

2005-01-01

Irish Journalist's Attitudes Towards, and Use of, Internet Technology

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Recommended Citation

Brennan, Edward: Irish Journalist's Attitudes Towards, and Use of, Internet Technology. Exploring Inequalities: Seventh Conference of the European Sociological Association, Torun. Poland, 2005. References updated 2009.

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Digital Media Centre

Conference papers

Dublin Institute of Technology

Year 2005

Irish Journalist's Attitudes Towards, and
Use of, Internet Technology

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Google as a Contacts Book: Uses of, and Attitudes towards, Internet Technology among Irish Journalists

Eddie Brennan

Abstract

This paper explores the effects of Internet technology on the occupational culture and work practices of Irish journalists. There is a common view that the Internet, as an alternative source for news is challenging professional journalists. Increasingly amateurs may produce and disseminate stories to a potentially global readership. This paper presents results from a qualitative pilot study exploring Irish journalist's reactions to this perceived threat. It reveals that the economic, social and legal features of the Irish journalistic field greatly mitigate any potential threat from the Internet. The research did reveal, however, that the Internet may have some unforeseen and unintended consequences for journalists. These will be discussed briefly in some preliminary hypotheses offered in the conclusion.

The Emperor Has No Clothes

On 3 July 2003, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi made headlines all over Europe. Standing in the European parliament, he suggested that German social democrat, Mr Martin Schulz, resembled a Nazi concentration camp guard. Later that month, another Berlusconi related story appeared in an Irish newspaper. On 31 July, the Irish Independent ran a front-page story under the headline 'Silvio and the taking back of Christ'. The story was about Prime Minister Berlusconi's alleged intention to 'take back' the Caravaggio painting the *Taking of Christ*, the pride of Ireland's National Gallery. However, this story was completely false. It was the result of a hoax which originated on a website called P45.net. The same site perpetrated a number of successful hoaxes. Stories on its messaging boards were picked up, reproduced and sometimes embellished by broadsheet, tabloid and radio journalists.

The site's creator¹ saw the success of these hoaxes to be symptoms of 'intrinsic, widespread, profoundly system-entrenched problems in the Irish media' (2003: 20). Chief among these problems are, according to Cunningham, a 'cut and

¹ The site was created and run by Michael Cunningham who had been a journalist with *The Irish Times*.

paste mentality’, an ‘IT [information technology] knowledge deficit and the circular reproduction of stories from one media source to another. He contends that the combination of increased time pressures and the deluge of information available through the Internet makes it ‘easier than ever to copy and paste a paragraph or two’ without bothering to check all the facts. He argues ‘many journalists still have a poor grasp of the net and of IT tools and techniques’. They may not know, for example, how to trace the real origins of an email’. Finally there is the problem that news may simply circulate from one paper to another.

Once a hoax appears in one media source, other media players are increasingly likely to bite too. So much of what the media report today isn’t stuff they’ve actually gone out and found out—its rehashed, recycled and rewritten from their nearest rivals. Hyperjournalism (Cunningham 2003: 20).

Incidents like the P45 hoaxes cast journalists in an extremely negative light. Increased time pressures and the temptation of free and easy stories from the Internet militate against standards. It would appear that, in some cases, professionalism and its associated prestige have been forsaken for the sake of expediency.

Are We All Journalists Now?

The Internet may present an even more serious threat to journalism’s standing. The weblog, abbreviated to the ubiquitous term ‘blog’, are seen by many to create an inclusive, democratic and anti-elitist media system (Lowrey and Burleson Mackay 2008; Deuze, Bruns and Neuberger 2007, O’Sullivan and Heinonen 2008; Kahn and Kellner 2004). Bloggers have been hailed as a new counter-culture, bypassing the concentrated ownership and perceived political bias of many mainstream media organisations. For Kahn and Kellner, blogs fulfil the Internet’s promise of ‘forming a global network of interlocking, informative websites’. They ‘make the idea of a dynamic network of ongoing debate, dialogue and commentary central and so

emphasize the interpretation and dissemination of alternative information to a heightened degree' (2004: 91). Bloggers, in their view, 'have demonstrated themselves as technoactivists favouring not only democratic self-expression and networking, but also global media critique and journalistic sociopolitical intervention' (2004: 91). Blogs then may be seen to empower people as citizens by wresting the control of information from a closed journalistic elite. The claim is commonly heard that 'we are all journalists now'.

Blogs gained particular notoriety in Britain and Ireland after the London bombings of July 2005. The attacks revealed novel newsgathering techniques and new attitudes to these methods among 'traditional' media. It was claimed that the 'power and reach' of blogs was proven in the aftermath of the London attacks (Day in *The Guardian* July 8, 2005). For Emily Bell, editor-in-chief of *Guardian Unlimited*:

Blogs acted as a quicker way of updating a story than writing a full, traditional new story, and that people turned to the Internet to get more up-to-date information than was being offered on TV, as well as using the blogs as a place to connect emotionally with events. (*The Guardian*, July 8 2005)

In a time of Do It Yourself reportage, the journalist's trade is seen by many to be at a low ebb. As Singer notes, the idea that anyone can gather and disseminate information has tipped the balance of power away from the professional towards the news consumer (2003: 147). The web facilitates personalised news, where readers rather than editors make decisions as to what is important, interesting and worthy of attention. In these various ways, new technologies have undermined the role and status of the professional journalist² (O'Sullivan and Heinonen 2008; Trench and Quinn 2003).

² There have been many attempts to locate journalism within the sociology of the professions (see Singer 2003 for example). Ironically, many journalists prefer to see their job as part of a trade rather than a profession, given that many professions are seen to act in their own interests rather than those of the public.

Professionals have always jealously guarded against pretenders to their status. With ‘bloggers’, however, the volume of pretenders appears set to blur the boundaries of the profession (Singer 2003: 147). A Profession must be uniquely capable of providing a particular service. If a group can usurp a profession’s methods a legitimation crisis will ensue (Lowrey and Burleson Mackey 2008: 66, Singer 2003: 140). The ‘blog’ has amplified perennial questions about who, or what, is a journalist? Singer sees journalists to be in competition with Internet enthusiasts and ‘bloggers’. In her view professional journalists may either admit amateurs ‘under the tent of “professional journalists”’ or face stiff competition to maintain their current position (2003: 140).

Traditional, paid journalism appears to be under attack. This is most evident in the way that new technologies have permitted the lowering or removal of barriers to entry to the field. Journalists may regard the web as a treasure trove of information but also a source of competition. Thus, stories may seep from the ‘blogosphere’ into mainstream media. The p45.net stories, and more infamously, the Drudge report provide two notable examples (See Hall 2000: 128). Singer argues that the challenge ‘is not about money or even job security. It is about the notion of professionalism’ (Singer 2003: 139)³. If accounts of blogging undermining traditional journalism are accurate, we are witnessing the dissolution of a trade or profession through technological change.

Technologies can transform occupational categories. They can alter the boundaries, rules and rewards of a profession or trade. This paper presents findings interviews with Irish journalists, which attempted to gain a sense of the extent to

³ Of course in the context of journalism the term ‘professionalism’ needs to be used loosely. Many journalists would subscribe to being members of a trade rather than a profession (Marr 2004). Lowrey and Burleson Mackey are sceptical about claims that journalism constitutes a profession. Moreover, they point out that arguments about what is, and what is not, a ‘profession’ tend to be ‘a theoretical dead end’ (2008: 67).

which IT is transforming Irish journalism. This piece presents findings from eight long, semi-structured interviews with journalists from national papers, both broadsheet and tabloid. See Table 1, for their pseudonyms and occupational background. Data were analysed using an adaptation of Bourdieu’s conceptual model developed for media production research⁴.

Table 1

Pseudonym	Job Description	Sex	Years in Journalism	Publication Type
Journalist A	Columnist and web editor	Male	>30	Broadsheet
Journalist B	Columnist and web journalist	Male	=10	Broadsheet
Journalist C	Business and Tech journalist	Female	<15	Broadsheet
Journalist D	Media correspondent and consultant	Male	>30	Broadsheet
Journalist E	Reporter	Male	>30	Tabloid
Journalist F	Crime and security correspondent	Male	>10	Tabloid
Journalist G	Reporter	Male	>10	Tabloid
Journalist H	Entertainment columnist	Female	<5	Tabloid

Some Peculiarities of the Irish Media Field

Following Bourdieu, the possibilities of a media organisation can only be understood by considering ‘the position of the national media field within the global media field’ (1998: 41). To understand everyday journalistic work in Ireland we must understand the peculiar national conditions in which it takes place.

By international standards, Ireland has an extremely small market for newspapers and advertising. Historically, Irish media have been weak in comparison with American and European media conglomerates. In broadcasting, and in print journalism, Ireland is a media minnow. Irish newspapers have long faced stiff competition from low cost British imports (see Horgan 2001: 191). Irish media are profoundly shaped by Britain through proximity and a shared language (see Horgan 2001: 159—163; Savage 1996: 134). Generally, Ireland follows trends set by countries with richer media traditions. Despite this, Irish journalism has its

⁴ This was developed for previous research on soap opera production (see Brennan 2004 and Brennan 2000).

peculiarities. It is necessary to outline these to understand how Irish journalists relate to the Internet as a news phenomenon.

Ireland has a vibrant newspaper culture. Over half of the Irish population (55.8 per cent) read a daily newspaper. Almost three in every four Irish people read a Sunday newspaper (71.8 per cent). Nine out of ten people in Ireland are reported to read any newspaper (86.2 per cent) (Joint National Readership Survey 2007/8 <http://www.jnrs.ie/survey.htm> Accessed 14, 1, 09). The Irish spend more time reading newspapers than any other country in Europe (Elvestad and Blekesaune 2008: 431). The Irish newspaper readers are reported to read for an average of 53.4 minutes per day. This is ten minutes more than the next nearest country, Norway with an average of 43.5 minutes of reading per day⁵. (Elvestad and Blekesaune 2008: 432).

O'Donnell argues that there is also a high level of trust in Irish newspapers (2003). A number of Irish journalists have gained immense prestige in recent years for investigative work exposing corruption in business and politics. As Corcoran has noted 'at the turn of the twenty-first century Irish journalists occupy a robust position, riding high on their new-found reputation as whistle blowers willing to take on establishment figures and institutions' (Corcoran 2004: 26)⁶

Irish domestic Internet access has, very recently, reached levels comparable with other developed European countries. In 2008, 7 out of 10 Irish households had a home computer. 63 per cent of Irish households have Internet access. Only four years earlier, however, these figures were dramatically different. In 2004 Ireland was ahead of only Portugal, Greece and Lithuania in its rates of access to home computers and domestic Internet connections. In the same year, 79 per cent of Danish households

⁵ It should be noted, however, that Ireland has a higher number of non-readers than Norway (12.8 per cent and 4.4 per cent respectively) (Elvestad and Blekesaune 2008: 432)

⁶ This was particularly evident in the standing ovation received by Paul Williams, crime correspondent for the *Sunday World* on RTÉ's *Late Late Show* (Tx 21:30, February 25, 2005).

had a computer and 64 per cent had Internet access. (Central Statistics Office 2004: 37). Ireland’s catch-up had been dramatic (see Table 2). However, Ireland still only enjoys the levels of access that Denmark had four years earlier. Since the Internet has only recently become available to a majority of Irish households it is unsurprising that there is no strong culture of web-based participatory journalism in Ireland.

Table 2: ICT Access 2005-2008

	2005	2006	2007	2008
Households containing a personal computer	55%	59%	65%	70%
Percentage of households with Internet access	47%	50%	57%	63%

Source:

Unlike the United States, there has been no Irish explosion in web-based journalism. As O’Sullivan found, companies with traditional media industry models dominate Irish journalism online. There is little emphasis on interactivity or free information. Instead, until recently, there has been a move towards charging for online content in the same manner as printed material (O’Sullivan 2004: 65—66). Notably, *The Irish Times*, which had offered an online subscription service has now adopted a free, non-subscription model that now only charges for archive access (*The Irish Times* 30 June 2008). Similarly, while Irish people can access websites and blogs from around the world, the number of ‘blogs’ that deal with Irish political or social issues is extremely small (O’Brien-Lynch in *The Irish Times*, 11 February 2005). Despite, recent prosperity and technical advance, Irish news consumption remains oriented towards ‘traditional media’, i.e., television, radio and newspapers.

The Irish Times is Ireland’s one notable online success story. Irishtimes.com (formerly Ireland.com) has attracted a large readership both nationally and internationally. One of the reasons behind the site’s success is, according to Journalist B, Ireland’s history of emigration. He explained that in 1999, ‘Ireland.com would have been at the same level as *The Guardian* in terms of traffic and in terms of global

reach'. The two papers that were seen to be making an impact in terms of international readership at the time were *The Irish Times* and *The Jerusalem Post*.

And that is because the *Irish Times* had the benefit of a huge diaspora in the United States and obviously the *Jerusalem Post* had a diaspora in the United States. And we both had the commonality of language... [for example] third generation Swedes in the United States do not speak Swedish so there was no reach for the Swedish newspapers. Whereas third-generation Irish people in the States speak English. And it allowed them to keep in touch with the Aul' Sod (Journalist B)

This is a telling example of a national, historically sedimented, peculiarity. Irish media continues to be shaped by historical inertia. Ireland's, now exhausted, economic boom did not permit it to make a clean break with its impoverished past. Ireland's experience of the Internet is quite unlike that of the United States or other countries with a longer history of industrial development.

Competition and Circularity Between Papers

Champagne argues that that 'generic discourse on "the journalist"' is in fact a major obstacle to understanding the field of relations within which this actor is situated and thus plays the game' (2005: 57). That is to say, that we cannot speak simply of journalists but must bear in mind that there are various positions of power within journalism. Following Bourdieu, we can conceive of journalism as a social field (see Bourdieu 1998: 40–1). It has a set of rules, which are written and unwritten, and a set of prizes, which are tangible and intangible. Respondents represented their work as a game where individuals and institutions were engaged in a form of symbiotic competition.

News and current affairs media depend on other media for ideas and information. This leads to 'a circular circulation of information' (Bourdieu 1998: 23). Respondents were keenly aware of such circulation between media outlets. In fact, it provided the basis for a form of competition.

The reasons given by respondents for ‘circularity’ varied from expediency to the social networks in which they operated. Journalist H revealed that she had become ‘very cynical about journalism’ since she started just three years earlier. A former idealism about journalism had been replaced with a view that it was a ‘cyclical thing’. She did not distinguish between tabloids and the ‘quality press’ in this.

People think broadsheets and tabloids are so separate but they're not, they just rewrite each other's stories constantly. Like a story that is in the *Indo [Irish Independent]* today is in our paper tomorrow and then it is in the *Examiner* the next day. It is just constant regurgitation of stories (Journalist H).

Regurgitation was not seen to be a problem with regard to readership and credibility because papers were seen to occupy distinct markets. Broadsheet and tabloid readers were seen to be generally separate groups. Journalist H, again, explained that every newspaper had its own specific rivals.

In my case our opposition is the *Star* and then *Mirror*. And it doesn't matter too much if the *Independent* have a story ahead of us... But we care if the *Star* or the *Mirror* have it ahead of us, more than we care about anything else... because they target our exact reader. You know what I mean if a [Title] reader reads the story in our paper that was in the *Irish Times* yesterday, they probably won't notice. The reason they won't notice is that you probably don't get a lot of people who read the *Times* and the [Title] everyday (Journalist H).

An additional explanation for a combination of circularity and competition lay in the tight-knit social networks in which the respondents operated. Journalist E deliberately tried to avoid this.

I know people who sort of never leave the world of journalism. You know, that are constantly talking to other journalists, getting feedback from other journalists. And you can go around in a circle where you get into ever-diminishing circles where you get to the stage where you are constantly repeating what other journalists think and feel. I try to deliberately escape that I try to socialise with people who aren't journalists so I can get away from that. I find that journalists are very inward looking sometimes, in fact, surprisingly so. And you have to really make a conscious decision to get away from that and broaden your horizons (Journalist E).

Such bounded social networks are typical of media professionals (Turow 1982: 12, Gitlin 1983: 117). Within these circles of colleagues, friends and acquaintances there

was also competition and distinction. Journalist F, who was a senior reporter, regarded 'reporting', as distinct from 'journalism,' as a calling that required a body of skills and singular dedication.

I would consider myself a reporter and not a journalist. So for me it [his social life] revolves around other news reporters. You know I wouldn't have the highest regard for people who come out of college and think that they can write for the *Sunday Independent*. That would not be my gig at all. So I respect and talk to other people who I see out on the ground here, who are working their heads off, and who were doing their hardest to get accurate exclusive stories (Journalist F).

Journalist G professed to spending a lot of time, possibly an 'unhealthy amount of time', with fellow journalists. He saw that 'Dublin was a small enough town' and 'before long you have pretty much worked with everyone'. Wandering about town he would often bump into people 'to go for a few pints' (Journalist G). 'Going for a few pints' became a site for informal, interpersonal competition among journalists.

When you do a story you want it to be the best story. You want to beat every body else. It is highly competitive, when you meet up with lads after reports and to be having a few pints, you would be taking the piss out of one another. Like 'what are you doing that story for I did that three months ago?'. Like just a banter type of thing... (Journalist G)

In the journalistic field then, competition happens between newspapers and individuals. Respondents experienced this as a significant occupational pressure. There were a number of prizes on offer in the field. Primarily, and evidently, there was money. As the comments above suggested there are rewards beyond the economic. There are also symbolic dividends. Respondents mentioned three leading columnists as though they were the *prima donnas* of the field. The columnists mentioned all wrote for *The Irish Times*, which occupies the symbolic high ground among Irish broadsheets. Journalist G mentioned the paper's sport columnist as an example. He was seen to enjoy greater autonomy on the strength of his reputation. Unlike tabloid journalists 'He is not told right here you have to file 400 words in such

a way. He is pretty much told you're Tom Humphrey's go and do what you do'. Columnists then gained notoriety and a degree of autonomy in their work. Even without such prestige, however, respondents saw that all journalists 'live or die' through their reputation (Journalist B).

A major prize in the journalistic field, noted by Champagne is the phenomenon of news pick up, that is breaking a story, which is then taken up by other media. In this manner a story is 'consecrated' as an important story, winning kudos for the reporter who broke it. As Champagne explains 'the most prestigious media outlets have greater weight in the production of news because they are read more, their stories are picked up more often by other outlets'. Thus, 'they exert a true power of consecration on other papers by virtue of whether they pick up their stories'. Recently, however, radio and more particularly television have gained powers of consecration surpassing those of the quality press (Champagne 2005: 61). This was borne out by respondents, for whom a major outlet in this regard was *Morning Ireland*⁷.

According to Journalist G, in competing for 'best story', one had to find the right line on a story. This might be an exclusive quote or a further revelation in an existing story. For tabloids arresting headlines could find their way onto *Morning Ireland's* newspaper review. Journalist G described breaking one story as a simultaneously proud and harrowing occasion. A young girl became pregnant while in public care. The public body concerned sent her to Britain for an abortion. Reporting this resulted in a live discussion on *Morning Ireland* and a deluge of phone calls that went on for a 'mad week'. This was hard work but having a story on the national news agenda for a week was a point of pride. Journalist C described her pride

⁷ This is Ireland's most popular and prestigious morning news programme, broadcast by the state broadcaster Radio Telefís Éireann.

in articles opposing data retention legislation, in part, because they had received international attention. For Journalist F having stories picked up by other media was one of the greatest kicks in his work.

Yeah, that is the biggest thing. That is what really rocks my boat when other papers pickup. Like I revealed the story about the Dublin bus crash... And of course all the papers picked up on this the next day. Like if ever I get the best story that appears in the morning you're always watching the *Herald* to see if they have lifted it (Journalist F).

Peer competition is part of the 'game' in the Irish journalistic field. It could also be argued that journalists need to adhere to journalistic principles of honesty and accuracy to maintain the respect of their peers.

Libel Legislation

Irish libel legislation profoundly affects Irish journalists and the stories they report.

Libel law was a key consideration when using information from the Internet.

Journalist D expressed the view that libel legislation had a far greater effect on journalistic practices than any new technology. Libel and the threat of litigation was a perennial pressure for all respondents. As Journalist G explained, under Irish libel law, a newspaper or journalist is obliged to prove a story beyond all reasonable doubt. As he put it, these conditions are more akin to a criminal prosecution rather than a civil suit.

In a libel case the defendant has to be able to prove beyond all reasonable doubt that what they have said is true. So let's say you get a piece of information from an inside source. The first thing an organisation is going to do is throw a writ in because they know that unless that person is willing to testify in court you're done for. So even though you were right... you can't get away with it because of the way the libel laws are construed (Journalist G).

As noted earlier, Irish journalists have exposed a mass of scandal and corruption.

There is a parallel history, however, of such revelations being stifled by draconian libel laws (see O'Toole in *The Irish Times*, October 20, 2003). In most circumstances

a libel case is too expensive for a media organisation to attempt a legal defence. Settlements and retractions are common. Economic and political self-censorship are often seen to be the key restraints in Irish news and current affairs (see Kelly and Rolston 1995: 580) For the respondents, however, libel was a constant consideration in whether or not to pursue a story. It was a far more potent source of self-censorship for respondents than any economic or political concerns.

Journalist G described the case of a journalist writing for *The Irish Independent* who, in the 1970s, had accused Ray Burke, a prominent politician, of being corrupt. According to the respondent ‘he was forced out of the country. He is living in Canada now because he was effectively told there is no further career [in Ireland]’. It subsequently turned out that Burke was indeed corrupt, taking bribes from business associates in return for legislative favours. In this case, as in others, truth was no defence.

But a lot of journalists around at that time, the previous generation to me would have told you that they knew that this was happening but they just couldn't write it. And I suppose that is one of the big problems that we still face (Journalist G).

Irish libel law shapes the way Irish journalists see and use the Internet. The use of an unreliable source poses a positive danger for a journalist's career. Thus, respondents were circumspect about using web-based information that did not come from recognised institutions. Some sites were ‘dangerous from a journalistic point of view’ (Journalist E). Part of being a journalist was the ability to identify such risks. This emerged as a key theme. Libel law had become insinuated into journalists' occupational culture.

A Journalistic Habitus?

Any coherent trade or profession will possess an occupational culture. In Bourdieusian terms this can be described as a habitus allied to a particular professional field. The habitus can be thought of as a lasting, general and adaptable way of thinking that shapes the way we read, understand, and react to the world around us (Bourdieu 1984: 170; see Inglis 1998: 11). In her research on journalists, Schultz has described this as a ‘gut feeling’ (Schultz 2008). Aspects of a journalistic habitus were identifiable here. Respondents shared a sense that journalism had a duty to hold those in power to account. Two of the respondents mentioned being inspired in their youth by the film *All the Presidents Men*⁸. All the respondents saw journalism’s public role to be central to their work.

To gain a sense of how respondents perceived journalism I asked them to describe the work they were proudest of. Journalist C mentioned a personal campaign against data retention legislation. Legislation had been proposed to allow the retention of all traffic records for phone and email for three years. The legislation was postponed and eventually enacted in a weakened form.

But certainly with data retention, and I was told by a lawyer I know who follows these issues, who works in the Department of Justice that they postponed a bill on this issue... Like he told me later that somebody within the department said that the main reason that they hadn’t introduced a bill was because they were afraid of me writing stories about it and drawing attention to it. So they couldn’t figure out how to do it. And this was why they slipped the thing through. But at least it got postponed for a long time and then came in with a whimper. So that I was really proud of (Journalist C).

Similarly Journalist F took pride in the fact that one of his stories had led to a change in legislation

⁸ *All the Presidents Men* (1976), Dir. Alan J. Pakula. The film dramatised Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein’s celebrated exposé of the Watergate scandal.

I did a story a couple of months later to the effect that Michael MacDowell⁹ was bringing in a law that journalists could not talk to Gardai [police], and that the Gardai would be arrested [if they spoke to journalists]. I wrote that and it led to a change in the law, a change in the legislation. So that it is the story that I am proudest of. And very few journalists have written anything that has actually changed legislation. So that is it basically. It's only taken me 12 years.

Journalist E, writing for a tabloid, thought that such papers could play a role in clarifying complex issues for people who did not read broadsheets. This was he felt in many ways more difficult than writing for a broadsheet where one had greater latitude in the use of language. As a tabloid journalist he had to find the right balance between readability and adequate explanation.

Well, I mentioned the subject of abortion. Now I wrote, the last time there was the abortion referendum, I wrote a piece that was widely praised as having distilled the issues down to their simplest and most readable format. And I was proud of that. I also did things on the Maastricht Treaty which was quite a long time ago now. But the European element can be very very dull and very hard for people to understand. Again if I can get that into a very digestible format I feel I've done a good job (Journalist E).

Both tabloid and broadsheet journalists stressed this public role. Among tabloid journalists however there was more of an emphasis on crime and the personal misdemeanours of people in power.

Respondents described much of what they know about journalism as though it were a kind of second sense. One could 'smell' that a story was not quite right. This is typical of the forms of tacit knowledge possessed by other media professionals (see Gitlin 1983: 26–27)

On the one hand there are the rules you have to abide by. For instance, the rules of court reporting, those are laid down. You do not breach those unless you want to get into trouble. The other side is just a feel, you know a nose, a savvy, that you get in any job after you have been in a job for a few years. Like a cop would know walking down a street who is trouble and who is not. A journalist will know that is a problematical story and that is not (Journalist F).

⁹ Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform 2002—2007.

Bad Journalism

All respondents got daily news from the Internet. They were likely to read paper editions in the morning and then access web editions throughout the day. Websites from the BBC and RTÉ were valued as reliable sources. Respondents did not then differentiate between printed and web-borne journalism. They all, however, saw a great gulf between what they considered to be good and bad journalism.

I don't think that is a distinction you can make between online and print, I think that there is a distinction you can make between good and bad journalism and that crosses all barriers... It is really all about good and bad journalism it is not so much about the technologies that are used (Journalist B).

A key component of good journalism was accuracy. Claims had to be checked against reliable sources. Here, laziness was seen to be one of the chief enemies of good work. The Internet of course provided plenty of opportunities for the lazy journalist. As Journalist G put it 'some people would be very happy to do a quick Google, write what they see and then that's it, happy days!' He stressed that, even when information was gleaned from a website, the web publishers could be contacted by phone for confirmation and fresh quotes. This made a story more distinctive and far safer. Journalist F saw that some journalists approached the Internet with a degree of gullibility.

You have to be very sceptical about everything that is on the Internet apart from official sources and reputable sources like Ireland.com. So it is like any other source of information. It is... like someone in a pub... But because it is written down people think 'oh yeah that's true'. And it shouldn't lessen your critical faculties at all (Journalist F)

Most respondents pointed a finger at younger journalists for suffering from such gullibility. There were, in their view, a number of justifications for this. They were, as Journalist F put it, 'Internet kids'. They had grown up with the Internet and were

accustomed to using it as a primary source of information. Older journalists attributed their ability to sort the ‘wheat from the chaff’ to years of experience. This was something younger journalists obviously lacked. Finally, some respondents blamed this perceived tendency on poor training in colleges. Journalist C noted a lack of professional scepticism among students. She felt that they needed to be taught to evaluate sources and gauge reliability. Journalist F also placed the blame squarely on journalism colleges. He was disappointed by the quality of graduates and had learnt that they did not ‘have the ability to double check things’.

Whereas here I have been tremendously disappointed by a number of people who get stories and they go “I don't need to check that, I don't need to ring the Garda press officer, or I don't need to ring Justice, or the Department of Health”. It is horrendous. So is it a big generational thing or is it the fault of the colleges. I think it is the fault of the colleges (Journalist F).

He cited an example of a college student who had made claims against his newspaper in a college magazine. In discussion, he challenged the student because he had not bothered to contact the paper for a statement on the issue. The student responded that he hadn't needed to because ‘it was an opinion piece’. The student ‘could not get his head around’ the need to check such a claim (Journalist F).

There was also an impression that young journalists entering the field did so with ambitions to become high profile autonomous columnists rather than diligent ‘hacks’. Journalist F cited one of the most promising young journalists in *The Irish Times* who declared that his ambition was to become a syndicated columnist. It appeared that the kick of ‘lifting the lid’ on public figures and the adrenaline rush of meeting deadlines had lost its appeal. For Journalist F, there was a general increase in ‘me journalism’ where journalists were increasingly becoming part of their stories.

There was also a degree of suspicion towards so called ‘citizen journalists’. Journalist F confessed ‘maybe it is because I am a snob but I would like to think that

the journalists I would be reading for the news would be experienced, trained journalists rather than Citizen journalists (Journalist F). He cited the example of John Charles de Menezes, an innocent man, shot dead by police on the London underground.

BBC had one of these citizen journalists on and he said 'I saw him running', the Brazilian guy who was shot, 'I saw he had a bomb strapped to him and there were wires coming from it'. And they were broadcasting that for several hours. And that is a dangerous road (Journalist F).

The worst of all journalistic sins was simply to fabricate a story. This went against any sense of journalistic ethics or honour. It also carried a potentially ruinous penalty. Journalist E mentioned that 'there was a temptation for a while for younger people coming into journalism to think that it was too easy, that you could just sort of access something [on the Internet] and put it straight into the paper'. This was a form of 'patchwork plagiarism' taking pieces from various articles or interviews. He noted that 'they were able to do that so fast that there were actually... looked up to for a while. Editors soon realised what was happening and began to crack down on it'. He gave an example of one case, which happened, outside his paper. A young journalist shot into notoriety as a celebrity interviewer.

He was producing all these brilliant celebrity interviews, very fast, and people were wondering how he did it. He just seemed to be a genius. And he went on like this for quite some time. And then he got caught out... The interviewees had gone back to the editor and said this guy didn't talk to us at all. And he was exposed (Journalist E).

This was described as 'an embarrassment all round' detracting from journalism generally. As a result there was an increased wariness among editors and journalists. Of course there was more at stake here than humiliation. Journalist G cited an infamous case where a journalist had fabricated stories. The most notorious of these involved falsified statements from the girlfriend of a policeman killed on duty. The

journalist in question thought she had left the country and so took the liberty of attributing quotes to her. 'This fellow', Journalist G said, 'was in one paper for three weeks and cost them 50 grand because everything was made up'. Structurally there were two forces keeping journalists honest and accurate in their work. A professional culture could engender pride or shame for one's performance as a journalist. Beyond that, however, libel law meant that inaccuracies were unlikely to be tolerated for long.

Attitudes Towards the Internet

None of the respondents mentioned any difficulty in acclimatising to Internet use in their work. All were at their ease in searching for and using web resources. For Journalist H, the choice was to 'adapt or die'. Journalist E stated clearly that 'there are very few luddites left. You just can't afford to be a Luddite in journalism. I mean if you haven't got the Internet. If you don't know how to work the Internet, you're dead'. Journalist F was unconcerned by the influence of the Internet on journalism. He saw that 'good reporters survive no matter what. They adapt'. Journalist A explained that there was really no option for newspapers as to whether they had a website or not: 'every publisher looks upon the web now, regardless of whether you want it or you don't want it, you can't but have it. You must have that presence'. The Internet was just another piece of office equipment. Respondents were blasé towards Internet technology and content.

You know I suppose it is a changing world but it is not the end of the world. I suppose it is like typewriters, typewriters speeded things up decades and millennia ago. In the 12 years that I have been a reporter, I don't think the Internet has made me change my style or the way I approach stories. It is just like a library (Journalist F).

Journalist B considered the web to be the subject of a lot of unwarranted technical hype. He said he looked 'forward to a time when the technology is irrelevant because

it should be irrelevant'. He mentioned the prevalence of television saying 'nobody gives television a second thought because the technology behind television is so commonplace now, that it is irrelevant. And the technology behind the Internet, and online publishing, will hopefully one day be irrelevant' (Journalist B).

While respondents were perfectly comfortable in their use of the Internet they warned that there were many dangers attached to Internet use in journalism.

The obvious dangers are taking things on trust and not checking them out thoroughly. You have to be very sceptical. You have to regard the web generally as being just like a street corner where people are talking all the time. You can sort of take it as pub talk. And you can take it at face value if you want to, but it's much... but it's absolutely essential that you don't unless its coming from a reputable source you have to check it out, check it out thoroughly (Journalist E).

The key strategy in avoiding incorrect information was to constantly turn to a small number of trusted and prestigious sources. All respondents mentioned the BBC, *The Irish Times* and *The Guardian* as trusted online resources. Similarly government or institutional websites could be trusted readily. It is ironic that a deluge of information has made journalists more likely to go to trusted institutional sources rather than wade through conflicting Internet reports. This was due to time constraints. Ironically, the flood of free information on the web may be causing journalists to narrow the scope of the sources they use. The next three sections will address how respondents used the Internet in their everyday work.

Interactivity

Journalist A and Journalist C, two of the more technically oriented respondents, mentioned interactivity as an important aspect of the Internet for journalists.

Journalist A explained that he saw an interactive connection with readers to be an

important part of journalism. This was in contrast to some columnists who wanted to sit on a soapbox and talk down to readers without hearing any feedback (See for example Waters in *The Irish Times*, November 16, 1999).

And that is the whole thing about journalism. It has been the hallmark of everything I try to do is this connect, that you should always have a connect with people and that journalism isn't one way. It is this kind of interaction with your reader. And this is difficult for some people in journalism who see it as a you know voice out, voice out, voice out (Journalist A).

There was a large practical problem here, however. Journalists could only reply to a small number of emails. Interactivity was confined, practically, to stories that were less read and less contentious. A highly controversial story would preclude interactivity because of the very large number of emails involved. Interactivity could be a niche activity or, when it came to larger stories, a mere semblance of interactivity for the few readers lucky enough to gain a response. Most other respondents, who were slightly less engaged with the web, placed very little importance on interactivity. Again, they were simply dealing with the Internet through a traditional journalistic model. They adapted it to their needs, rather than adapting to its technical capabilities.

Internet Detective

Journalist G described how working on a tabloid there is an emphasis on the reporting of crime and vice in particular. He found that the Internet proved to be a particularly valuable investigative tool in locating and exposing various criminal activities.

Journalist G reported that, in one instance, an Internet advertisement was found offering €10,000 to Irish women willing to marry immigrants to permit them citizenship rights. The journalist then 'set up in a bogus e-mail address from a woman and started corresponding'. This he claimed had led to the exposure of the scam and the arrest of those involved.

Similarly, Journalist G reported that the Internet served as a tool of surveillance for certain groups. One of these was a neo-nazi group, active in Ireland. In his view they were ‘using the Internet as a place where they can, with a degree of anonymity, say something which they wouldn't say in an open room out of fear of what would happen to them.

But now there are some people who were trying to organise and who are looking to meet. And presumably eventually target people of other colours or other faiths and so on. So those people as well we would keep a fairly tight eye on. And if they were planning a demonstration or something or if they were planning some form of meetings. We would be able to go along and surreptitiously get photographs of all and get them identified and find out who these people are. Just to know what you're dealing with (Journalist G).

This then was seen as a means of ‘keeping an eye’ on these groups in the hope that they might yield a story. Similarly the Internet was seen as a means of bypassing some traditional information services. In July 2005, an Irish teenager was killed in a terrorist attack in the Turkish resort of Kusadasai. In this case, Journalist G, reported journalists used the Internet to find websites for Irish bars in the area. These sites provided phone numbers faster than contacting international directory enquiries, which they anticipated would be oversubscribed. Any information yielded came from phone calls but the Internet was used as a means of expediting these contacts.

Journalist E and Journalist G found the Internet to be a useful investigative tool, particularly in the realm of corporate misdemeanours. Official company records can now be accessed directly through the Internet. This previously required a time consuming personal visit to the Company’s Office or Business Library.

Journalist E also found weblogs to be useful occasionally, not as sources of reliable information but as potential indicators of public opinion on particular issues.

You can get a good feeling for the grassroots opinion, which you would not have otherwise. For instance if you want to see how GAA¹⁰ fans are feeling about tickets being allocated to a match or something like that. Or how people are feeling about not being able to get U2 tickets to a concert. They feel they're being ripped off or something. You can check into one of those blogs and get a feeling for how people are thinking. You do not necessarily have to take it all at face value but you just get a feeling. And then you can start checking that out with people on the record and then get a story (Journalist E).

Similarly Journalist F found the Internet to be useful in gathering information in the area of crime and security. He made considerable use of bulletin boards concentrating on issues related to defence, security and crime. A number of stories had come to him through the personal message facility provided by these sites. This allowed someone to send a message confidentially. This might then serve as the basis for a story. He described it in the following terms.

People use this PM facility on these discussion boards, personal message. They know that I am a reporter so they all start mailing me or private messaging me stories in total confidence. So it is a great way of breaking that barrier between people who want to talk to me because mobile phones are very dangerous things, they can be followed very easily. But if you send someone a PM from one of these message boards then you are flying. So that is why I was telling you it is absolutely invaluable because people know, and they can send stories to me so quickly (Journalist F).

Government websites were also found to provide a degree of institutional and political transparency. The most popular form of Internet detective work mentioned by most respondents was the Irish government tenders website. Government contracts for building, equipment, consultancy and so on must be publicly advertised. All such tenders are carried on the Irish government website. Again, this never provided full stories but could provide valuable tip-offs.

You know you learn things to do like you look up the government tender pages to see if, for example, the army are looking for a new jet or if the guards [Police] are looking for new stun guns or something. You know, that is a two-minute search now where before I wouldn't know where to go to look for government tenders (Journalist F)

¹⁰ Gaelic Athletic Association.

Most respondents noted that the Internet had greatly expanded and accelerated access to information such as government statistics, policy, minutes of debates and so on.

Journalist E rated the government website, www.oasis.ie, very highly since it provided 'great to access to very solid information very quickly'. It was also linked to the government website containing records for the houses of parliament. He saw this aspect of the Internet as a useful contribution to a 'healthy democracy'. Comparing current political actions with past political speeches, for example, could expose political hypocrisy. This was of course, possible in the past but it would have been enormously time-consuming and would also have discouraged speculative searches.

Convenience

Following the previous points about government information, the most important consequences of the Internet for journalism were unanimously seen to be speed and convenience. Journalist E found that, with the Internet, he did his research the way he always had 'but quicker'. Writing an article generally necessitated research to 'get a feel' for the area in question. Before the use of the Internet became commonplace this would have been done through the use of clippings files. When one was familiar with the area in question they could begin to call relevant people. The Internet has greatly accelerated this process making organisational positions, statistics, summaries and so on, almost instantly available. All respondents saw the Internet as an indispensable journalistic tool. Journalist E went as far as to say 'the sweetest word in the English language for me is Google'. The search engine had become 'an extension, its like another limb. The traditional way for journalists to work would have been with the

phone in one hand and your contact book in the other. Google is a third arm in a way'.

Ironically, the convenience and efficiency of Internet information retrieval had exacerbated time pressures. There was an expectation among management and editorial staff that stories would now be produced more quickly. Both Journalist A and Journalist E had been in journalism for over 30 years. They could recall a time before even fax machines could be used to expedite the transmission of information. One needed to contact the relevant person directly by phone and then have the material delivered by post or courier. This could take days. Now, of course, similar information can be downloaded in seconds. This had made the article writing process faster for journalists but managers were keenly aware of this.

Now the thing is that your bosses obviously know it's that simple so they know that it's not going to take you two days, so they want the product ready right away. So, you used to be getting a couple of days on a weekly paper, a Sunday Paper, which I work for. Now its sort of like 'we want it this afternoon'. So the pressures on your time are greater. So you just have to get it done quicker. But as I said it's easier to get the information so you should get it done quicker (Journalist E).

The Internet also served as a basic fact-checking device. Typically respondents used it to check spellings, dates, biographical details and so on. Journalist H reported that the web allowed her to verify the identity of people featured in photographs. This provided a reassurance against cases of mistaken identity and possible libel claims. For those who remembered a time without it, email had made communications with sources notably more efficient. This was particularly relevant for sources in different time zones.

For instance I could often be doing international work and I'd maybe want to talk to someone in the police in Australia for instance. And to do that before I'd literally have to stay up half the night and wait until the guy goes into his office and phone him up. Now, you write an email. He gets it in the morning

and he replies to it. And then you get it when you come in. So you're really talking about communicating in a much better way (Journalist E).

Respondents did caution, however, that the Internet was just one resource among many employed by journalists. It was by no means their primary source of information. As journalist F put it the web 'is a handy place for people to get reports and things like that but for a breaking news story, the only place you can get that is talking to real people'. Journalist D noted that the effect of the Internet varied according to the area in which a journalist was engaged. He saw the web to be an essential tool for those writing articles in media and entertainment. Political correspondents on the other hand generally relied on information face to face from trusted sources.

Less Shoe Leather

Respondents identified a number of dangers attached to the seductive convenience of web-based information. The chief danger was the substitution of 'shoe leather' for a desk-bound journalism. Journalist A noted that 'foot leather isn't used as much as it was in the past' because 'there are other ways of doing things'. Journalist H, who was the youngest respondent, felt that older journalists were more inclined to seek out personal contacts. She, on the other hand, feared that she might be 'a little spoilt'.

I don't always want to go down to the bloody photo shoot. Do you know what I mean, when all the information is just there. I don't necessarily want to interview him if I can just write all his life story from the web. Do you know what I mean? There might be an element of laziness (Journalist H).

She also noted that the volume of breaking news offered by various web services left people 'sitting there with six windows open of news and they feel that they won't miss anything'. There was the worry that the web could encourage:

A feeling of having everything at your fingertips. A sort of a feeling of being in control of your sources, being in control of all of the news'. Like if something happens one of these will pick it up or the radio will pick it up, or the TV will pick it up. I mean or otherwise it is not happening.

Journalist E also worried that the web might lessen the level of human contact between journalists and various sources. Formerly familiarity or friendship between a journalist and a human source could lead to unexpected stories. A source could volunteer a story, which they had withheld from others. There was an element of 'surprise human contact'. He did not see that this was going to disappear because 'journalists are social animals' who 'continue to meet people in homes and in cafes and corridors'. Nonetheless, he worried that there was 'a danger of people are becoming increasingly desk-bound and losing that element' (Journalist E).

Conclusion: Some Preliminary Hypotheses

Given the limited scope of this research, it is not possible to come to any sort of firm conclusions about the relationship between Irish journalists and the Internet. In any event, as a piece of qualitative research it is most suited to the formation of hypotheses. There are a number of unanticipated issues that arose during the research. These may provide the grounds for further investigations in this area. It is, clearly, important that any further research include observational and survey methods to overcome the shortcomings of interviews.

An Overdetermined Technological Effect: Much of the discussion of the Internet and journalism lends itself to a form of technological determinism, which may be more or less explicit. However, as numerous commentators have made clear technology cannot 'determine' social developments (see Marjoribanks 2004; Law 1991; Latour 1991). When social transformations take place they may involve technology but only

as part of a raft of broader social, political and economic processes. This research has only looked at one small national field, which is largely inconsequential for the rest of Europe. Even the results found here, however, demonstrate that when we are considering the role of media technology, particularly a technology like the Internet which is sometimes regarded to pervasively and evenly affect the whole planet, the specificities of a local field must be considered. The Internet has not yet radically transformed Irish journalism. There are a number of reasons for this including historically low rates of domestic Internet use and a vibrant and trusted newspaper sector. There is no media vacuum that a politically oriented Irish blogging culture might usefully fill. This is in contrast, for example, with a country like South Korea where there are claims that blogging was influential in recent presidential elections (See Mattin in *The Guardian* 15 August 2005). Therefore, local structures, culture and infrastructure will interact with new technologies to create unique national effects.

As pointed out above, it is an irony that the sheer volume of information available on the Internet may be causing journalists to become more conservative in their choice of sources. A key issue here was trust. Journalists needed to know that they could trust their sources. They also needed in turn to let their readers know that they could be trusted. Trust, however, was effectively synonymous with brand. The BBC, *The Guardian*, *The Irish Times* could all be trusted because they were long established institutions. Websites could not be trusted. They provided no context and no clues as to their political agenda. Most importantly, web sites did not stand to lose money through libel litigation for bad journalism. Thus rather than making the information free, the Internet had driven journalists more firmly into the arms of large, traditional media companies whose brand strategies were built around trust and

reliability. Rather than cyberspace being a limitless new frontier, economic and symbolic capital from the real world were simply reproduced online.

Deprofessionalisation: This was not a major concern for respondents. None of the respondents regarded the Internet to be a source of journalistic competition. As Journalist H put it ‘the pressure comes from your opposition more than it comes from the web’ (Journalist H). While deadlines may have tightened reflecting the increased speed of work permitted by the Internet, none of the respondents felt that they were being downgraded in any way as a profession or trade.

There was one concern voiced by respondents which needs further attention. Web journalists were, on some papers, being paid far less than their print counterparts. According to Journalist D, this was because the web was seen as a training ground for young journalists. Initial views that web journalists were merely information workers rather than journalists have not held in Ireland. Again, libel law explains this in part. If web journalists write for the paper then they must be answerable to an editor. Journalists and unions in the *Irish Times* successfully argued this case to get full journalist status for web journalists (Journalist D).

There is one other concern, related to the deprofessionalisation of journalism. The Internet may not be detracting from Irish journalist’s symbolic capital but, as respondents announced, it may take from their level of social capital. That is the extent to which they are connected to organisation or institutions through ‘obligations’ to friends and acquaintances (see Bourdieu 1986: 243). A creeping atomisation of journalistic work may be an unanticipated consequence of reliance on the Internet as a primary source. Social capital not only facilitates journalistic work but it can serve as a source of power in organisational strategies (see Brennan 2000). A decline in the number of connections between journalists, sources and institutions

could in turn weaken journalists. It makes them more likely to accept one sided public relations and press releases. It also damages their position relative to newspaper ownership and management. This, allied with other changes, could provoke a decline in working conditions and occupational status.

The Internet Colonisation of Journalism? This article began with an account of a hoax. As many respondents admitted anyone could be unlucky and get conned by a hoax. On the other hand, their main effort in their work was making sure that a story could stand up against scrutiny and possible litigation. The point being made by the hoaxer, Michael Cunningham, was that Irish journalism was being colonised by the Internet. He failed to announce that his successful hoaxes were largely quirky, humorous human-interest stories that were very unlikely to be the focus of libel litigation¹¹. Journalist A described journalism as being about ‘a mixture of bad news, good news and good yarns’. It appears that the Internet may be a source for such ‘good yarns’ but not for more serious stories. If the hoax stories had been overtly libellous they would not have succeeded. The p45.net hoaxer, Michael Cunningham was making the point that the Internet is undermining journalism. Like a city built on a swamp, noxious material could percolate upwards into official journalism from the ‘blogosphere’. He has made this point, however, using stories which slip past libel considerations. This then is a very limited case and not one that is relevant to reports on politics, crime, scandal, litigation and so on. It appears more likely given the increased premium placed on trust that the traditional media institutions will colonise the Internet rather than *vice versa*. Singer saw that journalists were now being pressed to permit the amateurs and the bloggers into their ranks rather than facing a ‘direct

¹¹ The Berlusconi story in the *Irish Independent* was a major embarrassment but was unlikely to have become the subject of litigation.

assault from a competing group of would-be professionals on either ideological or practical grounds' (Singer 2003: 157). In the Irish case at least there is no threat of such an assault. Journalists do not feel threatened by the Internet or DIY reportage. If there are any threats to professional journalism they lie more in the unanticipated consequences of using the web as a source of primary interpersonal contact. And in a reliance on a narrowing set of large but trusted media institutions.

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