

Informed

NEWS FROM THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE

issue 45 October 2023

New deal offered in BBC Local dispute

NUJ members who work in BBC Local are to be balloted following talks at Acas between the NUJ and BBC managers aimed at ending the long-running dispute. Previously agreed strike action will be put on hold while the ballot takes place.

Talks brokered by the conciliation service have seen a number of issues addressed, including protecting the salaries of members at risk of redundancy who accept jobs at a lower grade, averting compulsory redundancies of NUJ members, a review of the BBC's plan to share local radio news bulletins, a delay of an all-England show on Sunday afternoons across the local radio network until September 2024 at the earliest, the addressing of some workload and anti-social working issues, plus a review of the BBC's Acting Up policy.

Members across BBC Local in radio, online and TV went on strike in March and July over the plans which cut local content on linear radio in half and moved resources to digital output. The changes have been opposed by politicians across the board, charities and local community groups. The NUJ will continue to press for the reinstatement of a greater breadth of local news at all 39 radio stations and lobby for changes to the levels of local output and for more sustainable funding for the BBC that serves to protect and enhance local news into the future.

Paul Siegert, national broadcasting official, said: "The impact of this restructure across our members in England has been severe, made worse by the BBC's approach to the implementation. Our latest talks have been constructive, and we have led to a revised proposal that builds on previous



On the BBC Birmingham picket line protesting against local radio cuts.

Aid for Gaza

Journalists in the Gaza need your help to do their job in desperate circumstances. The IFJ is supplying vital equipment and aid. Please donate to its safety fund. Branches can email jackiec@nuj.org to transfer from their management allowances.

DONATE NOW

concessions already secured by the collective determination of our members to stand up for local news and public service broadcasting, as well as for their colleagues facing redundancy. Now it's time for members to consider this proposal and decide upon next steps."

Further cuts to news and shifting more

programmes to Manchester had been reported in the press, but an expected announcement was put back because of the conflict in the Middle East.

The pay dispute at National World continues. Members at titles including The Scotsman, The Yorkshire Post, Belfast's News Letter, and Sheffield Star, took three days' strike action in September and remain on a work to rule. Laura Davison, national organiser, said: "The issues at National World are not going away. Members are determined to keep highlighting the woeful, unfair low pay and lack of progression within the business and take a very dim view of the leadership's refusal to engage with Acas about potential resolutions."

The situation of journalists in the Middle East has been a priority, and the union has been working with the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) to get vital aid to those working in the Gaza. See Michelle's message, page two.

**Also
in this
issue:**

Michelle's
Message
Page 02

Telegraph
sale
Page 08-09

GB
News
Page 10-11

NUJ
NATIONAL UNION
OF
JOURNALISTS

Michelle's Message



Journalists in Gaza are working in horrendous and dangerous conditions – but no story is worth a journalists' life, says Michelle Stanistreet

Last week, Tahseen al Astall, the vice president of the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate (PJS), spoke at a Zoom meeting organised by the NUJ's Brussels Branch. There was much of interest in his comments, but one phrase jumped out in reports of the meeting: "every inch of Gaza has a story to tell".

This neatly captures the granularity that is at the heart of reporting, as well as reflecting a principle that runs deep in NUJ thinking. More journalism is always better. Of course, we all experience news platforms whose values are not our own, content we consider partial, and reporters whose slant irks us. Nevertheless, the more voices we hear, the more facets of a situation are described, the better we understand the world.

It's why the NUJ priorities media pluralism and free speech, and places journalists' safety at the centre of our work. We may be dying to tell our stories – but no story is worth a journalists' life.

Nowhere could this challenge be more stark than in Gaza, where a courageous 1,000 journalists shine a beam of light through the fog of war. The risks they take doing so are beyond anything that most of us can imagine, with a heartbreaking tally of reporters – Israeli and Palestinian – who have already lost their lives.

Al Astall and his colleagues now believe that the Israeli military are deliberately targeting journalists, and in some cases phoning them up with threats that they and their families will be subject to attack. These accusations have yet to be subjected to any kind of evidential tests. Framed by the deaths of the entire family of Al Jazeera bureau chief Wael al-Dahdouh, however, it is easy to see why this suspicion has become currency in Gaza.

Al Astall and his members face additional challenges – the chronic shortage of water in Gaza and lack of fuel mean that reporters are mostly walking to cover jobs carrying equipment on their shoulders, while displaced journalists and their families are living in tents or refugee camps. The simplest everyday functions have become almost impossible. That reporting continues in the face of these problems is testimony to the resonance and determination of Gaza's journalists.

There are ways that we can all make a difference to their lives. The IFJ's International Safety Fund has already financed blast-trauma first aid kits and battery packs for journalists in Gaza, that have been distributed by leaders of our sister union the PJS. That effort was helped by £20,000 donated by the NUJ centrally – branches have also started to respond, for example a recent €500 donation from Brussels branch. We want NUJ Chapels, branches and individual members to help boost the Safety

Fund's coffers. The needs in that part of the world look set to grow and while much aid will depend on convoy access to the territory, unless materials have been purchased, they can't be packed on to lorries.

Another important development in our wider work to challenge the treatment of journalists by the Israeli Defence Force came this month, with the report submitted to the UN General Assembly by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Scrupulously researched by UN officials, it provides the closest that we yet have to a dispassionate account of the death of Palestinian journalists Shireen Abu Akleh, in May 2022.

"We must support the courageous journalists shining a beam of light through the fog of war."

The UN report ends its highly detailed assessment of her killing: "The Commission concludes on reasonable grounds that the Israeli security forces used lethal force without justification under international human rights law and intentionally or recklessly violated the right to life of Shireen Abu Akleh." It is a chilling assessment that may gain little traction against the current backdrop. It goes some way to explaining why Gaza's journalists are so determined to tell their story, however.

The resilience and determination of journalists to carry on in the face of adversity was also reflected well in a recent Guardian write up of the issues faced by Iranian journalists who work for the BBC's Persian Service in London. "We are not in a war zone but the war is ongoing, and in our houses now," said Rana Rahimpour, who has recently stepped down after more than 15 years as the lead presenter on BBC's Persian Service. She and her

colleagues described tapped phone calls, threatening messages and harassment of family members who still live in Iran.

These too are issues on which the NUJ has been engaged for many years, including facilitating the presentation of these journalists' issues at the United Nations. Indeed, such attacks have become so prevalent that a name for them has been coined - transnational repression.

The pressures faced by Iranian journalists here in the UK include those at the London-based broadcaster Iran International. Earlier this year, the Metropolitan Police advised the station to cease transmission from London because intelligence from Tehran suggested that an attack on its studios and staff was expected almost immediately. The station relocated, temporarily, to the United States before returning to London in September to new studios, designed to better withstand offensive actions.

Intelligence interventions are not the only sign of Government interest with journalists safety in the UK, at least. The NUJ's work as part of the UK government's National Committee for the Safety of Journalists has stepped up, with a renewed Action Plan underway. As part of this, we will be leading on the launch of a Press Safety Tracker, to maintain an official record of incidents. This will allow the mapping of trends, and provide a means to maintain pressure on the authorities to do more.

The fundamental simplicity of simply keeping an accurate record, goes to the heart of another axiom that underpins the NUJ's work. However, bewildering might be the range of issues and threats we face, focussing on simple practical steps within our control is always the best response.

It might be personal - we can donate, defend a colleague or point out a falsehood. Others responses require collective strength - making representations to an employer, organising a workplace, or intervening in

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

NUJ
NATIONAL UNION
OF
JOURNALISTS

www.nuj.org.uk

the legislative process. Co-operation with colleagues around the world might start by simply establishing contact, opening the door to understanding, which in turn can lead to more profound help.

In each case, concentrating on what we can do is the best way to avoid feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of issues.

Or, to put that another way, while Gaza is producing the most arresting news of the moment - wherever you look, every inch has a story to tell.

Tim Dawson, IFJ deputy general secretary reports on his organisation's work in Gaza, page 12

Broadcasting

Red warnings for the BBC

The red paint thrown at the BBC's London headquarters by a pro-Palestinian group was one of the first signs that the corporation was going to find itself under fire over its coverage of the conflict in Gaza.

While its reporters watched the missiles flying in the Middle East, those back at home in the UK covering the news found themselves caught up in fury and controversy as events unfolded. The BBC announced more "targeted" mental health support for members who had received abuse—online or in person.

Staff were told by BBC News chief operating officer, Sam Taylor, that help would also be at hand for those suffering from "trauma caused by viewing specific images, working closely with distressed individuals, or undertaking assignments on the ground".

Grant Shapps, the Defence Secretary, was just one of the ministers criticising the corporation for not calling Hamas a

Alamy Stock Photo



The BBC's London headquarters was hit by red paint by the group Palestine Action

terrorist organisation. The BBC said the best way to maintain impartiality was to ascribe the "terrorist" description to somebody else. Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, in part of a **statement** about journalists being able to report in safety, said: "Broadcast journalists need to use careful language to show they are reporting impartially, for their own safety and in adherence to editorial guidelines and frameworks governing impartiality."

The corporation reviewed its coverage of the explosion at the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City on its corrections and clarifications page, saying while the reporter had been working in a fast-moving situation, he had been wrong to speculate Israel had been behind the blast without verification "although he did not at any point report that it was an Israeli strike".

The Israeli government had accused the BBC of perpetuating a "modern blood libel".

Reporting Hamas

The BBC has come in for attack from the British government for failing to identify Hamas as a terrorist organisation in its recent reporting from the Middle East.

Reporting from a conflict zone with such a complicated background as the Middle East requires considerable care to ensure that reporting comes as close to unbiased facts as is possible in a fast-changing arena where the overwhelming picture is one of death, destruction and horror. Choice of words is critical and taking sides would be disastrous for consumer trust.

The proscription of organisations as terrorist is a political move identified in the Terrorism Act 2000.

Hamas (Ḥarakat al-Muqāwamah al-'Islāmiyyah) was added to the list of such groups by the secretary of state in 2021, Hezbollah (Hizballah) in 2019. Terrorism is defined in the Act as the use or threat of violence to advance a political or religious cause.

Governments can decide this group or that is terrorist to suit its policies but it is up to journalists to decide if they use the term. It may be appropriate when reporting to record that Hamas is defined by the government as a terrorist organisation or, bearing in mind the situation, to report that acts of terrorism are taking place.

However, terrorist is a loaded word when used in any arena implying that

only one side is in the wrong and makes identifying clearly what is happening very difficult.

The NUJ supports journalists who are trying to ensure they are reporting fairly and presenting both sides and all those who, quite rightly, try to avoid taking sides.

Of course, some publications, as opposed to UK broadcasters, are allowed to take sides in editorials and opinion pieces and may use the terrorism tag.

Provided sufficient care is taken in news items to separate fact from opinion – not always an easy job in such difficult circumstances – it should still be possible to report fairly.

Professor Chris Frost is chair of the NUJ's Ethics Council.

Update

Satirist author named guest speaker

Journalist and broadcaster Nels Abbey is this year's guest speaker at the Claudia Jones Memorial Lecture, organised by the NUJ's Black Members' Council.

Nels is probably best known for his 2019 satirical self-help book, *Think Like a White Man*, based on his experience working in the banking sector where he was taken on his first day at work by just about everybody for a security guard. His new book, *The Hip-Hop MBA: Lessons in Cut-Throat Capitalism from The Moguls of Rap*, is out in 2024.

You can hear about his early experiences when he left London aged 12 to attend a "tough traditional" boarding school in Nigeria on **Radio 4**. It was an experience which "scarred and scared him stiff".

He is man with many impressive hats, as his biography reveals. Nels is a former BBC executive, a Clore Fellow, a Penguin Fellow, a Fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts and co-founder of the Black British Writers' Guild. His journalism and comment pieces feature in many British



newspapers and magazines including the **Guardian** and Financial Times and he is a regular guest on Channel 4 News, Newsnight, LBC and Sky News.

Nels has been described as "a jokester, media leader, and essayist of British-Nigerian drop". *Think Like a White Man* was chosen by The Guardian as one of 30 books to help us understand the world and was described as a "book like

no other, taking you on a thrill ride/thrill guide through the world of default white dominance" with a sense of humour to soften the blow ... "or make it hit harder".

Tickets are free for the event on Wednesday 8 November from 18.15 at the October Gallery, 24 Old Gloucester St, London WC1N 3AL, but you must reserve a ticket.

RTÉ in peril

Kevin Bakhurst, director general of the Irish public service broadcaster, has told the Oireachtas Public Accounts Committee that RTÉ could run out of cash by spring largely owing to the decline in TV licence revenue. The government had agreed to provide €40 million in emergency funding, but that left the organisation €21 million in savings to find. The director general promised no compulsory redundancies, but there is a freeze on staff recruitment. He said while

commercial revenue had been strong, "reform of the broken funding system was urgently needed". Séamus Dooley, assistant general secretary, responded by saying the current crisis may be attributed to political failure over many years to reform funding and the licence collection system.

ITV news

The NUJ has asked ITV management to renegotiate the company's decade-old house agreement with the joint unions. Issues under review include working

time, overtime, banding and progression, digital demand and workload, expenses and sick leave. A pay claim for 2024 of the consumer price index plus 2 per cent is being submitted. The company received a mauling from a Parliamentary committee over the Phillip Schofield scandal. Jane Mulcahy KC is leading the external review of the relationship between the presenter and a young member of his team. ITV staff were sent an updated version of its relationships at work policy in which

staff must disclose any personal, family or sexual relationships with others in the company.

Iran International

Output from London had been closed because of security concerns and threats to staff by the Iranian authorities. Broadcasting has now resumed from a new office at Park Royal in northwest London. The NUJ was asked to create a 'security rep' to liaise with management on security issues. This is under consideration.

Update

The NUJ nets £2.5m for members

The extent to which the union supports members, saves their jobs and secures compensation was outlined to the national executive council.

The amount secured by the union for its members in legal settlement agreements has topped £2m since January this year.

Most of this sum comprises redundancy payments, and a further £500,000 has been won in damages for claims of unfair dismissal, discrimination and personal injury since July.

The union also supports members with complaints against the police during protests and attempts to secure journalistic material.

At the BBC, officials, secondees and reps have, through sheer bloody-mindedness, ensured that virtually all those whose jobs were put at risk have found new roles at the corporation following wide-ranging cuts in BBC Local, the World Service and BBC News Channel.

The NUJ will always fight compulsory



redundancies at the BBC with strike action. However, many members decided to take voluntary redundancy or leave, and the airways were full of sad goodbyes from popular local radio presenters signing off from their last show.

At Reach, members on its national titles were told they were at risk of compulsory redundancy, including the NUJ rep on The Express, royal correspondent, Richard Palmer. Reps responded with a motion saying the management had breached the collective agreement to seek volunteers before moving to compulsory

redundancies and forced the company to pause the process and ask for volunteers.

National World members working in Preston and Blackpool were able to see off changes to their working days and a system of being on "soft call", which meant members were effectively working but not getting compensatory time after talks between the union off and their editor.

At Newsquest the union has been supporting members suffering from the widespread abuse they are receiving on their own websites. Offensive and racist comments are being made on the comment sections of the website with little response from management. The union said this needed urgently investigating as matters of health and safety and duty of care.

Michelle Stanistreet said: "Whether using its collective might, adroit negotiation or legal means, the union is winning workplace battles, saving jobs and making many of our members' working lives so much better. That's why it is vital to be a member of the NUJ."

Lyra McKee lecture

Belfast and District branch is hosting the Lyra McKee Inaugural Lecture on Wednesday 1 November, eve of International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists, in the former Crumlin Road Gaol in Belfast. The guest speaker will be Irish Press Ombudsman, Susan McKay. The event is free, but **tickets must be reserved** in advance. Join NUJ colleagues, Lyra's friends and family to celebrate our respected and much valued member who lost her life in such a tragic way.

Martin O'Hagan remembered

The 22nd anniversary of the murder of Sunday World journalist, Martin O'Hagan, was marked by the union's renewed call for an international investigation into his killing and a vigil organised by NUJ Belfast and district branch. The NUJ wrote to the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs seeking Irish government support. The letter said there was a strong belief that security force informers were involved and that collusion was central to the failure

to properly investigate his death.

LDR 'profiteering'

The NUJ has challenged Newsquest over failing to pass on thousands of pounds of BBC licence fee payer funding to local democracy reporters (LDRs), by retaining more than £10,000 per role as "business costs".

The union asked for an explanation of why some of its LDRs are struggling financially on the £24,000 BBC set minimum when at least one other major publisher pays minimum

salaries of £31,200 for all its LDRs.

Northern ire

Local newspapers in the North of England and Midlands made their views on the Prime Minister's decision to scrap the northern leg of the high-speed HS2 railway line clear on their front pages. "Are you for real?" blasted the Newcastle Journal's splash. The Nottingham Post said Rishi Sunak had left the region "bottom of the pile". The Lancashire Post said: "City dream derailed?"

Update

Dangers of AI highlighted

The development of Artificial Intelligence could have grave consequences for the media in terms of abuses of copyright and propagating disinformation, high-level news organisations have told the government.

Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, represented the union at a meeting called by Culture Secretary, Lucy Frazer, which brought together broadcasters including the BBC, Sky and ITN, national and regional newspaper groups, PA Media and the News Media Association.

“The rapid development of AI poses huge questions for the future of our country’s world-class news industry,” Lucy Frazer said. “I want to make sure we are supporting journalists and writers who are grappling with the impact of this revolutionary technology.”

The union is asking members to report AI initiatives and policies at their workplaces. It is already alarmed by newspapers taking on “AI reporters”. One such post, advertised by Newsquest,

would require the journalist to feed in press releases and ask for resumés in the newspaper’s house style – churnalism at the push of a button, Michelle commented.

Matt Kenyon



The union publicly criticised the use of AI at Iconic Newspapers to write an article on whether refugees in Ireland should go home. The NUJ is now expecting to help form the AI policies of Mediahuis and the Irish Examiner Group and Reach has offered the NUJ monthly meetings to monitor developments of the new technology.

The union has held meetings with the Creators Rights Alliance and the Federation of Entertainment Unions on the implications of AI for those in the creative industries and NUJ president, Natasha Hirst, spoke on the topic at conference held by the Royal Photographic Society.

National World’s London website has introduced an AI-generated weather presenter “who” reads the bulletins on video. David Montgomery, the CEO, wants to use the “exploitation of AI in production across both print and digital platforms”.

The use of AI in undermining democracy was exemplified during the Slovakian general election. A pro-Kremlin populist won a tight vote after a campaign using fake recordings of liberal politicians planning to rig the election and saying they would double the price of beer. Recently, a fake social media audio clip broadcast Labour Party leader, Keir Starmer, swearing at his staff. The NUJ’s briefing paper on AI can be found **on the website**.

Senedd drop-in

Members of the Welsh Executive Council held a drop-in for MSs at the Senedd to discuss the report, Of and For Wales: towards a sustainable future for public interest journalism, to win support for making public interest journalism a public service and for the establishment of a Welsh media institute to promote quality news. The public interest journalism working group will continue to meet and a Senedd reporter has now been recruited. The Welsh government warned

that a budget shortfall could have implications for any funding and the NUJ has signed a letter calling for improved provision from for news and magazine titles, particularly those in the Welsh language which rely on government funding.

Industrial councils

A paper presented to the NEC by joint vice-presidents Gerry Curran and Fran McNulty represented the first step in implementing the DM decision to review industrial councils. The Development

Council will now hear evidence from the councils and analyse membership data to inform a union-wide survey in early 2024 to seek views on a reformed structure reflecting the distribution of members in the industry. It will look at ways to increase participation and provide training to make the union’s structures more effective.

Focus on subs

The NEC endorsed a paper by Chris Frost, chair of the union’s finance council, to inform a special conference

in February, open to all members, to discuss ways to reform the subscription structure. The paper will be circulated to branches as a starting point for debate on the issue and a webinar-style conference will be held to develop themes which will feed into motions for Delegate Meeting in April 2025.

Orwell prize

Applications for the NUJ/Orwell Society award for young and student journalists **are now open**.

Spotlight

alamy.com



The Telegraph building during its Fleet Street days.

Telegraph trophy sale

Media moguls and hedge funds eye up the newspaper prize, reports Frances Rafferty

The jostling posse of interested buyers shows the Telegraph Media Group, a so-called legacy publisher established in the 19th century, is still regarded as a “trophy media asset”.

The names in the frame chasing its flagship newspapers, The Daily and Sunday Telegraphs, reported by the Press Gazette among others, include German publisher Axel Springer; Lord Rothermere’s DMGT which owns the Mail, Metro, i and New Scientist titles; David Montgomery’s National World; GB News investor Sir Paul Marshall; ex-Telegraph editor William Lewis;

former Mail Online’s Martin Clarke; Czech energy industry billionaire Daniel Křetínský; and Sir Jim Ratcliffe, the billionaire owner of the chemicals company Ineos. Rupert Murdoch is said to want to buy The Spectator.

The sale of the group (TMG) and The Spectator was prompted by Lloyds Banking Group seizing these assets from their owners, the Barclay family, over debts amounting to about £1bn. Since then, the family has offered £1bn, raised from Abu Dhabi investors, in an attempt to derail the sale.

The brothers Sir David and Sir Frederick Barclay bought the Telegraph and Spectator titles from the disgraced Conrad Black in 2004. The secretive Bond-style twins’ financial empire was run from their very own Channel island, Brecqhou. David died in 2021 and the family has since been plunged into controversies including bugging each other’s conversations at The Ritz and Fredrick’s high-profile divorce and reluctance to settle up with his ex-wife – although a man who is supposed to guard his privacy would be best advised to choose his trousers more carefully.

The sale throws up the possibility of competition problems since some of those in the running already own huge chunks of the UK’s newspaper market. If DMG Media was to acquire The Telegraphs it would increase its print market share from 42 per cent to 47 per cent.

According to the Media Reform Coalition (MRC) 2023 report, **Who Owns the UK Media?**, there are “dangerous levels of concentrated ownership across the UK’s press, broadcasting, streaming services and online platforms”

Just three companies – DMG Media (publisher of the Daily Mail, Metro and i), News UK (The Sun and The Times) and Reach (Daily Mirror, The Express, Daily Star) – dominate 90 per cent of national newspaper circulation.

The perceived prize of The Telegraphs is proof that – despite the huge changes in the media landscape, the possibility

Who owns the UK Media?

- Three companies, DMG Media, News UK and Reach, dominate 90 per cent of the UK's national newspaper market.
- 71 per cent of the UK's 1,189 local newspapers are owned by six companies. Newsquest and Reach each control one-fifth of the local press market.
- Ten of the top 15 online platforms used to access news in the UK are owned by Meta, Google and X Corp (owner of X/Twitter).
- Netflix, Amazon Prime and Disney+ account for 80 per cent of all UK video-on-demand subscriptions.
- Bauer Radio and Global Radio own 65 per cent of the UK's local commercial analogue radio stations.
- Viscount Jonathan Harmsworth controls 40 per cent of the UK's national newspaper market through the Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, the i and Metro.
- Rupert Murdoch's News UK controls one third of the national newspaper market and also operates TalkTV, TalkRadio and talkSPORT.
- 72 per cent of UK people who get their news online do so through Mark Zuckerberg's Meta websites, apps and services. He controls Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and many other companies.
- In 2022 advertisers spent £26.1bn (75 per cent of total UK advertising outlay) on online platforms, with an estimated £20.8bn of that (59 per cent of total UK ad spend) going to Google and Facebook. In 2019, Google generated more than 90 per cent of all UK search advertising revenue while Meta's Facebook and Instagram jointly accounted for over half of all UK display advertising.

Full MRC report

of a Labour government in the not-to-distant future and dwindling support for Brexit – there is still cachet and influence to be gained from owning a right-wing newspaper. And from the media moguls lined up to take over, it seems highly unlikely there would be a realignment of its political world view. It could be just a matter of how right-wing it will go – Sunak or Braverman? Farage? While it has pulled out of the ABC newspaper circulation audit, TMG says it has hit its target of reaching one million subscriptions before the end of 2023. The sale price had been estimated at between £500,000 to £600,000 before the Barclays' bid.

“The UK media is dominated by a handful of corporate media moguls and tech tycoons.”

The apparent hat thrown into the TMG ring by David Montgomery caused huge anger among NUJ members working for his National World. They are in dispute over a miserly pay deal and, while they were striking, he was clinching a £11m cash purchase of the Express & Star and the Shropshire Star, further consolidating ownership in the local newspaper market. Telegraph staffers be warned – if he wins it will mean cuts. That's what he does.

The MRC's figures (before the sale) show that of the UK's 1,189 local newspapers (including print and online-only titles) 71 per cent were owned by just six companies. Newsquest and Reach, the two largest firms, each control one-fifth of the local press market – more than the combined share of the smallest 173 local publishers combined.

There has been a smattering of good news. During the summer, the independent Manchester Mill subscription newsletter reported it was preparing to expand following

investment from a group including the former BBC director general, Mark Thompson. Spin-off editions in Liverpool and Sheffield could be joined by those from Leeds, Birmingham, Glasgow and Newcastle replicating the formula of local reports and investigative journalism, according to the company's founder, Joshi Herrmann. Yet, the MRC, using data from the Public Interest News Foundation, estimated that 11.5 million people (17.5 per cent of the UK population) live in news “deserts” or “droughts”.

The MRC's report says: “A free, independent and plural media is essential to the functioning of a healthy democracy. However, our report's findings show that the UK media is dominated by a tiny handful of corporate media moguls and ‘big tech’ tycoons. Across our newspapers, TV channels, radio stations and online platforms, these companies hold a dangerous level of power to dictate our national conversation and influence the political agenda to favour their own interests.”

The report adds that the BBC's founding public service mission “has been undermined by licence fee freezes, political interference and a questionable strategy to find its digital future” and its entertainment was being squeezed by streamers such as Netflix.

The NUJ's News Recovery Plan sets out a road map for a rebooted media, calling for a plural, diverse press focused squarely on the public good and one that can be sustained in the future. The union is lobbying the governments in Wales and Scotland to back the recommendations of reports which make the case for public interest journalism being recognised as a public service and the establishment of institutes to protect and promote quality journalism.

Following questions from Labour MP Richard Leonard, Culture minister Angus Robertson said there were “a number of ways” the Scottish government could support an emerging institute for public interest journalism.

Spotlight

Matt Kenyon



GB News

Tara Conlan looks behind the cameras at the controversial TV channel testing the maxim that any publicity is good publicity

The right-leaning TV news station hit the headlines recently after Lawrence Fox made misogynistic remarks about female journalist, Ava Evans, on Dan Wootton's show, leading to the departure of the actor turned political activist, suspension of Wootton and the axing of another presenter, Calvin Robinson, after he voiced support for Fox.

It was just the latest in a series of controversies to hit GB News, the channel that to its critics is a hotbed of right-wing opinion and conspiracy theories and to its fans a defender of freedom of speech.

The former prime minister Boris Johnson is set to join the channel on a rumoured six-figure sum to add to the fat fee he receives for his Daily Mail column. He promised to play a key role in the coverage of the UK and US elections and share his "unvarnished views" on a range of topics.

GB News is understood to be under more investigations by industry regulator Ofcom than any other mainstream channel ever – there are 12 outstanding cases. Ofcom ruled the station had broken impartiality rules during a discussion between Richard Tice, of Reform UK, and Martin Daubney, former Brexit Party MEP, on immigration.

But why has GB News – which has created drama since its inception in 2021 and the swift exit of one of its founders Andrew Neil – racked up so many inquiries?

One source familiar with the channel claimed one reason could be the rapid rate of staff turnover and the relative youth of some of them. While that has meant innovation, particularly on social media, insiders say the departure of experienced launch managers has not helped. "It's an incredibly difficult channel to keep a check on. They have a lot of hot debates that people feel strongly about and people say unpredictable and unscripted things," said one news executive.

However, the channel's right-wing presenters and its ownership – it belongs to Dubai-based Legatum Ventures and billionaire hedge fund boss, Paul Marshall – placed it firmly in the spotlight well before Fox's outburst.

Presenter Mark Steyn left in February after the channel tried to make him responsible for paying fines issued by Ofcom. The regulator had opened two investigations over doubts repeatedly raised on his programme about the safety of Covid vaccines.

NUJ ethics council chair, Professor Chris Frost, observed: "GB News seems to specialise in various culture wars, with Fox and Wootton being probably the epitome of that. They are intent on presenting right-wing views ... and it's crucial that Ofcom comes down hard on a station which isn't impartial." He said the need for "accurate news and unbiased views" was more important than ever because, "across the democratic world

we're seeing more populist governments getting in".

In May a joint investigation by The Guardian and climate change activist website, DeSmog, found that during the previous year one-third of GB News presenters had at some point cast doubt on climate change science. And fact-checking organisation, FullFact, has repeatedly asked the channel to correct inaccuracies about Covid vaccinations.

Newspaper journalists are used to publications being more politically partisan and radio is used to employing the services of politicians – especially LBC – but TV less so and GB News' pushing of boundaries is troubling not only Ofcom but also the channel's competitors. Its main rival, Talk TV, home of Piers Morgan's show and owned by the original news channel disruptor, the Sky News-founding Murdoch family, is finding the contest hard going.

According to official Broadcaster Audience Research Ratings Bureau, in September 2023 GB News had a 4.4 per cent monthly reach and monthly share of 0.65 per cent, compared with Talk TV's 2.6 per cent and 0.13 per cent. They compare with BBC News' 13.9 per cent and 0.93 per cent and Sky News' 11.2 per cent and 0.8 per cent.

GB News says it has about 250 journalists working for it. However, its star political signings, rather than its employment of journalists, tend to grab the column inches. Ex-Ukip leader Nigel Farage regularly brings in 100,000-plus viewers and another of its most popular presenters is the MP, Jacob Rees-Mogg, who presents his State of the Nation show. He was also put under Ofcom's microscope over a programme in May which featured the MP covering a breaking news story about a civil trial verdict involving Donald Trump and which may have broken its rule that politicians must not act as news presenters.

According to MPs' register of interests, Rees-Mogg was paid £29,166.67 by GB News in August for "40 hours including

preparation and some paid holiday" and has been earning around the same each month since he began at the channel in March this year, averaging around £750 an hour. It's perhaps unsurprising then that some GB News staff were furious about a recent review of taxi expenses.

Another pair of the channel's presenters (and also serving MPs) are Esther McVey and her husband Philip Davies, who have so far pocketed around £93,000 and £78,724 respectively.

The MPs' register of interests shows that in March this year the definition

"We take Ofcom compliance seriously and we also take freedom of speech seriously."

of what they were doing changed from presenting a "news programme" to presenting a "current affairs programme". That was the same month the pair conducted an interview with fellow Conservative MP, Chancellor Jeremy Hunt, and which Ofcom said breached impartiality rules, for failing "to represent a wide range of significant views".

The change of genre description of the McVey/Davies programme is important if you look at Ofcom's broadcasting code, by which GB News' TV channel (it is also online and on radio) has to abide. Section five, which covers due impartiality and due accuracy in news, says: "No politician may be used as a newsreader, interviewer or reporter in any news programmes unless, exceptionally, it is editorially justified. In that case, the political allegiance of that person must be made clear to the audience."

Due impartiality is difficult to quantify. Those familiar with the Ofcom code think about 20 per cent will satisfy the regulator but a specific figure is not spelled out in the rules.

The issue came up again after Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, was

interviewed by the deputy chair of her party, Lee Anderson.

A GB News spokeswoman pointed out: "GB News chose to be an Ofcom-regulated channel and we are proud to play our part in bringing a wider range of opinion to Britain's media landscape. We take Ofcom compliance seriously and we also take freedom of speech seriously."

However, the balance between these two is not always clear cut and presents vital issues for our democracy. The Communications Act of 2003 and the Ofcom Code which stemmed from it were not framed with channels like those in mind, nor did they fully envisage the current mix of news and opinion in broadcast, or indeed the online and social media world.

The spokeswoman added: "We welcome the opportunity to meet Ofcom and to work with them in ensuring that our legal freedoms to speak freely are robustly protected while remaining aligned with some of the best journalism and broadcasting standards in the world."

Yet Professor Frost wonders how much younger producers are able to "control some presenters", especially high-profile ones. There have been reports, notably from Byline Times, about the culture in GB News. Journalists Tom Latchem and Dan Evans jointly broke the story that claimed Wootton offered colleagues at newspapers he formerly worked at money for sexual material (something Wootton claimed on his GB News show was "simply untrue") and another story which claimed the channel was employing at least five men who have faced past allegations of sexual impropriety.

Latchem told NUJ Informed: "The word from inside the channel is they are delighted at our reporting. Some of them feel helpless."

After Byline Times' allegations about Wootton broke, the presenter remained on air for two months until he was suspended over Fox's comments which, Latchem claimed, made his [Wootton's] alleged victims think they had not been taken seriously.

International

IFJ aids journalists as fatalities rise

Tim Dawson, IFJ deputy general secretary, reports on how the organisation is supporting the thousand reporters on the Gaza Strip

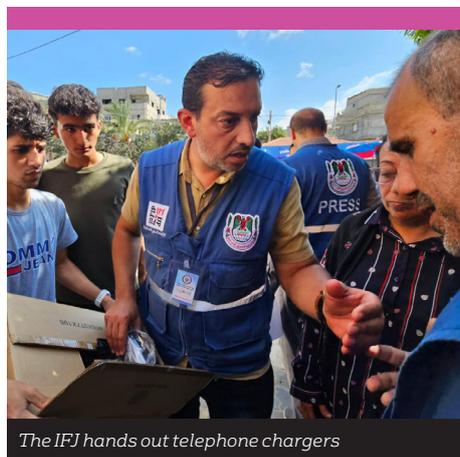
The pace at which the journalists' death toll is growing in Gaza is without precedent. But it is the slaughter of the entire family of a journalist that may ultimately become emblematic of the extraordinary bravery of Palestinian reporters during this conflict.

Wael al-Dahdouh is Al Jazeera Arabic's bureau chief in Gaza and a familiar figure to viewers of that channel around the world. Like many other Gazans, he evacuated his loved ones from the north of the territory shortly after Hamas' horrific attack on Israel. His hope was that the Nuseirat refugee camp offered them safety.

In recent days, however, Israeli rockets have landed on targets that are much further south - including persistent strikes on Kahn Yunis, the city from where most of Gaza's journalists now work. A rocket that struck the Nuseirat camp on 24 October killed al-Dahdouh's wife, son, daughter and grandson. Other members of his extended family are still unaccounted for. That single airstrike is known to have killed more than 20 people.

Speaking on Al Jazeera, al-Dahdouh said: "What happened is clear. This is a series of targeted attacks on children, women and civilians. I was just reporting from Yarmouk about such an attack, and the Israeli raids have targeted many areas, including Nuseirat."

Against this terrible backdrop, the International Federation of Journalists is helping its affiliate, the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate (PJS), to support the 1,000 or so reporters who are working



The IFJ hands out telephone chargers

in the Gaza Strip. The IFJ's international Safety Fund has paid for individual wound kits for reporters, and portable battery packs for their equipment. Dr Tahseen al Astall, vice-president of the PJS and the union's leader in Gaza is a familiar figure to news crews as he tours Kahn Yunis delivering help.

"The usual instinct of reporters is to go to where the shelling is happening, but the danger here today is extreme," Al Astall told me, "PJS is advising camera crews to stay in the south of Gaza for their own safety."

Tragically, we now know that nowhere in Gaza is safe. Indeed there have been reports that journalists in the Gaza are being targeted and the NUJ joined the IFJ in telling the Israeli government it must respect their welfare.

The response of journalists' unions to their colleagues' plight has been both swift and heartfelt. The NUJ's executive meeting on 20 October approved its regular donation of £20,000 to the IFJ's

International Safety Fund. Brussels Branch last week voted to donate £500. Numerous unsolicited donations to help this work have also been received from around the world.

In time the IFJ hopes to plan more substantial help for Gaza's journalists, possibly providing facilities for an international newsroom in Kahn Yunis, in co-operation with one of the UN agencies. Such provision, however, would rely upon moving equipment in an aid convoy into Gaza. The operation of these, to date, has been far too restricted to allow this.

The NUJ's executive meeting also adopted a motion on the conflict in Gaza. That text condemns the 7 October attack by Hamas, and subsequent bombing of densely populated civilian areas by Israel. Its main focus, however, is the danger to journalists in the territory and the growing death toll - at the time of writing 23 Palestinian journalists, three Israelis and one Lebanese have died. The motion calls on all combatants to respect international law by treating journalists as civilians and avoiding actions that might endanger their lives.

Finding cause for hope among the unfolding tragedy in Gaza is not easy. The tiniest flash came, however, when 85-year-old Israeli Yocheved Lifschitz was released from Hamas' captivity in a prisoner exchange. She turned back to her armed and masked captors, took their hands and said "shalom", the Hebrew valediction meaning "peace be with you". Her husband, the veteran Israeli journalist and writer Oded, 83, remains in Hamas' custody. Oded worked for decades for peace and the recognition of Palestinian rights, including in his work for the left-wing newspaper Al-Hamishmar. The NUJ had called for him and all the hostages to be released, and has been in contact with Oded's family and trade union in Israel.

If Lifschitz humanity and forgiveness inspires, as surely it should, then perhaps the heartbreak of escalating death toll can yet be arrested?