

NEWS FROM THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE Informed

issue 36 July 2021



Secrecy laws would treat media as spies

A raft of legislation and government plans present an unparalleled assault on journalism, democracy and human rights which would give an increasingly authoritarian government draconian powers.

If they become law, it would mean that – just by doing their job – journalists could find themselves branded spies and handed 14-year prison sentences. Reporters and whistleblowers would lose the defence of revealing information which is in the public interest and the reforms could water down protections, allowing police to seize journalistic material.

The government's consultation document outlining its plan to "counter state threats" is truly chilling and has united the NUJ and newspapers ranging from The Guardian and Independent to The Sun – which told its readers: "New plans would threaten scoops such as our exposure of Matt Hancock's affair. If these proposals are implemented, Britain will join the list of authoritarian states which

treat journalists as if they are spies."

The two Duncan Campbells – the former Guardian correspondent; and the investigative journalist specialising in civil liberties who was a defendant in the 1978 ABC trial on charges of leaking government information – reprised their double act of the July meeting of the London Freelance Branch in an article for The Guardian which said: "The Home Office now wants harder and more extensive secrecy laws that would have the effect of deterring sources, editors and reporters, making them potentially subject to uncontrolled official bans not approved by a court and punished much more severely if they do not comply."

Indeed Priti Patel, Home Secretary, has argued that press disclosures could be worse than spying because the work of a foreign spy "will often only be to the benefit of a single state or actor".

In a 48-hour period this month, Bills to prevent public protest, criminalise vulnerable asylum seekers, disenfranchise thousands of voters by

requiring official ID and strip the Electoral Commission of powers to initiate criminal prosecutions of election wrongdoing, made their way through the Houses of Parliament.

Under the Police, Crime, Courts and Sentencing Bill protestors could face criminal charges if otherwise peaceful demonstrations are deemed to cause "nuisance" or are "noisy" or even have an "impact" on others in the area. This Bill also gives a range of authorities the ability to extract information from electronic devices to seek evidence in prosecuting certain crimes; it's unclear if this will affect journalists.

The NUJ's Ethics Council has voiced deep concerns about the Nationality and Borders Bill which introduces a two-tier asylum system and the criminalisation of anyone who arrives in the UK without permission. The Law Society says it would be in contravention of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Most commentators agree it is a nasty piece of legislation which will endanger some of the most vulnerable people in the world fleeing war and persecution. The Bill also paves the way for potential offshore processing centres for refugees.

The government is pressing ahead with plans to limit how organisations such as the NUJ can use judicial reviews to challenge official decisions before a High Court judge.

Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, said: "The sheer number of anti-democratic, dangerous and simply nasty pieces of legislation from this government presents a real threat to journalists and journalism. We need to remain vigilant and use all our campaigning powers and work with the cross-party Parliamentary Group and other organisations to raise awareness and defeat these laws. Let's use the summer to gather our strength so we can come out fighting for press freedom and democracy."

**Also
in this
issue:**

Michelle's
Message
Page 02

Channel 4
Threat
Page 08

Digital
Recruitment
Page 10

NUJ
NATIONAL UNION
OF
JOURNALISTS

Michelle's Message



I have lost count in the past year or more – or however long it has been since the world seemed to upend itself – of the occasions when it seemed a new low has been struck in what are parlous and depressing levels of public discourse in the UK.

Whether it is manufactured outrage, coordinated social media pile-ons, the trumping of common sense by determined political ideology or ill-thought-out kneejerk commentary – or a combination of all of those things – the cumulative impact is of dysfunctional engagement and weakening standards in public life.

Whatever the motivations, and whether or not it happens in the online

sphere, it has a real-life personal and professional impact – not least for individuals caught up in the online fall-out, where aggressive and hostile voices are often amplified even if the number of trolls leading the charge are comparatively few.

Abuse is hurled so frequently, and often so readily, that it is behaviour and commentary that has become normalised. Par for the course. Inhabiting space that should be taken up by reasoned debate. It is also clear such abuse is disproportionately levelled at women and those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. The broader intent of such behaviour is obvious – to close down these voices, to make people think twice before engaging and speaking out.

This behaviour is having an impact on journalists and journalism on unprecedented levels. NUJ surveys of members demonstrate the increase and impact of abuse levelled out online, whether in what are sometimes odious and staggeringly offensive below the line comments on articles, or mob-like behaviour on twitter, when journalists are rounded on. Adopting a “don’t feed the trolls” stance often doesn’t cut it, and it certainly doesn’t erase the cumulative impact of being harangued, insulted and abused as you go about your daily work. And since when did ignoring bullies and not calling them out actually have the desired effect.

The starting point of many of these exchanges – which too many companies have tolerated up to this point as essential “reader engagement” – would have taken place on the letters’ pages of publications. The clever-dick tone may have been there, but the content would have been more considered and thought through before being posted or the send button hit, and if they ended up in print it would have been after passing through the hands of a seasoned editor.

Now you need to take a deep breath before delving into below the line comments – on doing so after the

outrageous mobbing of BBC journalist Nick Watt, it was sickening to read countless accusations of him being a shrill, collaborator alongside praise for the individuals chasing and haranguing him and regret that he wasn’t beaten or strung up. That this stuff is published with impunity is proof of the failure of the tech giants and the need for effective regulation. It is also, however, a dangerous indicator of the levels of hostility facing reporters and photographers on a daily basis, who are at the frontline documenting a polarised society where elements – fanned by far-right agitators and aided by conspiracy theorists – are increasingly viewing journalists as working hand in glove with the deep state, propagating lies and working to hoodwink, not to inform.

“Abusive behaviour is having an impact on journalists and journalism on unprecedented levels.”

The NUJ and our members are dealing with the consequences of this threat on a daily basis – whether on demonstrations, in attacks on journalists and their homes, and in abuse and harassment carried out online. It is driving our participation in the action plan devised by the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists, it is motivating the pressure we bring to bear on the police to ensure journalists can work safely, free from attack.

But we need to do more, and part of the problem is the wider diminution of standards we are seeing play out in the public sphere. Politicians need to lead from the front. They cannot on the one hand launch the world’s first safety plan for journalists, and then indulge in behaviour that imperils them. The dismissal of reports and news they disagree with cannot any longer be dismissed as “fake”. Government

ministers should not be allowed to get away with trolling individual journalists, impugning them and undermining their credibility. A Prime Minister must be held accountable for distortions and lies. And we all have to keep calling out this behaviour and not accept or allow the further erosion of what was once basic norms.

That also means us thinking twice before pressing send, before posting a message, before venting. It also means remembering that life is full of nuance; it's not black and white. We should all have the ability to shut up and listen, and to acknowledge that our words and deeds can profoundly affect someone, whether we know them or not. We should value empathy and seek to practice it – being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes, to see where they're coming from has a value even if we would never share their view. And on a basic level, if we're really trying to inform and influence people's views, it's never going to be achieved through shaming them, rounding on them or trading blows on twitter.

Jackie Weaver made headlines and gave the world a few laughs when the Handforth parish council Zoom meeting went viral. It also exposed her to the highs and lows of public notoriety, not least at the misogynistic hands of online trolls. When she's not maintaining good order at council meetings, she is also an ambassador for Compassion in Politics and has spoken out about the need for intervention to enhance standards of behaviour in political and public life. Some practical changes – that would also serve the interests of journalists and journalism as well as wider society – include enforcing the removal from posts of councillors who breach the authority's code of conduct. As things stand, councillors guilty of racism, sexism or homophobia can continue in role if they fail to do the decent thing and step down.

Compassion in Politics is also campaigning to make it illegal for

politicians at every level to wilfully and repeatedly lie to the public, and is promoting compassion training in schools and workplaces, with the aim of nurturing collegiate working and boosting our collective ability to tackle

wider societal problems. The trade union movement should wholeheartedly back this initiative and its premise that honesty, openness and transparency should be the core function of our political sphere and in public life.

REASONS TO JOIN

Press Freedom

The NUJ lobbies for journalists' rights so you can protect your sources, have editorial independence and do your job safely and freely, without censorship from the state. As a member of the International Federation of Journalists we are part of a 600,000-strong community working to ensure the safety of media workers across the globe, fighting for freedom of information, open government and plurality of the media.

Are you keeping good company?

Join the NUJ today at
[nuj.org.uk/join](https://www.nuj.org.uk/join)

NUJ
 NATIONAL UNION
 OF
 JOURNALISTS

www.nuj.org.uk

Spotlight

Let's get news wise

Photographer and NUJ vice-president, Natasha Hirst, discusses journalism and wallabies with Welsh primary school children

My recent Zoom visit to a class of nine- to 11-year-olds at Rhosddu primary school, Wrexham, rates as one of the most enjoyable experiences of my journalistic career so far.

The Guardian Foundation NewsWise news literacy project provides training for teachers and resources to engage children with understanding news and challenging misinformation. Classes are paired up with a "real, live journalist" for a Q&A session which the NUJ supports.

Zara Jebb, the class teacher, had shared her frustration on hearing the children repeat misinformation picked up from social media or their parents' Facebook pages. Once logged into Zoom, I could see Zara, Sorcha Hughes, the NewsWise co-ordinator, and, in a separate box, 20 impeccably well-behaved classmates at individual desks who then introduced themselves.

I told them briefly about myself and

readied myself for the questions. My jaw must have dropped at the first one: "What is social justice?" As Zara then explained, this phrase came from my Twitter bio so I was silently grateful that I'd not tweeted anything too swear-y recently.

I replied that, to me, social justice means building a fairer society for everyone and that journalism plays a role in highlighting injustice and by giving a voice to the people whose stories we tell; one of the things I love about my job.

There had clearly been discussions in class about media plurality and publications having different views. Zara raised the example of people in Liverpool refusing to buy The Sun after its report on the Hillsborough disaster. We also discussed fake news.

I was challenged to describe my most difficult photo assignment. It involved an election campaign, a pen full of wallabies and Queen guitarist, Brian May (cue blank

faces from the children). "What do you like best about being a journalist?" I was asked. Meeting new people and learning new things from them, I replied.

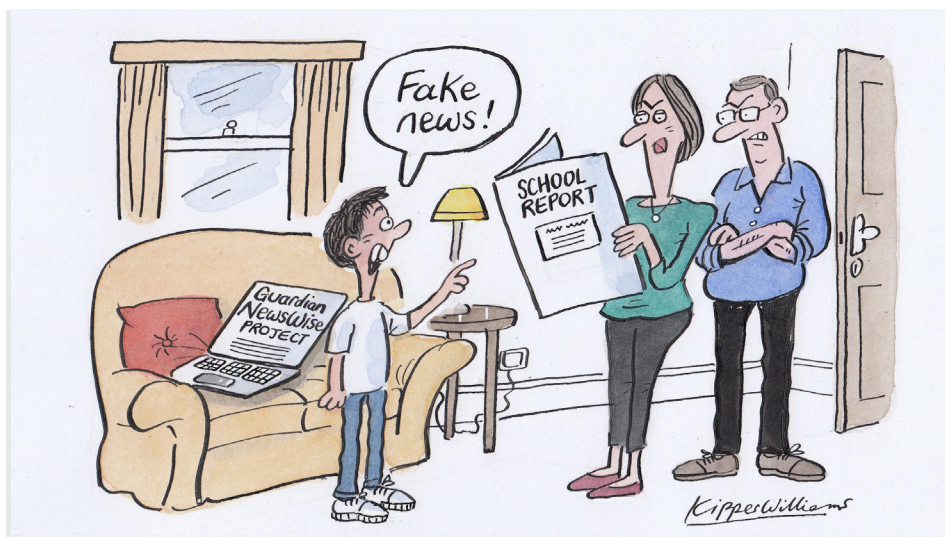
They were interested to hear my school experiences as a deaf child in mainstream education where expectations of me were often low. This led to a series of questions about lipreading and face-masks, sign language and whether I was bullied at school (yes, I was).

The children at Rhosddu come from an "economically disadvantaged" community, with 15 home languages spoken throughout the school. Our industry needs children like these to become the journalists of tomorrow and it was my aim to inspire them and explain that all that was required was having a curiosity about the world around them.

A month later, I'm told that the children are still talking about my visit and the school is keen to keep me involved in their media literacy journey. Their production of the Rhosddu Guardian is well underway and I eagerly await my copy.

Media literacy strategy

The NUJ's News Recovery Plan has called for the rollout of a nationwide media literacy programme to tackle disinformation and fake news, with stronger regulation imposed on tech companies which aid the dissemination of misinformation. The union has liaised with the government which published its Online Media Strategy this month. That sets out a skills framework which highlights the risks of sharing personal data online, advises on how to assess online content critically, examines the barriers to online involvement and helps organisations to undertake media literacy activity in a more co-ordinated, wide-reaching, and high-quality way.



News Update

Family courts pilot

Journalists have been able to attend almost all family court hearings held in private for 12 years – but cannot report what takes place.

Yet these courts have enormous powers. They can place children for adoption, extinguishing their legal relationship with their birth family forever. They can deprive children of their liberty. These decisions are carried out in secret, without scrutiny or accountability for the powers that are exerted.

Louise Tickle, who specialises in reporting on the family justice system, wants this to change. She is launching the Open Justice Family Court Reporting Project which aims to promote open justice and the right to a fair trial in family court proceedings.

This work is supported by The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, with funding from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. The hope is for the project to begin operating later this year.

The pilot intends to follow the Republic of Ireland and Australia where



anonymised press reporting of family court cases is permitted. It would allow reporters to interview and quote family members and case documents.

The pilot needs the blessing of the president of the Family Division to go ahead. It also requires the backing of several large media organisations, journalists will need training and trust built with the judiciary involved. The NUJ has committed to support the pilot and facilitate training when it launches.

For more information contact louise@louisetickle.co.uk

Healthier NUJ finances

John Barsby, honorary general treasurer, reported to the NEC that the vote at DM for a two-year increase in subscriptions had put the union in a healthier financial state.

The increased contributions are expected to bring in an extra £25,000 each month. While the pandemic meant huge reductions in travel and hotel costs for union meetings, this will change as more travel and face to face work resumes. The £10.5 million deficit in the staff direct-benefit pension scheme also needs addressing, he says, and payments will increase. There is another blow on the horizon because the government has forced a levy on trades unions of up to 2.5 per cent of their income to pay for the office of the Certification Officer. This could cost the NUJ a yearly bill of about £130,000.

NQ hire and fire dispute ends

The NUJ chapel at Newsquest Oxford, publisher of the Oxford Mail, has reached agreement with its employer that ends a bitter dispute after the company proposed to abolish time and-a-half pay for most bank holiday working, a change that would have particularly affected sports staff. Newsquest threatened to sack staff who held out against the new terms and re-employ them only if they accepted the plan.

The small chapel stood firm and garnered support from the city's two

MPs. It said: "Stripping journalists of bank holiday payments in the wake of a year when they have pulled out all the stops to serve their local communities is disgraceful and has piled stress and anxiety on to a newsroom already facing reduced staffing levels and unacceptably long working hours."

The chapel agreed to end the dispute when the company agreed not implement the change until January next year and undertook a serious review of overwork among the staff.

Laura Davidson, NUJ national

organiser, said: "Bank holiday payments were the straw that broke the camel's back. The real issue was always the overwork and overlong hours resulting from a radically depleted newsroom. I am enormously proud that the chapel has stuck together on this."

The NUJ joined sister unions in calling on the government to introduce new measures to prevent fire and rehire schemes. Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, said: "This exploitative and abusive treatment of workers has to stop."

Parliament

Storm clouds gather over press freedom

MPs may be hoping to enjoy the sun as they head off for their summer recess, but members of the NUJ's Parliamentary Group are conscious of gathering clouds when it comes to the media and freedom of the press.

Nowhere is this more in evidence than over the future of Channel 4, where the government opened a consultation with a recommendation to back privatisation. Grahame Morris, the group's chair, sponsored an early day motion condemning the move and an NUJ briefing was sent to MPs taking part in a Westminster Hall debate on the issue secured by Labour MP Angela Eagle.

Conservative MPs such as Peter Bottomley and Andrew Mitchell questioned the logic of flogging it off to one of the big US streaming services. John Whittingdale, media and data minister, has long sought to deliver privatisation, but he cut an isolated and beleaguered figure when pushed to defend the proposals. Clearly, he has a fight on his hands.

Elsewhere, there remain concerns about threats to the confidentiality of journalistic material and sources,

and the ability of journalists to protect their informants. The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill not only contains draconian attacks on freedom of assembly and the right to protest, and allows discrimination against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, but also introduces new powers to allow for the extraction of data from electronic devices as part of criminal investigations.

No limits are specified in relation to how much data can be copied or retained. Quite how this power stands in relation to existing legal protections for journalists will only be set out at an unspecified date with a code of practice introduced by secondary legislation. More worrying still are the government's proposals around reform of the Official Secrets Act which threaten longer criminal sentences for journalists who publish classified material given to them by a whistleblower.

Meanwhile, the long-delayed Online Safety Bill ought to have provided important protections for journalists and other public figures but appears to be a missed opportunity (and may even

pose unintended threats of its own). After lobbying from the industry, "below the line" comments on news publishers' own websites – often notorious for trolling, abuse and threats – will not be considered in its scope.

More positively, the government is on the back foot over the operation of its "clearing house", based in the Cabinet Office, which appears to log Freedom of Information requests from investigative journalists and regulate responses to press queries. Despite Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove's explicit denials, a tribunal case brought by openDemocracy was upheld with the ruling criticising the "profound lack of transparency about the operation".

After pressure from campaigners, including the NUJ and the Society of Editors, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee has opened an investigation, and is expected to summon the minister for further questioning. If Gove is feeling the heat right now, it may not just be as a result of the weather.

NUJ Official Secrets Act submission <https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/nuj-calls-for-public-interest-defence-for-unauthorised-disclosures.html>

Michael Calderbank, of Solidarity Consulting, provides parliamentary liaison for the NUJ

Legal perks

While the law has changed, making it much more difficult for many road traffic accident victims to get free legal support, the NUJ has agreed to continue to help members and their families. They will also still receive comprehensive legal cover for all accidents at work, personal injuries, serious injuries, industrial diseases (including asbestos-related

illnesses) and more. For extra information, visit the NUJ hub on the union's solicitor's website. <https://www.thompsonstradeunion.law/trade-unions/nuj>

News recovery Scotland

The Scottish government's public interest journalism working group, which includes industry figures and NUJ representatives, has reported considerable

progress. It was formed to consider the long-term sustainability of public interest journalism in Scotland. The union's News Recovery Plan had informed its debate and Joyce MacMillan, chair of the Edinburgh Freelance Branch, is now collaborating with a sub-group to write the group's report and recommendations, to be published this summer.

Bogus code

The Irish Executive Council dismissed the government's proposed new code of practice on employment status as "a tired old solution which will not solve the problem of bogus employment contracts". The union has called for robust legislation and said the code failed to address genuine losses suffered by misclassified workers.

Equality

Employers to get duty to protect staff from sexual harassment

The NUJ has called on the government to move quickly on its intention to introduce a new duty on employers to protect staff from sexual harassment at work, and to protect workers harassed by clients or customers as well as colleagues.

A survey carried out by the Government Equalities Office (GEO) as part of the consultation on the issue found that 54 per cent (mostly women) said they had experienced harassment at work.

The government also agreed to look at extending the time limit for bringing Equality Act 2010-based cases to

the employment tribunal from three months to six months. The Equality and Human Rights Commission will act as a watchdog and will have the power to enter into legally binding agreements with employers who have been found liable for breaches of the Act. The NUJ called for the commission to be given extra resources to fulfil this duty.

Natasha Hirst, Equality Council chair, said: "This is a huge win for the trade union movement after years of lobbying for workers to be protected from sexual harassment at work. Sexual harassment is a scourge in our workplaces, affecting seven in 10 disabled women and LGBT

workers alike, as recent TUC reports have shown. Protection from third-party harassment is incredibly important and we would urge that this duty to also cover freelances."

The protections will apply in England, Wales and Scotland, and those which require legislative changes will be "introduced as soon as parliamentary time allows", the GEO report said, "We also need to see cultural and societal change. Nevertheless, it is vital that we have a strong legal framework in place, which both establishes clear standards and expectations for individuals and employers alike and is responsive to the modern workplace."

The NUJ argued during the consultation that unions had an important role to play in working with employers to put in place policies to protect staff and freelances from sexual harassment and could represent members who experience harassment in the workplace.



LGBT+ sports

The union's LGBT+ network had a topical speaker just before the Tokyo Olympics. Sky sports editor, Jon Holmes of Sports Media LGBT+ Sports, talked about his organisation's work in promoting inclusion in sports and a space for LGBT+ people and allies working in sports journalism, TV production, and public relations. It enabled them to share experiences, advice, content ideas, and other

professional support, he said, and pointed out his Ready Rainbow guide for media and comms professionals could be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/3rrC0bt>

Truss letter

The NUJ has signed a TUC letter to Liz Truss, women and equalities minister, criticising the government's failure to address the inequality experienced by the LGBT+ community who face discrimination at work. It noted that nearly two in five LGBT workers have been harassed or discriminated against by a colleague and quarter had been discriminated against by their manager. Nearly

half of all trans workers experienced bullying or harassment at work. The letter also condemned the decision in April to disband the government's LGBT Advisory Panel.

Menopause inquiry

Almost a million women in the UK have left jobs as a result of menopausal symptoms and with menopause mainly affecting those in their late 40s and early 50s, they are leaving work at the peak of their career, with knock-on effects on the gender pay and gender pension gap, said the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee as it launched an

inquiry scrutinising existing legislation and workplace practices on the issue.

BMC elections

There were 17 candidates for eight seats in elections held during the NUJ Black Members' Council general meeting which, the serving officer said, showed the vibrancy and quality of activists in the union. The guest speaker was Shavanah Taj, the general secretary of Wales TUC, who said that unions needed to listen to what Black workers said about the reality of how racism manifests itself and they should amplify their voices throughout all structures.

Broadcasting

Matt Kenyon



No more Channel 4?

Ian Burrell examines the government's threat to the public-service network and its award-winning news programme

It was a poignant moment when Jon Snow announced in April that he would be standing down after 32 years as the face of Channel 4 News but no one thought it might be the end of the flagship news programme itself.

The 60-minute show, one of British journalism's star performers on the global news stage, last year won its fifth International Emmy in the past eight years. Channel 4, the programme's faithful patron since it went on air in 1982, also performed well in the

pandemic, thanks to a smart diet of lockdown-friendly content and increased traffic to its youth-oriented digital platform, All 4.

It has been four years since the Tory government considered and then ruled out the idea of selling off the channel. Once a financial basket case, C4 was sitting on record financial surplus of £74m at the end of 2020 with its revenue forecasted to top £1 billion for the first time this year.

But suddenly now privatisation is back

on the government agenda after the 23 June launch of a new consultation process.

Some at Channel 4 News see it as a foregone conclusion. While Snow is still working out his last months as an anchor, many newsroom colleagues are also planning their escapes, convinced that the programme will struggle to live on beyond his departure at the end of the year. "People are looking for jobs," said one newsroom source. "The newsroom feels privatisation is going to happen and that Channel 4 News will be impacted more than anyone else."

This pessimism stems from the ferocity of the government's renewed assault on public service broadcasting (PSB), which equally threatens the future of the BBC as it enters new negotiations on charter renewal and future licence fee funding. "Whenever there is a Conservative government, the future of public service broadcasting appears to be under threat because it doesn't seem to fit in with their ethos," says Paul Siegert, NUJ broadcasting organiser.

The architect of the Channel 4 privatisation drive is believed to be media and data minister, John Whittingdale, who instigated the previous push for a sale during his time as Culture Secretary in 2015-2016. NUJ president, Pierre Vicary, thinks the longstanding ministerial boycott of Channel 4 News (recently dialled down) is indicative of the government's deep-rooted animosity to the broadcaster.

"There is absolutely no commercial reason to privatise Channel 4 – in fact there are many reasons not to do so," he argues. "Given that, it's crystal clear that this is being driven ideologically."

Conservative hostility to Channel 4 News is based on a long list of grudges, many relating to Snow who attended a pro-Brexit rally in 2019 and said on air of that event that he had "never seen so many white people in one place". He is said to have joined in with chants of "Fuck the Tories" at 2017's Glastonbury

Festival and the Tories are still seething over a 2019 Edinburgh Television Festival lecture by former Channel 4 head of current affairs, Dorothy Byrne, who referred to Boris Johnson as a "known liar". Most of all, they hate the channel for its use of a melting ice sculpture in place of an absent PM Boris Johnson during a debate on climate change in 2019.

"This government is not going to tolerate dissident journalists," says Steven Barnett, professor of communications at the University of Westminster. He has "absolutely no doubt" that privatisation would mean the end of Channel 4 News, with its unique format that allows long-form analysis, investigations and extensive foreign reporting. "I don't think that an entirely privatised channel would be able to sustain that type of news bulletin at that time on a commercial channel."

That view is shared in the newsroom, where there is a fear that the hour-long show, scheduled at the start of peak-time viewing but attracting little advertising, will be replaced by a basic bulletin to meet a public service remit to supply news. "There's no other programme in the UK where you can have a lead story of 10 minutes," comments one member of the team.

Ivor Gaber, professor of political journalism at the University of Sussex, thinks the programme's format is "vulnerable" and is also fearful for the BBC's Newsnight in the light of the government's strategic review of PSB. "I suspect that the public service review will probably find BBC news bulletins satisfactory, but I don't think they will find the same for Newsnight," he says. "I would be fearful of the consequences for critical current-affairs programmes – for programmes that put government and other authorities under the spotlight."

In fact, an over-reliance on news bulletins would damage democracy, Gaber believes. "It's quite difficult to criticise politicians on a news bulletin which is trying to recount the main

things that have happened that day," he says. "A current-affairs programme has a different role ... to put under the spotlight not just the government but all sorts of public and private bodies and to act as the agent of the public in reviewing what they are doing and criticising where appropriate."

The government's PSB review, its Channel 4 privatisation plans and its widely-supported proposals for subjecting video-on-demand services such as Netflix and Disney+ to tighter regulation in line with that faced by traditional TV players will be part of a broadcasting white paper due in the autumn.

"It's crystal clear that this privatisation is being driven ideologically."

The BBC, reeling after the scandal over its handling of Martin Bashir's 1995 interview with Princess Diana, is in a tight corner. "It's clear that the BBC senior management are absolutely petrified and doing everything they can to appease the government," says Pierre Vicary. He points to the BBC's "mindless" policy of moving World Service staff outside London when they serve an international audience, not a UK one.

Siebert says plans to put radio science staff in Cardiff and the BBC Click technology team in Glasgow seem inspired by "sticking pins in a map".

The NUJ is also concerned that a BBC pay offer of 1 per cent appears to be driven by a fear of exceeding the government's deal for public sector workers.

"The government is clearly wanting to impose itself on the nation's broadcasting culture – the whole framework," says the University of Westminster's Barnett. "It's not just making changes at the periphery, this

is a government that wants to place its stamp on the whole media ecology."

Yet the outcome is not inevitably gloomy.

Privatisation of Channel 4 may not be a bad thing if the buyer is ITV, argues media analyst Ian Whittaker. "By a country mile I think that ITV makes the most sense," he says. "In France and the Netherlands you have the number one and number two entities [in commercial PSB] coming together in mergers that would not have been dreamed of before."

Channel 4, which is set to open its new Leeds headquarters in September and insists its current model is sustainable, seems confident that privatisation can again be resisted. Its PR strategy has avoided the threat to Channel 4 News (to the dismay of some journalists) and instead highlights the organisation's contribution to the independent production sector which is campaigning noisily for the channel's reprieve.

Responding in June to an inquiry into PSB by the Digital, Culture, Media & Sport select committee, the government acknowledged that the need for such services "remains as strong as ever".

Ofcom has completed a sympathetic review of PSB, noting that it invests £3 billion a year in the UK's creative economy. With the pandemic ongoing, the regulator concluded that UK audiences valued PSBs highly for trusted news but also soap operas and live sport.

Government hawks have been itching to get after the BBC and Channel 4 since the November 2019 election but the increased public trust these outlets have enjoyed during the pandemic has "tempered" the rhetoric of their critics, says Pierre Vicary.

Paul Siebert agrees. "It's the wrong time for the government to pick a fight with public service broadcasters because the public are back on board," he says. "So I am optimistic about their future but it's always going to be a constant fight when there is a Conservative government."

Spotlight



Reach out for local press domination

After making year-on-year cuts, local newspapers are recruiting digital staff. Tim Dawson finds out what's going on

In the past month, Chris Morley admits to having witnessed something on which he had given up hope. "There is a massive change in the newspaper industry; lots of companies are recruiting, and on such a scale that they are actually struggling to find sufficient suitable applicants."

The NUJ's Northern and Midlands organiser took up his job in 2007 after a couple of decades on the news desk at the Birmingham Post.

"I thought that the industry was in good shape when I started," he says. "A year later, in 2008, crisis hit. Since then, the annual cuts have been relentless, particularly around Christmas time."

The scale of the turnaround Chris Morley describes does, on paper, look remarkable. Reach is in the process of taking on 340 journalists. Newsquest is seeking 50 new editorial staff, and Archant 70. Even JPIMedia, which is still consolidating after a change of ownership, promises "£6.5m of cash to boost original reporting and replace clickbait".

The rush to recruit brings with it significant change to the nature of

newsrooms, however, says Chris Morley. "Reach is taking on mostly digital journalists who are expert at digging out stories that are trending on social media, or feature crime or celebrities. It is a very different industry to the one in which I worked."

Mark Johnson, Reach Group Chapel FOC, says: "This recruitment drive follows the 500 roles made redundant last year. Some of the people who left were on decent money. So, there may be a saving on the wage bill. Reach is also saving money by closing offices. They had 60 premises but will be left with just 15 regional hubs, with individuals left to pay for their home office."

One of the many senior journalists who took redundancy from Reach last year has a rather less sanguine view. "The company has got rid of expensive staff and are replacing them with cheaper ones. They are blitzing everything on building page views by publishing trivia and trivialising the news. They hope to impress advertisers, but it is the negation of journalism."

He illustrated his point with the case of a journalist on a Newsquest title. "She was a trainee and was expected to generate half a million page views a month and was told she wouldn't keep her job if she didn't. Reach has resisted that kind of bullying, but they are still trying to make creative people conform to the sort of targets you might expect of an advertising team."

Reach's report on its half year results was upbeat as its adjusted pre-tax profit rose to £67.8 million from £53.5 million a year before, with revenues up by 4 per cent. Its digital offering grew almost 43 per cent over the same period, as print declined 5.2 per cent. Jim Mullen, chief executive, said the group employed more journalists than in 2019 and said Reach was on a "clear path to long-term sustainable growth".

Chris Morley's reaction was: "While operating profits surge 25 per cent to £68m for the first half of the year and the profit margin cranks ever higher to

22.8 per cent, a sub-inflation pay offer of just 1 per cent to our members does not send a message that their efforts are being properly recognised. This is not what our members would take from Jim Mullen's quote that he is committed to delivering growth for the benefit of all stakeholders. NUJ members expect better and can clearly see that the company is in a position to do much better to reward them."

To date, the recruitment pushes appear to leapfrog around the country. Reach seems to have experimented with expansion in Yorkshire, before enlarging its "Live" network of digital regional brands elsewhere in England. Significant activity in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland is pending.

For an industry sector that was, until recently, considered a basket case, it is a remarkable turnaround.

Early in lockdown, the UK government's Department for Digital, Culture Media & Sport convened weekly telephone conferences with representatives of newspaper publishers. The NUJ attended, as did the chief executives of most British newspaper groups.

The case presented by the industry was bleak. One by one they complained about "haemorrhaging cash", "collapsing advertising markets", and that "survival was on a knife edge". Their reward was a rash of Covid-related marketing wraparounds and Brexit themed-ad campaigns. Between April and June 2020 the Cabinet Office approved spending of £216.8m on newspaper advertising. Despite NUJ calls for government cash to be tied to no-redundancy assurances, publishers reverted to type and simultaneously slashed jobs.

Since then, however, world trade has experienced a significant uptick. "The global economy is set to expand 5.6 per cent in 2021—its strongest post-recession pace in 80 years," says the World Bank in its latest predictions.

In the UK this has led to acute skills

shortages in hospitality and logistics. For regional newspaper publishers it has meant an advertising-expenditure rebound. By next year, total revenue will be ahead of the last full year before Covid, according to one industry survey.

Archant, with its four East Anglian dailies, nearly 50 weekly titles and a magazines division, is another company that is recruiting after years of lay-offs. Chief executive, Lorna Willis, said her promise of 70 new jobs represented "putting our money where our mouth is and giving the local media a damn good kick up the backside".

"By next year total revenue will be ahead of the last full year before Covid"

This won't necessarily be easy, however. Reach's ambition for UK-wide coverage has led it to expand into eastern England which for a long time Archant has had largely to itself.

Nor can Archant assume that existing staff will easily forget the era of cuts, redundancies and increased workloads. One of the most senior reporters on their daily titles told me: "New staff is great. The company might need to look hard at itself, however, if it wants to attract good people. We've had no pay rise this year and there was none last year either. In real terms that means our wages continue to fall. Employers are having to compete right now to attract staff. Archant may think that nobody looks at these things, but they do and they will be weighing that on balance."

More problematic still may be finding staff who can actually do the work. A news editor at one of JPIMedia's daily titles provides an interesting perspective. "Everyone is talking about Reach poaching our best staff, not least because they are offering joining bonuses and bonuses for recommending

good journalists who make the jump.. From an NUJ perspective, however, it means issues that we have been raising fruitlessly for years are getting traction with management. On the downside, I worry about us having the staff to serve our readers".

She also has an open mind about the quality of work that is driving Reach's expansion. "It is easy to dismiss it as clickbait, but when they came to our patch they assembled a significant 'public interest team' to cover the courts and local democracy. It was hard not to be impressed."

One young journalist who started work for Reach six weeks ago provides a flavour of her experience. "I graduated in journalism and got my NCTJ last September after the weirdest final year at university that anyone could have imagined. Throughout my degree, news from the sector got worse and worse and most of my classmates chose to seek jobs in PR or with branded content providers, such as football teams. I had given up hope of actually working for a local newspaper."

She joined a home-based tele-sales team for several months before landing the job with Reach. "It is just the most amazing thrill to start work every day – albeit still from home – and write stories that the world can read on a really busy website. It is a dream that, six months ago, I thought would never come true despite the years of training." Happily, she has also joined the NUJ.

Meanwhile, staff at Newsquest, particularly in North Wales and Cumbria, are working under horrendous and stressful conditions. Chris Morley's report to NEC noted that that, since the takeover of CN Group by Newsquest just a few years ago, the company's staffing went from 300 to just 30, so it would be rash to celebrate a renaissance of local journalism just yet. But as the industry energetically pursues innovation and expansion, maybe local newspapers do have a survival plan.

International

Anger and sadness at death of Dutch reporter Peter R De Vries

The death of crime reporter, Peter R. De Vries, on an Amsterdam street as he left the television studios of the programme RTL Boulevard, has sent shock waves through the Dutch press and beyond.

Peter, 64, was well known as a reporter and commentator on the criminal underworld and had been acting as an adviser and spokesperson for a crown witness in a trial against members of a violent drugs gang. He was shot five times at close range on the busy street and died nine days later on 15 July. Two men were arrested and remain in custody.

NUJ Netherlands and the union's Continental European Council said



SOPA Images Limited / Alamy Stock Photo

they were saddened and angered by the news and the NEC sent condolences to his family, friends and colleagues and a message of solidarity to NVJ, the Dutch union, saying: "We condemn

the constant vilification of journalists, including by politicians who stoke this atmosphere of hostility without regard for the consequences." One Dutch politician recently described journalists as "the scum of the earth".

Thomas Bruning, NVJ general secretary, said: "Peter R. de Vries was an iconic crime reporter, unrelenting fighter for justice and an example for many. His death is unreal, and the anger at this brutal attack is great."

Protection for journalists was called for after radio commentator, Renante "Rey" Cortes was shot dead outside radio station DyRB by a gunman on a motorcycle in Barangay Mambaling in Cebu, central Philippines, on July 22.

Belarus

The Belarusian regime has intensified its crackdown on journalists and their representative organisation, the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ). After searching and sealing BAJ's offices on 14 July, the authorities blocked the organisation's bank accounts on 20 July. Since early July, 66 media outlets, editorial offices and journalists' homes have been raided. NGOs and human rights activists have also been targeted. The International and European Federations of Journalists again denounced the regime's repeated attempts to paralyse their affiliate in Belarus.

Afghanistan

Reuters journalist, Danish Siddiqui, was killed while covering a clash between Afghan security forces and Taliban fighters near a border crossing with Pakistan on 16 July.

The 41-year-old was chief photographer for the news agency in India and had been embedded with Afghan special forces based in the southern province of Kandahar.

In 2018, he won the Pulitzer Prize in feature photography while working with colleagues documenting the violence faced by Myanmar's minority Rohingya community. His work spanned the wars in

Afghanistan and Iraq, the Rohingya refugee crisis, the Hong Kong protests and Nepal earthquakes.

Hong Kong

The Hong Kong Journalists Association has published its 2021 annual report on the effects of its repressive government on the media. Freedom in Tatters documents the effect of the National Security Law on press freedom and democracy, including the arrest of Jimmy Lai and the closure of his pro-democracy Apple Daily and the targeting of Hong Kong's public broadcaster, Radio Television Hong Kong. The report also noted several government

departments' moves to block access to public records.

Ethiopia

The International Federation of Journalists has condemned the increasing threats of arrest and violence to journalists in Ethiopia since the start of the war in Tigray. Twelve journalists from two independent media companies were arrested in late June and attacks against media are common. The Ethiopian media regulator suspended the licence of popular English-language online news website, the Addis Standard, on 15 July, claiming it "advanced the agenda of a terrorist group".