

# NEWS FROM THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE

# Informed

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## Plea to end slaughter of journalists

Majority World CIC / AlamyStock Photo

**The NUJ has called for an International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation into the death toll among journalists in Gaza, the release of all hostages, a mutual cessation of violence and a permanent ceasefire.**

At its first meeting of the year the NEC passed a **motion** declaring: "An immediate investigation by the ICC into the alleged systematic targeting of journalists by the Israeli Defence Forces is vital."

Proposing the motion, Tim Dawson, who is deputy general secretary of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), outlined the shocking scale of the slaughter of journalists in Gaza, with 10 per cent of the profession killed, compared to 1 per cent of the population as a whole in the enclave. "We have a deep moral responsibility to take this issue to a wider audience," he said.

The NEC motion called on the general secretary to send a message of support to the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate's leadership. The NUJ has been working with the IFJ to supply equipment and medical aid, including trauma blast kits, to media workers in Gaza (see page 12 for an update on the IFJ's work). Members and branches were thanked for their generous donations to the safety fund.

On the domestic front, Michelle Stanistreet, general secretary, reported on the progress made in the union's development of a safety tracker which will allow journalists to report incidents of online and physical abuse, harassment by the police and authorities, lawfare (the strategic use of legal proceedings to intimidate an opponent) and other threats to their personal safety and attempts to stop them doing their job.

A website hosted by the union will allow



One in 10 Palestinian journalists have been killed

### Aid for Gaza

Journalists in 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](mailto:jackiec@nuj.org) to transfer funds from their management allowances.

**DONATE NOW**

journalists to record incidents while having access to practical information to help protect them and keep them cybersafe. The UK's Department for Culture, Media and Sport has agreed to put £75,000 into the project. The union is also taking part in a government-led SLAPPs taskforce (see page 7) to look at ways to stop the

use of lawsuits to muzzle journalists.

The NEC received a report on the latest situation at the BBC, including the newest round of cuts - 127 roles in news and current affairs - which has halved the staff at Newsnight and the plan to turn the flagship current affairs programme into a late-night chat show. The corporation was let down by the government which played dirty by choosing to use a lower inflation rate figure to assess the increase in the licence fee following a two-year freeze, leaving the BBC with a £90m shortfall.

Michelle Stanistreet said she was updating the NUJ's News Recovery Plan, originally published as a response to the threat of the Covid pandemic on the industry, as a pamphlet during election year to highlight threats to public service broadcasting in a UK election year, the impact of Artificial Intelligence on media workers' jobs and the integrity of journalism and the crisis in local news.

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**NUJ**  
NATIONAL UNION  
OF  
JOURNALISTS

# Séamus Says



**Over the years the mission of the National Union of Journalists has been summarised in various slogans and soundbites, reflecting the multiple challenges facing journalists in an ever-changing media landscape**

**“Standing Up for Journalism” is the theme to which we most frequently return and as we bid farewell to the first month of a new year we are, as never before, called upon to stand up for journalists and journalism.**

The grim news coming from Gaza banished all hope of new beginnings as the relentless onslaught on civilians continued.

At its first meeting of 2024, the national executive council reflected on the carnage, on the scale of media casualties and on the assiduous exclusion of international reporters from Gaza in a carefully planned strategy of news manipulation.

The horrendous attack launched by Hamas and its allies on October 7 targeted civilians and in some cases, subjected them to acts of grotesque violence. In condemning the actions of Hamas, the NUJ has condemned the actions of Israel in targeting a densely populated area, the destruction of residential buildings, the killing of civilians and the displacement of thousands of families.

In highlighting the need to protect journalists we are in no way minimising the suffering of those trapped in Gaza, or those who suffered at the hands of Hamas: all human beings share the same colour blood regardless of race, religion, ethnic origin, or profession.

For many years we have spoken out against Israeli forces bombing media offices, the arrest and the abuse and violence against Palestinian and international journalists amid escalating violence in Gaza:

Article 79 of the Geneva Convention states that: “Journalists in war zones must be treated as civilians and protected as such, provided they play no part in the hostilities.”

In international law, media facilities are civilian objects and as such enjoy general protection. The prohibition on attacking civilian objects has been firmly established in international humanitarian law since the beginning of the 20th century and was reaffirmed following the establishment of the International Criminal Court.

It is vital that independent journalists are facilitated in covering the war and that the UN seeks to enforce that right. The targeting of journalists or media facilities is a war crime and should be treated as such.

Journalists are targeted because it is easier to break international laws away from the cameras and the prying eyes of journalists. Attempts to censor or silence journalists are also contrary to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

That is why the NEC called on the

International Court of Justice (ICJ) to investigate the killing of journalists as the death toll continues to rise.

The ICJ judgment published on January 26 orders Israel to “take all measures within its powers to prevent the commission of all acts within the scope” of the genocide convention.

The International Federation of Journalists has now written to Israel’s PM Benjamin Netanyahu and to his defence minister Yoav Gallant outlining international law and the requirement to protect civilians, including journalists.

This union has repeatedly called for the immediate release of all hostages and for a mutual cessation of violence, with a permanent ceasefire declaration.

*“The ever-increasing litany of the slain is why we need a new UN Convention on the Safety and Protection of Journalists”*

In covering the ongoing horror of the Israel-Palestine war journalists are mindful of their professional obligations. Those obligations in no way require NUJ members to remain silent in the face of increasing death tolls.

Across the globe, journalism has become a dangerous profession: 86 journalists were killed in 2022, amounting to one every four days, up from 55 killings in 2021.

At the close of the November biennial delegate conference of the union’s Irish members its delegates gathered at the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin to mourn not just the journalists killed in Israel and the Occupied Territory of Palestine but also those killed over two years in Haiti, Kazakhstan, Myanmar, Mexico, Brazil, Chad, Turkey, Central African Republic, Guatemala, Philippines, Bangladesh, Chile, Honduras, Yemen, Ecuador, USA,

Paraguay, Somalia, Columbia, Kenya, Syria, Cameroon, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Albania, Lesotho, Lebanon, and Ukraine.

Read in chronological order the mounting deaths in Palestine were brought into sharp focus as trade union activist Noel Pocock played a traditional lament.

That ever increasing litany of the slain is why we need a new UN Convention on the Safety and Protection of Journalists. The UN must ensure that those who seek to speak truth to power do not pay with their lives.

As journalists we must continue to support the IFJ Safety Fund, a practical, urgent act of solidarity, the very essence of standing up for journalism.

Public interest journalism requires support for journalists and investment in editorial resources. The NUJ is especially alert to the challenges posed by the use of AI to displace human being who must always be central to the editorial process.

Sadly, across the UK and Ireland we see major cuts in editorial resources, a running down in news desks and a loss of experienced staff.

In the BBC and RTÉ the values which underpin public service broadcasting are undermined by threats to employment and the actions of politicians.

Journalism safety is a priority across the union and the enhanced engagement with the PSNI in Northern Ireland and An Garda Síochána in the Republic of Ireland is also important.

The union has made a comprehensive submission to a review of defamation law in Northern Ireland while the recent judgment against MLA Gerry Kelly in his failed defamation case against NUJ member Malachi O'Doherty is a welcome development in an otherwise dark period for journalism. News that Mr Kelly is not to appeal the judgment closes a difficult chapter for Mr O'Doherty in the high stakes legal lottery that is defamation law in Northern Ireland.

A silver lining too is to be found in the Northwest of Ireland where the return of a one-hour morning programme

**REASONS TO JOIN**

**Press Freedom**

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

**Are you keeping good company?**

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

**NUJ**  
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to BBC Radio Foyle followed a major NUJ-led campaign with overwhelming community support which was effectively launched in January 2023.

BBC members in Northern Ireland, and especially in Radio Foyle, showed that the public understands the importance of professional, authoritative journalism.

As we enter a year of elections and referendums in the UK and Ireland we must ensure that those who make decisions about editorial resources remember their obligations and give our members the tools to do their job.

Standing Up for Journalism was never more necessary.

# Broadcasting

## War against the BBC

**The whistle-stop tour of the breakfast shows by Culture Secretary Lucy Frazer, to discuss the BBC's mid-term review was clearly instigated to further the narrative that the corporation is biased and has lost public trust.**

When asked during an interview by Kay Burly on the rival broadcaster Sky for evidence of the bias, she did not offer any. Nadine Dorries may have been the nadir of culture ministers, but Frazer was carrying on the government's constant BBC bashing. Even former Telegraph editor, Max Hastings, has described it as "a war against the BBC".

The **review** gives the BBC board the legal requirement to oversee the complaints process, brings BBC digital content under Ofcom scrutiny and greater oversight of the BBC's effect on commercial rivals.

In December, Frazer launched a **review** of how the BBC should be funded, "supported by a panel of leading industry

experts". This followed the government's short-changing the BBC by reducing the increase it had expected to the licence fee after a two-year freeze.

With an expected UK general election and the Paris Olympics, 2024 should be a bumper year for the BBC, which prides itself on its reputation for covering major set pieces, and, of course, there are two major world conflicts to be covered.

But the BBC is not in a good place. As former Conservative culture secretary, Lord Vaizey, told the House of Lords on 15 January: "Those of us who care passionately about the BBC are very worried about the direction of travel for BBC News." Former BBC director general, Lord Birt, added: "We find the BBC with its finances brutalised and forced to pull back in every area of programming."

They were speaking after the announcement that 127 jobs in news and current affairs were to go, with the Newsnight team cut from 57 to 23. New



digital news roles would be created, and the corporation's news verification unit would be assigned more staff.

The NUJ responded by saying the cuts would have consequences, especially following sackings at BBC Local, with shared shows doing away with truly local programming and many jobs lost, and the World Service's budget cut by £28.5m per year from April 2023, with 382 posts (almost one in five) going.

While the union managed to stem compulsory redundancies at BBC Local and has persuaded management to run a pilot to maintain live news bulletins, the service is much reduced, morale is low and new rotas are causing problems. The union's concession on preserving local Sunday afternoon shows could end by autumn.

## And in other news....

**Jeremy Paxman's famous sneer maybe long gone, with fewer tuning into what has always been the BBC's flagship current affairs show, but cutting the staff of Newsnight by half during a UK election year isn't just a bad look, it's a disaster.**

Sian Jones, the NUJ's national broadcasting organiser, has been listening to distraught members working on the show: "Our members in the Newsnight team understandably feel the investigative journalism and unique films and stories are what makes the programme stand apart from other output – and all that will go under the proposed changes, hollowing out the brand and undermining trusted news

output in an election year. You just won't get the same sort of scrutiny from a bunch of 'and finally' stories tagged on to a longer news hour elsewhere. Newsnight has been agenda-setting and can only do that with the experienced, dedicated team."

The cuts, Deborah Turness, the BBC's chief executive of news and current affairs, explained, were not just about the government's renegeing on the licence fee funding promise, they were also a part of the corporation's digital-first strategy, saying: "We need to make choices about where we allocate our resources."

Other parts of her plan include an extended, hour-long edition of BBC

News at One which will be relocated to Salford, and BBC Breakfast, also broadcast from Salford, to be lengthened by 15 minutes.

Newsnight will lose its investigative journalists but keep a political editor and its downgrading follows cuts to Panorama. Mark Urban, Newsnight's diplomatic editor, was one of many including former editors who voiced his dismay.

Those who have worked on Newsnight, and other current affairs programmes say it is being part of a team producing a programme with a known purpose and a reputation that provides scoops that are the driving forces behind the programme's success – people don't give tips to digital news hubs, they go to programmes they love and trust.

# Update

## New bill to stop SLAPPs

**The union is supporting Labour backbencher Wayne David's Private Members Bill aimed at protecting journalists from the use of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) to silence public-interest reporting. The bill is due to receive its second reading on 23 February.**

The Economic Crime and Transparency Act, which became law last autumn, does contain some protections, including an early dismissal mechanism of SLAPPs connected with economic crime, but more measures are needed to guard public interest journalism. The NUJ is a leading member of the government-sponsored SLAPPs taskforce formed to curb this use of litigation and will be arguing for support of Wayne David's Bill. The NUJ has been calling on the government to introduce its own stand-alone SLAPPs legislation.

Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, said: "The NUJ has repeatedly called for robust legislation to tackle the deliberate use of SLAPPs against



Courts are being used to silence journalists

journalists. It is unacceptable for journalists to continue to be targeted in this way, bearing significant financial burdens in drawn-out cases. As campaigning continues, the union is leading efforts to gather evidence on the scale of SLAPPs necessary to assess the ongoing harm to press freedom."

The union welcomed the decision of the Master of the High Court in Northern

Ireland to strike out a defamation claim against Belfast journalist and author, Malachi O'Doherty, by NI Assembly member, Gerry Kelly. Master Evan Bell described the claim as "scandalous, frivolous and vexatious" and awarded costs against Kelly. Séamus Dooley, NUJ assistant general secretary, said the determination was "extremely significant".

### Boost your skills

The NUJ has launched two free training opportunities, Leadership in the Newsroom to provide mid-career journalists, both staff and freelancers, with newsroom management and strategic planning skills and News Verification Skills for Journalists which covers topics such as spotting fake news, disinformation, misinformation and propaganda. **Book your place** now.

### BBC freelancers

The BBC has increased freelance rates by 5 per cent

in News after acknowledging there had not been a rise for at least six years. The union is now negotiating a new rate card for the UK. However, the BBC has said the increase for overseas stringers will be 5 per cent for digital, but only 1 per cent otherwise. The union is also putting pressure on the BBC to review the appalling freelance pay rates at the local level.

### Mediahuis

Mediahuis Ireland, owner of the Independent newspaper titles, Belfast Telegraph and regional titles across the Republic is to cut its staff

by 10 per cent, about 30 posts. Ian McGuinness, Irish organiser, said the loss of jobs in already diminished newsrooms would have serious implications. Irish Executive Council chair, Cearbhall Ó Síocháin, said more, not fewer, jobs were needed in "this era of digital misinformation".

### PA Media

Editorial staff at PA Media (formerly the Press Association) have taken a significant step forward in their bid for statutory union recognition. The Central Arbitration Committee

has accepted the NUJ's application and proposed bargaining unit. The chapel described it as a "momentous occasion" and an important stage in members' aim to have a say on pay and other important issues.

### Radio Cymru 2

The BBC's proposal to extend the number of Welsh-language hours at BBC Radio Cymru 2, so that it becomes a new UK Public Service, has been accepted by the regulator Ofcom. The union's Welsh Executive Council supported the changes.

# Update

## RTÉ totters from crisis to crisis

**NUJ members including Irish Executive Council chair Cearbhall Ó Síocháin, Dublin broadcasting branch chair Emma O’Kelly and Irish secretary Séamus Dooley accompanied Irish Congress of Trade Unions general secretary Owen Reidy to a special meeting with media minister Catherine Martin to discuss public funding of public service broadcasting in Ireland.**

Against a backdrop of shocking revelations of mismanagement and corporate governance failures, public trust in RTÉ has been undermined as the broadcaster totters from crisis to crisis. Last month it was revealed that RTÉ’s board had not been properly consulted on a failed commercial venture, Toy Show the Musical, which recorded losses of €2.2m. A further report is expected to confirm that rules governing the



company’s voluntary exit package were waived to allow a significant payment to the former chief financial officer without full executive board approval.

Emma O’Kelly warned the minister that the 400 redundancies over five years, proposed by the director general, would have devastating consequences for RTÉ and the creative sector in

Ireland. She said the response to a crisis created by a combination of government failure to provide adequate funding and corporate mismanagement should not be a “smaller RTÉ”.

Séamus Dooley said: “From bogus self-employment contracts to breaches of collective agreements and secret deals with selected individuals and disrespect for the industrial relations process, we are familiar with a culture which has dogged the organisation.”

The Irish Secretary said the new board chair and director general were putting in place new processes, but workers would want to see a difference on the ground. Two reports, on corporate governance and HR practices at RTÉ, are due in late February and Catherine Martin said the recommendations of the expert groups would inform her decision on the broadcaster’s future.

### £2.5m in settlements

Since last October, the union has achieved in excess of £2.5 million in compensation for redundant members. Natasha Morris, legal & equality officer, said: “These are challenging times and employers are often reluctant to improve existing offers, we however continue to succeed in attaining a better deal for our members.”

### Want a pay rise?

The TUC’s #HeartsUnion week from 12-18 February is about promoting the work of unions and boosting recruitment. This year’s theme of pay highlights that unionised workers are paid on

average 5 per cent more than similar workers. Put it on your branch and chapel agendas and find out ways to take part in the week’s activities on the **NUJ website**.

### Justice not seen

Kate Cronin, the Northamptonshire Telegraph’s court reporter, has criticised the Court of Appeal for not providing a video link so she could cover the case of a Corby-based human trafficker, despite new powers for courts to provide remote access for reporters and the public. She wrote: “It’s not realistic to expect local journalists to travel to London for what may be a

short administrative hearing (we have no way of knowing). These cases happen every day and are currently going completely unreported by the local press.”

### Channel 4

Culture Secretary Lucy Frazer has come under fire for blocking Rozina Breen, chief executive of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, from joining the Channel 4 board, despite being put forward by broadcasting regulator Ofcom. This means that, of the five new non-executive directors, four are white.

Overall, 14 of the 15 members of Channel 4’s

board are white and six are women. The broadcaster has announced more than 200 job cuts because of the TV advertising downturn, however as Channel 4 News is supplied by ITN, the NUJ believes those jobs should be safe

### Journalists at Work

The National Council for the Training of Journalists is asking journalists to complete a **survey** to gather vital data on working in the media. It asks questions on pay, attitudes to AI and working patterns, so it can build a picture of the workforce and how the industry is changing.

# International

## Fear of the knock at the door

**Six journalists have been killed in the Philippines since 2022 and media workers in Manila and the provinces are concerned about the government's failure to ensure their protection. Last year, radio presenter, Juan Jumalon, was murdered at his home studio during a live Facebook broadcast which was witnessed by those tuning in.**

When Michelle Stanistreet met Len Olea, general secretary of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) and Clair Suiza, human rights defender, together with Tim Dawson, deputy general secretary of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and Jim Boumelha, the IFJ's treasurer, she was told of the various tactics used to intimidate and harass media workers.

Although the ruthless and violent President Rodrigo Duterte lost office two years ago, the violations of press freedom have continued under Ferdinand (Bongbong) Marcos Jr. Duterte's rule was notorious for his relentless hounding of Maria Ressa, the co-founder of news website Rappler, and Nobel prize winner for her fearless journalism. Now Marcos



*l-r Clair Suiza, Michelle, Len Olea, Jim Boumelha and Tim Dawson*

Jr is continuing the harassment. A report on the country's media by the Reuters Institute cited journalists receiving death threats and plain-clothed police who pay surprise visits to reporters' homes.

Len Olea described how police planted evidence and laid false charges of association with terrorism on journalists, alongside online and physical surveillance. The "red-tagging" of journalists - branding them as a communist or terrorist and thus enemies of the government - persisted with journalists forced to flee their homes in fear of their lives. Len described her firsthand experience of

red-tagging after being targeted due to her prominent role championing media freedom.

The use of strategic litigation and cyber libel is rife. This includes one shocking example of a journalist receiving more than 700 SLAPPs, based on the number of likes accrued on a Facebook post. Although the case was dismissed, the ruling is being appealed by the governor who brought the legal action. Two broadcasters in southern Luzon faced 941 counts of cyber libel lodged by a provincial governor.

Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, was due to visit the NUJP in January. Len hoped this engagement would be the start of necessary action to achieve improved protections for journalists.

Len said: "Filipino journalists are pushing back against different forms of attack. We have learned to set aside competition in the face of difficulties, and our solidarity is growing stronger through the years. Getting the support of our audiences has also been vital in defending journalism and democracy."

### Free Jimmy Lai

The National Union of Journalists has joined the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in calling for the release of Jimmy Lai and for an end to his targeting by Hong Kong authorities. Four UN experts have also demanded all charges against the pro-democracy media mogul and founder of Apple Daily be dropped, saying: "Jimmy Lai's arrest, detention

and series of criminal proceedings over the past few years appear to be directly related to his criticism of the Chinese government and his support for democracy in Hong Kong."

The 76-year-old faces life imprisonment if convicted of threatening China's national security. Lai was convicted of fraud in 2022 after a court found he violated terms of a lease with Hong Kong

Science and Technology Parks Corp and he has since been held in solitary confinement.

### John Pilger

NUJ paid tribute to the Australian investigative journalist and film maker who died aged 84, describing him as a "giant of journalism". Michelle Stanistreet said: "A longstanding NUJ member, John was also the most

redoubtable supporter of progressive campaigns, creating work that was the embodiment of journalism that managed to be simultaneously fair, balanced, whilst unequivocally on the side of the underdog." Known for his work on *The Mirror*, Pilger reported on the wars in Vietnam, Bangladesh and Biafra and produced groundbreaking work across the BBC and ITV.

# Spotlight

Veekay / Alamy Stock Photo



*The resignation of the Mirror's editor started alarm bells ringing for the newspaper's future*

## Reach's reckoning

**Is the publisher of the Mirror and Express titles, and the largest regional news group, at risk of going under as it haemorrhages staff and revenue? asks Frances Rafferty**

**"Farewell from the newsroom at Canary Wharf, London, to our amazing, brilliantly talented colleagues" read the tweet accompanied by a video of five women journalists clutching their front pages being "banged out" of the newsroom – the noisy printers' tradition now adopted by journalists when colleagues leave their jobs.**

The tributes rolled in online: "So many years of talent walking out the door because @reachplc values eyeballs over quality journalism, rather than trying to achieve both. Good luck guys x." And: "Proud to have worked with such talent."

Last November the union was hit by a bombshell announcement from Reach, the publisher of more than 130 national and region newspapers and websites, including the Mirror, Express and Record titles. The news was that 450 posts, including 320 roles in editorial, were to

go, putting 570 posts at risk. It was the third round of job cuts that year and left staff numbers down by a third since 2016.

Since then the union has battled to reduce the number of compulsory redundancies and persuaded the company to let photographers keep some of their kit. In his report to the NEC, Chris Morley, senior organiser Northern & Midlands, noted: "The numbers opting to depart sadly highlighted the disillusionment with the industry."

This has included the surprise departure of Alison Phillips, the popular editor of The Mirror. A similarly abrupt departure last year was that of group editor-in-chief, Lloyd Embley – to lose both looks like carelessness.

It has been a bruising time for the staff and for NUJ officials dealing with the fallout, with one saying: "It has been emotionally draining and upsetting to see talented journalists and excellent reps leaving the company after so many years."

The changes and cuts had been made in line with Reach's digital-first strategy, which the union believes is deeply flawed. The group chapel passed a motion of no confidence in Jim Mullen, the CEO, and sent a letter to shareholders saying his plans were "endangering the economic health of the company and the livelihood of workers" and pointing to the fall in revenues, saying: "The dash to digital has proved illusionary and does not provide the single answer to Reach's problems."

Preliminary research published last year by the broadcasting watchdog, Ofcom, found the most common way to access local news was online (89 per cent), but anyone who has attempted to read their local Reach website will know it is not an enjoyable experience, with a confusion of pop-up boxes and intrusive adverts making it difficult to get through a news story or follow a feature. Plus digital advertising, mostly scooped up



David Warren / Alamy Stock Photo



## Harry's game

**In December, Judge Fancourt found that phone hacking and unlawful newsgathering had occurred at Mirror Group Newspapers (MGN) across The Mirror, Sunday Mirror and People. CEO Sly Bailey and legal director, Paul Vickers, had "turned a blind eye to what was going on, and positively concealed it," he said.**

Fancourt ruled that Prince Harry had been subjected to phone hacking on 15 of 33 stories published and awarded him more than £140,000 in damages. Although MGN has stated the judgment provides "clarity to move forward", because it ends any further claims, members working at Reach are acutely aware of the reputational and financial harm to the company. Defending action and settling damages has cost Reach significant sums: in its 2023 half-year results it details a "current best estimate" of £45.4m as the amount needed to resolve historical legal issues in relation to phone hacking and unlawful information gathering.

Gary Jones, former editor of the Sunday Mirror and People, and current editor of The Daily Express, was named by Fancourt as instructing Southern Investigations (detective agency) to obtain confidential information about Alistair Campbell's finances. He said that Jones would have known the information would not have been obtained lawfully.

by the tech giants, is not going to local titles.

Chris Morley said: "Reach is in a race over the next few years to make sure its declining revenue does not put it below the line before it can cap its £50m-a-year pension fund deficit payments, and multi-million pound provision for meeting its legacy hacking scandal claims. The company's digital income fell £21m in 2023 and was still less than 25 per cent of total revenue. And while Facebook and Google have deprioritised news for their businesses, filling that gap back up - never mind making significant new gains - looks still far away.

"Jim Mullen has put five years more on the profitable life of his national titles but, for me, there is an element of self-fulfilling prophecy happening with the vicious cuts cycle that has been going on. The harder the cuts, the bigger the erosion of quality and the less likely readers will be willing to pay top price for their newspaper. He told staff in a town hall meeting this month that, essentially, the print readership was literally dying off too quickly, and that was why more had to be done digitally with fewer people. Members are not impressed."

Mullen blamed the fall in his company's fortunes on tech companies such as Meta, the parent company of Facebook, for shifting its focus away from news. A Reuters Institute **report** gave figures from analytics provider, Chartbeat, which showed traffic to news sites from Facebook fell by 48 per cent in 2023, with traffic from X/Twitter declining 27 per cent.

Mullen met members of the NUJ Parliamentary Group who described a drop-in session they had hosted where NUJ reps and officials explained their dismay at the company's strategy. The small room off Westminster Hall in the Houses of Parliament soon became packed with MPs, MPs' researchers and peers. The idea had been to match individual MPs and their reps, but it soon became clear politicians and aides wanted to learn about the overall

situation and effect of the cuts on the national titles such as The Mirror and The Express.

The reps explained the cuts were hollowing out websites and, because more content was shared across titles, audiences would not be getting relevant news that had not already been published elsewhere. Worries about increases in newspaper prices and the value for readers if cuts led to a decline in the quality of journalism produced was also raised.

*"The numbers opting to depart sadly highlighted the disillusionment with the industry"*

The MPs were told reporters dedicated to their town's football team had lost their roles, coverage of the arts had been hit and, despite the huge growth in the popularity of women's football, its coverage was to be dismantled.

Meanwhile, as Jane Martinson, City University's Marjorie Deane professor of financial journalism, said in a Guardian article, since the Mirror was the "only national newspaper to have consistently backed the Labour party since the end of the second world war, Reach's historic titles are particularly important in an election year".

While the Mirror's circulation is a mere shadow of the days it sold 4.5 million copies a day, it still has a name for breaking stories such as Partygate and being largely supportive of trade unions. Many, including Martinson, believe Alison Phillips left because she thought expensive but award-winning journalism was no longer a priority.

Concern about problems in the wider newspaper industry has prompted the House of Lords communications select committee to launch an inquiry into the future of news - the NUJ will be making a submission.

# Spotlight

Matt Kenyon



## Reporting democracy

**With at least 60 countries going to the polls this year, including the UK, Ian Burrell looks at how AI and dirty tricks could play out**

**This will be the election year in which journalism must contend with the threat of AI-generated deep fakes and an unmoderated X (formerly Twitter) under Elon Musk, not to mention the presence of former prime minister Boris Johnson as a broadcast pundit and TV host.**

It will be an unprecedented time when more than half of the world's population goes to the polls, including the electorates of the UK, the United States and Ukraine, giving new opportunities for Vladimir Putin and other authoritarian leaders to manipulate results with disinformation, just as Facebook retreats from hosting professional journalism.

There will be local and European Parliament elections in the Republic of Ireland, and a possible general election to boot.

Political reporters must confront fresh challenges as they attempt to analyse

policies and put facts before the voting public. Their task in the UK is not being made easier by political parties which, once again, are infringing on the role of the Fourth Estate by producing campaign material that deliberately imitates the look of independent news media.

As real local papers are closed down across the UK in cuts by regional media companies, a wave of new "titles" have emerged, courtesy of the Liberal Democrats. The Mid Bedfordshire Community Chronicle, the South Oxfordshire Observer and the Hallamshire Herald are among publications that have landed on doorsteps in recent weeks, lauding the accomplishments of the LibDems. "Seriously disappointed to see this," commented Phil Creighton, editor of the real newspaper Wokingham Today, after the emergence of a political pamphlet carrying a Wokingham Focus masthead. "No political party should be issuing campaign material that looks like a bona fide local newspaper – it can easily be mistaken for the real thing."

The tactics mimic the behaviour of the Conservatives, who were forced to apologise to a news publisher after circulating a pamphlet called the Wolverhampton Chronicle, infringing an existing newspaper trademark. The Tories also created a Lincoln Chronicle, adopting the name of a defunct paper. "At a time when local newspapers are being hammered and circulations are plummeting it is very difficult to tell which is which," says Chris Frost, chair of the NUJ's ethics council. "Political parties ought to back off. People don't see the range of local newspapers that they used to and this will weaken trust in journalism even further. They might look at it as interesting local news without realising that it is coming with a political slant."

Hard-pressed local papers face being snubbed by political parties. Ben Fishwick, editor of the Southampton-based Southern Daily Echo, wrote to Downing Street last year to complain after Prime Minister Rishi Sunak

excluded the paper from a visit he made to his home city. On learning of Sunak's presence, the editor despatched a journalist to the medical surgery where the Prime Minister was talking to doctors and patients. The reporter was denied access. "I cannot understand why there was no facility for our reporter to ask a question, or for you to have given us prior notice," Fishwick wrote.

Access to politicians during the forthcoming UK general election is a concern for Westminster lobby journalists (see box) following unprecedented restrictions introduced for the 2017 and 2019 campaigns. Since then, the Conservatives have attempted to charge news outlets for access to party conference (a policy they reversed following an outcry last year). Media was banned from the Tory spring conference, while certain papers were blocked from asking questions of Sunak at the Scottish Conservatives conference.

Such a hostile climate does not improve the prospects for improving diversity among those covering and interpreting the policies put forward by the major parties. NUJ President Natasha Hirst, a deaf photojournalist, has previously covered elections in Wales and points out that campaign trail meetings are often organised spontaneously in buildings that are inappropriate for disabled journalists. "Behind the scenes it is absolutely frantic and accessibility is not thought about," she says. "The number of press conferences that I have attended that have been in rooms with terrible acoustics and no microphones."

Focused on photo opportunities, party comms teams give little thought to the need to provide live transcripts or British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters. "They are thinking about the visuals and how it will translate to a clip on BBC news or a photo in the paper," she says. "They are not thinking can journalists access the information we are providing."

Channel 4 News will buck this lack of diversity by including reporter Ruben Reuter, who has Down's

Syndrome, in their election team.

But shifts in the technology landscape mean that all political challenges will encounter new difficulties in covering this election year. In its Global Risks Report 2024, the World Economic Forum ranked AI-generated misinformation above climate change, war and recession as the greatest risk facing humanity this year. In its annual review, the UK's National Cyber Security Centre predicted that Russia and other countries would seek to meddle in the UK's elections by using AI to fabricate hyper-realistic deep fake videos at speed for social media. Former head of the civil service Gus O'Donnell has said that technical solutions for combating deep fakes will not be ready in time for the next election.

The Washington Post has claimed that "Big Tech Is Surrendering to Misinformation". Since buying Twitter and changing it to X, Musk has largely dismantled the moderation which restricted hate speech and fake news on the platform. "My prediction is that 2024 is going to be even more crazy," Musk tweeted with apparent relish.

A report in January from the Reuters

Institute for the Study of Journalism highlighted the abandonment of traditional news publishers by major social platforms. Traffic to news sites from Facebook falling 48% in 2023, and traffic from X declining by 27%. The trend comes at a vulnerable time for democracy.

News outlets including Sky News and the Daily Mail are investing resources in providing news content to hard-to-reach young audiences on TikTok. But the most successful news provider by far on the popular Chinese-owned video platform is Dylan Page (aka "News Daddy"), an engaging twenty-something Briton who entertains his 10.3 million followers by breathlessly opining on such things as Stephen Hawking's sex life, Kanye West's teeth and the critical elections of 2024.

For political journalists in parliament it is harder than ever to keep up. Hugo Gye, political editor of the *i* paper, said: "I remember 2010 when people talked about the first Facebook election." He predicts this year will be different, and more difficult to keep on top of, with political developments flying around on at least eight social networks including the "closed-off" WhatsApp.

## Battle buses parked

The old idea that party leaders are followed along the campaign trail by a large group of political reporters may be a thing of the past, according to Hugo Gye, until recently the chairman of the parliamentary lobby journalists. "The tradition for years had always been that each of the three main parties would allow a pack of journalists – a good 10 or 20 people from different outlets – to accompany their campaign for several weeks in the run-up to polling day, but in 2017 and 2019 that did not happen," says Gye, political editor of *The i* Paper.

Those snap elections hampered media

planning but senior politicians were also responsible for squeezing out journalists. Former Tory leader, Boris Johnson, tried to ban the *Daily Mirror* and did "not really accept the principle of being open to all outlets at all times", says Gye. Labour's Jeremy Corbyn "was outright hostile" to most political journalists.

Rishi Sunak has promised greater openness but a recent "PM Connect" event in Lancashire lobby reporters were allowed to ask only four questions between them. At this stage in the pre-election cycle, Sir Keir Starmer, Labour leader, has made himself very available to Conservative-supporting papers in order to reach voters who have not previously backed his party, which has been good news for these colleagues, said Gye.

# International

## Hunger as well as the bombs take their toll

*Tim Dawson, deputy general secretary of the International Federation of Journalists, on the privations faced by Gaza's journalists*

**The horrific death toll among Gaza's journalists has become a familiar headline. Ten per cent of the enclave's media workers have been killed since 7 October – a mortality rate significantly in excess of combat soldiers in most wars.**

Less well-known are the privations of those of Gaza's journalists who continue to work since the exclusion of international reporters from the enclave as the only source of news from Gaza.

"All the journalists have changed where they spend the night at least five times since the start of the war," says Nasser Abu Baker, president of the Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate (PJS). "Most are living under canvas, and shifting from tent to tent as the conflict has engulfed ever more of Gaza. Others sleep in school buildings, with thousands of other displaced people."

Conditions are grim. Baker describes one school, designed for 500 pupils, in which 30,000 people are living. Pressure on the 30 bathrooms can only be imagined.

Food is in such short supply that PJS now supplies flour to its members, supported with donations from journalists and their unions all over the world. "In the past weeks we have supplied 7,000 basic food packages," says Abu Baker. "As well as 1,300 or so journalists, we are also supporting their families – around 6,000 people in total." The situation is set to get worse following a freeze in funding by the UK, US and other western nations for UNRWA, the UN's agency for Palestinian refugees, following allegations that members of its

Tim Dawson



Nasser Abu Baker, Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate president

staff took part in the 7 October attack on Israel.

PJS hopes to provide tents, sleeping provisions, and warm clothes. Severe restrictions on the movement of goods into Gaza make this difficult, but the union is working with UNESCO to try and find a way.

Tahseen Al-Astall, PJS's vice president, is based in Gaza. "Every day we are walking, walking, walking, carrying our equipment on our shoulders," he says. "There is a story in every inch of Gaza and we journalists are determined to tell them all." Frequent internet outages – often coinciding with moments of the most ferocious fighting – make ordinary communications impossible and hold up the dissemination of news.

The union has around 2,300 members (approximately 80 per cent of Palestine's journalists), one thousand of whom attended its most recent congress in May 2022. Its politically plural board includes men and women and those of Muslim and Christian heritage. Headquartered in Ramallah, in the West Bank, the union's staff also face significant

issues undertaking their work.

"Moving outside Ramallah is almost impossible," says Rania Khayya, PJS's international relations officer. "Roadblocks are everywhere, and the Israeli army and settlers attack us. Journeys of 10 kilometres can take hours." Since October, PJS has logged more than 200 attacks on journalists in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Practical difficulties aside, the mounting death toll casts a heavy shadow over all Palestinian media workers, whose widely-held belief is that they are deliberately targeted. "The Israeli Defence Forces phone up journalists in Gaza and tell them that they and their families will be targeted, and then the attacks come – purposefully aimed rockets and missiles deliberately intended to kill us," says Al-Astall. With a mortality rate among journalists running at around three times that of health workers in Gaza, there is certainly a case to answer.

The International Criminal Court is already committed to investigate the targeting of journalists in Gaza. The initial order by the International Court of Justice which said Israel must comply with the terms of the Genocide Convention will increase hopes in Gaza that international law might yet serve their interests.

The response to the crisis from journalists' unions worldwide has been impressive – particularly from the NUJ. As well as £20,000 from the union centrally, branches have contributed to the IFJ's International Safety Fund, which is channelled directly to the PJS. Members in Glasgow voted to donate £1,000, Birmingham £1,000, Oxford £500, Bristol £500 and London Freelance Branch £2,000. Individual members have also shown significant generosity. For now, international solidarity means they have better access to the basic necessities of life – and the assurance that their work is appreciated by their professional colleagues the world over.

You can donate to the IFJ's **International Safety Fund**.