

Post-truth ethical pressures

THE NUJ is already surveying members about whether pressure was put on them during the EU referendum to report on issues around it in a particular way. (An NUJ event reporting back on this is expected in early 2017.) The concept of “balance”, which has long driven broadcast journalism, took a particular beating. What happens to “balance” when practically everything said by at least one side in the debate was such obvious fibs?

Sadly, just because the vote’s happened, it seems the phenomenon of journalists being leant on to put a particular spin on Brexit hasn’t gone away. A much more complex phenomenon is the pull from both directions to report that everything

is – or will be – hunky-dory in the economy post-Brexit (or not).

I encountered this rather chillingly myself at a business-to-business niche market industry newspaper. Shortly after the referendum, a long-term advertiser in a regional centre of our industry called, telling us how terrible we were for suggesting that there was alarm and uncertainty post-Brexit. The advertiser proceeded to engage me in a long discussion about what he thought my job was. (It wasn’t much of a discussion really, it was mostly me politely saying: no.)

Older hands working with the paper, who’d known the caller for over 40 years, were quickly able to call him back and bring him to his senses. Since then, not a day has

passed without a major headline appearing along the lines of “Economy doing better than ever post-Brexit”, followed by “We’re screwed, we told you so!” *schadenfreudig* Brexit catastrophe predictions. “It’s still too early to tell” headlines are notable by their absence.

What happens to the ethics of journalism in such an atmosphere? What should journalists do, and what can be done to support them in making the right ethical choices? We hope to cover the ethics of Brexit reporting (Brexethics?) in LFB’s March meeting. Speakers will include Professor Chris Frost, expert on journalistic ethics and witness before Leveson (see page 1).

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Making tax digital not as easy as pie

The UK government recently consulted on proposals to switch all tax return filing for the self-employed to unspecified new online systems. Key points in the NUJ’s response include the observation that “Journalists will be naturally suspicious of installing any software provided by the government.” The NUJ is alarmed by the possibility that the proposed scheme would discourage freelancers from using accountants, and suspects that the government “does not fully understand the nature of freelancing, which could involve a great number of third parties, who would find it burdensome” to have to supply information direct to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. The intended launch date of April 2018 does not give sufficient time to prepare. The full response is at www.bit.ly/NUJ-MTD

Concerned about Brexit? We hope to help

LONDON FREELANCE Branch has many members who are not UK citizens, and many of these are citizens of other EU member states. Several have approached us with, unsurprisingly, concerns. Both the Branch and the NUJ’s Freelance Industrial Council are working to help the union’s staff provide advice and individual support – as soon as we know what the advice needs to be about.

On the status of EU citizens who are now working in the UK, the *Freelance* recently mentioned this to a rather senior UK official. The response was: “but of course under international law all those already resident in the UK would have their status ‘grandfathered’.” That means that – so long as the UK govern-

ment respects international law – anyone now legally working in the country can stay.

There are, of course, many open questions, such as those over benefits like Working Tax Credit; and how will freelancers prove we are “working”. These questions are open because no-one in government has the faintest idea, either.

And there are equally questions for NUJ members working in the rest of the EU: not least, how to get management to maintain their earnings against the fall in the pound.

More generally, the NUJ has collaborated in a Federation of Entertainment Unions submission on concerns about the potential effect of Brexit on the creative industries.

And of course concern is not restricted to legal matters. Any members who are threatened by “kick ‘em out” tendencies spinning off from Brexit – perhaps particularly those from outside the EU – are invited to contact the *Freelance*.



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Members report discrimination & anxieties

ANXIETY about how Brexit will affect EU nationals working in the freelance community is just one of the issues identified in a long-term survey examining equality in the sector. The London Freelance Branch equality officers launched the questionnaire earlier this year to define what equality means for journalists in the age of freelancing.

Responses so far have overwhelmingly identified two main areas in which members feel they have experienced discrimination: gender and age. Disability, race and sexuality have also been highlighted.

Almost 30 per cent of respondents revealed that gender affected their day-to-day work in some way, with one female freelance journalist reporting “a severe lack of women being promoted in my immediate workplace”.

Another noted she had “experi-

enced sexism in many places”, with men being paid more and promoted more, and being patronising.

Although these are anecdotes, research has found that men in the media are paid on average 6.6 per cent more than women, while a City University survey of 700 British journalists found a significant pay gap in the news industry with nearly half of female journalists earning £2400 or less a month compared with a third of men.

The government’s Gender Pay Gap report identifies part-time working around unpaid care as a contributor to the problem – a challenge reported in the LFB’s survey.

“The high cost of childcare in London means that unless you are able to alter working patterns and hours, pay may not even cover the costs,” explained one respondent. Indeed, almost 53 per cent stated

they worked part-time, with 41 per cent working from home.

The issue of “sidelining” was raised by a freelance who considered age to have an effect, while others reported ideas “being dismissed”, and a perception by editors of being “too old to need work”.

Meanwhile, challenges when working for international organisations included homophobia and in-built workplace prejudice.

The survey has pointed out the continued need to tackle barriers to finding work, progressing, or getting a pay rise in the media industry, with lobbying government and industry bodies, liaising with legal experts, and developing support networks suggested as next steps for LFB.

You can still share your views and experiences by completing the survey: see www.londonfreelance.org/fl1612surv.html

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