

POLITICAL COMMUNICATOR

Kevin Rafter is associate professor of political communication at DCU. He has been a member of the IoD since October 2014

Could you tell us about your job at DCU and what it involves?

The job is a three-legged stool – lecturing, researching and administration. My research interests are in the area of media and politics, and I always have a few different projects underway at the same time. Publishing research internationally is important, and I've been fortunate in having my work accepted in several leading peer reviewed journals. I've two book projects with 2015 deadlines so they are consuming a lot of time at the moment. I also run a MA programme in political communication and have four PhD students. That work is very rewarding.

What about your non-executive positions and your role as a media consultant?

I'm a board member at Dublin Bus having come through the open public recruitment process introduced in 2011. I probably wouldn't have been on the radar for appointment otherwise so I'm a big supporter of the new State board appointment reforms arising from the McNulty debacle. I'm also a member of the board of Oxfam Ireland. Both roles are challenging in different ways – joining the audit and risk committee at Dublin Bus has been fascinating. I think I bring media and political insight and judgment to both boards.

Tell us something about your career background/progression

My first job was as a researcher with Dublin Chamber of Commerce. I did undergrad and postgrad study in economics at Trinity College. But I then sort of stumbled into journalism when RTÉ was recruiting in the mid-1990s. I had a brilliant career in journalism reporting on elections here and in the UK and Germany as well as the Northern Ireland peace process. I also got to present programmes like *This Week* and *Morning Ireland* in RTÉ and worked in Leinster House covering politics for *The Irish Times*, *The Sunday Times* and the *Sunday Tribune*. While still working in journalism I had started a PhD in political science so when the opportunity arose in 2008 to move into an academic role I readily made the switch.

What – if any – have been the main challenges of moving from life in journalism into academia?

Moving from the private sector to the public sector has brought certain challenges but the roles are actually somewhat similar in terms of focus on continuous deadlines. Working as an academic – and I would have experienced this previously as a journalist – self motivation is vital. Both careers bring great privileges, particularly in terms of the quality of work I get to do, but equally there is a responsibility to deliver what the job demands – be that the incisive interview or quality research paper.

Can you tell us a bit about your work with the Independent Panel on Accountability and Performance in the Irish Civil Service?

I was asked by the Government to chair this three-member independent panel. We delivered our report earlier this year after extensive consultations and over 60 meetings with politicians, senior officials, special advisers and others interested in the wider area. The work offered a fascinating insight into how the civil service system works. As chair I wanted a report with recommendations that, if accepted, would be implemented quickly and that wouldn't require another review process or become bogged down in debate about legislative change. I think we achieved that objective. The new Accountability Board, in effect a board of directors for the civil service, offers huge potential especially with external members who will have the task of challenging and reviewing how the civil service does its work.

Can you define your leadership style?

Working as a radio presenter you develop the skill of listening. I think I'm good at hearing what people are actually saying. I've found as a non-executive director that listening is a valuable attribute.

What has been your biggest lesson in business?

In my three and half years at the *Sunday Tribune* I was part of the management team that sought to refinance and reposition the newspaper. It was a tough ask. Ultimately I came to realise that the *Sunday Tribune* was a good idea but probably wasn't a good business. I had the same experience in a digital start-up that I was involved in last year. The idea was great but the business model was flawed. When you are so close to a project with all the emotional attachment involved it is a skill to recognise when it is time to move on.

Who or what are your main influences?

As a journalist I was lucky to meet lots of interesting people. I only interviewed John Teeling once but I still recall his infectious enthusiasm. I was delighted when his work at Cooley Distillery came off so successfully. I also admire the 'get up and go' attitude of people like Michael O'Leary and my former RTÉ colleague Mark Little who has shown with his Storyful venture that Ireland can be a good place to start a business.

Do you have plans for the future that you'd like to share?

I have a number of research projects in the pipeline with various deadlines into 2015. I would like to develop with my non-executive director roles. There are lots of great ideas bubbling in the digital start-up space in Dublin. The cluster of big players like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, alongside local start-ups, is very exciting. I have an early stage venture that draws on my previous media career and my current university work so I'd hope to see that develop.



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