunity for those of us who work in or represent those engaged in the media to access threats to journalists and to provide support and training to journalists.

Our experience of Tech giants is that they are extremely reluctant to take their responsibilities seriously.

In many ways Tech companies have been free passengers on the Digital bus which has had such a dramatic impact on the media industry.

In our recently updated plan for media recovery the NUJ renewed our call for

an urgent windfall tax on the tech giants whose platforms have sucked up editorial content without making any contribution to its production.

The UK body, TaxWatch, following analysis from October 2023 estimates that seven large US based tech companies amassed almost £15billion in profits from UK customers in 2021, but paid taxes of only £743million, meaning around £2billion in tax was avoided.

The inevitable move from print to digital was thwarted early on as the tech platforms hoovered up the lion’s share of the digital advertising revenue. Publishers that hitched themselves to these platforms have become further undone as Meta pivots away from news, and the rollout of AI Overviews on news-related Google queries has resulted in a loss of links to publishers’ original stories.

We believe that a windfall tax would ensure the tech platforms play a meaningful role in the preservation of a sector that is vital to our democracy.

Our plan also calls for conditionality – it is not and cannot be about the preservation of the status quo. Investment would come in exchange for guarantees on securing jobs and protecting the terms and conditions of staff and freelances, the editorial teams producing quality news that the public is reliant upon. Any investment would, of course, be given without any connection to decision-making on editorial content.

We welcome in principle the introduction of the democracy reporter schemes by Coimisiún na Meán which aimed at filling the void in coverage of local courts and local government.

These grant schemes are not intended to subsidise media organisations who have enforced redundancies, merged newspaper offices or titles and run down newsrooms.

My background is in regional journalism – although I also laboured for ten years in Independent House.

For long, provincial newspapers formed part of the fabric of rural Ireland and performed a public service by re-enforcing the sense of community and reflecting what was happening throughout the country.

The decline in the regional press and the dominant control of the sector by a handful of companies is a matter of profound regret.

As commerce – the desire for market share and higher profits prevails over editorial values; journalism suffers, with a consequent impact on democracy at local and national level.

The unrestrained power of the market combined with political cowardice have contributed to an undermining of Irish journalism.

The reality is that ownership shapes media content in a variety of ways:

Ownership is linked to financial control and determines the priority given to editorial budgets, it determines the business model, and it directly determines wages and terms and conditions of employment within the industry.

Owners influence the shape of news in a variety of ways, including through editorial appointments and structures.

If the industry is dominated - as it is, especially in the print and commercial broadcasting sector, by a small number of owners whose dominant values are those of the market, who increasingly view journalists as "content providers" and journalism as mere "data" to be shared in the most commercially advantageous manner possible, there is little space for public interest journalism.

In print and the commercial radio sector slashed editorial budgets and shared editorial content means less diversity not just in opinions but in what is covered and how stories are covered.

At the Goldsmith Summer School in 2018, in calling for a Commission on the future of the media in Ireland I said that we needed a debate on our understanding of public service broadcasting and how we proposed to defend public service values and posed a series of questions:

Do we value news and current affairs?

Do we value indigenous arts, cultural, music, language?

How can we make public service broadcasting, in its diversity and complexity, relevant to the New Ireland?

Well, we have had our Future of Media Commission and many of the worthwhile recommendations of the Commission are slowly, very slowly, being implemented at a pace which does not match the scale of the crisis in our industry.

The 2020 Future of Media Commission report, published on 12th July 2022, is already out of date but the only rejected recommendation, that public service media should be direct funded by the Exchequer, remains apposite.

I believe public interest journalism is indeed a bulwark of democracy and is not a lost cause.

It has been 12 months and 6 long days since the crisis in RTÉ exploded, convulsing the nation, shattering public confidence, demoralising staff and provoking a tsunami of reviews, reports and Oireachtas committee hearings.

From my perspective the RTÉ scandal was not about an individual. Nor was it about simply about exit packages, excessive remuneration, junkets or even flip flops. It was not about *conflicts of interest* but about *a conflict of values*. That conflict remains.

The values which form the cornerstone of public service broadcasting are

not those of the marketplace. The ethos of the marketplace informed the extravagance, the greed exposed at the heart of the scandal, the lack of transparency, the inequality, the waste, the secrecy.

It is against that backdrop I look with jaundiced eye at the solutions put forward this week as part of RTÉ’s five-year strategy.

The reports of the Expert Group on Corporate Governance and HR provide a roadmap for the future of RTÉ.

That future cannot be viewed only from the prism of a tick box exercise designed to satisfy the mandarins in Kildare Street while core services are dismantled to secure short term funding.

The requirement for corporate governance reform is real and urgent.

The NUJ has long demanded greater transparency, not least around executive renumeration.

It is a matter of record that trade unions in Ireland have, for example, long demanded action on bogus self-employment.

The RTÉ trade union group consistently challenged extravagant expenditure – including the notorious and wasteful “quid pro quo trip” to the Rugby World Cup in Japan, just as we queried the culture of private deals and so-called talent contracts.

So, we welcome the promised changes in corporate culture within RTÉ.

RTÉ exists to serve the public interest and in doing so to serve the public.

It does not exist to serve our members, who have no sense of automatic entitlement.

But neither should employees be expected to carry the can for corporate governance failures or the political failure to adequately fund public service broadcasting over many years.

Together, we need to rebuild trust. That will not be an easy task.

Language matters.

The opposite to public service broadcasting is private media, owned, controlled and designed with the primary purpose of making a profit.

The common parlance, “independent productions” can be confusing.

“Commercial production companies” would be a more accurate description of

the alternative to public service broadcasting – and it is a term which is in no way disparaging in a mixed economy.

The creative media sector embraces public service and commercial media organisations and the synergy which exists is a vital component to our cultural life.

The legitimate aspiration of nurturing creative talent across the for-profit media sector should not be at the expense of the public service broadcaster if it is intended to enhance the cultural landscape of the nation.

Fair City is the bedrock of Irish television drama, a programme rooted in the proud history of Tolka Row, the Riordans, Bracken, Glenroe and so much more, from Insurrection to Strumpet City. And yes, independent co-productions and commissions also form part of that rich tapestry.

RTÉ drama is not confined to television: the oft neglected RTÉ radio drama is a neglected jewel in the crown alongside archives, documentaries, Irish language and traditional music.

What is important is that the national public service broadcaster is afforded the resources in news, sports, arts, culture, entertainment, archives, music, drama, to do what is does best without the commercial constrains of the for-profit sector or the requirement to return a quick buck.

TG4 is a fine example of public service broadcasting, and I must emphasise that public interest journalism is not confined to broadcasting or based solely on State funded media.

But the essence of public service broadcasting is the freedom to operate in an environment where the values of the market are not the determining factor.

Audience share is important but public service broadcasting can never be defined by the lowest common denominator.

Much of the discourse around public service broadcasting reminds me of the exchanges in the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party – and that’s in no way a reference to any parliamentary committee:

'You might just as well say,' added the March Hare, 'that "I like what I get" is the same thing as "I get what I like"!''

Returning to RTÉ: As Irish Secretary of the NUJ I welcome the ongoing commitment to news and current affairs, but I am concerned at the short-term vision which sees RTÉ as a publisher-broadcaster required to meet minimum obligations while the lucrative elements of content are put out to tender.

It is said that a windy day is no day for a thatching (Ní hé lá na gaoithe lá na scolb!) and in a sense RTÉ has been forced to present a strategy while playing against a ferocious wind.

But we have so many questions: Will there really be no studio capable of holding a significant live audience in Montrose?

Are we really going to lose the iconic Ronnie Tallon designed radio centre with its magnificent recording facilities?

Might government not consider giving time and space for a more imaginative plan which could see the development of a centre celebrating the history of Irish broadcasting while accommodating the Concert Orchestra and RTÉ archives: could there be a more fitting way of commemorating Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh and the other great voices which defined Irish radio.

The deaths of Mícheál and Tommy Gorman this week served as a reminder of the value of public service broadcasting – challenging, independent, provocative and daring. It also re-enforced my belief that the Irish public values RTÉ and understands the worth of public service broadcasting.

Public interest journalism, in the public and private spheres, is defined by respect for ethical values and true independence. It requires investment in editorial resources.

In a year dominated by elections and global conflict we are right to be concerned by the increase in disinformation and misinformation, about the undisputed ability of technology to re-enforce prejudices, by the inherent dangers in allowing algorithms to determine editorial choices.

Speaking at the World Congress of the International Federation of Journalists in Dublin in 2013 President Michael D Higgins warned of the dangers inherent in the editorial power being amassed by search engines.

He told delegates: “We can see the editorial power being granted to search engines – it is not a huge leap to suggest that in the future, these adaptive and hugely useful technologies will come to exercise an increasingly powerful role in how people will access media. Similarly, it is easy to see how this globalisation of content might allow popular commercial material to become the exclusive preserve of large multinational content providers – vertically integrated media companies that might come to control the commercial middle ground and with it access to the platforms people use to view content.”

These concerns have already been shown to be fully justified.

As we gather in Kells today,  I am mindful of the huge price paid by so many journalists around the world.

In the Israeli - Palestinian conflict 116 journalists have been killed.

Journalism is both a precarious and dangerous profession.

There is a reason why journalists are being targeted.

Those who seek the truth are the enemy of those with something to hide.

Public interest journalism is worth defending but no one should have to die for a story.