

NEWS FROM THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE Informed

issue 31 March 2020



Keep Safe!

As president of the NUJ, I hope you and your loved ones are keeping well in these difficult times and that you are doing all you can to keep safe.

While the doors of our offices in London, Dublin, Glasgow and Manchester are closed, the union is very much open and working hard to support you and to uphold quality journalism.

The union's Emergency Committee met this week (by conference call of course) and had no choice but to postpone Delegate Meeting which was due to take place next month. This has several consequences, one of which relating to DM being when terms of office – including mine as president – were due to come to an end. We decided in accordance with the NUJ Rule Book that for the time being all national officers, councils and committees will remain in place until the end of the next DM, whenever that is. However, rest assured that the union's democratic bodies are still meeting – by Microsoft Teams and

other types of technology – and NUJ business is being carried out, and indeed is busier than ever.

In this special edition of NUJ Informed, Seamus Dooley, Irish Secretary, outlines how the union quickly switched to home working, while still maintaining a major role on the national scenes in the UK and Ireland.

The coronavirus crisis quickly hit the pockets of many of our freelance members, and others fear for the future of their jobs. It has been heart-breaking to read some of the testimonies of members whose shifts have been cancelled, with no more work in sight, while others fear for the future of the titles they write for.

Michelle Stanistreet, general secretary, explains on page 2 how the union has risen to meet these challenges, together with the broader trade union movement, to support all our members and argue for a proper financial package to see people through this emergency. Sadly, some of the usual suspects among our employers have been less generous in their response.

Now is the time to show solidarity and support each other. Trustees of the union's hardship charity NUJ Extra met this week. They have pledged to help those directly affected and who lose money as a result, as well as those who contract the disease or who have to self-quarantine because of it. The charity will also consider applications from those who do not contract the disease but who lose significant income from the economic impact of Covid-19 and the response to it – a significant variation to the charity's normal policy. So, if you are still in a job and feel secure in your employment, think about your less-fortunate colleagues and see if you can make a donation to NUJ Extra. It's very easy, you can do so online on the

NUJ website. Or perhaps your branch or workplace can think of ways to raise money.

If you go on to the website www.nuj.org.uk you will find our green Covid-19 button, where you can find a huge fund of advice, guidance and suggestions of where you can find financial assistance. The page is regularly updated as the situation changes.

One aspect of this crisis has been to highlight why quality journalism is vital and the huge role that our public service broadcasters and local press are playing in providing information and working with volunteers to make sure the vulnerable receive help. Ensuring public service broadcasters were categorised as key workers was one important win for us last week.

NUJ members are resourceful and adaptable and will endeavour to be out there telling the story. But I just urge you all to take great care if you are working outside of your home – make sure you have the correct protections and don't accept risk in this critical period.

As we all get to grips with new ways of working – I've been on four different video and five different conference calling systems in the past fortnight – we are bound to find the world of work changed after this pandemic. Among the difficulties, stresses and sorrow of this challenging period, there will be new or stronger connections and different ways of working which emerge and we will find strength within ourselves and among each other.

So take care, look after each other and offer solidarity where you can. I send you mine.

Solidarity,
Sian

**Also
in this
issue:**

Michelle's
Message
Page 2

#WFH
Homeworking
Page 8

Virus
Threat
Page 10

NUJ
NATIONAL UNION
OF
JOURNALISTS

Michelle's Message



Speaking with many NUJ members this week, there was a common sentiment expressed about the rapid escalation of the Covid-19 pandemic

We were suddenly faced with the challenge of having to adapt swiftly to a new normal, one that has thrown our work and personal lives into a swirling vortex and imposed constraints that we've never experienced before.

At the same time, as if the last few years of politics haven't been enough of a rollercoaster ride, we're now witnessing – and bearing witness to as journalists – an unparalleled intervention of the state in our lives, hearing the language of collectivism, compassion and solidarity from the most unusual of quarters.

Of course the reality is that the conversion to socialist principles is a skin-deep and slow reaction to the changing world around us, and in response to enormous pressure for our government to act more decisively. A

significant chunk of that pressure has come from the trade union movement – notable when the UK Chancellor paid tribute to the TUC and the CBI in the same breath, during his announcement of the financial package of support for workers and companies.

But a massive omission was for the millions of freelance, self-employed and workers in the gig economy whose already precarious livelihoods have been plunged into crisis. That's when the NUJ, with the TUC and sister unions, swung into action. It was unthinkable that the government was not going to come to the aid of 5m self-employed workers, including many in the media, just because it was difficult. This crisis has put the precarious lives of so many working people into sharp focus and responses to our freelance office have shown the stark reality of members whose work dried up virtually overnight. I joined a meeting with fellow trade unions and treasury officials to thrash out the issues. We need to look at the package in detail and will continue our conversations with government, but the obvious problem is that money is unlikely to be released into people's back accounts until June.

Of course the industry has also been lobbying and demanding state intervention to support newspapers and journalism – purporting to be the “fourth emergency service” in meetings with ministers, then turning around and closing free titles, laying off reporters and – in the case of Newsquest – cutting wages of staff they are not putting on furlough. The cynical opportunistic actions of companies who have disgraceful form for “never wasting a crisis.”

Our lobbying intervention when the lockdowns commenced meant we were able to demonstrate how journalists must be regarded as vital keyworkers, ensuring those members that need it (in the UK) would have the consequential access to ongoing childcare provision.

We've also been liaising with the National Police Chiefs Council to

ensure that those journalists – staff and freelance – who are doing vital public interest journalism documenting the impact of the Covid-19 crisis, are able to go about their work without interference or misunderstandings with local police. Of course, we're also reminding all NUJ members that this only applies to journalists carrying out this work – a press card is not a passport out of self-isolation and we're also obliged to look after our own safety and that of others in the coming weeks.

“We are here to help and support you.”

As Sian Jones, our president, reminds us – the NUJ might be doing its work differently, as we adjust to remote working, but our support and presence is as real and personal as ever. The priority of our staff and officials is to help our members through this difficult period. Our charity NUJ Extra – which I'm proud to be a trustee of – has swung into action and will do all it can to offer practical support to those who need it most, while continuing to support our existing beneficiaries.

Our schedule of reps' training had to be cancelled but the good news is that we are working with our trainer Caroline Holmes as we speak to ensure we continue to support reps with reconfigured online courses, and some new bespoke packages – including a focus on mental health which we'll launch in April, to help us through this period of remote working. With the NUJ on your side we want to make sure this period of necessary isolation is a physical one, not a social one, and your NUJ family – your chapel, branch, colleagues on industrial councils and union committees, and all of us who work for the union, are here to help and support you.

Take extra care of yourself and your loved ones in the coming days and weeks and know that the NUJ continues to have your back.

Coping with gale-force winds of change



By Seamus Dooley

Ní hé lá na gaoithe lá na scolb.

The old Gaelic proverb, translated as “A windy day is not a day for thatching” resonated as the NUJ came to grips with the full implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for the union, the media industry and, most importantly of all, for our members and their dependants.

Faced with a gale of unprecedented ferocity the NUJ team had to move quickly to steady the ship, putting in place emergency measures for remote working. Most officials are used to working remotely but abandoning the structure of an office with administrative

support and helpful colleagues is entirely different proposition.

Decisions had to be taken quickly but by using technology our service to members has been maintained, albeit delivered differently and occasionally more slowly than we might wish.

While our offices remain closed members can still contact their local offices and officials using the same phone numbers and email addresses.

From day one we advised that disciplinary meetings or grievance hearings should be postponed. Legal advice is available on the NUJ website about the duties of employers and employees.

One of the first initiatives was the introduction of video team meetings for officials. The development and policy committees were held incorporeally. It's no substitute for human contact, but for members working remotely all of the conferences were a welcome opportunity to catch up and, on a lighter note, to gain an insight into the home environment of colleagues!

As we go to press, officials are caught up in a tsunami of messages from

besieged chapel reps faced with notices of layoffs, part-time working, temporary closures and redundancies.

In the context of the state assistance packages, announcements unprecedented from a Tory government, there is no justification for employers rushing to lay off staff rather than exploring the new range of options available.

The NUJ was shocked to learn of the decision of Iconic Newspapers Ltd in Ireland to lay off staff in advance of the well-heralded Irish announcement of a temporary subsidy for employers. I have written to An Taoiseach highlighting the crisis in the Irish media, especially in the regional press sector. It makes our call for a Commission on the Future of the Media in Ireland even more pressing.

The Irish government has supported the media's role and in his televised address, an Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, stressed the important part played by journalists in keeping the public informed.

As in the UK, industry groups have, like the NUJ, successfully argued that media workers are key to the delivery of news and information. What is staggering is how some media organisations undermine that argument by seeking to lay off workers.

Even in a storm the NUJ must look to the future. At the end of this crisis there will be many roofs to thatch.

Message from Chris Wheal, chair of trustees NUJ Extra

“I am a sports journalist left with no work at all as a result of the near-blanket cancellation of all sport. As a husband and father, I still have considerable monthly outgoings – just limited funds with which to meet my responsibilities.” This is just one of many desperate emails the union has received. Now, NUJ Extra is geared up to pay out hundreds of thousands of pounds to help members affected by the coronavirus. The

trustees have waived one of its key guidelines that it cannot top up incomes of members who are unable to earn enough from journalism. The mass loss of income caused by the response to Covid-19 will now qualify for NUJ Extra help, even where the member has not contracted the virus or had to self-isolate to care for someone at risk or who has contracted it. The trustees are stepping up to process applications and have asked that members who can afford to wait a week or two do so. Trustees are prioritising applicants:

- Who are the sole income earner and have dependants.
- Who have a caring role.

• Who have no other available support. NUJ members need extra help and NUJ Extra will provide it. NUJ Extra has appealed to members, branches and chapels to donate to help those who need help. More information: <https://www.nuj.org.uk/news/nuj-extra-response-to-covid-19/>



News Update

A nation gathers around the TV

Downing Street



It was via a six-channel TV broadcast at 8.30pm that the Prime Minister set out strict new measures in response to the Covid-19 emergency.

Behind his desk at Number 10, a union flag at his back, he spoke to the nation. People would be allowed out of their homes for only limited purposes, he said. All shops selling non-essential goods, libraries, playgrounds, gyms and places of worship would close and all social events, excluding funerals, were banned. Police would be given new powers to enforce the new rules.

Families gathered round their television, self-isolators watched their phones and iPads in the attic in the time-honoured fashion during a national emergency. In all 28m people tuned in.

As his broadcast unfolded, journalists swiftly added to "live" news reports, prepared "what this means for you" podcasts and leader writers and comment writers got to work.

It's times such as this that the media and press are at their best. From the rolling TV news, to the teams at The

Guardian website putting out updates by the minute and The Sun's teatime Covid-19 newsletter, information, news and advice was out there. Coronavirus maps, explainers and videos on how wash hands were published.

The NUJ has been helping, making sure journalist and photographers are able to do their jobs as key workers and ensuring the press card continues to be recognised for news gatherers.

Tony Hall, the BBC's director general, said: "Our core role is to bring trusted news and information to audiences in the UK and around the world in a fast-moving situation, and to counter confusion and misinformation."

The corporation said it would postpone the planned £40m cuts and redundancies in news as it takes on the challenge of covering coronavirus pandemic and also postpone the introduction of licence-fee payments for the over-75s as well as delaying the closure of the Red Button text news and information service. Under the umbrella, Make a Difference, every local radio

station was to join local volunteer groups in helping co-ordinate support for the elderly, housebound or at risk.

The BBC opened its PSB offering beyond increased news coverage by using the One Show to include health and well-being advice alongside keeping fit and healthy eating tips. It said it would "retarget the BBC Food website around collections of recipes and advice on what can be made with essentials, especially for older people, and for low-income families". It offered families forced to school their children from home more BBC Bitesize content and a daily educational programme for different key stages or year. To entertain people bored at home it would put old favourites such as Spooks, Wallander and The Honourable Woman on iPlayer.

Suddenly wanting to "whack" the BBC doesn't seem such a good idea.

When the new government started its term, there was much briefing against the broadcaster, with sources talking of a great "pruning back". Today, getting your news on the Corvid-19 situation from a Fox-style broadcaster isn't such an enticing idea.

People have been turning to the BBC as a trusted source of information. Auntie is back and she's needed. The Prime Minister's statement was watched by 15.4m on BBC One, with a further 2.5m on the News Channel and just shy of 600,000 requests via BBC iPlayer.

Of course ITV, Channel 4, Sky and other broadcasters are important in providing trusted news and information. STV is now producing a 6pm programme for the whole of Scotland. Carolyn McCall, ITV's CEO, announced a new Monday night show, Coronavirus Report, and said: "As a public service broadcaster, we remain committed to doing everything we can to continue to provide news, drama, entertainment and factual programmes to our viewers to keep them informed about this crisis and to offer them an escape from it." Research by the European Broadcasting Union has found that even young viewers are tuning in to "mainstream" evening bulletins.

BBC Radio Humberside presenter *Andy Comfort* on local radio's role as a friend in times of need



In a 26-year career as a journalist I've never seen anything like this. People often talk of BBC Local Radio network coming into its own in bad weather such as snow and floods, although those of us who work on local stations know we're here for the community every day, rain or shine.

We are part of the community, we see them every day on the bus, in the cafes and parks and in our receptions and studios. At the moment they are

talking to us on the phone, by text or social media and they're doing it in large numbers.

Many of the people who could be most at risk from Covid-19 are BBC local radio listeners. Now it's their lifeline. If you tune in to any of the emergency half hourly Make a Difference bulletins going out on local radio stations across the country you'll know what I mean.

"A lady from Hull has been in touch - she's in a wheelchair, her husband is recovering from a stroke and their daughter is disabled and they can't get out to get groceries and essentials and they're worried - can you help?"

Within a couple of hours we were able to put them in touch with somebody who went to get their shopping and delivered it to them. There will be examples like this up and down the land, from BBC Radio Cornwall to BBC Radio Cumbria.

It's not just the essential information, local radio is a friend, a companion, and we're still trying to put a smile on

people's faces every day.

So how is BBC Local Radio rising to its biggest challenge to date? The whole network changed its schedule this week with neighbourhood programmes on every station now starting at 6am, 10am, 2pm, 6pm, 10pm and an overnight sustaining service thanks to BBC Radio London. This means we have some slack in the system in case staff have to go off work.

Only broadcast-critical staff go into the office - most are now working from home and co-ordinating via Skype, phone and emails. We use all the technology available to us and our engineers have worked miracles. We have a presenter self-isolating but presenting from his living room. I work from home in the morning then go in at 1.30pm and straight into the studio for the 2-6pm programme. Staff are following separation rules and my Bectu colleague and I are pleased with the measures now in place.

It's a strange world right now but we're adapting to the "new normal". As recently as six months ago BBC Local Radio staff began fearing imminent restructuring, programme sharing and job cuts. But, as Roger Taylor wrote in Queen's 1984 song, Radio Gaga, "You've yet to have your finest hour." BBC Local Radio is rising to its biggest challenge and it's doing so with confidence and pride.

Make a Difference

Local BBC radio stations have launched Make a Difference to help keep communities connected across England during the coronavirus crisis.

All 39 BBC stations have joined volunteers making sure people know that help is available in their area and how to get it. News updates are provided every 30 minutes. BBC Radio WM in Birmingham tweeted how a taxi company had offered free pick-ups of shopping for the most vulnerable and delivered 50 parcels for free. BBC Sussex and Surrey managed to get toilet rolls delivered to a 90-year-old man

from Pevensey Bay and BBC Radio Nottingham aired a plea for help from Tony who suffers from a terminal lung disease. That afternoon a local food bank supplied him and his family with everything they needed. It appears the listeners have already been appreciative with Anthony calling to Toby Foster's show on Radio Sheffield saying: "I just want to say it cannot be underestimated over the next few weeks how important local radio is going to be, there's so many people like me who rely on it for proper information rather than the rubbish that's put online and on the tele at the moment, it's going to be a lifeline I think."

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, led the first in a series of weekly church services broadcast on local radio.

News Update

Freelance package offers hope

Ana Jaks



The NUJ has welcomed the Chancellor's new package for freelancers affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, but says the devil will be in the detail.

Chancellor Rishi Sunak said the government will pay self-employed people adversely affected by the coronavirus a taxable grant worth 80 per cent of their average monthly profits over the last three years, up to £2,500 a month. It will be open to anyone with an income up to £50,000, but only those who have a tax return for 2019 will be able to apply.

Treasury officials have agreed to consult with the NUJ and sister unions on how the scheme will work. The NUJ had lobbied hard for protection for freelancers who had been left out of a deal whereby businesses would get grants to cover 80 per cent of their workers' salaries. The NUJ has called for sole

traders to be able to apply for the same loans as businesses and that thresholds for universal credit be dropped as many freelancers are barred from applying because they have money put by to pay tax and other contingencies. The government did agree to ask HMRC to defer its date to collect payments on account, due on July 31 and the next quarter of VAT payments.

The NUJ's freelance office has been inundated with members who are already suffering. One said: "I'm a freelance photographer, most of my work is to some degree event-based and right now I can't see anything in my diary. Overheads are going to continue though and I'm currently looking at outgoings to see what I can cut." And: "I work as a freelance journalist/producer for a broadcaster who had booked me in for 23 shifts in April. However, I expect the majority will be cancelled due to

Covid-19." And: "I'm a British freelancer based in Paris. We are in full lockdown. It's hard to move without papers. In terms of my situation, I'm now desperate. I've lost €6,000 overnight, and that money was going to be keeping me alive."

Pamela Morton, freelance national organiser, said: "Freelancers had all but been forgotten, so we are pleased the Treasury has listened to us and our sister unions, as many of our members are desperate and facing a frightening future with all their work cancelled. We welcome the offer from the Treasury to look at the details and explain how the deal will work for members, but our concern is about how soon the funding will reach people."

While the package was largely praised as generous, it will not work for everyone. The Chancellor claimed it would cover 95 per cent of the self-employed. The main problem is that the Treasury has said it is unlikely to get money to people until June.

This will offer little succour to one member who told the NUJ: "I have been laid off from the newspaper I've been working for as a freelance sub for more than two years and I had seven shifts lined up for April. I had work booked up to the middle of June and now I have none.

"I will have money coming in to the end of April, assuming my outstanding invoices get paid. Then nothing.

"I can't help crying - I don't know how I'll survive."

Press cards rule

The union can report a positive meeting with the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) about journalists' rights to move about in pursuit of public interest stories. Michelle Stanistreet said the NPCC chair agreed that the press card would be sufficient proof of a journalist's ID and that letters from publications would not be required. Freelancers would also be respected in the same way as staffers.

Chris Frost, ethics council chair, offers some topical advice

The Covid-19 crisis poses new ethical challenges to journalists. Of course, the NUJ's code of conduct still applies, perhaps more so than ever, so members should remember they still have a duty to inform the public honestly, accurately and fairly.

However, the new government advice means that some of the other clauses require more thought than usual.

Sources should not be put at risk of infection and all contacts should be carried out by phone or online where possible. Broadcasters should ensure minimum crews and a minimum two-metre distance – get that mic boom out of the stores and use a handheld mic! Photographers should also use longer lenses to ensure distance. Try to interview out of doors – the better weather will help here. You should not expect to be invited into someone's home.

Crisis, disease and death have always made for good stories, but we should avoid being swept along by the sniff of a particularly good human interest story. Intruding into the privacy of people mourning the death of a loved one should be done with caution and sympathy – not easy from a distance of more than two metres. Normal advice would be to cover such stories in person, but, it would be best to make such calls by phone. Remember, although this may be one of the first deaths in your area, the family still deserve the right to refuse to talk to you if they wish. If they do agree to talk, you need to respect their boundaries. Knowledge of a death may well be in the public interest and something that needs to be published but we still need to treat

the family with decency.

The rarity of the situation in which we now find ourselves leads to all sorts of potential stories from the difficulties of a family unable to attend a loved one's funeral to weddings with no more than five guests. Pregnant women are in the vulnerable groups and births in hospital are likely to become less frequent as medical facilities become stretched and story ideas open up, from babies born with the virus to births in odd circumstances.

Our code calls on journalists to resist threats or inducements to influence or suppress information. With government and others attempting to present the crisis to their advantage, journalists need to be as careful as ever about why someone is telling us something and if what they are saying is really true.

We should never rely on a single source, always test what we are being told against other views. However, you should remember that many of those you may need to speak to will be very busy, particularly medical experts and the like, and so phone and email is best, at least for initial contact or confirmatory information.

Our code tells us not to produce material likely to cause hatred or discrimination against identifiable groups; already there have been examples of attacks on Chinese students. It is important that NUJ members do not jump on such stories or seek a cheap and easy piece from hatemongers such as Nigel Farage who seek to promote themselves at the expense of others. Fortunately, there are plenty of excellent stories of human kindness around to give us all hope.

Go to the green button

It's been a challenging time for NUJ members, with coronavirus news moving fast and advice changing.

The place to go is the Covid-19 green button on the NUJ website <https://www.nuj.org.uk/work/covid-19-information>

The union has pulled together advice, guidance and the latest announcements from the UK and Irish governments and organisations such as the TUC and Acas on employment matters, health and safety, how to contact NUJ officials, information and where to get help and financial assistance. It also links to an extensive advice page for freelancers. <https://www.nuj.org.uk/news/covid-19-update-from-the-nujs-freelance-office/>

The NUJ is helping members to continue to provide the public with timely, accurate information on events, the latest health advice, promote and co-ordinate volunteering efforts, bring the community together and combat the proliferation of fake news. It also offers advice on how members can protect themselves and their families from the coronavirus.

NUJ branches are sending advice to members. Nottingham branch has been collating the experiences of freelancers. NUJ head office will send regular advice bulletins.

The coronavirus crisis has prompted Netherlands NUJ to go digital and is trialling its branch meeting via Google Hangout. Tony Sheldon, NEC member, said: "Our branch covers the whole of the Netherlands, so going digital could have huge benefits for the future in allowing members across the country to participate. We are asking all members to contact us if they face difficulties and to pass on professional advice for colleagues and tips on how to survive life indoors."

Spotlight

#WFH – when your co-workers are now toddlers



Juggling work and children, fighting with the spouse for office space and getting used to new technology to communicate with colleagues has been a steep learning curve for many of us confined to home.

Anna Hervé, NEC rep for the books sector, is now a proud practitioner of networking apps Zoom, Teams and Skype and Clear Scanner app. Most of all she is “ridiculously proud” of setting up her new printer/scanner off all by herself. Despite her cat photo-bombing virtual meetings and the screams off stage – possibly the son, maybe the husband – she is head down and working until it is her time to take care of their toddler.

She said: “As a book editor, working from home can be the ideal scenario. I can focus on editing text, without the distraction of endless meetings and all the quotidian tasks that dominate our office life. The one fly in my ointment? I’m the mother

of a toddler. The second day of balancing childcare and work was a distinct improvement, but it’s still a steep learning curve. Our son is thrilled with having his parents around 24/7, even if we’re increasingly frazzled. For me it means periods of intense concentration, followed by putting together a trampoline.”

As a freelance, Jade Wright is used to working from home – but not usually with husband Marc news editing the Daily Post, bringing together a team of reporters working across north Wales, and daughter Beatrice scattering all her toys across the floor. Her work editing an independent food and drink magazine, writing freelance arts stories and her back-up doing PR for hospitality clients has all but dried up. She said: “So, I am doing my tax return, getting to grips with my new camera, updating my website, plus that book I keep meaning to finish. I also have a full time job home-schooling a brilliant

and boisterous three-year-old. It has been wonderful to help her learn to read and count. I’ve lost work but finally gained the co-workers I’ve been missing. It’s just a shame.”

#WFH: how to keep healthy and productive – tips to help

- Do a mini risk assessment. What makes you feel anxious, and why? What challenges have you found? Review how you are doing.
- Plan your day, regular routines help provide purpose and focus.
- Focus on work during work hours, then pack away your laptop and switch to home life.
- Being active increases our energy levels and can bring a greater sense of wellness. Join body coach Joe Wicks on YouTube for free workout sessions. Take regular screen breaks, stretch, walk around, look out the window.
- Try relaxation techniques, such as meditation and mindfulness.
- Keep in touch with people by joining WhatsApp or Facebook groups. Arrange a virtual coffee or glass of wine or play an online game with friends, family or colleagues.
- Sleeping well can be difficult when you feel anxious. Try to go to bed at roughly the same time. Wind down before bed, turning off phones, tablets and laptops an hour before you retire.
- Get the balance right between following the news coverage and keeping informed and limiting your news intake if it begins to worry you.



Fran parks by the satellite van

On the Road with RTE's Fran McNulty

It's a strange conversation, your editor calls you aside. She asks if you'd mind not coming into the office anymore.

Would you be willing to be part of a group to work remotely for the foreseeable future. It means either one thing, your office etiquette has become too much for your colleagues or there's a need to keep some people in reserve, safe from Covid-19, or not in the office to infect other staff.

It was when one of the managing editors of RTÉ News asked me to leave the office that it was immediately apparent that this crisis was very real. It is to the credit of the Irish national broadcaster that these conversations were happening in early March, way ahead of the current focus on curbing the spread of Coronavirus.

Within 12 hours I was out of the newsroom. Since then I have been working out of my home and my car. In many respects it's not new for a specialist correspondent, we should be

on the road, meeting people, talking to contacts and getting stories on air.

An immediate challenge was technology. In my 20 years in journalism, I have never faced such change, such a different way of working. My job as the national broadcaster's agriculture & consumer affairs correspondent sees me travel to every corner of Ireland. I can broadcast live on radio from my iPhone, I no longer use radio sound recording equipment, it's all done on a telephone handset and using 4G connectivity. On big stories I have the tremendous support of satellite van operators, on smaller stories I edit television packages in the front seat of the car and send material using an internet connection.

The change is liberating and allows the story to become the priority.

Normally when we work with satellite crews we sit in the back of a van, cheek by jowl, editor and reporter side by side. The camera operator comes in for chats. It's a very small space, but with great

colleagues its comfortable and it adds to the team spirit. That comradeship is sadly gone. There is a new Corona reality.

The correspondent parks alongside the satellite van at the right angle to see the editing monitor. We select the right clips of interviews, discuss picture selection, separately, metres apart.

When the script is written it's time to lay down the voice. The satellite operator hands a sterilised microphone through my car window, he records my voice and when finished I sterilise the microphone and hand it back. If we exchange discs they must be wiped down with medical-grade sterile wipes.

The engagement with interviewees is also counter intuitive. We must be far apart, often to the point where it is difficult to hear each other. And no shaking hands. It goes against everything we are taught about bonding with people and engaging.

In the past few weeks I've been in supermarkets, marts, busy streets and shopping centres. Everyday you feel exposed. We wear gloves, constantly use alcohol gel and when necessary wear additional protective gear. A visit to a closed farmers' mart in Granard, County Longford, made it real. The mart empty; farmers who were stressed turned up regardless.

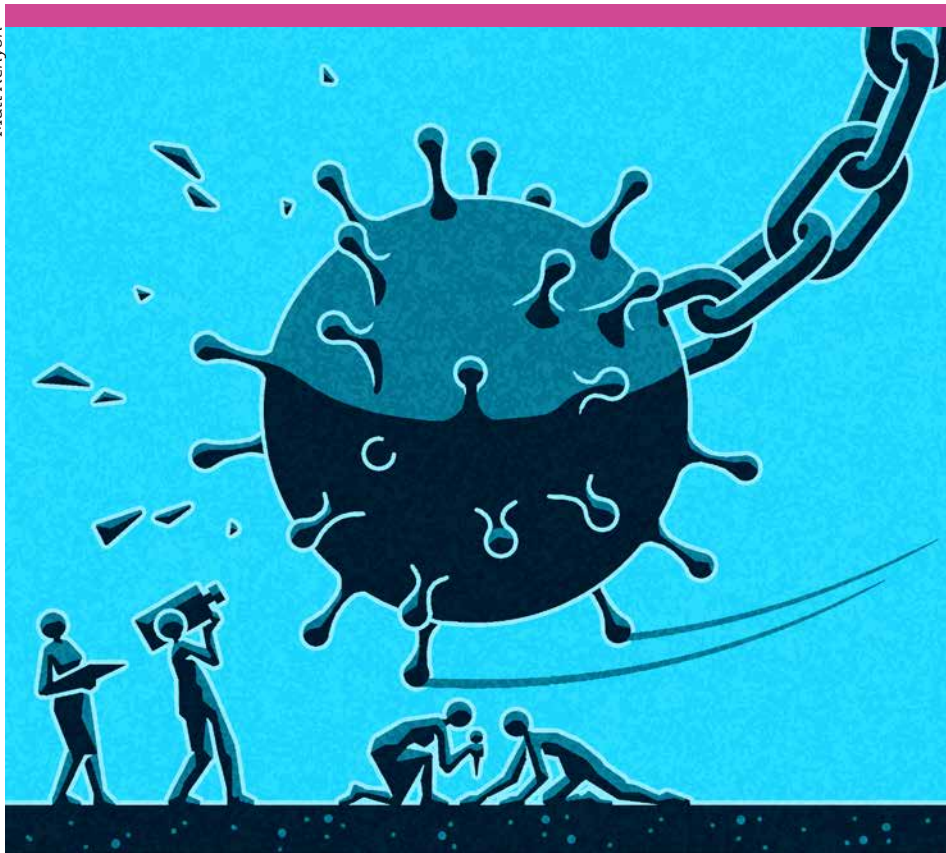
Audiences for news are growing. The public is turning to the public service broadcaster for accurate, trusted news. In an era where spurious WhatsApp message can become gospel, there was never a greater need for honest, verified news coverage. It is a mark of pride to be part of that. To be a journalist is to serve the public, on the front line telling the store of living with Corona.

As regional newspaper titles let staff go, amidst a huge crisis, we should value what public broadcasting can do for us. If only the crisis of funding that haunts RTÉ and others could be resolved. Perhaps now that the value of PSB is realised, the powers that be will take it seriously.

Spotlight

Telling the news in crisis times

Matt Kenyon



Hardship, havoc and innovation have been caused by Covid-19 to the industry. Tim Dawson investigates

Weekly since mid-March the Secretary of State for Culture has hosted a telephone conference. Senior editors, chief executives and proprietors, all representatives from the nation's newspapers take it in turns to describe their circumstances. All are veterans of a decade of falling advertising revenue and disappearing circulation. The fresh pain in their voices today is unmistakable.

One reports a 20 per cent fall in advertising spend, another the halving of print sales over the course of a fortnight. Supermarkets are increasingly reluctant to stock newspapers, so dramatically have sales fallen. Delivery boys and girls have

been sent home, for fear that they might spread the virus.

You don't have to listen in to many of these exchanges to realise that the Covid-19 crisis will reshape our media more profoundly than any single event in recent memory.

The response of the regional press has been predictably shabby. Supplicating themselves before government ministers in the hope of a bail out, they gravely describe themselves as "the forth emergency service". "Communities depend upon us minister," they intone. Call ended, many have acted brutally, without consultation, and in a manner that is apparently intent on not wasting a crisis.

Newsquest, for example, announced that significant numbers, possibly 40 per cent, of editorial staff will be sent home on furlough with only the government's income support to pay their bills. The rest of the staff will endure a 15 per cent, across-the-board cut, quite possibly in breach of their employment contracts.

JPIMedia announced it would stop printing most of its free newspapers, while titles such as the Edinburgh News (formerly the Edinburgh Evening News) told regular freelance contributors and casuals that there would be no further work until the end of the crisis.

The Racing Post will not publish for the foreseeable future, the Evening Standard is being delivered to homes for the first time and hand-out titles such as Time Out and Stylist have gone digital only.

While the business model of much of the media has been dramatically undermined, public thirst for the news has become frenzied. Boris Johnson's statement to the nation on 23 March was watched live by 27 million people. It was the largest ever audience for a television news event in the UK. Audience for all television news are believed to have doubled in the past fortnight and online news sources report their heaviest ever traffic.

This has been boosted by subscription-only sites such as the FT, the New York

Times and the Washington Post making their coronavirus-related coverage available to non-subscribers.

In a welcome move, the BBC has suspended its program to shed 450 posts – although a future funding crisis at the corporation seems even more certain.

“The response of the regional press has been predictably shabby”

Reading the runes for the future media landscape suggests that the current crisis will accelerate already evident trends, according to Douglas McCabe, the chief executive of Enders Analysis. He predicts a shift in consumer spend from retail to online, a transfer of advertising away from offline, an increasing move from print media to online consumption and a shift in the funding model from dependence on advertising to subscriptions.

The media industry analyst also cites newspapers' distribution crisis, with core older readers unable to obtain newspapers as a key issue for the industry. Innovative steps to distribute for free may resolve this, although as social pressure to isolate grows, this challenge can only grow.

Facebook is currently operating more slowly than usual, such been its increased traffic, largely driven by users searching for news. It has reversed a long-time decline in news-driven traffic to that platform.

The macro business impacts on the media might not be the most noticeable changes, however. Millions of workers, journalists among them, have discovered that a working from home is feasible. Radio broadcasters have accepted that content trumps sound quality. And television journalists have realised Skyped comment to camera from intriguing home settings is possible for many interview subjects, and that you can even anchor the evening news from a home office.

Fiona Roberts who produces Radio 4's Inside Science, has created an effective home studio from inexpensive equipment, much of which she already owned:

“I set up group Whatsapp or Facetime calls with the presenter and contributors from the confines of their own homes or wherever”, she explains. “This allows them to hear each other (and me when I switch my mic on) and record them. I then load the SD card files into an editing package and craft the final product.”

Her system is not without downsides. “It's not studio quality, and I worked for 23-and-a-half hours yesterday to finish a programme. So far we've been trying to not make the changes in the way we are working be too obvious on air. We've been lucky to date that our main contributors are scientists or science journalists who are quite tech savvy.”

There are issues, however. “The separation between work and home has gone, and I don't have the best ergonomic set up – backache and RSI are starting to become an issue. Also working so close to the, currently well-stocked, fridge is becoming problematic!”

For the moment, Roberts is accentuating the positive. “I am thinking of ways to take advantage of working at home and I am looking for stories that play into being stuck at home, often with kids, so we're look at science experiments you can do at home with your kids where reporters can record themselves and then send the audio to me.”

Working from a home office is by no means the only innovation. While much of the work of the courts has been put on hold ‘for lockdown’, those covering ongoing cases at the Old Bailey have been told that they can dial into hearings for the first time. A judge at Norwich Crown Court allowed reporters to cover cases by Skype. As anyone who has followed a case from a ‘media annex’, viewing proceedings on a screen is not the same as being in court – but it is easy to see that such developments could allow reporters to cover cases in courts located elsewhere

in the country.

For many reporters telling the story of the crisis has made this one of their most intense and emotional working periods ever. On-air correspondents have joined applause for NHS workers, anchors such as Diana Speed on the Today program have audibly shown emotion. Others, such as ITV Wales' Rob Osbourne have involved their entire family to explain the virus and our response.

Correspondents and experts in topics such as health and personal finance have enjoyed something of a boom, their specialisms suddenly sought after.

What we have yet to see are the results of many other journalists on enforced furlough, finding creative ways to fill their time. During The Times' lockdown of 1978/9 hundreds of editorial staff were paid to do nothing for 11 months. A great many wrote the books they had always promised – almost none of which concerned the challenges of introducing new technology to the newspaper industry. Doubtless in years to come, a

“It is hard to believe that current disruption will not leave profound marks on our industry and the way we work.”

cohort whose lives changed direction as a result of this crisis will be identifiable.

How completely any of us return to pre-Covid-19 ways of working remains to be seen. Fiona Roberts for one is looking forward to the resumption of her long and expensive commute. “I work in a very collaborative way, often have interns and trainees and experts visiting for interviews etc. I miss them all,” she said.

Not everyone feels that way, of course, and it is hard to believe that current disruption will not leave profound marks on our industry and the way that we work – quite possibly in ways that are still impossible to imagine.

International

Censorship spreads virus

By Tim Dawson

At the end of January, New York Times Beijing reporter Amy Qin arrived in Wuhan, a week into lockdown. Her dispatches painted a troubling picture. Hundreds were dead, thousands infected, and nearly twenty million people confined to their homes. She revealed official confusion and poor planning, as well as cheering stories of self-help - among them Zhang Lei, who volunteered daily to delivering groceries to the housebound.

On 17 March, Qin, learned that she was to be expelled from China, along with all the other journalists working for US papers. She fared better than Chen Qiushi, a lawyer and Chinese citizen journalist. He reported from Wuhan around the same time and has since disappeared

On 1 March the Chinese government ordered that all "content should be mainly positive, uplifting and devoid of rumours". Some have gone so far to argue that without information suppression in China, the crisis now engulfing the globe might have been avoided.

The paradox is the absence of dependable, authoritative reporting has prompted Chinese citizens to the most extraordinary ingenuity to share information. Criticism of Chinese leader Xi Jinping on social media appears in code, his name is transposed for 'Trump' for example. Wuhan Whistle has been translated in multiple tongues and is reposted as often as it is taken down.

"The control over information by the Chinese authorities at this time is highly concerning" says International Federation of Journalists general secretary Anthony Bellanger. "Access to public information is critical, if people are to be persuaded that governments are acting in their best interests and that the sacrifices this crisis demands



Proper reporting in China could averted the Covid-19 pandemic

of us all are worthwhile."

An equally disturbing picture emerges from Iran, where the coronavirus struck early and where the media also suffers dramatic repression. Official statistics suggest that nearly 2,000 people have lost their lives as a result of the virus. The World Health Organisation believes that the figure could be five times higher. Without a free media, the real figure may never be known. What is certain, however, is that official disinformation has intensified the crisis.

Regular flights between Iran and China continued long after the scale of the virus was understood - in part because of strong economic and geopolitical ties. Such was the scale of denial in official Iranian media that the country's first Covid-19 death was announced before any infection from the virus had been publicly confirmed.

India is in an earlier stage of the crisis than the UK. In Kashmir and Jammu, however, the internet has not been available since their special constitutional status was revoked seven months ago. It leaves eight

million people without quality, up-to-date information about protecting themselves from infection. That the health emergency has not prompted Prime Minister Modi to relax the clampdown demonstrates a disturbing indifference to public health in Kashmir, where 95 per cent of the population are Muslims. The first death from was reported in Kashmir a few days ago.

Quite apart from being personally uprooted, the real issue for Amy Qin is the stories that will now be untold. "I keep coming back to my last trip, to Wuhan, where people were so willing to talk - they wanted the world to know what was happening to them and to hold their government accountable".

If a deeper and lasting global commitment to safeguarding free expression is one change that emerge from the current crisis, it might just be our best guard against the next pandemic.

Censorship also struck Guardian journalist Ruth Michaelson, forced to leave Egypt after questioning the country's official death toll.