

# Informed

NEWS FROM THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE

issue 49 Dec 2024

## Guardian journalists on strike

Mark Thomas

**For the first time in over five decades, journalists at the Guardian & Observer went on strike over the proposed sale of The Observer. Placards and pickets were prepped for walkouts from 4-5 December and 12-13 December, and the strikes were extremely well supported. The NUJ stressed action could still be prevented with a pause to exclusive talks underway with Tortoise Media. However, shabbily, The Scott Trust and GMG Boards chose to approve the deal in principle before the end of the first 48-hour walkout.**

This dispute, at its core, focuses on the sustainability of The Observer's independent public interest journalism. The world's oldest Sunday newspaper, first published in 1791, has a deeply-valued cultural heritage and risks being sold in a hurried process the NUJ has urged must be paused for all options to be properly considered. With The Observer's journalism read online by 10m people every weekend, it is no surprise journalists are unshakeable in their commitment to defence of the title. Solidarity has poured in from across the union and members of the NUJ Parliamentary Group lent their wholehearted support with visits to pickets.

Reps sprang into action following news of exclusive talks between the Guardian Media Group and start-up Tortoise Media founded by former BBC News director James Harding. Readers and journalists quickly discovered that all was not as it seemed when no clear or justifiable reason was offered by GMG about the absence of meaningful consultation with journalists or the union, while



General secretary-elect Laura Davison speaking at the picket line

exclusive talks proceeded at pace.

Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, highlighted the union has many unanswered questions and said, "If there is a need for urgency on the sale of the Observer, there must be greater transparency and meaningful engagement with the very journalists who ensure its success."

Two main issues lie at the centre of journalists' calls. The first, transparency over why it is required at this stage without consultation and in the absence of an approach that allows for an open sale with other credible bidders. The second, a plea to cease the exclusive talks underway to ensure what is best for The Observer's readership remains the focus. Tortoise Media have committed to implementing paywalls, raising alarm over media plurality and the public's access to liberal, progressive media.

Journalists are determined in their campaign and feel deeply disappointed

in actions by the Scott Trust. Hugo Young, chair of the Trust from 1989-2003 said in a Guardian front-page: "The trust safeguards will be fully extended to the Observer, which will be edited independently of the Guardian and retain its separate character."

A motion passed in September by the NUJ Guardian & Observer group chapel noted the Trust chaired by Ole Jacob Sunde had failed to abide by these commitments made to the Observer. Despite the announcement of sale the NUJ remains committed to seeking a resolution that ensures the best interests of our members.

With 93% of journalists voting to strike and an even higher percentage (96%) agreeing to action short of strike, GMG would do well to recognise the resolve of members in this dispute. Visit the campaign page [nuj.org.uk/savetheobserver](https://nuj.org.uk/savetheobserver) and please **donate** to the NUJ's Hardship Fund in solidarity.

**Also  
in this  
issue:**

Michelle's  
Message  
Page 02

Big Tech's  
Content Grab  
Page 08

Musk and  
the Media  
Page 10

**NUJ**  
NATIONAL UNION  
OF  
JOURNALISTS

# Michelle's Message



**Lack of corporate transparency over the handling of the Observer sale leaves a legacy of “a monumental breach of trust” says Michelle Stanistreet in her final foreword**

**As the year draws to a close and I hand over the general secretarial baton to Laura Davison, the NUJ's work across our nations and regions has been as diverse and lively as ever. As is the lot with any NUJ general secretary, the industry finds ways of delivering up surprises and industrial challenges, and one of Laura's first duties as general secretary-elect has been to lead members across The Guardian and Observer chapel into their first strike action in 50 years - a task she is carrying out with aplomb.**

For an organisation that publicly trumpets its values, its commitment to

open-access journalism and its “not for sale” protection from malign commercial forces, it's done a pretty good job of demonstrating quite breathtaking hypocrisy when it comes to its own back yard. The haste with which it has shed longstanding commitments to The Observer has been quite the thing. The lack of corporate transparency and opaque negotiations behind closed doors has rightly appalled its journalists who are more used to scrutinising poor behaviour in other organisations. That the management chose to clinch the deal before the first strike action had even concluded was a final foolish move by a management that doesn't seem to have got its head around the fact that it has lost the dressing room. However the deal pans out, the legacy of such a monumental breach of trust by Kath Viner and Anna Bateson will continue to be deeply felt by all those journalists who remain and is likely to be irrevocable.

Beyond the hostile environment being created by the Guardian's management, the union's wider work on safety has continued apace. All members should now be familiar with our new Journalists' Safety Tracker, which we launched last month. The challenge now is to ensure that it is put to regular use. The tracker features a simple digital form and is the place to log all incidents of harassment, abuse, attack or threats that journalists endure in the course of their work - big or small. It's not a substitute for reporting to the police, or flagging to employers and engagers - we want members to do that too of course. But having the ability to collate data on the range and spread of incidents that threaten journalists' safety will be a powerful tool - one that we hope will lift the lid on the scale of the problem that has become a scourge right across the industry.

In the first meeting of the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists of the new UK government, that took place this month, ministers welcomed the launch of the tracker and committed to pressing ahead with further actions in

the coming period. Employers also gave their backing to promoting the tracker and encouraging their teams to use it.

Key to that work of course is also the spectrum of so-called “lawfare” journalists face, from the deployment of SLAPPs and other legal threats. Heidi Alexander, Justice Minister, confirmed last month there would be no UK SLAPPs legislation in this parliamentary session, less than a month after the Prime Minister said his government would tackle the issue.

**104 journalists killed this year, according to the IFJ**

**According to the annual report of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), 2024 was another particularly deadly year for journalists and media professionals.**

As of 10 December 2024, 104 journalists had been killed worldwide, more than half of them in Gaza, Palestine (55). The report was released on 10 December, to mark **International Human Rights Day**. According to the latest data, which is still incomplete, **104** media professionals were killed in the line of duty, including 12 women. IFJ General Secretary Anthony Bellanger said: “These sad figures show once again how fragile is press freedom and how risky and dangerous is the profession of journalism. The public's need for information is very real at a time when authoritarian regimes are developing all over the world. Greater vigilance on the part of our profession is required. We urge the Member States of the United Nations to take action to ensure the adoption of a binding convention on the safety of journalists, so as to put an end to the deaths and injuries that occur every year”.

## Aid for Gaza

Journalists in Gaza need your help to do their job in desperate circumstances. The IFJ is supplying vital equipment and aid. Please donate to its safety fund. Branches can email [jackiec@nuj.org](mailto:jackiec@nuj.org) to transfer funds from their management allowances.

**DONATE NOW**

The NUJ will continue to exert pressure on the government to right this wrong. In Scotland, we await the imminent publication of a consultation on SLAPPs and following the election outcome in the Republic of Ireland, we hope to see SLAPPs prioritised.

On AI, our campaigning continues with briefings to parliamentarians over concerns of possible pursuit of a text and data mining exception that would see harm to our members' livelihoods. We welcome that the House of Lords' Communications and Digital Committee has published its future of news report, where members "caution strongly against adopting a flawed optout regime comparable to the version operating in the EU." Ian Burrell reports in detail on page 8.

And throughout the union, of course, branches spent the autumn discussing and submitting motions for debate at next year's Delegate Meeting. The NUJ's Standing Orders Committee have commenced their important work, starting the process of pulling together the Preliminary Agenda. Branches have also been choosing their delegates to send to April's gathering. It will be Laura's first DM as general secretary and I wish her and all assembled delegates the best for what I hope will be lively discussion and debate that will lead to a renewed sense of purpose and energy for the couple of years ahead. I hope it will also be a much-deserved opportunity

for our reps, activists, officials and staff to reflect and celebrate their continued hard work and commitment. I'm leaving the NUJ in the safest of hands and with a great deal of pride and affection for the work our union does - its impactful campaigns and lobbying, our collective

organising to help journalists have a real voice at work, as well as the tireless day to day industrial and legal representation that makes a massive difference to individuals at often really challenging periods of their lives. It's been a privilege.

**REASONS TO JOIN**



### Press Freedom

The NUJ lobbies for journalists' rights so you can protect your sources, have editorial independence and do your job safely and freely, without censorship from the state. As a member of the International Federation of Journalists we are part of a 600,000-strong community working to ensure the safety of media workers across the globe, fighting for freedom of information, open government and plurality of the media.

**Are you keeping good company?**

Join the NUJ today at  
[nuj.org.uk/join](http://nuj.org.uk/join)



[www.nuj.org.uk](http://www.nuj.org.uk)

# Update

## A fond farewell to Michelle

**At the final NEC meeting of the year and the last for Michelle Stanistreet as she steps down as NUJ general secretary, in typical NEC fashion, there was a packed agenda with much to discuss.**

Motions to next year's Delegate Meeting were pored over with views on international issues, journalists' safety and artificial intelligence all shared. Following John McDonnell MP's presentation of the work of the newly-constituted NUJ Parliamentary Group, he expressed his thanks to Michelle for her engagement over the years and the driving force she has been in ensuing parliamentarians were well-placed to raise the concerns of journalists and threats to journalism. The Parliamentary Group sent their heartfelt best wishes to Michelle and gifts were presented from the NUJ's Paris branch, McDonnell and on the Parliamentary Group's behalf.

Whilst much of the meeting was business as usual, at a reception organised by NEC members at NUJ HQ, Séamus Dooley, NUJ assistant general secretary, said Michelle would be greatly missed by all and thanked her for her leadership. Gerry Curran, NEC vice president, recalled his first interactions with Michelle saying, "there was a familiarity, a friendliness, a joy,



*Michelle Stanistreet at her final NEC meeting, being thanked by colleagues and John McDonnell MP*

but also a solidity and a staunchness and steadfastness that I took to immediately." He recognised her strengths as a negotiator and what this had achieved for members, whilst Laura Davison, NUJ general secretary-elect, said Michelle had been "dynamic, enthusiastic and supportive whilst doing so much for the union."

NUJ members have written to the union passing on kind words to Michelle for her work on memorable campaigns,

landmark industrial cases and personal support offered.

As the NUJ's first female general secretary in its century-old history, Michelle referenced her happiness that she would not be the last, recognising a positive campaign had been led by both candidates vying for the position as her successor. She shared her best wishes to the NEC for the upcoming DM noting the union was in good hands with Laura's election by members.

## Journalists' Safety Tracker

**The NUJ's Journalists' Safety Tracker was met with a positive reception upon its launch on the eve of International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, including by Tim Dawson, International Federation of Journalists deputy general secretary.**

The online monitoring tool open to NUJ members and non-members captures

incidents of abuse targeted at journalists both online and in-person.

Harassment, trolling, hate mail and lawfare all feature as options journalists can report to ensure the NUJ tracks trends. Amid an increasingly hostile atmosphere on social media, the Tracker provides options to name the platforms where threats were wielded, allowing the union to compile data and use findings as

an evidence base for our lobbying with government.

For several years, Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, has raised her concerns about the laissez-faire approaches adopted by tech giants who fail to implement mechanisms that protect journalists online. All findings will be reported on anonymously and future iterations will consider feedback provided by journalists. Visit [nuj.org.uk/journalistsafetytracker](https://nuj.org.uk/journalistsafetytracker)

# Update

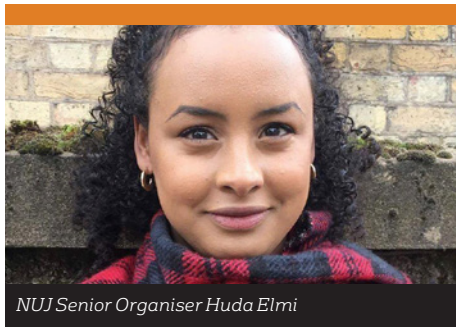
## RELX de-recognition fuels union recruitment

**The shock decision in October by The Lancet-to-Lexis Nexis owner RELX to derecognise the NUJ and end two longstanding collective bargaining agreements early next year has galvanised staff to join the union.**

After receiving the notice from RELX (which terms itself as a “global provider” of “information-based analytics” but which also owns brands such as Elsevier) without any discussion, NUJ general secretary Michelle Stanistreet condemned the union-busting move.

She noted the decision followed a period of “animated organising and recruitment” at The Lancet and said: “In claiming the mantle as one of the first UK employers to derecognise a union in the early days of a new Labour government, they [RELX] must surely also be aware of the imminent legislative changes to workers’ rights - reform that will make it easier to gain a collective voice at work.”

Since October there has been a big response from reps within RELX, who have asked for meetings with



NUJ Senior Organiser Huda Elmi

management – so far to no avail.

NUJ Senior Organiser Huda Elmi, who has put in a formal request for a meeting, said: “For a lot of people, they see this as a sort of shot across the bow that if RELX are going to be making these unilateral, unpopular decisions, without a union there to bargain and negotiate effectively and to protect them, then the writing’s on the wall and it’s going to get worse.”

She said that against a wider background of redundancies and changes in contract provisions in parts of the company, the decision to

derecognise has helped unite staff.

“Lots of people have joined the union and there have been lots of meetings. The reps have been doing brilliant work, bringing people together.

“It’s a really big organisation where people are sort of siloed off. So actually, all of these discussions around de-recognition have brought together bits of the various bits of company that otherwise aren’t communicating with each other.”

Elmi pointed out the agreement RELX wants to scrap is voluntary but, if it continues its current approach there is the option to make it statutory. Although that is a longer route, “it feels like there’s enough strength of feeling for it to be effective. I think we can and we will get recognition.”

In June the Central Arbitration Committee approved automatic union recognition at the Press Association following a successful campaign by the NUJ.

Elmi said that at RELX there is “real strength of feeling and mass recruitment going on. People are upset about where this is going and what this means” but keen to engage and negotiate with management, “to collegiately create a strategy for the future.”

### The Irish Times

The NUJ’s resolve in achieving a fair pay deal for journalists at the Irish Times remains, following a failure to reach local agreement. The Irish Times group of unions, comprising the NUJ, Connect, SIPTU and Unite, has referred management’s refusal to accede a pay increase to the Workplace Relations Commission, reported Séamus Dooley, NUJ assistant general secretary.

### Dom Phillips

Brazilian police have formally charged the architect of the killing of NUJ member and Guardian journalist Dom Phillips and indigenous expert Bruno Pereira in 2022. Their deaths highlighted the growing threat to the Amazon rainforest and its people from logging and mining.

The final police report claimed nine people played a part in the murders along the Amazon’s river Itaquai;

Phillips and Pereira were shot returning from reporting in the remote Java valley area. The police did not name the alleged architect of the killings but Brazilian press reports claimed it was Ruben Dario da Silva Villar, an alleged leader of illegal fishing and poaching groups. He has denied involvement in the murders.

The federal police said in a statement that it had, “over the course of two years of investigation, indicted nine

suspects, and the final report duly identified the mastermind behind the double homicide, who provided ammunition for the crime, financially sponsored the activities of the criminal organisation and intervened to coordinate the concealment of the victims’ bodies. The other suspects played roles in the execution of the homicides and in the concealment of the victims’ bodies.”

# Update

## Crippling cuts at the BBC

**Salami slicing across multiple teams at the broadcaster continues with recent announcements of 130 posts within news and programming to be cut and if you're questioning how long savings can be sought through endless job losses then you're not alone.**

Laura Davison, NUJ senior organiser and general secretary-elect, said: "It is unclear how much journalism at the BBC can withstand without decisive action and investment that recognises the immense benefit of independent, credible news and current affairs programming." The Asian News Network risks losing its entire news team and punchy interviews from HARDtalk will soon be no more as the programme will cease broadcasting by March 2025.

Proposals on changes to the newsroom and to radio bulletins have been met with shock due to their implications. If plans proceed, millions of UK radio listeners will receive their news from the World Service and risk losing access to local relevant content. The BBC's local radio stations, 5 Live and Radio 2 are all affected. The union believes the approach adopted is flawed, especially as some savings are disproportionate to

the scale and value of content produced. General secretary Michelle Stanistreet said cuts, "represent a damaging assault on journalism at a time when the UK needs greater plurality and diversity of news."

It has been confirmed that an increase in funding for the BBC World Service will be provided by government, giving some light at the end of the tunnel. However, the BBC has made clear that financial constraints mean the World Service is not immune to pressures faced by the rest of the organisation. As journalists wait in anticipation to hear more on whether this might result in cuts, the NUJ will continue its engagement with the broadcaster, doing all it can to avoid compulsory redundancies.

The Foreign Affairs Committee is holding an inquiry into the future of the World Service. "The BBC World Service is a cultural institution and integral to our soft power and standing across the world," said committee chair Emily Thornberry MP. The NUJ stressed in its submission that the 320m World Service audience formed the vast majority of the broadcaster's 450m weekly listeners, making the service a

Radharc Images / Alamy Stock Photo



crucial one – indeed a lifeline to citizens reliant on it for accurate and impartial journalism. We need look no further than examples of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the coronavirus pandemic and the ongoing war in the Middle East to recognise that future cuts to language programmes would have a considerable impact on diminishing the UK's soft power and reduce access to information for wide-ranging audiences.

## Accessible journalism

**Text descriptions (also known as alt tags or alt text) are a crucial tool for making all online content accessible to those who don't access content in what might be considered the traditional way.**

For news organisations, the use of these text descripts aren't just a matter of good practice or compliance, they're a commitment to serving all audiences, including those who are blind or visually impaired and who use a screen reader to access content.

When news organisations publish articles they share stories that often rely on photos, charts and infographics. Failure to include meaningful text descriptions effectively shuts some people out of the full story and undermines the fundamental mission to inform and engage all members of society.

In 2022 I was lucky enough to complete a fellowship with the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford where my research focused on ***how blind audiences are being left behind***

***in the data visualisations revolution.***

Since then I've created detailed guidance for all BBC journalists on ***how to write meaningful text descriptions for all images in news articles.***

Audiences today access content in new and diverse ways; including from text-to-speech software to smartphones. By using text descriptions on all images news organizations send a powerful message: "We see you. We value you and we understand how you engage with our content." ***Watch the webinar.***

***Johny Cassidy is the NUJ's Disabled Members' Council vice chair and a BBC journalist.***

# Update

## Supporting journalists with The King's Trust

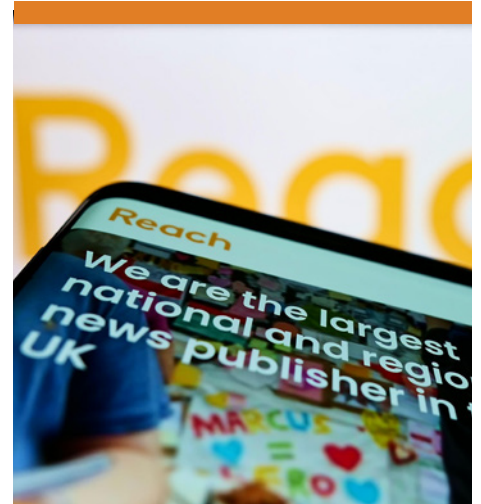
### Get into Journalism programme provides pathway to boost diversity in newsrooms

A new initiative between Reach plc and The King's Trust has enabled a dozen 18-30 year olds keen to embark on a career in the industry get their first foot on the journalistic ladder. The 'Get into Journalism' four-week training programme provided candidates from underprivileged or underrepresented backgrounds access to industry experts, masterclasses and a chance to write stories published in print. "I am keen to be a journalist to shed light on stories

and hold institutions to account", said Aakifah Gani, who completed her work experience at MyLondon.

The NUJ has welcomed the initiative and hopes it will continue as a much-needed pathway for passionate future journalists. The union has frequently raised the need for such schemes as a route into journalism and an alternative pathway that can boost real diversity in newsrooms. At the end of the programme, all candidates were able to apply for entry level roles in Reach newsrooms and complete a content creation apprenticeship. It's time

Timon Schneider / Alamy Stock Photo



more publishers consider their roles in encouraging those who could shape our industry in future.

### LDRS in need of 'urgent reform'

The NUJ is calling for urgent reform of the BBC-funded Local Democracy Reporter Scheme after a summit of LDRs revealed concerns the initiative is being exploited. Under the terms of the scheme, the BBC funds reporters, who are allocated to UK news organisations. However, some LDRs said employers use them to plug gaps in international and national reporting, also revealing inconsistent rates of pay and being asked to do more stories than agreed. Chris Morley, Northern & Midlands Senior Organiser, said: "Our members feel the BBC is not doing enough to keep its contractual obligations adhered to." The BBC has since revealed it is looking into the funding

model and how LDRs are paid.

### NAIC annual summit

Artificial intelligence and pay were key topics at the Newspapers and Agencies Industrial Council's annual summit in Birmingham on 9 November.

Threats and opportunities posed by technology were discussed, along with building chapels and pay campaigns. Speakers from companies including Reach, Newsquest, PA, the FT and the Guardian addressed delegates, along with officials from the GMB union who spoke about the unionisation campaign at Amazon's Coventry fulfilment centre. Steve Bird, NAIC summit chair, praised reps and said the successful "union recognition campaign at

PA and industrial action at Springer formed the backdrop for an inspiring and enlightening meeting."

### Fighting fair for freelances

Freelances are well accustomed to concerted campaigning efforts on pay and this year proved no different. Following extensive union negotiations, an agreed deal at The Guardian provided 2.5% increases in October for both freelances and casuals, with another increase of the same amount due in April 2025. Andy Smith, NUJ organiser, reported increases to rates including stock photography, illustration and crosswords – all without rises for several years. A good example of what can be achieved through solidarity; the Guardian chapel had

previously rejected offers that offered no increase to casual worker contracts.

### IPT hearing

In October, the NUJ was represented at Investigatory Powers Tribunal hearings considering PSNI covert surveillance into journalists Trevor Birney and Barry McCaffrey to identify confidential journalistic sources. Following a disclosure by former Durham Constabulary investigator Darren Ellis, Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, submitted an affidavit making clear no payment had ever been made to Grahame Morris MP for his role as chair of the NUJ Parliamentary Group. The union strongly refuted any suggestion by Ellis to the contrary.

# Spotlight

Matt Kenyon



## Big Tech's Content Grab

**Ian Burrell reports on what a text and data mining exception could mean for journalists.**

**Across the creative sector, there is growing concern that the government plans to bring back a proposal that could allow tech giants including Alphabet and Microsoft to exploit the work of UK content owners for training their AI models without paying.**

It was thought these controversial plans to expand the text and data mining (TDM) exception to UK copyright law were dead in the water. The Conservative administration, when envisioning post-Brexit Britain as a light-regulation AI hub, embraced the idea of ripping up the rules to allow AI developers free access to copyrighted content and databases for "any purpose", including commercial ones. But a fierce backlash from the media and arts sectors, in addition to a critical report by the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee,

At Risk: Our Creative Future, led to the scheme being dropped before the general election.

Now, amid vigorous Silicon Valley lobbying that is arguing the UK risks being left behind in the evolution of AI, the idea appears to be back on the table. A government consultation on the issue is expected to be announced before Christmas.

It will seek to resolve the growing tensions between data-hungry AI developers and content creators, including journalists, who believe the tech sector is taking without paying. "It is a bit like asking a builder to build your house but refusing to pay for the materials," says Owen Meredith, chief executive of the News Media Association, which represents national newspaper publishers.

Following rampant scraping of online copyrighted content, both before and after the revolutionary launch of OpenAI's ChatGPT model in 2022, several publishers have elected to sign licensing deals for the use of their material. The Financial Times and Reuters are among those working with Microsoft's Copilot model. Conde Nast is partnering with OpenAI, which has also signed a five-year deal with NewsCorp – reportedly worth \$250m over five years – and is offering upwards of \$1m-a-year to smaller news organisations.

The existence of these deals is cited by Dan Guthrie, director general of the Alliance for Intellectual Property, as proof that "there is no market failure" in UK copyright law and therefore no need for an extension of the TDM exception. But such deals are happening only in "very limited circumstances", he says, because tech firms generally want to train their large language models (LLMs) for nothing. "They need huge access to data and they claim it would be too complicated to ask permission so they are very keen to scrape lots of content from across the web without having to seek consent and therefore licensing and, therefore, paying for it."



Rather than sign deals, numerous publishers are taking tech firms to court. The New York Times is suing both Microsoft and OpenAI, which also faces action from Mumsnet and the Centre for Investigative Reporting. In a test case for the UK courts, Getty Images accuses StabilityAI of having “unlawfully copied and processed” millions of its copyrighted images using its Stable Diffusion text-to-image model. That case is not due to be heard until summer 2025.

In the meantime, as the tech sector and creative sector face off against each other, there is a worry that content continues to be scraped for free. In a report in May, the House of Commons’ Science, Innovation and Technology Select Committee warned that “the status quo allows developers to potentially benefit from the unlimited, free use of copyrighted material, whilst negotiations are stalled”.

The Labour government is seeking to resolve the impasse with a consultation overseen by both the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, reflecting its wish to embrace AI development as an economic driver while not damaging the creative sector, which is worth £124 billion-a-year and supports 2.4 million jobs. The process requires “thoughtful engagement”, said a government spokesperson. “We continue to work closely with a range of stakeholders including holding recent roundtables with AI developers and representatives of the creative industries.”

The TDM exception already exists to allow various uses of copyrighted or protected material, including a news reporting exception which permits journalists to write up or broadcast parliamentary debates without permission. Satirical outlets, such as the BBC’s *Have I Got News For You*, can cite the ‘caricature or pastiche exception’ to lampoon third party content. Universities can mine content

from academic publications to which they subscribe but only for the purposes of non-commercial research. Braille conversion is another accepted use of copyrighted material.

The Creators’ Rights Alliance, a broad network of dozens of organisations, including the NUJ, has come together to resist a far-reaching exemption. Their fear is that the government will try to compromise by implementing an “opt-out” protocol which would oblige rights-holders to exempt their material from AI use.

“That is so complex and time-consuming,” says Bea Bennett, NUJ senior campaigns and communications officer. “Google have all the resources but our members would have to put aside a great deal of time to be able to come close to doing that.” Isabelle Doran, CEO of the Association of Photographers, says: “It’s not something that an ordinary person who is just trying to make a living will understand – not every creative is a techie at the same time.”

As the European Union has found to its cost, an opt-out scheme is almost impossible to police. “There is no technical solution by which you can test compliance and whether the LLMs have actually obeyed your opt-out,” says Guthrie. “In essence you would end up with a TDM for any purpose, as proposed by the last government.”

For journalism, AI opt-outs could have the additional disastrous effect of removing publishers or freelance content creators from online search. “It is the same crawlers,” notes Guthrie. “So there is almost a double whammy for news media providers.”

Hope came in October in the form of an op-ed written by Sir Keir Starmer, for Journalism Matters week. “We recognise the basic principle that publishers should have control over and seek payment for their work, including when thinking about the role of AI,” he wrote. But rights-holders worry over the views of science minister

Lord Vallance and Matt Clifford, who heads the UK’s AI action plan. Writing in the Telegraph, tech journalist Andrew Orlowski reported that Vallance has been an adviser to Alphabet’s Isomorphic Labs, a London-based AI firm, while Clifford holds around 40 tech investments, including several in AI.

The threat to content producers is real and the consequences potentially irreversible. Caroline Dinéage, chair of the Commons Select Committee on Media, Culture and Sport, has written to Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy to condemn the “flawed notion” of the TDM exception. Tech firms must be “transparent” about the data they are using and “get around the table” with rights holders to sign commercial deals. “I’m increasingly worried this Government is sleepwalking into a policy with disastrous implications for our cultural and creative industries,” she later tweeted.

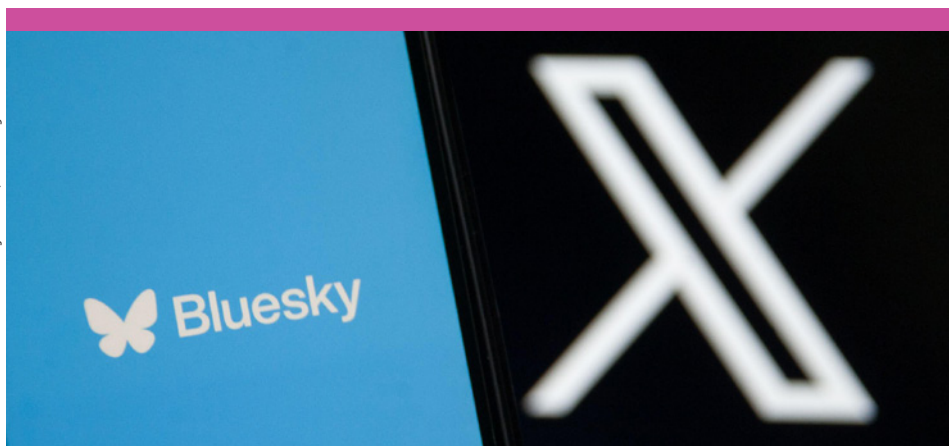
Rights holders are frustrated that a tech giant like Microsoft seemingly has a lesser regard for the copyright of online content than it has for its own products, such as Word or Xbox. “There is a real hypocrisy there – they obey IP rules when it suits them,” says Guthrie.

Doran argues that the tech sector could easily devise a method to identify the content it uses in training AI models and to pay fairly for it. She says the government can benefit from standing up to the tech firms and showing the world it values creativity. “We could be a safe haven,” she says. “Copyright has been around for a very long time and has never hindered innovation.”

A resilient and thriving creative sector will attract AI developers, Meredith believes. “For AI development to happen you don’t need to undermine other people’s property rights,” he says. “The creative industries have been a powerhouse and you don’t need to throw that away in order to find growth in AI development. They are not mutually exclusive.”

# Spotlight

Karlis Dzjamko / Alamy Stock Photo



## Musk and the media

### What does Elon Musk's involvement in Donald Trump's administration mean for journalism? Tara Conlan reports

**With his frequent denouncements of "fake news" and pejorative use of the words "mainstream media", Donald Trump's election win has many implications for journalists, but one of the key and most immediate ones is the influence of X owner Elon Musk.**

Billionaire Musk's behaviour and his heading of the Department of

Government Efficiency has prompted many in the media to take flight to X's new social media rival Bluesky, most notably the Guardian, which said it would no longer post on X.

The Guardian said it had been considering leaving "for a while given the often disturbing content promoted or found on the platform including far-right conspiracy theories and racism" but the US presidential election campaign underlined X as "a toxic media platform" and it said Musk, "has been able to use its influence to shape political discourse."

Non-profit Bluesky had 13.65million users before the US election but added over 7million during the following fortnight with many in media deserting X for its new rival. Journalists realise Musk's sway makes him one of the most powerful media owners ever, which has implications for the profession and X.

Jane Martinson, Guardian columnist, professor of financial journalism at City University and author of *You May Never See Us Again* - a book about the once-powerful media barons the Barclay brothers - said: "Elon Musk has used his own platform to publicly support his own right wing causes and influence the US election. The nature of social media and its enormous reach has made him more powerful than any other media owner."

Professor Chris Frost, NUJ Ethics Council chair, thinks Musk's position means it is likely "we'll continue to get masses of misinformation and other types of so-called journalism like that. Musk's put himself forward as this champion of free speech [but] free speech isn't about being able to tell lies, about being able to put out misinformation [or] trying to trick people."

"He's been put in an immensely powerful position. It's probably the most powerful position, actually, of anybody in the world, because he's been appointed to this enormous job with no democratic accountability whatsoever."

Frost pointed out: "If you want to get close to Trump, you need the money in order to buy the influence. It's quite clear that the media barons want influence because, obviously, it would assist their business." He added that Trump's views on the media have helped people become more polarised on social media, "which does seem it makes it an even trickier path for journalists to navigate".

#### Student Seminar

This year's sold-out Ireland student seminar focused on supporting journalists starting their careers. Stephen Corrigan chaired a panel of leading journalists sharing advice and

networking at the reception. The event returns in 2026.

#### National World U-turn

Proposals to cut 40% of journalists' jobs in Sunderland and Manchester were slammed by the NUJ

as a clear reversal in the strategy announced when chair David Montgomery took the helm.

#### Orwell prize

Entries are now welcome for The Orwell Society/ NUJ

Young Journalist's Awards, which offers a cash prize and Orwell Society and NUJ membership to the winners of two categories: columns and reviews. Encourage young members to apply by 24 March 2025.

# Update

## Truth prevails in Ukraine

**Sergiy Tomilenko, president of the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine (NUJU) updates on the situation in Ukraine.**

Michelle Stanistreet heard of the resilience shown by Ukrainian journalists during the war waged by Russia at a meeting with Tomilenko, part of solidarity engagement between the NUJ and our sister union.

Tomilenko described the eradication of Ukrainian news media in some regions including areas occupied by Russia. Here, the battle focused not only on efforts to revive accurate and truthful journalism but to resist concerted efforts by Russian authorities to spread disinformation, including the creation of fake newspapers delivered in Mariupol where a genuine media brand was used to deceive and spread lies.

Ukrainian journalists have refused to back down however, witnessing the impact their journalism has on communities reliant on it to expose Putin's propaganda. The reinstatement of print titles in some de-occupied territories has had a profound impact, and it is the passion and value placed on reporting including by locals, that drives journalists to continue in their fight against misinformation.



In 2022-2023, NUJU helped re-start 30 publications of print media from frontline and de-occupied areas. "In Mykolaiv, one reader kissed and hugged the newspaper when he received a copy" said Tomilenko. The dedication of journalists is apparent including by Oleksandr Kulbaka, editor-in-chief of the Sloviyansk newspaper who returns to Slovaivansk to distribute his title's newspaper despite evacuating his family to another region.

As the dangers to those reporting in frontline territories remain, it is the international solidarity and donations that allow the independent press in Ukraine to thrive. Safety equipment including press vests are essential and NUJ donations and those to the International Federation of Journalists' Safety Fund have helped provide life-saving equipment.

NUJU is unwavering in their commitment to members, steadfast in raising awareness of the manipulated narratives Russia attempts to promote whilst arresting journalists and threatening their families when they refuse to join propaganda efforts. Resisting blocks on Ukrainian media, attacks on publishing houses and kidnappings is now part of the fabric of the Ukrainian union, but speaking out against crimes against journalists will continue.

Tomilenko said: "Professional media serve as our strongest shield against Russian propaganda in frontline territories. When people receive reliable local newspapers, they don't just get information - they get hope and a vital connection to Ukraine. But as winter approaches, we face new challenges with Russia targeting critical infrastructure.

"Our Journalists' Solidarity Centres become even more crucial, providing powered safe spaces for journalists to continue their work. International solidarity, especially from colleagues like the NUJ, helps us maintain these vital lifelines of truth... every gesture of support from our international colleagues reminds us that we're not alone in our mission to keep independent journalism alive." Please encourage your branch to donate to the IFJ's Safety Fund.

### Safety of Gaza's journalists

In light of the unimaginable suffering of Palestinian journalists reporting from Gaza, the NUJ has written to Ambassador Dana Erlich, Israel's ambassador to Ireland and Ambassador Tzipi Hotovely, ambassador to the UK. Michelle Stanistreet and Séamus Dooley have urged greater action to ensure the safety of journalists and for

an end to the violations of international law witnessed. The union was robust in its response to Ambassador Erlich who failed to address the need for foreign media access into the country, choosing instead to attack Irish media for its coverage of war. Dooley said: "The bravery of journalists in Gaza whose reporting allows the world to witness the realities of war must be

commended and it is right Irish media continue as they have; to accurately report on Israel's attacks on press freedom and deliberate efforts to silence."

### Frenchie Mae Cumpio

The Filipino journalist detained since 2020 and held on charges related to terrorism financing and illegal firearm possession testified at a hearing

in November. The NUJ requested an official observer be sent to her trial on behalf of the UK embassy. Parliamentary intervention in the form of an Early Day Motion tabled by NUJ Parliamentary Group member Liz Saville Roberts attracted signatures from parliamentarians urging the UK government to use diplomatic efforts to secure her release.

# International

## The Jailing Journalists' Club President

*Tim Dawson, IFJ deputy general secretary, reports on the realities for journalists under President Lukashenka's regime in Belarus*

**The president has no respect for democracy. He denounces the 'mass media' and demands that journalists are 'locked up'. Independent news platforms have struggled to operate against his onslaught. Welcome to Belarus, the European country with more journalists in jail than any other; where more than 30 Belarusian publications are forced to operate from abroad and the journalists' union has been sanctioned as a 'terrorist organisation'.**

The country's president, Alexander Lukashenka, has been in power since his office was created in 1994. In recent years, as his 're-elections' have looked ever more rigged, he has repeatedly issued decrees and signed into law provisions to restrict media freedom. For an authoritative flavour of media life in Minsk, the Council of Europe's Safety of Journalists Platform is a good starting point (<https://fom.coe.int/en/listejournalistes/detentions>).

Its authoritative catalogue of media workers in prison is maintained as a public record to which states are invited



NUJ

to respond. The 38 reporters it lists as locked up in Belarus exceeds even the 30 in Russian prisons (from a country with a population 15 times greater).

The case of Ihar Losik is typical. A reporter for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, he is three years into a 15 year prison sentence for 'organising mass riots' and 'inciting social hatred'. At the time of his trial, RFE/RL President Jamie Fly said: "Ihar Losik's closed-door trial has been an outrageous travesty of justice. We again call on the Lukashenka regime to stop their assault on news organisations and journalists like Ihar and

let him return to his wife and daughter."

The EU's foreign affairs spokesman Peter Stanos condemned the conviction, as did Anthony Blinken, the US secretary of state. During his trial, Losik's wife chided officials from the judiciary for having "trampled on every piece of legislation, all legal norms, even though your job is to protect them." She has since been imprisoned herself. Losik has twice tried to take his own life and has been on hunger strike. Barys Haretski is vice president of the Belarusian Journalists Association, which currently operates in exile in Lithuania.

"Despite the ban, we continue to work, supporting our colleagues," he says. "We maintain legal support for journalists and the media, educational programs, information and analytical products. It is very important to preserve the Belarusian independent media sector now, as the Belarusian authorities are now very keen to capture the minds of the Belarusian audience with their propaganda."

Haretski encourages journalists elsewhere in the world to post on social media with pictures of his imprisoned colleagues as part of a 'solidarity marathon'. (<https://baj.media/en/nakirunki/solidarity-marathon/>). There is also a link to make financial contributions to the union. "Keeping up the fight is not easy, but knowing that there are journalists elsewhere in the world who are taking an interest in what is happening in Belarus gives us a real boost," Haretski said. Repression in Belarus is a real and ongoing tragedy.

## Assange

**Following the release of Julian Assange in June, President Joe Biden is being urged to pardon the WikiLeaks founder to ensure a precedent is not set for prosecuting journalists over stories about national security. Two US congressmen have called on Biden to**

**pardon Assange in order to protect press freedom.**

Under the terms of the plea deal that allowed him to return to his native Australia, Assange pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to violate the Espionage Act, leading to concerns that criminalising the disclosure of sensitive information could be used against journalists.

Assange was fighting extradition to the US where he was accused of leaking military secrets in 2010. He was arrested the same year and sheltered in the Ecuadorian embassy for seven years before spending five years in HMP Belmarsh. The NUJ condemned the case from the start, for its wide-ranging ramifications for journalists.