**Alternatives – Media reforms for media integrity and future of independent journalism**

**Search for alternatives to corrupt media systems in the countries of South East Europe**

**SEE Media Observatory’s final regional conference**

**Novi Sad, 13 June 2016**

**Session:** **Searching for leaders in media and journalistic community to protect and save integrity and future of journalism and media – The role of the editors: are they still the leaders?**

**Keynote speech by Geraldine Kennedy,**

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THE ROLE OF EDITORS

It is a pleasure for me to be invited to give the key lecture to the final conference of the South Eastern Europe Media Observatory in Novi Sad. I would like to thank Brankica Petkovic for asking me and Peter Preston of the Guardian Foundation for putting pressure on me to be here.

Let me introduce myself briefly.

I am the former Editor of *The Irish Times*, the first woman editor of a national daily newspaper in Western Europe and the United States. (Other countries use the title editor-in-chief). I was the first woman political correspondent in Ireland in 1980. I later became editor in 2002.

We were always very fortunate at *The Irish Times* that it is owned by a Trust with the objective of maintaining it “as an independent newspaper primarily concerned with serious issues for the benefit of the community throughout the whole of Ireland, free from any form of personal or party political, commercial, religious or other sectional control”.

I am looking forward to the debate on the findings of your research and I am happy to answer any questions you may wish to ask me about my experiences that may be relevant to you.

In my own country, Ireland, my reputation for vindicating independent journalism in hostile circumstances throughout my 40 years in journalism is well known. But, I had to fight for the integrity of the journalist.

As a political correspondent in 1982, my telephone was unlawfully tapped by the State, the Fianna Fail majority government of the day, to find out my sources of information. It was done under a new category of “national security”, as distinct from the legal grounds of criminal activity or security of the State.

I was threatened and bullied. I found a broken bottle on the windscreen wiper of my car outside a Dublin restaurant one night with a written message inside saying: “We are watching you.”

The Garda Siochana, the Irish police force, decided that I would have to be given 24-hour police protection for a period to do my job as a political correspondent: going from my home to the political correspondents’ room in the national parliament.

At another stage, I asked a senior politician to come to my then home on the banks of the River Liffey in Dublin to tell him that if I was ever found there, I hadn’t gone voluntarily. I had a fear of water and didn’t swim.

I, together with another journalist, Bruce Arnold, tapped at the same time, subsequently took a case to the High Court claiming an abuse of privacy and State power. We won.

We established the right to privacy in communications. A new Act was introduced in parliament.

The challenges that you face as editors are very serious but do not think that you are alone. The same pressures of political, ownership and commercial interference, as well as the introduction of press regulation, have been faced in Ireland over the last number of years. And, by and large, Irish editors have won the battles for independence and integrity in their journalism.

You are questioning what is the role of editors today in fostering and protecting the independence and integrity of journalism. Do editors still have a role?

Of course, they do. If they don’t, who would produce editorial content: news, independent analysis and comment?

Journalists like to think that press freedom is all about them. But, it is not. It is about the public’s right to know: their right as citizens. We exist to serve their right to know and be informed in a democratic society.

The freedom of the press is one of those simple phrases that cover a world of complexities. As we all know, it is an essential cornerstone of democracy, a major component of the eternal vigilance that is essential to political and economic freedom. It is among the first items for removal on the agenda of every authoritarian government but it is also under more or less permanent pressure from a variety of other, less obvious, more obscure sources.

We are fortunate in Ireland to live in a country and one of the few regions of the world in which press freedom is accepted, at least in theory, as a fundamental right.

Journalists in Ireland can go about their work without, for example, having to share their Russian colleagues real fear of murder. Think of the assassination of Anna Politkovskaya. Think of the journalistic statistics in Turkey this year. I must record, however, that it is 20 years this month since Veronica Guerin was murdered in her car at a traffic lights on a dual carriageway just outside Dublin because of her journalistic pursuit of drug lords and criminals.

 While we are generally free to do our jobs without fear of physical intimidation, there are a myriad of more subtle threats than the blunt instruments of violence or state power that affect the freedom of the press on a daily basis.

Few people in positions of power, whether they are elected politicians, bureaucrats or business people, like the media – except, of course, when it is doing their bidding or being complimentary to them.  The relationship between politicians and journalists tends to be a love/hate one, as I know from experience.  They know, as we know, that in practice it’s a fluid relationship.  Politicians may love us when they’re in opposition and apparently on the same side in challenging the government and ferreting out information about its activities.  Once in government themselves, they tend to exhibit the same tendencies of everybody in power – dislike of the media for endlessly asking awkward questions, quibbling about their actions, and interfering with their efforts to get across their message.

Few governments ever admit to having pursued the wrong policies; but many claim that everything would have been fine if only they had got their message across to the electorate.

Much as journalists and politicians know that they need each other, they should also know that we do not work for each other or even do the same job.  It is as important for journalists to remember that as it is for politicians.  It is easy for journalists to become advocates for one policy or another – and there is nothing wrong with that, as long as they don’t lose sight of their main role, which is, in a nutshell, to maintain a healthy scepticism, question everything, presume nothing, and put all the facts and truths that they know before their readers.

The journalist’s job is to keep the public informed about what is going on.  One of the most famous old definitions of news – news is what someone somewhere doesn’t want you to know – is still the best. Governments, political parties, companies, wealthy businessmen, institutions of all kinds from banks to charities spend very large amounts of money – to put it politely - on trying to get their message across to the public or – to put it less politely – on trying to manipulate the media and thereby manipulate the public.

That it is important for the media not to allow itself to be manipulated goes without saying.  But that is much easier said than done.  There are often fine lines to be drawn between allowing and facilitating debate and the free flow of rival ideas and, on the other hand, ensuring that a newspaper does not simply become a playing field for rival teams of spin doctors and vested interests.

In practical terms, in the day-to-day experiences of the media, the freedom of the press depends on a number of factors.  Some of the major ones, of which I have personal experience, include the media’s own behaviour; its ability to protect its sources; and its financial strength.

As I’ve mentioned, people in positions of power tend to dislike the media because it frequently gets in the way of their plans, simply by doing its essential job of informing the public.  Thus, they are very ready to limit the powers of the press once given any excuse to do so.  Unfortunately, the excesses of the media, mainly of the tabloid press, sometimes gives them just such an excuse in areas like privacy.  The Irish Government came very close to introducing a Draconian privacy bill alongside the changes in the Defamation Act, 2009.

It is important that the media, like all other institutions of power, uses their power and influence responsibly and is prepared to admit mistakes when it makes them. For this reason, during my period as Editor, advocated and fully supported the setting up of the Office of Press Ombudsman and an independent Press Council *to provide* redress to people who feel aggrieved and acts as a standard-setter for all elements of the media including the Irish editions of British newspapers.

The protection of sources is one of the fundamental requirements of a free press, which is why I was so appreciative of the support I received from The Irish Times to fight a court battle with the Mahon Tribunal of Enquiry up to the Supreme Court over the protection of the source of a document which led to the resignation of the former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern. The document showed that the Prime Minister was receiving monies from businessmen while he was Minister for Finance. I destroyed the document when asked to hand it over to the State and the courts.

 That case has now established, for the first time in Irish law, that we do indeed have the right to protect our sources.  I believe that that decision has strengthened enormously the freedom of the press in Ireland.

In many respects, the media is only as good as its sources.  We have had over the years many good investigative journalists, but we don’t have any investigative powers.  We can’t compel people to answer questions, demand discovery of documents and all the other powers that are, rightly, reserved to the legal system.

 We can observe and doorstep, question, analyse, challenge officialdom and we rely strongly on good sources to point us in the right directions and/or to tell us what is happening.

In my experience, many of the best sources are people who act for the highest motives – they see something going on which they believe to be wrong or an abuse of power or trust.  Some sources’ motives may not always be so pure: they may be driven by vindictiveness or revenge.  Yet, time and again, in the western world, we have seen the importance of anonymous sources in putting an end to abuses and malpractices by governments, companies and religious and other institutions.

One of the factors which *The Irish Times* had to weigh up in defending this case was the potential cost, of both a major fine if it lost and the substantial legal costs of the case itself. (As an aside, there was no consideration, of course, about the prospect of their Editor being sent to prison!)  Which brings me to my final point today – the importance of financial independence and the financial strength of the media.

In our world, there are two basic methods of funding the media: state ownership or commercial companies.  The former is generally restricted, for historical reasons, to broadcasting and has led to well-known pressures and problems with governments over the years. The latter range from multinational, publicly-quoted companies to a trust like *The Irish Times,* which also has to stand commercially on its own feet.

To be truly independent the press must be financially secure.  It has always been susceptible to general financial pressures or directly in the form of advertising linked to editorial demands or, indeed, to advertising withheld by governments, companies or organisations in retaliation for the expression of views they did not like.  While the latter has always been part and parcel of the daily pressures on press freedom – and one which all editors worth their salt can resist without great difficulty – a more general financial security has become the major concern for the media at present.

The reason, of course, is the internet, which has changed our lives in many positive ways already and will continue to change them in ways we cannot yet see clearly. The internet poses a huge threat to the traditional structure and financing of the newspaper industry.

To conclude.

It must be a difficult time to be an editor of serious journalism. The threat to the independence of editors is greater today than at any other time in the history of newspapers and broadcasting. There is regulation of a legal and other nature; there are the competing commercial interests to grow readers/audiences to survive; there are the advertising auctions between media outlets; and, there are the multiplicity of internet and other platforms “stealing” stories from expensive conventional newsrooms which have big editorial budgets and making them available to recipients for nothing. (As an aside, this business model is utterly unsustainable).

There is another challenge to the guardian of editorial interests in this new environment where there is less time for the Editor to be an Editor. The Editor is seen more as the head of the production floor, spewing out content on whatever platforms are the vogue of the moment, engaging more and more in general management, human resources, circulation and marketing, and how to make money on the website.

There is less and less time for the Editor to do his/her real job to keep informed about news: politics, business, sociology, trends in society to ensure that his/her newspaper is constantly engaged in a conversation with its community. If this could be done by market research, there would never have been an unsuccessful newspaper anywhere in the world.

A new definition of news is emerging but this time it is designed to suit its producers for cost reasons rather than its recipients. This will affect all of your careers in journalism.

To sum up, what would I say to you?

You are not proprietors, advertising managers or marketing gurus. You are editors. If you do not look after the integrity and independence of journalism, who will?