

THE IRISH JOURNALIST



Newsletter of the National Union of Journalists in Ireland

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New Govt must act to save media

The National Union of Journalists has called on political leaders to make the future of the media a key priority in the next programme for government, arising from the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the industry.

The NUJ is calling for a new Department of Arts, Culture, and the Media, claiming that the current alignment with Climate Action and Environment "is simply unworkable", due to the vast range of departmental responsibilities.

Following publication of the union's plan, 'From Health Crisis to Good News', Irish Secretary Séamus Dooley called on Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin and his Green Party counterpart Eamon Ryan to agree a programme for media recovery based on the document.

He has also written to the other parties in Dáil Éireann and is seeking cross-party consensus on the need for a media recovery plan.

In launching the document Séamus said, "Public service and commercial broadcasting organisations, national newspapers, the regional press, specialist titles and online/digital publications are tethering on the brink of ruin at a time when the role of the media was never more important to citizens."

Calling for bold, imaginative policies, including specific measures to protect the regional press and specialist publications across all platforms, he said,



Stand Up for Journalism

Over the past 12 months we have witnessed with alarm an increase in the number of violent threats against journalists in Northern Ireland. This month Loyalist paramilitaries have threatened journalists working at the Sunday Life and Sunday World newspapers in Belfast. This follows recent threats against a journalist working for The Irish News.

Attempts to intimidate journalists have come from assiduous Republican and Loyalist paramilitary groups and are intended to prevent the media from investigating their activities and exposing criminality. Threats against journalists and media organisations have no place in our society. It is vital that such behaviour is not tolerated.

No worker should be exposed to threats for doing their job. At a time when the media is playing such an important role in covering the terrible Covid-19 pandemic the recent, blanket threat is especially worrying. Elected politicians who criticised the threats have now become the subject of intimidation from groups without any mandate.

Attempts have been made to silence public representatives for defending the right to freedom of expression. Public support has sustained journalists during the dark days of the past. Today we assert the right of our communities to be informed by journalists operating without fear or intimidation.

It is the function of the media to ask difficult questions, to speak truth to power, to expose corruption, to shine a light into dark corners. Journalists in Northern Ireland will continue to do so. No group can be allowed to undermine the freedom of the press. Every effort must be made to ensure that those who are guilty of intimidation are brought to justice. We call for the immediate withdrawal of all threats against journalists in Northern Ireland and for the freedom of the press to be respected and protected.

- Public Representatives: MLAs, MPs, TDs, Senators, etc.
Members of Parliament: Sinn Féin, DUP, etc.
House of Lords: etc.
Business, Trade Unions and Civic Society: etc.
Media Organisations: etc.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Solidarity has never been more important

At this difficult time, our thoughts go first to our members and their families and loved ones who have been tragically affected by this terrible virus. We offer our deepest condolences to those who have lost loved ones and wish a full recovery to anyone who has fallen ill.

We also stand with our colleagues who have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic, and those who are left to pick up the slack in newsrooms with suddenly reduced resources.

The coronavirus pandemic has amplified inequities and weaknesses across our society, and the state of the media industry has been no exception.

Years before the pandemic changed so much in our daily and working lives, the NUJ had already called on government to establish a Commission on the Future of Media in Ireland.

Back in 2018, to mark World Press Freedom Day, Irish Secretary Séamus Dooley wrote to Taoiseach Leo Varadkar and opposition leaders to renew an earlier call by the union to set up such a commission. At that time, two years ago, Séamus said developments in print and broadcast had already lent the proposal "a sense of urgency".

How much more urgent that proposal is now, as the media industry finds itself struggling to survive under the devastating economic impact of the pandemic.

The NUJ has reiterated and updated that call, submitting a comprehensive recovery plan for media and calling on all parties involved in government-information talks to make the future of the media a key priority in the next programme for government. That plan is discussed in detail in the Irish Journalist on pages 1, 4 and 5.

Solidarity and union representation have never been more important, and our branch activists and officials continue to work tirelessly with members across this island.

We also hear in this issue from a sampling of branches on how they are staying in touch with members during the crisis, and from a West of Ireland reporter on work during the pandemic lockdown.

We urge any members with workplace issues or concerns who have not contacted their branch to do so. We would also urge members to encourage their colleagues who are not NUJ members to join, whether staff or freelance.

We are always stronger together, and perhaps even more so now, when we must be apart.

Carolyn Farrar
 Editor, Irish Journalist
irishjournalist@nuj.ie

Remembering Lyra McKee

#WeStandWithLyra trended on Twitter last month as NUJ members, joined by allies across Ireland and farther, marked the first anniversary of the killing of journalist and NUJ member Lyra McKee.

At 11am on Saturday, April 18th, the NUJ led an online celebration of Lyra's life and legacy to mark the anniversary, asking people to use social media to highlight the values Lyra embraced under the banner #WeStandWithLyra.

Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, said: "Lyra was a journalist who represented the best of Northern Ireland with a future ahead that reflected her optimism, her confidence, her ambition and her strong sense of social justice and commitment to equality.

"As we remember Lyra today, and think of her partner and family, we also think of journalists elsewhere who put their lives on the line when they get up and go to work each day.

"The greatest tribute we can pay Lyra is to find ways to encourage and promote the kind of



imaginative, insightful and brave journalism for which she will be remembered." Séamus Dooley, NUJ Irish secretary, said: "Lyra had an unrivalled zest for life and for living. That is what makes

her senseless killing so cruel. In her journalism she combined her passion for journalism with a deep commitment to social change.

"In her writings, in her approach to issues of poverty, equality and exclusion Lyra was not afraid to ask the difficult questions, to challenge the conventional and accepted wisdoms and to look for new and imaginative solutions to problems. That's her legacy."

He said: "Like Martin O'Hagan, Lyra did not ask for the crown of martyrdom. On her first anniversary it is important that we celebrate the legacy of a woman of imagination, humour and enormous talent.

"My thoughts are with Lyra's partner, family and colleagues for whom her spirit remains an abiding presence."

Séamus also welcomed the PSNI's renewed call to anyone with information about the killing to come forward and assist with the ongoing investigation.

Iconic comes under fire in the Dáil over its treatment of staff

The manner in which staff employed by Iconic Newspapers have been treated by the company was strongly condemned in the Dáil when independent Tipperary TDs Michael Lowry and Mattie McGrath raised concerns at the threat to media diversity in the regional press sector.

Outlining the position in Tipperary and Offaly, Deputy Lowry told Communications Minister Richard Bruton that staff had suffered “a crude swing of the axe and a distant diktat” with no consultation on their future

“They now control these three titles that heretofore thrived on their competitiveness and individuality. This clearly represents a media monopoly, which in turn is a disincentive to journalistic autonomy and traditional rivalry. Dedicated local journalists and contributors made these titles household names. Their hard work, local knowledge and empathy with communities, combined with the integrity of their reporting, built a bond and trust with the public. These titles are being ransacked of their unique, distinctive style and character. It is no longer about bringing the stories and spreading the news. Local papers are now the focus of ambition and greed,” Deputy Lowry declared.

Deputy McGrath echoed criticism of Iconic, accusing owner Malcolm Denmark for his “appalling treatment of hard-working journalists, staff journalists and local correspondents.”



“This pandemic is a scamdemic for big businesses. This behaviour was happening before the pandemic ever started. This man [Denmark] has destroyed the local papers and does not care about them. He paid himself the handsome sum of €3.1m last year, yet staff have not received a wage increase since 2008.”

Mr McGrath added: “He is recklessly riding roughshod over good, decent, hard-working journalists with families and who have served their communities well for decades. To add insult to injury, he is claiming the Covid payment to pay his staff even though the business is profitable. He is not interested in the *Tipperary Star*, *The Nationalist*, *The Midland Tribune*, or any other newspapers, right up as far *The Donegal Democrat* in Deputy Pringle’s constituency.”

At the time of going to press, consultations on redundancies were ongoing.

Not the full story

NUJ Irish Secretary Séamus Dooley has accused Communications Minister Richard Bruton of failing to acknowledge his own failure to deal with the emergence of a media monopoly across the Midlands and Mid-West region.

Reacting to the Dáil discussion on Iconic Newspapers, he said Bruton had failed to tell the full story.

“Deputy Michael Lowry raised legitimate concerns about the lack of diversity in Tipperary and the wider region. In doing so, he referred to the need for greater regulation of the regional newspaper sector.

“The reality is Mr Bruton did not use his powers to refer the acquisition of the *Midland Tribune* and *Tullamore Tribune* to the BAI for examination. Had he done so, the issues of editorial diversity and independence would have formed part of a BAI investigation and been debated in public at an Oireachtas committee.”

Mr Bruton told the Dáil: “Any takeover of a newspaper will be judged by the Competition Commission and by my Department in the context of plurality. Concentration in the market and the plurality of information available are both examined.

“I cannot give the Deputy an answer as to why any particular takeover was approved but the reasons will be on record as each case will have gone through the process that has been put in place.”

“In reality,” Séamus Dooley added, “the minister did not use all the processes at his disposal and ignored NUJ representations asking him to do so.

“That’s why readers of the *Midland Tribune* and *Tipperary Star* can now find the same front page story in two competing titles, why editorial roles are being combined and across Laois, Offaly, Tipperary and Limerick the distinct character of individual titles are being diminished.”



NUJ calls on all parties to commit to media rescue

The NUJ recovery plan for local and national media in Ireland includes the establishment of a Commission on the Future of Media and interim measures to save Irish media.

The NUJ news recovery plan for the UK and Ireland, *From Health Crisis to Good News: A recovery plan for the news industry* by the NUJ, can be downloaded from the NUJ website, www.nuj.org.uk. The plan is designed to sustain the press and media through the Covid-19 crisis and reinvigorate the industry into a reimagined future.

“A healthy democracy requires a healthy media industry,” NUJ Irish Secretary Séamus Dooley said. “The NUJ in Ireland calls on all parties engaged in government formation talks to commit to a media rescue plan and to the establishment of a Commission on the Future of the Media in Ireland.”

Journalism is not just a business, he said.

“In Ireland we have witnessed a new acceptance that the values of the market do not hold the key to protecting the welfare of our nation,” Séamus said. “There has been a welcome shift in public policy in health, education and social protection. A similar approach is needed to ensure the survival of local and national journalism.”

The NUJ call comes as the Irish media industry is experiencing the devastating impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

As Ireland sets about meeting the enormous challenges of the crisis, the NUJ is calling for a government-led strategic initiative to rescue the media, so that it may continue the vital role it has played during this unprecedented period of social and economic uncertainty.

As the consequences of the Covid-19 emergency on the Irish media become more apparent there is an urgent need for a reimagining of the State’s role in facilitating a diverse, vibrant and independent media, in enabling public interest journalism and in looking at imaginative solutions to secure employment in the industry.

The present crisis has shown just how vital it is to have a news media providing accurate information, how crucial it is for people to have trustworthy



Séamus Dooley. Photo by Derek Speirs

content and how essential it is that the government and authorities are held to account.

The crisis has also exposed the fragile state of the Irish media, the consequences of underinvestment by media organisations in editorial resources and the paucity of action by successive governments to protect public interest journalism.

“Public service and commercial broadcasting organisations, national newspapers, the regional press, specialist titles and on-line/digital publications are tethering on the brink of ruin at a time when the role of the media was never more important to citizens,” Séamus said.

That means bold, imaginative policies, including specific measures to protect the regional press and specialist publications, across all platforms.

By definition the establishment of a Commission on the Future of the Media would take time, and must operate in an inclusive and transparent manner. In the interim there is an urgent need for a government task force to implement short-term and medium-term policies to prevent the demise of the industry.

Targeted measures aimed at supporting jobs and quality journalism, and bolstering independent, diverse, ethically produced content are needed. Specific intervention is needed to protect and invest in hyperlocal and community enterprises.

THE NUJ NEWS RECOVERY PLAN



Short-term measures proposed by the NUJ include:

-- The transfer of all media policies to a new department, the Department of Arts, Culture and Media from the Department of Communications, Climate Change and Environment, marking a significant statement of commitment to the protection and development of the media.

-- A windfall tax of 6 per cent on the tech giants, using the UK Digital Services Tax model, towards funding a News Recovery Plan. The UK government committed to introduce a 2 per cent Digital Services Tax from April 2020 on the revenues of large businesses providing internet search engines, social media platforms and online marketplaces to UK users and the Irish government must not be afraid to follow the UK example.

-- Tax credits and interest-free loans to support journalist jobs, for frontline reporters covering the Covid-19 crisis and recovery.

-- A review of Covid-19 payment schemes with a view to greater flexibility in assisting freelance media workers who have sustained income losses but may still be in receipt of low earnings in a manner which excludes them from benefits.

-- No public money for firms making compulsory redundancies, cutting pay, giving executive bonuses or blocking trade union organisation. The NUJ is proposing the criteria already set out in competition legislation be used as a template for assessing applications for assistance.

These criteria are set out in the Media Merger Guidelines, May 2015, and set out factors to be considered in the public interest in determining approval of media mergers, having regard to media plurality and diversity and include editorial independence and regard to regulatory compliance and engagement with the industrial relations machinery of the State.

-- Companies receiving public funds are prohibited for five years from engaging in mergers and acquisition activity or leveraged buyouts that result in job losses or pay reductions.

-- Strategic investment in government advertising, including the hyperlocal sector, involving central and local governments and public bodies. The response of the media to the Covid-19 crisis and the increased engagement with readers reflects the relevance of the media as a reliable medium of news and public information.

-- The establishment of an innovation fund to promote public interest journalism at local and national level, developing the model used in the Simon Cumbers Media Fund established by Irish Aid.

-- Free vouchers for online or print subscriptions to all 18- and 19-year-olds, and tax credits for households with subscriptions.

-- Free vouchers for online or print subscriptions to people over 70 years old, in line with the free TV licence scheme.

-- Immediate steps to address the financial crisis in



public service broadcasting.

The medium-term measures include:

-- Establishment of a government-funded Journalism Foundation to invest in local news and innovative journalistic projects.

-- Confer "asset of community value" status on local newspapers, ensuring that titles are preserved for potential community ownership. The concept of "community status" is new in the Republic of Ireland but is common in other jurisdictions. Also allow the establishment of charitable status to media outlets that want it.

-- Employee representation of 25 per cent on executive boards in receipt of public funding.

-- Independent sustainable funding of public service broadcasting that protects its universality and prevents government interference.

-- Nationwide media literacy strategy to tackle disinformation and fake news.

-- Reform of media ownership rules, with a strengthened public interest test.

-- Training that opens up access to journalism, including apprentices for school-leavers. The absence of comprehensive in-service training is a regrettable feature of the Irish media industry.

-- Grant aid to enable training for journalists to transition from print to digital publications and to acquire new skills.

-- Protection for whistle-blowers and monitoring the potential impact of surveillance technologies being considered in response to Covid-19 challenge and easing of lockdowns.

-- Support for a global framework to protect and promote journalism and improve press freedom.

Media access:

In addressing the role of the media it is important to reassert the importance of accountability and transparency in ensuring public trust and confidence.

Resisting the moves to clamp down on journalistic access and to evade scrutiny is vital. The NUJ, its sister unions and the International Federation of Journalists are intrinsic to safeguarding worldwide media freedom. We also need to recognise that quality local journalism plays a critical underpinning role reporting on public health, providing an early warning protection in public health emergencies.

Aid packages for media are being introduced around the world; however a piecemeal approach will only go so far. The NUJ is calling for a global recalibration of the media industry and renewed commitments to press freedom, spearheaded by the IFJ and other international partners.

NI STANDS TOGETHER FOR PRESS FREEDOM

Northern Ireland unites against threats

Politicians, trade unions, church leaders, political parties, business groups and civic society members from all backgrounds united under the Stand Up for Journalism banner last month in one of the most diverse campaigns against violent threats ever witnessed in Northern Ireland.

Promoted by threats from dissident Republican and Loyalist groups against journalists and politicians, the campaign was co-ordinated by the NUJ and the three daily newspapers in Northern Ireland: the *Belfast Telegraph*, *Irish News* and *News Letter*.

The joint statement received international coverage and was supported by the secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the UK Culture Secretary.

The statement appeared in the *Belfast Telegraph*, *Irish News* and *News Letter* on May 20th.

International organisations such as the World Association of News Publishers, the International Federation of Journalists and the International Trade Union Confederation have also backed the NUJ calls.

This unprecedented joint initiative aims to highlight and challenge the increasing number of threats of violence inflicted on the media.

Under the banner 'Stand Up for Journalism', the public statement strongly asserted the right of journalists to work without threats, intimidation or harassment.

Séamus Dooley, NUJ assistant general secretary, said: "In the past the trade union movement took to the streets in protest against the threats to workers. In the difficult circumstances in which we find ourselves today, we rely on newspapers to highlight the threats to journalists.

"By working with the publishers and our members affected, we have been able to secure the support of a cross-section of society in Northern Ireland. We warmly welcome the strong stand taken by political and community leaders and look forward to a renewed drive to ensure journalists can safely carry out their work on behalf of the public."

Martin Breen, *Sunday Life* editor, said: "Enough is enough. Some 26 years after the ceasefires, terrorist organisations from both the loyalist and republican side are continuing to threaten journalists on an ongoing basis because we have been exposing their dirty deeds and criminal empires.

"We all have to stand up against these vile threats as their sole aim is to silence investigative journalism and curtail the public's right to know about those gangsters operating in their communities across Northern Ireland. We hold everyone to account and will continue to expose criminality and all wrongdoing no matter where it originates."

Brian Farrell, *Sunday World* editor, said: "The recent threats issued to our journalists only serves to



As the voice of trade unions across the world, the ITUC stands with those who suffer threats and intimidation in Northern Ireland.

It is essential that those with political and policing responsibilities take immediate steps to end the targeting of media workers.

Too many workers have been killed and injured in Northern Ireland. In extending solidarity with those who have been threatened my thoughts are also with the bereaved families who have lost loved ones.

— *Sharan Burrow, General Secretary, International Trade Union Confederation*

highlight the risk and importance of exposing the criminal menace that plagues our society. We will not be silenced nor intimidated and will not rest until those responsible are brought to justice."

Noel Doran, *Irish News* editor, said: "The increase in the number of serious threats against Belfast-based journalists is a deeply alarming development, so the significant level of support behind today's initiative is heartening.

"It sends out a strong message that all the attempts at intimidation will have no effect on our coverage, that the perpetrators need to be robustly pursued by the authorities and that civil society is firmly behind freedom of the press."

The NUJ has also launched a petition online at Megaphone.co.uk, called, Stop the rise in death threats against Northern Ireland Journalists. Members are urged to sign and give their support to this important campaign.



We need journalists to be completely free to be able to do their work. Any attempt to intimidate and terrorise journalists should be rejected by all of us in society.

The media are there to hold us to account, including church, to be truth tellers and make sure we know the truth. People of influence should be using every means possible to move them away from such attacks.

If anyone has information that they should bring it forward to the police or Crimestoppers.

— *Fr Martin Magill PP, Belfast*

NI STANDS TOGETHER FOR PRESS FREEDOM

Every worker has the right to go to work and come home from a day's work free from intimidation, fear or threat to them and their families.

Any functioning normal society has certain values and part of that is the freedom [of citizens] to go about their business without intimidation and fear of their lives.

Our movement cannot take to the streets now, so this is an alternative vehicle for showing solidarity with hard-working journalists and politicians who have had these outrageous threats brought to them.

— **Owen Reidy, Assistant General Secretary, ICTU.**

Journalists expose paramilitaries trying to behave in the old ways. There are some trying to move on and play a constructive role in their communities while others seem to continue as organised crime gangs, This is being exposed by journalists, so they do what they think they are entitled to do and threaten them.

My message is: It is time that you left the stage, otherwise the threats have brought a renewed focus to your activities and the full power of a democracy will be brought against you in the future, and to those from the so-called republican side who try to continue in the old ways.

— **Trevor Ringland MBE, solicitor and former Ireland and British & Irish Lions star**

These attempts to silence journalists in Northern Ireland cannot succeed. Those responsible for protecting citizens must ensure that paramilitary organisations are not allowed to continue to operate in any part of Northern Ireland. We salute those who have stood up for the right of the media to operate without fear or intimidation. The PSNI must be given adequate resources to combat this unacceptable behaviour and those who occupy positions of authority must be unambiguous in dealing with all paramilitary groups.

— **Anthony Bellanger, General Secretary, International Federation of Journalists**

A free press is vital. My bottom line is we do not need the paramilitaries, on both sides.

The Assembly and Executive have enough to worry about, as do journalists out covering stories for us. Their lives and their family's lives should not be under threat.

— **Baroness May Blood**



At a time when journalists are playing an important role in providing independent, verifiable information it is alarming to learn that reporters and media organisations in Northern Ireland have again been threatened by paramilitary groups.

The health, safety and welfare of workers is of paramount importance and it is extremely encouraging to witness such strong cross-community support for journalists currently.

There is no place in a civilised society for the intimidation of journalists or of those who defend the media's right to seek the truth, no matter how uncomfortable that may be for those under scrutiny.

— **Esther Lynch, Deputy General Secretary, European Trade Union Confederation**

The recent paramilitary threats targeting journalists and politicians represent an assault upon our society and upon democracy. This cannot be tolerated. Previous generations put their lives on the line to protect free speech. We must continue to defend that freedom today.

— **Arlene Foster, First Minister, Northern Ireland**

Intimidation of journalists and those in public life must never be tolerated. These threats, and those behind them should be condemned by each and every one of us.

The freedom of the press is of fundamental importance to our democracy and those who seek to attack that democracy have no place in our society.

— **Michelle O'Neill, Deputy First Minister**

A free press is an essential pillar of our democratic society. It is not expected that we agree with all opinions or news reports but what is expected is our expressed support for that pillar.

— **The Right Reverend Chris Hudson MBE, Moderator of the Non Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland**

WORK IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

Coping with the challenges of work in a time of coronavirus

By **Stephen Corrigan**

In the space of just a few short weeks, our lives have been turned upside-down. The challenges on a personal level have been great, but so too has the impact on our professional lives as local journalists.

While it has been an extremely difficult time for journalists in local newspapers, the Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the tenacity and commitment of colleagues right across the sector who have put their shoulders to the wheel to continue to deliver for our readers and the communities we serve.

Face-to-face interviews have become rare, while the amount of time we spend on the phone has increased

The change was swift - on Thursday, March 12, we were at our desks in the Connacht Tribune as normal. By the following Monday, we were scrambling to find spare keyboards and monitors to cobble together home offices from which we'd be operating for the foreseeable future.

Now more than ever, we're reliant on technology to get us through, and as anyone who has been working on a Virtual Private Network (VPN) for the past few weeks will tell you, it's an achievement to get through even one day without letting go of an involuntary stream of expletives prompted by a failed connection.



Stephen Corrigan

For most of us, the home office constitutes a laptop on the kitchen table or a desk in the corner of a bedroom - instead of lofty bookcases, most of us are displaying our bedspreads to the world via Zoom.

Face-to-face interviews have become rare, while the amount of time we spend on the phone has increased. Skype interviews and Zoom conferences are daily occurrences and it's now entirely normal to conduct an interview with your poorly lit bedroom as the backdrop.

While all these elements are new, the work remains the same. News is still happening all around us. In fact, there's more than ever - just perhaps different to what we're used to. The usual council meetings and regular markings are only now slowly returning, all with physical distancing built in.

What's shone through most in recent weeks is the unending good in people and the value of local news in highlighting those in our communities who are making the best of a bad situation.

As we find ourselves in yet another fight for our survival, local newspapers are week-in, week-out showing their worth and their determination to continue to fight that fight.

Stephen Corrigan is a news journalist with the Connacht Tribune.

NUJ Extra appeal

NUJ Extra is facing additional demands as members try to deal with hardship during the Covid-19 emergency.

Freelances and staff can apply for assistance from the charity, the union's solidarity fund for those in need.

We are extremely grateful to branches who have already contributed to the fund. Branches and

individual members are asked to help us deal with the high level of appeals. All donations welcome. Perhaps your branch might consider an online event as a solidarity fund raiser?

We all encourage those who may qualify for assistance to apply in strict confidence.

Details available online at <https://www.nuj.org.uk/work/nuj-extra>.

Supporting journalism in difficult times

By Michael Foley

By any criteria, the Irish media have so far done a good job covering the Covid-19 pandemic. It has used authoritative sources, has not hyped miracle cures or given credence to the social media conspiracy theories and has communicated important information accurately, reliably and in a timely fashion and has questioned both government ministers and those advising government as is its role.

It has helped that, unlike in Britain, health and science correspondents have been to the fore, those with the medical and expert contacts who understand the context and know what a virus is. In Britain the pandemic is often covered as if it was solely a political issue rather than a public health issue.

Journalists have, of course, covered the politics. It is the politicians who have to make the decisions following the advice of the medical experts, those experts who are now household names, thanks to the media. There is also the huge story of the government formation talks, so it is not exactly a slow news period.

In more recent weeks some of the opinion pieces have been pushing for a loosening of restrictions in ways that do not necessarily reflect the public mood. Well over half, according to an opinion poll for the Department of Health, are happy with the pace being taken towards normalisation.

Only two months ago the discussion about the future of the media was whether those getting their news on Facebook or Google would ever return to real journalism. Then came coronavirus and they did. Viewing figures for news and current affairs are up, online engagement with newspapers is enormous. The new subscription-led Irish Independent now has over 20,000 subscriptions; it was planning for about 8,000 by now, while The Irish Times has 120,000 subscribers, according to full-page adverts it has placed in its own newspaper.

The problem is, as every journalist knows, media depends on advertising as well as an audience and advertising spend is way, way down, between 60 and 70 per cent down, and that cannot be sustained.

Digital advertising has also fallen, but its market share is increasing. This is not good news for Irish media, given Google and Facebook's control of digital advertising spend.

Advertising might come back, but will it be in time to



Michael Foley

rescue the media? Already there have been job losses and many journalists are taking pay cuts. The Journal.ie is seeking financial help from its readers.

Every so often a government minister will say how important the media is for getting important information out, for unifying communities and also for asking the hard questions. But it goes no further than ministers tweeting stories from Susan Mitchell or other health writers.

Some small aid has been given to independent radio, but RTÉ still face a financial crisis and newspapers, especially local newspapers, are facing an existential threat.

The government could help but is showing little sign that it will. The British government is spending up to £45 million as part of a three-month partnership called, All in This Together. One part of that was a wrap-around on every UK title entitled, "Stay at home for the NHS, your family, your neighbours, your nation the world and life itself". There will be other initiatives getting important information to people through press and online advertising.

Across Europe, measures have also been put in place to aid the media at this time. News kiosks are allowed to remain open, in recognition of media and journalism being an essential service, while Belgium has launched a public information advertising campaign through the media. Denmark plans to compensate media organisations for revenue losses and Sweden is working on a state aid package to support the media.

In the long term, a full inquiry into the future of the media in Ireland is necessary, but in the short term the NUJ has called for a crisis forum to include the government, the NUJ and media industry representatives to examine how a vital service can be protected.

Ethical journalism survives when journalists are paid properly and work for independent media. Some years ago, the International Federation of Journalists had a slogan that said ethical journalism was dependent on journalists having a decent wage and standard of living. Then it was assumed it referred to those working in emerging democracies, but now it might be something for us to take note of.

Michael Foley is vice chair of the Ethics Council, where he represents the Republic of Ireland

WORK IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

A tale of two seminars . . .

By Neil Ward

Before coronavirus changed everything this year, NUJ Dublin P&PR branch had planned some innovative activity for 2020, kicking off with two seminars under the banner '2020 VISION'.

Simon Devilly presented 'Decoding an Election' in January, providing expert advice on how to cut through the political communication and white noise of a modern election. He provided guidance in campaign and election count coverage; we learned how the quota is derived, and how and when a candidate's surplus is redistributed.

That now seems like a different world. Many of us are now afraid for the health and wellbeing of loved ones - and ourselves. Some may be grieving for those they have tragically lost. We offer our sincere condolences to those members.

In March we were to host multi award-winning photographer and videojournalist Bryan O'Brien, fresh from his third win at the UK Picture Editor's Guild, to speak about the value of creativity and rethinking in visual journalism, and his use of Twitter and Instagram to promote and display photography and video. Unsurprisingly, given the demands of contemporary communication channels, this was fully subscribed.

But suddenly, events overtook us and we had to cancel the event. Like our colleagues across the country and farther, we are now all stronger together by being apart.

Despite the major problems we face in which members have suffered job losses, the branch remains confident that there are clear positives for the future. We can see a revival in the public appreciation of professional, verifiable and trustworthy journalism replacing the creep of 'fake news' and opinion on platforms that need radical realignment in a post-COVID-19 world. Reliable news has become paramount in this existential crisis. Public service looks like it's making a comeback in the public's affection too – and dare we say in times of such fear people come together. Trade unions will be essential actors in the economic debate and shaping the narrative of reconstruction. We need to organise.

Branch meetings will now be held in cyberspace on selected Tuesdays at 6.30pm; all members are welcome and will receive emailed invitations. Members wishing to virtually attend or propose issues to discuss, or to ensure we have your email address, should email nuj.dublin.ppr@gmail.com to give notice.

Neil Ward is chair of the Dublin P&PR branch.

West of Ireland branch staying connected with members

By Siobhan Holliman

As branches have gotten bigger, meetings have gotten smaller and less frequent.

For those who have memories of smoke and people-filled rooms in Tuam and Castlebar where motions for strike were proposed as often as another round at the bar was called, the sparse attendance at branch meetings could be viewed with sadness.

It might be sad but it's a stark reality and reflects perhaps apathy among some members and the pressure-filled lives we lead.

The West of Ireland branch is trying to stay connected with its members and to be relevant in this unprecedented crisis. A large proportion of our members work in local media as journalists, photographers and freelancers. The events just before and after St Patrick's Day instilled a real sense of shock and fear: Papers saw advertising bookings disappear, events cancelled and usual diary markings postponed. It was the same grim picture for local radio and colleagues in the West working for TG4, Raidió na Gaeltachta and RTÉ.

Branch reps were quick to voice concerns with our NUJ officials regarding the massive threat to the extremely fragile local media sector. Everyone was in agreement about the seriousness of the situation. A statement issued on March 20 by the Irish Secretary and joint Cathaoirleach Dara Bradley and Siobhán Holliman called on the government to examine "imaginative means" of supporting vulnerable sectors of the industry.

Members are aware of the pressure on local media

and it is vital that we, as a branch in the West of Ireland, continue to highlight the importance of retaining local papers and radio. We have also appealed to staff members to keep freelance members in mind if any work arises.

We continue to email our members asking them to let us know of proposed cuts or changes to their workplace and we also try and offer information and support that might be useful. Honestly, members are slow to respond, which is a pity as it's vital that the branch and NUJ officials are made aware of any proposed cutbacks. We will continue to highlight the need for additional supports.

A video conference call took place between Siobhán and Dara and Fianna Fáil spokesperson on Communications Deputy Jack Chambers who has raised our concerns with Minister Richard Bruton and continues to issue statements highlighting the crisis and need for definitive action.

We have also shared information from ICTU regarding the availability of free SOLAS courses which have been looked into by some members eager to upskill while out of work.

Branch officers can't meet as we had during these times of lockdown, but there have been plenty of message discussions and emails. Some of us are still trying to figure out new ways to communicate in groups and we're optimistic about hosting a virtual branch get together over the coming weeks.

Siobhan Holliman, IEC joint cathaoirleach, is chair of the West of Ireland branch.

Podcast keeps freelances up to date

The Dublin Freelance branch has launched a podcast to reach out to freelances in the absence of Freelance Forum events.

The podcast, called Freelance Forum, was started after coronavirus restrictions led to the cancellation of the March Freelance Forum event in Dublin. Episodes address useful issues for freelances, from pitching to podcasting, finances to mindfulness.

“Now more than ever we needed the forum to keep in touch with freelances,” Gerard Cunningham of the Freelance Forum and Dublin Freelance branch, said. Gerard produces and hosts the podcast.

There are already eight episodes available online, with guests Padraig O’Morain, former Irish Times journalist who writes about and teaches mindfulness; Sinead Ryan, a print and broadcast financial correspondent, on freelance finances; Emmet Ryan, editor of Connected at the Business Post, on freelancing; journalist and author Joe Joyce on writing fiction; NUJ Irish Secretary Séamus Dooley on the future of journalism; broadcaster and trainer Aileen O’Meara on podcasting and audio production; RTÉ producer Sarah Binchy on Sunday Miscellany and other opportunities for pitching to RTÉ; and journalist Ken Foxe on using Freedom of Information.

For the past 10 years, the Freelance Form, with support from the NUJ and Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI), has drawn people to Dublin twice a year for events that offered tips from commissioning editors and other insights into developments in the field. They were early to explore a number of advances, anticipating such phenomena as the rise in podcasting.

Gerard has applied to journalism schemes for funding to cover expenses for the Freelance Forum projects. While a decision is still pending, he decided to go ahead with the podcast.

“We had the concept and we decided we’re just going to do it,” he said. Gerard had produced a radio documentary funded by BAI, Mechanical Meitheal, about software localization efforts in the Irish language, but podcasting was new for him.

“I’m enjoying it,” he said. “It’s a new process so I’m learning on the go and learning fairly fast.” It takes him about two days to turn around each episode.

The Freelance Forum podcast is available on the podcast app of your choice and members are encouraged to leave a rating if the app allows. Gerard



Aileen O’Meara, broadcaster and trainer.

would also like members to get in touch with him with any ideas for future episodes at tribunalreporter@gmail.com.

The Freelance Forum podcast is available through iTunes, Stitcher, Pocket Cast, and other podcast apps.

Seamus Martin joins Fetisov awards council

Veteran Irish journalist Seamus Martin has been appointed to the council of the Fetisov Journalism Awards.

The awards have a fund of 500,000 Swiss francs under a programme devised by Russian businessman, scientist and philanthropist Gleb Fetisov, who was jailed by the Putin regime.

Details of the jury and the expert council as well as a call for entries can be found online at the Fetisov Journalism Awards website, <https://fjwards.com>.

NUJ condolences

Sympathy is extended to Helen Taylor, Irish office, and to her family on the recent death of her father, Bill.

Bill (86) died at the Mater Hospital, Dublin following a short illness.

Online seminar on government supports for new start-ups

The Dublin P&PR and Dublin Freelance branches are hosting an online seminar on Irish government supports for start-up businesses.

The seminar will be held on the evening of June 24th on Zoom, at a time to be announced. The event will be chaired by NUJ rep George Kiely, who has more than 30 years experience in developing business.

The seminar will focus on the financial assistance and other supports that Irish state-sponsored bodies have to offer micro-businesses, but will also address such issues as how to start a micro-business, developing a business plan and how to approach a bank.

The Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) located in every county in Ireland are particularly relevant here, and there are also many providers of financial and training schemes for individuals and groups interested in starting a business. Experts in the sector, particularly LEOs, will engage with participants in this interactive online seminar.

Barry McCall proposed the event and organisers said the seminar will be of great use to journalists and other members interested in creating new enterprises within the sector.

For more information, contact the P&PR branch at nuj.dublin.ppr@gmail.com.

Fergal Bowers goes on record for Covidaid Ireland charity project

Fergal Bowers, RTÉ health correspondent, is part of the team behind a new charity music project, Covidaid Ireland, to help people meet the challenges brought by the coronavirus crisis.

The project will benefit Age Action Ireland and its hardship fund, which was established with the Irish Red Cross. The funds will be used to assist people most in need who have been affected by Covid-19.

Covidaid features a song originally recorded by Mike Oldfield in 1975, 'On Horseback', which has been re-imagined musically for the fundraiser. The single is available for download on iTunes, GooglePlay and all other music platforms for €1.29.

The project features singers and musicians who have volunteered their time, including Gemma Goodey, Noah Byrne, Robyn Byrne, Emma Burke, Isla Burke, Eoin Burke, Niamh Grant, Moya Grant, Méabha Lynch, Veronica Ricketts, Lauren Rix and Aoibhe Smyth. The guitarist is Kyle Tyther.

Covidaid Ireland was devised by Fergal, who provides the spoken word on the song, with Irish producer and composer Gary Grant, who produced



the track. Fergal collaborated with Gary to create this coming together of musicians and singers from the four corners of Ireland, while Gary, based in Canada, is under lockdown in Toronto.

The main sponsor is Uniflu and the initiative is also supported by the Irish Pharmacy Union, with community pharmacies promoting the song.

Paddy Connolly, Chief Executive of Age Action Ireland said, "Age Action needs to raise at least €250,000 to be able to meet current need, so we hope that the public will get behind Covidaid Ireland, download the song or donate at the Covidaid Ireland GoFundMe page today to help us help older people in vulnerable situations."

Visit www.covidaidireland.ie for more.