UNTANGLING THE WEB:
An evaluation of the digital strategies of Irish news organisations

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Introduction

As Ireland's print media continue to suffer a drop in their circulations, how important is the implementation of a viable and, above all, profitable web strategy, and how extensively are these currently being employed within four Irish news organisations? These include Ireland's three best selling dailies: *The Irish Times*, the *Irish Independent*, and the *Irish Daily Star*, and a regional newspaper with a notable online presence, the *Limerick Leader*.

This research examines the day-to-day operations of Irish news organisations; the resources devoted to their digital media/online departments, the revenue-generation strategies in place to monetize the work of these departments; and the prioritization given to the various mediums through which information is distributed.

These issues have been explored by interviewing the people with responsibility for digital development within these organisations to ascertain what they believe that they are doing both correctly and incorrectly, in their attempts to gain traction for the online news sites within their organisations.

Just what does this move online mean to Irish news organisations, and what differentiates those who are moving online from those who are not? What differences exist in their news-gathering approaches and the platforms via which they disseminate news? How far will these organisations go in their pursuit of online revenues? Are paywalls the end-goal, or is the only way to safeguard their futures to adopt the media model that is digital first?

Digital First

> Digital platforms are first in the processes and priorities of the Digital First journalist. We publish newspapers as well, but newspapers cannot drive our work. Newspapers are a shrinking audience and revenue stream and our digital community and revenue stream are growing. Our survival demands a digital focus. Editors responsible for print products will assemble them primarily from content produced originally for digital platforms. (see Buttry, 2011)

As Buttry argues above, digital first still involves the printing of newspapers. What is different, however, is where the resources, drive and priorities are focused – online.

Ireland online

In order to gain a greater understanding of how Ireland's print media organisations are reacting to falling print circulations and the steps that they plan on taking to counter this, four of the major figures within these organisations were interviewed in the summer of 2012, in order to ascertain how they were placed to combat these declines.

Hugh Linehan
Hugh Linehan is the editor of www.irishtimes.com, the accompanying website to *The Irish Times*. He was interviewed on 27 June, 2012.

Nóirín Hegarty
Nóirín Hegarty was the editor of www.independent.ie, the accompanying website to the *Irish Independent*, from March, 2011 until September, 2012. She was interviewed on 4 July, 2012.

Ger Colleran
Ger Colleran is the former managing director of Independent Star Ltd, which owns the *Irish Daily Star*, and its current editor. He was interviewed on 31 July, 2012.

Alan English
Alan English is the editor of the *Limerick Leader*, including www.limerickleader.ie. He was interviewed on 10 August 2012.

What does the move online, and the model that is digital first, mean to Ireland's news organisations?

Hugh Linehan views digital first as 'often defined as being "not waiting for the newspaper" to put the story up on the web', but believes that this can be overly simplistic and inflexible:

> It's also about that in every meeting that we have, in every daily conference that we have and in every discussion we have about commissioning an article or piece of content, that the first item on the agenda is the digital output, and the reason for that is because our business model is changing, journalism is changing, and increasingly we need to recognise that digital is the most important channel.

The speed that digital first can require provides a conundrum of sorts for Nóirín Hegarty. 'You cannot sacrifice truth and accuracy for speed, but you've also got to be fast. There's no point in us having a story that is an hour later than *The Irish Times* or *TheJournal.ie* or RTÉ.' The types of news that she believes should be reported in a digital first manner are:

> Anything that's in a radio bulletin environment should be online. Anything that's live should be online ... all these things happen after the print deadline and once the print deadline is gone, you're into another day and you've got to be responding in a continuum.

In contrast, Ger Colleran believes people are almost afraid of questioning the migration to online, despite the mistakes that have been made to date:

> One sounds antediluvian sometimes by ... even the slightest hint of question of the movement towards digital, but ... there have been massive mistakes made in terms of the rush to digital.

Any move online, in Colleran's eyes, must be done with a view to it being a success. Doing so without a genuine belief in its success is pointless. 'You might as well go pelt sods of turf at yourself,' he says.

> I mean, I'm not religious about online. I'm an atheist about online. I don't give a flying shit for binary ... zero and one, who cares. I couldn't give a shit. Neither do I give a shit for print. The printed paper ... knocking down trees. If there was another delivery mechanism I'd save the oul trees.

Being owned by Johnston Press at the time of the interview had an impact on what Alan English would like to do with the *Limerick Leader* from a digital first point of view:

> While I've always had a progressive attitude towards the Internet and the digital publishing side of things, the way the company is led from the very top is going to have a very significant impact on how the *Limerick Leader* proceeds.

This has also had the effect of taking the look and feel of the *Limerick Lea*der's website out of the paper's hands, with English believing that some of its incarnations have been less than progressive.

Responding to whether the buying and selling of more than three-quarters of regional titles in Ireland between 1998 and 2008 (see McGreevy, 2012) has proved good or bad, English believes it to be a mixture of both. While he would 'like to work with web designers on an individual *Limerick Leader* website', he does acknowledge the positives. 'You don't see too many small, family-owned, local newspapers that have a dynamic Internet presence,' he says.

With 109,000 unique visitors and 689,000 page views in July, 2012, the website for the *Limerick Leader* is 'way ahead of all the other Johnston Press titles in Ireland,' English says.

How do Irish news organisations put their content online?
Linehan views the fact that *The Irish Times* has 'been on the web for nearly a generation now' as nothing to be particularly proud of, believing that they are still doing things in largely the same way as they were in the mid-1990s:

> Every evening we produce a newspaper, we take the contents of that newspaper in a pretty raw digital form and we perform a function called content uploading which is the digital equivalent of getting three men with a shovel and getting them to shovel all that stuff over a high wall into a garden next door which is called www.irishtimes.com.

From the journalists' point of view, Linehan makes the point that some can be quite clueless as to the work that goes into putting content online:

> Some of them have a vague notion that they email their copy into some great mothership and somebody sprinkles Internet pixie dust on it and it miraculously ends up on the Internet and they don't know how it happens. They are all in for a rude awakening over the next few months.

Up until 2011, the *Irish Independent* operated a shovelware model with the addition of some syndicated content. This had changed by the summer of 2012, however, with Hegarty estimating that 200 stories were being added to the site on a daily basis, comprising of those 'that are self-generated, stories that are aggregated, stories that are coming from syndicated, you know, updating of running stories, optimisation of stories'.

Videos prove particularly popular on the site, with around 2.5 millions views a month, and monthly page views are between 36 and 37 million a month. As a news site, however, Hegarty knows that a balance needs to be struck:

> We'll have a news story and then you'll have two picture stories that are really there to generate views, human interest stories that are designed to capture your attention – decent pictures, decent headline and whatever.

Technological advances need to be coupled with an improvement in the quality of what appears online. Viewing what appears on independent.ie now as 'radio news bulletin style journalism, the A and E of journalism,' Hegarty says that it remains far from groundbreaking. 'Are we going to win any awards for our journalism,' she asks herself. 'No, not anytime soon because, you know, we're not doing things that are investigations.'

Colleran admits that thestar.ie is little more than a site at the very beginning of its life. 'Nobody in their wildest excesses could describe it as full-blooded,' he says, saying that it's 'slow, but slow with reason.'

Within the *Limerick Leader*, specialist software is used which integrates web publishing into the existing journalist workflow. In addition, limerickleader.ie now contains web-only stories, along with breaking news and local radio stories appearing on the web first.

How are the online departments of Irish news organisations structured?
Within *The Irish Times*, Linehan commands an editorial staff of approximately 20:

> We have 11 people working on the online news team, one person working in online business, two fulltime people working in online sports and a number of casual freelancers as well, with some freelance bloggers.

In addition, *The Irish Times* has approximately 10 people in IT and IT support, with a further six operating in a commercial capacity.

The *Irish Independent* operates with fewer online resources than *The Irish Times*, but Hegarty hopes to change this, having integrated the digital team into the newsroom. This is the latest of many changes for the Irish Independent which, according to Hegarty, had no journalists employed in digital 15 months before our interview.

> I came in and we now have four journalists which are online full-time. One is devoted to Independent Woman which is a niche area for us which has seen major growth and then three journalists are on the main site, independent.ie.

Within the first year of becoming editor of the *Limerick Leader*, English had created a 'digital role'. Having found someone for a position – which has since disappeared – he believes that the work done online during that time 'did show intent, and that's probably the reason why our [online] figures are much better'.

How much are Irish news organisations being held back by their print legacy?

Having an existing print product can lead to tensions when deciding what goes online and what doesn't, as Hegarty has found, despite recognising the need to 'keep elements of the coverage in the print edition only because you want people to buy the print edition.' As the circulation figures for *The Irish Times* continue to drop, Linehan believes that it is the print edition that will remain the primary source of income for 'at least the next five years.'

Linehan views *The Irish Times* as being full of 'very skilled people who have learnt what is a high-skilled trade over many years'. Believing the papers output to be of a sufficiently high standard, he lists work practices which he doesn't believe to be followed by some of the more recent entrants in Ireland's news industry:

> We don't copy and paste content from other people. We do take syndicated content and we pay for it. We make no bones about that. We credit that all the time, which other people don't necessarily always do. I think those are all important values.

Hegarty lists another value – verification. 'You can get it [the news] from Twitter … but it may not be verified in that traditional way,' she says. This trust and credibility costs, as does good journalism 'and that's what we've got to model and pay for.'

Colleran, on the other hand, is conscious of the dangers of being at the forefront of this transition. 'I don't think we need to be too far ahead of it,' he says, 'but we certainly shouldn't be behind it, because the damage we can do to our company is enormous.'

> When do you step off one train and onto another without falling between them in a disastrous calamity that will wreck a company or a business? That is the key point. Some people have half-jumped and are dragging themselves behind the train at enormous costs to themselves. I don't think that's profitable.

Competing with the printed edition of his own paper 'doesn't make financial sense,' he says, using *The Irish Times* as an example to prove his point:

> The extraordinary thing here is that there are even columnists, writers with *The Irish Times*, who don't buy *The Irish Times*. They've told me this themselves personally. They read it on the net for a fraction of the cost. I mean, how does that make sense? It's bonkers economics. But it's also vanity publishing for a company that is essentially broke.

> You see, there's a certain kind of, you know, the emperor has clothes. But, you know, the emperor doesn't have clothes. The emperor is naked as far as I'm concerned. All these great prophets, let them declare, let them break it out; let them show us how much money they're making, what type of fine garments they're wearing, because they're all naked, at least in *The Irish Times*.

English is quick to admit that the *Limerick Leader* used to adopt a defensive approach to online in order to help maintain its print sales. Describing the concept of a free version of a paper online as something 'that people in Ireland need to get their heads around,' English believes that those in the industry need to 'consider that there are two separate audiences.' An exception to the rule would be 'a real big scoop' which wouldn't be put up on the web until a number of hours later. 'It's a balancing act,' he says.

While the existence of a printed product can impact what appears online, a lack of online expertise can also become an issue. Recalling better economic times, English says Johnston Press purchased 'very very elaborate and expensive' camera and editing equipment, with two journalists from the *Limerick Leader* being sent to England for training. The results, however, were less than impressive, according to English.

Describing attempts to use the equipment in 'the first flush of enthusiasm,' the resultant video was heavily criticised once it hit the web, with English describing some of the comments:

> [We] put it out there and then, of course, comments on YouTube … 'what a pile of shit', you know (laughs) 'this is unbelievably amateur, embarrassing,' so … I've got a thick skin, I wasn't bothered about it, but it just emphasised the point.

In order to get around this, the *Limerick Leader* has since paired up with a separate company who English describes as 'video specialists'. Despite this, English believes that amateur video still has a future.

> The kind of video I'm talking about is … with a mobile phone, where there's no expectation that it's anything other than a mobile phone … just do 30 seconds of a clip, put it on, attach it to a story and I think people will watch that kind of thing.

In addition to having to compete with online competition which offers news for free, English is perturbed by the fact they also have to compete with the *Limerick Post*, a free newspaper which certain newsagents stock alongside the *Limerick Leader*.

> It's absolutely ridiculous but true, that shops who make their money by selling our newspapers will say 'fair enough, I'll take 500 copies of the *Limerick Post*,' and somebody, who's maybe lost their job will come into the shop and would have bought our paper and said, 'ah fuck it, I'll settle for this'.
>
> You wouldn't see that in England. All the free papers are just delivered door to door. The idea that you'd allow a free alternative … it's not like if

you're selling chocolate bars, you're going to say there's a free chocolate bar here as well. It mightn't be as tasty, but it's chocolate. (laughs)

Despite his disappointment at this, English doesn't blame the public for availing of the opportunity to get their news for free. 'The industry is entirely responsible for that,' he says. 'They allowed the expectation.'

What is stopping Irish news organisations from focusing solely online?
Linehan discloses the drastic effect that deciding to pursue a digital only strategy would have on the company:

> *The Irish Times* currently employs 400 people, of whom 200 are journalists. I don't think we could sustain employing 50 people, of whom 10–15 are journalists on our current digital revenues if we were to do that [go digital only] … a lot of people who are currently able to pay their mortgages and are able to feed their kids would be in a very difficult position because there wouldn't be jobs for them anymore.

Colleran believes that print still has 'a medium and long term future'. While he does admit that the growth of digital is most likely to continue to increase, he believes people first need to work out how to monetise it.

With a large percentage of the readers of the *Irish Daily Star* in the 15-44 age bracket, they represent one of the more tech savvy demographics. 'Our benefit of having young people might similarly be our disbenefit, depending on how we play the ball,' Colleran says. 'We have to ensure that when the transition is required … that we are there to make it with them and that they will come with us.'

Speaking of the benefits that digital only news organisations have over his own, English sees himself as 'trying to ride two horses at the time' while 'they don't have to be in anyway protective of their print.' Despite this, English knows that his online competitors need to make money too. 'We're charging for a paper', he says. 'It generates cash on a daily basis. One of the advantages we have is that we have a product and you can't have it unless you pay for it.'

What level of buy-in exists for online in Irish news organisations?
Attempts to further integrate online into the day-to-day operations of the news organisations of the interviewees were typically met with issues of buy-in. The reasons for this varied.

Linehan explained that seeking greater focus on online has been met with responses of 'but it's not the most important channel.' Buy-in is improving, however, with Linehan describing those who 'didn't want to confront some of the realities of what was happening to our business in 2008' as being a minority now. Speaking of the bite-sized nature of online updates, he has encountered the view within *The Irish Times* that 'they think digital is just for shallow kids basically, you know, "it's bite-sized news for the idiot generation"'. This, in Linehan's view, is little more than 'generational prejudice.'

Buy-in has also been required in the *Irish Independent*. A lack of knowledge of social media has proved difficult in the Irish Independent previously, Hegarty

believes. 'It is a very steep learning curve for some people,' she says, describing those within the organisation 'who don't know what services to utilise and … refer to it as "the Twitter machine"'. Hegarty believes that a failure to embrace change is 'going to be a nightmare for them because it's going to be horrendous for them to cope with this new world.'

As the managing director of Independent Star Ltd at the time of our interview, Colleran said that he wasn't looking to seek any online buy-in from any members of his staff. 'You'd want to be a complete gobdaw not to know that it is not at all likely to turn a profit on the web,' he says. While he holds these beliefs himself, he hopes that his competition will continue on their current path. 'I hope they make all the mistakes that will be clear to everybody coming in their wake, and we'll try to avoid them and benefit.'

On the subject of buy-in at the *Limerick Leader,* English believes that a youthful newsroom helps:

> I think we are getting buy-in. We do have quite a young newsroom and we have a very Internet savvy group, which are on Twitter and use Twitter to basically get information for stories and to promote stories … I'm looking for buy-in to take it to the next level.

English has found Twitter to be of great help to the *Limerick Leader* in making them 'first with a story.' Describing their coverage of court cases, he explains the process:

> We've got reporters that we'll have instructed that the first tweet … we want to break the story, right, that's a point of pride for us … don't just wait for the judge to say guilty or not guilty, have the tweet ready to go … bang! The tweet is gone within one second of the guy saying the word, you know. So we do love that. That's a real buzz. Then we'd follow up then as quickly with the story.

What difficulties have Irish news organisations faced in making online profitable?

Describing the way in which the precursor to irishtimes.com was run (ireland.com), Linehan admits that, as a separate company with different terms and conditions to the rest of the staff prior to integration in 2008, 'it's no secret that they felt like second class citizens and perhaps you could argue that they were treated as such'.

This wasn't the first time that Linehan had become aware of a lack of understanding within the organisation as to the value of online and how it could be of benefit to *The Irish Times*. As features editor, he became 'a bit cheesed off' when no one from the online department would ask him for his input as to how his team's output should appear online. Describing it as 'systematic of a problem where the website was seen as just publishing the newspaper content in whatever way,' he now believes that things have improved since they all work out of the same building.

One thing that Irish news organisations did not get wrong, according to both Linehan and Hegarty, is what Linehan refers to as the 'original sin' moment. Linehan believes that charging from the very beginning would not have worked, just as it hasn't worked for the music industry. While viewing *The Irish Times* as being 'slow to change,' Lenihan feels 'the boom didn't help, ironically,' believing that radical change can only come once prosperity is gone.

One mistake Linehan does believe was made, however, was in putting the *entire* newspaper up online:

> Rather than lumping up the entire paper … I would have perhaps looked about developing a small core of people who were thinking about ways to create a truly digital medium rather than just a digital replica of an existing paper medium … we could have maybe saved a lot of wasted time.

Hegarty, however, does believe that things could be different now had something different been done in the 1990s. 'Ideally everyone would have come together in 1998 and figured it out,' she says.

Like Linehan, however, she believes that little was known at the time about how the Internet would grow.

> I wouldn't have gone into online back in 2000. It would not have been viewed as a career path for anyone who was ambitious or anyone who was serious about journalism because nobody knew where it was going. Really it's only in the last couple of years that it's become very clear that what suited the last generation is not going to suit the new generation.

English believes, that where online is concerned, newspapers have adopted a separatist attitude, which has hurt them:

> If they do have an interest in digital, it's probably one person who'll be over in the corner and he'll be referred to as the Internet guy and everybody else basically thinks that that takes care of it. That's the absolute opposite of what we're trying to do here, where it's basically that everybody is digitally minded.

How are Irish news organisations currently making money from online?

According to Linehan, *The Irish Times* currently has between six and seven thousand paid subscribers to its e-paper. While supplemented somewhat by advertising, Linehan admits that this 'has been a great disappointment to newspapers'. Despite *The Irish Times* having come out from behind a paywall in 2008, he still believes 'that people are willing to pay for certain types of experiences and we will be looking to explore that.'

These numbers, however, are unlikely to replicate those in print. Hegarty is aware of the low conversion numbers: 'The numbers are about 2.5 percent of your traffic that are prepared to pay … you've got to ideally get your numbers up to such a point so that the 2.5 percent matter,' she says.

Dynamic ads which can appear to be more intrusive then their print equivalent need to be tolerated if revenues are to increase, Hegarty believes. 'I worked in a newspaper that wasn't viable [the *Sunday Tribune*] and it's closed, and it was a traumatic experience where a lot of very good people lost their jobs,' she says. 'It is a business; we're not here as social workers.'

In 2012, the *Irish Daily Star* currently generates online revenues from sister site starbets.ie, online advertising, and by providing access to the paper's summer sports coverage for those outside of Ireland for a one-off payment of €3. 'I remain to be

convinced that there is going to be an avalanche of business in that direction, but we'll see,' says Colleran. If the day comes where people are asked to pay for the online version of the *Irish Daily Star*, Colleran believes that the price would have to fall significantly.

The provincial website, limerickleader.ie, is set to start making online revenue from the digital archiving of their back catalogue of issues. 'A lot of papers, in my opinion, don't realise the value of their past,' English says, describing the interest, and revenues, which these back issues can generate.

There also exists a partnership with the company, iAnnouce, which allows tribute pages to be created for people who have died, which have added to online revenues for the Limerick Leader. The paper also has its own online version of the Golden Pages, along with property and motoring sections which also generate revenues.

Something else that may bring readers in is the fact that the Limerick Leader reports on local news stories, which are less likely to be covered elsewhere. For this to matter, however, it needs to generate money:

> I think there's always going to be a market for hyperlocal news. The issue is whether there is going to be the money to fund it … if there's an expectation that it's free and we cannot create an effective advertising model to monetise the content that's very expensive to produce, well then everyone's in trouble. It goes to the heart of local democracy. 95-percent of people are blissfully unaware of the fact that nothing of any quality is free.

This same belief, when held by journalism students, annoys English:

> I see comments from journalism students who are absolutely straight up about the fact that they don't buy newspapers … everything has to be free … then there's an expectation there that these journalism students are going to be employed. It is a bit of a bugbear with me. We have to get real.

How big a struggle is it for Irish news organisations to get funding and resources?
'Our revenues have shrunk enormously since 2007. Horrendously,' Lenihan says, 'and you can quote me on that.' Within *The Irish Times*, everyone now has to work much harder for less money, which can make seeking funding for online projects difficult.

Linehan hopes that funding for *The Irish Times* may also come from new, non-commercial avenues, whether 'that's a slice of the license fee' or is 'funding from non-profit trusts which fund activities in societies which are deemed to be beneficial to those societies,' in which he includes investigative journalism.

RTÉ, Lenihan believes, remains the 'elephant in the room'. While wishing to do more with audiovisual, he says that the outdated nature of the Sound & Vision fund means that it is 'only applicable to content which is "broadcast" i.e. that old fashioned definition that somewhere on a hill that there is an aerial beaming out.'

Hegarty believes that a lack of visibility as to what the financial return will be can slow the development of news sites, such as independent.ie. One such addition that Hegarty would like to see would be high quality videos that would 'amplify a story',

along with more Irish content. 'We don't have the resources to put into it,' Hegarty admits, however.

While Hegarty believes that the sharing of RTÉ's license fee 'would be a fairer way of doing things', she does not hold out much hope. Similarly, Colleran does not believe anything like this will happen, nor should it. Describing print as 'the only element of the media that is completely independent,' he believes that to accept payment would be akin to throwing 'itself into the embrace of government.' Colleran does believe funding for some of the provincial papers may need to come from other sources, however.

> There's a great need for what we might describe now as a public good … democratic accountability. Who is going to cover Kanturk District Court if the Corkman is dead? Who is going to do Killarney District Court or the town council if the Kerryman can't publish anymore? These are very important issues.

In 2012, English remained committed to getting extra funding and resources from the owners of the *Limerick Leader*, Johnston Press:

> We need the tools to do the job. We need the laptops, we need the smartphones and I can't go to journalists saying that I want you tweeting from matches and not providing them with the equipment to do that.

Echoing Colleran's worry for future coverage of Ireland's regional courts, English believes that 'if we cannot find a business model that will allow us to send reporters to all the different courts' that 'society, ultimately, is the loser. I can't remember the last time we gave anybody a staff job here, and that's worrying,' he says.

How aware are Irish news organisations of the differences in online audiences?
While the websites for *The Irish Times*, *Irish Independent* and *Limerick Leader* all contain content which does not exist in their print editions, opinions differ between their editors with regards to how willing they should be to deliver stories which are guaranteed to generate page views.

From the perspective of *The Irish Times*, Linehan believes that they have managed to grow their online presence while not deviating from the paper's ideals, stating: 'We don't go whoring after traffic, we haven't dumbed anything down, and we don't intend to.' Linehan does believe that the style of writing could benefit from being updated to be more informal online, however.

Hegarty is less inclined to adhere to strict rules regarding content, however. While acknowledging that it is the celebrity-based stories that do drive up views on independent.ie, she believes that despite the 'snobbery', these stories are of vital importance to the site.

> People complain about them in the same way that people tell you that they're at the Gate Theatre on a Monday night and aren't watching the soaps; the figures will tell you that they're watching *Coronation Street* and *Eastenders*.

Hegarty believes, however, that serious journalism needs to continue online.

> So it's about balance, because that's how you lose your credibility … if it's all dwarves having sex on trains, I mean, great, you'll peak on views but in terms of people coming back and believing you, they won't.

While the same story may run in both print and online, she believes that their prominence and popularity can vary between the two mediums. Targeting these different markets requires more than the shovelware operations that existed previously, as Hegarty now knows. 'It's more nuanced than that,' she says.

The 'continuous publication' that independent.ie readers want 'means a lot more work for journalists,' Hegarty says. Comparing how she would have covered a court case when she left college in the 1980s to how a journalist might do it today, she describes the extra steps they'd take:

> I'd be tweeting from the court case, I'd be filing the story while I was in court because you can use these devices (point at her smartphone) … I'd be coming out and I'd be trying to take a picture … I might be following up with something else later in the afternoon and then I might be on the radio talking about the story.

Despite refusing to ramp up the online offering of the *Irish Daily Star* anytime soon, Colleran is aware of what its future audience will want. While the print edition of the paper would have pictures on page one, the digital equivalent would 'probably want five, six, seven, 10, 20 more pictures … maybe even a video thrown in'.

English is sometimes surprised by the stories which prove to be popular on limerickleader.ie. Seeing this, however, makes him question who is right and who is wrong:

> It's actually very informative and instructive because you think, if that's popular online, well, what's wrong with actually putting it on the front page of the paper? Who are we to prescribe what the news is and decide that this is more important than this?

How important is online participation to Irish news organisations?
While realising that an increasing number of online readers want to move from passively consuming the news that is put in front of them to being able to give their views by commenting, the legal ramifications of this remain of concern.

While Linehan believes that blogs that are hosted on *The Irish Times* allow for 'conversations with your users', interaction has increased most through its now unmoderated commenting system. The previous, pre-moderated model was 'archaic, fuddy-duddy, conservative and trying to keep too much control,' Linehan says.

Somewhat at odds with *The Irish Times* being fearful of retaining too much control over users is their insistence that users log-in using their Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn accounts. 'Just because something isn't illegal doesn't mean that you don't want loads of crap essentially on your site,' he says.

From a legal point of view, both *The Irish Times* and the *Limerick Leader* work on the general premise in the UK that if you provide a way for comments to be flagged

as being defamatory and take them down within a reasonable timeframe, you are covered. The *Irish Independent*, however, pre-moderate all comments.

Online participation, in the form of commenting on stories, is also important to English. The moderation of these within the *Limerick Leader* had been outsourced in a decision taken by Johnston Press. English had found moderating comments to be an 'extremely exasperating' experience, marked by a consciousness about what qualified as 'free speech'.

What do Irish news organisations believe they need to do in the immediate future?

Despite an increasing focus on the financial health of Ireland's print media, Linehan believes that they need to start hiring again. Speaking of being 'stuck in a kind of a deep freeze for the last five years,' he believes that *The Irish Times* don't have enough 20-somethings. Another concern is the ethnicity of the newsrooms within Irish news organisations:

> I look around our newsroom and everybody I see was probably born in Ireland to Irish parents and that to me doesn't reflect the society we're supposed to be representing and writing about.

Hegarty believes that the online components of traditional news organisations have to continue to play catch-up with their new competitors in order to succeed. 'The start-ups can do it at a relatively low cost, with young journalists who really get this social media interaction,' she says. 'That's the reality.'

Continuing, she says: 'The important thing is that we are moving forward. We're not standing still, even if we're not moving forward as fast as I want.' In Hegarty's view, this will involve a paywall of some type in the future:

> We'll all do it at different times and maybe if we do it first, then *The Irish Time*s will benefit for a while and vice versa, but I don't see any other way forward than that. You can't just provide this for free.

'I've said it before that this is the biggest change in publishing since the Gutenberg Bible.' Before people can be expected to pay for it, however, 'it's got to be brilliant,' she says.

Any future online developments within the *Irish Daily Star* will only come when 'we can justify it on the basis of not cannibalising what we have already,' Colleran says. As long as there is 'a receptive audience willing to pay for this [printed] product, then that will continue,' Colleran says. 'One would be nuts not to do so.'

For English, limerickleader.ie is now his main focus:

> My current baby is online. I've decided that we're really going to kick on from where we are so I'll be … formulating different strategies for what we want to try to do, and to take the rest of the newsroom on the journey.

With some of the bigger Johnston Press titles in the UK already having an iPad edition – such as *The Scotsman* and *The Yorkshire Post* – English believes that this could

be the way forward for his own publication which could, in turn, potentially increase advertising revenues:

> I don't think we can do any micro-payments for stories on the website. That boat has sailed ... if you've got a video player in the heart of the website it does allow you to do 15–30 second advertisements before you get to the content that people are actually looking for. If people don't like that, well, tough.

Looking to the future, English is aware that the *Limerick Leader* can't currently meet the expectations that people may have. 'You feel that you do disappoint those people if three hours after that [a breaking story] there's nothing on the website,' he says. 'The office isn't stocked seven days a week. We're just grasping that nettle at the moment.'

So what has changed?
In the time since these interviews were conducted, each of the four news organisations mentioned in this paper have increased their online presence. While the *Irish Daily Star* has increased the number of stories on its website, its sister site starbets.ie is no longer in existence. It is also slow to embrace social media, with just over 3,000 people following its Twitter account. This pales in comparison with that of the regional *Limerick Leader*, which is nearing 16,000 followers. In addition to this, limerickleader.ie now offers e-paper subscription services for both the city and county editions, has a digital archive of its publication from 1905 to 2004 that can be searched by subscribers, and also offers an online service whereby photographs that have appeared in the print edition and/or online can be purchased via the website.

The biggest changes have come, perhaps unsurprisingly, from both *The Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent*. In February 2013, a new look independent.ie was launched, on foot of the integration of print and online journalists into a single newsroom.

A month later, a new look irishtimes.com was launched, with a special emphasis on the mobile user experience. Underlying this was the integration of its content management system. A greater use of live blogs, an increase in the types of content that can be embedded, and the use of podcasts for exclusive content, such as the signing of Newstalk's former Off the Ball team, have all demonstrated a greater commitment to online.

Conclusion
Despite the current issues facing Irish news organisations, each of those interviewed were acutely aware of the challenges they faced, and that the growing desire to consume news online showed no signs of abating. While Irish news organisations continue in their attempts to adapt accordingly, the global mindset that what appears on the web is inherently free is slower to change. With print circulations continuing to provide the majority of income for Ireland's print media, funding for online remains an issue. The pre-existence of a printed product causes further problems in terms of limiting what can appear online and when. Attempts to ensure that print circulations are not further eroded by the often identical (and currently free) content which appears online will continue, until either a new way to monetise it can be found or Irish news organisations decide to charge for it directly.

One such company to charge for online is the *New York Times*, which now has over 700,000 paying subscribers (see Roberts, 2013). Despite these subscriptions, however, advertising for both print and online remain a disappointment. Reducing the online reach of advertising by essentially locking them behind a paywall will run the risk of diminishing these revenues even further and is something that all news organisations will need to consider carefully when deciding their next step.

AUTHOR

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