



Press Council of Ireland

Speech of Mr Dáithí O’Ceallaigh, Chairman

at the launch of the

2013 Report of the Press Council of Ireland and Office of the Press Ombudsman

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The past year has been marked, not only by the continuing existence of a challenging environment for all our member publications, but also by important developments in relation to how our media are produced and how they are consumed.

The media landscape, in fact, has changed dramatically even in the seven years since the Council was established. In 2007, certainly, many newspapers had associated websites. Today, most of our member publications are in effect multi-platform publishers, and the old idea of a website which simply reproduced what was available on the printed page is no more.

Today, newspapers frequently publish on the web material which has not appeared in their print editions, including interactive comments from their readers. Compared with print – which will, I am certain, continue to serve a vital function in our society – the web is elastic, its boundaries limited only by the capacity of publishers to populate it with worthwhile material, and by the attention span of readers and consumers who are, as often as not, time-poor! It can and does include, as well as text, both video and audio, whether generated by the newspaper itself or included as a link to another media source.

I am glad that the Articles of Association of the Council, when being drawn up in 2006, plainly foresaw this situation, to the extent that the Council, and the Office of the Press Ombudsman, are now well placed to deal with all challenges involved in this technological explosion.

Not the least significant example of how this challenge is being met has been the recent accession of a major news website, TheJournal.ie, as a full member of the Council. We have always believed that the Council is well placed to embrace new as well as legacy media which are prepared to work with an independent system of accountability and redress based on a Code of Practice which reflects the best judgement of media professionals themselves. In time, we anticipate, other digital media will recognise the value of our system, and will find that the adoption of these Principles, and membership of the structure which supports them, is an essential hallmark of the quality of the services they offer to the public.

The Council believes that best professional practice in journalism is platform-neutral and that, in the digital age in which the financial barriers to entry have all but crumbled, it will continue to seek acceptance of the Code of Practice, and of the principles of accountability and redress, wherever these are relevant to digital publishers.

It is important to remember that the Council also has the responsibility to defend the freedom of the press. In this context, developments in the European context may be significant.

One of these has been in 2013, the publication, during the year covered by this Report, of a document by the European Commission containing the recommendations of a High Level Group Report on *A Free and Pluralistic Media to Sustain European Democracy*. This Report had many useful recommendations which were welcomed by the Council, including those supporting the development of media literacy in schools, making the internet more democratic, and the importance of investigative journalism, among others. The Council, however, formally signalled its objection to one of the recommendations which suggested the EU should seek “more extensive competence” in respect of media freedom and pluralism. The Council’s view was that while such an expansion of competence could be extremely beneficial and progressive in the case of some Member States, it might be viewed as unacceptable in Member States where the history and cultural importance of press freedom is already well established.

More recently, a decision by the European Court of Justice which may have implications for the protection of privacy has occasioned considerable comment. While this decision is not of immediate relevance for newspapers, given that the entity involved was Google, which is not a publisher and which therefore does not benefit from the protection afforded to newspapers who frequently deal with personal information for legitimate journalistic purposes, this is a developing situation which the Council will keep under review.

I would like to express my appreciation, and that of the Council, for the substantial financial commitment of the press industry to our system of independent self-regulation, which is being maintained despite the many financial pressures which the industry continues to experience. The press continue to honour this commitment because the Council is not a marketing or a public relations exercise, but a highly significant development in independent institutional accountability in the private sector and, as such, a substantial contribution to the democratic ideals which the press, among other institutions, exists to serve.

I would like to pay tribute to the contribution of Frank Cullen of National Newspapers of Ireland. He too deserves our thanks for his involvement in this project, which can be traced back more than a decade to before the establishment of the Council and the Office of the Press Ombudsman in 2007. He has played a major role in supporting the Council and the Office of the Press Ombudsman and their important function in Irish Society.

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