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***Staring at the Sun:
What Type of News and Information Society do we Need?***

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Like all those possessed of genuine wisdom, Plato taught in stories that touch the heart. His famous 'allegory of the cave' from *The Republic*, is a prime example of how the use of poetic tropes lead to a discovery of the truth. There is a cave in which a group of prisoners are chained facing a wall. Behind the prisoners burns a fire which projects their shadows onto the wall. Unable to turn around, they confuse these images with reality. They linger in this deluded state until one of their number escapes his chains. He climbs the stairway to the mouth of the cave and, in staring at the sun, is momentarily stunned. Having known only a pale imitation of the sun in the false light of the cave, he is blinded by the real light outside. For the first time, he is able to distinguish appearance from reality, an image from the genuine article, falsehood from truth. Seeing reality is, for Plato, the goal for all those intent on pursuing the good life.

Plato's great insight was that we humans are naturally tempted to take refuge in illusion and fantasy. We run from reality by creating virtual worlds which enable us to evade the responsibilities of the real. All addiction is, in some way, an attempt to create such a world – an attempt to use the virtual in an effort to suspend the actual. Our world is, of course, still plagued by all the old addictions, but never before has Plato's analysis seemed more apposite. For now, we live in what I have termed in my recent writings: 'Cyberia' – a virtual space of images, appearances and shadows.¹ It is as though, having briefly glimpsed the sun, we have retreated to the cave and to our chains. In Cyberia, there is endless chatter but little real communication. It is a space in which subjective opinions ceaselessly circulate, but where objective knowledge is in short supply. In such a world, it is as though the ancient distinctions between appearance and reality, truth and opinion, simply do not exist.

The consequences of this are far from benign, especially in those areas of human life which aim at truth and excellence. In education, students rarely consult the original source, opting instead for recycled 'research' on the internet. Instead of staring at the sun, they google the shadows. In confusing this second-hand information with truth, the result is very often a mishmash of opinion masquerading as knowledge. In journalism, likewise, there is always the temptation to avoid the hard road of truth in favour of the easy option or the quick story. Instead of permitting truth to guide the story, the story takes risks with the truth. It is then that truth and knowledge are sacrificed on the altar of mere expedience.

We begin and end in stories. We have our individual stories and our family narratives, all of which are told within the general context of our cultural and historical stories. We have our 'founding myths' which give meaning to our lives and which help us

make sense of the great mysteries of existence. Indeed, without stories we could not converse or socialise in the way we do. Many conversations begin with the question: 'What's the story?' Meeting people for lunch is simply a pretext to tell stories about ourselves and others. Life, we might say, turns on stories - a fact that is becoming ever more obvious with the phenomenon of so-called 'Reality TV'. Of course, Western culture has always been a culture of storytelling. Long before television, stories were told as a form of entertainment. However, ours was also a *confessional culture* in which we told stories of our sins, infidelities and wrongdoing. Quite literally, people poured out their souls in their sad tales of broken promises and shattered lives. While secularism may have put paid to the confessional, it did nothing to subdue the confessional culture. We could say that the therapist's chair is the new confessional, a place where people seek healing through storytelling.

Today, we also air our stories publicly on radio, TV and across the web. This has resulted in the collapse of the 'public-private' distinction, a distinction that relied upon some stories being kept to ourselves. Reality TV, gossip columns, 'kiss-and-tell' tales – all of these have the same effect of revealing those elements of people's stories that, in a previous age, would have been kept secret. If anything, therefore, our culture has become even more confessional, but also more prurient. It seems that we no longer have any right to our secrets, what we might call our personal or hidden stories.

Cyberia is, thus, an obsessively confessional culture where there are absolutely no secrets or privacy, but also one where the old established criteria for distinguishing between stories rooted in fact and those rooted in fiction have completely collapsed. In our virtual culture, everything - no matter how shocking - soon becomes a drama to be viewed as we might a soap opera. Pain, death and suffering are no longer occasions for empathy, but are very often sensationalised for the purposes of entertaining a passive public.

Our 'tell-all' confessional culture is based on narratives that are self-indulgent, distorted, and often the stuff of fantasy. As I see it, our job as journalists is not to fan the flames of fantasy, but to tell our stories rooted in truth and reality. Our job, in other words, is to point people away from the shadows towards the sun. In our virtual world, we are often tempted to forget that behind every story are real people living real lives. Hence, everything we say or write about them has, quite literally, the potential to 'remake' those lives. While we can never recreate the events of a person's life as those events happened, we can at least aim to be as faithful to the facts as possible. Indeed, it is only in a faithful retelling of stories that the trust upon which the moral integrity of our profession depends, can be secured.

An inaccurate news item, a misquote, playing loose with the facts – all lead to a distortion of the story. Such distortions are not without moral consequence, for if a person is the sum total of his or her stories, then it follows that in playing loose with facts we simultaneously play loose with lives. If our stories demand research, fact-checking, trust-making and truth-telling, it is because we know – or at least we ought to know – that what is at stake are people's reputations, their life-stories. In the old literary culture – the 'culture of the Book' - there was a sense that *all* stories had to be underpinned by hard work or labour – what the Greeks called *techne*, meaning a production that took time, effort and care. By contrast, in this age of immediate satisfaction and gratification, an age of rolling news and rapid output, there is often little time for the type of labour that ensures accuracy. The consequence is that, very often, truth is compromised. As such, people are

also compromised because in getting the story wrong, you get *them* wrong. You re-create their lives by re-creating their story.

Recently, for example, I was interviewed by a journalist for a leading daily on a matter of public interest. I spelled out, in very precise, detail my role in this story and carefully went through the facts as they unfolded. However, when I opened the paper the following morning, I found that there was a major distortion, one which I had specifically cautioned against. I immediately wrote demanding to know why this person had broken a promise made in good faith to a fellow journalist. There was no plausible reason given and it was only when I threatened legal action that a correction was made in the paper. By then, of course, the damage had been done. Moreover, it was not as though the story would have been compromised had the truth been told. It was simply that someone felt it could be spiced up by toying with the facts.

If this is a grave error, it is because, in our age of opinion, the journalist ought to be an *agent of truth*. We very often forget that journalists are primarily *authors* – people who still rely on the written or spoken word to tell a story. The pad may have replaced the pen but the moral vocation of the journalist remains constant. He or she has a duty to drive us from the shadows into the sun and to rescue us from our cosy illusions by forcing us to face reality. That is why, when illusion becomes all-pervasive, journalists become indispensable to the moral health of society. Their authorship assumes an authority which elevates them well above the ‘chatter sphere’ of Cyberia. This relationship between *authorship* and *authority* is not popular in an age of equality, an age when the very notion of authority is routinely dismissed as an elitist concept. Either way, we shall always have need of those whose authority is not assumed but earned by conveying the truth in a way that challenges the popular consensus. These are the people we look to, and rely on, to tell us what really happened. Their authority is founded on the fact that they have earned our trust.

The moral vocation of a journalist is, in my view, that he or she tells a story that is rooted in truth and based on solid evidence. There is, of course, a big distinction between *knowledge* and *information* – the latter being the raw dissemination of factual data. Knowledge, on the other hand, is predicated on a deep understanding of our world and the human condition. It cuts through images, illusions and appearance in order to reach the heart of the matter. To possess knowledge is, thus, to have authority over your subject, to understand things *objectively*. If Cyberia is a sphere dominated by subjective opinion, journalism ought to be a domain in which people write objectively, truthfully and authoritatively. That is because journalism is the last redoubt of the written word in a world which has withdrawn behind the screen.

An age without imagination hungers for immediate and limitless stimulation. Having made the transition from book to screen, we are no longer satisfied with stories that leave something unsaid or unseen. We crave every lurid detail, and those stories that fail to reveal their darkest secrets run the risk of falling stillborn from the press. There is always someone out there who will fill in the gaps, someone who will dive to those depths to which others simply refuse to sink. Great storytellers are, however, those who leave some things off-screen. Think, for example, of Shakespeare’s tragedies, where our empathy and sympathy is aroused, not by the violence which we don’t see, but by the tragic effects in the lives of the protagonists. Shock, in other words, is not the source of moral empathy. We do not identify with a person’s pain through images of horror or debasement. While such images may be standard fare in Cyberia, they simply cannot surpass the power of sad and

sentimental stories which put me in the shoes of the victims. In sum, our job as storytellers should not be to shock or depress people, but to simply and truthfully tell our stories.

In a culture of noise, distraction and inattention, it is difficult to be heard or read with any diligence. Hence, the temptation is always to fantasise our stories in order to grab the attention of those whose only contact with reality is through a screen. Again, however, we must always remember that stories – *all* stories – are what constitute life, and upon those stories rest, not only reputations, but very often a person's survival. That is why trust and truth are so important and the basic moral lamps which should guide our way.

All of this has convinced me that the best training ground for journalists is amid the flickering embers of our dying culture. We need to see ourselves, in the first instance, as *authors* – writers whose goal is to use language in the service of truth. We need to use our pens and our pads in the service of something greater than ourselves. It is not easy to stare at the sun. It is not easy to follow a story wherever the facts and details may lead. An anecdote from my own experience highlights the point.

Having taken temporary refuge from academia at the Sunday Independent in 2003, I started writing on the issue of Islam in Ireland. I had been approached by some concerned Muslims about the radicalisation of their community. The group was led by the son of Saddam Hussein's former physician, a woman who had been in the dictator's favour until she openly voiced moral concerns regarding the brutality of his regime. His response was to have her summarily shot. Her husband fled to Lebanon, but her son was apprehended and imprisoned in Abu Ghraib prison. While there, he was subject to ritual torture and humiliation, resulting in one side of his face being hacked open with a broken bottle. His injuries were so extensive that he required facial reconstruction. It was this courageous man - a doctor in exile - who revealed to me the full horror of Hussein's tyranny and the equally disturbing nature of radical Islam in Ireland.

When, thanks to this brave and good soul, I revealed that the Irish Muslim community was being terrorised from within by individuals who were travelling to Syria on Irish passports in order to commit atrocities in Iraq, and that the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Yusuf al Qaradawi – a man banned from entering the United States and known as the 'Shiekh of Death' - was chairing meetings of the 'European Council of Fatwa and Research' in Dublin, I was threatened for my troubles. This resulted in police surveillance of my home and phones over the course of many months.

The truth had led me to a dark place, somewhere I was not eager to go. However, as someone trained in philosophy and theology, I had some understanding of the nature of Islam, and my writings on its spiritual values and way of life were appreciated by most Muslims who took the time to read them. Hence, the charge of 'Islamophobia' could not so easily be levelled by those who see any criticism of Islam as a cover for prejudice and racism. The big problem is that those who have subsequently written about the subject possess little or no insight into the theology of Islam. This means that they can often sound ill-informed or even bigoted. In other words, even if the truth leads you to places you would rather avoid, a comprehensive understanding of the details of your subject will enable you to make vital distinctions. In my case, the distinction between Islam and Islamism made all the difference and, in drawing it, I earned the trust of the silent majority of Irish Muslims. In the absence of a literary culture rooted in philosophy, art, religion and politics, those distinctions, and the deeper understanding they promote, are routinely ignored.

Truth demands that we pay attention to detail and to language, but it also requires a heavy dose of moral courage. Practically speaking, this means abandoning the thick fog of

ideology – or what American theologian Mark C. Taylor calls ‘imagology’ – for the pure light of truth. The prisoners in Plato’s cave had become slaves to ‘a dictatorship of relativism’. Their vision had become so restricted that they could only see things from one very partial and parochial perspective. Plato called this *doxa* (opinion) in contrast to *epistêmê* (knowledge). The tyranny of *doxa* is, of course, operative all across Cyberia, but it should not, I believe, be a feature of the mainstream media. If we are to serve as agents of truth, we must break free of our ideological chains or from the imagology by which we often become constrained. This does not require abandoning our core convictions, but it does mean challenging the cosy consensus that often surrounds them – especially when truth is at stake. That is because our profession is not a means of ‘manufacturing consent’. Neither is it there to determine the political direction of a country solely on the basis of ideological agendas backed up by ‘opinion polls’ – something which, as we have witnessed in recent elections and referenda, is lamentably becoming established practice. If anything, our purpose is to act as agents of integrity, even when doing so conflicts with our innate ideological instincts.

Consider the example of George Orwell, a man of letters who, in my opinion, should serve as a paradigm for all aspiring writers and journalists. Indeed, no journalist can quite claim the title without having absorbed his remarkable essay ‘Politics and the English Language’. That piece is an unsurpassed masterclass in how to write for a general public. ‘A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes’, Orwell insists, ‘will ask himself at least four questions thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?’ However, he adds, you could ‘shirk it by simply throwing your mind open and letting the ready-made phrases come crowding in. They will construct your sentences for you – even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent – and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself’.²

What marked Orwell off as a truly great writer and journalist, was that he could tolerate neither moral hypocrisy nor the use of ideology or propaganda as a defence against the truth. For him, ideological convictions should never blind us to the reality of a situation, even if confronting that reality has the direct consequence of undermining those convictions. Shouldering such moral responsibility does not make for an easy life. It is far more comfortable to stay shackled before the shadows. However, if we journalists have an ethical vocation it is surely to park our prejudices in order to report the facts as they stand. It is to tell stories from every angle and not just from our own partial perspectives. How we do so without the guiding moral insights of texts like *1984* is, for me, the great dilemma we now face.

In the early nineteenth century, Søren Kierkegaard described ‘the public’ as a ‘phantom’ conjured by the popular press. It was, he said, a ‘kind of colossal something, an abstract void and vacuum that is all and nothing’. One hundred and fifty years later, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida echoed those sentiments when he also described public opinion as a ‘phantom’, asking: ‘Where is [this phantom] to be seen?’ His response was that the media ‘allows opinion to be constituted and recognised as *public* opinion’. That is, ‘opinion polls adjust themselves at a rhythm that will never be that of political or union representation. For they see the light of day in a press that often retains the initiative and power...The newspaper or daily *produces* the newness of this news as much as it *reports* it, that public opinion is no longer *in our day* what it was yesterday and from the beginnings of

its history'.³ I do not say that opinion polls are purposely used to distort reality, but I think Kierkegaard and Derrida were correct that, far too often, we are tempted, or even encouraged, to conflate them with reality. This is why a healthy democracy can only thrive when we can distinguish the sun from the shadows, reality and truth from appearance and opinion. Hence, if journalism is to retain its role as the vanguard of democratic freedom, surely it must resist the temptation to manufacture reality by 'ventriloquising' the phantom of public opinion.

Orwell's biographer, John Carey, wrote that one reason why Orwell 'hated the Americanisation of English culture was it because it falsified reality. Looking through an American fashion magazine he notices that there are no references to grey hairs, fatness, middle age or death. Everything is subsumed into a fake world of eternal glamour. [Orwell's] own course was exactly the opposite, to strip off polish and give life back its actuality and miscellaneousness. He valued "solid objects and scraps of useless information". He hoarded "petty and irrelevant" details that made the past come to life – a cabman bursting into tears in 1914...because the army had commandeered his horse.' He had, according to Carey, 'an almost poetic alertness to the mundane'. It was this that made Orwell the 'first serious student of the ordinary'. And yet, it was precisely his love of those ordinary everyday things which make human life so interesting, that made Orwell a great journalist and cultural critic. That is because he looked at the everyday with the eyes of one schooled in literature and culture. Even when writing journalism, he described ordinary things as a good novelist would and, in so doing, rendered them *extraordinary*, interesting, authentic and sincere.

Put simply, it was this – his reliance on literature, art and culture – that made Orwell, like Dickens, so morally incisive. Carey highlights the fact that 'commenting on the news that a number of scientists had refused to work on the atomic bomb, because they foresaw what use would be made of it, he celebrates them as sane men in a world of lunatics, and feels sure that they must have had some cultural education – in literature and the arts – not just a scientific training'. He goes further in stating that Orwell was, before anything else, a moralist. As such, 'decency' is the key word in the Orwellian lexicon. Thus, if 'Dickensian' is a word that stands for 'the dark side of Victorian London', Orwellian 'stands for an attitude to life'. It is composed, says Carey, 'of many strands...There is the plain-speaking, the down-to-earth style, the hatred of all luxury and pretentiousness and showing-off. There is the honesty with which he dissects his own contradictions and prejudices. There is the determination to get at the facts and to experience life as others – coal miners, down-and-outs, soldiers – live it...There is the love of books and the commitment to the art of writing...Above all there is "decency" and Englishness and faith in the common man. The virtues and values of our present civilization – wealth, consumerism, celebrity – were not Orwell's... Against them, he offers an example of how to think and live – and write'.

All of which is to say that Orwell shows us how to exist in the clear light of the sun. He did not share Plato's disdain for the poets – people who, because they relied too heavily on imagery, ultimately betrayed truth and reality. By contrast, Orwell saw that you do nothing to compromise truth by expressing it in a poetic or literary idiom. Indeed, to look at the world morally, to respect decency and to practice it, demands that we know something of those virtues as they are revealed in great art, culture and literature. I do not say that we journalists should follow him in all respects, but I am convinced that there are few people worthier of emulation by those in our profession than Eric Blair - the person we have come to know simply as 'George Orwell'.

To speak plainly, to dissect one's own prejudices with honesty, to display determination in getting at the facts, to love books, to see writing as an art, and, above all, to treat your subjects with decency, is to approach journalism as something much more than a job. It is to see that what we do is not merely manufacture news and information. It is to see ours as a noble vocation, a way of placing yourself at the service of society, and, in so doing, to become servants of democracy, truth and justice.

The future of print journalism may be uncertain, but, irrespective of how many new digital frontiers we reach and transcend, it is definite that democratic society will always have need of journalists. That is because, at our best, we are agents of truth in a world where people cannot often tell where the border between fantasy and reality begins and ends. My hope is that we shall always have the courage to see that our principal purpose is to guide them across that threshold. We do this by having the courage to shed sunlight on dark places – *but* always in a spirit of 'generous anger' and with a good dose of decency.

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¹ See Mark Dooley, *Moral Matters: A Philosophy of Homecoming* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

² George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language' in *Essays*, John Carey ed., p. 962.

³ Jacques Derrida, 'Call it a Day for Democracy' in *The Other Heading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 88-89.