

NEWS FROM THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE Informed

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Survey shows Covid-19 toll on NUJ members



Photographer Andy Aitchison's arrest nightmare. Full story on page 7

It is a year since all our worlds were turned upside down by the Covid-19 pandemic and consequential lockdowns.

The union's national executive council heard the results of an all-members' survey which showed that virtually everyone who took part found their work situation was now completely different. It has been a tough time for many.

For the most part, the viewers, listeners, readers and all those hungry for news, books and journalism will not have noticed the difference as media workers adapted to the new situation - broadcasting from sheds, interviewing by Zoom, using long booms and reporting from the box room or kitchen table. It has been a year when trustworthy and quality journalism has been at a premium.

Michelle Stanistreet, general secretary, said: "We should be proud of ourselves and the work members have done throughout the pandemic. However, our

survey shows that it has taken its toll. The union spent most of the summer dealing with redundancies and many of you told us you fear further job losses looming.

"Juggling family life, home schooling and work, dealing with the challenges of being isolated, or having to shield, grieving for lost loved ones, and losing work and income, has led to half of our members saying they have mental health concerns. One in six have seen their earnings affected, with one in three saying they had lost half or more of their income. Many freelancers found themselves not eligible for the government's aid package, despite heavy lobbying by the NUJ and the government's commitment to "put its arms around every worker".

"As the vaccinations roll out, hope is growing that restrictions will be relaxed. But things will not be same - just under three-quarters of members said they looked forward to greater flexibility in

working from home or the office, and no doubt meetings and interviews via video conferencing packages will continue. Throughout this difficult year the union has been there for its members and we'll continue to support anyone facing unreasonable pressure from employers or who needs support in doing their job."

The NEC heard that it has been a busy new year already for the union. On the last day of 2020, David Montgomery announced that his company National World had snapped up JPI Media and its 200 titles. On page 10, Ian Burrell looks at what could be in store for the newspaper group which includes the Scotsman, Yorkshire Post and the News Letter.

As NUJ Informed went to press, the union was looking forward to the publication of the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists' action plan to protect journalists in the UK from abuse and violence. With recent threats to members in Northern Ireland and on the BBC's Panorama team after a programme linking a mob leader and the boxing industry in Ireland, it will be timely.

The union sprang into action to support Andy Aitchison, a freelance photographer wrongly arrested by Kent police when covering a protest at Napier Barracks asylum centre. Andy spoke to the NUJ (page 7) after action taken by the union resulted in him having his phone and camera card returned.

The union also spoke out to condemn the actions of a government minister in publicly attacking HuffPost reporter Nadine White, offering full support for our member who was subsequently trolled for having the temerity to pose legitimate questions to a minister. On page 7, she tells the NUJ what it is like for a woman of colour when reporting on social affairs and race.

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NUJ
NATIONAL UNION
OF
JOURNALISTS

Michelle's Message



The sheer quantity and breadth of work being done across the union's nations and regions right now is really quite breath-taking.

It's particularly awe-inspiring how many lay members, branch officials and chapel reps are putting in brilliant effort to make things happen, despite the many pressures ongoing restrictions are having in everyone's life right now. That collective energy and doggedness is really what makes the NUJ tick.

We've been scoring great results on organising and recruitment initiatives led by reps across various sectors. Vital work has taken place on restructures, combatting job losses, tackling discrimination and ongoing important health and safety matters. The same is true of our work on campaigning and lobbying – on issues including the future of the industry, on Freedom of Information and transparency, on journalists' safety, on the ability of newsgatherers to work unimpeded in the UK and Ireland, and also across borders post-Brexit, and the future of public service broadcasting.

And of course, on the NUJ's News Recovery Plan. Our chapels and officials continue to do excellent work to build support for the range of measures we believe will sustain our press throughout the pandemic and create new pathways for a diverse and plural press and media. In December, the Welsh Executive Council and Pamela Morton organised a highly successful town hall event, which I chaired – the panel including Louise Elliott, programme and digital editor at ITV Cymru Wales, actor and local news activist Michael Sheen, deputy minister for the economy and transport Lee Waters and journalism lecturer Ifan Morgan Jones.

In Scotland, the short-life working group focussed on supporting and strengthening public interest journalism committed to after NUJ lobbying, held its first meeting on January 21. Several colleagues from Edinburgh Freelance Branch, which has spearheaded much of our work in this area, are now on the committee in their own respects. Sitting within the department of Fiona Hyslop

MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture, the union's recovery plan recommendations are at the heart of its work.

Journalism should not just be a business – nor can it just rely on charity, philanthropy or the crumbs from the tech giants' table

In Northern Ireland, branch members and union officials have met the newly launched Northern Ireland Assembly's All Party Media Group on Press Freedom and Media Sustainability. After hearing harrowing evidence from NUJ member and Sunday World journalist Patricia Devlin over the continuing harassment and intimidation she is being subjected to, and following the recent threats made against the Panorama team in Belfast, the group has sought a meeting with the PSNI Chief Constable Simon Byrne, to discuss the proliferation in harassment and threats against journalists. This is alongside engagement the NUJ has been having directly with the PSNI.

In the Republic of Ireland, the NUJ's assistant general secretary gave evidence to the Irish Media Commission, putting forward a compelling argument and video presentation, Journalism Not Just Business [<https://bit.ly/3uEpnW>], taking forward the principles for meaningful government intervention in the sector contained in the union's News Recovery Plan.

Work is also continuing on the London Assembly front and discussions and engagement continues to take place with officials in DCMS, both directly and through joint-union meetings of affiliates in the wider creative sectors convened by the TUC.

Given the overarching role we cite in the plan that the tech giants could

play in providing sustainable funding to future proof journalism, I've spent a lot of time over the past year talking to ministers, MPs and policymakers, and sensed a shift in view as the pandemic has progressed about what intervention could be palatable or achievable. That's made events in Australia in recent weeks and days fascinating and salutary to witness - with Facebook's decision to "defriend" a country and turn off its news to Australian citizens, in an unvarnished two finger salute to the government's legislation to introduce a media code. It's hard not to view the government's subsequent deal, struck to meet all of Facebook's own red lines, as a capitulation that should send shivers through democratic states everywhere.

Earlier this week I met with leaders from sister trade unions in the States, Canada, Australia and the IFJ to discuss our collective view on what is a global problem. We issued a joint response condemning the bully boy tactics and urged governments around the world to take urgent steps to protect and sustain news, boosting diversity, increasing quality information and delivering more journalist jobs. [<https://bit.ly/2NuFEbY>]

At a time when the need for quality trustworthy information is vital, in the midst of a global pandemic, instead we're seeing across the world the axing of journalists' jobs, the closure of titles and creation of more news deserts, the censoring and restriction of information, and journalism being pushed around as simply a commodity to be bought, sold and used as leverage by hedge funds, corporations and tech giants.

Bilateral deals - clinched on Google and Facebook's terms directly with companies they wish to do business with - misses the opportunity for a transparent repurposing of support for a sector that cannot and should not be treated like just another business. Journalism is a public good. Journalism is essential for democracy.

With disinformation and conspiracy

theories on the rise, a more diverse, pluralistic news industry is vital. We want bigger and bolder measures to ensure that money does not just go to propping up the same monopoly media owners, or failing business models that are starving journalism of investment and short-changing the public. We want to see public-interest media supported and strengthened, with journalists paid a fair share of the profits made from their work, new jobs forged, and new and more diverse voices created and sustained.

An independent fund could use money received through a tax on revenues or profits, directly funding national news recovery initiatives - saving jobs, sustaining media, supporting new voices, tackling disinformation and boosting media literacy.

Journalism should not just be a business - nor can it just rely on charity, philanthropy or the crumbs from the tech giants' table. Governments need to step up, acknowledge the crisis facing journalism, and take urgent measures to protect and sustain news and information. The whole package of measures we and other unions have put forward - using tax and fiscal policy, public advertising campaigns, job retention and creation subsidies, all with conditionality that goes directly to funding journalism in the public good - could radically transform the economic crisis facing media. Standing together with journalists elsewhere in the world with a collective mission to rebuild journalism as a public good is what is driving our efforts across the NUJ's nations and regions.

That work, reflecting on the challenges and opportunities thrown up during the pandemic and campaigning into the rest of this year and next will be the focus of NUJ delegates coming together in the postponed Delegate Meeting - taking place virtually on Friday 21 and Saturday 22 May. Taking advantage of technical opportunities means we're hoping chapels, branches and the wider membership will make that week a busy

Delegate Meeting 2021

Following the postponement of the NUJ Delegate Meeting following the Covid-19 outbreak and lockdown, an online conference will now take place in May alongside a programme of broader events taking place across the union's nations and regions.

DM will take place online, with the main business and motions happening on Friday 21 May and Saturday 22 May, following a formal opening of proceedings on Monday 17th May that will include events focussing on the union's News Recovery Plan, our safety of journalists campaign, the union's international solidarity work and a celebration of our Members of Honour.

We will showcase a package of training seminars and professional skills sessions, including collective bargaining and mental health and wellbeing training. Branches will also be encouraged to organise online events during a week of activity to make the role of journalists and journalism.

Branches will be able to amend their delegations. Late Notice Motions will operate in the usual way, with a deadline for receipt to the NUJ Standing Orders Committee of noon, Friday 14 May.

A fuller briefing for branches will be circulated.

and diverse reflection of the great work happening throughout the union, with a programme of meetings and events that all members can dip into and engage with.

Survey

Pandemic puts severe pressure on NUJ members' mental health



More than half of NUJ members say they have had mental health concerns and suffer from stress and anxiety since from working from home because of the pandemic.

They said feelings of isolation, anxiety about losing their job, symptoms of long Covid and higher workloads led to depression and insomnia. One member said the "fun of the job had gone". Juggling childcare, home schooling and getting work done was taking its toll, with 45 per cent saying they had problems coping.

The fear of redundancy loomed large; almost three quarters (72 per cent) said there had been redundancies at their workplace and 85 per cent believed the continuing crisis would lead to further job cuts.

The all-member survey carried out between the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 revealed that six in 10 members (61 per cent) said their income had been affected by the pandemic, with 13 per cent losing all their income and more than a third (35.5 per cent) earning less than half. One in six freelancers said their work had decreased sharply or dried up completely, with 13 per cent

saying their work had increased or there had been little impact.

Compared with a similar survey carried out last spring, there were fewer editorial staff on furlough; 14 per cent compared to 45 per cent - but, as in our previous survey, there were concerns that the selection was unfair. Half of those responding said there was no transparency in who was chosen or any option of rotating the furlough among staff. "No consideration given to personal circumstances, business needs overrode health and home needs," said one member. Only a quarter said their employers made up the full 20 per cent

difference between the amount paid by the government. JPI Media is still furloughing staff - some have been off work since April.

Laura Davison, national organiser, agreed members were under strain. "The main issue seems to be the pressure caused by last year's redundancies - people working longer hours, or very intensively and with fewer casuals available to provide cover," she said.

In spring 2020, 42 per cent of those working said they'd had their pay cut, with 71 per cent of the recent respondents now saying they had reverted to their full pay. This time, 30 per cent said they were suffering pay cuts.

Although most people (78 per cent) said they had the necessary equipment to work remotely, 18 per cent recorded having back, shoulder or neck pain from working in inappropriate settings, such as at the kitchen table. Some 13 per cent of those responding said they had problems with internet speed and/or connectivity and 39 per cent saying they sometimes did. One respondent found their broadband speed was not enough to edit videos.

NUJ Extra provides financial aid for members. To apply for aid or donate: <https://bit.ly/3koQyVz>

Working from the office

Last year's survey identified problems with the measures taken to make offices Covid-secure and it seems lessons have not been learned. One in five said they were not always able to socially distance and a third were not confident that adequate cleaning was taking place. Comments included: "We hot-desk computers for shifts -

someone may have got up 15 minutes before we take their seat. We are supposed to wipe down all equipment before and after each shift, but not everyone does. Shared equipment includes a headset with microphone." And: "Everything is there in theory but often they don't have wipes or sanitiser and many colleagues ignore the one-way systems as they are not enforced by managers." Lack of ventilation was also common problem.

Survey

Working from home

It is clearly tough for families sharing computers and workspace, finding time to do their job and helping children with their schooling. Feedback included: "My employer failed to appreciate family responsibilities and has not made any effort to accommodate home schooling or mitigate against my expected outputs or performance." Another said: "It's very difficult to work full time and home school, especially with an unforgiving boss." And: "I have been offered no support and was told to take annual leave or unpaid leave to cover childcare." A good employer made all the difference: "We're just about juggling but the BBC has been very supportive, allowing us to change hours and work slightly less." Then there was the technology: "It is a struggle now the kids are online all day at home. We cannot increase the bandwidth owing to the age of cabling/ distance from the exchange."

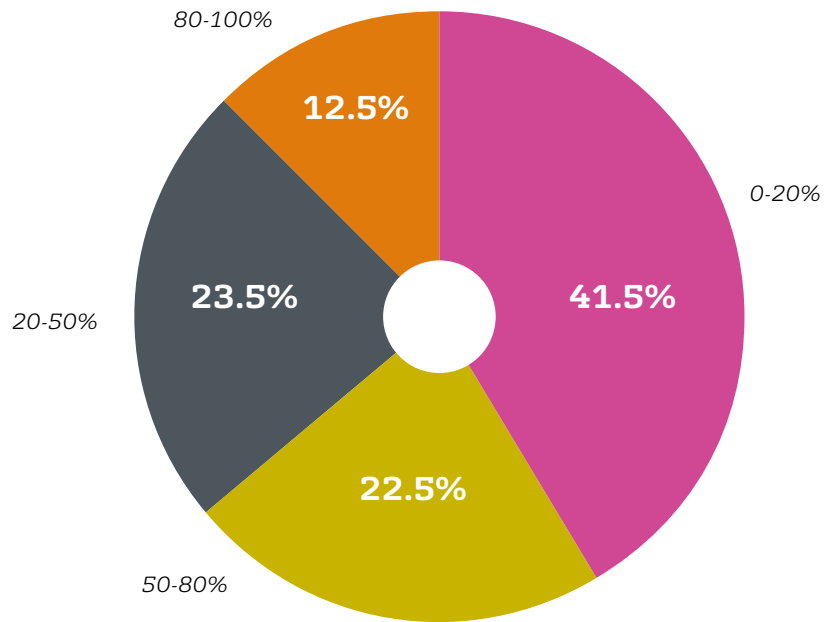
Others found it difficult to edit and record audio with the dog barking and family interrupting.

Disabled people

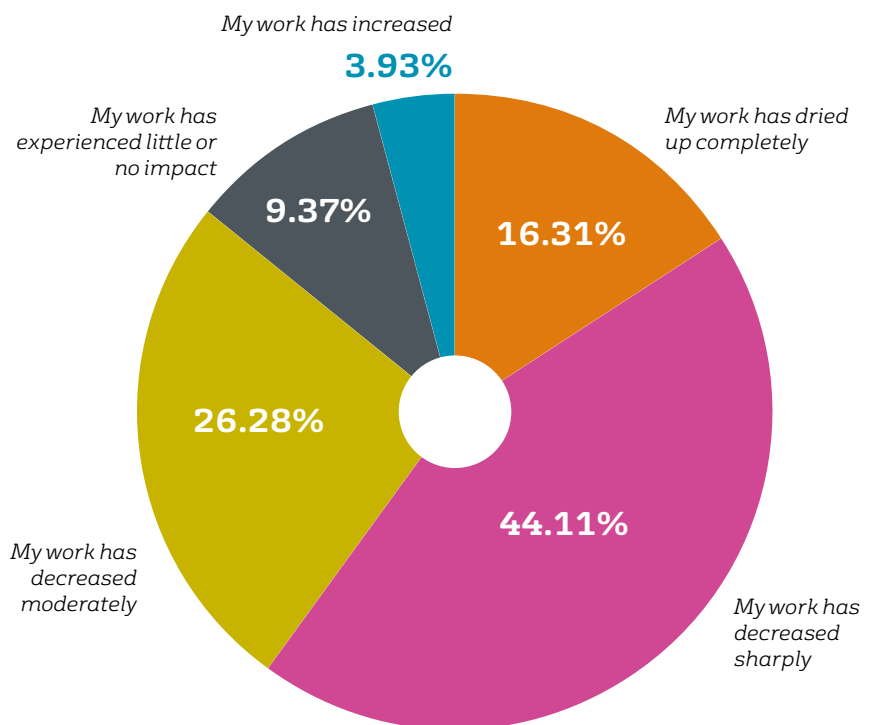
Of those who took part in the survey 8 per cent said they consider themselves to be disabled, with eight in 10 saying they had not had reasonable adjustments organised through their workplace since Covid-19. While Zoom and other packages allowed communication, events and online conferences, one member reported that not all platforms were as good as others for people who need assistive technology. Natasha Hirst, chair of NUJ Equality Council, said: "It is vital that employers provide disabled journalists with the reasonable adjustments they need to work at home and flexibility is given to parents and carers who are trying to manage work around family life. Our chapels and branches can help members find where to go for advice and support."

The survey was carried out between the end of December 2020 and January 2021, with 840 respondents

Q1. To what extent has the pandemic and lockdown led to reduced household income?



Q2. How has your self-employed work been impacted by Covid-19?



Survey

Freelances struggle for work and aid a year on

It was freelances who saw their work disappear almost from the outset of the pandemic. Work and contracts were cancelled with immediate effect, with many members getting less than a day's notice from companies they had worked for over several years. They had to wait an agonising week to find out what the UK government support would be.

It was even more devastating for those who joined the 2.9 million people identified by the National Audit Office who found they were not eligible for the government financial aid schemes. A year on, over half said they disagreed that the UK Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS) had covered their losses, with one in 10 having applied for a mortgage payment holiday. A similar number applied for a coronavirus bounce back loan, which helps small and medium sized businesses up to 25 per cent of their turnover with a maximum loan of £50,000, likely reflecting the fear of being able to pay it back. As ever when times are financially difficult, freelances budgets get cut, leaving many

members without shifts and work a year on. Freelance travel writers, arts and theatre critics and sports reporters and photographers are still waiting for the industries they cover to recover. As the Chancellor was due to announce the next round of payments for freelances



#Forgotten Freelances

in his March budget, 68 per cent strongly agreed they needed further support. Almost half did not see their income improving until mid-2021. Even more alarming - and personally devastating for the individuals concerned - nearly a quarter of those surveyed did not expect to make a living as they did before the pandemic. Pamela Morton, national freelance organiser, said: "The survey clearly shows things are not much better than last year and that, although we have seen recovery in some sectors, many remain affected in

terms of our members' work. It's been truly distressing that the self-employed seem to have been an afterthought throughout this pandemic in terms of UK government support and it has been the trade unions pushing on providing help. We now have the cruel situation that the UK government has delayed details of the fourth SEISS grant until the March 3 budget. The UK government must use this time to finalise the mechanisms to support those excluded and provide further support for the self-employed beyond the end of April. We are also calling on the government to equalise rights with employees and provide full access to benefits and social securities. The economy and industry vastly relies on freelances but without

help from government and companies, in how they treat freelances, our freelance journalists will not be able to keep working in the industry they love."

The Scottish government announced a further £17.5m of emergency coronavirus funding to support creative freelancers and the events sector and in Wales an additional allocation of £8.9m from the Cultural Recovery Fund for freelancers was made available.

The plight of freelances highlighted by Covid-19 has led to the union launching its Fair Deal for Freelances campaign and Freelance Charter.

Union finances

Carrying most of the union's business and committee sessions online has created significant savings for the NUJ, the NEC heard. Membership was holding up, particularly in workplaces facing restructures and cost-savings, and making The Journalist magazine digital-only helped offset drops in income such as rent from tenants in Headland House.

John Barsby, honorary general treasury, pointed out that redundancies including job losses of around 2,000 posts at the BBC were in train and the current drops in expenditure were one off, as a result of the constraints of the pandemic. The meeting signed off the union's accounts and agreed to put forward a motion to DM for a revised increase in subscriptions, noting there

has not been a subscription rise for seven years, while all other operational costs were growing.

Parliamentary work

Grahame Morris, chair of the NUJ's Parliamentary Group, gave the NEC a full account of the interventions made on behalf of the union in the Houses of Parliament, and representations made to the UK government on

the union's campaigns and concerns - including promoting the News Recovery Plan, condemning cuts at the BBC, calling for support for the Forgotten Freelances and transparency over the blocking of FOI requests, supporting media freedom initiatives, stepping up the protection of sources, tackling Covid-19 infringements, and battling to save the Union Learning Fund.

News Update

Journalists under fire

Andy Aitchison



Protest at Napier Barracks asylum centre

When you are a journalist you expect to get the story, not be it, but that's just what happened to members Andy Aitchison and Nadine White (pictured) who both received full support from the union.

Andy, a freelance photographer, was sent a tip-off about a protest in support of asylum seekers kept at Napier Barracks in Folkestone, and Nadine, a reporter for HuffPost, asked equalities minister Kemi Badenoch why she had not taken part in a campaign video with other black politicians to counter vaccine hesitation in the black community.

They were just doing their jobs.

This led to a knock on the door of Andy's home by the Kent police who told him they were arresting him on suspicion of criminal damage. He then spent seven hours in a cell and had his mobile phone and camera memory card confiscated, despite showing officers his press card.

Nadine's perfectly legitimate question led to the minister making their email correspondence public on Twitter and calling the journalist "creepy and

bizarre". This tweet unleashed vile and racist attacks on Nadine - she was abused on social media platforms, sent threatening emails and phone messages and was forced to close her Twitter account.

In both cases, the union and other supporters rushed to their defence. Working with Bindmans law firm, the union sent a letter to the police saying Andy had clearly acted as a journalist and under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act his material was protected and the police did not have the power to seize it. On Friday 5 February, the police said they would not be pursuing his case and his phone and camera card were returned. The NUJ called for an inquiry into Kent police's action and an apology for Andy.

To add insult to injury the police fined Andy the following week for breaking Covid-19 regulations; this was later rescinded. Bindmans partner Kate Goold said: "This repeated conduct by Kent



Police is arbitrarily obstructive of the crucial work carried out by journalists. It shows a flagrant disregard of their ability to report on events which the wider public plainly benefit from being informed of."

During Home Office questions, Andy's MP, Damian Collins, asked the Home Secretary if she agreed that there should be "a review of the guidance given to the police before action like this is taken against accredited journalists". Priti Patel's reply was not helpful

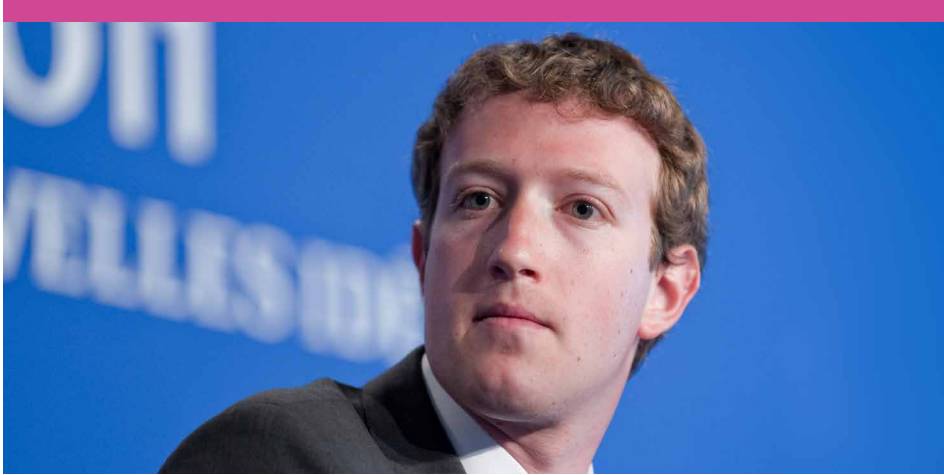
Andy said: "It was really weird to find myself in the spotlight, but I was furious and it was very important that the story got out. It could have been very damaging for me. The NUJ has been fantastic with their support during a week of my life which has been a very tricky time for me and my family."

Nadine was deeply shocked by Kemi

Badenoch's response to her question. In an article in the Evening Standard, she said: "I found the ordeal to be humiliating and stressful, particularly at a time when I'm grieving the death of my older sister who passed away from Covid-19." It was also an attack on press freedom, she said.

Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, said Kemi Badenoch had been out of order: "Elected representatives should be working to boost standards of public discourse, not indulging in petty outbursts towards journalists and journalism." This sort of abuse is not new to Nadine. She told the NUJ that as a journalist and woman of colour she regularly received vile messages. "I get called the n-word, which has become part and parcel of my job covering race and social affairs." She always reports it on Twitter and tells her employer.

News Update



Zuckerberg's bully-boy tactics pay off for him

Mark Zukerberg (pictured) received international approbation for pulling the plug on Facebook in Australia because the government was voting to make it pay for the news content it carried.

Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, said: "The bully boy tactics of Mark Zuckerberg must be resisted. Tech platforms should pay for journalism and compensate the newspapers and journalism they have almost destroyed. The NUJ's News Recovery Plan calls for a global recalibration of the media industry and renewed commitments to press freedom. This includes regulating

unfettered platforms which provide a voice for dangerous conspiracy theorists and information deliberately planted to undermine nation states' elections. It is time that governments stood together to protect ethical journalism and a plural, independent press which plays a crucial role in democracy."

Facebook's move heralded a salvo of the war between the tech giants and democratic states for the future of news journalism and the regulation of disinformation and misinformation on social media platforms. Facebook has been notoriously slow to take down posts from anti-vaxxers and posts peddling

lies. Zuckerberg was shooting across the bows of other jurisdictions, including France, the EU, US and Canada, looking to bring in laws to rein in the powers and regulate the tech giants.

Congressman David Cicilline, chair of the US's antitrust committee, who had taken evidence from Zuckerberg last summer said his latest move was "not compatible with democracy". In the UK, Facebook was condemned by Julian Knight, chair of the all-party DCMS committee, and the newspaper industry's Media News Association. The Irish Times said Zuckerberg had acted "like a child, taking its ball and walking off the pitch".

Scott Morrison, Australia's prime minister, said he would not be intimidated by Facebook, but capitulated to the platform's demands and the ban was reversed.

Rupert Murdoch had lobbied hard for the law, supported by the industry. Google had made similar threats to pull out of Australia, but instead made deals with media company Nine Entertainment and Murdoch's News Corp, including not only his Australian newspapers but titles in the UK and America. Google's News Showcase programme pays for content and has deals with more than 120 publications in the UK, but Michelle Stanistreet said publishers should receive finance to improve plurality and diversity. The NUJ has called for a levy on the tech giants to fund public interest journalism.

Covid-19 in NI

The Northern Ireland Assembly's All Party Group on Press Freedom and Media Sustainability is holding an inquiry into the economic impact of the pandemic on media organisations and journalists. It also wants to know how best the NI

executive should interact with local media and solve the long-term challenges to media sustainability. The union is encouraging members to take part. Find out more on the NUJ website: The deadline for written submissions is 26 March 2021 <https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/ni-assembly->

[call-for-evidence-on-media-sustainability.html](#)

Menacing threats

The union called on the authorities in Northern Ireland to take action to identify and punish those who consistently threaten journalists. The latest incident

was graffiti appearing across East Belfast with the name of Sunday World journalist Patricia Devlin accompanied by the image of a crosshair of a gun. The NUJ's Equality Council has put forward an emergency motion in support of Patricia at the TUC's Women's Conference.

Spotlight



A shot in the arm for ethical journalism

Monkey memes, conspiracy theorists, Covid Recovery Group hardliners and a nasty dose of vaccination nationalism has made reporting of the pandemic complicated.

This is bad news when getting trustworthy information is literally a matter of life or death. As those attending an event held by the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) heard, journalists are crucial in tackling disinformation, the communicating of public health messages and checking the facts.

Thanks to the efforts of specialist journalists in broadcasting, print and online, many of us have become armchair epidemiologists, expounding on R numbers and kept informed on the latest government advice even when the complicated tier systems each have their own rules.

But, unfortunately, while most people get their news from the regulated broadcasters, many also pick up dodgy information on the Wild West of social media platforms – from David Icke, from their WhatsApp group friends and from the presidents of America and France.

Donald Trump's suggestion of injecting disinfectant as a virus treatment was one of his many jaw-dropping pronouncements. This was clearly a very dangerous thing to say. But more recently, during the fall-out between the EU and the UK over the vaccination programmes, President Macron claimed the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine was "quasi-ineffective" for the over-65s.

A report in the German business newspaper, Handelsblatt, that the AstraZeneca vaccine had an efficacy of only 8 per cent among those over 65 swept the globe before the report's mistake was revealed – the 8 per cent referred to the number of volunteers of a certain age not the efficacy rate. Andrew Pollard, director of the Oxford Vaccine Group, said older people in the UK should be reassured that the vaccine was both safe and that there was data showing a "strong immune response" in older people.

The vaccine info-wars are not new. The Russian government, with its own Sputnik V vaccine to promote, was fingered by GCHQ for putting out a set of crude memes and video clips suggesting

people receiving AstraZeneca jabs would turn into monkeys.

A study published in Nature in May showed 100 million individuals had expressed views on vaccines and vaccination – either positive or negative – while using Facebook. Yet, while the anti-vaxxers were a much smaller group, they were better at reaching undecided individuals. Facebook was notoriously slow in shutting down this misinformation and disinformation. Research carried out last month by broadcasting watchdog Ofcom found one in three people said they had come across false or misleading claims about the coronavirus.

At the EJN event, Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter, author of *The Art of Statistics*, said the media had on the whole done well and the relationship between reporters and experts had matured, with the scientists getting better at explaining and journalists "realising that science is a hotly disputed area".

Yet, however jab-tastic the press has been – The Sun called for a "Jabs Army" of volunteers to help get millions of Brits vaccinated rapidly against Covid – many of the same organisations supporting the vaccine rollout are still happy to give space to rent-a-gob, anti-lockdown pundits, which inevitably creates confusion.

Professor Chris Frost, chair of the NUJ's ethics council, said: "While journalists are working with life-or-death stories that are guaranteed must-reads, a journalist's number one ethical rule must be to report the truth as accurately as possible.

"This can be difficult when reporting on technical subjects with which few reporters are fully familiar. Choosing sources for their expertise rather than headline potential is vital. It is the journalist's job to make stories attention grabbing and accurate and, tempting though it may be, avoid quoting that maverick headline-seeking contrarian, regardless of their expertise or entertainment value."

Spotlight

Matt Kenyon



David Montgomery: sack-and-slash manager or media moderniser? Ian Burrell profiles the new owner of JPI Media

With his drab-coloured suits and dour demeanour, David Montgomery embodies the cold aura of the Victorian business magnate yet seems to view himself as an inveterate media moderniser with the tech savvy of a Silicon Valley visionary.

It is one of many dichotomies of a man who, while dull and aloof in person, has been one of the most compelling figures

in the British press for 30 years. Another striking contrast is the juxtaposition of his unwavering belief in the value of newspapers with his willingness to sacrifice the jobs of journalists who work for them.

But could that be about to change? Montgomery's latest adventure as a press owner follows his acquisition of JPI Media, the regional publishing stable that includes The Scotsman and the Yorkshire Post, for the giveaway price of £10.2m through his investment vehicle National World. To some surprise, he is promising to give back control to local newsrooms and is encouraging staff to pursue "exclusive content" over "clickbait".

Such a strategy is different from the one he pursued at Local World, his previous local press venture, when journalists were told to follow a centralised model and to "skim" content from the internet as part of a "content harvesting" process which

proposed handing "a large measure of control" of newspaper websites to press officers from outside bodies. The Local World consortium sold up to Reach for £220m in 2015, making a hefty profit for its founder.

At the age of 72, Monty is back on the frontline. "On a personal level, I think it's just remarkable that he has taken on this difficult challenge," says the media commentator Raymond Snoddy, who has closely followed the career of his fellow Northern Irishman. "I don't think cost-cutting is an option - he's going to have to do something to bring these papers back to life."

Steve Auckland, former chief executive of Local World, expects Montgomery to grow the business. "I think JPI was shockingly run from central command over many years and had lost sight of local journalism." But Laura Davison, the NUJ's national organiser, points out that, after a long period of cost-cutting at JPI Media, reinvigoration can only be achieved by spending money. "People have seen good colleagues leaving the business," she says. "What they are looking for now is investment and stability." The NUJ will meet with Montgomery's team next month.

The takeover comes amid a crisis in the local press, highlighted by the Cairncross Review and by research published in October showing that daily print circulation of local titles in 2019 was at 31 per cent of 2007 figures, while weekly circulation was at 39 per cent. The pandemic has exacerbated this circulation decline and sent advertising revenues plummeting. Now reduced to three dominant publishers, the regional sector is having to rethink its model. Newsquest has introduced metered paywalls, while JPI Media had also moved towards a subscription model under a "digital acceleration" programme.

Montgomery has built a senior management team with deep experience of the local press, including former employees of Reach/Trinity Mirror, finance chief Vijay Vaghela,

and Mark Hollinshead and Tindle Newspaper's, Danny Cammiade .

National World's narrative of benign ownership faces industry scepticism. "Mr Montgomery's definition of 'exclusive local content' needs to be challenged to make sure he's not simply carrying out the same process that he followed when fattening up Local World for sale," says local media analyst Steve Dyson, former editor of the Birmingham Mail and Teesside Gazette. "I'm personally not at all sure his investment vehicle approach is anything more than see-through flannel."

The business magazine Management Today once described Montgomery as a hot contender for the title of Britain's "most vilified boss". That was in 1997, when it noted that he was "still striving to prove that he is more than a sack-and-slash manager." Plus ça change!

Montgomery, raised in Bangor, a coastal resort outside Belfast he was given a fierce work ethic by his father, an electricity company clerk. He edited the student newspaper at Queen's University, Belfast, (often wearing a suit and tie), and then headed to the Mirror Group (MGN) as a graduate trainee.

Ironically, he distinguished himself as a sub-editor, a role he has come to dismiss as dispensable in digital journalism. He moved to The Sun as chief sub and, after being fired by Kelvin MacKenzie, joined up with Nick Lloyd who made him his assistant at the Sunday People, then his deputy at the News of the World. Lloyd remembers a "very clever and determined" journalist who "would stay in the office until midnight". When Lloyd relocated to America and Rupert Murdoch asked him who should become editor, he replied: "The best person would be David Montgomery."

In 1987 Monty took the helm of Murdoch's Today where he was known as a hard taskmaster and relentlessly hands-on. "He was a bastard but he was a fair bastard," acknowledged The Sun columnist Jane Moore, a former Today colleague.

Here are the roots of the newspaper

management style of a workaholic who believed he could do it all. It's telling that the most famous story about Montgomery - that colleagues changed his nickname to Rommel "because Monty was on our side" - has been separately attributed to the newsrooms of the News of the World, Today and the Daily Mirror. Montgomery has shown himself to be "not entirely sentimental about the workforce", says Lloyd.

It was the drowning of Robert Maxwell, off the Canary Islands 30 years ago this November, that gave Montgomery the chance he craved to be a newspaper boss. He put together a business plan that convinced The Mirror board he could rescue a business riddled with debt. As CEO, Monty quickly fired the editors of The Mirror and The People and set about driving down costs.

"Nothing in Montgomery's history suggests that he worries a great deal about the public service aspect of journalism."

MGN had a stake in the struggling Independent and its editor Andrew Marr recalled that Monty was determined that the liberal broadsheet should become "a tabloid-style scandal sheet for yuppies". Marr told MPs that he was told to not put "too many dead black babies" in the paper.

The Murdoch influence on Montgomery was evident. He has reflected on how "Rupert comes from the same background as I do: Scots Irish", and praised Murdoch as "an inspirational leader" and "great decision-maker". At Labour-leaning MGN he brought in a string of News Corp figures, including Sun icon MacKenzie, the former Times editor Charles Wilson and Piers Morgan, who after being put in charge of the Daily Mirror, caused a scandal by running a headline "Achtung! Surrender" before the

England-Germany game in the 1996 Euro Championship, Germany won.

After initial success in stabilising the business, Montgomery was forced out of MGN when it moved firmly into the local paper market by merging with regional publisher Trinity in 1999.

But his cost-cutting reputation helped attract City backers and his ambition led him into a pan-European publishing empire, Mecom, which acquired titles from the Netherlands to Lithuania. As he sought tech-driven efficiencies to push up profit margins, staff at the Berliner Zeitung branded him the "Anglo-Saxon Locust".

He promises to be more nurturing with The Scotsman and has brought in former BBC Online chief Neil McIntosh as editor. Tim Luckhurst, a previous Scotsman editor, remains concerned. "Holyrood and the Scottish National Party executive need and deserve scrutiny and I worry that The Scotsman's role in that important task will be undermined by further diminution in its staff," he says. "Nothing in Montgomery's history suggests that he worries a great deal about the public service aspect of journalism."

Montgomery's vision for local news involves television - he runs the Local TV network, based in eight regions from Bristol to Tyne & Wear. His interest in the medium goes back 30 years to his involvement with Live TV, notorious for topless darts and weather reports delivered in Norwegian.

Yet he always claims to be embracing new tech trends. "There is an old-fashioned way to operate and a modern way," he likes to say.

Like his mentor Rupert, now 93, he remains restless. "Some people think me and retirement don't go", is another of his phrases. He has a sardonic humour - a photomontage of a tank with his head popping out the turret used to hang outside his office at Mirror Group.

The thin Ulsterman is not yet about to emulate Wagner's buxom Valkyrie and bring down the final curtain - quite yet.

News Update

BBC strike looms over job cuts

BBC reps are gearing up for a ballot for industrial action over compulsory redundancies, with former Inside Out staff and a member in BBC Scotland set to leave the corporation in April.

Most of the job cuts so far implemented have been achieved through voluntary redundancy, but about a dozen members from Inside Out have not been redeployed, despite there being 17 vacancies advertised for the current affairs strand's successor. Paul Siegert, national broadcasting organiser, is continuing talks with management.

The corporation has a new chair of the board, Richard Sharp, who admitted donating £400,000 to the Tory party and said he would donate his £180,000 salary to charity. Meanwhile, the government has dropped its plan to decriminalise TV licence evasion, which would have cost the BBC hundreds of millions of pounds.

There are more BBC cuts to come and, since staff will not be offered a pay rise in 2021, the union is in talks about pay progression. **ITV** gave staff a one-off £750 payment in lieu of an



BBC

annual rise. **ITN**'s profits have fallen by about £2m for 2020 compared to 2019, a pay rise seems unlikely but members have agreed to a new deal comprising a shorter working week and the right to claim overtime. Meanwhile, broadcasting staff at the BBC, ITV and **Sky** are being given voluntary lateral flow tests for Covid-19.

Members at **RTÉ** are preparing to ballot on a set of temporary measures by management to save €4m, on top of a projected saving of €4m from a voluntary redundancy programme. The proposals emerged from talks between RTÉ and the Group of Unions. Workers earning

less than €40,000 will be exempt from the cuts, which will be restored after two years.

Union recognition talks at **Iran International** grind on and, while the end may be near, victimisation of members has continued and the union is taking the broadcaster to an employment tribunal over the victimisation and redundancy of its former FoC.

Ofcom has revoked the UK licence of the China's state-owned broadcaster **China Global Television Network** (CGTN) because its editorial was "ultimately controlled by the Chinese Communist Party, which is not permitted under UK broadcasting law". The Chinese government retaliated by banning **BBC World News** from broadcasting in China. Michelle Stanistreet called on the international community to condemn the move and support the BBC.

Better news came for some BBC members when the government revoked a cap of £95,000 exit payments on public sector workers.

General Secretary election

Applications for the post of NUJ general secretary are open. The post is subject to election by ballot of the NUJ membership every five years. It is a full-time post based at the London head office. The union is operating a four-day week until the end of September 2021, when it will return to five days. The application form and terms and conditions of employment can be obtained

from personnel@nuj.org.uk. The closing date is noon, Monday 3 May. The post is advertised in The Journalist and on the website.

Card cachet

Increased applications for membership have resulted from the UK press card being seen as a must-have item during Covid-19 restrictions, with some anti-lockdown protesters attempting to pass themselves off as the press with fake cards.

The union has notified the police. Branches were asked to remain vigilant when agreeing applications. Press card holders were told to use them only during news gathering otherwise they will be cancelled.

LDRs recognised

Local Democracy Reporters working for JPI Media have won union recognition for collective bargaining, following suit with LDR colleagues working for

Newsquest. Laura Davison, national organiser, said: "I'm really pleased that recognition has been agreed and congratulate our reps and members on their achievement."

Scottish u-turn

Lobbying by the NUJ and others forced the Scottish government into a u-turn on excluding newspapers from non domestic rates relief when it lost a forced vote in Parliament.