

The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) is the only representative trade union for full-time, professional journalists in the UK and Ireland.

The NUJ represents staff and freelance journalists working in print, broadcasting and on-line at national and local level.

On a daily basis our members interact with the police services in the UK and Ireland.

The nature of journalism means that there can be an interdependence - Irish journalists rely on the Gardai to carry out their work, Gardai seek the co-operation of the media in the solving of crime.

Communications take place at a number of levels, formal and informal, structured and unstructured. There has been a growing tendency to seek to centralise communications through the Garda Press Office, with Gardai who provide even routine information to a local journalist working in their regional newspaper or radio station exposed to risk of disciplinary action or prosecution.

This approach on the part of the legislature and Garda management is reflective of a culture of secrecy which conflicts with the values of openness and transparency.

NUJ members frequently report that the role of the Garda Press Office is perceived as being to prevent journalists getting access to information, a barrier which must be crossed rather than a public service aimed at facilitating public interest journalists.

This is not to underestimate the importance of data protection or respect for due process but frequently the insistence on secrecy is merely a kneejerk position, refusal to co-operate being the default position.

Photographers frequently encounter difficulties at crime scenes and report inappropriate obstruction by Gardai, sometimes accompanied by heavy handed tactics and inappropriate verbal behaviour.

We seek formal recognition of the NUJ press card and a structure of communications with the NUJ and representatives of media organisations, perhaps through a users' group as part of a media policy predicated on the principles of openness and transparency.

An annual round table discussion would be useful to discuss operational difficulties encountered by media practitioners.

They may always be a tension between the media and the police, such tension is both inevitable and helpful but there is a need for a greater awareness of the needs of the media in the changed media landscape.

In this regard there should also be an examination of the training given to Gardai based on an ethos of greater openness.

Public order training should include training in how to interact with bona fide media, in particular photographers.

The NUJ would welcome the opportunity for input into the development of a media strategy and would be prepared to meet the commission to discuss the issues raised.