

**World Press Freedom Day 2010 Wales Lecture**  
**Delivered by Martin Shipton, Chief Reporter, Western Mail on the theme:**  
**“New Threats to Press Freedom”**

World Press Freedom Day should be an occasion for celebrating the rich diversity of global news output. It would be good to think as we enter the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that the forces of opposition to freedom of expression were receding, and that we could look ahead with confidence to a time when political censorship in all its forms would be a thing of the past.

Unfortunately that is no more than a delusional fantasy. We live in a time where not only are the forces seeking to crush press freedom in many countries as strong as they have been, but where more insidious kinds of threat are looming that could destroy much of what we take for granted. Here in Wales we have much to be thankful for. Journalists do not have to worry about whether they will be gunned down as they make their home, and social disorder is mostly restricted to drunken brawling on a weekend.

Elsewhere, the role of a journalist is much more elemental and in many places fraught with danger. Every year the International Federation of Journalists – the umbrella organisation to which my union, the NUJ is affiliated – publishes a report detailing the circumstances in which media workers across the world have paid the ultimate price for doing their job. In 2009, 113 journalists and other media workers were murdered in targeted killings specifically because of their professional role. Reading the report makes one full of admiration for those journalists who are prepared to risk their lives so that people across the world have a better understanding of why things are as they are. Some died in war zones like Afghanistan, others in countries like Colombia and Somalia where internal conflicts have resulted in a breakdown of social order. Europe is not immune to the murder of journalists, as the targeted shooting of two Russian women reporters demonstrated.

Anastasia Baburova, a journalist for the investigative newspaper Novaya Gazeta – also the paper for which Anna Politkovskaya, murdered in 2006, worked – was shot at close range on January 19 while talking to leading human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov in Moscow. He was also killed. Baburova was critically injured and died several hours later in hospital. Markelov was a lawyer who had acted for Novaya Gazeta on a number of cases. On the day he and Baburova were killed, he had held a press conference in Moscow to denounce the release from prison of ex-Colonel Yuri Budanov, who had been convicted of the murder of a civilian during the Chechen conflict.

The other female Russian journalist murdered last year was Natalia Estemirova, who was kidnapped on July 15 by unknown gunmen in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya. Her body was later found in neighbouring Ingushetia with bullet wounds to the chest and head. Her outspoken criticism of corruption and human rights violations in Chechnya is believed to have led to her murder. Also in 2009, on November 23 to be precise, occurred the single most bloody attack against the news media on record anywhere in the world. A convoy of politicians, lawyers and journalists was ambushed by gunmen as it travelled to an election office in the lawless southern Filipino province of Maguindanao. In total 57 people, including 32 journalists and other news media staff, were shot and hacked to death. Most were buried in shallow graves on a hillside off the main road.

Murdering journalists is, of course, the most extreme form of repressing freedom of expression. There are, however, many other ways to muzzle the media. The organisation Reporters Without Borders compiles annually a league table that measures on a country-by-country basis the conditions for press freedom that exist. To compile the league table, Reporters Without Borders prepared a questionnaire with 40 criteria that assess the state of press freedom in each country. It includes every kind of violation that directly affects journalists (murder, imprisonment, physical attacks and threats) and news media (censorship, confiscation of newspaper issues, searches and

harassment). It also considers the degree of impunity enjoyed by those responsible for press freedom violations. The table also assesses the level of self-censorship in each country, and the ability of the media to investigate and criticise. Financial pressure, seen as increasingly significant, is also incorporated into the final score.

The questionnaire takes account of the legal framework within which the media operate, including penalties for press offences, the existence or otherwise of a state monopoly for certain types of media, and how the media are regulated. It also considers the level of independence enjoyed by publicly owned media, as well as reflecting violations of the free flow of information on the internet. The questionnaire assesses not just violations of press freedom perpetrated by the state, but those for whom responsibility lies with armed militias, clandestine organisations and pressure groups. It was sent to 15 freedom of expression organisations in all five continents, to Reporters Without Borders' network of 130 correspondents around the world, and to journalists, researchers, jurists and human rights activists.

It's a sobering thought that in 2009 only five countries out of 175 in the world were considered to have all the optimum conditions for press freedom – Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Norway and Sweden. In a scale where zero is best, all five scored zero. The least free country in the world was Eritrea, with a score of 115.5. The top 14 countries were all European, if Iceland is considered to be in Europe. The UK was in joint 20<sup>th</sup> place with Luxembourg and the United States, with a score of 4.

According to the annual report of Reporters Without Borders, two appalling events marked 2009: the massacre of journalists in the Philippines and the unprecedented wave of arrests and convictions of journalists and bloggers in Iran following President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's disputed reelection. A total of around 160 journalists in all continents were forced to go into exile to escape prison or death, often in very dangerous circumstances.

Wars and elections constituted the chief threat to journalists in 2009. Reporters Without Borders said: "It is becoming more and more risky to cover wars as journalists themselves are being targeted and face the possibility of being murdered or kidnapped. But it can turn out to be just as dangerous to do your job as a reporter at election time and can lead directly to prison or hospital. Violence before and after elections was particularly prevalent in 2009 in countries with poor democratic credentials."

As bloggers and websites continue to flourish, censorship and repression have surged proportionately. As soon as the internet or new media start to play a leading role in the spread of news and information, a serious clampdown follows. "Bloggers are now watched as closely as journalists from the traditional media," says Reporters Without Borders' annual report. Another major concern in 2009 was the mass exodus of journalists from repressive countries such as Iran and Sri Lanka. The authorities in these countries have come to understand that by pushing journalists into exile, they can drastically reduce pluralism of ideas and the amount of criticism they attract. "This is a dangerous tendency and it must be very strongly condemned," secretary-general Jean-François Julliard of Reporters Without Borders said.

Now despite the dreadful repression that impedes freedom of expression in too many parts of the world, there is one important, and possibly perverse, piece of comfort that can be drawn from this situation. The reason why totalitarian regimes, armed militias and sometimes pure criminals want to suppress journalists and freedom of expression generally is because of fear: fear of what may come of the truth being told. The assassination of journalists in Russia who have been investigating atrocities in Chechnya and neighbouring trouble spots occurred because of the fear that their research - that their words - may influence events. The same point applies in the cases of all the

other journalists who have been murdered, all the newspapers that have been banned or harassed, all the radio stations that have been blocked. Those responsible for the various acts of repression would not have bothered if the words of journalists were not seen as potentially influential and event-changing.

What I now want to do is talk about the very real threats to the survival of journalism that exist in Wales and Britain today. I'm not talking about the threat of journalists being murdered. I'm not talking about a repressive regime that plans to close down newspapers. What I'm referring to is the long suicide of the newspaper industry coupled with increasing public apathy about the quality of the news they access.

When I was a teenager, I used to look forward to Sundays so I could read the Sunday Times. It was full of investigative surprises. You couldn't be sure what the paper would contain, but you knew it would be worth waiting for. The Insight team was legendary. One week there would be a superbly researched exclusive about local government corruption in a provincial city, the next week there was likely to be an excellently sourced account of dirty dealings by the CIA or revelations about undercover operations in Northern Ireland. Even the colour magazine was likely to contain serious reportage rather than the lifestyle padding we are offered today. There were occasions when the Sunday Times would work in tandem with World in Action, the leading current affairs programme on ITV, to jointly expose some wrongdoing or injustice. It was material of this kind that inspired me to become a journalist.

Today the content of all newspapers is much different. There is very little investigative work done, certainly of the scale undertaken when Harold Evans was editing the Sunday Times. It is deemed to cost too much money, both in terms of employing journalists who may take months to complete an investigation and in legal costs to defend the libel writs that are likely to flow in your direction if you upset the rich and powerful.

Nevertheless, when I started my career in journalism more than 30 years ago, I had no idea that change in the content of British newspapers would be as drastic as it has been. Most newspapers began to lose their way around the mid-1980s. Seduced by the success of a new generation of women's magazines, newspaper owners decided their titles should seek to ape the style of such magazines. I was working in the North East of England at the time, and for me a watershed decision was made by the editor of the Evening Chronicle in Newcastle when he decided to splash not on a dramatic murder that had gripped the city's imagination, but on a shopping story. I was working for the Northern Echo, 35 miles south, but the consternation among journalists in the Chronicle newsroom was replicated in my own office and among my own colleagues. All of us sensed that something significant had happened when the decision to prefer the shopping story was taken. We realised that it wasn't just an aberration, and that things were going to change in a way we would not relish.

The advent of the shopping story signalled what became an increasing reliance by newspapers on easy content that panders to commercial interests. I remember being shocked, years ago, when news stories began to run about people who appeared in TV advertisements. It was part of the relentless slide into what I describe as "junk journalism". My working precept has always been that news is a piece of information that someone doesn't want to see published: the rest is advertising. Today, regrettably, a high proportion of material that gets into newspapers is content that has been provided by the public relations industry on behalf of clients who want to see their name in print. Very often this is in the form of spurious surveys conducted about some fatuous consumer topic that has been sponsored by a PR company's client. Often they are not even bona fide opinion surveys that could withstand the slightest methodological scrutiny, but have been cobbled together from the unanalysed results of some internet questionnaire before being submitted to newsdesks as if they

were based on robust research.

Some people are still carrying out robust academic research, however, and much that is relevant to my theme has been undertaken within yards of this building at the Journalism department of Cardiff University by people for whom I have the utmost respect. Professor Bob Franklin, Dr Andy Williams and others studied the impact on newsrooms of the changes that have occurred in recent years. The data they collected was used to great effect by the Guardian journalist Nick Davies in his book *Flat Earth News*, an excellent critique of the contemporary newspaper industry. He paints a picture of journalists metaphorically chained to their desks, having to produce more and more copy and having little time to check facts. In many cases, material supplied by PR agencies is appearing in newspapers virtually untouched, because the reporters have such a heavy workload to undertake. Because of that, they inevitably rely more and more on unchallenging material that is supplied to them free of charge by organisations with a vested commercial interest.

All of this, of course, is driven by the cost cutting that has taken place in pursuit of higher profits. Most small newspaper companies have been swallowed up by the giants like Trinity Mirror, the group for which I work, Northcliffe Newspapers, part of the Daily Mail group, Newsquest and Johnstone Press. Each of these groups is primarily interested in maximising their profits. The only way they appear to be able to achieve this end is by slashing the number of people they employ and in the process damaging or even destroying the newspapers they own.

In January of last year I gave evidence to a sub-committee of the National Assembly in my capacity as Father of the Media Wales Chapel of the NUJ. I told the committee how in recent months, concern about the future of the newspaper industry in Wales and the UK as a whole had reached a point where the NUJ considered it appropriate to raise the matter formally both with the Welsh Assembly Government through the Heritage Minister Alun Ffred Jones and the sub-committee of the National Assembly which had been considering the outlook for the broadcasting industry in Wales. I outlined how we believe the crisis is such that there is not merely a threat to many hundreds of jobs, but to an essential element of Welsh democracy. The loss of the *Western Mail*, for example, would be a very considerable blow to Wales.

In November 2008 the editorial department at Media Wales was faced with an announcement of the fourth round of redundancies since the end of 2003. There were seven job losses and offices at Aberdare, Ebbw Vale and Neath were shut. The Neath and Port Talbot Guardian newspapers were shut down. The announcement of the job losses and office closures was quickly followed by a letter to all staff from Trinity Mirror's chief executive, Sly Bailey, in which she revealed that the group was encountering cash flow problems arising from difficulties in making loan interest repayments to the bank and pension contributions. Consequently, said Ms Bailey, we would not receive a pay increase in 2009.

For most members of the union, and the wider workforce, this came as a considerable shock. It raised elemental fears about whether the company would survive. It seemed especially odd in a year when we had undergone major change to an integrated newsroom, with journalists working across newspaper titles and with greater emphasis on web journalism, including videos. We had also moved into a new purpose-built office in the centre of Cardiff.

The temptation was to see the crisis affecting the company simply as a manifestation of the recession. Yet, although the difficulties had clearly been accelerated by the economic downturn, the conditions for the crisis affecting the newspaper industry had been in place for a long time. Declining circulations, unsustainably high profit expectations, falls in advertising revenues and uncertainty about how to secure sufficient volumes of future digital (web-based) revenue had combined to prompt grave concern.

Between Jan-June 1994 and Jan-June 2008, average daily sales of the Western Mail declined from 68,590 to 37,152. Over the same period, average daily sales of the South Wales Echo declined from 82,117 to 44,624 and of Wales on Sunday from 65,567 to 42,763. Yet the decline in circulations had not been matched by an equivalent decline in profits.

In the 1980s, regional newspaper groups in the UK aspired to make a profit return on turnover of around 10%. Expectations had since been raised much higher.

In 2003, Media Wales had a turnover of £54.3m and made a profit of £16.2m. That was a 29.91% profit return on turnover.

In 2004 turnover was £55.3m and profit £19.6m – a 35.47% profit margin.

In 2005 turnover was £55.0m and profit reached a peak at £21.0m – a margin of 38.21%.

In 2006 turnover was £52.1m and profit £18.9m, a margin of 36.33%.

In 2007 turnover was £50.2m and profit £15.4m, a margin of 30.74%

So far as Media Wales was concerned, high profit levels had been maintained not by increasing revenue, but by shedding labour. In 2003, Media Wales declared that it had 826 employees. By 2007 the number of employees was down to 553. In the course of 2008, we estimate there were at least a further 65 job losses. A total of 1,200 job losses across Trinity Mirror occurred in 2008 and 44 titles closed. According to Trinity Mirror's 2007 accounts, the total shareholder dividends paid out in the year amounted to £63.7m. The total dividends paid out over a decade amounted to £520m.

I told the sub-committee that all the indications were that newspaper circulations would continue to decline. Management has been unable to reassure us about future advertising revenue from the website. Despite the widely perceived understanding within the industry that profit margins will fall, Trinity Mirror has been unable to provide a coherent narrative to investors about the future. Instead, the board relies on cost savings to maintain profit levels as high as possible. In 2008, Ms Bailey announced cuts amounting to £20m across the group, and a further £20m was cut in 2009. I told the sub-committee that the impact of continuing cuts would continue to impair the quality of the group's newspapers, contributing to a continuing downward spiral.

That wasn't the end of it, of course. At the Trinity Mirror annual shareholders' meeting last year, when I was one of around 20 NUJ members who obtained proxy passes from shareholders so we could ask serious questions of the group's directors about their future strategy, we learnt the extent of the debts that had to be repaid over the next few years. The net debt of the group at that time was £388m, in addition to which there was a deficit in the pension funds of £275m. The group's non-executive chairman, Sir Ian Gibson, and the finance director, Vijay Vaghela, made it clear to us that there would be further cuts. Profit margins needed to be high so the debt could be repaid.

And indeed, last autumn we were told in Cardiff that the management wanted to cut the full time equivalent of 13.2 further jobs. We held an industrial action ballot, and the result was a 96% vote in favour of strike action if any NUJ members were threatened with compulsory redundancy. In the event, we were able to ensure that none of our members were forced to leave the company against their will, although jobs were lost that have not been replaced.

The downward spiral continues. With almost messianic fervour, newspaper companies embraced the internet without knowing how to make money from it. In common with many others, we began putting our content free online, instantly devaluing in financial terms the information and commentary we offer to the public.

Most people now expect information for nothing. Very rarely do they give a thought to what it costs

to bring that information to them. Traditionally, people were prepared to pay a relatively modest sum to buy a newspaper. At £2, even the most expensive paper sold in Britain – the Sunday Times – costs less than a pint of beer. Yet if the game plan is gradually to phase out printed newspapers in favour of web publications, there is no sign that the advertising revenue available will be able to sustain even the kind of reduced editorial operations we have now.

With every local newspaper that is shut, with every local office that is closed down, communities are the poorer. The pattern is for journalists to retrench to centralised newsrooms, inevitably more remote and less able to cover the events and stories that are of significance to local people. And readers are not stupid. They recognise the loss of a local flavour, the increasing blandness of the content, the result of churnalism dependent on commercial and other vested interests who want to push their products or their ideas - and they stop buying the papers in droves. Those who have internet access – and in relatively depressed parts of Wales like the Valleys, that is sometimes quite low – often don't even bother to access stories on the website, because of their disillusionment. So the new threats to press freedom referred to in the title of this talk are far removed from the traditional threats where repressive regimes or powerful multinationals want to stop people finding out about their ill deeds. What we are now faced with is the obliteration in many places of effective sources of news. Of course there are other factors at work – the worrying tendency of many young people and sometimes their elders as well to live in self-absorbed bubbles divorced as much as possible from the real world; the faster pace of life that for some makes keeping up with current affairs seem a luxury that can't be afforded. But to a very large extent, newspapers have been the victims of their owners' greed for unsustainably high profits and a trivialisation process fuelled by cost cutting.

The sad decline of the Daily Mirror is a further case in point. At one time it was a paper for working class people with a campaigning and political edge that did not patronise its readers but spoke to them on their own wavelength about important issues of the day. And it did that by being entertaining, pithy and irreverent. What would a great Mirror editor like Hugh Cudlipp make of the paper that bears its name today? Most mornings I come into work in the Media Wales newsroom to see the front page of the Mirror's website on a giant screen on the wall. And most mornings I cringe at the crass, celebrity dominated nonsense that confronts me. Mostly there is nothing there that I would recognise as a news story. Yet within Trinity Mirror this is supposed to be seen as the acme of journalistic achievement and the template to which we should aspire. It's a sick joke.

In Wales, there probably hasn't been a time since it was established when the Western Mail wasn't a punchbag. In the early years, of course, it was seen by working class people working in the mines and steelworks as the organ of their oppressors. One Labour MP who is standing down at the general election still refers to the paper as the Coalowners' Gazette when currying favour with the less media-friendly of his party colleagues, of whom sadly there remain too many. Later the paper was noted for its antipathy towards Welsh nationalism and its sycophancy towards the Royal Family. That's no longer the case, I'm pleased to say. Nor is it a Tory rag as one of the unsuccessful Welsh Labour leadership contestants from last year told party members during closed party hustings meetings.

The Western Mail could, of course, be better if we had more resources. But in comparison with many other papers produced these days, it's not bad. And, let's face it, it's the best we've got in Wales and the only paper that tries to take a national view of our nation. Its survival as a daily paper is, however, under threat. There may be no immediate or announced plans to turn it into a weekly, but that, I'm very sorry to say, is the direction of travel. That's what Trinity Mirror did to the Birmingham Post a few months ago – what had long been the morning paper in the UK's second largest city. It would be foolish to assume that the Western Mail is immune to such market forces. There is already concern about the democratic deficit that exists in Wales because so many people

choose to buy newspapers that are produced in London and have virtually no news from Wales in them. If there is ignorance now about the goings-on at the National Assembly, and how the policy agenda in Wales differs from that in England, how much worse will it be without the Western Mail? There are those who think that blogging and so-called citizen journalism will fill the gaps created by newspaper closures. I disagree profoundly. Without trained journalists to provide quality control – and yes, of course quality is under threat from greedy media groups – people will be even more at the mercy of vested interests that want information conveyed in a way that is advantageous to themselves.

I am not saying that non-journalist specialists have nothing interesting to say, and of course there are examples of non-journalists breaking stories that the mainstream media either haven't got or won't publish. But in the main there is a fundamental difference between the trained journalist and the blogger who likes to comment on events as they occur. If trained journalists are not providing the raw information on which bloggers can comment, the system of reliable news reporting will fall apart and there will be a huge vacuum that will undoubtedly be filled by the vested interests.

Now there is an optimistic school of thought that argues we are in a golden age where citizens through web forums are able to express their views in a way that has never previously been open to them, and that this represents an enhancement of democracy. Of course I would not seek to turn the clock back and prevent such sites from operating, but I do wonder about the quality of debate.

Generally speaking, there is a demonstrable qualitative difference, in my view, between the views expressed in letters that are published in serious newspapers, and the shoot from the hip comments posted on the same newspapers' websites. At our WalesOnline website, there is no pre-moderation before comments appear beneath the stories to which they refer. Very often, the views expressed would make Attila the Hun appear to be a Guardian-reading progressive. If a story appears about asylum seekers, you can guarantee that BNP supporters will have a field day with the racist and bigoted comments they post. It is a serious bone of contention for me that while legally delicate stories that I write are quite rightly subjected to the rigorous scrutiny of our libel lawyers, members of the public can post offensive comments on our website with impunity. Of course, they will be taken down if someone complains or if one of our team spots material that is unacceptable. But the material will be up there for a period when it should never have been published. Often, people with progressive views will be disinclined to post comments that detract from the reactionary consensus because of legitimate concerns that they will be subjected to virtual bullying because of their views.

The bullies are often out in force. When during the European Parliament election campaign last year, I wrote a story revealing that the BNP was using a warehouse in Welshpool as a clearing house for 27 million leaflets, the racist party urged its members to send a barrage of protest emails to the Western Mail and to post messages on our website. One message that went up accused me personally of inciting people to burn down the warehouse. I quickly protested and insisted the comment was removed, but I was in the ridiculous position of having been libelled by my own newspaper's website.

Forgive me, then, if I am not an unalloyed adherent of the core Press Freedom Day precept that “unregulated political comment online helps the democratic process”.

Press freedom can only exist if there is a press, and the press is diminishing in its quantity and output. The outlook appears bleak, and the prognostications are not good. At the end of his book *Flat Earth News*, Nick Davies quotes a passage from another apocalyptic book about the future of journalism by John Nichols and Robert McChesney called *It's the Media Stupid*. The passage reads: “The type of political culture that accompanies the rise of the corporate media system worldwide looks to be increasingly like that found in the United States: in the place of informed debate or

political parties organising along the full spectrum of opinion, there will be vacuous journalism and elections dominated by public relations, big money, moronic political advertising and limited debate on tangible issues. It is a world where the market and commercial values overwhelm notions of democracy and civic culture, a world where depoliticisation runs rampant, and a world where the wealthy few face fewer and fewer threats of political challenge.”

Is there a way of avoiding what seems the inevitable demise of a once great industry, so essential for the functioning of democracy? In the NUJ we are at least talking about the problem, considering the feasibility of alternative business models that could come into play if and when the corporate media giants implode. A week tomorrow, on Saturday April 17, we are organising a mini-conference on the future of journalism in Wales at Chapter Arts Centre from 1.30 until 5.30. You are all very welcome to attend.

Finally, I should tell you of some recent intelligence that demonstrates how greed is still very much at the centre of the media industry, despite all its problems. As recently as Wednesday evening, we read the following item in Media Guardian: “[Sly Bailey](#), the chief executive of [Trinity Mirror](#), received a recession-busting 66% increase in her total remuneration package in 2009 to £1.68m. Bailey's pay packet included a £736,000 basic salary and pension contributions of £248,000. She also received a bonus of £671,000, despite the Daily Mirror-owner [reporting a 41% fall in pre-tax profits in a year that saw 30 titles shut or sold and 1,700 job losses](#). In 2008 Bailey's total remuneration package was about £1m.

“The next highest paid director was finance chief Vijay Vaghela who took home £909,000 last year, also a 66% increase on his pay packet in 2008. Vaghela was paid a basic salary of £430,000 and a bonus of £350,000 as well as £110,000 in pension contributions. In 2008 he was paid £545,000. “Trinity Mirror's third executive director, the secretary and group legal director, Paul Vickers, took home £754,000 last year. This was a 46% increase over the £515,000 in total that Vickers received in 2008. Last year Vickers received a basic salary of £375,000, a bonus of £229,000 and a pension contribution of £119,000.”

You can imagine how that went down with Trinity Mirror journalists who last year endured a pay freeze and whose final salary pension scheme was shut down at the end of March on the grounds of unaffordability.