

NEWS FROM THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE

Informed

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Budget day target of BBC local radio strike

NUJ members in England working for BBC Local are to strike over local radio cuts and programme sharing.

Following a ballot result of 83 per cent of members voting in favour of strike action, NUJ reps agreed to hold a 24-hour walk-out on March 15 until the same time the following day to hit media coverage of the Spring budget. The BBC wants local radio stations to share programming after 2pm on weekdays and at weekends. NUJ members have robustly opposed the changes which would result in a diminution of local content and up to four radio stations sharing the same output.

A work to rule will follow the strike and further action, such as striking on the day of the coronation and to coincide with the Eurovision Song Contest, is also being considered.

Those striking will be journalists working for local radio, regional TV and online in England.

Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, said: "This emphatic result demonstrates the strength of feeling among BBC members and their

determination not to stand by and see local radio output dismantled. I urge the BBC to take stock and meaningfully engage so that we can come to a solution that acknowledges the vital roles that quality, relevant and genuinely local news play in our public service broadcaster. The BBC's focus on digital content and delivery shouldn't be at the expense of local news and journalism."

Paul Siegert, the NUJ's national broadcasting organiser, said: "Local radio is supposed to be local and that is why 5.7m people listen to it every week. NUJ members are not opposed to the BBC investing in digital services, but it should not come at the expense of local radio and the communities it serves. No one wants to take strike action but the future of local radio is at stake so our members were left with no option."

The **Keep BBC Local Radio Local** campaign has had huge support from the public, MPs and peers of all parties. The cross-party culture and media select committee said in its report, Sustainability of local journalism, that



the proposal to share content across the network "will diminish the unique localness of the BBC's current services and we urge the corporation to reconsider these plans".

Further action could also take place in Northern Ireland where the BBC wants to ditch 36 local radio posts, axe the Radio Derry Breakfast Show and news bulletins from Radio Foyle as part of the same plans. Hundreds of local people gathered at the Guildhall in Derry to voice their anger. The union has got some movement from the BBC following talks with management, but those talks have now stalled. In a consultative ballot of members 95 per cent voted to take action.

Sharp must go

BBC chairman, Richard Sharp was given his marching orders by a poll of BBC journalists for failing to disclose his role as a go-between for a loan to the then Prime Minister at the same time he was applying for the corporation's top job.

Just four per cent of those questioned said he should continue as chair; 97 per cent said Sharp's behaviour had caused

damage to the BBC's reputation; and 91 per cent said the scandal had undermined trust in BBC journalism. Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, said: "It's clear that Richard Sharp has lost the dressing room. Sharp has repeatedly cited the critical importance of editorial standards, trust and independence - yet this whole farrago shows a willingness to apply less stringency and rigour to his own behaviour and conduct."

The poll followed a highly critical MPs' report saying Sharp had made "significant errors of judgement" when he failed to reveal his part in the loan during a pre-appointment hearing with them. Industry figures such as Jonathan Dimbleby and Baroness Patience Wheatcroft called on him to resign, while Labour and the Scottish National Party described his position as "increasingly untenable".

**Also
in this
issue:**

£2.5m
payouts
Page 04

Robo-
journalism
Page 08

Cairncross
revisited
Page 10

NUJ
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JOURNALISTS

Michelle's Message



While glued to Succession's three seasons to date, it was hard not to wonder just how close this screen fictionalisation came to the reality of life at the top of Rupert Murdoch's empire and his family.

Surely the rococo venality, plot-pivoting back stabs, and elaborate reverse ferrets were super-charged for narrative effect?

Well now we know. Dominion, a manufacturer of voting machines used in the United States, is currently suing Fox News Network. It claims that the Murdoch-owned TV station amplified patently untrue allegations that its devices fraudulently awarded votes to Joe Biden in the 2020 Presidential election.

In preparation for their case, Dominion has obtained bundles of internal Fox News communications, including thousands of emails and WhatsApp

messages between Murdoch and his senior staff.

The picture these communications reveal is extraordinary. As source material goes, it's another example – joined by Matt Hancock and his undoing by journalist and anti-lockdown pundit Isabel Oakshott this week – of how off-the-cuff exchanges carried out on mobile phones give an unvarnished insight into the inner workings of corporate or governmental thinking and decision making.

Fox had been a prominent cheerleader for Donald Trump and built a lucrative and loyal audience for prejudice-affirming news beaming in from the right. This success had made it a significant revenue-generating pillar of Murdoch's business, earning \$1.8bn of operating income in 2020.

As the election result unfolded, however, Fox executives faced a deeply uncomfortable dilemma. It was clear that Trump lost. Evidence of voting fraud of significance could not be found. Even his most ardent news-room fans thought that Trump's pronouncements to the contrary were unhinged. Failure to point this out risked their credibility. Pointing it out might cost them their audience and personal popularity. In Murdoch's estimation the truth was not what their audience wanted to hear. Days after the election, Murdoch emailed the network's chief executive Suzanne Scott about the challenge of reporting the President's behaviour – how it was “making it harder to straddle the issue” of the result and telling her that “we should talk this through, very difficult”.

During this time, Trump's lawyer, Sidney Powell, was invited on the network again and again to promote the “election steal” agenda despite anchors such as Sean Hannity being clear it was untrue: “The whole agenda that Sidney was pushing, I did not believe it for one second,” he said. Indeed, this legal case has unveiled that almost all of Fox's senior anchors appear to have promoted “election steal” theories on air, at the same time as saying in private

communications that they considered them bunkum.

There is plenty more in the trove of evidence. In December 2020 Murdoch and his son Lachlan received a jittery message from Paul Ryan, a former speaker of the House and the Fox board member. “We are entering a truly bizarre phase where [Trump] has actually convinced himself of this farce.” Fox executives vacillated between the truth and what their audience appeared to want – handing Trump a megaphone as he hollered.

“Logan Roy proclaimed that the future is real, the past is all made up.”

As fascinating and enjoyable as Murdoch's legal skewering may be to pore over, it's a corporate crisis that exposes serious issues.

The first challenges the view, popular at the political fringes, that ‘the mainstream media’ pursues a news agenda designed to hoodwink the public. The Fox message cache reveals a desperate scramble to anticipate viewer interest. This is media not as puppet master, but as prisoner of its audience. Indeed, the chaos that appears to have engulfed Fox News during this period gives lie to any sense that such an operation could competently enact any kind of conspiracy.

This process also underscores the importance of the public service obligations that underpin broadcasting in the UK and Ireland and, in particular, the way in which the BBC is funded. Maintaining a significant news outlet outside immediate commercial pressures, with values entrenched in the public good, anchors our entire public service broadcasting landscape.

The dangers of ignoring your own sense of news value in pursuit of hoped-for audience are also shown in stark light. Short term gains there might be, but loss

of credibility will eventually extract its price.

By concentrating on aggregate listening figures alone you ignore the value of those times when a local broadcaster is the only source of dependable and vitally important news. Just ask any parent in a rural county who has woken up to unexpected snow and needs to know which schools are open, which roads are safe. Credibility earned in such moments resonates long after the snow has melted.

The 92-year-old mogul's attempts to steer individual correspondents are also laid bare. It is unsurprising to learn that Murdoch is in daily contact with senior editors and often attends editorial meetings. His craven agenda is still jarring, nonetheless. In one message he said that he did not want to antagonise Trump because "he had a very large following, and they were probably all viewers of Fox, so it would have been stupid".

This soon trickles down the chain. Tucker Carlson's producer emailed the popular host saying that the "election steal" is "all our viewers care about right now". Carlson replied: "I just hate this shit" but seems, nonetheless, to have gone along with Murdoch's diktats, even calling for the sacking of a junior colleague who reported that Trump's fraud accusations were untrue.

It highlights how vulnerable reporters can be in such a charged atmosphere, and the issues arising from management cliques with unchecked power. In a unionised newsroom there is a counterbalancing force that can, when necessary, protect a journalist's commitment to accuracy and ethical standards.

This is true in any workplace, but the context of Fox News' travails shows how much more important it is at a news organisation. As the TV executives raged at each other about how far they could go reporting the outgoing president's frothing madness, US democracy was challenged by a mob descending on Washington. A more

REASONS TO JOIN

Be Part of a Collective Voice

As a member of the NUJ you are part of a united force championing the rights of media workers and defending attacks on press freedom. Successful workplaces are those where the management and workers share the same aims and talk to each other. Being a member of the NUJ means giving yourself and colleagues a real voice at work.

Are you keeping good company?

Join the NUJ today at nuj.org.uk/join

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visceral demonstration of the need for quality news and the safeguards that its production requires is hard to imagine.

Whether all of this will be sufficient to persuade the courts that Fox should pay Dominion the \$1.6bn that it is demanding, we'll have to see. The potent warnings provided for the news media

and for journalism stands, regardless of the case's conclusion.

Logan Roy proclaimed that "the future is real, the past is all made up". It is our job as journalists and as a union of journalists, to ensure that a snappy line in an engaging drama remains just that – a fiction.

Update

The NUJ has signed a recognition agreement with the Scottish investigative journalist media co-operative, The Ferret

Ferret sniffs out union deal

The Ferret's Rachel Hamada and Alastair Brian and the NUJ's John Toner (right) said they were delighted to be signing the union recognition deal.

Alastair, father of The Ferret's NUJ chapel, said: "Our journalists promote transparency and hold power to account, so it is important to be able to collectively support workers on the website."

The chapel believes the agreement offers a unique opportunity to ensure that The Ferret's innovative model, offering a greater role for readers and the wider community can also ensure better conditions for its staff, as well as standing up for the right to trade union membership and activism.

Rachel Hamada, co-chair of The Ferret said: "The Ferret is a co-operative with



places reserved for journalists and readers on the board. We were founded with a mission to ensure investigative journalism is resourced properly. We want The Ferret to be a great organisation to work with for everyone and so we are delighted to recognise the Ferret chapel of the NUJ and welcome their support."

John Toner, national organiser for Scotland at the National Union of Journalists, said: "We are delighted that The Ferret has agreed to recognise the NUJ for the purposes of collective bargaining. All staff are freelance, and it is very rare, possibly unique, to achieve a recognition agreement that covers solely freelance workers.

"We appreciate the constructive approach taken by The Ferret board, and we wish all companies were so progressive in their dealings with the NUJ."

The **Ferret's** website describes itself as independently regulated and non-partisan, which will "keep nosing up the trousers of power" and cover important issues the mainstream media often misses.

NUJ legal payouts more than 2.5m

The NUJ's legal department reported £1.4m in compensation awarded for unequal pay, unfair dismissal and discrimination in the past four months, and a further £122,000 in personal injury cases.

Officials are also saving jobs and negotiating enhanced packages during the latest spate of redundancies across newspapers and magazines. In January, Reach, the largest regional newspaper publisher and owner of the Mirror and Express, announced 200 jobs cuts were to be made across the group. A total of 34 journalists were successfully redeployed into other roles, including a trainee with less than a year's service, and 27 more volunteered to take the package on offer. Those leaving from former Local World titles

benefited from enhanced redundancy terms negotiated by the union in last summer's pay dispute.

There have been 20 compulsory redundancies, including a significant proportion of photographers. However, better terms were secured with those leaving, such as getting access to images and videos they created at work for their portfolios. The union is seeking compensation for those who have lost the company's photographic kit, making it difficult to freelance, and successfully won a £10,000 final payment when a long-term freelance's contract was ended.

Management at the Disney-owned Baby TV eventually agreed to award bonuses to those made redundant, thanks to the NUJ. Members suffering

from Long Covid and other conditions have benefited from deals brokered by officials and reps, making it easier for them to continue to work.

Members at RTÉ, the Irish national public service broadcaster this month received their €1,000 tax free voucher paid as part of the pay deal accepted before Christmas.

The union is now preparing for the 2023 pay round, with group chapels agreeing collective claims.

NUJ general secretary Michelle Stanistreet, said: "The NUJ is always there to fight for our members' jobs and the best deal if redundancy can't be avoided. Whether it is supporting a collective pay claim or dispute, or helping a member with their specific concern or problem, the union is by your side."

NUJ legal assistance

Update

Nicola Bulley's death puts media in the dock

Lessons must be learned by broadcasters and editors, says Ethic's Council chair Chris Frost

The tragic tale of Nicola Bulley gripped the nation after the missing person story extended into its fourth day with no resolution.

The police initially issued minimum information, leading many to see this as a modern-day mystery of the sort that rarely happens in a time of security cameras, ubiquitous smartphones and GPS tracking.

Social media took up the story and the village of St Michael's, a small rural community based largely around the road bridge over the River Wyre, was soon flooded with tourists curious to see for themselves and would-be amateur detectives determined to crack the case.

Bloggers and conspiracy theorists were not far behind, offering theories

PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo



that ranged from the mundane to the bizarre. Inevitably, some turned on the family with scurrilous accusations. For journalists trying to cover the story there was a wealth of angles, depending on how willing you were to listen to the wilder suggestions. Nicola Bulley's body was found in the River Wyre on February 19.

The police also had to divert staff from the investigation to deal with would-be sleuths trespassing in gardens or breaking into local homes and caravans that had been left empty. For the journalists, whether from the local papers, radio or TV stations or the nationals, there are a number of lessons to learn, some of which need to be shared with police forces. Ofcom has already written to ITV and Sky News asking them to "explain their actions" after receiving complaints from Nicola's family that their requests for privacy were ignored after the discovery of a body.

Journalism is about informing the public about events happening around them that they need or want to know about and understand. It is important that journalists fight for the right to free expression and the right of the media to report events. For a story such as this, journalists working the scene would expect to talk to neighbours, to witnesses and to the family. However, journalists also need to remember that others have rights, and that common decency obliges us to think carefully about how we gather the news and how we disseminate it.

Police information

The Leveson Inquiry talked of "public concern that the police had become too close to the press in general, and News International in particular". Crime reporters complain that now the police do not provide briefings beyond public press releases. The NUJ argues that greater co-operation will improve crime reporting. Lancashire police were strongly criticised for publicising Nicola Bulley's personal problems, but these were widely known in the village and police questions

about them would have obliged confirmation. More careful press relations might have made that situation easier.

News gathering

The NUJ code insists on honest, open and straightforward means of gathering material. TV and radio journalists should brief the source before recording when possible – and we should treat them fairly. Family members, of course, are prime witnesses but we must be aware of their right to privacy.

Privacy

Where information of a private nature is in the public interest and helps the understanding of a story, the public deserves to know. But personal details of family relations, health and emotional issues need particular care. The NUJ's code calls on journalists to do nothing to intrude into anybody's private life, grief or distress; exactly the sort of situation at St Michael's. If the family says they don't want to talk to us, that is the end of the matter. No one, especially at a time of maximum

emotional distress, should be harassed and bullied.

Sexist comments

The final point to learn from this case is an oddity. Journalists should not produce material that is likely to lead to hatred or discrimination. Several newspapers criticised the lead detective, Superintendent Sally Riley, for her looks and dress. We would be amazed if a senior male officer was criticised in this way and one wonders at the desperation of columnists to sink to these depths.

Update

Casuals campaign

Tim Dawson, Freelance Industrial Council chair, on raising shift rates

Most newspapers and magazines would not get published without the small army of journalists known as casuals performing their daily shifts. Yet publishers treat this critical group of workers with a contempt that they would angrily call out were it happening elsewhere in the economy.

A minor victory at The Times could be the start of a shift in rates some of which have not changed for decades.

A couple of months ago the NUJ took up the concerns of members working at News UK who complained that subbing shifts were being paid at £156 a day, as they have been for nearly quarter of a century. Static rates are hard to stomach with inflation at two or three per cent a year. Once prices are performing double-digit jumps, the reduced spending power looks stark. NUJ Freelance Organiser David Ayrton wrote to the company pointing out that casuals were being



impoverished at the same time as the newspapers on which they toiled were exposing hardships throughout the working population.

A few weeks later, without fanfare, rates increased to £166 a day. "I'm glad that the company recognised members' concerns," says David. "We are not recognised at News UK, but have a positive relationship with the company, which we would seek to build on. Just as important is applying similar pressure elsewhere in the news media."

An informal survey conducted last week showed up lots of other companies where rates have changed little or even dropped over the past two decades.

Future plc, which has taken over much of the old IPC stable, is paying £120 a day for production shifts, despite some of its titles having paid as much as £150 a day in the past. Last November the company posted "another year of record results" with revenue growth of 36 per cent to £825.4m. Staff received a 4 per cent pay rise and bonuses of at least £1,905.

Reach pays £136 a day on its national titles and committed to reassessing freelance rates at the end of last summer's strike. Emap's B2B titles are now paying £150 a day, despite the rate on the same magazines being £170 a day over a decade ago.

The union's freelance office is asking members to send information on present and past shift rates to freelanceoffice@nuj.org.uk. All communication will be received in confidence and will be used to try to boost payments. Casuals and freelances should also notify London Freelance Branch's **Rate for the Job**.

Chris Wheal

The NEC gave a vote of thanks in appreciation of Chris's work as chair of the trustee of NUJ Extra, the union's welfare charity, and as a member of the board of the Broadcast Journalism Training Council as he steps down from the two roles ahead of DM. The charity came into its own under his stewardship during the pandemic, offering a lifeline to members in financial difficulties after losing their jobs or shifts because of lockdowns, cuts or ill-health. He praised the generosity of branches, chapels and

members for contributing to the fund. **Donate to NUJ Extra.**

Dom, Bruno and the Amazon

The NUJ, held an exhibition at Headland House in honour of member, Dom Phillips, and Bruno Pereira, expert on the indigenous peoples of Brazil, who were murdered in the Amazon last June. Dom's niece, Domonique Davies, and exhibition organiser, Fiona Frank, were among speakers at an evening event to celebrate the men's work. There will be another opportunity to see the

exhibition at the TUC's Congress Centre during the NUJ Delegate Meeting in April.

Killed list

The International Federation of Journalists' 2022 report on journalists and media staff killed reveals 68 deaths of media professionals and 375 journalists and media workers currently behind bars. In 2021, the death toll was 47. The roll call of loss and tragedy during 2022 is dominated by Ukraine, where 12 journalists were killed, followed by Mexico (11), Haiti (7), Pakistan

(5) and Colombia and the Philippines (4 killings each). Hong Kong topped the list with 84 journalists in jail, with Myanmar (64), Turkey (51) and Iran (34) and Belarus (33).

Snooper's charter

The NUJ has permission to join the human rights organisation Liberty's "People vs the snoopers' charter" Court of Appeal case so it can challenge the "bulk" surveillance regime included in the Investigatory Powers Act, which has serious implications for press freedom.

Update

A woman's place is in her union

On International Women's Day encourage a woman you know to join the NUJ...it could change her life.

The NUJ's Equality Council is using the day to persuade union members to recruit a woman to the union. Natasha Hirst, the council's chair, said "This year, on International Women's Day, we are asking all our members to invite a female colleague to join the union. Being active in a union is the best way to promote women-friendly workplace policies. We work with the TUC to combat gender pay gaps, sexual harassment and educate employers about the need for flexible working and breaking the taboo of talking about the small adjustments women need to help them at work during the menopause."

The average woman in paid employment effectively worked for free for nearly two months of the year compared to the average man, a TUC



analysis revealed last month. The gender pay gap stands at 14.9 per cent. This means that working women must wait 54 days – or two months – before they stop working for free on Women's Pay Day – this year it was Thursday 23 February. The gap is wider for older women.

At this rate it could take more than 20 years to close the gap, so the NUJ is working with others on ways to make pay more equitable and challenging companies with large wage gaps to rethink their salary policies.

The NUJ is also proposing a motion to make pay transparency in job advertisements mandatory at next week's TUC Women's Conference. Research shows that only six in 10 UK job advertisements in 2022 disclosed the salary and the media industry is a major culprit.

The NUJ's motion says: "Expecting job applicants to negotiate their pay, often during a job interview, can perpetuate unequal pay between women and men, as well as widening ethnicity and disability pay gaps. Questions concerning an applicant's present salary should also be banned."

Christina Lago, one of the NUJ's conference delegates, said: "We'll be calling the TUC to lobby government, employers' bodies and employers to normalise the publication of pay rates, salaries and salary bands in employment adverts."

The NUJ's second motion calls on the TUC to add its voice in condemnation of the Iran government's attack on women's rights and the right of journalists.

Joe's dream job

Many reporters today too often find themselves glued to their computer screens and phones, but when Joe Ali became a community reporter he was delighted to find plenty of great stories by getting out about on the streets of Cardiff.

After studying journalism at university, he took part in the National Council for the Training of Journalists' (NCTJ) Community News Project in June 2020. The project combined on-the-job learning with studying a formal industry-standard qualification and was provided by a partnership between the NCTJ, Facebook and nine regional publishers.

Joe became the community reporter for Wales Online and decided to showcase stories from the Welsh LGBT+ community in Cardiff. He wanted to tell the stories of real people and go deeper than just writing about Pride events. One story he is particularly proud of is the tale of young transgender woman's experiences of conversion therapy. Joe met Alia when covering a story about an important centre in Wales for LGBT+ people, the Welsh ballroom community.

Once the cameras were switched off, he said, she opened up about her experience growing up being transgender and how she has found a new family in that community. Alia was later comfortable enough to let Joe video their conversation about her life at her home.

His work as a community reporter led Joe to receive a Reach Plc editorial award.

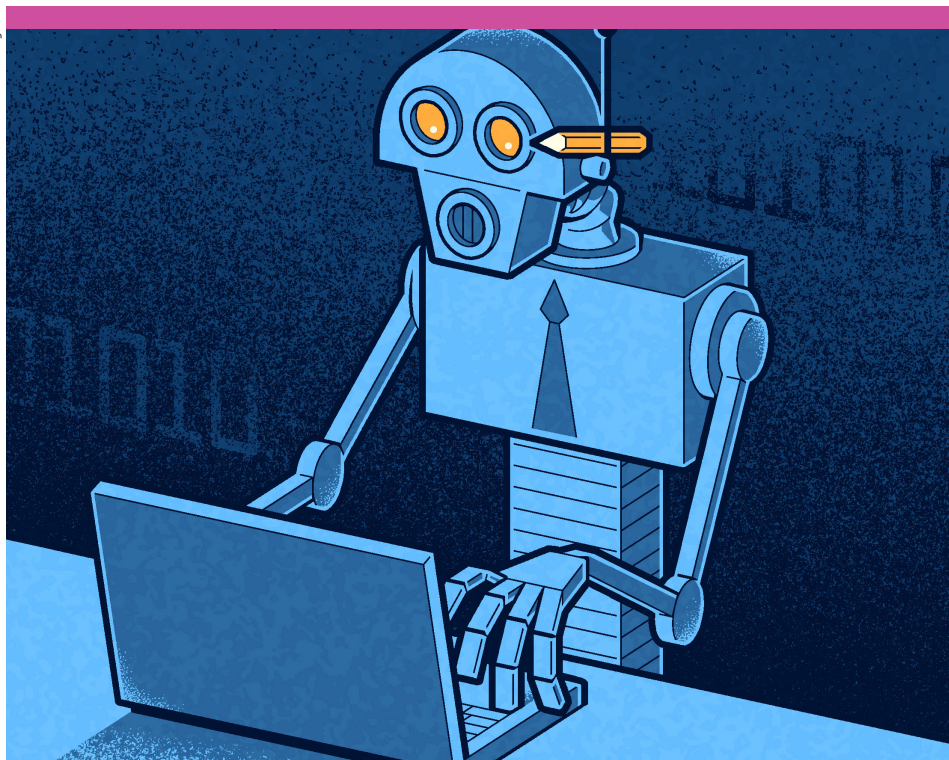
Joe said: "It was my first job in journalism, and it was a dream come true. It's enabled me to get those skills to report on the LGBTQ+ community and to work on stories beneficial to that community."

He has since moved on to Pink News, and came along to the NUJ's LGBT+ network for its LGBT+ History Month event to talk about his work. Joe, who describes himself as queer, said he felt proud for helping his newsroom build bridges with marginalised communities.

Find out more about the scheme

Spotlight

Matt Kenyon



A is for AI

Misinformation super-spreader or useful tool? Ian Burrell investigates technological developments, including ChatGPT

Vladimir Putin, the Grand Poobah of global propaganda, was quick to see the potential of machine learning. “Artificial intelligence is the future, not only for Russia but for all humankind,” he once told the Kremlin channel RT. “It comes with colossal opportunities but also threats that are difficult to predict. Whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will become the ruler of the world.”

Trusted journalism was probably not on the Russian leader’s wish list of AI “opportunities” in 2017 but robot reporting is now very much upon us. The instant popularity of Open AI’s chatbot ChatGPT – used by a staggering 100m people since it launched last November – is causing frenzied speculation about its potential impact on newsrooms and on the information the world consumes.

ChatGPT can structure an article and write with flair, even replicating the

styles of famous authors. So convincing is the app’s tone and so rapid its take-up, that some fear it will spawn a golden era of fake news production. Those concerns are amplified because the data set on which the app is based has been shown to be riddled with false facts, sometimes taken from blogs and forums.

Journalists worry that newsroom roles will become redundant as more jobs are automated by AI. BuzzFeed, a pioneering digital publisher, but one that has repeatedly inflicted brutal efficiency cuts on its journalistic ranks, has embraced ChatGPT and will use it to personalise content for readers. This announcement gave an immediate boost to BuzzFeed’s flagging share price.

Jim Mullen, CEO of Reach, announced that he has a working group exploring AI and the “potential and limitations” of ChatGPT. This naturally caused concern as the company had just said it was shedding 200 jobs, around a half of them editorial.

Technophobia has not served journalism well in the past. Google was viewed with suspicion as an information gathering tool. Wikipedia was mocked. Scoops were obtained by expending shoe leather, not by staring at screens.

“Can you imagine being in journalism now without search or a mobile phone?” asks Charlie Beckett, founding director of Polis, the London School of Economics’ international journalism and society think-tank, who runs its pioneering JournalismAI programme.

ChatGPT has already demonstrated “extraordinary potential”, he argues. “It can write incredibly effectively, it can be very accurate about some things, but I would say no one should ever rely on it absolutely.” He reminds sceptical journalists that they are “already using AI tools” – search algorithms, for example – and have an obligation to inform themselves on the evolving technology. “AI is going to be part of the way journalism happens, so they should know about it.”

Indeed, the AI-driven RADAR

(Reporters and Data and Robots) project has been effectively deployed for more than four years by PA Media, whose wire copy sits at the heart of the UK news ecology and is highly-trusted by journalists. RADAR was developed by Gary Rogers and Alan Renwick of Urbs Media in association with PA to mine stories from open data sources.

RADAR is very different from ChatGPT in that it is a “journalistic tool” that leaves the human in control, says Rogers. “Journalists write the text themselves. It is a very human interface and very transparent, unlike some language model technologies.”

In 2020, RADAR’s team of six editorial staff supported local media with 1,400 data stories, written bespoke for the areas covered but made from a similar template. “If you think of AI technologies as journalist assistants rather than journalist replacements you get a better feel for how this fits into the industry,” says Rogers.

As for ChatGPT, he has concerns. “The danger of something that writes as convincingly as ChatGPT is that it is very plausible,” he says. “A news operation cannot afford to have something operating in its midst which it cannot trust – and you cannot trust ChatGPT.”

The fact-checking service NewsGuard dubbed ChatGPT “the next great misinformation super spreader” after it tested the app against 100 false narratives and found that it “delivered eloquent, false and misleading” accounts for 80 per cent of them.

NewsGuard found that malign actors could evade the app’s misinformation safeguards by simply asking it to write from the perspective of, say, a vaccines conspiracist or the Russian propaganda site Sputnik News.

The American media publisher CNET came unstuck in January after publishing stories using an internally developed AI tool to improve its standing in Google searches. After inaccuracies were exposed by rival publishers, CNET issued corrections for 41 out of 77 stories

generated by the AI tool. Its editor in chief, Connie Guglielmo, defended the activity and said CNET would continue “exploring and testing how AI can be used to help our teams”.

Former BBC director of news Richard Sambrook told Informed that AI could be used “constructively or malignly” and held potential both for “streamlining some journalism workflows” and “exacerbating” misinformation.

For Paul Bradshaw, professor in data journalism at Birmingham City University, ChatGPT’s lack of attribution for its source material is a major concern. He warns that the app’s “quite striking” quality of writing will make it easier for bad actors to create a news site “that looks authoritative”.

But he sees value in the technology for writing “first drafts” and says its ability to “craft a narrative” may help journalism students who have instincts for finding a story but face a “massive barrier” in telling it. He also praises ChatGPT as a brainstorming device, saying it “generates better ideas than

a lot of people do”. A Daily Mail article headlined Artificial Armageddon? suggested the technology could create mass unemployment, international conflict and calamity, loneliness and a misinformation monster.

Magda Woods, a data science specialist who works in magazines, thinks the usability of ChatGPT – which has taken off faster than even the social media network TikTok – will provide valuable clues for publishers wanting to improve the functionality of their own AI tools. She suggests that more usable AI tools may quickly emerge to help editors make commissioning decisions on stories that will appeal to target audiences.

She says the embrace of ChatGPT will also accelerate the development of AI-driven commercial applications in publishing, including the honing of subscription models and the testing of new products.

“It will speed up processes that were already going on,” she says. “ChatGPT is a phenomenon and the conversations happening within the industry are huge.”

Keeping it ethical

The easy access and mass public adoption of ChatGPT, or its sister product from Open AI, the image software DALL·E 2, creates major ethical dilemmas for journalists, both in the way they evaluate information and how they produce stories themselves.

The ChatGPT app’s gift for instantly producing lucid copy could be even more of a temptation to reporters under deadline pressure than it is to a student struggling with an essay.

Chris Frost, chair of the NUJ’s Ethics Council, has deep concerns. “We have only got to look at some of the data stories about Covid-19 and the misinformation that has come out

there,” he warns. “How are you going to be able to rely on an AI bot which is scraping whole data sets and is going to pick up stuff that is just not true? Somebody has to go through it and say where does this come from and can I believe it?”

ChatGPT could be a portal to future newsroom changes, some of them helpful, some painful. But experts consulted by Informed agreed the popular app must be treated with caution by journalists and the copy it produces subjected to rigorous fact-checking. “Currently it’s a bandwagon people are jumping on to and experimenting with,” says Richard Sambrook, emeritus professor at Cardiff University’s School of Journalism and former BBC director of news. “As it develops further we need guidelines around its use – if not, in due course, regulation.”

Spotlight

UrbanImages / Alamy Stock Photo



Read all about it

On the anniversary of the Cairncross Review on the sustainability of the press, Frances Rafferty reports on the state of the industry

It was five years ago that Theresa May, then prime minister, said the decline of credible news providers was leaving the public “vulnerable to news which is untrustworthy” as she announced a review into the sustainability of the UK press.

She cited falling circulations and the “hollowing-out of local newsrooms” and said the review would examine new funding models for the printed press at national, regional and local level. High quality journalism was a force for good, she declared.

Four years after the publication of *the review* its author, Dame Frances Cairncross, sounds deeply disappointed. In a letter to the Mail on Sunday she said: “My report in 2019 laid out nine recommendations to support and sustain the news media sector. So far, only one of these has been fully implemented. If we want a culture in which journalism can thrive, we need to do much more.”

The NUJ described the **government's response** to her report, which revealed there were around 6,000 fewer journalists working than the previous decade and that print circulation of national and local newspapers had halved, as a “wasted opportunity”. This was a polite way of saying the government had completely bottled what was seen as a once-in-a-generation chance to protect public interest journalism and curb the destruction of the industry by the tech giants.

So, where are we now? Following the pandemic and Ukraine war, in a much worse place. This year companies

announcing redundancies include Reach, publisher of the Mirror and Express and the largest UK regional newspaper group. News Corp, owner of The Times, The Sun and Talk Radio, said it would be pruning 5 per cent of its UK workforce, and 300 job cuts were announced at DC Thomson, publisher of the Beano and a number of Scottish local newspapers and titles in England. More jobs went at the BBC, Bauer and Time Out.

Things have not got better for NUJ journalists since the review's publication. The attrition rates on jobs and titles have added to workloads and pay remains low. The national Reach strike last year followed a 3 per cent pay offer at the same time as the company gave its top two executives pay packages worth more than £7m.

A Press Gazette **report** said 995 jobs at English-speaking news media businesses had been cut or put at risk in January 2023, accelerating a trend beginning in the second half of 2022. An **analysis** by the trade website noted the top four regional publishers controlled 88 per cent of the market. In terms of circulation, Reach was the largest at 32 per cent, followed by Newsquest (29 per cent), DC Thomson (15 per cent) and David Montgomery's National World which bought out Johnson Press after the Cairncross Review (12 per cent). When weekly and daily titles are combined, the leading publishers' control of publishing was almost two thirds (62 per cent) of the market. The voices of many independent publishers have been lost on the way.

Local radio is also under attack. BBC Local journalists in England have voted to take strike action following cuts which mean a loss of posts and sharing of programmes across the network which, the NUJ says, takes the local out of local radio. The BBC argues it is expanding online local news coverage, but the NUJ says the 5.7m listeners still deserve a proper service.

In response to the crisis caused by the

pandemic, the NUJ published its **News Recovery Plan** (NRP), with a separate plan for **Ireland**. This was a road map for resetting the media by putting public interest at the heart of journalism. It was an attempt to rebalance the power of the tech giants, such as Facebook and Google, which had been taking news content while sucking up all the digital advertising, leaving the traditional press high and dry. One recommendation was for a levy on the tech titans to support public-interest news. It argued: "Journalism is not just business and a healthy democracy requires a healthy media industry." The union promoted the plan in a series of public meetings across the UK and Ireland, with local activist and actor, Michael Sheen, adding a little showbusiness glitter to a Welsh gathering.

Edinburgh Freelance Branch took up the NRP's cause with vigour – holding a series of meetings with local MPs which resulted in the establishment of an industry-led, independent working party, including the NUJ, which made a set of **recommendations** to the Scottish government on ways to encourage a more diverse and thriving media and the Scottish Public Interest Journalism Institute was launched, chaired by Richard Walker, former Sunday Herald editor and founder of The National. He said as it will provide a public good, there was a case for public funding. In Wales, the NUJ was pivotal in the setting up of a similar working group which is due to report its recommendations this month.

However, it's not all bad news, new models are emerging. The Manchester-based email newsletter, The Mill, reached profitability just before its second birthday. Publishing through newsletter platform, Substack, it has 1,600 paying subscribers and its sister newsletters, the Liverpool Post and Sheffield Tribune, have reached 650 and 900 paying subscribers, respectively.

Thomas Barlow, of the Independent Media Association, says his organisation

has grown from 50 to 70 members in the past quarter. He believes solutions to problems of distribution and income generation are being found with innovations such as Quench and social networking service Mastodon.

Dame Frances Cairncross's letter to the Mail on Sunday said the legislation to give the **Digital Markets Unit** statutory powers to "mitigate the imbalance of power between tech platforms and publishers, along with targeted interventions to support local publishers" must be brought forward. The fight-back against the tech giants has already started with governments lining up to sue Google – the European Commission has already fined Google a total of €8.25bn for anti-trust violations covering more than 10 years and the Irish regulator has fined Facebook €265m for a privacy breach.

Both companies have shared a few crumbs from their trillion-dollar tables with journalist causes. A third of media executives in a Reuters Institute **survey** said they expected to get significant revenue from tech platforms for content licensing or innovation. However, Reuters noted many of these deals were due to expire and Facebook's parent

company, Meta, has reportedly said it will not be renewing current arrangements in the United States.

In January, an MPs' **report** said the quality and coverage of local news would continue to decline, thus damaging democracy, without support from the UK government. The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport select committee report called for an innovation fund for news to explore ways to fund publishers and encourage more philanthropic grants for local journalism. It said any support must reach smaller publishers and not just the multi-title news publishers. The cross-party group also said the BBC must reconsider its proposals for its local radio stations.

Jonathan Heawood, executive director of the journalism charity Public Interest News Foundation, provides funds for independent news providers. He agrees on the need for a government subsidy for public interest news, saying: "Policymakers urgently need to get behind the Cairncross recommendations, so that we can build a diverse and sustainable news economy that's fit for purpose in the twenty-first century."

All which shows there is plenty of mileage yet in the NUJ's News Recovery Plan.

Irish media commission

It's all systems go after a long delay by the Irish government in implementing the recommendations of the Future of Media Commission.

Priority is being given to two publicly funded schemes aimed at promoting public interest journalism. The Court Reporting and Local Democracy (LDR) schemes will be running on a pilot basis later this year. Funding may be allocated to each of the 25 district court areas in the state to promote coverage of district and circuit courts.

The government has appointed a

stakeholder forum which will meet on a consultative basis to review implementation of the report. Séamus Dooley, assistant general secretary represents the NUJ on the group.

The NUJ is proposing that freelance journalists as well as media organisations should be able to apply for the reporter schemes, which will go out for tender. On the Local Democracy Reporting Scheme funding may be allocated to each of the 31 administrative areas or on a regional basis.

Both schemes will be administered by the recently appointed Coimisiún na Meán.

International

India condemned for raids on BBC

The NEC has sent a message of solidarity to journalists working for BBC India after a series of raids on their Delhi and Mumbai offices and homes by the tax authorities following the screening of a critical documentary about Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

India: The Modi Question was broadcast on television only in the UK, but the Indian government attempted to block people sharing it, describing it as “hostile propaganda and anti-India garbage” with a “colonial mindset”.

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The documentary covered Modi's role in the 2002 Gujarat riots and tensions between his Bharatiya Janata Party and India's Muslim minority.

In January, more than a dozen students were detained for planning a screening of the documentary series.

The BBC said it would co-operate with the tax authorities, adding that it was supporting staff, some of whom “faced lengthy questioning or had been required to stay overnight – their welfare is our priority”. It said: “The BBC is a trusted, independent media organisation and we stand by our colleagues and journalists who will continue to report without fear or favour.”

Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary said: “These raids were a cynical exercise in intimidating the BBC and represent a serious erosion of press freedom in India. We join the IFJ in condemning the raids and will continue to support our colleagues in India to do their jobs.”

UK must protect media from threats

The UK would lose its UK's reputation as a haven for journalism and for free speech if the government failed to protect the media from foreign-based threats, Michelle Stanistreet has warned.

The NUJ general secretary's statement followed Iran International's closure of its London headquarters after advice from the police. Staff were told to work from home and the broadcaster said it would transfer output to its

offices in Washington DC. Journalists from Iran International and BBC Persian have been subjected to a campaign of intimidation and abuse from the Iranian authorities for more than a decade and the threats have escalated since the protests in Iran over the death in custody of Mahsa Amini last year, arrested for “not wearing her headscarf in accordance with standards”.

Since September 2022, at least 100 journalists have been arrested in Iran

and detained with at least 20 remaining in prison.

The NUJ statement said: “London is an international hub for journalism which broadcasts around the globe, around the clock. If news platforms do not feel safe or cannot carry out their work effectively, they will vote with their feet – damaging an important part of our economy and undermining the UK's reputation as a haven for journalism and for free speech.”

Russian union suspended

The International Federation of Journalists has suspended the Russian Union of Journalists. The decision was taken after an investigation into the conduct of the RUJ since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the formation of RUJ branches in annexed

Ukrainian territories. IFJ president, Dominique Pradalié, said: “It is urgent we now find ways to continue to support those independent journalists inside and outside Russia who are at risk or need assistance, and continue to deliver solidarity to our two Ukrainian affiliates.”

Hong Kong

The NUJ joined the International Federation of Journalists in urging Hong Kong's Chief Executive in Council, John Lee, to overturn a requirement for mandatory patriotic broadcasts. At least 30 minutes of programming on national education, national identity

and National Security Law (NSL) must be broadcast weekly as part of new legislation. The IFJ's Hong Kong Freedom of Expression report, published in October last year, revealed that at least 12 independent news providers have permanently closed in Hong Kong since 2020.