

Media's role in mediating our 'different psychic landscapes'
by Allan Leonard 18 October 2022 – Shared Future News

A set of current and former journalists shared their experiences and thoughts on the role of media and social debate across the island of Ireland. Hosted by the Irish Association, the event "Journalism without borders" attracted several dozen, including other journalists and commentators. The discussion explored what we think the public knows about society on both sides of the border, and why or why not that is the case.

Indeed, **Stephen Douds** (president of the Irish Association) explained in his introduction a motivation for the day's event — the role played by newspapers, TV, and radio in literally mediating understanding and awareness of the diversity of life across the island of Ireland:

"It is still remarkably easy to live in ignorance of the lives of our contemporaries — and their daily concerns — in the other jurisdiction on the island, and that despite two public service broadcasters and any number of privately owned newspaper/newspaper groups and radio stations. Not to mention all the many social media platforms."

He recalled a previous Irish Association event, when Ireland President Michael Higgins spoke about ethical remembering and history, and in regard to the importance of stories said: "One story leads to another... no single story can ever be separated from the story of the neighbour... our lives on this island are dense and intertwined and we hope that our stories can lead us somewhere new."

Douds finished by saying that media at its heart is storytelling — public storytelling — to existing and sometimes new audiences. He hoped that today's event "can in time lead us to somewhere new: perhaps to where we are all better informed and more aware of the concerns, priorities, and lived experiences in parts of the island we know little about".

Roisin Ingle, a columnist for the Irish Times for over 20 years, gave a keynote address: "Changing the narrative: Portadown tales, Derry Girls and Belfast books". Ingle began with her improbable meeting her northern Protestant husband-to-be while covering the Drumcree riots of 1997 in Portadown: "Love at first riot". She was welcomed by his family and her mother-in-law, nicknamed Queenie, is the character that her readers very much engage with. The relationships with her northern family "seeped into my work". Ingle considers Queenie as a very good example of a new story.

Meanwhile, Ingle thinks the popular TV series Derry Girls is a wonderful example of telling the old stories in a different way. She recalled the episode where young people across the divide are assembled and asked to identify what they had in common. Instead, they readily fill a blackboard of differences, such as Protestants putting their toasters in the cupboards: "Queenie kept her toaster in the cupboard." Ingle said that she was delighted to see the Irish Times cover the story of the physical blackboard going on display at the Ulster Museum, as part of an exhibition, Culture Lab: Don't Believe the Stereotypes.

Ingle remarked that stories from Northern Ireland “don’t tend to traffic brilliantly well” at the Irish Times and that Northern Ireland “is a bit of a turn off for some readers”. But, she continued by making the point that the way in which this island is going to be shared and how we live together on it “is the biggest story coming down the tracks”; she informed the audience of the Irish Times’s plans for all-Ireland opinion polling to gauge what people think about the future.

Here, she cited colleague Freya McClements’s reportage on the 2021 Northern Ireland census results, which showed that 17.4% of the population identified themselves as having no religion: “That’s tens of thousands of people who don’t usually get taken into account in the story of this place. Who are these Northern Ireland atheists? Where do they fit into the Northern Ireland narrative? I want their stories.”

Ingle said that we should be trying harder to find stories that reveal something new and surprising about people here: “We need to get away from the obvious and into those in-between liminal spaces.” She cited women writers from Northern Ireland and their works — Anna Burns (Milkman), Louise Kennedy (Trespases), and Susannah Dickey (Common Decency): “It’s so gratifying that they are finding big audiences in the republic and helping people connect in a different way with Northern Ireland.”

She called for more stories of the ordinary lived experience, about the way lives in both north and south intersect, “the different ways we rub up against each other”. She insisted that such everyday stories are not “fluff” or trivial: “They’re important. They’re the kind of stories that are going to allow people to understand each other more, to laugh with each other, to care more, to have empathy for our neighbours, to think about things differently and in the space of understanding maybe things can shift and move in a positive way.”

Ingle was aware of negative stories, such as a song sung in the Ireland women’s football dressing room or “a song sung in an Orange lodge a while back”: “There are songs and words that hurt and wound and cause people pain. I don’t believe journalists can stop people singing or chanting or are going to stop bonfires or balaclavas, but I do believe we can present other more positive and helpful narratives to our audience.”

Mark Devenport, the conference chair, framed the first panel discussion in terms of north-south and east-west collaboration and competition in the media marketplace. He cited informal and formal crossovers, such as receiving spillover signal from Saorview and non-geoblocked southern programmes, courtesy of a deal between the UK and Ireland governments which was signed in 2010 and has its origins in the cultural section of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

Devenport recalled the experimental, all-island newspaper, Daily Ireland, which was published from January 2005 to September 2006. He asked panellist Sam McBride whether a separate edition of the Sunday Independent (of which McBride is northern editor) is a recognition of two separate markets for two separate jurisdictions on the island. McBride replied that north-south traffic is driven by metrics — what readers in each market want to read — than by any “editorial engineering”.

Freya McClements (northern editor, Irish Times) explained how north-south crossover depends on the type of story. Examples of those that don't crossover well into the south include the energy crisis and Northern Ireland's education system, while those that do — such as the debate on Ireland unification and political/cultural identities — are those that resonate wherever you are on the island.

Denzil McDaniel (former editor, Impartial Reporter) expressed his appreciation of the commercial pressures of chasing clicks versus reporting stories that need to be told (such as proceedings of local government and courts). He was critical of the performance of public service broadcasters, who have less commercial pressures yet are not reflecting the communities they serve, especially in border areas.

Reflecting on the upcoming 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, an audience member asked whether the accord would have been reached in today's social media environment. McClements replied "no", giving an example of when a subsequent negotiation to restore the Northern Ireland Executive failed, due to the instant feedback expressed online. Similarly, Devenport recalled how during the 1996–98 multi-party talks journalists would be corralled into rooms where their mobile phone network connections would fail. McBride was more qualified in his response, saying that social media has democratised access to information (and thus useful to him as a journalist), but this hasn't been reflected in wider society.

The second panel discussion attempted to address how people get high-quality, reliable information and analysis across the island of Ireland. Deaglán de Bréadún (former northern editor, Irish Times) said that under the rule of editor Douglas Gageby, it was said that the amount of space and coverage given to the Northern Ireland Parliament was longer than the official parliamentary record: "I had that kind of injected into me." De Bréadún added that there was a huge interest about Northern Ireland in the south during the Troubles, but "thanks be to God those days are over for good". In the end, he concurred with McBride's remarks that people are going to be most interested in news that immediately affects them: "A fire in Carrickfergus is going to draw more readers [in Northern Ireland] than a fire in Cork."

To contrast, **Emma DeSouza** (a columnist and commentator) said that there is a southern appetite to learn more about Northern Ireland. She has found that there is much misunderstanding and outdated biases and prejudice "about what us northerners are". DeSouza suggested that this may come from a disconnect "between our people, north and south" and that there is a need for a greater understanding and knowledge of what modern Northern Ireland looks like. Her work is focussed on highlighting changes in northern communities, such as Irish language learning and GAA in east Belfast, an evolution of political murals to street art, and social issues such as mental health and women's rights. "I think that there just needs to be a little bit more effort made and getting that across to a southern audience," said DeSouza.

Matthew O'Toole MLA spoke about his work as chair of a Northern Ireland Assembly all-party group on media sustainability, with his passionate belief in the role of journalism in democracy. Without casting judgment, he said that effects of partition included the creation

of different perspectives of society, reflected in different media environments and deepened by the Troubles: "We've existed in slightly different psychic landscapes at times." He added that there are many exceptions to this, including ecclesiastical work of churches, cross-border life, sports such as GAA, rugby, and cricket. However: "It's still a bit odd that we have this invisible barrier in terms of seeing what's happening and understanding one another; it needs to get better."

Mike Nesbitt MLA concurred with the idea that we don't know each other as well as we should and thought that is very important, "because the foundation stone of the politics of this place is built on relationships ... and you can't really do good politics unless your relationships are right." He said that he was as guilty as the next person in not having a broad and mature enough set of relationships in the south, but uses a couple of channels regularly. Nesbitt said that he thinks unionism should be engaging in debates about what the future looks like on this island.

A member of the audience asked for the panellists' views on the role and responsibilities of the media in regard to the constitutional debate. DeSouza responded that there is a challenge for the media in terms of how it reports and covers the significant social and political change taking place:

"I think we have to have a serious conversation over whether the media is creating a positive environment that is oriented towards peace in a post-conflict society or whether at times the media has a role of intensifying conflict and creating an agenda that can actually make these conversations more difficult."

DeSouza suggested evidence of a negative media bias, when "fringe political views" were given prominence coverage and the "normalisation" of reporting on paramilitaries. She thought that all involved in the media industry need to go back to the basics of ensuring fair and appropriate coverage, including ensuring that the diversity of society is included. DeSouza also argued that both BBC Northern Ireland and RTE should bring forward increasing north-south conversations "because [such conversations] do impact and have relevance in UK and Irish affairs across this whole island".

Nesbitt responded by saying that in his 17 years' combined experience at BBC Radio Ulster and UTV, "nobody ever tried to impose a kind of editorial framework upon me". He mooted whether the difference in perception of the media lies in unionism preferring the status quo versus others seeking change, and that unionists' desire to maintain the status quo is "a natural organic thing and it's not being imposed by people [with] an agenda". O'Toole developed this thought, by arguing that there is an advantage for sustaining the status quo when you have media that accepts underlying assumptions: "The status quo is effectively a kind of inertia... Some of the structures [and] ways the media present the world reinforce and help recreate a default to the status quo."

O'Toole continued by saying that it's one thing to consider how media organisations construct the environment in which they report and a responsibility in a post-conflict society about how you report it. He said this leads to another set of challenging questions: "Are you doing peace process journalism or are you doing actual journalism?" O'Toole said that in any

case, it is right that people who have immense power are held accountable to the choices they make in terms of covering a post-conflict society.

DeSouza provided two examples which illustrated the challenge of challenging what journalists report and gets covered. The first was the case of the Holywell Trust that dropped its tender for a research project about how the debate on a united Ireland was being covered in the media, after some “painted it as some sort of nefarious agenda, funded by the Irish government”. The second came from a peacebuilding conference that DeSouza was responsible for, when Ireland President Higgins made a remark about integrated education and a TV news programme ran a segment of only those opposed to integrated education, while panning views of the women attending the conference without reference to it whatsoever: “So this great, positive event that was around peacebuilding and reconciliation was completely ignored in place of what was a seemingly controversial statement — a negative feedback loop”.

Stephen Douds closed the event with a reminder of the Irish Association’s objective of the promotion of communication, understanding, and cooperation:

“Perhaps I have rather glibly tripped over that line about communication and understanding. It’s been a long time since we spent time in a room together just to reflect on professional communication in the media, the conversation about social media, and the kind of private media world that we have access to and the quality of communication and understanding, north and south, and within Northern Ireland that we are responsible for.”

Through a rich mixture of journalistic and political experiences and perspectives, the conference provided historical and contemporary insights into commercial challenges and editorial choices in reporting news and stories of interest to various audiences. Perhaps the conclusion to Mark Devenport’s opening question of whether what gets published is the fault of our media or simply the consequences of an audience only interested in what’s on their doorstep is: it’s complicated.

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