

MICHELLE STANISTREET, NUJ GENERAL SECRETARY SPEECH, Wed am.

Thanks Dominique. Thanks Anthony. Morning everyone. I'm delighted to welcome you all here in London – we haven't been having the best summer weather, but hopefully with your arrivals you have brought sunnier climes and the rain will stay away.

We're not alone in having General Elections sprung on us unexpectedly, so you'll understand why our arrangements had to be slightly reconfigured. We're very grateful to the ITF for opening up their headquarters to us this week, and particularly to ITF staff who have been so helpful to the NUJ and my team in organising the practical arrangements for our meetings.

We're looking forward to hosting you this evening in our Lords Reception in the Houses of Parliament and at our dinner tomorrow, and I hope the IFJ's AGM and its Executive Committee meetings go well this week.

We're certainly meeting at an interesting time today. Just this week, major new global research from the **Reuters Institute for Journalism** shed some light onto the global consumption of news, in its Digital News Report.

In a bumper year for elections, the **level of news-avoiders** is worrying – 39 per cent of those surveyed said they sometimes or often avoid the news, up 3 percentage points on 2023's average. And not just avoiding news, but disinterested – 70 per cent indicated they were extremely interested or very interested in news in 2015, compared to just 38 per cent this year.

Another concerning area is the **fragility of trust in journalism**. In the UK it's actually weakened - the proportion of those who trust most news most of the time is 35 per cent, down from 51 per cent in 2015. Compare that to Ireland where it's stayed static at 46 per cent over the same period.

We all know as journalists that **trust is hard to build, but easy to lose**.

Right now the pressures on journalism and journalists are at their most grave at a time when we need quality trusted information and news more than ever.

Yet levels in public trust are impaired, frontline news resources have been hollowed out in many media outlets after successive cutbacks; the levels of deliberate engagement in mis and dis-information by a range of actors are unparalleled; a combination that has been turbo-charged by the rapid

deployment of generative AI. On top of this, journalists have also been contending with significant additional pressures in the form of rising rates of harassment, intimidation and threats – including the realm of so-called “lawfare” where the rich and thin-skinned pull out all the stops to stymie and thwart legitimate journalistic reporting, using SLAPPs and other forms of legal bullying.

It makes quite the perfect storm.

We’re now 4 years on from the onset of the global pandemic, when the role of journalism as a vital component of the spectrum of essential public services, seemed blindingly clear. That collective wake-up call about the role public services play in society – keenly felt at the time – hasn’t filtered through into meaningful public policy change. The rapidity of technological change has only served to deepen the challenges journalism faces.

It was in that context of lockdown and pandemic that the NUJ launched our **News Recovery Plan** – a campaigning call to action which sought to tackle the many fault-lines that exist in our industry, ones that were exacerbated by the crisis of a pandemic.

My priority was to focus on practical ways in which the news industry could be reconfigured in a way that better roots the industry in the public good. Key to that was making clear that any public funding and intervention has to be around key principles of conditionality – the NUJ’s calls are absolutely **not** about propping up the status quo that has often failed journalists and the communities we serve.

Four years on the NUJ’s National Executive Council will meet next week, and hopefully endorse a revamped version of that **News Recovery Plan**, which I’ve just finished writing and I’m sharing with you hot off the press.

It contains a range of solutions we believe would have a practical and beneficial impact on frontline journalism.

We want **tax perks for online or print news subscriptions and local advertising; media literacy initiatives** in schools, crucial if you’re to tackle the issue of information integrity and what separates out journalistic content from any other information from the earliest of ages. We want **community asset status for local papers**, so companies can’t shut them down without meaningful scrutiny and the chance for local communities to step in and take them over; **funding support for new start-ups and public interest journalism initiatives**; and calling time on the tech platforms’ free ride with sustainable funding through a **digital windfall levy and ongoing tax** – with checks and

balances that mean a change in algorithms can destabilise economic news models at a stroke.

Public service broadcasting needs to be better supported and the **BBC's future and funding needs to be freed from political interference** with a sustainable funding model that properly funds its news and journalism – whilst still guaranteeing the principle of universality.

We need better protections for whistleblowers, and greater **clampdowns against the use of surveillance of journalists** and behaviour that undermines the protection of journalistic sources.

We want **more robust media ownership legislation that caps ownership levels** and creates greater diversity and plurality.

Our work on **journalists' safety** has been a key campaign over the past 3 years and our work on the government's National Committee for the Safety of Journalists has been an important part of that work. We launched our **Journalists Safety toolkit in 2022 and will launch a Press Safety Tracker** this autumn. More importantly, we've worked to change the culture amongst journalists – to make people take a step back and realise that harassment and abuse is not and must not be seen as part of the job. To encourage reporting of incidents to the police, and putting more pressure on employers to do more to support their staff and freelancers.

We want **proper funding for the Safety Committee**, so we can roll out a suite of training – akin to the model funded by the Dutch government and the PersVeilig programme with special support for freelancers, and aggravated sentences for those found guilty of harassing or attacking a journalist.

The NUJ has a unique spectrum of safety issues affecting our members in different parts of the union – the whole gamut of online abuse, the particular harassment of women, often with threats of sexual violence and rape, sometimes morphing into in-person harassment and stalking; our work with our members at the BBC Persian Service and Iran International against the state-sponsored repression of those journalists working here in London, and the weaponizing of their families in Iran; and the particular harassment and threats from so-called paramilitary groupings in Northern Ireland, usually because of reporting of their criminality.

A key new area of our plan is on **generative AI** – not something that was concentrating minds 4 years ago but is now a major area of the NUJ's industrial engagement and discussions in workplaces.

The **copyright infringement** of journalists, and other creators, whose work has been sucked up without consent and without payment into these large language training models is **theft on a grand scale**. Without legislation and governance to protect creators and enshrine values, such as transparency and consent, the impact of this technology could be existential for the news and wider creative industries.

It's a major focus not just because of the obvious potential impact on jobs and terms and conditions, but because it impacts on the quality and integrity of journalistic content and on ethical standards. **Transparency** in AI use is vital – particularly given the reality of that climate of fragile trust in journalism. Unsurprisingly Reuters' report found that globally there is “**widespread suspicion**” about the use of AI, especially for news on politics or war.

Our officials, and workplace reps, are engaged in a lot of activity and dialogue about how AI is being woven into the fabric of news production processes. Already some of the stories we see reported are coming to us are effectively a joint enterprise between bots and real-life journalists. New roles, like AI-assisted reporters and AI content editors have been created in local and regional newspaper groups.

It's certainly changed the tone of some interventions from publishers about how they're creating content. Where once publishers may have felt rather embarrassed to admit to its journalists topping and tailing press releases to fill pages – you now hear media executives proudly share in public meetings or in government round tables how their AI tool takes in press release content, and turns them into house style content at the click of a button. So-called churnalism but without the shame factor.

For the NUJ human oversight in the editorial process has to be critical. There have been some widely reported errors in the use of bots using court transcripts and press releases as data sources to write up stories, including references in articles to the police as “the bizzies” - a slang term that is probably lost in translation, but one that appeared in print and online because it had featured in witness statements that had been inputted as source material. If you're going to use AI as a tool, you actually need journalists to deploy those tools to meet a high editorial standard.

AI of course poses opportunities that could prove beneficial and aid investigative reporting – scaling up requests, interrogating large data sets,

packaging up stories to speak to different audiences, something that might prove helpful to freelancers in particular. One group here, for example, has developed a Freedom of Information Request generator, completing requests in seconds.

However it's also a fact that the news industry is dominated by corporate entities that prize and prioritise the bottom line. Over the past 15 years since the global credit crunch to now – media companies have engaged in countless rounds of cost-cutting restructures that have led to the loss of thousands of journalists' jobs and relentless downwards pressure on quality.

We know that most major news platforms have leaped on AI hoping that it provides the tools to allow them to repair their economic models. Some hope that they will receive huge payments from AI firms for allowing their material to be used in large language models.

It's not cynical to think that much of their immediate focus here is on the short term gain rather than longer term consequences or ethical considerations.

That makes our work as trade unions – fighting for journalists' rights and for quality trusted journalism – more important than ever. Our plan is about an ambition to recalibrate the news industry and better root it in the public good.

As the NUJ's general secretary, a key positive of our campaigning on the News Recovery Plan was the enthusiasm it was met with by NUJ members across the union's nations and regions. It led to versions of the plan evolving in the Republic of Ireland, informing our work on the Future of Media Commission; in Northern Ireland, and particularly engaged work on improving public interest journalism in Wales and in Scotland with working groups established in the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament. This revised plan will take forward that work, I'm hoping with the same energy and enthusiasm.

The problems facing journalists and journalism are certainly not unique and when it comes to generative AI and the role of the tech platforms, the solutions by necessity should be global ones. For us, that makes the work within the IFJ and our collaboration as sister unions incredibly important and a collective strength we should together seek to maximise.

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