



Comment

Comment is free, but never easy

MARTIN'S FAREWELL – by Mark Marlow

Facts are sacred, comment is free. So said the fabled editor of the Manchester Guardian, CP Scott, around the start of the last century.

This dictum has been handed down through generations of newspapers, usually interpreted as a shot across the bows of those who would comment rather than report.

In the near century since Scott's heyday, comment has been elevated within the pages of newspapers, but today, in the internet age, his dictum has more relevance than ever. The web is choc-a-bloc with comment, much of it little more than top of the head opinion, the kind of stuff that would have Scott spinning in his grave.

For those of us who do write opinion pieces in newspapers, there is a lot

more required than just the capacity to have an opinion.

The first tool of the opinion writer should be the ability to write. You may have a subject that is difficult to sustain.

On these days, the reader might derive enjoyment from reading something that is well written.

Our old friends the facts are sacred in comment. For opinion to hold any water it must be based on fact. For example, if you are arguing that the Government is doing a terrible job, then facts require that you back up such a contention.

Opinion poll results, policies that have had a devastating impact on some people, the performance of leading politicians, all of these must be analysed in furthering such

an argument, and facts must be sprinkled throughout the offering. Never, ever rely on the web for your facts, for if you do, you will fail, if not today, then certainly in the near future.

Experience is a good ally for the opinion writer. In order to garner opinions you must have some knowledge of the way things work, such as politics, the courts, areas like planning or education. If you have a reasonably good knowledge then you are aware when something is not right, and your passion is ready to be fired up.

Comment may indeed be free, but when it's done properly, it certainly isn't easy.



There is a difference between fact and opinion

News is fact - opinion is your point of view.

If teachers vote to go on strike, news is the account of what they did. Opinion is your view on their decision – good or bad.

The views expressed are your own. They may not be shared by everyone, but they are how you feel about the teachers going on strike, whether you think they are right or wrong, the effects the strike may have on you and other students.

But the key is to say something only if you have something to say. There is no point sitting on the fence. Be provocative, stir a few emotions, ruffle a few feathers. There is nothing better than a good rant, once you can back up your argument.

Never try to be controversial for the sake of it.

Comment

Over to you...

- News websites contain many views and opinions as well as news coverage . Can you distinguish between the two? Go to a news website such as IrishTimes.com or your local newspaper and select some examples.
- Choose an opinion piece from one of the Irish Journalism Awards shortlist available on **IrishJournalismawards.ie** Which articles interest you? Do you think they are well written? Why?
- Look at the Letters Page in a local or national newspaper. Choose one you agree/disagree with. Outline why?
- Write a letter to the editor on a subject you feel strongly about in more than 400 words.

“The views expressed are your own. They may not be shared by everyone, but they are how you feel.”



SEARCHING FOR RESCUE 116 by Steve Humphreys