



The Radharc Awards 2018

The speech by Emily O'Reilly Ombudsman for Europe

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Thank you for that introduction and thank you for the honour of being invited to speak at what has become a very important event for Irish documentary making and I congratulate the Radharc Trust for its admirable commitment to supporting a sector that operates in a very challenging media environment.

I will confess that I hadn't thought very much about Radharc in recent years until the invitation to speak here today arrived, although like many people here it was a staple of my childhood alongside Daithi Lacha, Home for Tea and Tolka Row and I know that in that one sentence I have aged myself terribly...

My family did not have a television until about 1964 when we moved from Tullamore to Dublin but my Tullamore aunts did have one and my memories are of the local children outside my aunts' little terraced home in Dillon Street with their faces pressed up against the window to get a glimpse of this miracle.

I do remember the TV breaking down once and we all hovered anxiously around the electrician when he arrived begging him to fix it. Which he did through the simple expedient of picking up the plug and inserting it into the socket.

I do recall the image of Fr Joe Dunn speaking into the camera night after night, moving from black and white into colour as the decades rolled on. I remember images of missionaries, of

nuns and priests in places that were bewilderingly strange and foreign to all of us and the shock of hearing a Dublin or Kerry accent in a landscape that could not have been more different from those places.

So it was therefore interesting for me to go to the archive and look at some of the programmes from the very early days. And it struck me that young people now looking at those programmes now with 21st century eyes would view them with the same sense of amazement as we did fifty years ago but for very different reasons.

We were amazed at seeing Africa and the Far East, they would be amazed at seeing what was playing out in the towns and villages of Ireland at that time, amazed to observe the presence of the Catholic church in the tiniest spaces of Irish life, to see being played out in this documentary format the cultural and political omnipotence of the Catholic Church, precisely the intent of the original programmes at least, as conceived by Archbishop John Charles McQuaid.

Radharc has been justly praised for opening up some parts of Irish social life and for shifting our gaze out beyond our national borders. But looking at those old programmes made me think about 'reality' and about 'truth' and about the challenge that documentary makers face in finding the latter in the former, in creating out of the reality chosen to be portrayed perhaps an immutable truth.

In my preparation for today, I also came across a short nine minute piece of footage from another priest, Fr Jack Delaney who made several mini documentaries of Dublin inner city life in the 1930s including one in the grounds of a Magdalene Laundry in Dublin.

In that tiny silent movie, we observe the nuns and the Magdalenes, strolling the grounds, laughing, smiling, picking

flowers, the Magdalenes playing a ball game, everything is picture perfect, everyone seems happy. The only moment that doesn't quite chime with this picture of communal bliss is when a group of Magdalenes are paraded briskly around a central area hurried along by one of the nuns.

The film is real. The place is real, as are the nuns and the Magdalenes. Yet the film is not and cannot be the truth. We now know at least part of what the truth actually was yet capturing the truths of those decades for those women was something that Irish television either would not or could not do.

It was actually there, in plain sight, the laundries in full view, but never still, revealed. Perhaps truth is revealed only when time and cultural shifts paint in the rest of the picture, not as tangible things or people but rather as a deeper appreciation of the cultural hinterland of the moving pictures. Perhaps truth is revealed sometimes only in the rear view mirror.

Seeking out that elusive truth is particularly challenging today when there is no shortage of imagery and of image makers and no shortage of propagandists and ideologues who can, courtesy of new technologies, shape and shift our reality in quite extraordinary ways and in accordance with their own particular agenda.

It can be done, as it has been done mainly since the invention of the camera, even without those technologies. It's called propaganda of course but today the capacity to create it has moved away from the big players, from those with the finance or the expertise to create it, and is essentially in the hands of anyone with a smartphone.

But while the challenges of reaching beyond the noise are intense for documentary makers, so too is the hunger of many people to make sense of this hyper reported and

propagandised world, to burrow through it all, to find that trusted source, to know that what you are watching is not just real, but true.

A few weeks ago, I sat through several hours of the testimony of Brett Kavanaugh and Professor Blaisey Ford to the US Senate Committee considering the appointment of Mr Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court.

I had decided that I didn't want to have it mediated to me, spun to me, or to see snippets online, rather I wanted to observe myself the testimony of both, to bear witness to it, so that I could assess what both people said and observe the interactions of the other participants without filters. I was perhaps doing what the word 'documentary' is intended to convey, trying to find truth from the raw record, from the documents.

It's rare of course that any of us will have the time or the capacity to sift through hours of available raw material to find the truth behind an event or an assertion, so we rely on people like you, on documentary makers to do it for us and we need to trust that you will – even while advancing a point of view – at the very least provide us with evidence based, fact checked, authoritative work and above all work in context.

But even with all that, your work provides only one part of an equation on one side of which is what you produce and on the other side is the impact that it may have.

In this country there has been a strong link between documentary work and transformative outcomes. Documentaries that tracked institutional abuse, from industrial schools of the past to the nursing homes of the present have resulted in strong shifts in culture and

ultimately of policy. Other troubled areas of Irish life have also benefited from the gaze of the documentary maker.

But outside of these shores, in the United States, in parts of Europe, we witness a disconnect between observable truth and the actions that we would expect to flow from the revelation of that observable truth. I have said before that Donald Trump, in many respects, was a most transparent Presidential candidate. Very little was hidden, not his sexism, his misogyny, his dog whistle racism, yet he still got elected.

I do not know the full truth of the Blaisey Ford Kavanaugh saga but at the very least it is clear that Kavanaugh did not conduct himself during the hearings in a manner that was compatible with what one would expect from a person of that rank. Yet he now sits on the Supreme Court.

In both cases, the truth didn't really matter, either because in pursuit of power, the truth was put to one side, or – in the case of Trump's election - because there was an alternative 'truth' about globalisation, about elites, displacement, migration, that Trump voters chose to put a higher premium on than the truth of his actual unmediated self. And that alternative truth had been expertly sliced and diced through algorithms and other processes to meet the bespoke prejudices and preferences of millions of people.

And it's not always the so called bad guys who hide or who distort the truth. Political expediency is an equal opportunity operator. Some of you here today may have watched the 2014 documentary *Night will Fall* which told the story of how a 1945 British Government documentary comprised of raw footage of Nazi extermination camps was shelved for seventy years because the post war political

mood music had changed and it was no longer judged useful further to expose the evil of war time Germany.

The buried expose - German Concentration Camps Factual Survey - had involved Alfred Hitchcock whose work was intended to show not just the barbarity of the camps, but also – crucially - how close ordinary German communities had lived to the camps, the revelation of a particular, deeply unsettling truth that pictures of the dead and dying alone could not reveal.

But within a few months of the start of the work in 1945, the documentary had become a political headache for American and British officials absorbed now in the rising Soviet threat. The consensus was that the film was no longer necessary, a mere four months after the Bergen Belsen death camp had been liberated and its horror filmed by US servicemen newly trained in camera work.

On the 4th of August 1945 the film's producer, Sidney Bernstein , received a memo from the British Foreign Office which read: "Policy at the moment in Germany is entirely in the direction of encouraging, stimulating and interesting the Germans out of their apathy, and there are people around the Commander-in-Chief who will say 'No atrocity film,'" *It* was shelved one month later, though its footage was key evidence in the trials of Nazi war criminals and just a few years ago was restored by the Imperial War Museum in London and finally released.

In the final scene, as the camera zooms in on the faces of the dead, the narrator speaks: "Unless the world learns the lesson these pictures teach, night will fall. But by God's grace, we who live will learn."

So, it's one thing to make or to attempt to make a documentary, it's quite another to arrange to find yourself in

the world at a time when your work will be received, will have impact, a time when people are ready to care.

In our own time we can watch people drown in the Mediterranean fleeing from the 21st century hell of Syria or some other place of unimaginable suffering, We can even watch that hell too if we have the stomach for it.

We may even be a few news cycles away from seeing the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi being butchered inside the Turkish Embassy in Istanbul. We are not wanting for horror, for image, but what we also need is the power and skill and patience of the documentary maker to make sense of this, to present it in such a way that ensures that we cannot avert our gaze, to present but also transcend base facts to allow for that bigger truth.

And what many of you do is deeply, inherently political and because it is so, it will frequently be met with a countervailing political force such as what happened in 1945 when the looming Soviet threat necessitated the propagation of a different narrative, the switching of enemies.

On a much more mundane level, but instructive nonetheless, some of you may recall an RTE documentary of the dangers of the housing bubble in Ireland – broadcast at a time when we were still giddy aboard the Celtic Tiger. The programme and the programme makers were rubbished, the truth denied because it didn't suit the political and financial mood of the day. Again, truth viewed more perfectly through the lens of the rear view mirror.

Some time ago, I reflected on the multiple apologies this state and others have given in recent years whether for institutional abuse, or the laundries, or Bloody Sunday or the Hillsborough disaster and remarked that apologies, while

welcome, are so much easier when so much has been forgotten anyway, when so many are dead or no longer relevant and the messy political compromises that delayed those apologies for decades are no longer salient, apologies given in other words, when it's safe to do so, when the downside is limited when there may even be a political benefit now to be gained.

Like documentaries, it is context and timing that determine the relevance. Consider the documentaries that will be made about the Trump administration in decades to come when our grandchildren will marvel at how so much became 'normalised', how so many colluded.

I know enough about documentary making in Ireland to appreciate the challenges that independent producers particularly face, financial, logistical and I'm sure at times emotional. The effort and patience it must take to see it all through is enormous and I commend all of you who have done all that and who have achieved all that you have.

Your work is precious and for some of you, its importance may not be realised for many years or even decades to come. It is all the more important and impressive therefore that the Radharc Trust continues to support that work. You help us to see and to explore not just the single strands but rather the whole fabric of our shared lives and for that we thank you.