

# NEWS FROM THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE

# Informed

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## Telly Chaos! STV on strike

NUJ

**News bulletins were taken off air at STV as NUJ members joined picket lines in Glasgow, Aberdeen and Dundee and gathered at Holyrood, Edinburgh, prompting the Scottish Sun's headline "Telly chaos".**

The journalists were on strike on 28 March after their 6 per cent pay claim was turned down despite the company posting £20m in profit on record revenues last year.

Nick McGowan-Lowe, national organiser, said: "Journalists at STV have not just been reporting on the cost-of-living crisis - they've been experiencing it too. Our members across Scotland produce the award-winning journalism of the STV brand and are only asking for their pay to keep track with inflation."

The flagship STV News at Six show was pulled and replaced by a repeat programme featuring weather presenter, Sean Batty, travelling to the East Neuk of Fife to make cheese.

The strike garnered huge press coverage and was raised in the Scottish Parliament by Neil Bibby, Scottish Labour MSP for West Scotland, who said the journalists deserved a fair pay deal. First Minister of Scotland, Humza Yousaf, agreed and urged STV back to the negotiation table.

The journalists will strike for a second day on Tuesday 16 April and chapel members are considering further industrial action.

The issue of the safety of journalists was brought into sharp relief during the Easter weekend following the stabbing of Iran International presenter, Pouria Zeraati, who was attacked outside his home in south London, and the throwing of petrol bombs at journalists covering



STV strikers on the picket line in Dundee

the commemoration of the 1916 Easter Rising in Derry.

The national executive meeting had been told of increased threats to journalists in the UK from the Iranian authorities including recent revelations that 44 journalists had been convicted in absentia by the Tehran Revolutionary court on charges of "propaganda against the Islamic Republic".

The Metropolitan Police said last year that, since the start of 2020, 15 plots to either kidnap or kill UK-based individuals perceived as enemies of the Iranian regime had been foiled. Pouria Zeraati has since left hospital and he and his family have been moved to a safe place whilst the investigation into his attack continues.

The attack comes as Volant Media, owner of Iran International, is forging ahead with redundancies at the broadcaster and at their sister-outlet Afghanistan International. This has

caused great alarm among members not least given that some staff depend on their immigration status and right to remain in the UK through their job

In Derry, petrol bombs were thrown towards the media reporting on a parade in the Creggan area by a group wearing balaclavas. One petrol bomb exploded at the feet of a journalist. Séamus Dooley, NUJ assistant general secretary, described the incident as "completely unacceptable and deeply disturbing", noting it occurred a day after what would have been the 30th birthday of freelance journalist, Lyra McKee, murdered while observing a riot in Creggan in 2019.

Meanwhile, Reach's online safety editor disclosed that last year 109 of its employees reported some form of online abuse related to their work, including threats, sexual harassment and harmful personal comments and 26 of these cases were reported to the police.

**Also  
in this  
issue:**

Michelle's  
Message  
Page 02

AI  
Update  
Page 08

Royal  
saga  
Page 10

**NUJ**  
NATIONAL UNION  
OF  
JOURNALISTS

# Michelle's Message



## Politicians are desperately seeking our votes in this bumper election year, so now is the time to bend their ears, says Michelle Stanistreet

**With 2024 set to be a bumper year of elections globally, the future for the media - at a time when the challenges facing journalists and journalism are graver than ever - must be a key issue.**

Half the world's population has the chance to vote in elections in at least 64 countries this year - including a UK general election before the year is out and in Ireland the chance to choose new MEPs in June.

So many elections in a year of seismic political flux will be significant news events in and of themselves, stretching journalists to produce coverage that tests, explains, and exposes those seeking public office. But they also provide an opportunity for us to collectively raise issues that concern journalists in their working lives at a moment when politicians are at their most receptive.

All the signs in the UK are that an unusually high number of seats will change hands, either between parties or individuals, which makes this a particularly productive moment to raise issues. So - what to ask those seeking your vote?

Commitments to safeguard public sector broadcasting are always important but particularly so now. The BBC's charter will be reviewed during the coming parliament and will be the subject of lobbying and negotiation whoever forms the next government. Having a clear idea of the instincts of parliamentarians will be critical to ensuring an outcome that safeguards BBC news in all its forms and preserves the vital principle of universality. Much hot air has been deployed on the question of scrapping the licence fee, without commensurate acknowledgment that anyone who cares about universality must be assured that there are credible alternatives in place before the current model, however imperfect, is jettisoned.

In Ireland the public has emphatically shown its passion and concern about the country's public service broadcaster in recent months. While turmoil at RTÉ has done little for the public reputation of management at the national broadcaster, the NUJ's work has demonstrated that the public's support for the broadcaster's essential function is undimmed. The importance of well-resourced public-interest news is a critical issue that attracts allies from across the diverse communities the BBC and RTÉ serve.

Expanding and better funding of the UK's Local Democracy Reporters scheme - from state funding rather than the existing licence fee coffers - is another undertaking worth seeking. The value of this dedicated resource is shared across party lines, and MPs more than most understand how important it is to ensure their work and initiatives are reported to constituents - but its reach could be deepened and strengthened,

particularly so in the many regions where the provision of local news content has been hollowed out and undermined.

Journalists' safety, from physical and online attack, has been a core focus for the NUJ in recent years - with the rising escalation in threats and harassment of journalists a global scourge that our sister unions around the world are tackling too. The current UK government deserves credit for establishing the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists. Its initiatives, such as the press safety tracker we are currently developing, are important work - but it is drastically underfunded compared, say, with its Dutch counterpart. Bringing this work to the attention of aspirant parliamentarians, and seeking assurances that they will pressure for more resources could really bear fruit. With funding of up to € 500,000 per year, the Dutch PersVeilig project is able to offer a free training programme to journalists, carry out safety assessments and install necessary protective equipment for journalists under threat, and ensure that freelances are adequately supported and protected. The sums involved are minuscule in the context of national spending but would make a significant impact in better equipping journalists to face down the threats that have become commonplace while doing their jobs.

## 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 UK government has broken new ground by legislating to prevent the law being maliciously used to silence journalists and stymie reporting. The simple act of government ministers talking about Slapps has done much to change the weather. The legislation itself, however, tacked onto the Economic Crimes Act last year, is very limited in scope. If you have any direct experience of Slapps or wider 'lawfare' threats being used against you, then take your testimony to the candidates. Real-life examples can be highly effective shapers of future legislation.

Or perhaps unwarranted surveillance has been used to thwart your reporting, or is a particular concern because of your areas of work? NUJ member Barry McCaffrey's phone records were twice surveilled by police, to try to smoke out a leak from within the PSNI. Persuading aspirant legislators that snooping on journalists is fundamentally wrong in a democracy should not be difficult.

For members in Ireland the elections to the European Parliament (6-9 June across EU members states) will be of enormous significance, with growing concerns about the rise of the Far Right in many countries. The ETUC has published a detailed manifesto which emphasises the need to end precarious work and improve working conditions. The transposition into national law of the Directive on Minimum Wages has the capacity to transform collective bargaining, introducing a comprehensive EU framework on information, consultation, and worker participation.

Elsewhere in this issue there is a report on the International Federation of Journalists' campaign for a UN convention on the safety of journalists. Given the upward battle to get to this stage, any lobbying for support is welcome.

And any conversation with a political candidate would not be complete without getting to grips with their approach to AI, its impact on journalism and the wider creative industry.

**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](https://www.nuj.org.uk/join)

**NUJ**  
 NATIONAL UNION  
 OF  
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[www.nuj.org.uk](https://www.nuj.org.uk)

Journalism by humans remains at the core of the NUJ's campaigning, as is full transparency about any deployment of generative AI content or tools - something that is vital when it comes to improving public trust in journalism and in democratic institutions. How to uphold intellectual property rights, how

to tackle those organisations who've carried out widespread scraping of content and how to approach future licensing agreements are just some of the challenges facing the wider creative sector which forms economic powerhouses that governments fail to fully harness.

# Update

Mark Thomas



While the NUJ welcomed the High Court's temporary reprieve of the extradition of Wiki-leaks founder Julian Assange – contingent on the US government's assurances he will not face the death penalty – Michelle Stanistreet said that if he is prosecuted, free expression the world over will be damaged

## NUJ leaves EFJ

The decision of the NUJ to leave the European Federation of Journalists was described as a “sad day”, but members of the national executive council who voted for the move were assured that everything possible had been done by the NUJ to prevent the split.

Successive NECs have discussed and debated the issues the union has had with the EFJ's direction of travel, and evolution from its founding purpose as a regional group of the International Federation of Journalists, including changing the rules to allow membership from unions not affiliated to the IFJ. The NUJ had been further alarmed by EFJ discussions about establishing its own press card. There was growing concern at the way the EFJ viewed the UK and Ireland as being outside what was frequently described as the “European unions” within the IFJ.

The union's position as an international union, with a strong commitment to global solidarity and media freedom, would be maintained via its ongoing relationship with the International Federation of Journalists and close relationships with sister unions around the globe, including across Europe.

Michelle Stanistreet said the union would continue its collaborative work with European journalist unions, for example the sharing of information on a safety tracker with the Dutch union The NVJ and on SLAPPS with Swedish colleagues. At Council of Europe level the IFJ continues to defend media freedom. At EU level the NUJ will engage directly with the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Commission and the union's links with the European Trade Union Congress continues through the TUC and ICTU.

## Future finances

**More than 80 members gave up their Saturday afternoon to discuss the future of the NUJ, its subscription model and how to improve recruitment.**

Members expressed their enthusiasm for the union but called for more fairness in balancing the subs for different groups of members and by making it easier to join by reducing the 50 per cent earnings threshold.

They heard that, according to the Office of National Statistics, almost 200,000 people worked in jobs that

were eligible for NUJ membership and there was some discussion about recruitment in a world where the gig economy rules and freelancing is the lot of many.

Professor Chris Frost, chair of the Finance Committee and one of the webinar's organisers, said: “It was great to see so many members come together to discuss the union's future and how we can make it better and brighter for everyone with fairer subs and stronger support for journalism and journalists.”

# Update

## DG promises a leaner BBC

**Increased commercialisation and revenue building schemes - such as the deal between Disney+ and Dr Who - will be needed to boost the BBC's funds was the message of Tim Davie's Royal Television Society speech.**

The director general said: "We will continue to aggressively grow BBC Studios internationally, building our production capabilities and direct-to-consumer services like bbc.com and now the wholly owned BritBox."

In return for investing in the popular show, Disney+ gets to be the overseas distributor, while it remains in the BBC's remit and advert-free in the UK. Davie said below inflation licence deals had chipped away the corporation's income, a 30 per cent real terms cut between 2010 and 2020. He described stripping money from the BBC during this period, with the expansion of the streaming behemoths and rise and growth of digital, as "short-sighted".

This had led to "reducing our public service headcount by over 1,800,



*The BBC plans more commercials deals such as Dr Who and Disney-plus*

cutting over 1,000 hours of content, including many loved programme titles" and creating the single News Channel operation.

While he promised to continue journalism of "very highest standards" and more investigative and long-read reporting, he also spoke of creating "a leaner, more agile public service BBC" - a phrase that immediately set off alarm bells with NUJ members.

Sian Jones, national broadcasting organiser, said the cuts to Newsnight

and Panorama flew in the face of his promises. "It's crucial to have a strong BBC with universal reach to provide audiences with impartial information free from AI-supercharged fake news," she said, adding that the dash to digital must not be at the expense of the BBC's universal offering to all communities.

Davie repeated his call for the government to fund the World Service and said he would be consulting on how the licence fee could be more progressive, fair and proportionate. The Conservative government has said it is committed to the licence fee until 31 December 2027, but wants to "assess alternative models" for the future.

Much of the pre-speech briefing had been about the BBC's proposal for its podcasts to carry advertising when broadcast on platforms such as Spotify or Apple. This immediately rattled the cages of rival broadcasters, such as Global radio and the News Media Association who said it would "wreak havoc on commercial players".

### GB News

The broadcaster went unpunished by the regulator Ofcom despite breaking rules banning MPs from acting as newsreaders five times. Regular MP hosts include Jacob Rees-Mogg, husband and wife team Esther McVey and Philip Davies, who all make substantial sums for working for the channel. Angelos Frangopoulos, chief executive of the broadcaster, was unrepentant, telling a peers' committee his channel had received 50 inquiries from the watchdog over the past three years.

### Al Jazeera

The union has raised a case of serious sexual harassment by a member of the staff with management. Following an initial investigation, affected staff were dismayed that the perpetrator remained in post - a second investigation is now in train. Pay talks at the broadcaster are ongoing and slow following the company's offer of 1 per cent. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said a new law would end Al Jazeera's operations within the country.

### Vice woes continue

Vice Media is laying off

hundreds of workers and closing its site Vice.com. While most at risk were outside the NUJ's bargaining unit, the union persuaded management to add £5,000 to the statutory redundancy pay originally offered. Meanwhile, the pay claim is being negotiated and either or both these processes could lead to a ballot for industrial action.

### Pay deals

BBC members narrowly voted to accept a pay deal linked to a pay progression scheme based on setting goals, impacting members

in different ways, delivering total consolidated rises between 3 and 7.5 per cent. At ITN an improved deal of 4 per cent for staff earning up to £50,000, 3 per cent for those earning £50,001-£90,000 and a flat £2,700 above that was agreed. At Iran international the union persuaded the company to skew its 3 per cent offer towards lower paid staff. The NEC agreed contingency plans for strike action at Springer Nature where members have made a 7.5 per cent claim. Reach members accepted a 5 per cent increase.

# Update

## Journalists spied on

**An Investigatory Powers Tribunal (IPT) to examine whether two investigative journalists, Barry McCaffrey and Trevor Birney, had been subject to unlawful covert surveillance by UK authorities was adjourned following shock revelations.**

New documents produced on the first day of the hearing in London on Wednesday 28 February included a directed surveillance authorisation pertaining to McCaffrey and approved by former Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) chief constable George Hamilton. Ben Jaffey, KC, representing the journalist, described the late disclosure as a shambles.

The two men have already had arrests quashed as unlawful by a Belfast judge in a judicial review supported by the NUJ. The men had been questioned by police and had journalistic materials taken in August 2018 in connection with the documentary film, *No Stone Unturned*, which investigated the Loughinisland massacre of 1994.

In 2019, Birney and McCaffrey lodged a



Barry McCaffrey, Grahame Morris MP & Trevor Birney

complaint with the tribunal to establish whether they had been the subjects of unlawful surveillance. Séamus Dooley, NUJ assistant general secretary, called the revelations deeply disturbing, saying: "Today's brief hearing has confirmed a far more egregious breach of process and we hope the truth will emerge in open court."

Before the proceedings were halted, Jaffey said McCaffrey and Birney's electronic communications were

monitored before dramatic dawn raids on their homes designed to provoke the journalists to contact their suspected source who was also under electronic surveillance.

The NUJ's Belfast Branch delivered a letter of protest about this spying on journalists to PSNI headquarters.

A report to the NEC outlined further concerns about the PSNI, saying that constructive discussions to ensure the safety of journalists in Northern Ireland were being undermined by police trying to force two broadcasters, two newspapers and a news service to hand over photographs and/or videos of a dissident republican parade in Derry last year.

The NUJ won an apology and settlements from the police for three lens-based journalists who were detained while covering a Black Lives Matter protest in London on December 10, 2014.

They were confined with the protesters, then filmed by the police while showing their press cards and told to leave the area preventing them from reporting on the subsequent arrests of 76 protesters.

### Freelance rates

The survey of 500 journalists, commissioned by the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society, found the median income for freelancers who spent at least half of their working time on journalism was £17,500. Disabled journalists earned significantly less than non-disabled colleagues at £11,250 and 63 per cent of freelance participants came from professional family backgrounds compared with only 19 per cent from lower

socio-economic backgrounds. The NUJ has launched a campaign to boost rates.

### Mediahuis

The Irish publisher of titles including the *Irish Independent*, *Sunday Independent*, *The Herald*, *Sunday World* and *Belfast Telegraph* announced it would be shedding up to 30 jobs without consulting the NUJ. Thanks to the union, no members were made compulsory redundant but Séamus Dooley, the

NUJ's Irish Secretary, said the many rounds of cuts at Mediahuis were undermining journalism.

### In Good Company

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions is holding Trade Union Week from 29 April to 6 May which promises to be "the largest mobilisation of trade union members in decades". The NUJ is planning workplace activities and on Thursday 2 May an event on the theme *In Good Company*, will be held at the Robinson

Suite, Radisson Blu Hotel, Dublin.

### Welsh training cuts

Government funding for the Welsh Union Learning Fund was cut by 13 per cent and NUJ Training Wales will lose £8,125 from its popular journalists' professional development project, also open to members outside Wales. Fees may need to be raised, but with the lunchtime *Fast Skills Fridays* costing only £2, the increase should not be excessive.

# Update

## Diversity does matter

**Media organisations have been urged by the NUJ's equality council to adopt robust policies to improve diversity in newsrooms and publishing houses after a report revealed it was a low priority in the industry.**

The Financial Times's consulting division's **report** was followed by government-commissioned research which found that, while employers wanted to "do the right thing", they were often implementing equality, diversity and inclusion (ED&I) initiatives "without an evidence base" and were not evaluating the impact the changes were having.

**The report** was launched by Kemi Badenoch, Secretary of State for Business and Trade and the women's and equalities minister, who denounced many ED&I schemes as "snake oil" and a waste of money for companies. But her anti-woke spin ignored crucial findings in the report which said companies which collected data and had transparent reporting could create successful policies, with only 38 per cent of employers collecting equal opportunities information from employees and/or job applicants.

The report quoted research from



WTUC delegates Ann Coltart, Raj Ford, Cristina Lago, Ann Galpin, Mariam Elsayeh & Natasha Hirst

consultancy Deloitte which found "high-performing teams are both cognitively and demographically diverse". It also said the "evidence strongly indicates that homogeneity in an organisation breeds groupthink and stifles creativity and progression".

The union supports the Labour Party's plan to introduce a new race equality act that would force companies to publish their ethnicity pay gap. Companies with more than 250 employees must record the gender pay gap (GPG). A TUC analysis revealed the UK GPG stood at 14.3 per cent, with women aged between 50 and

59 having a GPG of 19.7 per cent.

Cristina Lago, Equality Council co-chair, said: "Diversity in the media is essential for quality journalism and to ensure that the plurality of voices and views that exist in society are properly represented. It is also a basic requirement to strengthen public trust in media outlets as independent organisations able to hold power to account."

An analysis by the **Reuter's Institute** which tracked "top editors" found people of colour were significantly under-represented and white people significantly over-represented relative to their share of the general population in five countries studied. In the UK, 7 per cent of top editors in 2023 were people of colour and 5 per cent of online audiences accessed news from at least one major news outlet with a person of colour as top editor.

The NUJ's delegates (pictured) to the Women's TUC won support for motions on the risks posed to women by AI and the dangers of "unisex" protective wear which do not fit the female form. They also spoke on motions concerned with violence against women and online abuse, menopause at work, and gender stereotyping in media and the arts.

### #ShowUstheMoney event

Come along to an online event on Tuesday 23 April with the Equality Council, recruitment experts Liberty Hive and NUJ Parliamentary Group member Kim Johnson MP to find out more about the campaign to make job adverts fairer by giving a salary range in the advert and by outlawing questions about

a person's salary. Michelle Stanistreet said: "Employers keep pay rates a secret so they can screw down starting salaries, hide sexist salary anomalies and keep freelance rates low."

• **Book your place**

### NUJ all-members' survey

Don't forget to complete the NUJ **all-member survey** covering working patterns,

earnings, and concerns over safety. Your answers will ensure the union's representation of members' issues is as relevant as possible.

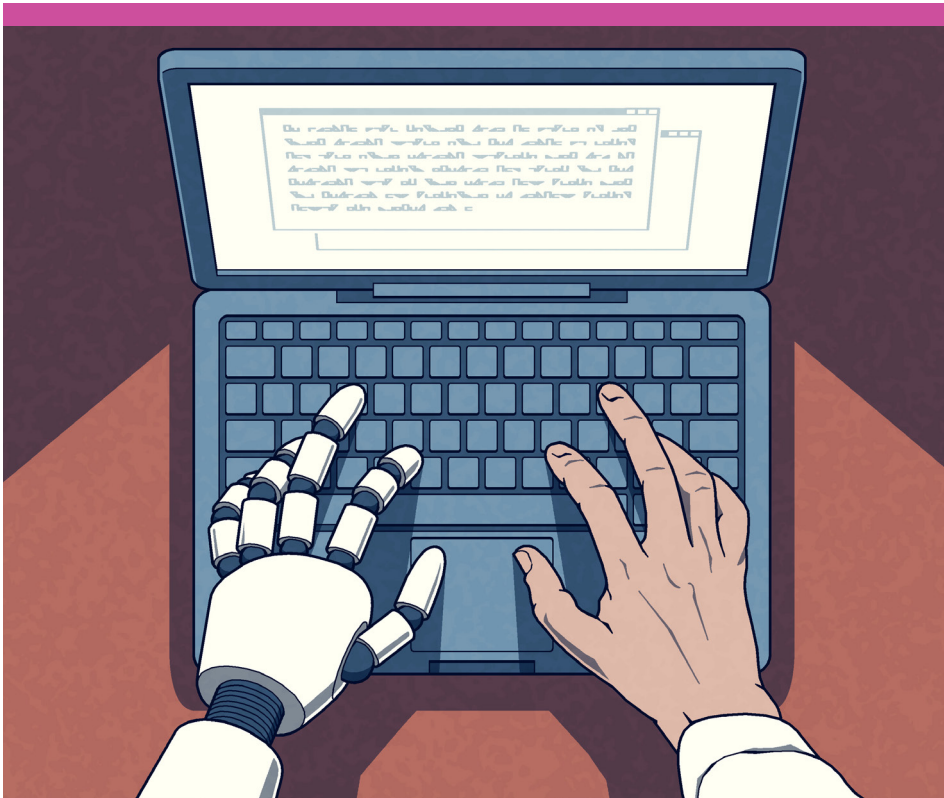
### LDR scandal

An NUJ FOI request revealed that nearly a third of Local Democracy Reporters left their job in the 11 months to February 2024, a quarter

the previous year, because of poor pay. There is a minimum senior salary outside London of £24,000 - but the publishers taking part in the scheme get nearly £38,000 per role from the BBC which funds the scheme run by newspapers. The NUJ's analysis also showed that last year women comprised only 39 per cent of the LDRs employed.

# Spotlight

Matt Kenyon



## Go Gutenbot

**The UK's largest publisher's most prolific writer is an AI tool which works for multiple titles simultaneously. Is this the future of journalism? asks Ian Burrell**

**This is a time when historic local titles, from the *Berrow's Worcester Journal* (founded 1690) to the *Keswick Reminder* (owned by tiny Barron Media), are turning to AI for help in producing copy.**

The role of "AI-assisted reporter" has become a smart career move at Newsquest, which owns the Worcester free weekly which has appointed eight AI-focused journalists to local patches from Sussex to Northumberland.

Reach, for which Gutenbot is knocking out up to 22 stories a day at one big city title, has just advertised for an "AI content editor" to work at its MyLondon website. The successful applicant will "manage content created in partnership with Reach's approved AI systems, developing teams and ensuring audience targets are met".

We are at a critical juncture in the story

of how real-life journalists and robots work together to report the news. "This is the year when newsrooms are going to start figuring out new ways to fit generative AI into their news production processes," says Charlie Beckett, professor in media and communications at the London School of Economics, "and when individual journalists will discover how generative AI can save them time and find them stories. We are now getting to a point where there are identifiable benefits alongside the risks."

Financially-pressured news organisations must innovate to survive but enlisting generative AI as an editorial partner could further undermine public trust in journalism. The use of bots to rewrite press releases and court transcripts has led to some alarming errors, including a formal reference to the police as "the bizzies" after the slang term appeared elsewhere in a quote.

Yet the benefits of using AI to free journalists from some of the more tedious aspects of the job are starting to become apparent. It is also helping to make subscription models function better. "Various examples demonstrate that efficiency and productivity gains have been achieved, including dynamic paywalls, automated transcription and data analysis tools in news production," concluded the Columbia Journalism Review last month after a three-year study on **Artificial Intelligence** in the News

This study, which drew on interviews with workers at 35 news organisations – including the BBC, News UK, the Daily Mail group and The Guardian – found that most of the beneficial applications of AI were for "mundane" things and that it had not proved to be a "silver bullet".

The impact on job numbers of having a more automated newsroom will likely depend on the outlook and business model of the individual publisher. "Currently, AI aids news workers rather than replaces them, but there are no



guarantees this will remain the case," said the CJR study. "AI is sufficiently mature to enable the replacement of at least some journalism jobs."

In the light of this threat to its members' livelihoods, the NUJ is running a campaign, Artificial Intelligence: Journalism before Algorithms. "We need a landscape where news is properly resourced, with real-life sentient journalists, not bots, where the challenges of mis- and dis-information can be properly tackled and the news and information produced can serve to improve public trust in journalism," said Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary.

She noted that media companies which had carried out "endless rounds of cuts and redundancies" were among those rushing to embrace AI, which is why NUJ officials are watching developments with concern.

The NUJ is part of the Content Authenticity Initiative, a group of creators, technologists, journalists and activists working to fight misinformation and boost media transparency by adding digital signatures and provenance metadata to authenticate content.

The BBC is exploring the potential uses of AI with 12 test pilots, almost all internal. These focus on reformatting and translating content to make it more available and supporting its online journalists with a tool for suggesting headlines. The BBC is in talks with big tech companies over granting access to its archive for training their AI tools.

The Telegraph has forbidden staff to introduce AI-generated text into copy except in extreme circumstances signed off by editors. The Guardian's will only use generative AI with human oversight, and "only where it contributes to the creation and distribution of original journalism". It views AI tools as "exciting" but "currently unreliable".

Some UK publishers, such as Reach with its Gutenbot tool, are building models internally to take control over the data sets they use.

The Financial Times has released a generative AI tool that allows its subscribers to ask a question and receive a "curated response" drawn from the FT's content of the past two decades.

But, ultimately, the way that the public learns to experience AI will largely be determined by big tech, both in America and China. It could change online search as we know it. "As platforms prioritise AI-enhanced search experiences, publishers fear a shift where users opt for short answers, impacting audience engagement," says the CJR's study. Nic Newman, of the Oxford-based Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, concurs. "The biggest risk to the news industry is the implications for the business models because of what might happen to search."

*"Currently, AI aids news workers rather than replaces them, but there are no guarantees this will remain the case"*

Publishers, already reeling from the collapse in referrals from social media, would be devastated by a new fall-off in traffic from SEO. But Newman says such a shift would at least "force" news outlets "to create content that is distinctive and more human and provides more value".

Such a shift towards human interest journalism could benefit the independent news sector where there are fewer resources for investing in AI models. "When audience trust is already so low, it's hard to see how more automation is going to improve things," says Jonathan Heawood, executive director of the Public Interest News Foundation (PINF). "They're hardly going to embrace stories that are churned out by AI content farms."

Independent providers are using easy-to-access AI tools for "background tasks" such as "transcribing audio and

analysing big datasets" but mostly "prefer to emphasise the human dimension of their work", Heawood says. "We might see more fragmentation in the industry between those who put people and communities at the heart of their journalism and those who are more interested in machines and profits."

Newsquest's enthusiastic head of editorial AI, Jody Doherty-Cove, told an NCTJ event in December that his company's investment in AI was designed to give its reporters time to "do that human touch journalism that really resonates with the communities". But some journalists at the publisher, which operates a bonus scheme based on page views generated, are unhappy that high-traffic rewrites of press releases on the openings of new fast-food outlets are now becoming the lucrative domain of the "AI-assisted" reporters.

The LSE's Beckett, who heads a Journalism & AI project, says journalists will come to see many AI features as "basic office tools" which will be used across the world of work. "You will be able to set your content management system up to translate your article into 10 languages and create an audio version, it might even turn it into a 30-second video."

He suspects local publishers are looking to compensate for having completely run down their titles and are hoping AI will free up reporters so "that there is at least something in the local paper that is local journalism".

A shortage in human interest journalism is not going to be filled by bots. "The least useful use case is content creation because if AI can write an article safely then it is probably quite boring," says Beckett. "It might do the football results but not the match reports because for that you need the atmosphere and the drama. The AI is not good at that."

• **Artificial intelligence: journalism before algorithms** is the NUJ's campaign page monitoring the effects of AI on journalism and creators' rights.

# Spotlight

Kensington Palace



## Picture perfect?

**It was meant to be a happy, family Mother's Day picture to quash fevered speculation about the Princess of Wales's health ... but it didn't work out that way. Tara Conlan reports**

**A picture may be worth a thousand words, but the Mother's Day picture of Catherine, Princess of Wales, and her children became worthy of thousands of stories and highlighted key issues facing the industry.**

Taken by the Prince of Wales and released by Kensington Palace, the photo was the first official image of Catherine distributed since her abdominal surgery earlier in the year.

However, people began noticing inconsistencies in the picture and a rare "mandatory kill notice" was issued by picture agencies. PA, Getty Images, AFP, Associated Press (AP) and Reuters removed the image. AP noted an "inconsistency in the alignment of Princess Charlotte's left hand".

Conspiracy theorists went into overdrive on social media and the following day the princess issued a statement saying: "Like many amateur photographers, I do occasionally experiment with editing." She went on to express "apologies for any confusion the family photograph we shared yesterday caused".

Soon afterwards, an image of the back

of her head in a car heading to London with her husband was snapped which led to more conspiracy theories online and it was not until she revealed her cancer diagnosis in a video that the social media noise abated.

The debate about the issues the episode raised continues, including what level of control institutions are trying to exert over their images, how much privacy royalty expects and the relationship between the royal family and the press. Press photographers say they were routinely excluded from events in Downing Street because an "official" photographer was used so politicians could have control over the images released.

Famously, Queen Elizabeth II said: "I have to be seen to be believed" but in the deepfakes era, "seeing is believing" is more problematic.

As NUJ London Central branch chair and royal reporter of 20 years, Richard Palmer, says: "It's an absolute minefield. There are a lot of delicate issues. We are at a new frontier ... particularly because of AI and deepfake."

According to the Editors' Code of Practice: "The press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images." The NUJ defines public interest as including "protecting the public from being misled by an action or statement of an individual or organisation". The NUJ code also says journalists must "strive to ensure that information disseminated is honestly conveyed, accurate and fair".

Trust is vital, so a manipulated picture can lead to questions about what else is being controlled.

The photo was released on the Prince and Princess of Wales's social media channels. On Instagram the image now has a message overlaying it saying: "Independent fact-checkers say that the photo or image has been edited in a way that could mislead people."

Natasha Hirst, NUJ president, said it was a poor decision by Kensington Palace to release the image, saying: "There should

be an accurate reflection of what was in front of a photographer when that shutter button was pressed." She explained: "We have to be incredibly cautious about the provenance, source and credibility of anything we publish, but the royal photo was particularly surprising because it came through from a 'trusted source'."

"I completely understand the argument that the Princess of Wales has been very unwell. The family don't want to be under constant scrutiny but releasing that image actually put them under far more scrutiny."

We now know that at the time the couple were coming to terms with Catherine's diagnosis and how to explain it to their young children. They probably hoped to release the news after term had finished at the children's school to prepare them before their friends started asking questions or they overheard other adults discussing it.

This meant the Mother's Day photo needed to dampen, rather than fan the flames of curiosity about Catherine's wellbeing.

As Natasha Hirst, herself a photographer and writer, explains, authentic images are important to protect the integrity of official media. "The public may think it's just a family photo," she says. "We all manipulate our images on social media all the time, so why can't Kate? But the royal family has a very different status... they are under a lot of scrutiny, especially because Kate has been absent from the public eye."

While the public are hungry for royal pictures, many also have the impression of press photographers as paparazzi who don't care about people's personal lives. Previous royal encounters include the photographers who pursued Princess Diana the night she died in Paris and the hacking of Prince Harry's phone.

Such incidents would test any family's relationship with the press. But while the monarchy can go direct to the public via social media, the press is important - particularly as it abides by codes of conduct that can help to

correct online falsehoods.

Chris Frost, NUJ Ethics Council chair, points out that there has long been a debate about photo manipulation and image enhancement, going back centuries to royal portraits being made more attractive to encourage suitors. Nowadays, he says, it needs to be very clear what's being adjusted and why or institutions will lose people's trust. "This has happened before in a photo of the late Queen Elizabeth with her grandchildren."

That photo, taken in the summer of 2022 by the Princess of Wales, was also digitally enhanced. Professor Frost says it is part of a trend for public figures to take their own photos, thanks to smartphones' editing tools.

*"For the integrity of visual media, people need to be able to trust what they see."*

Natasha Hirst says she understands why people want to take their own PR images but increasingly it is at the exclusion of independent press access. "This issue with the royal family is in the wider context of government also trying to have more control over its public image. We have to have independent eyes on those in power," she says.

Richard Palmer points out that a photo of Catherine being driven by her mother a few days before the Mother's Day image surfaced was not run by UK publications, but was by US outlets, with some claiming the palace had put pressure on the British press not to use the picture. However, his view is that British editors did not publish the photo of Carole Middleton driving her daughter because of "a collective view that it wasn't the right thing to do".

"I think the problem is that the law on privacy is not clear," he says. "And everybody in the media worries about picking the wrong battle and advancing the cause of privacy campaigners to the detriment of freedom of expression."

Just after the Mother's Day photo was

released, the blurry snap of Catherine in a car with William leaving Windsor for a Commonwealth Day church service in London was published by the UK press. "You could argue the difference then was that William was on his way to an official engagement, which gave some further legitimacy to running the picture," says Richard Palmer. "But it's fine margins... the law's not clear."

The Editors' Code stipulates the press must "justify intrusions into any individual's private life without consent" and that includes, "an individual's reasonable expectation of privacy" although account "will be taken of the complainant's own public disclosures of information" and individuals cannot be snapped "without their consent, in public or private places where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy".

Richard Palmer says the royal family has more privacy than when he started covering them, when it was fairly common for journalists to take pictures of them on holiday. However, he has noticed a rise in orchestrated social media reactions to royal stories, particularly on X/Twitter from "the Sussex squad" of Harry and Meghan fans. In this sphere the most bizarre conspiracy theories and baseless speculation are spread.

Natasha Hirst believes the ethics of our industry have improved and there is much more respect for privacy than there used to be. "But at the same time press freedom is being restricted," she says, "by the National Security Act, the restriction on protesting... and the increased privatisation of what appeared to be public spaces."

She is concerned newspaper budget cuts mean local papers sometimes use PR images rather than send a photographer and worries about the rise of AI-generated images in news, most recently in social media headlines about a woman who was fined for flying into New Zealand with a chicken sandwich.

She concludes: "When it comes to the integrity of our visual media, people need to be able to trust what they see."

# International

## Journalist safety deserves a convention

*Tim Dawson, IFJ deputy general secretary, describes making the case for journalists' security to diplomats in Geneva*

**A year or so ago, I spoke at an event to commemorate NUJ member, Dom Phillips, who was murdered while reporting in the Brazilian Amazon. The union hosted an exhibition of Phillips' work, members of his family travelled to Headland House to participate and it was an evening of tears and laughter. I felt privileged to make a modest contribution.**

Cycling home that evening, I fretted about how easy warm words about the departed are, likewise vague commitments to future action. To the question of what one can personally do to make journalists safer, my journey from Kings Cross to south-east London provided no answer.

Fast forward to March of 2024 when I led an International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) delegation to the United Nations in Geneva.

Among other engagements, we attended a meeting, convened by the UN's Greek ambassador, Ioannis Ghikas. Representatives of seven other countries joined us to discuss how the UN might be persuaded to adopt a convention specifically committing countries to protect the safety and independence of journalists. The IFJ has campaigned for such a convention since 2019, when Carmen Draghici, professor of law at City University in London, drafted a text. This draws together all existing international protections for journalists – among them Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (freedom of expression), UN Security Council Resolution 1738 (journalists engaged on dangerous missions), and the Geneva

JOAO LAET/AFP via Getty Images



Dom Phillips talks to two indigenous men in Roraima State, Brazil

Convention of 1949 (obligation to protect citizens during armed conflicts). It also proposes a Committee on the Safety of Journalists, comprised of independent experts and modelled on the Committee Against Torture's provisions. Such a body would be mandated to hear complaints and issue reasoned decisions, thereby making legal remedies quicker and more accessible.

In my naivety, I imagined that making our case would be easy – particularly against the shocking backdrop of journalists' deaths in Gaza. What we actually faced from a roomful of diplomats was something akin to the grilling budding entrepreneurs receive on the TV show *Dragons' Den*. Fortunately, I was accompanied by IFJ treasurer, Jim Boumelha, as well as Professor Draghici herself.

"My government believes that journalists would be better served by the enforcement of current laws, not the adoption of new ones," was the first parry. Draghici countered with the point that, although protections did exist, dispersal in a raft of general provisions

made them hard to enforce when they were violated. "Current law fails to acknowledge that journalists face greater risks when compared to other civilians," she said. "There is a strategic advantage to be gained from targeting the media – as belligerents try to win the war of images. Those who wish to prevent the dissemination of information and international scrutiny deliberately target journalists."

We also argued that news cycles and reporting technology had revolutionised the work of combat journalists. Today's requirement for television pictures demands that reporters are far closer to the action – with a concomitant increase in risk. Online targeting and social media pile-ons were an even more prevalent issue than physical attack, we pointed out.

The most probing of the ambassadors present also turned out to be among the most supportive. Before our interrogation was done, however, he revealed that his attitude was less determined by the quality of our answers than by the lobbying by an IFJ affiliate in the country he serves.

That admission provided an insight into how such a convention might be achieved. Concerned individuals make representations to their elected representatives, who in turn lobby ministers. Ministers direct their diplomats, who are empowered to reach international agreements. Rarely have I seen those dots so clearly joined. It might take several years, but our campaign to bring states on board is gaining momentum.

On my way home from Switzerland, I wondered how long it would take to persuade sufficient governments to ratify a convention. As I did, I realised what should have struck me on my way home from celebrating Dom Phillips. Highlighting the issue of journalists' safety, wherever we speak up, wins us allies. Increasing the visibility of the problem, wherever we do so, has the capacity, in itself, to improve conditions for us all. We should all be speaking up.

• Find out more about **the campaign**.