

Easier transcribing

HOW TO get those spoken words into a text file? What transcription hacks do we know? And, for younger, readers, what is shorthand? These questions came before LFB's September meeting.

Lizzy Millar is a freelance minute-taker, reporter and shorthand tutor for the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) and through www.shorthand-tutor.co.uk – and she opened by pointing to Branch co-secretary Nick Renaud-Komiya: "I taught him shorthand". How did it go?

"In a former life," Nick responded, "I was a staff reporter at the *Health Service Journal*. I had done some courses... Lizzy came in to give us some tuition on practical applications. Shorthand has proven incredibly useful. It's a skill that you need to keep alive – not that I manage to practise an hour a week. It never runs out of batteries, for a start." As Lizzy says, "You don't need to carry any kit."

Lizzy observed that the people on her courses are students on NCTJ courses; people fed up with transcribing recordings; and those who might want to pass through airports and security checks. In this era of mass digital surveillance, one advantage of shorthand "on paper rather than in electronic form" is that it can't be hacked or intercepted.

Academic studies demonstrate that when you write by hand you absorb more of the meaning. You can edit shorthand on the page with a highlighter. If you're transcribing you have to get everything down and then edit. And have you ever met anyone who's regretted learning a new language or an instrument?

Lizzy understands there is a place for transcription. She would recom-



Speakers Lizzy Millar and Angus Batey: Image © Hazel Dunlop

mend a recording as a backup – especially if you're reporting a long meeting. But technology can let you down. She recalls a time when someone tapping nervously on the table wrecked an audio recording.

Angus Batey has "never learned shorthand and I've been doing this for 30 years". He is a music journalist who has now moved to cover defence. He long ago decided he needed complete transcripts. But transcription is the bane of your life. In his work, an interview of two hours is not uncommon.

Recently, he's been working on a magazine that appears daily during major air shows, reporting on conferences he'd have to write up for the next day. An editor suggested Angus try an online transcription service called rev.com to save time.

The editor would pay for the service: "it would free me up to be more productive... and save him quite a bit of cash overall." That cost is US\$1 a minute – within 24 hours you get a Word document. The hu-

man transcribers "get" technical acronyms and arcane business terms.

Occasionally they make mistakes, but if they know they're not sure about something they put a note in with a timecode reference to the recording. In advance of the next airshow, Angus had to do 30 interviews in a month, so he negotiated with his editor to "split the cost of the transcription service so I can free up time". He was able to do at least twice as much work, and added that, "I am not a lawyer but I'd say that's a cast-iron example of a tax-deductible expense."

There are much cheaper services that use machine-learning to do transcription untouched by human hand. That from rev.com costs US\$0.10 a minute. Its accuracy is "not that great" but it's turned around 10 to 15 minutes and useful for "quick news reports, such as in my case, Boeing's update on its woes with the 737 Max plane".

© Mike Holderness

• An 1800-word version is online.

NUJ wins member £8360 back pay

WHEN IS a contract not a contract? When the clauses do not reflect the reality of the working relationship.

This was the decision of an employment tribunal when it ruled that NUJ member David Walsh was a "worker" despite what his contract tried to say.

David had worked shifts on a casual basis for *The Scotsman* for several years. He had asked for holiday pay on a number of occasions but was refused on the grounds that he was self-employed.

The company's stance depended on its standard freelance contract, which states that the freelance is

self-employed and an independent contractor.

The tribunal ruled that the reality was different; that David met the statutory definition of "worker"; and that he was entitled to paid leave. As he was not afforded this right during his engagement, Mr Walsh was awarded £8360 in compensation.

The case was made unusually complicated by the fact that the company in question, Johnston Press, is now in administration. Compensation must be recovered from the National Insurance Fund.

As the NUJ's national organiser for Scotland, I note that we were

always confident that Mr Walsh was a "worker", and that the wording of the agreement did not get around this basic fact. The agreement in question is still in use by JPI Media, and the judgment could have implications for other freelancers.

The best way for any company to avoid legal action would be to negotiate freelance contracts with the National Union of Journalists.

David Walsh was represented by Thompsons Solicitors, and we thank them for their sound advice and representation.

© John Toner

National Organiser, Scotland

LFB meetings
Thursday 31 Oct
New members meet
11 Nov
Reporting religion
9 Dec
End-of-year party
See back page &
@NUJ_LFB