

Stop Press! What is Journalism?

“The Value of independent journalism is often best observed when it is absent or endangered”

Geraldine Kennedy, Editor of The Irish Times

In an address on the topic “What is Journalism”, the Editor of The Irish Times, Geraldine Kennedy, paid tribute to the slain Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya and said that the “value of independent journalism is often best observed when it is absent or endangered.” She cited US Secretary of State, Condoleeza Rice’s reaction to the killing of Politkovskaya as “a reminder that without investigative journalists who are willing to seek the truth it is very hard for a democracy to function.”



Ms. Kennedy on the left - Fr. Twomey on the right

Ms Kennedy was speaking at the presentation of awards to the three winners of the first ever national Stop Press! Schools Journalism competition run by The Word magazine at the Alexander Hotel in Dublin. The overall winner was 18-year-old Huw Duffy from Wesley College, Dublin.

Congratulating The Word magazine on hosting this competition, Ms Kennedy said “There is a special responsibility on those who are in the national media to encourage young entrants into our profession and a competition such as you have organised is very helpful at spotting out young talent. It also encourages young schoolchildren to take their part in society, to formulate their views.”

She added that the topic selected for the competition: Immigration Remaking the Nation, was the biggest topic on the social agenda in our society today and that it had been selected for the Douglas Gageby fellowship this year.

In her address on the subject of journalism to the assembled guests who included Dublin's Lord Mayor, politicians, editors, journalists, priests and religious, Ms Kennedy said "I think that the profession exists for the purpose of serving the public interest and the right of members of the public to know about matters of local, national and international importance. Journalism is an essential requirement of a mature and working democracy."

She added, "I think it is important for people to remember that freedom of expression, which is protected by the Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights and relied upon by journalists, is a function of the right to know and this in turn depends on journalistic disclosure of information which is sometimes secreted or obscured from public scrutiny. The argument for allowing citizens rather than an elite to choose their own government rests fundamentally on the belief that those citizens are capable of making informed choices."

"I would say that journalism is the contemporaneous reporting and recording analysis and comment on events that make news it is for citizens to decide in a democracy what to make of the information that journalists provide for them. They may chose to ignore it or they may chose to act on it. They may find the information illuminating or question the motives of those who have put it in the public domain that very process of decision and the formation of public opinion is the material of everyday democracy and what journalism is all about."

In his address, Editor in Chief of The Word, Fr D. Vincent Twomey, SVD, paid tribute to Geraldine Kennedy whom he said had left her mark on the world of journalism and politics in Ireland and currently occupied "one of the most prestigious editorial chairs in Western Europe".

The theologian said there were "many parallels between missionaries and journalists". He added that "Even though missionaries are concerned with the Good News of the Gospel and journalists seem to be mostly concerned with the bad news, both are basically concerned with the search for the truth and making it known, with the promotion of justice and seeing that it is done, and, finally, with enlightening and entertaining people."

Fr Twomey suggested that "Like the missionary whose task is to proclaim the message of hope, the journalist can also give hope by helping society change for the better."

He paid tribute to the courage of missionaries and journalists, who often risked their lives. "Often, missionaries and journalists pay the price for their commitment to truth, justice, and basic information in closed societies. Twenty-six Catholic priests, religious, and lay catechists were killed while serving the Church in the year 2005. A media watchdog has described 2006 as the 'most savage and brutal' year on record for journalists, with '100 media professionals killed across the world.' This year saw the brutal murder of Hrant Dink, the Armenian editor in Istanbul."

He added, "Speaking the truth, writing about it, publishing it, can be dangerous, as indeed our special guest, Ms Geraldine Kennedy, has experienced in her own day and even today. And yet society cannot flourish without the truth and so the vocation of the missionary and the career of the journalist are, each in their own way, indispensable for the wellbeing of society even when they may not always see eye to eye."

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