

“The BBC can be a terrifying place to work. I saw able, keen young staff reduced to nervous wrecks.”

Presenter Laurie Mayer on BBC Tunbridge Wells.



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AND THEY SAID IT DIDN'T HAPPEN

For many years, the National Union of Journalists has been concerned about the levels of bullying and harassment reported by our members. While complaints have come from all quarters of the media, the majority have been in broadcasting. The NUJ's Broadcasting Industrial Council decided to conduct a questionnaire of its members in both the BBC and commercial broadcasting operations. The results have shown that bullying is rife, particularly in the BBC.

Of the people who replied to the questionnaire and said they had experienced bullying at work, an alarming 87 per cent were from the BBC.

Virtually all of them said the BBC's own in-house procedures for dealing with complaints were totally inadequate. Delegates to the union's annual meeting in April this year called for new procedures in the BBC to deal with bullying, harassment, grievances and disciplinary matters "in a manner compatible with the principles of natural justice, the provisions of the Human Rights Act and other relevant domestic and European Acts."

The union says procedures must include an independent element to ensure fairness and restore confidence in the employer's commitment to eradicating inappropriate treatment in the workplace.

But on August 5th this year, the BBC again rejected appeals by the recognised unions for independent investigations into such cases rather than the present procedure of having them conducted by managers who, in effect, are often investigating their own colleagues.

The BBC says it is promoting a new set of values, which include staff trusting and respecting each other. But comments from employees who took part in the NUJ survey show a different picture. Several said things were so bad they'd had to leave their jobs; there was a "culture" of bullying from the highest levels; managers covered up for each other; and disciplinary procedures were "a sham."

There have been a number of high profile cases: Helen Reed won an industrial tribunal for unfair dismissal against the BBC after being bullied out of her job in Bristol; Sharan Sandhu settled her case against the BBC World Service, but the details remain confidential; Laurie Mayer's case for unfair dismissal is still to be heard at a tribunal after he blew the whistle on bullying at the BBC's news operation in Tunbridge Wells.

The NUJ's National Broadcasting Organiser, Paul McLaughlin, says the survey confirms the experiences of members.

“Bullying in broadcasting is a sad and miserable fact of life for many of our members. Tackling this curse on our industry is a central and vital part of our trade unionism within the NUJ. For those involved in dealing with the issue it is perhaps the most difficult workplace issue we deal with. Those who responded to our survey know, just as the bullies should know, that we will not rest until bullying is a thing of the past.”

The NUJ has been campaigning against bullying for some time. This effort is beginning to bear fruit as the issue is now receiving the prominence it deserves. The next step is for employers to take action. The NUJ says they should acknowledge that problems exist, demonstrate their commitment to change and work with the union to solve the problems and design modern and effective procedures to stamp out such damaging behaviour.

In considering other forms of inappropriate behaviour such as race or gender discrimination, we have experienced a cultural shift over the past five or ten years. What was considered by management to be acceptable behaviour is now clearly recognised to be inappropriate. For example sexual innuendo. While such behaviour still exists in places, a good deal of progress has been made and it is now widely seen as unacceptable.

In the same way society needs to alter perceptions of bullying to make sure it won't be tolerated in any workplace.

The majority of bullies tend to be from middle management grades, sometimes acting under the (false?) impression that tough and aggressive actions are expected to get the job done. Senior management must – once and for all – send out the correct signal and demonstrate by their actions that the cliched newsroom bully is a thing of the past.

John Barsby
Chair, NUJ Broadcasting Industrial Council

Paul McLaughlin
NUJ National Broadcasting Organiser

“On a regular basis I have been belittled or degraded and treated with contempt. I can’t prove any of the above as it’s skilfully done.”

COMMENTARY

Our statistics have been broken down into three main areas. The first section deals with those who have been the subject of bullying, where they work and so on. The second area deals with a profile of the bully. Finally, we have a section looking at policies and procedures in dealing with bullying and an assessment of the outcomes, both personal and procedural.

PROFILE OF THE PEOPLE BULLIED

“I left a few years ago, but I’m still unwell with stress related illness. I’ve had almost a year off work and still have nightmares.”

Our survey shows that anyone can be bullied. Numerous members suffered stress and illness and many were forced to take lengthy periods off work. We found that the period of bullying varied from four months to a staggering fifteen years. Many people believe those who are bullied tend to be women, but responses indicate a fairly even distribution between the sexes.

GENDER OF PEOPLE BULLIED

MALE	42%
FEMALE	58%

With more than half of NUI members in broadcasting working for the BBC it is not surprising perhaps that respondents tended to work for the corporation. However, the fact that the vast majority of those who were bullied worked for the BBC shows that the corporation has very serious problems to address.



WORKPLACE OF PEOPLE BULLIED

BBC	87%
INDEPENDENT	13%

Of the group who did not work for the BBC, examples came from Independent Television, Commercial Radio and Independent Production.

“It was a constant undermining of my skills and talents. I was on a short term contract and felt on the edge the whole time.”

It is clear from the responses that bullying is prevalent across the BBC and occurs throughout all editorial areas. In the survey almost half the respondents came from local radio and regional television, an area where to quote one participant, “short term contracts are used as a weapon” and another said “people who lodge complaints are treated as trouble makers”



WHERE DOES BULLYING OCCUR INSIDE THE BBC?

NEWS	33%
WORLD SERVICE	19%
NATIONS AND REGIONS	40%
WORLDWIDE	4%
OTHER (including F+L)	4%

PROFILE OF THE BULLY

“I was constantly subjected to unwanted touching and sexually suggestive comments. For the record, I didn’t report it because I felt it would have a negative affect on my career.”

Stereotypically, bullies tend to be male and this is born out by the figures below. However, we can also see a large incidence of women carrying out the bullying. This could be reflective of the fact that women have made significant progress in some areas in achieving managerial status.

GENDER OF THE BULLY

MALE	65%
FEMALE	35%

The NUJ survey overwhelmingly endorses the perception that bullies tend not to be isolated offenders.

HAD THE BULLY DONE THIS BEFORE?

YES	92%
NO	8%

This also shows the inadequacy of management’s responses to the issue as almost all bullies demonstrated a serial pattern of behaviour.

“The words of managers are taken for granted against those of lower grades.”

Almost all respondents indicated the bully was a manager or someone more senior within the organisation. This not only demonstrates that bullying is predominately a managerial vice but it also highlights the inadequacy of procedures which seek to deal only with bullying from a peer to peer perspective. Equally, internal procedures which instruct managers to investigate other managers are seen to be fatally flawed.

PROCEDURES AND POLICIES

“There is a culture of managers covering up for other managers.”

Less than half the respondents had asked the employer for an investigation. This should not be seen as an unwillingness of the member to tackle the issue but shows an alarming lack of faith in procedures.



ASKED EMPLOYER FOR INVESTIGATION

YES	47%
NO	53%

“I think it’s essential for external mediators to be brought in.”

One of the most shocking conclusions of our survey concerns perceptions of internal and non-independent procedures for dealing with the issue.

WERE YOU SATISFIED WITH THE PROCEDURES?

YES	6%
NO	94%



The NUJ is calling for an independent element to company and organisation procedures. Current procedures are failing crucially in two areas. Firstly they are not solving the issue and bullying continues to be rife. Secondly they do not have the backing of staff who have little faith in management's willingness to address the root of the problem.

”Too often managers can contain complaints about bullying and just ignore it.”

WERE YOU SATISFIED WITH THE FINAL OUTCOME?

YES	6%
NO	94%

Members see the present procedures as a way for managers to act in defence of their colleagues and ‘cover-up’ cases of bullying or harassment.

“The NUJ helped my colleague get re-instated after being sacked by a bully, but he’d lost his house and confidence and it took him ages to recover.”

Although many members have continued working within the broadcasting industry despite being bullied, a large proportion (32%) of the sample experienced negative effects either in employment terms or their future prospects.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

LEFT OUT OF DESPERATION	15%
CONTRACTS TERMINATED OR ENDED	5%
CAREER PROGRESS BLOCKED	7%
SOUGHT OTHER EMPLOYMENT	5%

The desperate concern and fear of many members becomes clear from the comments they have written. What is emphasised is the need to end the widespread practice that allows bullying to thrive unchallenged. Members endorse the view of the National Union of Journalists that an independent and transparent system is required.

SOME EXAMPLES OF THE COMMENTS RECEIVED IN OUR SURVEY

“I was so afraid of writing this that I disguised my handwriting.”

“The BBC’s disciplinary and grievance procedures are a sham. There needs to be independent arbitration.”

“He dragged a radio colleague by her hair and threw a typewriter across the newsroom.”

“Managers must be informed that the penalty for bullying is the sack.”

“When I raised the issue the managers just closed ranks and the situation became worse.”

“My manager set other staff against me and I became a no-go zone.”

“I think the management chose to look away.”

“Staff need to know they can go to a more senior manager and ‘grass’ without recrimination.”

“There should be someone wholly independent at the BBC.”

“Bullying should be grounds for constructive dismissal with massive compensation for victims.”

“People who lodge complaints/grievances are treated as trouble-makers and discipline problems.”

“No one makes such complaints lightly. It’s a very stressful experience.”

“Too scared to be identified.”

“Put your neck on the line for all those who are being bullied and you’ll be named as a troublemaker.”

“I am far from the only one who doesn’t feel comfortable at work but we don’t know if we can or dare speak up.”

“The fear is of reprisals and devaluing of your career.”

“The only way to stop these reigns of terror is to subject the perpetrators to 360 degree appraisal by their own staff.”

“The culture in the office was one of division.”

“I think the most important thing is to make people aware that bullying will not be tolerated.”

“I felt unable to do anything as I was on contract.”

“It was hard to prove as incidents were small. Diversity is not practised here.”

“I’ve never suffered bullying in the workplace, but I’m aware that it happens.”

“Senior managers do nothing about the culture of bullying because they believe it keeps discipline.”

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