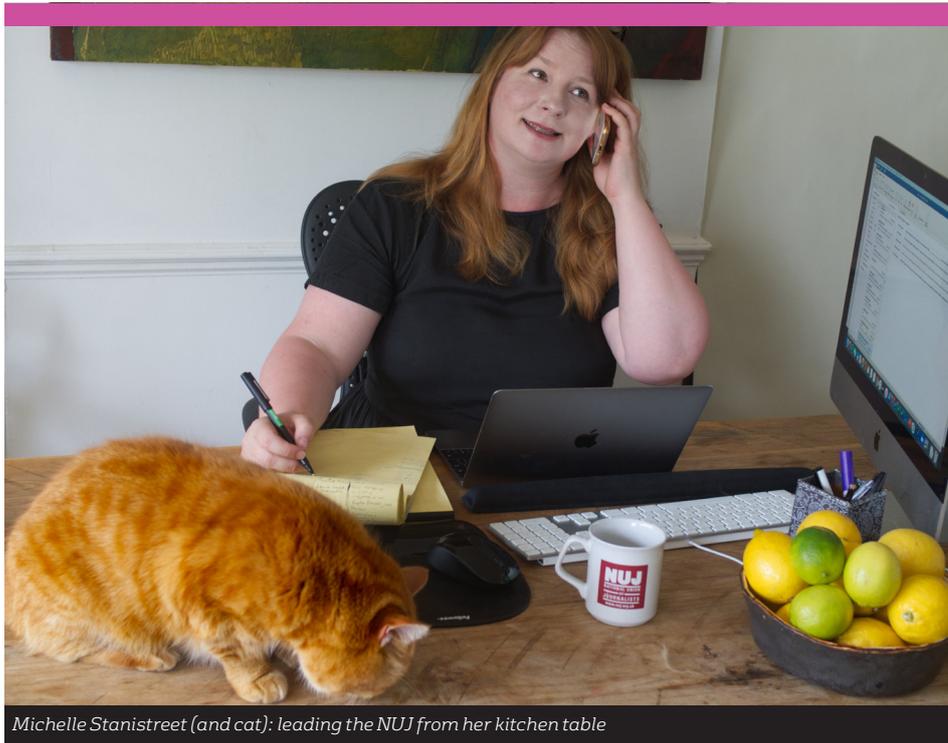


NEWS FROM THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE Informed

issue 32 Aug 2020

Union pulls together in time of Covid crisis

Tim Dawson



Michelle Stanistreet (and cat): leading the NUJ from her kitchen table

The NUJ's first-ever virtual national executive committee (NEC) meeting took place as the Covid-19 crisis ushered in a very different world since it last met, creating huge job cuts across the industry and a very different way of working for everyone else.

Michelle Stanistreet, general secretary, said: "We are currently engaged in excess of 4,000 redundancy consultations in all sectors. Predominantly, those cuts and redundancies are targeted at grassroots journalism roles."

Despite the crisis, membership is

increasing, particularly in workplaces facing cuts. The union's branches have risen to the challenge in supporting members, putting on extra meetings and providing advice via Zoom. Chapel reps have been working flat out supporting members through consultations, holding frequent meetings, attending NUJ training sessions and liaising with colleagues in other workplaces.

The Guardian held a 400-plus member virtual chapel meeting to vent its anger at the newspaper for ditching 70 journalist jobs and closing magazines and sections. At Reach, chapels lodged a collective grievance against the 580 job

cuts proposed by the company. The NEC passed contingency motions for possible strike ballots at Reach North Wales, Reach Merseyside and Bullivant Media - with the Midlands weeklies voting for two sets of 48-hour strike action this month.

The union lobbied hard when freelancers were left out of the government's aid package for workers and has now lodged a legal challenge to get redress for those cast adrift. The NUJ has galvanised MPs to write to watchdog Ofcom and the BBC over the cuts to news and current affairs and has negotiated better severance terms for members on former Local World titles now owned by Reach.

The NEC commended the general secretary for not furloughing staff, as other unions have, so the level of service to members could be maintained during the pandemic and praised staff and reps for their hard work. The union ramped up communications with members with a monthly magazine, NUJBranch, special additions of NUJ Informed and member surveys. NUJ training moved swiftly online and has run numerous workshops and courses accessible for all members.

The NUJ holds regular meetings with Oliver Dowden, Secretary of State at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and the union's News Recovery Plan has led to discussions with ministers and officials on how its measures, such as tax relief for media organisations and tax credits for jobs for journalists, can rescue and reboot the industry.

Michelle Stanistreet told the NEC: "On a daily basis we are demonstrating the different kind of union we are and how we deliver for members. We are out there, challenging and engaging and fighting for our members across the industry."

**Also
in this
issue:**

Michelle's
Message
Page 2

M'lud on
Camera
Page 8

Giant
Killers?
Page 10

NUJ
NATIONAL UNION
OF
JOURNALISTS

Michelle Says



Hot desking ... at home. Michelle Stanistreet sits out the heatwave as the union seeks to stave off redundancies, challenge the Treasury's package for the self-employed, battle with union-busting tactics from BAJ and work with the government on a rescue plan for the media.

It's sweltering in south east London as I write at my kitchen table, and the thought of ice-cold office air-conditioning has never felt more appealing. The NUJ's staff and officials continue to work remotely from home, and it is less a case of work carrying on as normal and more that we are flat out, busier than ever.

And no wonder – the impact of Covid-19 is really beginning to kick

in. The number of redundancy consultations has been steadily building over the last few weeks, with ongoing consultations and negotiations over thousands of jobs. Whilst the blow to advertising revenue, sales and subscriptions is severe and obvious, some proposed cuts and redundancies are more opportunistic.

Through pushing back on companies' proposals, putting alternative counter proposals, questioning and sanity-checking restructure plans and boosting redundancy terms, we are able to save jobs and neuter the worst excesses of successive managements' latest "vision" and do all we can to ensure those leaving are doing so on a voluntary basis.

We are lucky to have such a dedicated team of staff, backed up with amazing reps and activists who continue to pull together to provide NUJ members with as much support, advice and the best representation possible.

Where reps themselves are also at risk from redundancy, it's a real testament to their commitment to the NUJ and their colleagues that they're working so hard despite being under enormous personal pressure themselves.

As well as being involved in a wide range of industrial work, we are also fighting hard on the legal front. This week we lodged a protective award claim on behalf of the 20 staff dismissed from the Jewish Chronicle – who learned of the liquidation of their employer on the eve of Passover.

There was no consultation over their dismissals, no attempts to seek alternatives or ways to mitigate them. Taking this case is important to demonstrate to the Jewish Chronicle management – and all other employers – that they cannot trample over workers' rights without facing consequences and penalties.

Throughout lockdown, and the launch of the government's Self Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS) we've been lobbying hard for the Treasury to do the right thing, and bridge the

many gaps in provision that have left so many freelance and self-employed workers cast adrift. It makes no sense for government support to be provided at a time of unprecedented crisis to some workers, and for others to be excluded – simply because of the nature of their employment status or payment relationship with engagers.

"We are lucky to have such a dedicated team of staff, backed up with amazing reps and activists who continue to pull together to provide NUJ members with as much support, advice and the best representation possible."

Despite our best efforts the government has not righted this wrong, and following legal advice we have now lodged a Judicial Review against the government's discriminatory actions against freelancers, and the failure to allow PAYE workers at the BBC to access the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme furlough scheme.

We haven't taken this decision lightly, but the NUJ is firmly committed to doing all we can to resolve this injustice – and to ensure that in the event of future lockdowns, our members are not further discriminated against. We know so many freelancers have been plunged into huge insecurity, anxiety and financial challenges as a result.

As this affects many more workers beyond NUJ members, we will be seeking a cost-capping order and are launching a crowd-funder to raise money for the funds for the case, seeking help from across the trade union movement and from groups that have also been campaigning on this issue. Please do all

you can to support this special appeal and promote it in your own networks. A small contribution from many people who care about this issue will help ensure we can take the case through to a hearing.

We are also continuing to support our large and active chapel at Iran International, who have been put under enormous pressure thanks to the appalling behaviour of the British Association of Journalists and Iran International's management.

John Hendy QC is working on our complaint to the UN agency, the International Labour Organisation. It will question the legality of legislation here in the UK that allows union-busting and its facilitation through blocking agreements intended to thwart recognition applications by a union that workers choose to represent them, rather than one imposed upon them. We're awaiting further responses from the Central Arbitration Committee and, if necessary, will also take further legal action to defend a vital principle that matter for all trade unionists.

The NUJ has also tabled a motion to the TUC Congress in September, calling for a broad campaign and reform of the legislation to put an end to such shoddy anti-union, union-busting behaviour.

The turmoil in the industry has underlined the importance of the NUJ's News Recovery Plan. We are deploying significant effort to building support from politicians and policymakers behind the series of measures we believe could stem the damage currently being wrought, and reboot and rebuild the sector in the coming months and years.

I've held positive talks with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport officials in the last couple of weeks over the need for a package of tax reliefs - aimed at supporting Jobs for Journalists, as well as boosting subscriptions and an advertising impetus for local businesses. Part of that work is also exploring how such measures could boost freelance

REASONS TO JOIN

Journalists' Rights

The NUJ fights for journalists' rights, freedom of expression and ethical journalism. We support reporters in protecting their sources, photographers from having their footage taken by the authorities and media workers from surveillance. The union's cross-party parliamentary group gives the NUJ a voice on legislation which affects its members.

Are you keeping good company?

Join the NUJ today at nuj.org.uk/join

NUJ
NATIONAL UNION
OF
JOURNALISTS

www.nuj.org.uk

opportunities in the industry as well as secure employment.

Perhaps by the time you read this, this run of meteorological high pressure will have run its course. You will hear me cheering when it has. Rather easier to

forecast is the pressure on our industry, journalists generally and out union. I fear this will only increase in the months to come. Rest assured, however, whether our officials and activists toil from home, office or on the road, the NUJ will not wilt.

News Update

NUJ challenges government's unfair freelance aid package

The union has taken the UK government to task over its Covid-19 scheme for freelancers which excluded many members, particularly those taxed by the PAYE system, causing great hardship and stress.

It has appealed for members to help fund a judicial review of the Self Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) which the NUJ believes is unlawful, discriminatory and irrational, given the Chancellor failed to protect a significant number of working people whose incomes were affected in precisely the same way as others who qualified for assistance.

Michelle Stanistreet said: "We're taking this legal step because it is clearly wrong and grossly unfair that some workers have been given vital support whilst others have been cast adrift. Even at this late stage our hope remains that the government will rethink and take urgent measures to right this wrong.

"This crisis should act as a wake-up call on the working practices of journalists and other freelancers in the



Chancellor Rishi Sunak

creative industries. We need reformed public policy for freelancers and the self-employed that is fit for purpose and reflects the way in which workers are forced to operate by employers."

Following lockdown, the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, announced the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme for employees, but only after a huge campaign by the NUJ and others did he put in place the SEISS - however, it soon became clear many freelancers were falling between the cracks of the schemes. The NUJ's #ForgottenFreelancers campaign then lobbied for those people, including

Treasury

workers who had been forced by managements into becoming self-employed traders, the newly self-employed and those who were earning more than £50,000, who all lost out.

The BBC bowed to pressure to include 649 freelancers working for the corporation, paid via the PAYE system, in the furlough scheme extended to other freelancers. They will receive their average earnings for March, April and May and the payments will be capped at £2,500. Paul Siegert, NUJ national broadcasting organiser, said the decision would provide a life-line for hundreds of PAYE freelancers, a vital part of the BBC family.

#ForgottenFreelancers legal challenge.

We will be asking you and/or your branch to join the crowdfunding effort to seek redress.

See the website and NUJ Active for further details.

DM planned for end of year

The NEC agreed that the Finance Committee, in consultation with the Standing Orders Committee, will investigate how the Delegate Meeting (DM) can take place either by the end of the year, or the beginning of the next.

DM is the union's policy-making body and its meetings are held every two years to establish rule-

book changes, subscription increases and union policy. It was postponed from April this year because of Covid-19 and the restrictions on large gatherings.

It was agreed the next DM would be shorter, with as few members as possible attending while remaining democratically legitimate, and ensuring that late-notice motions and emergency

motions on issues raised by or during the pandemic could be taken. The committee will examine how



other unions and the TUC are holding their conferences and what options there are for a virtual DM if necessary.

The NUJ has an Emergency Committee which convenes when there is pressing union business. The Development Committee and the Policy Committee identified a number of motions that fell in line with existing policy and could be put into action. The union's democratic processes have continued via Zoom and Skype meetings.

News Update

News Recovery plan wins wide support



Google will be asked to pay for news content

The union's route map to tackle the effects of the Covid-19 crisis on the industry and reconfigure it so it is grounded in the public interest is winning support among politicians and the media.

The News Recovery Plan sets out a bold set of interventions to support and protect jobs and quality journalism. Key to the NUJ's plan is forcing the tech giants, which have helped themselves to newspapers' content while sucking up virtually all the digital advertising, to pay their way. The fortunes of digital news strategies can founder on the whim of a Facebook algorithm.

The union is calling for a digital service tax, or a digital information levy, to fund the measures set out in the plan, with a one-off windfall charge followed by an annual levy based on company profits. The tide could be turning. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission has set up a code which would require Facebook and Google to pay news media for use of their content. On June 25, Google said it had reached deals on using content with news publishers, including in Australia, Brazil, and Germany. The NUJ is waiting to hear more details.

This month the general secretary held a meeting with ministers and officials at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport to discuss a range of tax measures to cushion the effects of the loss of £1bn in advertising across the UK media during the lockdown.

The French government has voted for tax credits for anyone taking out a new subscription to a current affairs newspaper or magazine. Canada is considering raising the tax credit on digital news subscriptions from 15 per cent to 50 per cent. These are all ideas under discussion.

The Edinburgh Freelance Branch set up a series of meetings with politicians from all parties to talk them through the plan and gain support. Alyn Smith, the Scottish National Party MP for Stirling, agreed to draft a motion in support of a tech giant levy for his party's national conference. The Scottish Conservative Party put out a press release supporting many of the plan's proposals. The politicians also expressed interest in the need for increased media literacy and subsidised newspaper subscriptions for young people - 16-year-olds have the vote in Scotland.

This idea is also popular, for the same reason, among Welsh MPs and AMs. Pamela Morton, the NUJ's national organiser for Wales, discussed how the Welsh government could provide funding for the media via an arm's-length body during a session with the Senedd's Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee.

The Irish Executive Council has published versions of the News Recovery Plan, focused on the Republic and on Northern Ireland, and co-ordinated a major campaign in Northern Ireland highlighting threats to journalists

The union will be calling on the TUC at Congress to back the aims of its News Recovery Plan and to campaign for:

- Tech giants to pay their way, after years of exploiting editorial content without paying for its creation, through a digital information levy.
- Government investment in public interest news, through arms-length funding mechanisms.
- Tax breaks for news subscriptions and support for new media start-ups.
- Widescale media literacy campaign to tackle disinformation and fake news.
- Greater plurality in the media and tighter ownership regulation.
- Support for public service broadcasting and independent oversight of the BBC's licence fee settlement to ensure it is free from government interference.

and produced a special news recovery edition of the Irish Journalist. Séamus Dooley, Irish Secretary, said he would promote the plan in discussion with the Irish government's Commission on the Future of the Media, including the transfer of all media policies to a new department, the Department of Arts, Culture and Media.

The union has also had discussions with Angie Pitt, the head of MediaWise, the Guardian's media literacy project, to decide how the NUJ can promote journalism to young people of all backgrounds.

NUJ's News Recovery Plan: from health crisis to good news: <https://www.nuj.org.uk/documents/from-health-crisis-to-good-news/>

Health Crisis to Good News: a recovery plan for the news industry in Ireland <https://www.nuj.org.uk/news/from-health-crisis-to-good-news-a-recovery-plan-for-the-news/>

News Update

Cash-rich Reach makes 'bombshell' cuts



Welsh press hit by damaging job losses

Reach executives were subjected to blistering comments by members of the Senedd's Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee, concerned the newspaper group's job cuts would undermine reporting of Welsh news.

Reach's Alan Edmunds, its chief operating officer, and Paul Rowland, editor-in-chief of Media Wales, together with the NUJ's Pamela Morton, Wales national organiser, and Martin Shipton, chair of the Reach group chapel, were summoned to the cross-party committee following the announcement of 580 job losses across the company and a vote

of no confidence in the management by NUJ members in Wales.

Originally, 90 journalists in Wales were told their jobs were at risk. Martin Shipton said this came as a bombshell to members who had been told by Jim Mullen, Reach CEO, the company had £20m in reserves. Paul Rowland said he expected 20-21 Welsh jobs would go. Members were further angered when Reach, which already owns a 50 per cent stake in the Irish Daily Star, revealed it was buying the remaining 50 per cent stake in the newspaper.

The Reach executives were told that the politics stories on WalesOnline were old, the Celtic Weekly newspapers in south Wales had been so hollowed out there was hardly any local news and the Members of the Senedd feared the Cardiff-based Western Mail would struggle to provide a proper Welsh voice because of the cuts.

Alan Edmunds said the plans resulted from structural problems in the industry and that at the height of the pandemic 80 per cent of local advertising had disappeared. The new arrangements

would create more efficiency; copy sharing across the group would compensate for the job cuts.

Martin Shipton said the losses came just as the Senedd's responsibilities were increasing - its different response to Covid-19 to the rest of the UK illustrated this. He said Reach continued its digital expansion despite 84 per cent revenue coming from print, while Google and Facebook hoovered up most of the online advertising. The committee followed the session with a letter to Reach's Jim Mullen, saying the cuts would harm Welsh democracy.

Reach furloughed up to 1,200 staff across the UK at the height of the pandemic and cut wages by 10 per cent. Eleven chapels challenged the pay reduction. Full pay was restored in July and the union may go to a tribunal to recover the lost pay. The consultation on the redundancies continues.

Meanwhile, Newsquest announced about 60 redundancies and a 15 per cent pay cut for those earning more than £18,000; it failed to top up the government's 80 per cent wage support for the one in five workers on furlough. JPI Media imposed 10 per cent pay cuts on earnings over £18,000 and more than 60 journalists were put on furlough. It says it is not presently making any redundancies but has closed 11 offices.

Evening Standard cull

London's Evening Standard, owned by Russian billionaire Evgeny Lebedev, is to shed 69 editorial jobs from its 167-member newsroom. Emily Sheffield, the new editor, is to move the newspaper in a digital direction and put on more live events. According to the FT, the Standard's problems predate the pandemic, when commuter readers

disappeared, saying it made losses of £13.6m in the year to September 2019 on turnover of £62.6m.

PR workers stressed

More than three-quarters of PR members have worked longer than usual hours during the pandemic, with almost four in five feeling more stressed. Two-thirds revealed, in a survey carried out by the

NUJ's public relations and communications council, that they had suffered abuse or had to deal with abuse because of their employer's work during the pandemic. Most employers ensured people had the right kit for working at home, but a third said they did not.

George Viner Fund

Three new George Viner scholars have been chosen

and will receive bursaries towards their course costs. Fund trustee Jim Boumelha praised the high calibre of candidates, saying it had been challenging to select the winners. The previous candidates' awards ceremony was postponed and a joint event is planned. The union's charity aims to increase diversity in the British and Irish media.

Broadcasting

BBC blitz on jobs

A raft of cuts announcements at the BBC has resulted in a total of almost 2,000 jobs, the vast majority front-line rather than management posts, due to go.

Hardest hit has been the English regions, where 450 posts are to be cut and savings of £25m will have to be made by 2022, with the BBC proposing that: 142 jobs will be lost in online and TV news; 139 in local radio and the Covid-19 schedule, reducing daytime output from four shows a day to three, will continue; 29 jobs will go from the award-winning current affairs Inside Out programmes; seven from the London-based wire service; plus 125 further redundancies.

BBC Scotland has been told it must make £6.2m in savings, the equivalent of about 60 posts. Wales is expecting to lose 60 posts and Northern Ireland between 30 and 40. BBC News had already announced 450 job cuts, but that figure has risen to 520 because of extra costs incurred during Covid-19.

Following pressure from the NUJ, the BBC launched a pan-BBC trawl for volunteers for redundancy but the union is concerned that such an enormous reduction in roles will have a severe effect on the quality of journalism produced.

More than 60 MPs and peers from across the political spectrum wrote to Dame Melanie Dawes, chief executive of Ofcom, about the attack on national and regional BBC news and political programmes. The letter asked the broadcasting regulator to assess whether the cuts would endanger the BBC's ability to fulfil its statutory duties. More than 100 personalities, from journalism, the arts, sciences and politics also wrote to BBC management in defence of

regional currents affairs and politics programmes.

A row has also broken out over the future of the award-winning current affairs strand, Inside Out, which has been cut from 11 regions and switched to a new programme produced from six "regional hubs", with Inside Out staff having to apply for the posts.

Michelle Stanistreet said: "The government should step forward to fill this Covid-19 funding gap, rather than inflict further cuts on an already financially challenged BBC. There must then also be a broader debate around the funding of the BBC so our public service broadcaster can be taken off the critical list and its future health and independence secured."

The general secretary recently met Tim Davie, chief executive of BBC Studios, the corporation's commercial subsidiary, who will replace Lord Hall as director general in September.



Disney sparkle eclipses the news

The news boost created by people turning to public service broadcasters (PSBs) searching for trusted information during the pandemic has proved short-lived, according to a report by Ofcom, the broadcasting watchdog.

The BBC and ITV are now losing out to the big American streaming services, such as Amazon and Netflix, with the relative newcomer Disney+

becoming the third most popular adult streaming service. By June 2020 the combined viewing share of PSBs fell to 54.6 per cent, its lowest level since August 2019.

The report (Attitudes to PSB - 29 July 2020: <https://bit.ly/2PsLJfu>) said the pandemic "showed public service broadcasting at its best, delivering trusted news and UK content that viewers

really valued", but they faced fierce competition from streaming services.

It is a particularly tough time for commercial public broadcasters. Ofcom estimated television advertising revenues would fall by 17-19 per cent in 2020 and said Channel 4's reliance on advertising made it vulnerable.

In its results for the six months to June 30, ITV reported a 50 per cent fall in adjusted earnings, while advertising revenues fell by 21 per cent. Sky reported a 15.5 per cent year

on year fall in revenues. The BBC has also come under fire since announcing that people aged over 75 will now have to pay for their TV licence and the NUJ is calling for the government to pick up the bill. The corporation had delayed passing on the cost because of the pandemic and this and other Covid-related costs amounted to £125m.

Michelle Stanistreet praised the BBC and its staff for its Covid-19 response and said: "The government must fund this fee and not make the BBC the villain of the piece, as it is being portrayed."

News Update

Police apology to No Stone Unturned Two



Barry McCaffrey and Trevor Birney with the NUJ's Séamus Dooley

Chief Constable Simon Byrne, of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), offered an unreserved apology to the investigative journalists Barry McCaffrey and Trevor Birney and said he accepted the ruling of the Lord Chief Justice that the search warrants were unlawful.

The two men had been arrested at their homes in August 2018 over the alleged theft of a police ombudsman document that appeared in their documentary, *No Stone Unturned*, about the loyalist killings of six men in a Loughinisland bar in 1994.

Michelle Stanistreet called on the PSNI to take immediate steps to return all data held by the police to the journalists, and to bring those responsible for the massacre to justice.

In May, Declan Morgan, the Lord Chief

Justice of Northern Ireland, exonerated the journalists, saying they acted in a "perfectly proper manner" in protecting their sources for the documentary, and Séamus Dooley, the NUJ assistant secretary general, said: "It's a good day for journalism and a good day for human rights in Northern Ireland."

In July, at Belfast's High Court, the two men were able to celebrate a landmark press freedom victory after the search warrants were quashed – the full written judgment said there was "no confidence that the trial judge applied the right test" when granting the *ex parte* search warrants.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland and Durham Constabulary were involved in the criminal investigation.

Michelle said: "This case is an important and historic victory for all journalists working in the public interest. We very much welcome the decision of the judges to quash the warrants and the bold emphasis they have placed on the right of journalists to protect their sources.

"Journalists must not be treated as criminals, they must not have their homes and offices raided, simply for doing their jobs. This judgment is good news for democracy and it sends a clear signal to the authorities and to all those working to serve the public interest with quality, investigative journalism."

NUJ Extra praised

The trustees and administrators of the union's welfare charity, NUI Extra, were praised by the NEC for providing a lifeline for many members during the pandemic period.

The NEC thanked members and branches for fundraising in support of the charity which changed its rules to help people who lost work or became ill because of coronavirus. The charity has sought feedback from all those it supported.

Trustee Francis Sedgemore said: "The charity has decided to wind-down the Covid-19 scheme, providing members with ample notice of the change. New applications will be considered, including from those who for whatever reason chose not to apply before, but have been financially hit as a result of personal incapacity or the pandemic-related recession."

NUJ Extra offered all those affected the chance to get a further £250 for training, including new skills to help them secure work. Chris Wheal, head of the trustees, said: "We would urge every member who knows about NUI Extra to seek out a member who is unaware of us and tell them about the support we offer." Please continue to donate at: <https://cafdonate.cafonline.org/433#!/DonationDetails>

Alaraby TV

The NUJ has won a formal trade union recognition agreement at Alaraby TV, securing collective bargaining rights for editorial workers at the company. The network, launched in

January 2015, has 400 media staff and broadcasts a variety of programmes and news in Arabic, covering politics, entertainment and culture. Paul Siegert, NUJ national broadcasting organiser, said: "Our

members have worked hard to reach this agreement."

Hong Kong

Wilson Li, a freelance ITV News journalist, was arrested in Hong Kong under the newly-implemented national

security law. An ITV News spokesperson said they were urgently seeking clarification of the circumstances. His arrest followed that of the pro-democracy media tycoon Jimmy Lai, owner of the tabloid *Apple Daily*.

Spotlight

Please unmute M'lud



Tim Dawson looks at how online justice is being delivered

When HM Courts and Tribunals Service wanted a poster boy for their revised approach to media relations, the Evening Standard's Tristan Kirk stepped up. Speaking in a Ministry of Justice (MoJ) video he hoped that new guidelines would "smooth out that relationship between journalists and court staff".

Lockdown, alas, has strained such cordiality. In early August Tristan Kirk tweeted about the shortcomings of arrangements to accommodate the media at high-profile hearings, concluding with a blunt: "This isn't good enough @HMCTsgovuk".

Such frustration is indicative of just how challenging Covid has made the open administration of justice.

Kirk is not the only reporter to have become exasperated. Early in lockdown, telephone access was arranged to allow reporters access to Julian Assange's

case management hearings. The audio quality one day was so poor that following proceedings was impossible. On another, those dialling in heard nothing because the switch on the feed was not pressed.

What issues have arisen must, of course, be judged against the extraordinary backdrop. Courts are used to their procedures evolving over decades. Covid changed all that. Within a week in March, the conventional administration of justice in England, and other jurisdictions, was suspended and largely unfamiliar new procedures forced into the spotlight.

New rules were hastily enacted to allow video access to court hearings. Fewer than 1,000 cases were heard using audio or video technology in the last week of March, when the lockdown began; by mid-April it was more than 3,000 a week.

Throughout this, the needs of journalists were part of the planning, according to a MoJ spokesperson: "Working closely with journalists, we have also issued new guidance to court staff on how to help during the pandemic, and set up a national helpline to directly access support if needed." Before lockdown was eased, even criminal cases were allowing journalists to dial in.

The complications have not just been technical ones, however. To know which hearings to apply for dial in access for, court lists are necessary. Magistrates, in particular, have not always been good at issuing these. Access details for one of the Assange hearings were widely shared on the internet, with the result that thousands dialled in, rendering the proceedings inaudible.

Experienced court reporter James Doleman, for example, thinks that telephone and video access to courts should be retained. "It is always better to be in court, if that is possible, but particularly for shorter hearings, calling in makes a massive difference, often avoiding a round trip of hundreds of miles for a twenty-minute hearing."

Charlotte Tobbit of the Press Gazette was able to dial in to Belfast High Court for the judgment in the No Stone Unturned case from England. She said: "It was easy to hear the judge in the courtroom and others who spoke briefly from remote locations. My worry was over how to get the written judgment afterwards and indeed the issue of disclosure of documents is trickier than if you are in a courtroom and able to go up to the relevant party.

"My experience at a magistrates' court was mixed. I was impressed with how helpful court staff were by phone and email in terms of providing access and then the names of the people who spoke during the hearing afterwards. But it was incredibly difficult to hear everything that went on in the courtroom and other remote observers have found this elsewhere.

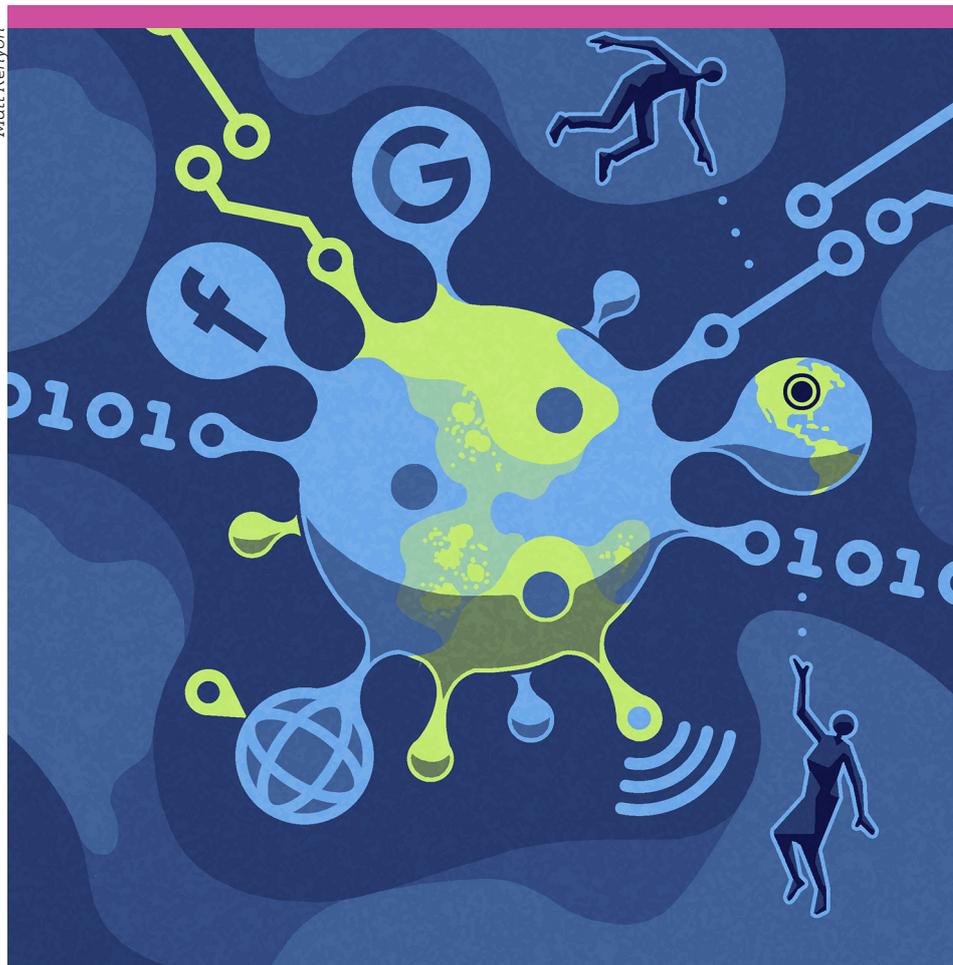
"If sound issues can be ironed out and the ability to dial-in does continue for a long time then this could be excellent. But there needs to be consistency across the courts."

Lord Chancellor Robert Buckland has suggested the NUJ meet MoJ officials to discuss taking this and other issues on.

Spotlight

Tech giants call all the shots

Matt Kenyon



It's a 'busy, complicated, disruptive time', Ian Burrell looks at how the industry's response to Covid-19 could change it for ever

Never before has the future of our news industry been so much in the hands of the Americans.

The impact of Covid-19 has put into overdrive the switch from print to digital, enhancing the power over news of the US tech giants to an unprecedented degree. Mark Thompson, CEO of The New York Times, has called it a "busy, complicated, disruptive time" with "a decade (of transformation) happening in literally a year or two".

Dame Frances Cairncross, who last year

published a government-commissioned review of the future of UK journalism, told NUJ Informed that UK news groups had "found it very difficult" to "make any money at all" from their physical products. "In six months they have had five years compression on returns."

The upshot, she believes, is a big win for Silicon Valley. "As news becomes digital-only, the product relies for its distribution on the platforms, it can no longer rely on the corner shop or WH Smith's. So, the power of the platforms over the news industry has grown considerably in the past six months."

This stark conclusion was underscored by a report in July from advertising body WARC showing that UK ad spend on national news brands in Q2 of 2020 was down 46 per cent year-on-year (including a 40.2 per cent fall online), and down by 52.4 per cent on regional news brands. Advertisers cut budgets and put news articles about the pandemic on their blocklists, costing publishers millions.

A July report by the Competition and Markets Authority found that Google and Facebook were taking 80 per cent of the UK's digital advertising spend. It called for a new regulatory regime to ensure that big tech does not "engage in exploitative or exclusionary practices".

Back in April, when many publishers reacted to the start of lockdown by implementing a wave of job redundancies and furlough schemes, the NUJ produced a News Recovery Plan. It is aimed at helping the sector to find a sustainable future with a purpose more rooted in public service.

Michelle Stanistreet, general secretary, says the fundamental issue here is a revised relationship between the platforms and the producers of news, and the NUJ plan proposes tripling the Digital Services Tax imposed on big tech, currently set at 2 per cent.

"Our plan is saying 'Enough is enough, it's time for the tech giants to pay their way'," she says. "They have had a free ride for long enough and now is the undeniable moment when that needs to be sorted

out." The clearly parlous state of the news industry in the light of the pandemic has prompted a change in government attitudes to curbing big tech's dominance, says Nic Newman, senior research associate at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. "This has been a shock. People have been dilly dallying for a long time but governments all over the world have started to address this issue."

Australia is at the front of this charge. On 31 July it introduced a groundbreaking code of conduct that aims to give publishers a "fair go" by forcing Google and Facebook to pay news outlets for content - and threatening them with fines of hundreds of millions of dollars if they don't.

Dame Frances believes real change can only happen if there is a political will in America, where CEOs of the big tech companies have recently been grilled by Congress about antitrust concerns. "If anything is going to be achieved it seems to me it can be achieved only with the co-operation and goodwill of the United States," she says.

"These are American companies and ultimately any law-based solution has got to start with the United States or it will not go anywhere."

In the meantime, Covid-19 continues to wreak havoc on the UK and Ireland news sectors. Michelle Stanistreet says that furlough schemes adopted by publishers became "like a waiting room for redundancy". Reach is cutting 550 posts (12 per cent of its workforce), while at The Guardian the Saturday supplements team and sports department are at the forefront of 180 job cuts made in response to a £25m shortfall resulting from the crisis. BBC News is shedding 520 posts.

BuzzFeed News and Quartz have shut their London operations. Worst hit of all is the local news sector. Newsquest has cut staff across the country, including 23 jobs in Newport, south Wales, and nine in Glasgow.

Early in lockdown, Midland News Association, publisher of the UK's

largest regional daily, the Express & Star, proposed 90 job cuts.

In Ireland, regional publisher FormPress has made dozens of redundancies and temporarily closed two papers in what NUJ Irish organiser Ian McGuinness sees as cynical opportunism. "FormPress has exploited the crisis; using it as an opportunity to get rid of some employees permanently and cheaply."

In June, Ireland appointed its first designated media minister, Catherine Martin. NUJ Irish Secretary Séamus Dooley describes the development as "welcome" but says action is needed to stem a "financial crisis" at loss-making national broadcaster RTÉ.

Away from newsrooms, many freelance journalists have been devastated by the pandemic. "Those budgets are the first to be culled," says Michelle Stanistreet. The NUJ is lodging a legal challenge to the

"Most of the news brands have seen a 'Coronavirus bump' in their digital reach"

exclusion of many freelancers from the government's Self Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS).

It's not all been bad. Jo Allan, managing director of industry body Newsworks, says advertisers have noticed the rise in trust in established news brands at a time when journalism has been recognised as a public service. "There is a shift in sentiment from advertisers looking to reach engaged and scaled audiences in brand-safe environments."

Most news brands have seen a 'Coronavirus bump' in their digital reach. Subscription-based news models have done well. Nick Hugh, CEO of Telegraph Media Group, told NUJ Informed that while advertising revenues have been "absolutely hammered", he expected the company to finish the year in the black. "It's actually my expectation that in 2020 we will achieve the same level of operating

profit and EBITDA that we did the year before, despite the virus."

Telegraph subscriptions have seen double digit year-on-year growth during the virus and have climbed to 508,000. "Those that have been pursuing a reader-based strategy or subscriptions-based strategy are in much better standing than those that are entirely dependent on ad revenue," says Nick Hugh. He adds that the Telegraph's print business has been more "resilient" than competitors because many of its readers are subscribers who have the paper delivered.

But Newman points out that a consequence of this comparative success of subscription-funded news is that "we are seeing more quality content disappearing behind paywalls". Most UK readers will not pay for digital news and are vulnerable to the disinformation that circulates on social platforms.

He hopes that ad-dependent news groups can at least become more efficient by embracing the new remote-working culture and the technological innovations that they have previously resisted.

Small independent publishers have capitalised on increased levels of trust by reaching out to readers for help, with website On the Wight raising more than £10,000 in donations.

The NUJ's News Recovery Plan is similarly practical. It advocates a nationwide media literacy project and a government-funded Journalism Foundation to invest in local news. Its call for tax breaks is already reflected in the government's new VAT exemption for digital news.

Michelle Stanistreet says the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport is showing "unprecedented levels" of interest in the need to protect journalism. Covid-19 has been painful but it's also a "window of opportunity", she says. "You can develop something that's bolder, more fit for purpose and much more rooted in the public good."

Unless the tech giants and Washington decide otherwise.

News Update

NUJ a key partner in safety body

Creating a safer world for journalists to carry out their work without fear of intimidation, harassment, imprisonment or worse is the object of the government's National Committee for the Safety and Protection of Journalists.

The NUJ is a key member of the safety and protection committee, which includes media organisations, the police, Crown Prosecution Service and BBC. Michelle Stanistreet gave a presentation to its inaugural meeting in July with media and data minister, John Whittingdale, and minister for safeguarding, Victoria Atkins, and outlined the recent threats members have experienced.

While attacks on journalists are not new, there has been an increasing atmosphere of intimidation, whether from US president Donald Trump calling the press the enemy of the people, far-right demonstrators turning on photographers and TV crews and members of the public becoming violent after being photographed while not social distancing.

Michelle described how members

Mark Kerrison / Alamy Stock Photo



Photographers have been attacked at several far-right demonstrations

in Northern Ireland were routinely threatened by paramilitary groups, with an offshoot of the Ulster Defence Association recently targeting all the staff of the Sunday Life and Sunday World in Belfast. She reported incidents of unacceptable and abusive behaviour from the British police, matters since raised directly with the National Police Chiefs' Council.

She also highlighted the case of the NUJ's MoC at The Mail in Barrow, Amy Fenton, who suffered horrendous online threats and abuse for her public interest

stories on false sex grooming allegations. Attacks have continued on members at BBC Persian Service and Iran International by the Iranian authorities, largely by intimidating their families in Iran but also by threats to snatch them off the streets of London.

Michelle said: "Unfettered journalism is a vital part of our democracy and the NUJ looks forward to working with the committee to protect a free media and end the impunity of crimes against journalists."

The safety and protection committee's first task will be to develop a national action plan setting out a framework to provide journalists with protection from physical harm and threats of violence.

The committee will meet twice a year and journalists will be invited on an ad hoc basis to share their experiences. Observers, such as the International Federation of Journalists, will provide international perspectives.

The IFJ's global tally of journalists killed in 2020 is so far 23.

Send your ideas for the safety committee's action plan to campaigns@nuj.org.uk

Belfast united

In May, the NUJ spearheaded a coalition of publishers, editors, trade unionists and politicians in Northern Ireland to publicly condemn violent threats made against newspaper journalists and staff by paramilitary groups. A statement was published in the Belfast Telegraph, Irish News and News Letter newspapers noting an increase in the number of violent threats against

journalists in Northern Ireland during the past year, saying: "Threats against journalists and media organisations have no place in our society. It is vital that such behaviour is not tolerated. No worker should be exposed to threats for doing their job."

#WeStandWithLyra

On April 18, the anniversary of her death, the NUJ celebrated the life of investigative journalist

Lyra McKee, who was shot by the New IRA in Derry; arrests have since been made. Members were asked to share examples of her journalism, tributes and pictures on social media. She was also commemorated, together with murdered Irish journalists, Martin O'Hagan and Veronica Guerin, in a candle-lit tribute on International Workers' Memorial Day which remembers those killed or

injured carrying out their professional duties.

Beirut blast

Messages of solidarity were sent to Lebanese media workers injured after the explosion in Beirut, which killed more than 200 and injured thousands more. Reuters senior television producer, Ayat Basma, provided some of the first images of the explosion from her phone, despite being cut by flying glass in her home.