

## Editorial

Farrel Corcoran<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Professor Farrel Corcoran is an author and retired academic of Dublin City University. He has served as Head of Communication and Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the university. From 1995 to 2000 he was chairman of RTÉ, the Republic of Ireland's public service broadcaster.*

Art Colleges have their annual exhibition of the best student art works. Film Schools have their film festivals to showcase their student productions. For all kinds of reasons, it is important also to have a showcase for those using the printed word. This journal is the publisher of the best work of the students of Communication Studies and the beginnings of an archive of what concerned them over the years.

But there is a much more important thing at play here than showcasing. What does it mean today to become an author, that is to say originating something significant, an idea, a theme, a probe, and being motivated and focused enough to launch it into the public sphere for the enrichment of others? The function of journals like this one is to promote creative thinking and understanding, to provide insight for readers through reflection on important public themes. It involves empowering readers (OK – not a mass public, but still an important readership) with a deeper understanding of the world as it is and as it could be, honed through the particular lens of Communication Studies. This perspective draws from the best of both the humanities and the social sciences. It offers a smart, critical analysis of politics, media, popular culture, the arts, society, public opinion, science and technology and all the other facets of life that give our society its cohesion and that prevent it from disintegrating into reactionary, prejudiced, ignorant, angry tribalism.

Why is this important? Because while every man and woman's angry ignorance diminishes them, it diminishes me too. What is needed from our brightest undergraduates, whose work is showcased in this journal, is the ability to drive bold new ideas into everyday conversations, to ignite debate beyond these pages, to participate actively in the public sphere that we all share, to become a voice for progress in society.

Cynics may call this too lofty an ideal, too ambitious, difficult to realise, especially for young undergraduates. But if we don't encourage the ambition to become an author in our university students, take a look at the alternatives and see what will fill the vacant spaces. People in our society today are going through an extraordinarily rapid and confusing expansion of their lives, as the public consciousness that nourishes or impoverishes them goes through accelerated change at a rate probably never before witnessed in history.

In large part, this is because of the major new set of 'authors' who have been dominating the public sphere for the last dozen years or so: those we call tech billionaires and the new class of tech managers who have successfully created enormous corporate chokepoints on the internet, solely in their own interest. 'Silicon Valley' stands as shorthand for this, the way Hollywood did in a previous era. Few people still talk about Silicon Valley in the glowing, optimistic terms we used twenty years ago. This buccaneering new class of internet entrepreneurs, who began humbly as bright young visionaries fumbling at their computer screens, is now hell bent on monetising every aspect of communication, from grabbing our initial attention on a screen (at the same time, sucking away personal information about who we are) to unleashing, at its worst, a chaotic stream of emotive and extreme content on social media. This amplifies hate, hysteria, disinformation, outrage and distrust, to the point where the cumulative impact of the algorithmic system finally breaks free from the online ecosystem and begins to steer social behaviour in the 'real' world. We see it working in the Dublin street riots of November 2023 and in the current American election campaign to decide a President

who will be in the White House until January 2029. It is quite telling that the major tech companies now stand accused by the International Trade Union Confederation of undermining democracy and financially backing reactionary, far-right political movements.

Greed for profit drives this new, dangerously opaque communication system, which is still in its infancy: it didn't exist when the authors in this journal were born, but they will be the ones who must push back against its worst features. It has already brought about what Shoshana Zuboff calls the 'epistemic chaos' that is inflaming the US public sphere so dramatically. It is sobering to read reports from the authors' union PEN that more than 10,000 books were banned in US public schools last year, under new censorship laws in Republican-led states like Florida. (Think about that next time you enter the DCU Library, a key supporter of this journal.) As Andreas Hepp, author of *Deep Mediatization*, puts it: how can it be that platforms that connect billions of people, collect comprehensive information about them and that form the backbone of public discourse, are in the hands of a few private companies, without any public deliberation about the human impact of this concentrated power?

Many things are needed to push back against epistemic chaos and the outraged polarisation of our culture, but one of them is fostering the formation of authors in the best sense, intelligent young scholars not afraid to take a stance and argue confidently from it, educated to critically analyse what they see and hear around them and publish their ideas in engaging, clear writing. This is what this new journal is all about, and hopefully its writers will discover that being part of CUJ is just the first step in becoming lifelong authors. There is a unique pleasure to be found in the effort to focus your mind on addressing a group of fellow citizens, a group bigger than friends or family, therefore requiring some form of publisher. In a certain sense, you don't discover what you truly 'think' about an important issue until you submit to the mental discipline of writing. But the effort is rewarded in the special joy of finding your own voice as you work towards being an author. The times we live in require more – and better – authors to counteract the bad authoring that we encounter every day, threatening our society, the divisive far right political mayhem swirling around online.

### **Context**

The *Communications Undergraduate Journal* (CUJ) is a peer-reviewed, open access, multi-disciplinary journal targeted at undergraduate scholars, with contributions exclusively from the same student community. The journal is co-published by DCU's School of Communications and DCU Library. Its core aim is to showcase examples of outstanding scholarly work from the BA in Communications Studies.

This degree programme was the first undergraduate degree in communications in Ireland, and since its inception in 1980, has remained a pioneering and innovative force in education in this domain. Today, it forms part of a School of Communications that is home to approximately 1,000 students and is ranked in the top 200 of almost 4,500 universities worldwide in the area of communications.

The BA in Communications Studies is designed to give students a thorough and holistic understanding of the role communications play in local, national and international settings by helping them to develop the scope and skills to think critically about communication in its various forms. The programme's diverse range of modules combine to engender an awareness among students of the ways in which mass media both reflect and construct representations of the world.

Another important concern of CUJ is to encourage students to experience how library-based scholarly content is sourced and applied effectively. Mechanising successful search strategies and critical use of scholarly information is an important ingredient of sound academic writing: it is a key skill that every successful undergraduate student should seek to master.