Specialist survival

AT OUR May meeting London Freelance Branch welcomed journalists working in specialist fields. How do they make money?


Science’s internationalism is one of its greatest strengths. You can pitch a science story based on research in the US to “anywhere in the world”.

A big drawback is the embargo system: all science journalists, including the staffers, get copies of research papers two or three days ahead of publication, so there’s a mad scramble to pitch stories about them. A way round it is to “mine” www.arXiv.org for scientists’ drafts. “If you get there at the right time you can find stuff that’s about to be properly published” – it’s been deposited there by scientists submitting for publication.

Doing science stories well takes up much time. One online news outlet offered only £200 for 1500 words that “required talking to many experts”. So Kelly started out “doing two days a week of general news editing” as well.

Nori Jemil is a writer, photographer, videographer and British Guild of Travel Writers Photographer of the Year 2018 (www.norijemil.com). She writes for National Geographic Traveller (UK). She got into this line of work by chance when teaching in South America. She’d won competitions, then met someone at an event and gave them her card, which they passed on to a National Geographic editor – Nori’s now listed as a regular contributor. The key to success is networking at events – “not hounding people, but sidling up to them and hoping they remember you being brief later.”

She also leads Arctic and Patagonian photography tours – “which pays quite well” and teaches A-level film and videography. These allow Nori to travel the world preparing pitches for travel pieces. Articles for online-only sites – including video, film and text – fetch maybe £150 each. These “generally don’t pay as well as NatGeo and Condé Nast Traveller”. Many Guild of Travel Writers colleagues “are doing well… if you can write well you can be paid well-ishly.”

Airline mags, content marketing agencies and BBC Travel are commissioning now; the latter pays well.

Keep sending pitches, “accept you’ll get rejections – or be ignored.” On the day of the meeting she got commissioned for “something I pitched a year ago”.

Writer and editor Laura Laker covers cycling for the Guardian, Sunday Times, BBC, and Sky (@Lakerlikes). She found herself “a strange little niche by accident”: journalism training led to a London Cycling Campaign internship, where she “fell in love with cycling… at a time when it was booming.” A commission by a cycling weekly led to “a thing as a campaigning journalist… because cycling is a small world.” A friend was a producer for Sky and wanted someone – “so, terrified, I went on – and became the voice of reason” on cyclists and road safety. She’s also crowdfunded work, offering donors exclusive coverage of a Dublin conference on active travel.

There is a personal angle, too: Political Science graduate Laura studied to be a writer, photographer and videographer – “which pays quite well” and teaches A-level film and videography. These allow Nori to travel the world preparing pitches for travel pieces. Articles for online-only sites – including video, film and text – fetch maybe £150 each. These “generally don’t pay as well as NatGeo and Condé Nast Traveller”. Many Guild of Travel Writers colleagues “are doing well… if you can write well you can be paid well-ishly.”

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I met John Perry Barlow in a conference room in Washington DC in 1992, two years after the World-Wide Web was launched. We were ostensibly there to report a conference on “open source intelligence”. I was there to see who turned up from this interesting new virtual world. So, I think, was John: and he was on another mission.

Until then known as a songwriter for the Grateful Dead, John was a rancher from Wisconsin, involved with the state Republican Party.

The Dead made their living from live performances, which they were famous for encouraging their fans to tape. Diehard fans crisscrossed the world to attend and tape more Grateful Dead concerts.

In this John saw a model for the entire online economy. Authors and performers would give up collecting payment for now-infinitely-copyable works. We would make our living from live performances.

It was an intriguing idea. We discussed it in email. A year later John published Selling Wine Without Bottles: The Economy of Mind on the Global Net. It concluded: “In the years to come, most human exchange will be virtual rather than physical, consisting not of stuff but the stuff of which dreams are made. Our future business will...
The Rate for the Job

WE HAVE a good range of rates for photography this time – mostly thanks to one member. We need more so that we have a basis on which to update the Freelance Fees Guide. Please send some more now!

Thinking about work for a company you’ve not dealt with before? Look at the Rate for the Job to find out what companies in similar niches have paid. Then aim higher.

You can submit rates online at www.londonfreelance.org/rates – please give not only the basic rate (e.g. for First British Serial rights) but extra payments negotiated for extra uses, like the Web. These are shown as (£) £400+100. Rates marked X are, in the editor’s fallible opinion, below par. Treat all rates as minima, even the happy few.

Photography: Textbook. (multimedia, published in USA), less than quarter page, very high run, terms I use in 1 edition £1328 ©; German magazine, 7 photographs, terms print use only £623; Sunday Independent (Ireland), payment following copyright infringement in print and online (retrospective licence) £609 ©; TV programme, 2 photographs on screen, terms “PSR” rights for unlimited transmissions including catch-up services, valid for 5 years £500; Sun online, 3 photographs £450; NUJ, photographing event £300; local council website, image embedded in a downloadable PDF as an online resource, terms – one website only £200; Mirror online, 2 photographs, terms online use only £200; Mail online, 2 photographs £200; Local council, publicity flyer for a council event £200; Daily Star, 1 photograph, terms print use only £150; documentary film, flash fee for 1 still in non-commercial short film, terms – licenced for festivals only £130; Mirror, 1 photograph (less than 5 square inches), terms print use only £130; textbook (published in Canada), less than quarter page, terms I use in 1 edition £110; Guardian, 1 pic, terms I use online £100; museum display (in Spain), I photo use for 1 month as a poster in display £100; Metro online, I photograph, online use only £100; private collection, 200+ old used press prints (mostly 10x8 on RC paper) each £50; Local paper (Archant), 1 photo, terms I use print and online £50; Buzzfeed, previously-shot (stock) image, terms one time web use £40.

Shifts: BBC Future, editing day (8 hours) £180; Evening Standard, picture editing day £180; Evening Standard magazine, picture editing day £180; Sunday Times, subbing day £176.96 ©; Financial Times, subbing day £160; Hospital trust in the West Midlands, day writing copy for and editing monthly hospital staff magazine, no expenses, turned down because required six weeks training for a short gig and a “bank agreement” with details of all other earnings £152; Sunday Times, picture editing day £150 X; English Language Gazette, very specialised reporting per hour £21.14.

Words, per 1000: New Scientist, features, all rights (also note that they pay on publication) £510 ©; BBC Future, 1200-word feature @ £400 = £333; The Register, feature, terms first worldwide online £250; Telegraph, sports feature, 1200 words – exclusive interview/profile with news peg £200; Metro, opinion piece – offer of £65 for 650 words declined £100 XXXX.

Words, other: Book authorship, writing 15,000 word book, all rights (copyright assigned) £1500 X; Africa Science News Service, flat fee US$600.

Photographers! Help!

MANY thanks to those who submitted the rates here. We need more! The NUJ is updating the Freelance Fees Guide and we have to base this on reported rates. So please visit www.londonfreelance.org/rates/submit and let us know the rates you’ve received for five recent jobs – the good, the bad and the indifferent – in strict confidence.

Support the writers!

THE REPORT of the All Party Writers Group 2018 Inquiry into authors’ earnings, entitled Supporting the Writers of Tomorrow, is now online. At a manageable 13 pages – of admittedly fairly dense type – it’s well worth taking the refreshingly short amount of time it takes to read. In the brief introduction to the findings of this cross-party group of MPs and Lords – featuring data from ALCS, the Society of Authors and others – John Whittingdale MP says, “The world is changing and evidence suggests that writers are unfairly disadvantaged by this… we will need to ensure we preserve the right of the writer to be fairly remunerated for all the uses of their works: we need to ensure that authors’ earnings are not diminished by under-representation in a growing creative marketplace.”

The “creative industries” are now valued at £101.5 billion, but authors’ share of this has dropped by 42 per cent in real terms since 2005. The report finds that authors earned on average £12,330 from their writing in 2005 (just over £18k in today’s money “in real terms”). By 2013 the figure was down to £11,000 a year; now it’s £10,500.

The dissolution of the Net Book Agreement that set minimum prices for books was felt to be a significant factor in this downward spiral. Book-sellers, under pressure from online retailers, now discount books, so the royalties passed on to authors also shrink. The drop in income is a global trend – authors experience it in the US and Canada too.

The report notes that there’s currently over £16 million a year in European Union funding for projects that pay authors through “Creative Europe”. It recommends that the UK government “secure support” for an equivalent to Creative Europe to continue after Brexit. The report makes a plea that a “reasonable” copyright regime that benefits authors remains in place in the UK after it leaves the EU, in particular calling for government to resist calls for “fair use” provisions to be extended.

Recommendations include “measures to level the playing field in the market” to protect bookshops, zero VAT on e-books, a more gentle tax and benefits regime that would allow self-employed authors to claim for childcare and for “new training” and other needs. The report also asks that Making Tax Digital not to be made too burdensome for authors, with the requirement for quarterly digital tax returns to be kept at the level at which VAT starts to be charged – currently £85,000.

© Matt Salusbury
Charitable deeds aid members in need

Dutch freelances await payment judgment

A JUDGE in Amsterdam has deferred judgement in a case – the first of its kind – brought by two Dutch journalists who are taking their client to court over their low fees of €15 an hour. Writer Britt van Uem and photographer Ruud Rogier have taken their former client, regional news publisher Persgroep (“Press Group”) to court, in a landmark case that could set a precedent for freelancers throughout Europe. The case is significant because it could establish the principle that freelancers are entitled to decent payment.

TRAGEDY from page 1

be conducted in a world made more of verbs than nouns… The thoughts in it have not been ‘mine’ alone but have assembled themselves in a field of interaction which has existed between myself and numerous others, to whom I am grateful. They particularly include: Pamela Samuelson, Kevin in Kelly, Mitch Kapor, Mark Godwin, Stewart Brand, Mike Hilders, Miriam Barlow, Danny Hillis, Trip Hawkins, and Alvin Toffler. However, I should note in honesty that when Wired sends me a check for having the thought ‘it is a mere €42’ in the strictest confidence: tim@tenwet.demon.co.uk

ENTREPRENEURIAL PACKAGING

I published Moral Rights and Authors’ Rights: The Keys to The Information Age – my one refereed journal – in the strictest confidence: tim@tenwet.demon.co.uk

More online

Do keep checking www.londonfreelance.org/fl/for updates and expanded reports – including an engaging account of a media literacy workshop, at www.londonfreelance.org/fl/1905mlw.html

© Mike Holderness

John Perry Barlow
Image CC:BY Joi Ito
Quality Management System? Eh?

SOME local authorities put their media and PR work out to tender — often via an outsourced operation. In some cases, local authorities or their media contractors require journalists taking on such work to complete a very general tender — in at least one case it seems as if the tender was originally designed for large organisations, not freelancers who are sole traders.

The NUJ’s Freelance Office has come across a tender document for work on behalf of a local authority that demands the freelance detail the following: quality management and assurance system; environmental management system; business continuity plan; and complaints procedures. The freelance in question tried to explain that such organisational procedures aren’t built into their sole trader small business model.

But this point was rejected, with a reply claiming that the tender document had already been “adjusted” for small businesses.

If you have any experience as a freelance of dealing with such onerous demands by local authorities for detailed policies and systems such as those above, please let Freelance Organiser David Ayrton know (see page 6). Intelligence in this area will help the Freelance Office to advise members what to do in such cases.

One freelance suggests that in response to a request for detail on their “Quality Management and Assurance System”, a suitable reply would be to say that you undertake all the work personally, that you have many years of undertaking such work, that you can provide references for former clients.

In response to “requests” for detail on your Business Continuity Plan, the same freelance suggests telling them that you have a network of experienced associates — other freelances you know who can take over the job if needed — and offer to provide their contact details.

© Matt Salusbury

Transcription! Aaaaaaargh…

“What I enjoy is writing not transcribing! Transcription, I’ve always hated,” says feature writer Sheryl Garrett — and a multitude of journo sigh and moan: “Ooooh, me too!” It’s many writer’s worst part of the job. But growing awareness of recent developments which just might ease the pain got a bunch of us exchanging recommendations in e-networks.

Sheryl is one of several fans of hiring a (good!) transcription service, in her case provided by individuals not an agency. “When I was really busy I found the most amazing transcriber and it changed everything. I was so much more productive, literally doubled the number of commissions I could take.”

“Left to myself, I’d do an interview, come home and next day start putting off the transcription: clean the house, do chores, do the laundry — and by then I’d be up to be more productive while I’m on his dime”.

© Phil Sutcliffe

The resourcefulness of fixers

THE ETHICS of working with fixers were discussed at June’s LFBI meet- ing. Our speaker was Dr Dawood Azami, World Service multimedia editor and former BBC Bureau Chief in Kabul.

Dr Azami gave examples from Pakistan of the “resourcefulness of fixers”. One unnamed Western journalist arrived ‘with a story in mind,” seeking a fixer to assist on his story about the feelings of parents of Paki- stani Talibans killed on the battle- field in Afghanistan.

The journalist went to a father of a son killed in Afghanistan. The fa- ther told how his son had “wanted to fight for Allah, now he’s dead, I’m fine with that”. The next father of a “martyred” Talibani said much the same. But the journalist was looking for a sad story featuring a devastated parent. So the fixer “found a fake fa- ther for him,” who told him what he wanted to hear. Another journalist went to Paki- stan seeking Talib training camps. These “don’t exist in the open… they’re underground”. Fixers can’t find them for you.

The fixer said, “let me find some- thing, give me some time.” He later took his client into the hills to see “five or six people in turbans, look- ing like they are being trained”.

Fixers have “skills, they have local knowledge, they can arrange your transportation, be your interpreter; can give you story ideas if you have an open mind,” says Dr Azami. But “the job is very risky,” made worse by the fact that there are now more “taboo topics”.

Criticising “politicians or their policies” is taboo. Human rights are now something “you cannot cover in South East Asia”. India is “getting worse” for off-limits subjects. Af- ganistan is ‘freer” than most of the region in terms of what government tolerates, as long as you don’t offend the “more dangerous” warlords.

“Many fixers were killed in the past years in some of these coun- tries,” notes Dr Azami. When fixers help journalists “they are in trouble”. They are not recognised as a profes- sion, but “recognition brings more trouble for fixers – anonymity is sometimes useful”, in some cases “required”. Then there’s “not having insurance… a major problem”. Fix- ers are “paid on a daily basis… nobody knows what happened to them after the correspondent leaves.”

Another risk for fixers is to men- tal health: “they face dreadful things.” For journalists, medical help should be available. Fixers are abandoned.

Despite initiatives by the Front- line Club and others to support fix- ers, Dr Azami hasn’t heard of fixers being helped. It’s hard to identify or find them — “they don’t know who the fixer is… they are not registered, they have no job title for fixers, they are hired for a few days, they work for a local NGO or are “unem- ployed youth, students” or a new fixer demographic, “activists turned journalists”, who are more at risk. Corporate cost-cutting means the role of fixers is changing. Many news organisations have “closed lo- cal bureaus”, with “just one or two (local) journalists sending… mate- rial”. This leads to many becoming “proper journalists: they now work for the New York Times or CNN”. Now there are “many local journal- ists who started as fixers”.

LFBI Committee member Erica Dezone also introduced a video by “my dearest friend”, Brazilian photo- journalist Felipe Paiva, who de- scribed life for fixers in South Amer- ica. Felipe says it’s “hard to measure how the profession as a whole is doing… fixers are a very disorgan- ised group. You go to the square, if you are lucky somebody hires you, if not you go home.” This is done via a “very informal mechanism”.

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Felipe Paiva’s video is linked from www.londonfreelance.org/ fl/1907fixt.html

© Hazel Dunlop

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• More: www.londonfreelance.org/fl/1907tran.html — and more on the meeting on 9 September on page 6.
NUJ’s women in photography conference a hit

THE NUJ Women in Photography conference was an inspiring one-day event bringing together industry experts and photographers to examine the current state of the industry and women’s careers as photographers.

The panel was chaired by Natasha Hirst, chair of the NUJ Photographers’ Council – with contributions including one from myself in my professional capacity as a photographer and researcher and as London Freelance Branch chair.

I showed examples of photographs I had taken in different conflicts, discussing the various levels of support or hostility I received from my fellow male photographers while doing so. I described two occasions in the UK where I was assaulted by male photographers trying to grab my pitch. I concluded by calling on the NUJ to establish a code of conduct on male photographers treating their female colleagues with respect.

We also heard from Celia Jackson the founder of the Phrme collective in Cardiff, which offers support, including portfolio reviews, to people of all ages and backgrounds working in photography. She discussed the barriers to entering the industry.

Adrian Hadland, professor of communications, media and culture at the University of Stirling, is one of three authors of the report The State of News Photography (www.bit.ly/FL-PhotoReport). This examined the impact of the move to digital in the photographic industry. Adrian said that the digital era has had a harsher impact on women than on men in the photography industry and that he and his male colleagues had found that 54 per cent of women respondents said that sexism was a barrier to their careers. The report’s key findings included:

- Professional news photography is dominated by men: 85 per cent of respondents were male;
- The majority – 60 per cent – of photographers who responded to the survey were self-employed;
- Three-quarters of respondents work full-time as photographers;
- Photographers largely work alone (80 per cent of respondents);
- Photographers’ earnings are very low: one-third make $10,000 per year or less. Despite this, most say they are managing financially;
- The unauthorised use of photographs without payment is widespread. An overwhelming majority of photographers in this study have been affected by this, most received no compensation; and
- Photography is a potentially dangerous occupation, with more than nine tenths reporting that they felt vulnerable to the threat of injury at some point during their normal duties. South America, Central America, and the Caribbean are the most dangerous regions, while Europe and North America are the safest.

Charlie Booth, one of the founders of Redeye in Manchester, spoke about barriers that prevent women and ethnic minorities from establishing a career in photography.

Redyeye is conducting a survey to learn more about the barriers to progress as a photographer. This will collect data on how Redeye can improve support to all photographers across the industry. They want to understand what more needs to be done to create equality in the photography world.

Following the panel the afternoon flowed with positive group discussions and networking.

© Pennie Quinton

- There’s a longer version online, with links.

Together in Tunis

TRADE UNION members from around the world have now a “Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists” and are supporting a campaign for a UN Convention on the Protection of Journalists and Media Professional.

Those are just two of the results of the 30th World Congress of the International Federation of Journalists which took place in Tunis in June.

London Freelance Branch was present as well, as I was elected to take part in this meeting, joining the official NUJ delegation. This included General Secretary Michelle Stanistreet, Assistant General Secretary Seamus Dooley, President and Vice president Sian Jones and Pierre Vicary, Jim Boumelha and Ronan Brady. We were among the 245 delegates representing 187 unions and associations across the globe, talking about the future of journalism in the digital age.

I heard about how to attract to unions young journalists working in digital jobs, how to help them defend themselves against unscrupulous employers, how to fix gender inequality in media and update uncompromising ethics to meet the new-tech challenges.

The Congress was the first to be held in Africa and in a Muslim country. Each document was written in three languages (French, English and Spanish) and real-time translations were provided in Arabic as well. The Brussels-based IFJ, founded in Paris in 1926, has never been so global.

Tunisia was the first democracy to emerge from the Arab Spring revolutions. The President of the Tunisian Republic Beji Caid Essebsi visited the Congress to talk about free speech. The newly-elected IFJ president is African as well: Youness M’Jahed, from Morocco, spent years in jail because of his political views. On the occasion of the IFJ Congress, the African unions were all together and represented by the FAJ president Sadiq Ibrahim.

Together with thousands of colleagues, we marched along the streets of Tunis to the headquarters of the Tunisian union SNJT (syndicat national des journalistes tunisien) to call for an end to impunity for crimes against journalists: the appalling number of 95 colleagues were killed last year. W4e remembered freelance Lyra McKee as well – see the May Freelance. The locals supported us from balconies and terraces – it was such an empowering moment, even if more needs to be done in Tunisia about security, gender equality and LGBT rights.

The NUJ has a respected position and it is on the frontline on topics such as the gender pay gap and equal pay. We also presented a motion proposing better collaboration with the UNI Global Union.

© Francesca Marchese

Jim Boumelha, Pierre Vicary, Ronan Brady, Michelle Stanistreet, Sian Jones, Seamus Dooley and Francesca Marchese in Tunis

© Francesca Marchese
**LONDON FREELANCE BRANCH MEETINGS**

**Summer hols, shorthand and transcription**

IN ADDITION to our regular cycle of monthly Branch meetings, there is a New Members’ Meeting for those new to the London Freelance Branch on Thursday 25 July. The meeting is at 6pm at the Camera Museum, Museum Street, London WC1A 1LY. The nearest Tube is Holborn.

There is no NUJ London Freelance Branch meeting in August. Older readers may remember “holidays”. LFB is taking the nearest freelance equivalent on a holiday. Those of you who work regular shifts for a client are reminded that you may in some cases be entitled to holiday pay.

Regular LFB meetings resume with a gathering on Monday 9 September. Shorthand and transcription will be the provisional theme of the September meeting.

Do journalists still use shorthand, then? Yes, apparently! Shorthand is undergoing something of a renaissance right now.

We hope to include some fun activities by way of introduction to Teeline shorthand.

Then there’s transcription. We hope to be able to demonstrate some “transcription hacks” for transforming voice into text, whether through software that’s free, paid for subscription services or by other means. See page 4 and www.londonfreelance.org/ fl/1907tran.html for a taster.

Speakers are to be confirmed, possibly including a Branch member who is also a shorthand tutor. Watch this space for updates (see below.)

**This went to press on 3 June.** Your deadline for the August online only issue is 22 July.

LFB meetings (except for new members’ meetings) are always on the second Monday of the month, from 6.45pm to 8.45pm in the basement of the NUJ’s HQ at Headland House, 72 Acton Street, London WC1X 9NB, accessible to people who use wheelchairs.

**REDACTED NUJ SUBSCRIPTIONS**

LFB reminds its members that under the NUJ’s rules you do not need to pay more than one per cent of your taxable income in union subscriptions – subject to a minimum of £10 a month.

This means that you take all your business expenses off your turnover and ask the Union’s administrators to agree to let you pay one per cent of what’s left. If you are fortunate to have an income more than a hundred times the standard rate, of course you pay only the standard rate of one per cent of what’s left. If you are not fortunate, when you pay only the standard rates, the amount you pay is dependent on when you joined; see www.nuj.org.uk/news.dmi16-nuj-subscription-rates for a report of the 2016 Delegate Meeting decision.

It also means that you need to submit evidence of your income to the Union each year. You should get a reminder from the Union’s Membership Department. To apply for a reduced rate, contact membership@nuj.org.uk.

You need to call or email the membership office in plenty of time for 31 January of each year or they will automatically put your subscription up to the standard rates. If you are fortunate enough to earn enough in a given calendar year to go off reduced subs and onto the standard rates, Membership will stop sending you reminders. So if you earn so much less in the next calendar year that you are eligible for reduced rates, you will have to contact Membership all over again to tell them of the new situation.

More details can be found at www.londonfreelance.org/ fl/1906subs.html © Mike Holderness & Matt Salusbury

**LETTERS**

**Travel check**

I’ve come across a start-up travel website called Culture Trip and want to know whether any NUJ members have had any experience with it. If you have I’d love to hear about your experience for a potential article.

Emiliano Mellino
emilianoam@gmail.com

**Surveillance evidence**

I had 48 pages of stories published as evidence to a Commons Committee in June last year. This means that any hack can describe, under privilege, without risk of libel, the nine companies described as “criminal corporations” in the evidence. The Irish Supreme Court picked up the evidence. But no hacks. Contact me if you’d like to find out more and see how we can get the story moving.

Kevin Cahill
CahillKJ1944@gmail.com

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**AUDIO TRANSCRIPTION**

service for writers confidential, reliable, accurate and affordable. My prices start at £50 per audio minute for one to one interviews. I have extensive experience in providing transcripts for sports writers, life history writers, and ghostwriters on a range of topics: www.trustworthytranscriptionists.co.uk

**CENTRAL LONDON** office space for rent near Leicester Sq/Covens Garden. 1-5 floors of 4 desks each in historic building off St Martin’s Lane. 21st-century connectivity, 17th-century charm. We seek tenants to join us: we are a humanitarian charity and a cultural consultancy. £1900pcm per floor, free WiFi, elec, rates, 24-hr access. Contact: s.drummond@everyonefounda- tion.org

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**RETREAT RESIDENCE** in SW France. Owner NUJ member. Broadband Quiet village. Near rail and air. www.faugeres.co.uk Contact: enquiries@faugeres.co.uk with discount code FHLNUJ18

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Kevin Cahill
CahillKJ1944@gmail.com

**NEW MEMBERS MEET**

We remind you that the next LFB meeting for members new to the Branch is at 6pm on Thursday 25 July – as always on the last Thursday of every third month. As usual, the meeting is at the Camera Museum, Museum Street, London WC1A 1LY – the nearest Tube is Holborn. Please tell any new members you meet who are new to freelancing.

**LEGAL HELPLINE for NUJ members in emergency only**

**England and Wales**
0800 587 7530

**Scotland**
0800 85 3425

**FREELANCE EDITORS**

Mike Holderness
Matt Salusbury

email: freelanceoffice@nuj.org.uk

Follow us on Twitter www.twitter.com/NUJ_LFB

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MEDIA literacy and how to encourage it – particularly among “yoof” – was the theme of an NUJ event to celebrate Media Literacy Week 2019, which started on 18 April.

Opened by NUJ General Secretary Michelle Stanistreet, the event included speakers with extensive experience of working to promote media literacy skills. Michelle noted that the NUJ, with its strong Code of Conduct, is keen on forging links with “schools and colleges… something that the NUJ… wants to build on and develop”.

Kate Morris, former assistant news editor with the i paper and now teaching and researching news literacy at Goldsmiths, University of London, says the real challenge with today’s degree students is to get them interested in news. They’d rather be writing opinion pieces, she says. A big proportion of respondents to the Cairncross Review (into the sustainability of high-quality journalism), she noted, felt that money should not go to journalism because “we don’t trust them.” A Reuters Institute survey showed that 58 per cent of respondents were worried about fabricated news, but they struggled to find actual examples of it.

She cited one case of misinformation – the widely-circulated “fact” that more children die from suicide in UK than of any other cause. Our bullshit detectors “they know is going obviously cannot be true, and a quick look at the Office of National Statistics shows that “it’s cancer”.

The problem we face today is one of information overload – we can no longer recall where we read the information (and misinformation) we receive.

Clickbait critique
Kate listed some of the challenges facing publishing. With ad revenues tanking, content “they know is going to generate clicks” gets priority. She recalled at the Indy a story that was clearly in the public interest, about murky goings on at Westminster. Its coverage was “when we had the windrushed scandal: it formed part of a lesson about holding power to account.” Children “are getting involved in politics… to invite young people in to see what we do”, says Angie. NewsWise’s journalists go into school and talk about fact-checking and a day in their life. One of the students’ favourite lessons with NewsWise is on the Windrush scandal: it formed part of a mission to boost young people’s political engagement. They are into “political literacy” and they deliver six-week course all the way form Year 7, mostly in secondary schools. These include asking “What is power?” Brexit and Trump have changed things, says Lucie – now kids want to talk about politics.

Kids who Lucie works with tell her that, for example, “North Korea is going to bomb America, I got it from Snapchat” or “Kylie Jenner is part of the Illuminati”. Children “are interested in these things, but don’t have a platform to discuss them”.

Facebook is history: meet Snapchat
They’re “getting involved in politics but not actually having the skills to fact-check it”. Facebook is history: for the kids it’s all Kylie Jenner and the Sun via Snapchat and Instagram. One child told Lucie that they occasionally read freesheet Metro “when...
I can’t get on my phone”. The only journalist they can name is Owen Jones, and then only because of reaction he generates among the tabloid commentariat.

Get your phones out, fact-check the articles, Lucie teaches the young people she works with. She says that if we can allow kids that three-second “Oh, is that all right? Do I want to share these things?” moment, or better still if you can persuade them not to share rubbish, you are doing well.

Shout Out also works with prisoners and NEETs (people Not in Education, Employment or Training). Some of the latter group “could not write, didn’t know who their MP was, didn’t know what an MP was”.

One of the NEETs became really interested in “whether the media was biased against the disabled” when he found out his MP had “voted against every disability benefit” – he ended up writing a letter to the MP.

Catherine Deveney is a writer and novelist who has worked with NUJ Training Scotland on their media skills initiative. She was the only freelance at the event who has worked in media literacy – it seems at the moment to be mostly the preserve of staffers. (NewsWise would like to work with “other journalists”.)

Critical skills development

Catherine worked on multimillion-pound media literacy projects in schools, first for the geographically huge Highlands and Islands region and then on a national project for Skills Scotland. The latter project includes training for two days on what is news, interviewing skills, the difference between news and features and “critical skills development” for teachers and students. There is an “ethical dimension as well” to these projects. Some teachers have described these as “the best in-service training of their career”.

Part of the training involved students going “alone and getting a story in 20 minutes”. Catherine described one student discovering her teacher’s husband was terminally ill – and interviewing the teacher “with real professionalism after just two days’ training”.

Funding “is a problem”, says Catherine. While there is Scottish government funding for these projects, in contrast to mean-spirited England, this tends not to be sustainable. It often finishes after a few years.

Enough with ‘fake news’

Catherine doesn’t like the term “fake news”, noting that Trump, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Pope Francis use it to describe reports they don’t like, especially revelations about clerical child abuse in the case of the Pope.

We heard of a News Literacy Network that exists to share best practice in the field. The Irish newspaper industry sponsors a News Literacy Scheme in that country.

Disappointment was expressed at the attitude to news literacy at the Department for Education (which effectively covers England). It says news literacy is already being done in schools through IT – where students learn about search engines – and through “critical thinking” taught in history, English and IT. Our speakers and audience felt this was far from adequate.