

Eyewitnesses earn

SPEAKING at October's LFB meeting, photographer John D. McHugh outlined the thinking behind Verifeye Media eyewitness news agency (www.verifeyemedia.com), which he co-founded.

An LFB member, John spent years covering Afghanistan. In 2011, after years "dragging a huge amount of kit... up and down mountains", he first used an iPhone to upload photos from Kandahar City, which he sold to *Newsweek*. In the same year, John was at the Arab Spring's Bahrain protests. He only got in because he had "no gear, just an iPhone." The Bahraini Shia protestors on the spot taught him how to mask where he was when connecting to the internet, by using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs).

All this led John to start his news agency. He "spent about a year researching" it. He and his wife had sold their flats, and "put all of our money into it, over £100k... eventually I will get paid. I hope."

Verifeye Media built an app that "gathers a lot of info that I need." As well as metadata including the date, who took the photo, when, which direction the photographer was facing and so on, this includes a "veracity rating" showing the contributor's "digital profile for last ten years... the stories they've worked on."

In addition to the app, there's what John calls "the human journalist algorithm". He says: "Every story is approved by me. We reject far more than we publish... the machines can't tell if it's produced by Assad's

propaganda people." Who are the eyewitnesses who provide the images? While 90 per cent of contributors are freelance journalists, "eyewitnesses produce a disproportionate amount of content."

The latter are "refugees, aid workers in NGOs, people living in Aleppo... anybody who has the ability to take out their smartphone and document it." During March's Calais "Jungle" clearances, a Verifeye contributor, an aid worker living there, was up earlier than the journalists and shot "60 seconds of heavily armoured cops battering a pregnant woman... Only they could get it."

Verifeye currently "work with someone we don't know" from The Berm, a sealed-off strip of the Jordanian border with a refugee camp behind a vast sand wall. John was able to verify his footage and send it to Channel Four. "We anonymise all of our contributors – Channel Four know everything we do except who it's from."

Verifeye's clients "have to pay for it there and then... before they download it." One outlet first "wanted us to become a 'preferred supplier' and so on and so on". When Verifeye declined, "they suddenly found a credit card in the office."

Verifeye's eyewitness journalists are always paid "within seven days, usually the same day." Its contracts are in plain English, no "heretofore" or "whereas". They "normally sell stuff for £200" of which Verifeye takes 50 per cent.

© Matt Salusbury

● There's a longer version online.



John D. McHugh speaks: Photo © Hazel Dunlop

What's going on with UK press regulation?

A SLOVENIAN colleague asks: "What's going on with press regulation in the UK?" Deep breath! Here is an attempt at a condensed answer.

From Spring 2011, News International began publicly admitting liability and paying compensation to people whose phones the *News of the World* had tapped, including that of murdered Milly Dowler. This resulted in *NotW* being closed down.

Lord Leveson, a senior judge, was appointed in 2011 to conduct an inquiry into the "culture, practices and ethics of the press". His 2012 report identified misdeeds. It recommended replacing the old Press Complaints Council (PCC) which the NUJ has long denounced as owner-controlled.

But how to carry out Leveson's recommendations? State regulation

of the press is scary. So a Royal Charter was concocted – formally set up by the Crown, not the government. Under the Charter an Independent Appointments Panel would select members of a Recognition Panel to decide whether to recognise one or more press regulation organisations.

The NUJ supported Leveson's outline of independent regulation (it being the least bad visible idea).

How to persuade publishers to take part? With a stick. Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 provides that when a publisher *not* registered with an "approved regulator" is sued for defamation, the court "must" award costs against the publisher, win or lose. (The courts are left with technical discretion.) Section 40 also makes the court

more likely to impose "exemplary damages" to deter others from malpractice. If a publisher is registered with an "approved regulator" then the court "must not" award costs against it (again, with some discretion). That's a big stick, given the six- and seven-digit costs common in UK defamation cases. Under the Act Ministers can bring this into effect when they choose: they haven't.

In October 2013 the Privy Council, formally a body of advisers to the Queen, granted a Royal Charter to govern a press regulation system – despite a last-minute court challenge by publishers including News International and the Barclay Brothers, owners of the *Telegraph*. In 2014 these objecting publishers set up

See **PRESS REGULATION** on page 3

LFB meetings

9 January

Branch Annual
General Meeting

13 February

Reporting crime

See back page &
twitter.com/NUJ_LFB