Better Boost Contracts

THE NUJ organised a meeting in support of the concept of the BBC as a public service broadcaster on Wednesday 10 June at the House of Commons. Very necessary. But the BBC needs to clean up its act when it comes to dealing with contributors. It expects people to write complete scripts for free.

Bernie Corbett, late of this parish and now General Secretary of the Writers’ Guild of Great Britain, has written to (Lord) Tony Hall, Director-General of the BBC, expressing deep concern about the Corporation’s “shadow scheme” for would-be scriptwriters. The WGGB is the trade union for scriptwriters and allied trades.

As Bernie explains: “Each writer engaged on a shadow scheme is expected to produce a trial script in the same way that an established writer creates a script for production. This involves producing up to three drafts over three months’ full-time work. The fee offered is £1000. The rate of pay works out at about £2.38 per hour – far below the national minimum wage of £6.70 per hour, let alone the London living wage of £9.15 per hour.”

After sending the letter, Bernie discovered that writers on the EastEnders shadow scheme don’t get paid £1000 – they get paid nothing at all. In a recent batch 12 people wrote scripts and three got commissioned. Perhaps worse still, a successful writer who has had scripts produced for, for example, hospital drama Casualty is expected to go through the “shadow scheme” before having a script produced for, for example, hospital drama Holby City. As Bernie concludes, “this is insulting to professional writers of proven ability.”

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Martin O’Hagan murder: secret terror deal claims

CLAIMS were made in the recent Panorama programme Britain’s Secret Terror Deals regarding the September 2001 murder of Sunday World journalist Martin O’Hagan, who was Secretary of NUJ Belfast and District Branch. He is believed to be the only journalist murdered in Northern Ireland (See www.londonfreelance.org/ohagan1.html for the full story.)

Citing “extraordinary evidence,” Panorama alleged the murder of O’Hagan was “among the cases where state and paramilitary collusion is alleged to have been covered up” according to the Independent. The Police Ombudsman’s report into Martin O’Hagan’s death was delayed because the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) refused to hand over “crucial” intelligence files, eventually released when Ombudsman Dr Michael Maguire threatened to take the PSNI to court. His eight-year investigation into Martin O’Hagan’s death is ongoing, noted the Independent.

George Hamilton, Chief Constable of the PSNI, said he “entirely refuted” Panorama’s suggestion that officers colluded with Mr O’Hagan’s killers. There’s a link to Panorama: Britain’s Secret Terror Deals, on the BBC iPlayer until 2016, from the online version of this article.

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Finding out whether

THE CAMPAIGN to find out whether we as individual journalists have been spied on by GCHQ continues, but things are now more complicated (see the the April Freelance). Protection of sources – and our ability as journalists to continue to persuade sources to talk to us in confidence – is severely compromised once there’s blanket surveillance by intelligence services of everybody’s back catalogue of phonecalls, emails and stuff they’ve ever looked up online.

But Privacy International’s planned mass submission on behalf of all the signatories has been rejected by the Surveillance Commissioner. For now, all the petitioners will need to make submissions individually.

While the new Tory government’s attempt to destroy the Human Rights Act seems stalled, the Queen’s Speech announced a new “snooper’s charter” to make blanket surveillance of absolutely everybody legal. Looking up the longer version of this online at www.londonfreelance.org/fl/1504gchq.html may expose you to state espionage.

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GCHQ spied on us gets harder

FAIR CONTRACTS from p 1 of this right. So the most important things we seek are collective bargaining of minimum standards for the contracts under which authors, including freelances, work; and the right for trades unions themselves to bring cases to court, rather than forcing individual freelances to stick our heads above the parapet.

Publishers and broadcasters are currently opposing any move to deal with the unfair contracts they oppose. That’s an expected knee-jerk; all management opposes any move to regulate it, from the 1833 Factory Act or before. Publishing manages, however, have always depended on the political argument that creators must be able to make a living to defend their business model – from legal arguments over the 1710 Statute of Anne, at least.

In late September, Günther Oettinger told us, there will be a massive consultation event on the Commission’s draft proposals. They are due to be published in November; but he indicated that he’d hold them longer if that offered an opportunity to get them right.

There are, however, signs of an odd realignment. Julia Reda is now the only Pirate Party member of the European Parliament – instinctively opposed to large companies’ use of copyright. She got the job of writing a report for the Parliament on changes to authors’ rights (and copyright) law. The Legal Committee of the Parliament was due to vote on a draft on 16 June. Julia Reda is frustrated about the level of lobbying against “exceptions” to authors’ rights. She set up a website at www.copywrongs.eu to complain; and one of the dozen points she invites supporters to root for is “Protect authors from unfair contracts.” Specifically: “Artists don’t have lawyers. Publishers and labels have armies of them. Guess who has the upper hand in contract negotiations? Protect artists from exploitative total buy-out contracts Europe-wide and allow them to take back their rights if unused.”

It’s going to be a hard slog, but it’s getting interesting. London Freelance Branch is holding a meeting to discuss this in Parliament on 13 July – see page 6.

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• Multiple battles rage over ebooks

See the website www.londonfreelance.org/fl/