

John Cunningham Memorial Lecture

Jon Williams, Managing Director RTÉ News & Current Affairs

NUI Galway: Monday November 23rd 2020

It is a real privilege to be here this evening, honouring the career of John Cunningham. Thank you to Enda- and to the other members of John's family. I never had the privilege of meeting John Cunningham. But then, neither did the thousands who read the Connacht Tribune, or the hundreds of thousands who watched his contributions on Today Tonight – the Prime Time of its day.

But you did not need to meet John Cunningham to know him.

His words spoke for him.

Next week it will be four years since I first walked through the doors of RTÉ - four years in which the former Mother & Baby Home at Tuam has never been far from the headlines.

In 2017 – a month after I arrived – “significant human remains” were discovered in the grounds of the former St Mary's home. A mass grave, described by then Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, as a “chamber of horrors.” Last month, the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation completed its work. The current Government says its report will be published shortly.

But, for John Cunningham, it was personal.

Long before the rest of the world- and indeed, the rest of Ireland - began focusing on Tuam, John was writing about what had happened there. Not about those who died. About those who lived. And no-one was better qualified to do so.

John spent the first seven years of his life living in the Tuam Mother and Baby Home. His own mother died shortly after he was born - and in his words, “because of the close proximity of The Children's Home to my family home, and

because rearing a sickly infant would be well-nigh impossible for a widower who already had four young children,” he was reared at The Home.

This was Ireland of the late ‘forties’ and early ‘fifties’ when Ireland was a different place.

In 1998, he wrote an extraordinary piece for the Connacht Tribune, detailing the long lines of potties, the inexplicably large numbers of young women, and of the mysterious business of the arrival and departure of the same young women, and endless numbers of babies and toddlers. Of searing and emotional partings. As others pointed fingers, his was a plea for understanding.

JC wrote:

“I felt it was important to write this piece so that the plight of the birth mothers might be taken note of. They too have undergone pain – the pain of parting from a child because they were unmarried mothers in an era when society saw them as sinners, and outcasts. It was a society that preferred to have them and their children inside the walls of institutions like The Children’s Home ... fallen women and ‘Home Babies’.”

How hard it must have been to write about his surrogate mother, Mary and his dozens of “brothers” and “sisters”. Not least, because one of the first things you learn as a journalist, is the story is never about you. We’re much more comfortable reporting the news than making it. But sometimes, given what we do, that’s where we find ourselves.

When Tom asked me to give tonight’s lecture, I chose as its theme “the truth matters”. Given that, I do need to take a moment to talk about why RTÉ is making headlines, right now, for the wrong reasons.

I am one of those who failed to observe the necessary social distancing in RTÉ earlier this month. It was an error of judgement which I deeply regret, and, for which, I take full responsibility. I apologise, unreservedly - and I am very sorry that I failed to do the right thing on this occasion.

We should lead by example. The best way for us to rebuild trust is to do what we do. To be back in work today, come back in again tomorrow, and in the days after that.

Over the past nine months, as the pandemic has transformed our lives, I have had the chance to reflect. About the importance of what we do. About the past. And about the future.

My journey to Dublin has taken me from across the Irish Sea to across the Atlantic – and back again.

I was born in Liverpool, and I joke with people that I must be the only Scouser with no Irish roots. And believe me I have looked. Figures from the Department of Foreign Affairs says over 100,000 UK nationals have applied for an Irish passport for the first time since the 2016 Brexit referendum. You need an Irish born parent or grandparent to qualify. There were plenty of them knocking around in Liverpool. Just not mine.

Growing up in the 1980s, Liverpool was a bit of petri dish for politics – and for news. There was more than enough of both. It was the time of Margaret Thatcher, of Militant and Derek Hatton. Of Kenny Dalglish at Anfield. And Liverpool's Irish golden era: the age of Ronnie Whelan, Mark Lawrenson, Jim Beglin, John Aldridge, Steve Staunton, Ray Houghton - and of Michael Robinson, who so sadly died earlier this year.

There was never any doubt that I wanted to be a journalist.

My first job was in Leeds, on the BBC's regional news programme in Yorkshire. Everything I know, I learned at "Look North" – about journalistic ambition, and the importance of production. I arrived as a trainee, expecting to stay for 5 minutes. I became the editor, and remained for 6 years.

From there, it was on to help launch the news service for the UK's fifth terrestrial TV service, Channel 5. We had no money, and even fewer staff, but a TV genius for an editor, called Chris Shaw. Instead of being out and about every night, 5 News made a feature out of being in the newsroom. Every night, Kirsty Young anchored the new channel's flagship news programme, not from behind the traditional desk but on her feet, walking around the newsroom and -perching on the desks of various -specialist -correspondents as they explained the stories. The contrast with the more traditional bulletins on the BBC and ITV was stark. But 5 News remade TV News – and much of what it pioneered is now the standard elsewhere.

In 2000, I went back to the BBC to edit its daily political programmes – including Tony Blair's second election campaign. One of my presenters was the former

Sunday Times editor, Andrew Neil. In the autumn of 2001, I had asked him to anchor the BBC's coverage of the party conferences. And on a sunny Tuesday in September, we set off for Brighton for the annual meeting of Britain's unions – the Trades Union Congress. The BBC was a side job for Andrew. At that time, he was editor in chief of the Barclay Brothers' press stable which included The Scotsman. He had a chauffeur and very smart Jaguar car in British racing green. The Prime Minister had one, similar.

Brighton is about an hour south of London, and Tony Blair was due to address the TUC at 2.30pm so we set off in Andrew's fancy car at around 1. As we got close to Brighton, we were listening to the radio when it reported that a plane had crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. It was September 11th and a scene of horror that would define the next decade of my career was unfolding across the Atlantic. As we all know, a second plane crashed into the South Tower, a third into the Pentagon and a fourth came down in a field in Pennsylvania. In the space of two hours, nearly 3,000 people were killed.

As Andrew and I arrived at the stage door of the Brighton Conference Centre in his Jag, there was already a large group of press waiting for Tony Blair to arrive. And with its tinted windows, as I stepped out of the car, microphones were thrust into my face demanding comment, as even friends mistook my door opening for the arrival of the Prime Minister.

A light moment on an otherwise horrific day.

Tony Blair never made his speech. Instead, he returned to London. Most of the press did too. Moments before the train was due to depart, Blair's jag pulled onto the station platform, and he and the Downing St team boarded the carriage next to the small posse of press. I was with Andrew Marr who was then the BBC's political editor, Adam Boulton of Sky, and Eleanor Goodman from Channel 4 News. At ITN – which made the news for ITV, Channel 4 and 5 News – you could listen, by phone, to the output of the various studios. It was designed for teams out in the field in case the audio feed into reporters' ears went down. But on that Tuesday evening, it was the only way we could follow what was going on during the hour-long trip back to London. And not just us. Hard to imagine now – but at one point, someone from the Prime Minister's team came into the carriage, and seeing that I was listening in to ITV's coverage, borrowed the phone and disappeared back into the PM's carriage. The phone was returned some minutes later.

That two-hour window would define the following decade of my career. I went to produce the Six O'clock News as Deputy Editor, through the wars, first in Afghanistan and then Iraq. I became the UK News Editor as, really, for the first time since The Troubles, Britain confronted a domestic terror threat, culminating with the 2005 London attacks on 7/7. And then, three years later, Foreign Editor just as Britain doubled down on the war in Afghanistan – a place I would visit on more than a dozen occasions in the years that followed. I had the privilege of working with great correspondents like Ian Pannell, and two of Ireland's finest who learned their trade at RTÉ: Orla Guerin and the great Fergal Keane.

And then in 2013, I moved to New York to do the same job for ABC.

The US network had been my closest partner at the BBC. In 2007, I had been part of a small team who had facilitated the secret deployment of Prince Harry to Afghanistan. Harry was embarking on a career in the Army – and the head of the army, the Chief of the General Staff, Richard Dannatt, was clear that given his regiment was going to be deployed, if Harry could not, his career would be over before it had really begun.

The problem was, if it got out that the third in line to the British throne was in Afghanistan, he would suddenly become a target for the Taliban. So along with the British newspapers, we agreed to delay reporting his deployment in return for access to Harry, before, during and after his time in Afghanistan. And – back to my theme – because the truth matters - it was vital the audience got a dividend from any deal to protect Harry.

I confess I never really understood America's obsession with the British Royals – but it was clear that they would be mad for this. Throughout the 10 weeks Harry was in Afghanistan, I kept my ABC friends across what was going on. Then, one afternoon in February 2008, I was in South Africa when my phone rang. It was ABC to tell me that Matt Drudge – the media sensation of the time – was reporting Harry was in Afghanistan. The blackout was blown. Harry came home – but fortunately, we already had enough material to show him working as a forward air controller. The BBC-ABC relationship that had grown in the aftermath of 9/11, was cemented in the sands of Helmand.

Four years later, when my opposite number in New York left ABC, his boss rang me to ask if I would be interested in replacing him. The job of Foreign Editor is one of the best in the BBC – and after seven years, I was starting to worry that one of my colleagues might push me under a bus. And so, began a four-year

adventure that took me to Russia with George Stephanopoulos to interview Vladimir Putin, working with the legendary Diane Sawyer, and gave me a front row seat for the highs and lows of US foreign policy during President Obama's second term. From the Iran nuclear deal to the war in Syria.

And then one day, unexpectedly, I got an email asking if I would be interested in coming to Dublin to run RTÉ News and Current Affairs. I can count on the fingers of two hands, the number of opportunities in the world for an English speaker to have your own news division, working across radio, TV and online. It was not a hard decision. Or at least not for me. But when I arrived, so many people asked me why I'd want to leave ABC to come to RTÉ. The irony, was four years earlier, when I moved to New York, people there had asked me the same question – why would I leave the BBC to join ABC?

But there is something else that made the decision to move here an easy one. And that is the passion and the curiosity of the Irish people for News and Current Affairs. Having worked on both sides of the Atlantic, and on both sides of the Irish Sea, there is something special about this place. I cannot help but think the people of Ireland are more interested in – and better informed about – news than those in either the US or the UK. And long may it remain so.

Perhaps that national curiosity is why so many ordinary Irish men and women achieve extraordinary things in the international area.

Think of former Foreign Minister, Séan McBride who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in Namibia and helped found Amnesty International, his fellow Nobel Laureate, John Hume, Mary Robinson of course, or Mary Lawlor whose Frontline Defenders do such incredible work around the world.

And now, there's the man who is leading the world's fight against Covid-19. Mike Ryan was born in Sligo, and raised in Mayo. He studied medicine at NUI Galway – and is now Executive Director of the WHO's Emergencies Programme. A few months ago, I had the privilege of meeting him with colleagues from some of Europe's other public service broadcasters via Zoom. "Why you people are so important" he said, "is because even if we have a vaccine tomorrow - up to thirty percent of people, according to polling, would not use it. There is he said another pandemic... that of misinformation."

RTÉ is the most trusted media organisation in Ireland. 93% of people think it's impartial, 96% think it is trustworthy. Increasingly, in the fake news world, truth is a priceless commodity.

The Irish are among the biggest consumers of Facebook and Twitter. A few years ago, a survey by Deloitte found that Irish adults look at their mobile phone 57 times a day, compared with the European average of 41. 16% admit to looking at their phone more than 100 times a day – double that elsewhere in Europe.

But it also means the 'fake news' stakes in Ireland are higher than elsewhere, and with the world in the grip of a global Coronavirus pandemic, technology means the truth is under attack like never before.

In just a few short years, fake news has become the poison in the bloodstream of our societies - undermining trust and destabilising democracy. It has never been harder to separate fact from falsehood, certainty from assertion, truth from downright lies.

Mind you, three hundred years ago, the writer Jonathan Swift was warning of the same dangers. "Falsehood flies and the truth comes limping after it" he wrote in 1710. Swift, best known for writing Gulliver's Travels, knew the importance of fact as well as fiction - as well as being a writer and satirist, Swift was also a journalist, editing London's Examiner newspaper for four years.

But do not take my word for it. Scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that false information on social media spreads six times faster than the truth. And it is harmful health advice & wild conspiracy theories posted online have helped to drive polarisation, deception & fear.

Ironically, the pandemic has also driven demand for the exact opposite: rigorous, fact-based journalism, from traditional, trusted news sources. Covid means more people are reading, watching, and listening to what journalists produce. Facts, and expertise matter more now than ever.

And it highlights just how essential it is that the public can rely on the information they need, reported in a manner that is calm, measured, and accurate. And reported by people they trust - experts like RTÉ's Health Correspondent, Fergal Bowers as well as Orla O'Donnell and Sinead Crowley who have joined him on the health beat during the pandemic.

Nine out of ten people in Ireland say RTÉ has been their main media source for accessing information on Covid-19. This season – since September – the

audience to Six One is up by more than 10%. And the pandemic has also brought a younger audience to RTÉ News, many of whom have stayed. The Nine O'clock News is the most watched programme on television among those aged 25-44.

Online, record numbers came to RTÉ News online for the General Election in February. Since the schools closed on March 13th, traffic online has rarely been below that previous record, set just earlier this year. While in the latest JNLR figures this morning, Morning Ireland recorded the biggest audience on Irish radio in almost 20 years.

The irony, is that the challenges facing our industry have never been greater. Even pre-Covid, the business of journalism was struggling. The numbers reading newspapers and watching linear TV have been in long term decline. So too is revenue. It means the pandemic has become an existential threat to many newsrooms. To borrow a phrase, never has so much been consumed by so many, for so few euros.

Add to that – on both sides of the Atlantic - those who seek to delegitimise journalism are massing. In Ireland, so-called “anti-mask” campaigners claim Covid is a hoax and have accused the media of conspiracy. While in the United States, before, during and after the US election, routine verbal attacks on the media have grown into targeted physical attacks against journalists. Their aim is the same – to sow suspicion and doubt.

That is why – at this key moment - RTÉ News has launched a high-profile campaign built around that simple statement: “the truth matters”. Running on radio, TV, in print and online, the campaign seeks to draw a clear distinction between accurately sourced news and the rage and noise in social media.

These echo chambers serve to widen divides in society. Every day we see attempts to target, troll, or intimidate journalists, and stop them from doing their job. Around the world, journalists face growing physical threats and violence too - an assault on press freedom, and our duty to seek out the facts, without fear or favour, to speak truth to power.

That mission is a common cause for journalists around the world. I am incredibly proud to serve on the board of the Committee to Protect Journalists – a New York based NGO that campaigns, not just to protect journalists, but also journalism. Just last week, we honored four courageous colleagues from Iran,

Russia, Bangladesh, and Nigeria for their contribution to the cause of press freedom - four individuals from different corners of the world, united in their pursuit of the truth.

But the tragedy is that, too often, those who try to tell the truth are silenced. Permanently. Murder is the ultimate form of censorship. Since 1992, when CPJ began keeping records, almost 2,000 journalists have been killed. Among them of course, on this island, Veronica Guerin, Martin O'Hagan, and Lyra McKee.

But there is another Irish name among that sobering statistic: Simon Cumbers.

Eighteen months after 9/11, the US and the UK invaded Iraq. Toppling Saddam Hussein was the easy bit. The destabilizing effect that invasion had on the entire Middle East is still playing out. After Baghdad fell, terrorists displaced from Iraq started making their presence felt next door in Saudi Arabia.

In May 2004, four men, armed with guns and bombs, attacked two oil installations and a residential compound housing foreign workers in the east of the country, the hub of Saudi's oil industry. Over 25 hours, the gunmen killed 22 people - including 19 foreigners from 9 countries, including the US and the UK.

The BBC's Security Correspondent, Frank Gardner, a fluent Arabic speaker, was sent to cover the story from London. With him was a 36-year-old cameraman from Navan, called Simon Cumbers.

On Sunday June 6th, they set off for a residential district in Saudi Arabia's capital, Riyadh called Al-Suwaidi. While they were there, they were ambushed by Al-Qaida gunmen. Frank was hit by 6 bullets and left for dead; Simon was killed.

That afternoon, I had gone to a friend's birthday party. And while I was there, my mobile rang. It was the newsdesk. Technically Frank worked to the Foreign Editor - but security straddled Foreign and UK News. They could not get my colleague. They did get me.

Reports were coming in that two journalists had been shot in Riyadh. There were fears Frank was dead. I went home, got the car, and started driving towards Frank's home in Putney. We had asked the other British news organisations not to report the story while we tried to figure out what had happened. Frank had a wife and two young daughters. We did not want them finding out accidentally. But as I was driving towards Television Centre in West London, the story changed. The dead man was Irish. It could only be Simon.

At 36, Simon was two years younger than me, but had done more than many would do in a lifetime. His work had taken him to every continent: from the Amazonian rain forests to the African deserts and the Arctic Circle. He had covered civil unrest in Indonesia; earthquakes in Turkey and India, and the 2004 train bombings in Madrid. With Frank thought to be alive, suddenly the priority was to get to Simon's wife, before she learned the news from elsewhere.

Since I was in the office, I said I would go and tell her. Louise worked for the BBC News channel. I did not really know her or Simon. But we did have a mutual friend. And Navdip agreed to come with me, so there was at least one familiar face as I broke the news.

When we arrived, Simon's wife was not home. So, we sat in my car just down the road, and five minutes later, Louise arrived back at the house. We gave her a few minutes just to get sorted inside before we walked up to the front door.

I am not sure anybody can truly prepare you how to tell someone the person they love has been killed by Al Qaida. When Louise opened the door, she saw Navdip and, with a big smile on her face, asked "what are you doing here". And then she saw me, as it slowly dawned on her what had happened.

All I could think was that I had to get Louise sitting down before I told her. As the door opened, we walked straight in, almost forcing her backwards into the front room, and onto the sofa: it was there that I told her that Simon had been killed.

The following day, after a frantic night, getting visas and booking tickets, I met Louise and her sister as well as Simon's parents, Bob and Bronagh, at Heathrow airport, and we boarded a flight to Riyadh.

The moment we landed; I went straight to see Frank in hospital. When he had been shot, he had been taken to the local hospital, where he certainly would have died. In 2004, the Governor of Riyadh was the man who is now the King, Prince Salman. He ordered that Frank be taken to Riyadh's King Faisal Hospital, where he was lying in ICU, unconscious, and unrecognizable pumped full of fluids.

Frank's wife, Amanda, arrived the following day, and from that point, my job was to make sure red-tape did not get in the way of us bringing Simon's body home. Easier said than done. Even though he had been killed, he still needed an exit visa. And without an exit visa, the hospital would not release his body. It took a week – but eventually we flew back to London, a final flight together for Simon

and Louise. A funeral in Kew, before he came home to Ireland, where was buried in Greystones, Co. Wicklow.

One of the great privileges of moving to Dublin has been to be reunited with Bob and Bronagh. A year after Simon died, in consultation with Louise as well as with him mum and dad, Irish Aid established the Simon Cumbers Media Fund to honour his memory. The aim of the Fund is to assist and promote more and better-quality media coverage of development issues in the Irish media. In

death, as in life, Simon is helping shine a spotlight on stories that might not otherwise get the focus they deserve.

It is just one more way in which Irish journalism matters.

And collectively, we've a good news story to tell. On local radio, in print, online and on-air, Ireland's journalists worked throughout the pandemic, ensuring our audiences had the information they needed to remain safe. In the words of then Taoiseach, journalists "redefined what frontline work really means". As scientists race to find a vaccine for Covid, the antidote to that "infodemic" of fake news is all around us: verified, scientific, fact-based reporting and analysis, on air, in print and online.

But that trust places a special responsibility on us: to operate in the public interest and be fair, impartial, objective and yes, to challenge where necessary, in our mission to champion the truth.

That is why RTÉ's role is now more vital than ever. The values we are built on - and the principles of good journalism that define what we do - have never been more needed.

It is because the truth matters, that we invest in RTÉ Investigates. When the team went undercover at a Dublin crèche look at standards of care after complaints by several parents, they found a pattern of disturbing behaviour

and practices, including fire-safety breaches and rough handling of children. RTÉ Investigates: Crèches, Behind Closed Doors" showed how cots were packed into rooms, leaving it difficult to access babies in the event of an emergency.

It is because the truth matters, that RTÉ has correspondents on the ground, in Belfast, London, Brussels and Washington. That firepower of Tommie Gorman and Tony Connelly, with first Fiona Mitchell and now Sean Whelan in London,

means RTÉ has led the way in reporting Brexit – Tony and Tommie’s insights online, a must-read far beyond these shores. And as an all-island broadcaster, with correspondents in communities right across Ireland, during the pandemic, it has meant that we have been able to contrast the differing approaches by the Government in Dublin and the Executive in Belfast – and the consequences for those, particularly, in border communities. The virus does not stop at a line on a map. And nor do we.

And because the truth matters, transparency was at the heart of our US Election coverage online. With the help of our friends at Reuters, readers could click on the RTÉ News website, and follow the race for the White House, in every county, in every state, across America in real time. Using data from the National Election Pool, the RTÉ map updated every 30 seconds, showing the percentage of the total expected vote in each of the more than 3,000 counties that make up America’s 50 states. Every time a county reported a new set of results, that data was sent to readers’ devices and the map was updated. It meant that when President Trump claimed victory at 2.30am Washington time, suggesting he had “won” Pennsylvania, anyone visiting RTÉ News online could see that 15% of the ballot - more than a million votes – still needed to be counted.

Next year, RTÉ turns 60. Launching Ireland’s very own television service on New Year’s Eve 1961, the President, Eamon de Valera set RTÉ a challenge. His was the first face seen on Irish television. Broadcasting in black and white from his book-lined study at Áras an Uachtaráin, Dev - the man who had helped give birth to the Republic - said he hoped the new service would provide “recreation and pleasure, but also information, instruction and knowledge” - an Irish take on the BBC’s ethos “to inform, educate & entertain.”

By 1961, 60% of Irish homes had a television. Hard to believe, but until then, Irish audiences could only watch British programmes. So, the former Taoiseach had another ask of the fledgling RTÉ: to be worthy of “an old nation with distinctive characteristics.” Much has changed in the last sixty years – not least where, how, and what we watch on television. But our mission is the same: to enrich Irish life with content that challenges, educates and entertains. And that need – for a distinctive Irish voice, for facts, for truth.

For more than half a century, RTÉ has connected journalism, politics, culture, and communities, while retaining the trust of the public. 90% of people in Ireland access our content

part of the media industry, RTÉ is dealing with the challenges of the changing ways in which people are consuming our content – and we are busy transforming ourselves. But some things do not change.

Whether it is Covid, Brexit or the US Election, today, RTÉ News is living up to de Valera’s challenge on that opening night – providing "information, instruction and knowledge" and doing so, in an Irish voice. In his words, “an old nation with distinctive characteristics”.

This is a moment of opportunity.

Because the truth matters.