

From Health Crisis to Good News

A recovery plan for the news industry in Northern Ireland

As Northern Ireland comes to grips with the damage wrought by the Covid-19 crisis the National Union of Journalists, UK and Ireland, is calling for a strategic initiative to rescue the media so that it may continue the vital role it has played on a daily basis during this unprecedented period of social and economic uncertainty.

As daily and weekly newspapers face unprecedented challenges across all platforms – print, broadcasting and digital – journalists are fearful for their future and that of the industry. The media is facing a crisis on a scale never previously experienced, with drops in advertising revenue of between 60 and 90 per cent during lockdown.

As the consequences of the Covid-19 emergency on the 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 enthusiastic people are for trustworthy content and how essential it is that the government and authorities are held to account.

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

There is an inevitable and necessary tension between the political establishment and the news media. Journalists are called to speak truth to power and in Northern Ireland media organisations have frequently incurred the wrath of political parties simply for fulfilling that role.

In a divided society the practice of journalism is extremely difficult. In Northern Ireland journalists face unique challenges and regularly operate in the shadow of intimidation and harassment – conditions that underline how vital it is for journalism to scrutinise and hold power to account.

The NUJ is extremely grateful for the enormous outpouring of support for our recent campaign against threats to our members from paramilitary groups over recent months.

The response from the business community, from trade unions, from civic society and from public representatives across the political divide reflects a welcome recognition of the important role of public interest journalism in a democracy.

If trust and confidence is to be maintained in public administration, in local government, in policing and in the administration of justice it is vital that media organisations have the resources to enable journalists to provide accurate, timely and truthful reports.

An ethos of open government and a willingness to engage more fully with the media would enhance democracy in Northern Ireland. The current system for briefings at Stormont has been criticised and does not always allow scrutiny by journalists from across a range of media organisations and freelancers. At local government level there remains a culture of secrecy and an apparent resentment on the part of some elected representatives at the presence of journalists. The concept of “in committee” council meetings should have no place in a modern democracy.

Public service and commercial broadcasting organisations, national newspapers, the regional press, specialist titles and digital publications each plays a vital role in the journalistic ecosystem – yet many outlets are teetering on the brink of ruin at a time when the role of the media has never been more important to citizens.

The impact of the Covid-19 crisis is both macro and micro, national and local. The fundamental assumptions which have long underpinned government policies have been subject to intense scrutiny.

In setting out our proposals for the media in Northern Ireland we believe that there must be recognition that public interest journalism is a public good which must be protected in a healthy democracy. That requires commitment from the UK government, from the Northern Ireland Executive, and from all stakeholders in the media industry.

That means bold, imaginative policies, including specific measures to protect the regional press and specialist publications, across all platforms. Newspapers have been particularly badly hit by this crisis – with severe constraints on distribution and delivery systems on top of the collapse in advertising revenue. Industry experts are predicting unprecedented levels of title closures in the coming months if no intervention is secured.

There is also a strong tradition of freelance journalism and independent productions in Northern Ireland. Freelance journalists are among those worst hit by the crisis.

Special attention must be paid to ensuring the maintenance of sporting, cultural and linguistic diversity, so that all the citizens of Northern Ireland are served by the media.

Public service broadcasting also plays a critical role. The BBC is facing existential challenges, with over £125million Covid-related costs to make good on top of the £800million savings to be secured in this Charter. The diverse broadcasting and programming, in Northern Ireland and the UK’s other nations and regions, is a core part of the BBC’s remit and further cuts and mass redundancies will inevitably compromise the breadth and quality of content.

Given that many viewers in Northern Ireland value access to RTÉ and TG4 the NUJ welcomes the decision of the Irish government to establish a Commission on the Future of the Media in Ireland. However there is an urgent need to address the financial crisis in RTÉ and to ensure that the ability of the Irish public service broadcaster to adequately cover news across Northern Ireland is not compromised because of the failure to reform the TV licence. The importance of TG4 in providing Irish language coverage is recognised in the Good Friday Agreement.

Far from allowing this global health crisis to precipitate a collapse in quality journalism, at a time of greatest need, the NUJ is seeking intervention through a range of short and medium term measures to not only survive this crisis, but to revitalise an industry that plays a key role in the spectrum of essential public services.

That is why we are seeking the support of the Northern Ireland Executive, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee for our campaign to secure the future of Northern Ireland's media organisations, who have served their communities through the darkest days and are now struggling to survive.

The role of the media in maintaining community solidarity during the Troubles and the heroic efforts made to ensure continuous publications in the most adverse circumstances imaginable has long been recognised.

Following the restoration of the elected Assembly and the formation of the Executive the media remains an important bulwark of democracy. At local authority level it is important that local news organisations continue to report on the decisions which impact upon the education, health, welfare, and wellbeing of citizens.

This plan sets out a framework for restoring and developing journalism in Northern Ireland considering the unique social, economic, and political landscape.

Many of the key measures require the support of the UK government.

The short-term measures include:

- A windfall tax of 6 per cent on the tech giants, using the Digital Services Tax, towards funding a News Recovery Plan.
- Tax credits and interest free loans to support journalist jobs, for frontline reporters covering the Covid-19 crisis and recovery.
- No public money for firms making redundancies, cutting pay, giving executive bonuses or blocking trade union organisation.
- Strategic investment in government advertising, including the hyperlocal sector, involving central and local governments and public bodies.
- Further funding by NESTA's Future News Fund of innovative, public interest journalism.
- Free vouchers for online or print subscriptions to all 18-and-19-year olds and tax credits for households with subscriptions.
- Full transparency around expenditure on public advertising, with particular reference to the decisions which inform the placement of advertisements.

The Medium-term measures include:

- Establishment of a government-funded Journalism Foundation – as recommended in the UK's Cairncross Review – to invest in local news and innovative journalistic projects.
- Confer "asset of community value" status on local newspapers – like community pubs – ensuring that titles are preserved for potential community ownership.
- Tax breaks, rate relief and other financial support for local social enterprises and journalistic cooperatives taking over titles from major regional operators, running them as not-for-profit enterprises.

- 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.
- Protection for whistleblowers 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.

The NUJ is working with the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) to meet the challenges to press freedom thrown up by the pandemic. The IFJ, NUJ and sister unions are resisting moves to clamp down on journalistic access and authorities evading scrutiny. The plan says: “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.”