

## The ignorant online

GIVEN my job description and all that goes with it, it's no great disclosure to state that I'm a heavy user of social media, Facebook, Twitter and the like. Such online resources have provided me with several contacts and generated many stories, chief among them the campaign to retain the 24 hour Search And Rescue Helicopter service for the South East.

That campaign proved a fantastic example of genuine, cross-county collegiality, when citizens from all five counties of the region, along with neighbouring Cork for that matter, came together, made their case passionately, and prevailed.

Similarly, the 'Save Waterford' campaign, which focused on the retention of services at Waterford Regional Hospital as it was then known, elicited a phenomenal local response.

The brainchild of Andrea Galgey and Gillian Corcoran, 'Save Waterford' drew 15,000 people onto the streets of the city within barely a week of their taking to the web to voice their concerns about WRH's future.

It also demonstrated that the social media can prove a powerful force when positively utilised. But what a shame it is that all using Facebook and Twitter consider it in such progressive terms.

Virtually any time a newspaper columnist makes reference to 'keyboard warriors', such scribes are accused of being luddites, of being antiinternet and so on. Nonsense.

As I've already stated, I use the social media practically everyday for both professional and personal reasons.

As Public Relations Officer of Carrick-on-Suir RFC, the club's Facebook page is an online noticeboard which our younger, web-savvy players and members can instantly access.

We now have almost 1,000 Facebook friends (a number that's doubled since last September) and the page has greatly improved the club's connectivity with the wider public, as well as with former players now living abroad.

But some of the comments I read on a consistent basis across a host of Facebook pages (the damage is somewhat less noticeable on Twitter due to its limited word count) leave me appalled.

Just imagine the worst thing you could imaginably say directly to someone's face. Well, if you've got any scruples at all, that single worst thing might pass through your mind (we're only human) but you'd never dream of giving voice to it.

But such perfectly sane logic doesn't seem to apply to a considerable constituency of Facebook users when it comes to shooting off on a whole range of issues.

A fortnight ago, for the first time in my 'Facebook history', I deleted a post I had written in relation to boosting retail in Waterford city centre. Alas, the debate which broke out in the subsequent comments posted beneath my original post took what I considered to be an unpleasant turn, so I addressed it by deleting the entire posting.

“Censorship. Alive and well,” wrote one poster, to which I replied: “I’m all for reasoned debate, but I’m not letting anything carrying my name over it descend into anything that I, on the basis of 15 years in journalism, consider unpleasant. And that’s all I’m saying on it.”

The same editorial logic I apply in print also comes into play when it comes to my social media interactions.

Never in my wildest dreams would I consider printing unverified comment, claim or contention in these pages, and I’m similarly minded on that small segment of the web which I am entitled to edit.

In a typically insightful piece for the London Independent on May 25th, Robert Fisk stated that “Something is rotten in the state of technology”. Referring to the death of Minister of State Shane McEntee, Fisk recalled the words of the late TD’s brother Gerry, who told mourners about the abusive messages the deceased had received via the internet.

“The response from those claiming to be ‘readers’ of this newspaper (the Independent) was 1) to suggest that the brother was lying; 2) that the minister deserved to die because of his policies (which included cuts to care homes); and 3) to condemn the dead minister for not being thoughtful enough to postpone his suicide until after Christmas.

“Was it always like this? Did these hateful anonymous messages arrive when ‘Letters to the Editor’ was the only way to express feelings – in print of course – about other human beings?” To answer Fisk’s justly rhetorical question, of course it wasn’t.

The emergence of “the faceless people” Gerry McEntee referred to at his brother’s graveside has not quite propagated with the growth of the internet itself, but a cursory glance would suggest that negative, spiteful and reactionary online comment is becoming pervasive.

Take the Belfast Telegraph’s Facebook page for example, which I frequently access.

I for one wouldn’t like to be employed by the ‘BT’ when it comes to moderating any comment related to flags, marches, pastors or the past.

While faceless online comment is a great deal easier to live with than the horror which the people of Northern Ireland experienced throughout the Troubles, sectarian hate is alive and well among those moved to post on such matters.

“But the dirt, racism, foul abuse, the lies and innuendo and slanders and bullying on the web, on blogs and text messages and chat rooms, has become a sickness,” wrote Fisk.

That the thoroughly vile and ignorant voice appears to be trumping the more informed and moderate views expressed through the social media is thoroughly unwelcome.

“We no longer reflect,” Fisk adds. “We react.” How right Fisk is in this respect. So what can we moderate types do?

Firstly, keep using Facebook and Twitter. Secondly, ignore the ignorant.