



June 2020 Branch

Welcome to the June edition of NUJ Branch, a special newsletter providing information and news from branches during the present crisis. Michelle Stanistreet, general secretary, gives an update on her work supporting members, meetings with ministers and her evidence session on the future of journalism to members of the Lords Communications and Digital Select Committee from her kitchen table.



We have all been shocked by the sickening scenes of journalists and photographers being attacked and harassed by protesters while they have been covering the series of demonstrations and events in the wake of the US police killing of George Floyd. The worst violence – in a prevailing atmosphere described by journalists on the ground as menacing and threatening – came during the London demonstrations at which far-right thugs were out in force.

Any attack or abuse of photographers and reporters in the course of their work is unacceptable and physical attacks must be robustly investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice. The latest incidents underline how the mood against media workers is febrile and alarming. During lockdown the situation has worsened. NUJ rep Amy Fenton was forced to flee her home – on police advice – after threats of the most vile and offensive kind were made against her and her young daughter, for her reporting work as Newsquest's chief reporter in Cumbria. In Belfast the family of award-winning journalist, Patricia Devlin, was threatened by a loyalist paramilitary group, on top of the earlier violent threats made against newspaper staff and journalists in Belfast.

I raised these cases when I gave evidence to the Lords Communications and Digital Select Committee, calling for political leaders to do more to stem this spiralling antagonism. Leading by example would be good for starters, given some ministers and government officials have been part of the problem – banning reporters from press briefings, attacking so-called campaigning newspapers, giving anonymous briefings to undermine stories and dismiss them as “fake news”. These are the actions of a government choosing to whip up a febrile and toxic environment, particularly on social media, rather than one trying to tackle the pollution of public discourse and protecting journalists' ability to do their job safely and well. The UK government has committed to establishing a new national committee for the safety of journalists with an associated action plan, and we're pressing them to engage with us in this work.

Our overwhelming priority has been supporting members and the industry during the Covid-19 crisis. Recent weeks have felt like the eye of the storm, but this week, as the government aid packages begin to taper, the notices of redundancies in newspapers and publishing have begun. That's why urgent intervention is needed and why the NUJ's News Recovery Plan is a campaign we're running across the

union's nations and regions. Branches all have a role to play in that. I continue to speak up for workers in the industry at meetings convened by Culture and Media Secretary Oliver Dowden, with the publishers and management of newspaper organisations, and via the TUC and the taskforce established to address the wider creative industries.

During the evidence I gave to the Lords committee inquiry into the future of journalism – my first experience of a virtual oral evidence session, speaking to peers from my kitchen table – we discussed the plight of freelancers, the lack of diversity in the industry, the need for greater media literacy and our proposals in the plan to make sure public interest journalism prospers beyond the crisis. We held a successful Zoom town hall gathering last week with the Labour Party's shadow media culture team Jo Stevens and Chris Matheson; almost 80 members participated and posed questions and explained the problems they were experiencing because of Covid-19.

In Solidarity,

Michelle Stanistreet

RECOVERY PLAN

02

Scotland to tackle the tech giants?

The Scottish government could persuade tech giants to fund a significant public-benefit news fund, Dame Frances Cairncross told a Zoom meeting of the NUJ's two Edinburgh branches.

The former journalist, who chaired the UK government's 2019 inquiry into the future of journalism, said Scotland might be an exemplar for the rest of the world. "Local papers need to build new relationships with their readers and find new ways to make money," she said at last month's meeting.

However, she was sceptical that compelling the tech giants to surrender funds would work. "If a government tried to extract money from them forcibly, they could simply withdraw their services from the UK, leading to uproar," she said. She believed the Scottish government should negotiate with Google and Facebook to provide funds toward a government-funded institute for public-interest news. The NUJ's News Recovery Plan has called for a journalism foundation which would invest in local journalism, innovative media projects and public-interest journalism.

Dame Frances, who worked for The Times, The Guardian and The Economist, said: "Projections suggest that news providers will lose £1 billion in revenue as a result of this crisis, and it will hit local papers harder than nationals. The complication, however, is that so many papers are owned by international corporations, such as Gannett, or individuals like Murdoch and Lebedev. A support plan that simply hands them money is clearly unacceptable."

But a tax on the tech giants found support from Alyn Smith SNP, MP for Stirling, who agreed to draft a motion on the subject for his party's national conference. He was keen

on the idea of a Scottish Journalism Foundation, possibly joint financed initially by Google/Facebook and the government. The Edinburgh Freelance Branch had spoken to him while promoting the NUJ's News Recovery Plan as part of a series of meetings also with Labour MSP Claire Baker, Conservative MSP Maurice Golden, and Green MSP Patrick Harvie. The union has provided a briefing for Scottish MPs and MSPs on the impact of Covid-19 on the media: <https://www.nuj.org.uk/documents/nuj-briefing-on-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-the-scottish-media/>



Youth news pilot

The News Recovery Plan calls for increased media literacy and a voucher scheme for young people so they can buy subscriptions to newspapers/websites. Sixteen-year-olds have the vote in Scotland, so it would be a way of introducing young

people with a stake in the democratic process – who largely rely on Facebook and other social platforms for news and information – to more trusted news sources. It would also make news organisations think more carefully about making their offering

youth-friendly. Joyce McMillan, Edinburgh Freelance Branch chair, said: "Fiona Hyslop, chair of the culture and economy committee, has already shown interest in such a voucher scheme. Scotland would be the obvious place to try it out."

CAMPAIGN

03



Save Inside Out

The BBC has to find savings of £125 million because of the effect of Covid-19 alone, but plans to make easy savings by cutting the regional current affairs series Inside Out and regional Sunday politics shows must be stopped.

Staff on the 11 regional Inside Out programmes have been told to stop

filming for September while a review is carried out of its future, which is due to report at the end of the month. Meanwhile, there are fears that the regional Sunday politics programmes, which have been cut to one England-wide show because of Covid-19, will not return.

Jobs are expected to be lost on both and the BBC will lose award-winning programmes which tackle issues at

a local and regional level and play an important role in democracy at local council and constituency level, undermining the BBC's claim to be the premier public service broadcaster across the UK.

A letter signed by more than 100 celebrities, including Stephen Fry, Lennie Henry and Alison Steadman, urged BBC management to save the programmes. Michelle Stanistreet, general secretary, said: "Make your voice heard and tell the BBC that these local programmes must not be cut. Contact your local politicians and ask them to support the campaign."

NUJ Extra

Nottingham branch has set up set up its own emergency fund for members who are experiencing hardship. Di Peasey, branch chair said: "So far we have paid the membership of one member and have appealed to others to contact us if they need help. We have already donated £300 to NUJ Extra and will probably make another donation later in the year."

Chris Wheal, chair of the union's welfare charity's trustees said: "I'd like every branch officer to try to find a member who needs NUJ Extra's help but who has not yet applied. We know that there are many NUJ members out there who have been hit hard by the Covid-19 crisis. They may not have been ill, but they may have seen shifts cancelled or rotas cut or simply seen their workload dry up as our industry retrenched and cut back. My message to branches is, please help us find them so we can give them that little bit extra." www.nuj.org.uk/work/nuj-extra/

Branch action

Write to your MP/mayor asking them to tell the BBC not to cut regional journalism. Use this model letter: <https://www.nuj.org.uk/documents/mp-letter-inside-out-and-sunday-politics/>

Tweet your support using the hashtag #savebbcinsideout

BOOKS

Getting the data

The Book Branch is an active branch with 700-plus members – since the pandemic it has seen a boost in attendance at its virtual meetings.

Catherine Brereton, branch treasurer, said: “It’s been good to see new faces. People are obviously worried about their working conditions and jobs and perhaps having an online meeting makes it easier for more to attend. It’s been good to make contact and has enabled us to monitor the situation in publishing.

“There have been equality implications of the health crisis and of lockdown: both are

disproportionately affecting different groups covering ethnicity, age, gender, disability and other health factors, class, and family and caring responsibilities. Gathering more information about members’ experiences will inform what activists can do to help them and in our negotiations with employers.”



The branch has been tracking pay cuts, furlough, reductions in hours, holidays, workloads, health and safety while home working, those who also have to care for children, the impact these factors have on people’s mental health and their concerns about the future.

At Pan Macmillan, where a new chapel is being formed, almost no one has been furloughed, instead the company opted to introduce staggered voluntary pay cuts for those earning more than £32,000 and reducing everyone’s working hours slightly.

Penguin Random House, which has a recognised NUJ and Unite joint chapel, agreed to furlough terms suggested by the NUJ with almost no amendments. However, although the agreement stated furlough would be voluntary,

in practice some staff are not being given a choice.

Faber, another recognised NUJ chapel, has furloughed about 40 per cent of its staff by alternating departments, morale is suffering and many are feeling overworked.

Independents, Verso and Pluto, are demonstrating the benefits of union organisation. Despite financial difficulties, Pluto has awarded staff a £50 per month pay rise to compensate for extra costs incurred from home working.

The Book Branch has linked up with Oxford & District branch to monitor publishers in that region which have introduced cost-cutting measures, including pay cuts.

Redundancies in the sector could be looming. A survey published last month by The Bookseller found that more than half of the UK’s small publishers feared they could be out of business by the autumn; bookshop sales have been severely affected by lockdown.

The Bookseller also reported that publishers such as HarperCollins, Hachette and Simon & Schuster were exploring the need for staff to return to their offices in autumn.

Catherine said: “We need to ensure that members are equipped to face the challenging months ahead – their health and safety at work is paramount – and that we at the NUJ must resist any threats to working conditions and to jobs themselves.”

You can read a longer version of this piece at <https://oxfordnuj.wordpress.com>

Labour listens

Catherine Brereton spoke at a town hall meeting of 80 NUJ members and the Labour Party’s culture and media team, Jo Stevens and Chris Matheson, about how disastrous a crash-out

Brexit would be for the publishing industry. Michelle Stanistreet discussed the union’s News Recovery Plan and members highlighted the problems faced by freelancers during Covid-19, attacks on journalists and BBC cuts.

Local radio matters

Dominic Blake, senior reporter and FoC for BBC Radio Solent, on radio's role during Covid-19

local
news
matters
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How can we stay on air, with only 20 per cent of staff available to us? That was the worst-case scenario for which the BBC found itself planning at the start of the pandemic. The response was immediate. Within a week 16,500 employees were working from home. BBC local radio stations switched to four-hourly programmes designed to keep presenters in reserve and to make programme sharing easier in the event of widespread infection. Visitors were banned and working areas rapidly reconfigured to comply with social-distancing rules. Local journalists continued to report live and on location, but only when safe and necessary. These results have been astonishingly successful, with no known cases of virus transmission between staff.

Local radio bulletins became half-hourly and have been kept up 12 hours a day, seven days a week. Our programmes contained a constant stream of help, support and advice. We launched the Make A Difference campaign, which has already seen 800,000 listeners getting in touch to offer help to their communities.

Every week we broadcasted the Clap for Carers, virtual church services and even a virtual pub bringing people together for important moments such as weddings, birthdays and anniversaries.

We have explained complex new rules, the government's Covid-19 aid packages for workers, highlighted problems and challenged the authorities whenever that was required. Where was the PPE (personal protective equipment)? How would the elderly be protected? When, where and how would be people be tested for the virus? As I write, my station is looking at the proposals which will allow more shops to open and finding out how they plan to keep people safe.

As the disease spread, it was our grim task to report hundreds of deaths in local hospitals and its devastating impact on care homes, but we have also helped people to make it through the darkest days.

Listeners have talked about their hopes and fears. They've used the airwaves to thank and

encourage key workers; people like 75-year-old Pam who called to pay tribute to the NHS for the support given to her dying son.

Across BBC local radio, the reaction has been inspiring. It is estimated that regular listener figures have rocketed from six to eight million since the end of March. One day, we hope to report that the pandemic is over, but until then we will continue to serve our communities, providing facts, free from opinions, with the reassurance of trusted and familiar voices.

Bob Norris

Solent branch has launched an award for three journalism students in memory of its "cherished" former chair, Bob Norris, who believed passionately that education and training would bring about diversity in the industry. Bob, a former NUJ assistant general secretary, was on the NCTJ board. The prizes will awarded in summer. <https://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2020/news/new-award-launches-in-journalist-and-training-chiefs-memory/>

News upon Tyne

Gerry Hunwick, Newcastle NUJ Branch secretary, reports on how the North-east media adapted to the situation and won praise for their efforts

As trust in mainstream media reportedly falls to new lows, Newcastle Upon Tyne's local media outlets have experienced reassuring feedback from their audiences that local news matters.

The 23 March suspensions heralded new ways of doing things for media workers in the city, both paid and volunteer, just as one of the biggest news stories affecting everyone's lives was breaking.

TV, radio, online and print have all been affected, by staff shortages due to sickness or self-isolation, budget cuts, inability to work from usual bases, social distancing, learning curves with unfamiliar technology or simply not being able to interview people as in pre-pandemic days.

Almost overnight we had to find a brand-new way of working while still maintaining all local news broadcasting to a high standard, one ITV employee said. It had to be factual, clear, relatable, focused on local people, hold decision-makers to account and give an insight into the impact of policy decisions (such as in care homes).

Seemingly, this has worked well for ITV, which reported a 20

per cent national increase in viewing figures for locally-programmed news since March. This has all been achieved despite staff missing out on bonuses because of a slump in advertising revenue. "Couldn't be prouder of my team for the way they have worked through the coronavirus crisis to keep our viewers informed," said Michaela Byrne, head of news at ITV Tyne Tees & Border.

At the BBC, things are little different. They too have experienced the same upheaval in working practices, but additionally budgets have been slashed and TV broadcasts such as the investigative

Inside Out and the weekly North East & Cumbria Sunday Politics show are off air. Staff are worried about the potential of losing this locally made programming permanently and fear the impact this might have on seeing the region reflected at national level.

Metro Radio (part of the Bauer Media group broadcasting across the North east) has kept people updated with local news bulletins run by a skeleton staff and through adjusting programming to allow more local voices. Volunteer-run community radio has also risen to the challenge. "I would never have been able to have so many guests on my show" says Spice FM presenter Doc Anand, who feels that broadcasting from home using video-chat technology has made connecting with the local community easier. The station has also reached out to vulnerable South east Asian communities, broadcasting health messages and government advice in Hindi and Urdu.

In a sign that perhaps all audiences were not being entirely catered for, one local arts group asking: "What's really gannin' on?" has produced a 40-page Lockdown Gazette, with plenty of graphics, activities, local information and a section on how to spot fake news.

Local news matters. It's an NUJ mantra, but one the Newcastle media have taken to their hearts in trying to produce timely, accurate, informative and entertaining material for their different audiences during this time.



TRAINING

07

Take the risk out of work



Health and safety, whether in the office or working from home, is essential – but never more than during this pandemic.

That is why the union is bumping up its training in health and safety and urging members to become health and safety reps, who have specific powers set out in law. Caroline Holmes (pictured), who runs the NUJ's reps' training programme, said: "Health and safety reps have rights, whether your workplace recognises the union or not. Every aspect of health and safety has implications for equality, which is embedded in all our training. We know that Covid-19 has had a different impact on BAME and disabled people.

"Once you have the groundings in H&S law and regulations, your employer will have to listen to you. Failure to follow proper H&S rules can be a criminal breach. Risk analysis is also relevant if you are working from home; the display screen equipment regulations and the set-up of the computer rules apply equally.

"Some employers and HRs are trying to move H&S into 'wellbeing', but don't be fooled. Employers must protect the health, safety and welfare of their employees and other people who may be affected by their business, and assess risks in the workplace.

"The employer is responsible for health and safety; an H&S rep has no greater liability in law for health and safety

breaches than any other employee."

Caroline will be holding a health and safety webinars for branches on Tuesday 30 June and one for reps in recognised and non-recognised workplaces on Wednesday 1 July. Contact her on tuttraining@nuj.org.uk to book your place.

Research has shown that workplaces with union recognition and health and safety representatives experience around half the number of serious injuries than those without them.

NUJ Active

Details of reps' and professional training can be found in the union's bi-monthly email newsletter, which also gives news of events, campaigns, petitions and activities for NUJ members. Make training a regular item on your branch agenda. Contact campaigns@nuj.org.uk to get your event in NUJ Active. London Freelance Branch has voted to fund its members on the NUJ's professional courses for freelancers: <https://www.nuj.org.uk/events/search/?keyword=Keyword&type=13&daterange=12>

H&S advice

The NUJ's H&S committee has a wealth of resources at: <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/bplgs792gevl17e/AADFjP6xJ19W1e8UQwEnWfSWa?dl=0>.

Get official guidance for the UK on the Health and Safety Executive website and for Republic of Ireland Health and Safety Authority.

REASONS TO JOIN



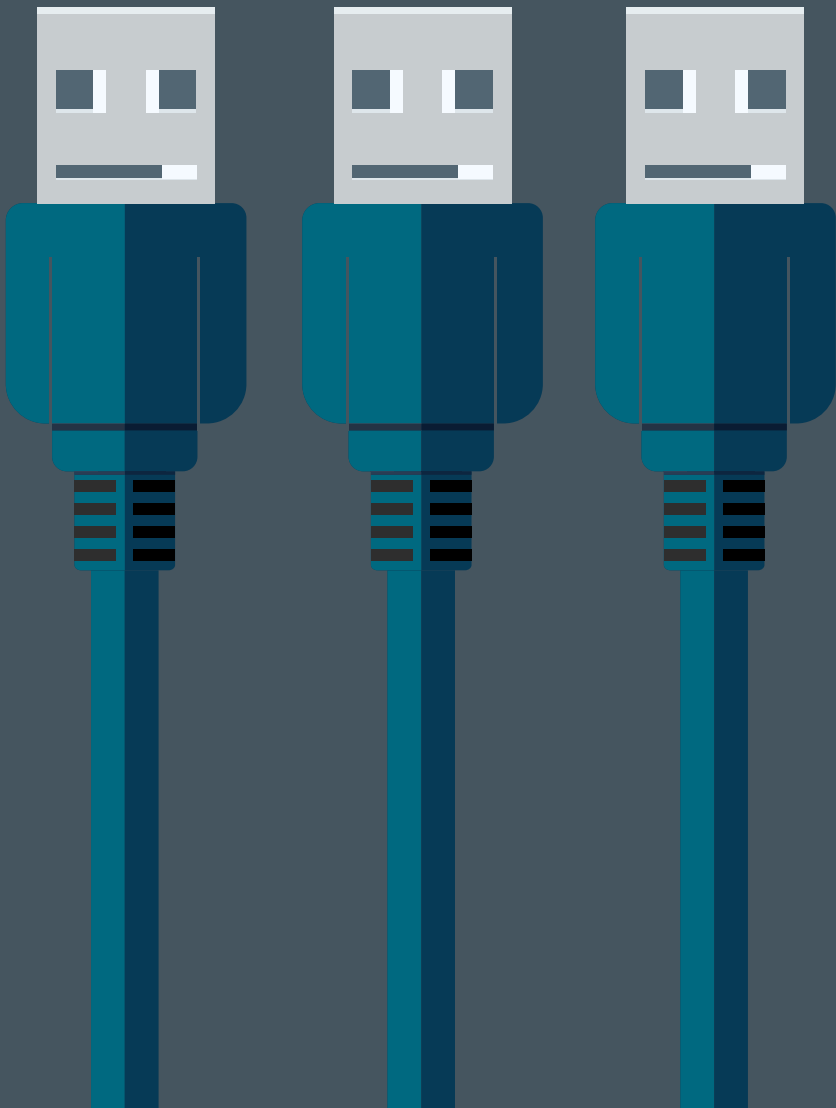
Networking

The union puts on events for media workers to come together to share their knowledge and expertise. These can be by sector, such as the freelance forums and photographers' summits, or cross-sector on issues that unite all media workers. Students and newcomers can benefit from meeting experienced members in the industry.

Are you keeping good company?

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nuj.org.uk/join



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