

## **Defending Journalism in the Digital Age – ESIEMTH – 12 Nov 09**

### **James Doherty, President NUJ**

I wish to begin by thanking President Makis Voitsidis and your union for inviting me to Thessaloniki – I have to say that I am eternally grateful for the hospitality that has been shown to me. When I travel around the UK, I am lucky to have a hotel with hot water, let alone a sea view in such beautiful surroundings.

When I return to the UK, I will ask for similar treatment, but I doubt that anyone will listen!

And on behalf of the 40,000 members of the NUJ in the UK and Ireland, I'm proud to bring you a message of solidarity and support.

We are here today to examine the future of journalism in the Digital Age. I noticed on your leaflet that you have the IFJ's Stand up for Journalism banner – a campaign started by the NUJ almost three years ago.

And we must all stand up for journalism, now more than ever. Across the world, journalism is under threat like never before.

Increasingly, the greatest threat to press freedom and quality is not from the internet, it is not new technology. It is the same problem that almost destroyed our economy, both here in Greece and indeed, across the world. In television, newspapers, radio and online, it seems that nothing is more important than profit. Quality is not longer relevant in the quest for profits – and journalists and their skills are seen as an expensive, redundant force. Citizens, apparently, can do the job for less. Free is better.

The explosion of so-called citizen journalism, amateur blogs and web 2.0, is perhaps, an unexpected bonus for the media executives, who are always looking to find another way cheap way of making money for their shareholders.

I am not arguing against new technology. Far from it, we should be embracing it, welcoming the digital age as a fresh beginning, a new medium which can include the public in reporting and making the news - but the harsh reality in the UK, the US, and increasingly across the world, is that publishers and broadcasters are not investing in the journalists who have the skills and knowledge to produce professional content. While they may claim to be focussing their efforts in the technology of tomorrow, their actions prove that they have no interest in the quality of the material being published, whether it's produced online, in newsprint or broadcast through TV and radio.

Just look at the example of the UK. In the last few years, thousands of journalists' jobs have been lost. Around one-in-five of all jobs in the local media have gone in the past 18 months alone.

Our main commercial broadcaster, ITV, has shed almost half of all jobs, while the BBC – held in the highest regard around the world – has seen hundreds of quality journalists gone, after thousands of jobs were lost in the last few years.

More than 60 local newspaper offices have closed and dozens of newspaper titles have gone in towns and cities where they were once so valued. Every sector of the UK and Ireland's media – all

have been victims of the collapse of the failed economic model of media ownership.

So who is to blame? It is easy for us to point to new technology – and the failure of advertising revenues in a global recession – and the difficulty in raising advertising revenue to pay for the brave new medium of the internet. But that is far too simple.

The news business has evolved. News is immediate. It's on demand. Here in Greece, the most recent research showed that:

78% of Greeks access news from TV broadcasts, followed by 41% in the press, 35% through the internet and 32% from listening to their radios.

There has been an explosion in largely unregulated broadcasting since the state public TV service lost its monopoly in the late 80s. And now Makis tells me there's a battle to save the last element of publicly supported broadcasting here. We too are battling to save the BBC, so we wish you well in your fight to save public service broadcasting here in Greece.

I'm told there are around 170 private radio and TV stations here in Greece today, of which, only 10% are regulated. We must all fight to ensure the highest standards of professional journalism – it is our duty, if we are to be trusted by the public as the provider of quality information and news.

As the amount, and speed, with which information is collected and distributed, we must be able to show that it is the quality of information, not the quantity, which is important – it is little wonder that the public does not know where to turn for clear and impartial

knowledge.

I'm no expert when it comes to the media here in Greece – and I am very keen to hear about your experiences. I know that you face many of the same problems we too face in the UK. But I firmly believe that there is an appetite for news here, just as there is back in my home. I am sure that during your elections last month, and as the economic crisis spilled on to the streets in February, that Greek citizens were hungry for as much news as possible – turning to quality journalists and quality journalism to help them negotiate their way through difficult and turbulent times.

It has been the same in the UK and Ireland. Where once we had a strong media to question the politicians, to investigate corruption and inefficiency, the destruction of our media, by people motivated by greed and not quality, has left our citizens asking where they can turn to for fair and unbalanced news.

That is why I am here today. That is why I am saying that we must defend quality journalism in the digital age.

You do not become a journalist simply because you sit in your bedroom facing your computer, picking up on political and showbiz gossip and publishing it as fact.

The best journalists have learned their profession. I started my career in newspapers in my local newspaper. I reported on crime, on the local government, on the issues which mattered to the community I served. I hope I was a voice for that community, asking the questions of those in power which demanded an answer.

But with so many thousands of experienced journalists now unemployed, there is a push towards new technology and with it, a new breed of journalist.

It is less expensive to have a trainee or a student, writing and publishing online, than it is to have a journalist who has gone through the system, who understands issues and who knows how to see through the political spin.

It is more attractive to big business, to have a local community, sending in their own copy and photos – all of it free – than it is to have an editorial team who can edit, write and create material which is of real value.

That is not to say there isn't a place for such local input. We saw this during the recent Presidential elections in Iran. The oppression of opposition supporters would not have been seen by the outside world, had it not been for the instant power of social networking sites such as Twitter.

But it remains a matter for journalists and editors, to receive material and provide the expert analysis before publishing or broadcasting. I'm sure it won't be long before a blog or a Twitter post, somewhere in the world, attracts global headlines, and then is revealed as an elaborate hoax. In fact, it has probably happened already.

The value of journalists and journalism is our ability and experience in dealing with facts – ensuring that they are removed from opinion – and reporting them to our readers and listeners.

In a world of Twitter, Facebook and Google, the distinction between fact

and opinion, reportage and hard news, is becoming increasingly blurred.

That is why we have been fighting to preserve the so-called old media. Not to say that print journalism must be maintained at all costs. No. As I have said, we must embrace every news medium. But we must also understand that the new media will not work, unless it retains some of the skills and knowledge which journalists – and the public – value so much.

But we must not be elitist. We must not say that quality journalism is at the expense of a more liberated news-gathering process. The public has never trusted journalists – such is our association with the political classes and ruling elite in every society.

For journalists and journalism to remain relevant in the digital age, we must forge a partnership with those members of the public who are keen to participate in newsgathering. That is not just about leaving a comment at the end of an article or feature, but demonstrating that our skills will help us all to uncover the truth. Professional bloggers are a great innovation, who can help to unearth the truth and investigate specialist areas which were once the preserve of well-resourced news organisations. Indeed, if we work together in this new medium, creating strong partnerships, we can strengthen journalism in a way which protects and enhances our democratic structures in a way that has never been seen before.

But there has to be a commercial market for such a partnership. Our industry is called the news business for a reason – because it makes money. There is – and always will be – a huge appetite for information which is made relevant and accessible, in an age when information,

untamed and undiluted, has never been so readily available.

Some of you may have heard of Rupert Murdoch, I'm guessing??

Murdoch and his News Corp colleagues were instrumental in changing the face of the media in the UK – during which time he tried to destroy my union (a process which failed, I'm pleased to say). Now Murdoch is looking to charge for access to his online publications, such as the Wall Street Journal and, closer to my home, publications such as The Sun newspaper.

For those of you who don't know, The Sun, is the biggest daily tabloid newspaper in the UK, with a circulation of around seven million copies. It still has on page 3, pictures of topless women – so perhaps, given the internet's obsession with sex and celebrity – he has a chance of charging for some of its content. Similarly, the Wall Street Journal, with quality business and specialist reporting, could find a way of charging for content.

But with so much information out there, would any of us pay a few pence to access content? We have grown up, happy to pay for our daily newspapers. In the UK, everyone has to pay around 150 Euro a year in tax to pay for the BBC and the huge range of services it provide.

But with the BBC and many others providing online content for free, it is difficult to see how anyone would wish to pay for the privilege in an age when we have been fed a diet of unrestricted and free internet news access.

A few weeks ago, new research revealed that only 5% of UK internet users would pay for online news. But I doubt that it will stop Rupert

Murdoch from trying to stop the boat long after it has set sail.

Even if Murdoch convinced major players in the media market to follow his lead – and even managed to block Google and other news aggregators from supplying his content, as he is now trying, there will be others who look for a market – and benefit from the advertising – associated with free content.

But quality is something which may attract a price. Quality websites provide commentary, analysis and opinion by contributors whose skills are often sought by users for their expertise. There could be a method of paying for information which adds value to what is already available online. Although disliked, it is now accepted by many, that we must pay to download copyrighted music, or films or television. The leap to specialist news may well happen.

If consumers will pay 2 Euro for the latest Britney Spears song, surely some will pay a few Cents for access to their favourite columnist. Just as the technology has changed with regard to pirated songs and films, there can be little doubt that similar technology will be used by a cartel of news media publishers in the not too distant future. Not for access to breaking news, but for specialist knowledge – the kind which only journalists can provide.

If proprietors such as Murdoch wish to charge for accessing online content, then it is my hope that it will be because the quality of the content is high. That is why we continue to fight for quality journalism in the digital age – because if the digital age is to be a success, then it will need quality journalists to be at its heart.

Google can repeat the news, it cannot report the news. It cannot analyse



the news or give professional commentary.

So what can we do in this bold new digital age? Well, we must continue to fight for jobs, for pensions, for decent salaries and to fight for our industry as it changes in the most fundamental way since the invention of the telegraph.

That's why in the UK, we've been lobbying parliaments, town councils and the general public, making them increasingly aware that once our media is gone, it's never coming back. The skills and experience cannot just be thrown away.

We have made it clear, that the profiteering – 30 to 40 per cent returns on investment each year – are unsustainable in a land where most major industries are happy for a six or seven per cent profit each year. We are not the big banks, but the people running our media in the UK have been just as irresponsible – enjoying the bonuses and big payouts when times are good, cutting jobs and asking for taxpayers' help when times are poor.

Our news media businesses remain profitable. But more than that, what we do is fundamental to a strong local community – crucial to the health and wealth of society and a functional democracy. That remains the case whether our work is online, on mobile phones or in the traditional media.

These days, I am no longer in the newspaper business. I am the PR manager for the city of Glasgow – and apologies to those who are translating, if it is difficult to understand my Scottish Accent! But it is depressing that I can issue a press release and there's no one left in newsrooms to ask the important questions. It is frightening that after the

waves of redundancies in newsrooms, that the few young journalists who are left, do not have the skills or knowledge to question what is happening in the world around them. That is not the industry we know. That is not the industry we love.

So what do we do? We fight. Up and down the UK and Ireland, I have visited picket lines and workplaces that are fighting for their survival. Journalists are in a fight for their lives and livelihoods.

It's difficult to hear stories of journalists, tears in their eyes, who face losing their jobs. It's heartbreaking to listen to journalists who don't know how they will pay their mortgage or feed their kids.

Of course, many of you here today may be in exactly the same position. Or you may be worried that it will be your turn next. Your pay being cut, being forced to work longer hours, being asked to provide more and more stories as your news organisation makes the move online.

The NUJ recently carried out a survey of multi-media newsrooms to find out what the reality is for journalists working in the digital age. It will be no surprise to discover that they are working longer hours, with more responsibility, but no extra pay.

In fact, almost three quarters were working longer hours, with only 7% being paid more for doing so.

This is not the fault of new technology, but of management who do not value journalism and content over the quest for further profits. The NUJ is unashamedly in favour of new media where it enhances good journalism, we are unashamedly opposed to moves which undermine it.

I was pleased to hear that across Greece, all journalists striked in support of sacked colleagues in February of this year.

You are fortunate that both here in Macedonia and across your land, workers will stand united against the threat to our industry.

We are entering a new digital age – but we must not forget that unless we have a strong union, standing up for quality journalism, then it will be a digital age, with no real value at all.

Thank you for listening to me – and I wish you all well in the fight to defend journalism in the years to come.

Ends.