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We are witnessing the death throes of RTÉ

RTÉ is going out of business. Businesses go bust all the time. Technology can blindsides a legacy business, or bad management, but sometimes it's just that the world moves on. In the case of RTÉ, it's probably a bit of all three. The young have switched off and are unlikely to come back. I have never seen my children tune into RTÉ. Their friends are the same. Whereas my mother is a devotee, and I am agnostic, maybe catching a bit of current affairs, the kids are gone.

There in three generations of the one family is the story of a faltering corporation. I say this with a heavy heart. I've worked with RTÉ on many occasions, and have huge admiration for many of the staff.

When you stand back from the theatrics of the past weeks, we are witnessing the death throes of an organisation. While the State can compel people to subsidise RTÉ, even jailing folk who don't pay their TV licence, this smacks of Stalinism and doesn't feel like a long-term strategy. People's listening and watching habits have changed and, like the demise of the compact disc in the face of music streaming, no amount of political special pleading is going to change this. We may worry about these trends, but they are the facts.

What is happening in the media-information-persuasion-entertainment business?

RTÉ, like all broadcasters, is in the business of grabbing people's attention

and time, and here the global trends are unambiguous. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report, a joint project from Reuters and the University of Oxford, reliant on YouGov polling data across the globe, throws up some fascinating developments. The 2023 report suggests that what they term, "social natives" (those growing up in the era of social media) are increasingly less likely to go directly to a news site or app for news and instead rely on social media.

In the UK, the share of those aged 18-24 accessing online news directly from a news site or app has more than halved, from 53 per cent in 2015 to just 24 per cent last year. The corresponding figure for those aged over 35 has remained flat at around 52 per cent.

Within social networks, we've seen a shift towards Instagram and TikTok. The likes of Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) are still more likely to carry news from more mainstream news providers, whereas Instagram, TikTok and the like are much more dominated – worryingly – by prominent personalities or influencers.

In Ireland, the decline of TV as a news source has accelerated over the past eight years. In 2015, 76 per cent of respondents consumed TV news. This fell to 58 per cent by 2023. One winner in the current affairs or information business has been podcasting. This comes from the fact that people now want to curate or personalise their own media, and are not prepared to simply take a suite of programmes devised by some remote TV or radio scheduler.

Today, 14 per cent of Irish people listen to podcasts and they tend to be younger, educated and richer than those who don't

– the sweet spot for advertisers. Who knows what tomorrow might hold, but it is clear that the millennials and Gen Zs have switched.

What about Generation Alpha, those born from 2010 into a world of on-demand media and streaming services? These youngsters have access to an array of content from YouTube to Netflix, and when they decide they like something, they can watch that instead of channel-surfing. And every time they watch something, the YouTube algorithm is watching them, learning what they find most engaging and bombarding them with similar content to keep them addicted.

Profound consequences

And addicted is the right word, because we are witnessing a large shift in our popular culture that will have profound consequences for society. We are moving to a dopamine culture, where all information – be it politics, sport, journalism, music, even relationships – is repackaged into bite-sized, immediate hits of dopamine.

"Dopamine culture" is a term coined by Ted Gioia, an American music historian and critic. (If you don't know him, you should.) Gioia observes a culture which has moved because of technology. In music we have moved from albums to TikToks; in journalism from newspapers to scrolling; in entertainment from cinema to short reels of videos; in sport from playing a match to gambling on it; and in relationships from marriage and commitment to swiping on an app.

Everywhere you look you see people on their screens, and you can imagine

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these little dopamine hits going off in their heads as they scroll, digest, discard and scroll again, addicted to the buzz of the hit. And like all addictions, the buzz wears off increasingly quickly, demanding more of the drug, leading to generations of people who are scrolling, swiping and driven to distraction by relentless digital interruption. This is the TikTokisation of culture and it is upon us. Talk to anyone in the music industry for example, and they will tell you that if a song doesn't grab the distracted listener within the first 20 seconds it will be discarded.

How can you make art in such a world?

Entertainment is art made easy, but art is challenging, difficult to make and, to appreciate, requiring effort, which is ultimately rewarding. Political analysis, too, requires commitment, time and effort

at understanding – as does understanding the economy and its place in the society. But if everything is speeded up, made instantly digestible, where do we get knowledge, the product of application and serious contemplation?

In my career I've experienced this shift. In the old days, when I presented current affairs programmes, economics was seen as hard, stuffy and boring. Radio and TV producers were obsessed with turning economics into entertainment, to keep people interested. This required a certain type of mind, turn of phrase and editing style.

In recent years the entertainment motive has been replaced by distraction and relentless output, be it on X or Facebook: live social media clips, where content is shortened, simplified, repackaged, and repeated. The aim is to keep people distracted, swiping and scrolling on platforms that require less and less individual application. And these platforms are being replaced by even more attention-grabbing clickbait such as TikTok, where the aim isn't so much constant distraction but addiction to more dopamine hits.

This is the new warp-speed world that RTÉ is operating in, and the challenges it faces are those that come when one world collides with another. I have a lot of sympathy with those who argue that we need to slow down, but it's hard to see that happening. Spend some time with younger people and the evidence of dopamine culture is everywhere. The implication, for truth, for politics and for reasoned analysis, is obvious.

The funny thing about RTÉ is that when it's gone we might miss it.

‘THE WAKE AT HOME HAS COME BACK AGAIN’

One of Ireland's relatively few women undertakers reflects on how Ireland's culture of death has changed over the decades



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"I was 20 the first time I drove the hearse," Marian Healy Prendergast says matter-of-factly. We are sitting in her home in Glin, Co Limerick. Prendergast, one of Ireland's relatively few female undertakers, is reminiscing about growing up in a family where the business was tending to the dead and the distraught people they leave behind.

"We grew up with the business," she says. "I would remember as a child being cleared out of the sitting room when someone came in with bad news, and my mother making tea. I would give credit to the women of yesteryear; the wives of undertakers, meeting the people. The culture was different; there were no phones. People came to the door, and my father might be out, so my mother would entertain them until they came back."

Prendergast's grandfather, Tom Healy, started their business in 1893, which was part of a carpentry workshop. His sons continued it, with Joe, Marian's father, eventually taking over in the 1950s.

"We would get small jobs when we came home from school, like you would in any family business. I'd have to line coffins with material. I'd keep some of the left-over lace and fabric for my dolls. I can remember my father making boxes in the workshops; small boxes for amputated limbs. I never questioned the small boxes, because I was so enraptured of availing of the lace trim that was left over."

It was, says Healy Prendergast, the tradition at that time to bury amputated limbs. "A baby or a limb to be buried was buried either very early in the morning or late in the evening. My own grandmother's two legs were amputated. They went down into the grave first, before her," she says. When her grandmother later died, she was buried in the same grave as her amputated limbs, as was the practice.

In the days before electricity

Formerly, coffins were made locally, usually by the undertaker. In the days before electricity, her relatives held candles for those making coffins. It was considered bad luck to make a coffin in advance of a death, so her father would make the sides and other parts, and then assemble them when a death occurred.

"We buy our coffins in now," She keeps some dozen or so on site at a time. Later, I see one under a bedspread in an adjacent building.

Embalming was not always part of an Irish funeral. Pre-electricity, as Healy Prendergast says, houses were far more dimly lit. Any decomposition of the body being waked was not as visible. "But it was definitely there. There would be fires lit, and lots of people in the room. Once electricity arrives, society wanted better presentation of the remains. That's when embalming and sanitisation of the remains came in."

Joe also made pony traps, and his brother upholstered them. Funerals were not enough in themselves to support a family. Healy was also a signwriter, a painter and decorator. There is a framed letterhead of a blank invoice on the wall in Prendergast's family home. "If I supply you with funeral requisites or any other work on credit, I do you a good turn. If you do not pay your account monthly you do me a bad turn," it reads. Then as now, it appears, some payment for funerals can be less than timely.

Back when her father was working in the business first, coffins would be transported on a farmer's cart and pulled by a horse or two. These were the wishes for



■ Undertaker Marian Healy Prendergast at her funeral home in Glin, Co Limerick. Below: 'The big breakthrough with the funeral was the motor hearse,' says Healy Prendergast, 'which my father brought to Glin in the 1950s.'

PHOTOGRAPHS: BRIAN ARTHUR

the funeral of Desmond FitzGerald, the knight of Glin, who died in 2011: his remains were transported in a red cart by a black horse. Healy Prendergast conducted his funeral.

"The big breakthrough with the funeral was the motor hearse, which my father brought to Glin in the 1950s."

Joe decided to sell on this hearse a few years after buying it. But first he had to reconfigure it. Nobody wanted to buy a second-hand hearse for their personal use. So he cut off a section of the long back part, including the vehicle's distinctive glass panels with their solemn etched scrolls.

Those same panels from that hearse are still on display today: they form the glass panels in the two doors that lead in and out of the funeral home on Mill Street, and the window in between them. The building, now more than 60 years old, was established by Joe as another first for the area.

It was never an automatic decision for Healy Prendergast to take over from her father. "I drifted into it when my father was still involved in the business," she says.

When Joe died in 1999, she decided to continue the business. "Undertaking was always male dominated because there was such a physical side to it. Nowadays, we have technology to help with that, like the introduction of the coffin hoist. I outsource my embalming. There are more women coming into that area too.

I think [former state pathologist] Marie Cassidy encouraged women to get involved in the area of forensics. She broke the mould and was responsible in encouraging women into the field of undertaking."

Her phone rings frequently

Undertaking had changed hugely since her grandfather started the business. Those changes have kept evolving. "Putting notices on local radio. RIP.ie. People now want printouts from the RIP.ie notices, for instance."

Undertaking also has unique demands on the people who practise it, due to the nature of the job. If you look at the website of most undertakers, they declare they are available 24-7. Her phone rings frequently

while I am with her.

As it happens, bigger changes in undertaking occurred during Healy Prendergast's time than in either of her father or grandfather's stewardship of the business.

"Covid changed everything," she says. She is still upset that the Government chose not to classify undertakers as front-line workers. It was not just that at the height of lockdown, only 10 people were permitted at funerals: the drastic changes to the way funerals and burials were conducted have had lasting consequences.

"Due to the restrictions at the funeral home and the numbers going to a funeral, the reposing of the remains went back to the house again. The wake at home has come back again. Sometimes it might be

restricted to relatives, with a formal reposing then being at the funeral home. For the undertaker, after the funeral home, we take back the remains to the house again, and then take it again from the house to the church. That is extra work. The remains are brought to the house twice, not once."

It used to be common for a wake to take place at home, then the remains taken to the church for an evening removal with prayers, and the funeral the following morning.

Shortage of priests

"But the church – as we know – now has a shortage of priests," she says. "There is no parish priest in Glin since the last one retired a few years ago. He was not replaced. And that is happening in every second parish around the country." There are now a number of parishes in the region that are now collectively served by just two priests.

"So the laity are now getting involved," she says. "There's a committee formed for it, like the people who give out Communion. Some of the family have even led prayers. You will get an older age group of people coming to a funeral and they will have a problem with the laity being involved, so you have to work around it."

As she sees it, in the future, there will be three or four coffins in a church at a time, as the number of priests dwindle still further. "I think the smaller churches will close because of the lack of parish priests, and nobody to replace them. The rural undertaker will have a big question mark over them; will they survive? Will they still exist in a few years? Will all funerals go through the big towns?"

What are the essential qualities of an undertaker?

and there has to be laughter and grief." She cites a regular funeral gift in her rural parish as "a sod of turf from the bog". It symbolises the fire, the heart of home, the place of storytelling.

She says it is tradition that "a layman's coffin is always facing the altar; the feet are towards the altar. But the clergy face their congregation. And the only other person I saw where the feet were towards the congregation was at Brendan Grace's funeral. I saw it on television. I wondered was that deliberate, or to do with cameras. Most people wouldn't have noticed, but I did."

Cremation is on the rise. Of the 20 or so funerals she organises a year, a good half of them now involve cremation. When people are cremated overseas, the ashes can be brought back in hand luggage, but must be accompanied. Coffins, she says, come in as cargo and freight. They have to be screened and checked, including by sniffer dogs, before being released. The undertaker is the one who receives the coffin at the transport hub.

She saw her first dead body at the age of four; a neighbour laid out on a bed at their home. It wasn't until she was older that she actually touched a dead body, and realised with a shock that it was cold. "I have seen too many dead bodies since," she says. "But it doesn't bother me."

How has her job impacted on her own thoughts on mortality?

"I try to have faith," she says. "I question my faith when I see a three-month-old dead baby going for a postmortem, and the parents distraught in a hospital corridor. You wonder why some people have so much tragedy visited to their lives. But as well as faith, a sense of humour is very important. If I didn't have a sense of humour, as someone who deals with death, I would go totally nuts."