



# April 2021 Branch

*It's a year since NUJ Branch was launched in response to the pandemic. Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, looks at how the union and its branches have responded to these extraordinary times*

Little did we know that, a year later, the crisis would still be ongoing, with the latest lockdown restrictions only now being gradually lifted across the UK and Ireland. To think that previously most of us were unfamiliar with Zoom or the phrase: "Jane, you're still on mute." NUJ Branch has provided the latest Covid-19 guidance and, as important, allowed branches to share experiences and highlight the work of the union.

Throughout this past year I regularly met ministers and industry representatives to discuss ways to shore up news organisations against the impact of Covid-19: essential to that was ensuring that journalists were classed as key workers so they could carry on newsgathering and get access to childcare when the pandemic first hit. The union's News Recovery Plan was launched last April and has played a huge role since, shaping our work as we have set out the package of measures and interventions that would both support and protect jobs and journalism during the pandemic, and provide forward-thinking proposals to rebuild a vital, plural media with public interest journalism at its heart.

It has been fantastic to see the union's councils, committees and branches run with these ideas and put them at the centre of debates held across the governments of the UK and Ireland on how quality journalism can be sustained. We have forged an international consensus that the power of the tech giants must be curbed. There's some way to go, but Mark Zuckerberg's cage has

been well and truly rattled.

I am proud of how members rose to the challenge, providing vital news and information in often difficult circumstances as the crisis unfolded. Readers, listeners and viewers have all been well served and the role of journalism and its unique position in our society and communities have been clear.

The results of our two all-member surveys were sobering - with more than half saying they suffered stress and anxiety and had concerns about their mental health since working from home. The fear of redundancy loomed large; almost three-quarters said there had been job losses at their workplace and 85 per cent believed the continuing crisis would lead to further cuts. Freelances have been hit hard and the union has campaigned on their behalf and will continue to seek a fair deal for the self-employed.

I must commend the union's trade union and professional training projects. They quickly moved training online, opening up access to all members, and put on a series of webinars to help reps cope with new industrial challenges as well as promoting wellbeing. With the Federation of Entertainment Unions, we secured a fantastic deal on professional training for freelances with the BBC Academy's Lockdown Learning suite of courses.

Other major pieces of work continued. The NUJ was a driving force behind the government's national action plan on the safety of journalists, we are scrutinising and challenging legislation which threatens media freedom and our ability to protect sources, and continuing to



strengthen our equality work, including the recent introduction of a new LGBT+ NUJ network.

The pandemic has forced changes in the industry. Publishing and other sectors accelerated their digital offerings. Reach has completely changed its operating model. Many of its staff will not return to an office, others will work largely from home. This may suit some, but not others. Pay is becoming a hot potato as all those who made sacrifices and worked to the limit to get newspapers out and news packages broadcast feel they are not being rewarded. One positive consequence of the pandemic has been an increased interest in joining a union - for its part, the NUJ has been focusing hard on recruitment and organisation with new chapels established, recognition deals clinched and work to progress others underway. As people turn to trusted media in these difficult times, the case for a strong, independent and properly funded press that values journalists and journalism could not have been made stronger.

In Solidarity

**Michelle Stanistreet**

# NEWSPAPERS

“It’s been a year like no other”

*It wasn't like anything we had experienced before, says Laura Davison, national organiser for newspapers, news agencies and new media.*

Almost overnight, journalists were working from home, the government introduced a furlough scheme and news organisations imposed pay cuts. Initially, shops selling newspapers were shut and railway stations, where commuters usually picked up publications, stood empty. Yet, people were hungry for news, especially when the tier system of restrictions was introduced and local information became vital. The glaring lack of press plurality in Wales was exposed when it was revealed readers were getting their information from London-based newspapers – a point made clear by Welsh Executive Council members during inquiries into the effect of Covid-19 on the Welsh media.

The NUJ responded swiftly. Chris Morley, Northern & Midlands senior organiser, explained: “We had the structures – the chapels, the group chapels and the branches – in place to communicate with people, support each other and start to deal with this completely new and fast-moving situation. The group chapels went

from meeting quarterly to weekly and sometimes twice a week. The reps were all fantastic, responding immediately and working with NUJ officials to deal with the emergency.”

Laura Davison said: “The branches played a major role in providing a network of support and information – they were massively important.”

An early victory was providing a lifeline for casual staff by persuading newspapers to put them on furlough; initially they had been excluded. Publications went online, the Daily Mail produced a newspaper without one soul in the office and others followed suit; newspaper and magazine subscriptions rose, but titles also folded and then the job cuts started in earnest. Reach announced 550 redundancies, 314 in editorial.

Chris Morley said: “It was incredibly intensive. An enormous number of meetings were called, putting huge pressure on the reps.” Editorial cuts were whittled down to 266 with only a handful of compulsory redundancies. The NUJ’s Scottish office produced similar results, also saving jobs. But, as ever, reduced headcounts meant extra workload



*The union's first socially-distanced picket line. Midlands-based Bullivant Media took four days of strike action last August during lockdown over pay, potential job losses and working practices. Branches responded generously, offering financial support*

and stress for those remaining. Other newspaper groups also imposed cuts, making for a tough and difficult summer.

The government’s furlough money and extra advertising appear to have saved many publications so far. “Interestingly, while digital advertising remained weak, the presses kept rolling and print kept up the bulk of the revenue,” Chris Morley said.

Reach has announced that many staff will not return to an office and others will work largely from home. While it may suit those with children or those with long commutes, others working from the end of their bed cannot sustain that mode of working indefinitely. “Members who have made sacrifices have now been told they will not get a pay rise. Equally, there will be a push back from those who find it difficult to work from home. If the ‘new flexibility’ is seen to favour only the employers, there will be problems,” said Chris Morley.

## The Forgotten Freelances

*It has been a bleak year for freelances excluded from government aid, reports freelance national organiser, Pam Morton*



**T**he pandemic has shaped freelances' work diaries like no other event in recent history. Arts and travel writers and sports reporters watched their bread and butter jobs disappear overnight. Health and science writers suddenly found they were in demand.

Our all-members' survey carried out at the beginning of 2021 showed almost half said they did not see their income improving until mid-2021, and that was before the latest lockdowns were announced. Almost 45 per cent said their work had "decreased sharply", with 16 per cent saying it had dried up completely. Even more alarmingly, nearly a quarter said they did not expect to make a living as they did before the pandemic.

As NUJ Branch found, many members used NUJ-organised training sessions to learn new skills, such as those who launched their own podcasts. Photographer Charlotte Graham surprised even herself by getting a drone qualification to produce exciting new pictures and win commissions. But

the main story of the past year has been the hardship and heartbreak experienced by the Forgotten Freelances, those who found they had been excluded from the government's Covid-19 aid schemes.

My inbox was filled with messages from desperate members. "I have three remaining shifts and nothing else in the foreseeable future. I have no other work and do not know what I will do. I have two small children to support....," was a typical communication.

The NUJ lobbied hard, writing many letters to the Treasury. The pandemic had fully exposed the precarious nature of the work and few benefits and safeguards freelances enjoy. That is why the union launched its Fair Deal for Freelances campaign and a Freelance Charter. The NUJ has long campaigned for reform of the system, so freelances are taxed appropriately as self-employed individuals and are able to have access to holiday and sickness pay and basic protection - #FD4F: [www.nuj.org.uk/resource/fair-deal-for-freelances.htm](http://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/fair-deal-for-freelances.htm)

### Photographers

Key worker status was vital for photographers, so they could do their job under lockdown conditions. The union set up a protocol with the National Police Chiefs Council to protect newsgatherers but, sadly, officers on the ground did not always follow it. While photographers increasingly became the target of demonstrators, they were sometimes also under pressure from the police. After each incident, the union sought talks with the Met and other police authorities: the union came to the rescue of photographer Andy Aitchison, arrested and equipment confiscated, while covering a protest at Napier Barracks, Folkestone, and later booked for breaking Covid-19 regulations. Engagement with the police continues to ensure that in challenging conditions all newsgatherers can continue to work safely and unimpeded.



## TV viewing soars during crisis



*Reporting from sheds and the pandemic frontline, broadcasters went the extra mile, says broadcasting organiser, Paul Siegert*

**W**ith the BBC under fire this month for its extensive coverage of the death of Prince Phillip – The Sun claimed more than 100,000 viewers complained about missing EastEnders and the MasterChef final – the corporation has maintained a high profile during the past year.

A new director general, Tim Davie from BBC Studios, arrived and – amid much speculation that ex-Telegraph editor and BBC arch enemy, Charles Moore, was to be the new chair – Richard Sharpe, the Chancellor's former boss at Goldman Sachs, was appointed. The threat of decriminalisation of the licence fee hung over the corporation but appears to have been dropped.

The BBC, together with the other public service broadcasters (PSBs), ITV and Channel 4, have had a good pandemic. Ofcom, the broadcasting watchdog, said the demand for news during the crisis helped them achieve their highest combined monthly viewing share in more than six years in March 2020. The PSBs were each rated as trusted sources of

news and information by more than eight in 10 people at the start of lockdown.

Credit must go to our members, who quickly adapted to the new situation and either found themselves broadcasting from sheds and broom cupboards or were out on the streets and visiting hospitals at the height of the pandemic. Local radio's Make a Difference played a huge role in linking volunteers in the community with those in need.

This all came at a cost. While members were going beyond the limit, the BBC was working through a huge cost-cutting exercise and in March management said the £125m extra spent on Covid-19

coverage meant a further 70 jobs would go. BBC England saw 450 jobs vanish as part of a £25m cost-saving programme. The threat of a strike ballot over compulsory redundancies remains, but we continue to press for new roles for members at risk.

The BBC led the way in Covid-19 safe policies as people returned to the office, with temperature checks, social distancing devices and regular lateral flow tests. ITV was more reluctant, but fell in line after pressure from NUJ reps.

While TV advertising was initially hit hard, more people were watching television – and subscribing to Netflix and Disney+ – and the fortunes of broadcasting companies have been better than expected. This is why members at the BBC, ITV and ITN, who have worked so hard this year, are extremely disappointed to be told there would be a pay freeze, with one-off payments negotiated at ITV and ITN.

The union won recognition at Alarby TV and our reps are now playing a major part in negotiating redundancy and relocation packages as the company moves to Doha. And, at last, the two-year recognition campaign at Iran International looks close to being signed off. Members and reps there must be commended for sticking with it despite a very hostile management.

**HANDS  
OFF OUR  
B B**

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



## Providing a friendly face

*Mark Fisher, branch secretary, explains how Edinburgh Freelance Branch stepped up its game*

**I**t was going to be one of Edinburgh Freelance Branch's biggest meetings of the year. We'd asked our student members to give a talk about their journalism dissertation topics. They were lined up to discuss sports websites, women's magazines, daily podcasts and the power of multinational corporations. We'd booked an extra-large room for the occasion.

But this was March 2020, and the pandemic was on its way. Our venue was still open, but the students were getting nervous. The day before the meeting, their university, Edinburgh Napier, followed other colleges in halting face-to-face teaching. With only hours to go, we had to cancel.

One week later, the UK's first lockdown came into place.

Funny to think many of us had never heard of Zoom at this point, but only a day after the lockdown began the branch went online. As secretary, I billed it as "the first of a likely series" of meetings.

Gamely, we agreed to meet weekly, hardly envisioning that, over a year later, we'd still be at it. Nor did we envision the opportunities presented by meeting so often. Our first thought

had been to provide camaraderie at a time of isolation. Joyce McMillan, our chair, saw it as a way to show members we were there for them at a point when many freelance incomes had been wiped out. In our early meetings, we circulated information about NUJ Extra, government support and political campaigns.

We were pleased to see an increased geographical spread of members and a more equal gender balance, an experience reflected in the survey reported in the December 2020 edition of NUJ Branch, but what we didn't predict was how galvanising the weekly rhythm would be. If a member suggested an idea, we could respond to it and report back to the branch not a month later but in a matter of days.

It was this energy that inspired us to lobby Scottish politicians after we'd discussed the NUJ's News Recovery Plan. We requested meetings with the major parties, nearly all of whom agreed. By June, the Scottish Conservatives had put out a press release headlined, "Recovery plan is vital

for the survival of newspapers," and by the end of the year, three of our members had been selected to sit on the Scottish government's working group on public-interest journalism.

Those were tangible gains, but so too was the chance to welcome guest speakers from afar, among them Michelle Stanistreet, Dame Frances Cairncross and Jeremy Dear, as well as colleagues from Cardiff, Belfast and all corners of Scotland.

Above all, seeing the familiar, friendly faces of fellow branch members every Monday afternoon would become a rare pleasure in a turbulent year.

## Action

### Racism in the media

London Freelance Branch is holding a special meeting, open to all NUJ members, on racism in the media, following the controversial Report from the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (the Sewell report) on Monday 26 April, 18.45.

### Find out more:

<http://www.londonfreelance.org/fl/2104ritm.html>

# TRAINING

06



## A year of Zoom learning

*Trade union trainer, Caroline Holmes, recalls how her programme was adapted to meet new challenges*

It is nearly a year since the NUJ's trade union training programme was moved online; the transition from face-to-face to remote training was made in just a few weeks.

The four stage reps' programme was rewritten in response to our new way of working and living with Covid-19. New equality and health and safety strands were developed to provide more focused training for reps dealing with associated issues during the pandemic.

Online training presented many challenges in terms of delivery and participation, with new online platforms to learn, new protocols and ways of working together, and the fatigue that inevitably results after spending so much time looking at screens. Members and reps with disabilities had specific issues with accessing online learning which needed to be overcome.

It also created excellent opportunities. It broadened our reach to reps and members who previously were not able to attend face-to-face learning. This showed in the year's figures, with 112 members taking Reps' Stage 1 and, overall, 156 completing one or more training

session. We lost some excellent reps during the job cuts and finding replacements was essential.

Extra sessions were put on dealing with redundancy, working safely through the pandemic and supporting members' health and well-being. These webinars can be found on the NUJ website: [www.nuj.org.uk/engage/nuj-reps/video-resources.html](http://www.nuj.org.uk/engage/nuj-reps/video-resources.html)

I held regular reps' briefings, with officials on hand, to provide updates on any key changes, and for reps to share best practice techniques and support each other. We organised bespoke training for chapels which required specific help to deal with major changes, such as redundancy or restructuring of a business.

Reps are the bedrock of the union. I am proud so many of them rose to the unprecedented challenges of the past year and I am glad we were able to equip them with the skills and support needed to carry out that task.

Latest dates for reps' training: [www.nuj.org.uk/learn/nuj-training/trade-union-training.html](http://www.nuj.org.uk/learn/nuj-training/trade-union-training.html). Email [tuttraining@nuj.org.uk](mailto:tuttraining@nuj.org.uk) to book your place.

NUJ professional training run in Scotland and Wales also moved swiftly online, with tutors rewriting their classes for screens. As work dried up for freelancers, they were keen to expand and enhance their professional skills. Being online meant that for the first time those outside Scotland and Wales could have access to the courses, with members from Paris and beyond signing up to the Scottish-run workshops. Take-up in Scotland also increased, leading to an overall total of 930 learners, far exceeding targets. In Wales, Lockdown Learning was launched, a series of practical courses introducing members to skills including podcasting, creative writing, writing, video editing, social media networking and many other subjects. The project was awarded a further £17,500 by the Welsh government to provide pandemic-specific training. NUJ Training Wales put on 39 courses, ran two events and in all gave training to 647 learners.

- NUJ Training Scotland: [www.nujtrainingscotland.com/](http://www.nujtrainingscotland.com/)
- NUJ Training Cymru/Wales: [www.nujtrainingwales.org/](http://www.nujtrainingwales.org/)



## Glasgow branch donates £14,000 to NUJ charities

**G**lasgow branch has this month made donations of £7,000 each to NUJ Extra, the union's welfare charity, and the George Viner Memorial Fund (GVMF) which provides bursaries to journalism students from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds.

Jim Boumelha, chair of the GMVF trustees, said: "The commitment and generosity of the NUJ Glasgow branch is a model of solidarity that makes the NUJ a union we are all proud to belong to. Covid-19 year has been difficult for all journalists, but for students from Black and ethnic minority background it has been particularly challenging. You truly make the difference for them, and we are extremely grateful. On behalf of the George Viner Fund trustees, I thank all the branch members and officials for making this generous donation which will allow us to continue assist Black and ethnic minority journalism students take a first step towards a career in journalism."

Glasgow gives a monthly payment

to NUJ Extra and has frequently held events to support both charities. John Matthews, branch member, shared the news with trustees: "I'm really delighted to let you know that the NUJ Glasgow branch just agreed to my proposal to give £7,000 to both NUJ Extra and the George Viner Memorial Fund. I would strongly encourage others to make similar commitments."

NUJ Extra, the union's welfare charity, has offered a lifeline in the past year for members getting into financial difficulties after losing their jobs or shifts because of lockdowns, cuts or ill-health.

Its third wave of Covid-19 aid runs to June 21. Leyla Yusuf, the charity's administrator, was full of praise for branches' generosity. Many made extra donations from the money saved from not having to book meeting venues, and the total raised was just under £32,000 in 2020. In all, 35 branches

and chapels made payments, with £16,000 from individual members. The highest one-off contribution was £4,000 and 14 branches make a monthly donation.

Francis Sedgemore, NUJ Extra trustee, said: "Journalists have been hit hard by the pandemic, freelancers disproportionately so. Governments have provided statutory support, but for various reasons some folk fell through bureaucratic gaps and received no help from the state. Thanks to the boundless generosity of NUJ branches and individual members, NUJ Extra is supporting many journalists with grants to offset loss of income. This has made a massive difference to their lives in very difficult times and it beautifully illustrates the value of mutual aid which lies at the heart of trade unionism."

## Action

Find out more about NUJ Extra, how to donate and apply for a grant:  
[www.nuj.org.uk/about-us/nuj-charities/nuj-extra.html](http://www.nuj.org.uk/about-us/nuj-charities/nuj-extra.html)

Donate to the George Viner Memorial Fund and encourage journalism students to apply for a bursary:  
<https://www.nuj.org.uk/about-us/nuj-charities/george-viner-memorial-fund.html>

**REASONS  
TO JOIN**

**SOS**



### **We Offer Support and Help**

The NUJ is your lifeline if you get arrested or the authorities try to confiscate your data or images. We chase non-payers, represent and support you during disciplinary or redundancy procedures or if you are being bullied or have other work-related problems. We offer professional help with reporting guides and advice on ethics, networking opportunities and training to help you develop your skills throughout your career.

**Are you keeping good company?**

Join the NUJ today at

**[nuj.org.uk/join](http://nuj.org.uk/join)**

**NUJ**  
NATIONAL UNION  
OF  
JOURNALISTS

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