

THE IRISH JOURNALIST



Newsletter of the National Union of Journalists in Ireland

Summer 2021



Journalist Lyra McKee will be remembered on Thursday at a special event in the lead-up to DM weekend. Last month, Derry council buildings, including City of Derry Airport, the council offices and the Guildhall were lit in rainbow colours to celebrate Lyra's life and mark the two-year anniversary of her tragic murder. (See page 4).

Online DM key to the future

By Séamus Dooley, Irish Secretary

The multiple challenges facing the NUJ will be brought into sharp focus at the union's first ever online delegate meeting on May 21st and 22nd.

DM 2021 takes place against the backdrop of the global Covid-19 pandemic, which has had a catastrophic impact on the media across all platforms.

The financial consequences of the media crisis and the financial measures needed to secure the long-term future of the NUJ as an independent, cross-border union for journalists will dominate the opening day of conference while the report of General Secretary Michelle Stanistreet will focus on outstanding achievements by the union at a time of unprecedented demands for service.

In the run-up to the formal conference there is a wide range of seminars, meetings and events open to all union members.

Among the highlights will be Monday's talk on the

union's response to the Covid crisis, featuring Future of Media Commission member Siobhan Holliman.

Thursday's public service broadcasting commission will hear from a diverse range of speakers, including Irish language producer and RTÉ Trade Union Group Secretary Cearbhall Ó Síocháin.

At 6.30pm on Thursday night, the NUJ will remember Lyra McKee with a special panel discussion including Lyra's partner Sara Canning, her friend and colleague Kathryn Johnston and ICTU Assistant General Secretary Owen Reidy.

Throughout the week there will also be training events. While conference is confined to delegates and nominated observers, the week-long programme of events is open to all members.

The Covid pandemic, the union's news recovery plan and threats to journalists and journalism will be among the topics discussed at the conference, chaired by President Sian Jones.

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A week of online events for DM 2021, pages 3-4; Journalism: Not just busin€ss, pages 6-7; Minding your digital footprint, page 15.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Important work ahead for delegates

The Delegate Meeting is an opportunity every two years for activists from across the union to come together to discuss and decide issues of importance.

This year, Covid restrictions means we will not be able to meet in person – and led to DM being postponed for a year – but the work to be done is as important as ever. With motions from branches across the sectors and regions, the agenda provides an important look at priorities and concerns across the union.

The fact that DM 2021 is online will also make it more accessible to members, and that is to be welcomed. It wouldn't be surprising if there are delegates and observers who may have been interested in taking part in previous years but were not in a position to travel.

And in the week leading up to DM there is a rich programme of online events and workshops open to all members.

One of the biggest issues on the agenda for the future of our union will be the proposed rise in subs, which would be the first in seven years. There will always be opportunities for people on lower salaries to apply to avail of the reduced contribution rate, but Chris Frost, Finance Committee chair, has reported on the need for the union to secure this increase if it is to continue to provide members with the services they deserve. There was a report from Chris in the Winter 2019 issue of The Irish Journalist, in advance of what was to be the 2020 Delegate Meeting.

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If there are developments around your branch or chapel for The Irish Journalist, please contact us at irishjournalist@nuj.ie.

Carolyn Farrar
Editor, The Irish Journalist



NUJ Extra is there for you

The union's charity NUJ Extra is launching a third wave of support for NUJ members who have suffered lost work as a result of Covid-19 and lockdowns.

NUJ Extra have committed to providing funding until June 21st. Members who have lost work due to the effects of the pandemic or the response to it should contact NUJ Extra using their online form if possible, though a paper version is available.

Members who have claimed before and members who have not yet claimed are urged to apply. If you claim now for the first time and NUJ Extra can see that you would have benefited from previous support, they will backdate the payment to you.

NUJ Extra trustees urge all NUJ members to seek out those colleagues who need our help and encourage them to get in touch.

To apply you need to show that you have paid full NUJ membership subscriptions for at least one year; details or examples of work lost or the impact on your livelihood; and that you have claimed all benefits to which you are entitled and accessed any government support available.

To all other members, NUJ Extra says this: Please do what you can to fundraise for NUJ Extra. There has never been a more important time to donate.

You can reach NUJ Extra at extra@nuj.org.uk.

Creativity in visual journalism discussion with Bryan O'Brien

The Dublin P&PR branch is hosting a free online discussion next month with award-winning Irish Times photographer and video journalist Bryan O'Brien.

Bryan, a three-time winner at the UK Picture Editor's Guild awards, will 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.

The branch organises two or more seminars each year; this is its first for 2021.

The event is at 6.30pm, Wednesday, June 9th. The event is free, but registration is required at <https://www.eventbrite.ie/e/nuj-ppr-branch-creativity-and-visual-journalism-with-bryan-obrien-tickets-152252757095?ref=estw>

Spaces are limited, so people are urged to book early.

NUJ condolences

Sympathy is extended to Irish Secretary Séamus Dooley on the death of his partner of 19 years, Brian Cooke.

Brian, who died suddenly and peacefully at home recently, will be familiar to many members of the union through his attendance at NUJ events and functions over the years.

Gear up for DM with a week of special events

A week of online events, taster training sessions, trade union workshops, and a Friday social, will lead into the union's first online DM.

On Thursday, May 20th, at 6.30pm, there will also be a special event, Remembering Lyra McKee, with a panel including Lyra's partner Sara Canning, her friend and colleague Kathryn Johnston and ICTU Assistant General Secretary Owen Reidy.

Details and booking information for all events are at the NUJ website, www.nuj.org.uk

Talk-ins

Monday May 17th, 5pm: Following the Road Map: NUJ's News Recovery Plan. (See story, page 4)

Tuesday, May 18th, 5pm: The Right to Know, with NUJ President Sian Jones; Rob Evans, The Guardian; Jenna Corderoy, openDemocracy; investigative journalist Paul Lashmar; and Tim Dawson, NEC.

Wednesday, May 19th, 5pm: International solidarity, with Jeremy Dear, deputy general secretary, IFJ, and panel.

Thursday, May 20th, 5pm: Defending public service broadcasting, with Rebecca Keating, Radio 4; Cearbhall Ó Síocháin, RTÉ Trade Union Group secretary and Irish language producer; Jo Stevens, Labour media and digital shadow secretary; Sir Peter

Bazalgette, ITV chair; Owen Evans, S4C chief executive; and Patrick Barwise, author, The War Against the BBC.

Lunchtime skills sessions

Monday, May 17th, 12.30-2.30pm, News writing with David McKay, NUJ Training Scotland; Tuesday, May 18th, 12.30-1.30pm, Podcasting with Dan Mason; Wednesday, May 19th, 12.30-1.30pm, Social media campaigning with Dan Mason; Thursday, May 20th, introduction to scriptwriting with James Doherty, NUJ Training Scotland; Thursday, May 20th, 3-4pm, Fast and free online tools for journalists with Dan Mason.

Trade union workshops

Tuesday, May 18th, 12 noon to 1pm, Equality in action, with Natasha Hirst, Equality Council chair; Caroline Holmes, NUJ reps training; Frederica Cocco, FT rep; and Raj Ford, BBC rep; Wednesday, May 19th, 12 noon to 1pm, Organising and recruitment in a hybrid/remote workplace with Caroline Holmes, NUJ reps training co-ordinator.

Friday night social

Friday, May 21st, 7.30pm, with comedian Mark Thomas; comedian Shazia Mirza; and musical satirists Johnny & the Baptists.

Online Delegate Meeting is the key to the future

Continued from page 1

Inevitably it is the issue of the union's finances which has generated most debate in the run-up to DM.

The Irish Executive Council and a number of Irish branches have already indicated support for a motion by the union's National Executive Council for an increase in subscriptions rates which Chris Frost, chair, Finance Committee, has warned is an essential pre-requisite to the union's survival.

In an unprecedented move the NUJ's staff unions in Ireland, SIPTU and the officials' chapel, are writing to delegates urging acceptance of the NEC proposal amid fears that a failure to secure the union's finances will force a merger with a general union.

It is seven years since NUJ subscriptions have been increased. A measure of the interest in the finance debate is the fact that the original NEC motion has attracted ten amendments to that motion seeking in the main to reduce the increase or add new categories and one motion opposing any increase.

The NEC is proposing an increase in subs rates of a maximum of 13% for 2021 and a further 3 to 5% for 2022. This should increase subscription income from its present £4.7m in 2020 to between £5.2m and £5.3m in 2021 and £5.35m to £5.5m in 2022.

NUJ subs are based on bands. Under the NEC proposal, lower-paid members will not be adversely impacted and the percentage increase sought for grade one is lower than the other grades.

Grade	2020 (as now)	2021	2022
Grade one:	£180pa (€216)	£192pa (€228)	£204pa (€240)
Grade two:	£216pa (€276)	£240pa (€300)	£252pa (€312)
Grade three:	£300pa (€372)	£336pa (€408)	£348pa (€420)

Despite significant efforts union membership has declined overall and paying membership has fallen by 21.8% over the past 10 years, from 28,170 to 22,027. Even during the Covid-19 pandemic we continue to recruit new members and any subs increased must be matched by an intensified recruitment drive.

The problem is that recruitment only works if the NUJ has the capacity to meet the needs of members. It is worth noting that staffing levels have decreased from 61 in 2008 to 35 at present, thus reduced by almost half since the last rise in subs. There is no capacity for further reductions in staffing levels.

Over the last year staff accepted a temporary move to a four-day week as a necessary measure, which entailed a pay cut and accepted a move from a defined benefit scheme to a defined contribution scheme. In this regard NUJ employees share the experiences of many members.

The decisions made online this month at DM2021 will shape the future of the union.

Remembering Lyra



NUJ members are being invited to take part in a special online event celebrating the life and legacy of Lyra McKee on Thursday, May 20th, the eve of the union's delegate meeting.

Speakers will include Lyra's partner, Sara Canning, journalist Katherine Johnson and Owen Reidy, ICTU General Secretary. Séamus Dooley, Assistant General Secretary will chair the event. Details at www.nuj.org.uk

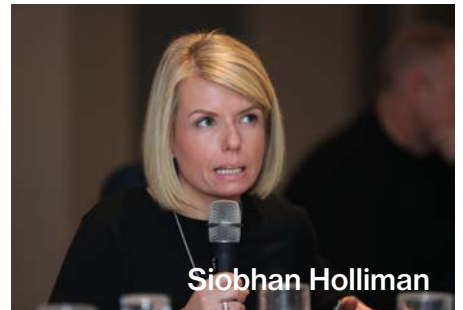
Above, Mayor of Derry City and Strabane District Council, Cllr Brian Tierney, pictured with Sara Canning, and friend Sinead Quinn, at the council offices on Strand Road, just one of the buildings that were lit up to mark the second anniversary of Lyra's death on April 18th.

Charting the recovery

General Secretary Michelle Stanistreet will chair the opening event of DM 2021 on Monday, May 17th, the first of a series of evening seminars open to all members of the union.

The panel discussion will review the significant progress made across the UK and Ireland since the launch of the union's News Recovery Plan, "From Health Crisis to Good News", in April 2020. There will be a strong focus on future challenges and opportunities, reflected in the theme of DM, "Not Just for the Crisis Years".

The speakers will be Siobhan Holliman, joint chair, IEC, and a member of the Future of Media Commission; Joyce McMillan, chair, Edinburgh freelance branch, and a member of the Scottish government's working group on public interest journalism; and Nick Powell, chair, Welsh Executive Council.



Siobhan Holliman

Bogus employment under scrutiny

The Dáil's powerful Committee on Public Accounts has raised concerns about RTÉ's failure to give workers who secured employment contracts under a review of their employment status retrospective rights, including sick pay, holiday pay, maternity leave and access to the organisation's pension scheme.

At a meeting of the committee, RTÉ representatives advised that RTÉ has made an interim settlement with the Revenue Commissioners for money due as a result of misclassifying workers as "self employed". It was confirmed that both the Revenue Commissioners and the Scope investigation unit of the Department of Social Protection are reviewing RTÉ's practice of engaging workers on what are known as bogus self-employed contracts.

Following a protracted trade union campaign, RTÉ agreed to a review of employment contract by legal

firm Evershed Sutherland. Eighty-five workers secured employment contracts and RTÉ had agreed to enter into discussions with trade unions on the issue of retrospection.

NUJ members have been extremely frustrated at management's failure to deal with retrospection and at the PAC the organisation stated progress could not be made pending the Revenue Commissioners and PAC reviews.

PAC have written to Séamus Dooley, Irish Secretary inviting him to set out the union's position.

The Irish Secretary said: "I will be advising the committee that RTÉ's position is unacceptable. The terms of reference envisaged that retrospection would be agreed at the end of the Evershed process. The State investigations are not part of that progress and so our talks cannot be contingent on the outcome of these reviews. Workers were wrongly classified, they have rights and these rights should be vindicated regardless of these investigations."

Back to drawing board at RTÉ as cuts proposals rejected

Union members have rejected proposals for a temporary pay cut and other changes to wages and conditions proposed by RTÉ following negotiations with the Group of Unions (TUG).

The proposals, put to ballot without a recommendation by the TUG Executive, were rejected by 87% against to only 13% in favour.

In a statement the TUG said: "The clear message is that these proposals are now off the table. Staff will not accept a pay cut and RTÉ management must reflect on that reality. Our members have not had a general pay increase for 13 years.

"It is now a matter for RTÉ to consider the outcome of the ballot. The Trade Union Group will continue to be available for discussions with management and our engagement in negotiations will be informed by the outcome of the ballot."

At the time of publication management had not tabled new proposals.

Under the "Stability Agreement", RTÉ aimed to save €8.3m and this formed part of RTÉ's pledge to deliver €60m in cost savings over three years. The organisation was seeking cost savings from pay cuts ranging from 3.5% to 5.35% and reductions in allowances, though those earning less than €40,000 a year would be exempt.

The agreement, including the paycuts, would have



lasted for two years starting on 1 May. RTÉ is also launching a Voluntary Exit Programme seeking 60-70 job cuts. Paid sick leave would have been halved, bringing it into line with the public service, while self-certified sick leave would have dropped from five days per year to seven days over a two-year period. Salary protection for staff experiencing long-term illness would have fallen from 75% to 66%, with RTÉ reducing its

contribution from 33% to 20%.

The proposed pay cuts would see those making between €40,000 and €70,000 lose 3.35% in their gross pay, while those on salaries ranging from €70,000-€100,000 would experience a reduction of 3.85%.

Staff on salaries of €100,000-€130,000 would lose 4.35%, while those earning €130,000 to €160,000 would see a reduction of 4.85%.

The highest paid staff earning above €160,000 would have salary cuts of 5.35%.

RTÉ's financial position was confirmed by independent consultant Eugene McMahon.

Irish Secretary Séamus Dooley said: "The proposals were strongly opposed by NUJ members. I believe the TUG decision to put management's proposals without recommendation to members was correct since no further progress was possible in the talks process. It's now a matter for RTÉ to bring forward new proposals and to win the trust of their staff."

Spotlight on pay inequality at RnaG

The pay differential between journalists working for RTÉ Radió na Gaeltachta and their counterparts in English language services has again been highlighted.

RTÉ Radió na Gaeltachta journalists enjoy inferior pay terms for the same work. The 25% differential has been



consistently highlighted by the NUJ, most recently in the union submission to the Future of Media Commission.

There was surprise and

disappointment among staff when Director General Dee Forbes recently told the Dáil's Public Accounts Committees that she was not familiar with the pay gap. The subject had been raised earlier this year by Séamus Dooley, Irish Secretary, at a thematic dialogue hosted by the Future of Media Commission in which he and RTÉ representatives had taken part.

A number of politicians are backing the renewed campaign for an end to the pay discrimination, which is led by RnaG chapel officers.

State must support public service media

The Government must provide increased funding for public service media and devise new structures to promote public service journalism across all platforms and models of ownership, the NUJ has told the Future of Media Commission.

In a comprehensive, 26-page submission to the commission, *Journalism, Not Just Business*, the NUJ detailed the importance of public service media, set out the context that led to the current crisis – including those factors outside of the commission’s terms of reference – and recommended actions Government should take to safeguard the future of public service media in these times of unprecedented challenge.

Recommendations were based on the NUJ policy document, *From Health Crisis to Good News – A recovery plan for the news industry in Ireland*, which was published on World Press Freedom Day, May 3rd, 2020.

NUJ concerns for the future of the media are not new.

In September of 2014 the NUJ called for the establishment of a government commission on the future of the media in a submission to a BAI seminar “Ensuring Plurality in the Digital Age”, in which the union warned of the crisis facing the industry. The establishment of a broad-ranging commission has long been an objective of the NUJ, supported by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.



Context

Denuding of newsrooms in the commercial radio sector, both national and regional, is an ongoing cause for concern.

A feature of the national newspaper sector has been the reduction in overall staffing levels, non-replacement of specialists and a dramatic reduction in budgets for freelance contributors.

The amalgamation of editorial teams working across titles has had a negative impact in terms of editorial diversity.

Financial measures

The NUJ proposes the establishment of a government-funded Journalism Foundation of Ireland to invest in media and to promote public interest journalism.

Submission to the Future of Media Commission

The NUJ submission noted: “Throughout the pandemic Irish journalists have demonstrated their vital role in the spectrum of essential public services. Media workers at local and national level are working around the clock to ensure the public has access to timely, reliable and accurate information.

“On a daily basis public service broadcasting is informing, educating and entertaining a public hungry for authoritative information from trusted sources. National and regional print journalists and broadcasters have reaffirmed the value of trusted news sources.

“During uncertain times, the value of independent journalism, impartial news and trusted editorial content, is clearer than ever, standing as a bulwark against targeted misinformation and propaganda. Yet the media industry’s fragility is laid bare at this time of greatest need.”

The submission noted that public service media have a distinct role in ensuring that public interest journalism, and by extension the public good, are not subject to the vagaries of the market economy.

“With the emergence of new platforms and what has been identified as ‘fake news’, there is a growing appreciation of the value of professionally sourced verifiable and objectively presented news,” the NUJ submission stated.

There must be a clear focus on the crucial role of staff and freelance journalists in providing quality public service journalism, the NUJ stated.

At the same time, the NUJ has repeated its concern that the terms of reference of the commission are insufficient to deal with many of the urgent issues that the industry faces.

The full submission is available online at: <https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/journalism-not-just-busin-ss--nuj-ireland-submission-to-commission-on-the-future-of-media.html>

Irish Language

The NUJ has long been concerned that RTÉ views Raidió na Gaeltachta as a regional news service in that staff do not enjoy the same terms and conditions of employment as RTÉ journalists engaged in the same work through the medium of English. This difference is not just an industrial relations issue but is illustrative of a mentality which runs counter to the nurturing of Irish language services by RTÉ.

Media Literacy

A national media literacy programme in association with public service media would enhance democracy by empowering citizens.

Training and Access

There is a strong argument for a national training programme for all media platforms. It is worth noting that the shift to university degrees as the main form of entry to journalism has led to a homogeneity of the profession in Ireland.

Local Democracy

The Journalism Foundation of Ireland would invest in local news and innovative journalistic projects and should be independently chaired and governed by a board which would include all stakeholders.

Vouchers

The NUJ proposes a free voucher scheme for online or print subscriptions to all 18 and 19-year-old subscribers and tax credits for households with subscriptions as a means of encouraging younger people to subscribe.

Preserving Local Media

The union is calling for measures to ensure the preservation of local newspapers through the conferring of a new “asset of community value” status, ensuring that titles are preserved for potential community ownership.

State Role

No public money should be made available for firms imposing compulsory redundancies, pay cuts or denying the right to trade union organisation.

An important code for those who would suggest codes

By Michael Foley

In 1936, at the NUJ's annual conference, a code of conduct was finally agreed, following a debate that had gone on for the previous two years. It was the first of its kind in the world.

In the intervening 85 years, the code has lost one clause and now has 12 but the major change is that it is less about relationships in the workplace (Staff men who do lineage work should be prepared to give up such work to conform with any pooling scheme approved ... to provide a freelance member with a means of earning a living) and more about the public interest (a journalist should produce no material likely to lead to hatred or discrimination on the grounds of a person's age, gender, race, colour, creed, legal status, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation).

Obviously, terms such as 'staff men' have disappeared but there are ghosts of the past in the present code, such as protecting anonymous sources or obtaining information by honest and straightforward means and a general defence of a free press.

What the two codes illustrate is that the NUJ has been concerned with standards and ethics for a very long time.

The code is for guidance and offers a number of principles to help journalists when faced with an ethical dilemma or with something contrary to one's conscience.

It is not the only code for journalists in this country. Newspaper, magazine and some online publications are also guided by the Code of the Press Council of Ireland and agree to be bound by its rulings. Broadcasters are bound by codes drawn up by the BAI, under the Broadcasting Act, and RTÉ has its own highly prescriptive codes for its journalists.

The NUJ's code is a statement of values and expresses a belief in a free press and the public interest. It is not prescriptive. It offers guidance but sometimes there is a need for more detail, more understanding and more reflection as to how things change and how a journalist might approach a particularly sensitive story.

Consequently, the union has issued its own guidelines, or endorsed guidelines, on the coverage of suicide, covering poverty, reporting Covid and reporting Islam, among many. Some of these are produced by outside bodies that have sought input and endorsement of the NUJ.

Such guidance can be helpful, but they might, understandably, be resented by a body of workers who feel there are so many telling them how they should do their job. It sometimes appears that every NGO has issued guidelines for journalists. Sometimes NGOs get funding for putting together a code for journalism, of which they have no experience.



Michael Foley

If anyone has watched the Future of Media Commission's Thematic Dialogues and the way contributor after contributor called for a media code, one would think there was one for everyone in the audience.

One might wonder how effective the codes are. Does anyone read them, or take the advice offered? Do they gather dust on shelves in newsrooms? In many cases, probably yes.

So let's offer a code of conduct for those thinking of writing a code of conduct or ethics, or any sort of guidance for media workers. First, do some research to identify the problem. Questionnaires, interviews, even focus groups need to be undertaken, so that those being addressed, journalists, can see the issue and the need for a code. Those producing guidelines must understand how journalists work and the constraints they work under. Journalists are restrained by law, ethics and professional practice, and for broadcast journalists, the provisions of the Broadcasting Act.

So the research is done, an issue has been identified and the organisations or charity or lobby sets to devise a code. And then, when finished, they contact the NUJ and ask for an endorsement, so that the NUJ logo can go on the code.

Too late.

Contact the NUJ early in the process. If a code is to work it must be meaningful to journalists, offer real support and insight to an issue and be cognizant of issues, such as the broader public interest and press freedom as a public good.

The union does endorse codes and welcomes many of them as offering support to both journalists and those who find themselves part of a news story, but endorsement comes with involvement and the earlier we are involved the better. After all, we have 85 years of experience.

Michael Foley is the Republic of Ireland member of the Ethics Council and has advised on so many codes.

Union urges actions for NI media sustainability

This time of great need for timely, reliable and accurate information has put a spotlight on the fragile state of the media industry, the union has told a Northern Ireland Assembly group on the media.

In a wide-ranging submission to the Northern Ireland Assembly's All-Party Group on Press Freedom and Media Sustainability, the union addressed the impact of Covid on the media and made recommendations for actions designed to ensure the long-term sustainability of the industry.

In identifying the particular role of the media, the submission stated: "In Northern Ireland, the media continues to play a vital role in community cohesion. A further diminished media landscape would put this in peril, where special care must be taken to ensure a diversity of platforms and interests."

The detailed, nine-page submission addressed a range of issues, including media industry in crisis, financial support and investment; media advertising; windfall tax on tech giants; supporting local jobs, businesses and innovation; furloughs; media education; freelance workers; suggestions made to the UK government in the NUJ's News Recovery Plan; media access in Northern Ireland; and media safety.

The media industry was struggling prior to the pandemic, the submission noted.

"The economic shockwaves of lockdown has pushed many companies, big and small, to the brink - jeopardising the livelihoods of staff, freelance reporters and photographers - causing damage that could be irreparable.

"At a time when their content is more vital than ever, newspaper groups have furloughed staff, and cut the pay of those who are working flat out to provide life-saving news and information."

Among the recommendations in the union submission:

-- "At a time when staff welfare and journalistic service should come first, some media companies are playing fast and loose with their obligations to consult with the NUJ over the impact to staff and editorial content. A cynical 'never waste a crisis' approach cannot be allowed to further compromise already stretched standards and resources."

-- "Targeted measures aimed at supporting jobs and quality journalism, and bolstering independent, diverse, ethically produced content are vitally



Matthew O'Toole, MLA, is chair of the Press Freedom and Media Sustainability All-Party Group.

needed."

-- The NUJ also encouraged the APG and Northern Ireland Executive to support union calls on the UK government "to introduce a windfall tax on the tech giants whose platforms suck up editorial content, without making any significant contribution to its production".

-- The Northern Ireland Executive should help support and assist the creation of more local jobs for journalists and financial support packages should be offered for innovative, public interest journalism, providing a lifeline to smaller enterprises.

-- Media literacy needs to be embedded in the Northern Ireland curriculum from early years onwards and the union also called for the rollout of nationwide media literacy initiatives.

-- The union said the government-commissioned Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices (2017) explored the tax and employment rights of freelancers, but its recommendations have been largely ignored. The union urged the government to align the employment status framework with the tax status framework. The NUJ's #FairDeal4Freelancers includes a charter of freelance rights that sets out benefits the self-employed should enjoy.

-- The union called for implementation of the National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists in Northern Ireland, saying, "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."

By Donal Kavanagh

Sometimes, it's the little things.

Working in a small local radio newsroom, we go into the main studio and engineer our own news bulletins while the presenters grab a quick coffee. The pre-news checklist has now expanded to ensure we have time to disinfect surfaces and remember to bring our individual pop shield.

Ever tried to wipe down a mouse or mixer slider without compromising the sounds playing on air? It can be a challenge. Needless to say, in my case, several extra steps are racked up because I forget to bring in the pop shield and then have to run back to pick it up.

Perhaps the strangest of all is this is now becoming normal.

As I suspect is the case in many newsrooms, our working patterns have changed, so while we would have spent much of the day pre-pandemic with two people in the newsroom, now we rotate so that there is just one. I find myself missing the conversation, not just in terms of the banter, but also in terms of sharing perspectives, chatting about upcoming meetings, which councillors have interesting motions, and who said what at the last meeting that might be worth a follow up.

It could be worse, of course. In our case, the way we operate means we have to physically go to the workplace. Personally, I find that has been a positive thing, helping to maintain a sense of normality that those working from home don't necessarily have.

The downside is we spend much of the working day talking about and reporting on Covid. On a typical day, up to 40% of our news stories will be directly associated with Covid, and it inevitably gets



mentioned in most other stories too. Planning permission is granted for something – the start date is dependent on Covid. A local organisation wins an award – it was presented at a virtual event.

We're not getting out to meetings, so we're at our desk, monitoring them online, then ringing up the councillor afterwards for a phone interview. It's not the same as the face-to-face experience. Of course, there are very few, if any, people coming into studio for the mid-morning talk show, but conversely, much more use of Zoom, which is then livestreamed, so people see much more than before.

Perhaps most noticeable is that fact that we're reporting daily on figures, incidence rates, mean and median ages, five-day averages, vaccination dosage statistics and positivity percentages. We're all on first-name terms with several doctors, and talk about it so much on air, that friends and family off air ask our opinion on what will happen. As the old graffiti piece didn't quite put it: "Yesterday I couldn't spell epidemiologist, today, I am one."

Donal Kavanagh is a reporter and presenter at Highland Radio in Letterkenny, Co. Donegal.

Working freelance on the pandemic roller coaster

By Amanda Ferguson

Pandemic life has been a roller coaster for Irish journalists.

In April 2020, roughly one month into 'stay at home' messaging, I experienced a major impact on my income, which, with hindsight, was well timed for the start of a new tax year. A grim silver lining, but anyway.

I have always been self-employed, and because clients' budgets were being squeezed, my income was too.

A client I had been working for on a weekly basis for several years "paused" my arrangement and immediately I lost a third of my annual income. My arrangements with other clients changed too, and I am not ashamed to admit I cried sore because it felt like everything I had worked hard to build up over a decade was falling apart.

I dried my eyes, stayed calm, diversified, and kept moving forward.

I have always been busy. That has not changed – I was still in demand. The difference was as the tax year ended in April and when my sums were totted up, I had earned 50 per cent of what I had earned the year before. A shock to someone on an upward trajectory, but that's life.

I have always done a wide variety of media work, but for the first time, instead of the lion's share of my income coming from writing, most came from broadcasting, online events and project work.

Over the last year or so everyone has had time to reflect on what they want from life, what they need, and what is important. Amidst the great trauma of this chapter in our history I think we owe it to all those who have suffered so horrendously, or who didn't make it, to be grateful, and not forget what we have learned about health, collective solidarity, and what truly matters.

I have learned so much and want to thank all those who continue to support me, and also Women In Media Belfast, which we launched in February.

I have never spent this much time at home. I am



Amanda Ferguson

usually at Stormont, in a courtroom, covering a protest, at a diary event, or launch of something or other. A lot of work has been over the phone, on Zoom and so on. It has been an adjustment, but it's grand.

I love being "just a freelance" as some call us. It suits me.

Sure, you don't get sick pay, holiday pay, or a pension. There is little to no security and you can be victim of whims, personal grievances, global health pandemics, and so on, but I wouldn't change it.

While we are among the most vulnerable workers we also have the most freedom, and that is something money cannot buy.

Amanda Ferguson (amanda.ie) is a freelance northern correspondent and Ireland stringer based in Belfast.

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Gerard said the branch has also been pleased with the turnout at online branch meetings.

"We may keep some of the branch meetings online," he said. "Turnout is different, and we've been delighted to see people who couldn't make it otherwise." He said that when circumstances allow the branch will hold in-person meetings, but said online meetings may also be part of the schedule.

Work on organising the autumn event series will begin later this summer, and Gerard said they still don't know whether events will be held in person or online.

"At the minute everything is kind of waiting for this thing to clear and hoping it will clear," he said.

At the time of going to press, there were 23

episodes of the Freelance Forum podcast available online. Recent episodes included interviews with Philip Cooper of BAI on the Sound+Vision scheme; Simon Cocking, chief editor, Irish Tech News; author Paul Carroll on writing fiction, marketing and promotion, self-publishing and ebooks; photographer/journalist David Branigan on licensing and copyright; Elliot Higgins, founder and chief executive of the investigative journalism collective Bellingcat; and four young journalists from GORM TV, Funmi Jinadu, Sadrine Ndahiro, Mamobo Ogoro and Ala Buisir, on inclusion and diversity in Irish media.

The Freelance Forum podcast is available at the Dublin Freelance branch website, dublinfreelance.org, and wherever you get your podcasts.

Dooley says Iconic must change tune on union rights

The Irish Secretary has called on Iconic Newspapers to match its call for Irish government support with a change in its own attitude towards trade union recognition.

In February, editors of the company's regional titles published a letter to readers calling for support of the newspaper print sector, a call the NUJ made in its News Recovery Plan published May 2020 and repeated in its submission to the Future of Media Commission earlier this year.

Séamus Dooley, Irish secretary, responded to the editors' letter with a letter that supported the call for support of the print sector, but reminded Iconic of the cornerstone of the recovery plan: that public money should not be made available for privately owned firms making compulsory redundancies, cutting pay, giving executive bonuses, or blocking trade union organisation.

Séamus wrote: "Our members are not 'understanding' of the imposition of layoffs or reduced hours and why it is they have not been afforded the opportunity to be collectively represented by their union. We would welcome the opportunity to engage with Iconic Newspapers to work together with the NUJ to protect local news and the members on whom the industry depends.

He wrote: "The NUJ has sought a meeting with your publisher to discuss our concerns and awaits a response."

Since then, the company has failed to respond to the request for meetings despite strong political support for the campaign.

Séamus said: "There is a supreme irony in the fact that the NUJ's plea for recognition of the importance



of regional journalists has been ignored on the one hand by government and on the other by Iconic.

"The work of experienced, committed journalists has not been shown appropriate respect by the company," he said.

The NUJ is also writing to all TDs calling on them to support the right of workers to be collectively recognised by their union. The lack of a legal right to collective representation has been brought into sharp focus by the actions of Iconic Newspapers in refusing to recognise the NUJ.

The company owns 20 newspaper titles in the Republic of Ireland, as well as a range of news websites for those publications.

The Cabinet recently approved the establishment of a high-level review group, to be chaired by Professor Michael Doherty (Department of Law, Maynooth University), whose terms of reference include examining the issue of trade union recognition. This follows a campaign by the ICTU.

While this is a welcome development, the NUJ doesn't believe that any employer needs to wait for the report of the review group before recognising unions representing their staff.

Dublin P& PR is a branch on a mission

One of the four NUJ Dublin branches is undertaking an initiative aimed at recruiting members and organising chapels.

Gerry Curran, membership secretary to Dublin P&PR branch, is working with union officials Ian McGuinness and George Kiely (who also both happen to be members of the branch) on the plan.

As well as seeking to recruit new members and get lapsed members back into the union, the initiative hopes to strengthen existing chapels, re-establish them where they have fallen into abeyance, and establish them where none existed.

Any Dublin P&PR branch member who wishes to establish or re-establish a chapel can contact the union at info@nuj.ie and Gerry, George and Ian will assist them.



Gerry Curran: recruitment drive

Employers should follow Irish Times lead on tax

The NUJ is calling on Irish employers to follow the precedent set by The Irish Times to pay the tax bill accrued by any employee, due to them being on the various wage subsidy schemes during the COVID pandemic.

The Irish Times, which also owns the Irish Examiner Group confirmed the offer to the Dublin Printing Group of Unions after the Revenue Commissioners said it would facilitate any employer that wished to do so. The offer by The Irish Times also applies to the Irish Examiner Group.

The Irish Times ensured there were no cuts to its editorial employment levels during the pandemic, including maintaining wages, which the NUJ welcomes.

Ian McGuinness, NUJ Irish Organiser, said: "Journalists of all types were vital in ensuring that public interest journalism was to the fore, and countered rumours and conspiracy theories about COVID.

"Maintaining staffing levels was something that all good media employers tried to do during the pandemic, and it is only right that our members



Ian McGuinness

should not find themselves out of pocket for doing their vital job during a once in a century worldwide health emergency.

"We are calling on all media employers to follow the lead of The Irish Times and assist their journalists with any tax liabilities they incurred as a result of the wage subsidy schemes."

Negotiate your working from home allowance

NUJ members are again being urged to ask their chapel officers to negotiate working from home allowances for staff obliged to work remotely. Many employers are not paying their employees any extra for working from home, despite the savings made by the employer in having journalists work in this way.

Any negotiated agreement will have to be in line with the Revenue Commissioners and HMRC guidelines, depending on the jurisdiction it is applicable to.

In the Republic you may be eligible for tax relief on expenses such as light, heat, phone, broadband, etc. Your employer can pay you an allowance but is not obliged to do so, hence the need for members to raise it with their chapels. An employer who decides to pay the allowance can give individuals up to €3.20 a day without the employee having to pay tax, PRSI or USC. Rates above that will attract those deductions.

Where an employer does not pay an allowance, the individual can make a claim personally for tax relief at the end of the year and they can contact the Revenue Commissioners in relation to this. This involves refunds on tax that has already been paid.



To qualify as a home worker, you should have a formal agreement with your employer that you have to work from home and that you are required to perform essential duties of your employment at home. Home working does not include your bringing work home in the evenings or at weekends.

North of the border, employers are not obliged to pay employees for any additional expenses they incur during home working. Employees may be able to claim a certain amount of expenses from their employer if their employer agrees. Again, tax relief does not apply to those who choose to work from home. Additional costs such as phone bills, heating, broadband, etc can be factored in.

If your employer does not pay your expenses, you can either claim tax relief, via HMRC, on £6 per week from April 6, 2020; or on the exact amount of the extra costs you incurred above the weekly amount. For the latter you will need to produce bills and receipts.

With regards to freelancers working in both jurisdictions, they should consult with their accountants in relation to any potential tax reliefs that they might be entitled to.

Union calls for action against threats

The NUJ renewed calls on the authorities to take action to identify and punish those who consistently threaten journalists in Northern Ireland.

The union's call in February came in response to graffiti appearing across East Belfast that threatened Sunday World journalist Patricia Devlin. The name of the reporter was sprayed onto the wall in at least two locations and was accompanied by the image of a crosshair of a gun. She has been subjected to vicious threats from anonymous sources on Twitter, most recently this month.

Séamus Dooley, Irish secretary, said: "This menacing and cowardly graffiti is the behaviour of thugs who are trying to target and intimidate a specific journalist, but they are also trying to send a warning message to other media workers.

"The NUJ calls on the PSNI as well as Northern Ireland's political and community leaders to do all they can to support independent, quality journalism. The authorities must now identify and prosecute the perpetrators to the full extent of the law."

He said the latest threat is also part of a wider trend of increasing threats since the first lockdown.

Séamus said: "Those behind threats need to feel the full force of the law, this is the most effective

way to defend and protect media freedom and public interest journalism in Northern Ireland."

Threats against journalists were raised at a meeting with the Chief Constable of the PSNI by Michelle Stanistreet, General Secretary and Ian McGuinness, Irish Organiser.

ICTU Assistant General Secretary Owen Reidy has also strongly condemned attacks on media workers.

Support is at hand

There has been a worrying spike in death threats to journalists during lockdown, which came from paramilitaries, organised criminal gangs and other groups or individuals. In addition, there has been a notable increase in NUJ members reporting online abuse to the union.

The NUJ Irish Office is encouraging any journalist who receives such threats or abuse to notify the union in confidence.

The NUJ will only issue public statements with the consent of the member and if it is considered appropriate.

Members can contact the NUJ Irish Office on (00353) 1 8170340 or via info@nuj.ie. Contact details for NUJ officials are available on the NUJ website.

Michelle condemns Bloody Sunday media gag

General Secretary Michelle Stanistreet has condemned a judge's decision to ban the media from reporting the opening statements and all witness statements in the case of Soldier F.

At a preliminary hearing in March, as well as confirming that the anonymity put in place last year would continue, District Judge Ted Magill placed a ban on the reporting of statements by the prosecution and defence, and the testimony of witnesses due to give evidence at the hearing.

The NUJ general secretary said: "This is an alarming ruling, which goes against the principle of open justice and the need for the criminal justice system to operate in public and be subject to public scrutiny. Journalists cannot fulfil their duty in representing and reflecting the public interest if they are banned from carrying out their work."



Michelle Stanistreet

Online debate must move beyond Harris

By Séamus Dooley, Irish Secretary

The decision of the Sunday Independent to terminate the contract of Eoghan Harris for his totally unacceptable behaviour on social media serves to focus attention on the toxic nature of what passes for debate on many platforms, notably Twitter.

The NUJ has previously called for an end to anonymous accounts and for tech companies to take direct responsibility for the damage caused by trolls.

The Harris episode highlights the coordinated nature of online trolling. The former Sunday Independent columnist was upfront about the purpose and nature of what he referred to as his “site” and claimed that he was one of a team hiding behind a Twitter mask.

Women have long been a particular target of trolls and there is a deep misogyny at the heart of many anonymous Twitter accounts. NUJ members such as Patricia Devlin and the late Lyra McKee have been subject to the most vile abuse.

Eoghan Harris is an influential columnist afforded a significant platform over many decades. He is a former nominee of former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern to Seanad Éireann. It is inevitable - and right - that his behaviour should be called out. Those subject to his particular style of vitriol are right to be angry.

However, it would be wrong to view this episode as



Séamus Dooley

an isolated incident confined to one man, group or political faction.

Various political factions and parties, left and right, engage in activities under the sinister cover of anonymous trolls. Mainstream political parties and elected representatives need to examine their own activities and take responsibility for the actions of members and employees.

Journalists, including political commentators and reporters, are frequently the chosen target of abuse.

It's time for zero tolerance of online abuse and journalists have every right to demand protection from social media platforms.

At the very least political parties should develop internal codes of practice governing the behaviour of members.

Media organisations needed clear social media guidelines and policies which protect their staff.

Journalists, staff and freelance, need to protect themselves, while recognising that social media can enhance public discourse.

Tread carefully: the perils of your digital footprint

Recent developments have drawn attention to the need for care in the use of social media.

Many media companies do not have clear policies or guidance on the use of social media by employees.

Many expect employees to engage with viewers and listeners on social media but do not give explicit directions on what is deemed acceptable or unacceptable.

The Code of Conduct can be adapted as guiding principles for journalists in their own engagement on social media, but clarity is needed when journalists identified with media organisations air their own views on platforms such as Twitter.

Some years ago I facilitated a workshop at the ICTU under the banner “Don't Tweet Me This Way,” a title borrowed from an NUJ seminar. The tips remain topical.

Ask yourself:

Would you write it in a memo?

Would you say it at a face-to-face meeting?

Would you say it to your boss?

Would you say it in front of a judge?

Would you say it to your granny?

Cardinal rules:

Do not tweet while drunk.

Do not tweet while angry.

Do not pick fights.

Don't slag off your boss.

Do not reveal company secrets.

Do not compromise sources.

Do not feed the trolls.

It's OK to have an untweeted thought.

Key elements of policy:

What is the overall approach to social media by your employer?

What are the ground rules?

What are appropriate practices, both on and off duty?

What is confidential company information?

— SD