



# **Covering protests and demonstrations as a journalist or media worker: A Bectu guide**

**August 2024**

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# Newsgathering at protests and demonstrations

In recent years, the UK has seen a number of large demonstrations and protests where newsgatherers have faced increased risks. Rising far right and anti-migrant activity has seen a number of violent actions break out, with many media workers directly targeted, having their equipment smashed or being racially harassed<sup>1</sup>. Large demonstrations as part of the Black Lives Matter movement, Palestinian solidarity and actions by groups like Just Stop Oil have become political focal points of the past few years.

There have been a number of arrests of journalists<sup>2</sup> in the UK – as the Government has strengthened police powers around protests and demonstrations. This included the arrest of a Bectu member who was covering a Just Stop Oil protest<sup>3</sup> in May 2023.

The introduction of two pieces of new legislation have added to this; the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 and the Public Order Act 2023. The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 has been highly criticised as being deeply authoritarian, and impacting the right to protest and freedom of expression. The increased powers given to police under the act did not explicitly set an exception of journalists.

After the arrests of several journalists following the 2022 act passing, there have been legal changes to safeguard the rights of journalists covering demonstrations and protests. The 2023 Public Order Bill<sup>4</sup> specifies that police cannot use their powers solely to prevent a person from reporting on or observing protests. This came into force in May 2023, with the exemption of where journalists are suspected to be causing another offence such as public nuisance.

## Journalists and the right to protest

The UN Human Rights Committee explicitly outlines the importance of safeguarding journalists in monitoring or reporting on demonstrations and protests. They are entitled to protection in order to carry out newsgathering, to ensure they are not subject to harassment and their equipment must not be confiscated or damaged, regardless of whether the assembly is lawful or not<sup>5</sup>.

## Police powers in relation to journalists

As of July 2023, the Public Order Act states that “A constable may not exercise a police power for the sole purpose of preventing a person from observing or reporting on a protest”, as well as in relation to activities related to the protest, protest-related offences, or a protest related breach of an injunction<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/media/article/2024/aug/06/journalists-union-calls-for-action-over-increased-violence-against-news-gatherers>

<sup>2</sup> [JUSTICE-Public-Order-Bill-Journalist-Protection-Amendment-January-2023.pdf](https://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/public-order-bill-journalist-protection-amendment-january-2023.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/richfelgate/status/1655199737471959041>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-order-bill-overarching-documents/public-order-bill-factsheet>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/advice\\_information/explainer-monitoring-reporting-on-protests/](https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/advice_information/explainer-monitoring-reporting-on-protests/)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/15/section/17#:~:text=\(1\)A%20constable%20may%20not,or%20reporting%20on%20a%20protest.&text=\(c\)activities%20related%20to%20a,exercise%20apart%20from%20this%20section.](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/15/section/17#:~:text=(1)A%20constable%20may%20not,or%20reporting%20on%20a%20protest.&text=(c)activities%20related%20to%20a,exercise%20apart%20from%20this%20section.)

Police guidance from the National College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs' Council<sup>7</sup> clearly states that “the police should ensure that they do not interfere unnecessarily with journalists doing their work, even if inadvertently”, although journalist status does not exempt obligation to comply with police orders.

However, as relatively new legislation, this attempt to safeguard journalists may not be upheld in practice. Where this is breached, there may be cause for legal action.

## National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists

Although not directly related to the arrests of journalists, there have been wider commitments to improve conditions for journalists and the relationship between the police and newsgatherers. In 2021, DCMS and the Home Office launched an action plan for the safety of journalists, setting out a plan to respond to high levels of harassment and threats to journalists' safety. As part of this, the plan commits to better training for police and journalists, and a Journalist Safety Officer was appointed at 22 police forces across the UK, including Police Scotland and Police Service Northern Ireland.

## Guidance for media workers covering protests

For journalists and media workers covering protests, there are several things to be mindful of to ensure your safety, wellbeing, and legal compliance.

Some organisations, such as the BBC<sup>8</sup>, provide specific requirements and control measures for those working in crowds, protests and demonstrations, as well as a series of compulsory trainings for staff before they can work in these situations. However, for many, especially those who are freelancing, there is less support available.

It is essential that you put your safety above anything else and take precautions seriously. Your employer or engager also has some duties to ensure your safety and wellbeing and should not put you in danger while doing your job. Note that this is general guidance and that depending on the situation, journalists should consider specialist legal, security and safety advice.

## Preparation

- **Know your rights**  
Freedom of expression and the right to receive and impart information are recognised and protected by law, and journalists and their equipment are entitled to protection for newsgathering processes. If you want more information on your rights at a protest, you can contact Liberty<sup>9</sup>. Your employer or engager also has some responsibility for your safety and wellbeing<sup>10</sup>.
- **Plan ahead**  
Before attending a protest or demonstration, you should do your research and prepare accordingly. Understand the nature of the demonstration in order to make a risk assessment ahead of time, although even for peaceful gatherings, you should come prepared that things could escalate quickly. The Rory Peck Trust offers a

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<sup>7</sup> <https://assets.production.copweb.aws.college.police.uk/s3fs-public/2023-06/National-protest-operational-advice.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/safety/resources/aztopics/demonstrations-protests-crowds#legalbbcrequirements>

<sup>9</sup> [EXPLAINER: Monitoring & Reporting on Protests - Liberty \(libertyhumanrights.org.uk\)](https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/explainer-monitoring-reporting-on-protests)

<sup>10</sup> <https://bectu.org.uk/topic/health-and-safety/>

helpdesk service for freelance journalists planning to report on protests or civil unrest, offering guidance on physical, digital, psychological or legal risks as well as risk assessments and planning<sup>11</sup>.

- **Travel and communication**

Map the area and plan your travel, including an escape route, ahead of time. Make sure your phone is charged and you have a portable charger, although be aware that you may not have mobile phone signal at large demonstrations. If possible, do not attend alone and ensure you have emergency contact numbers to hand<sup>12</sup>.

Nominate your employer or engager, a colleague or a personal contact, someone not attending as a point of contact, who knows where you are and what time you plan to return home.

- **Equipment**

Prepare your equipment so you have sufficient memory and backup, spare batteries and powerpacks. When considering risks, use this to inform your choice of what to carry. For example, if there is a chance of violence, it may make more sense to work with a smaller camera so you can be more mobile.

- **Insurance**

Check your insurance, and make sure you and your equipment are adequately insured. You can speak to your employer or engager about what they can provide.

- **Identification and clothing**

Depending on what you find in your risk assessment, it may make sense to clearly identify yourself as press, for example, using an armband. Avoid loose fitting clothing or lanyards that might be grabbed. Ensure you carry your UK Press Card Authority (UKPCA) press pass so that you can be identified as accredited press.

### Press passes

For journalists covering protests and demonstrations, proof of genuine newsgathering is essential, with official policing guidance<sup>13</sup> recognising UKPCA press cards as the primary form of identification.

Bectu is a gatekeeper for the UKPCA, so Bectu members who meet the criteria, including adequate proof of their journalistic work, can be issued a UKPCA press pass. Journalists should ensure that these are in date with the number on the back clearly visible.

**It is essential that as a press pass holder, you carry this with you at all times if you are planning on covering demonstrations and protests. Be prepared to show this to police.**

## Staying safe

- **Your safety comes first.** Show respect, follow police orders and don't get into arguments. If you are seen to be obstructing the work of the police, you may be committing a criminal offence. You may also be committing an offence if you are seen to be causing 'public nuisance'<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, be careful of your actions that

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<sup>11</sup> <https://rorypecktrust.org/how-we-help/helpdesk/>

<sup>12</sup> Some employers, such as the BBC have a designated safety team: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/safety/contacts/safety-contacts/> Check with your employer or engager what is available to you.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.met.police.uk/foi-ai/metropolitan-police/disclosure-2023/january-2023/instructions-officers-regarding-journalists-covering-just-stop-oil-protests/>

<sup>14</sup> [EXPLAINER: Monitoring & Reporting on Protests - Liberty \(libertyhumanrights.org.uk\)](https://libertyhumanrights.org.uk/explainer-monitoring-reporting-on-protests)

may cause things to escalate in a large crowd. You may want to identify yourself as press to the police. Try to avoid attending alone, and if you must, buddy up with other journalists and media workers.

- **Stay on the edge of crowds and maintain situational awareness**  
Don't head into the centre of crowds, so that you can get out if you need to. Keep aware of what's happening around you and where you think there is an increased risk or something doesn't feel right, be ready to withdraw from the situation. Consider your position, for example when interviewing, so that you have a view of what's happening around you at all times. The Committee to Protect Journalists have a helpful guide on situational awareness<sup>15</sup>.
- **Keep an eye out for fellow journalists**  
Look out for other journalists, introduce yourself, and stick together where possible, especially if you are alone.
- **Prioritise your wellbeing**  
Covering a protest can take a lot of energy, physically and mentally, especially if the protest or demonstration has a direct impact on you, for example if you are a Black journalist covering anti-racist demonstrations or far-right activity. Make sure you are also looking to support others who may be more impacted. Ask your employer or engager what they can provide and make them aware of any accessibility needs. The Film and TV Charity helpline is available for those working in film and TV<sup>16</sup>.

## Being responsible

- **Responsible journalism**  
Make sure you are following the Independent Press Standards Organisation's (IPSO) Editor's Code of Practice<sup>17</sup> and the National Union of Journalists' code of conduct<sup>18</sup> on ethical coverage. IPSO provides guidance on reporting major incidents<sup>19</sup>.
- **Don't amplify harmful actors**  
It is not responsible journalism to amplify those who seek to divide. Data & Society has some helpful guidance in its Oxygen of Amplification report<sup>20</sup>. Be vigilant about misinformation, disinformation and conscientious about how your footage will be construed.
- **Filming and photographing**  
There are no laws about filming in public places in the UK, unless this is for criminal or terrorist purposes. However, you should consider how identifiable the people you are filming or photographing are and think about gaining the consent of people you intend to film or photograph, especially if there are children present. There are guidelines available from Film London<sup>21</sup>.
- **Behaving responsibly**  
Conducting yourself responsibly, by keeping your distance when tensions are rising, treating others with respect, following police orders, and avoiding aggravating tensions, for example by filming in someone's face or asking

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<sup>15</sup> [Situational awareness: A guide for journalists - Committee to Protect Journalists \(cpj.org\)](https://www.cpj.org/situational-awareness-a-guide-for-journalists)

<sup>16</sup> [Support Line | The Film and TV Charity \(filmtvcharity.org.uk\)](https://www.filmtvcharity.org.uk/support-line)

<sup>17</sup> [The Editors' Code of Practice - IPSO](https://www.ipso.co.uk/the-editors-code-of-practice)

<sup>18</sup> [National Union of Journalists \(NUJ\): Code of conduct](https://www.nuj.org.uk/code-of-conduct)

<sup>19</sup> [Guidance on reporting major incidents - IPSO](https://www.ipso.co.uk/guidance-on-reporting-major-incidents)

<sup>20</sup> [3-PART-3 Oxygen of Amplification DS-1.pdf \(datasociety.net\)](https://www.datasociety.net/3-PART-3_Oxygen_of_Amplification_DS-1.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> <https://filmlondon.org.uk/resource/filming-people>

aggravating questions while tensions are high, is not only responsible, but will help to keep you safe.

## What to do if things escalate

- **What to do if you are harassed or targeted**  
If you are harassed, targeted, or abused while covering a demonstration or protest, you may want to report this to the police, and you should report it to your employer or engager who should offer you support. You can also speak to your union rep or contact Bectu. The Media Lawyers' Association also has guidance for journalists facing online abuse or harassment<sup>22</sup>.
- **What to do if you are kettled at a protest**  
Sometimes, police will surround a demonstration to control the crowd by keeping them in one place, in a tactic called kettling. They may keep the crowd there for several hours and journalists can frequently be caught up in these. If you find yourself in this situation, you should seek to show your press pass to a police officer so that you can be released, though be aware that police take a discretionary approach to this. Netpol<sup>23</sup> and Liberty<sup>24</sup> both provide guidance on kettling.
- **What to do if the police demand your equipment or footage**  
You do not legally have to hand over equipment to, or delete any footage or images at the instruction of police, unless they have a reasonable expectation that it will be useful to the investigation, and they hold a court order<sup>25</sup>.
- **What if a journalist is arrested covering a demonstration or protest?**  
Where arrests have taken place, journalists have then been released without charge shortly after, and there are a number of cases where compensation has been paid. Action has been taken against the police for detaining and arresting journalists, with a number of high-profile cases over recent years. A case was settled this year, ten years after the Met detained three journalists at a BLM protest in 2014<sup>26</sup>. A review into the arrest of three journalists covering Just Stop Oil protests by Hertfordshire police was found to be unlawful<sup>27</sup>, and compensation was paid by Kent police to a photographer who had his equipment seized by police at his home after photographing a demonstration at Napier barracks in 2021<sup>28</sup>. It is possible to make complaints directly to a police force or through the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC)<sup>29</sup>. With the introduction of the 2023 Public Order Bill, there may be more scope for responsive legal action if journalist arrests are made.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.nuj.org.uk/asset/1127B42F%2DEC5C%2D4B49%2D901DF56B85A9A73D/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://netpol.org/guide-to-kettles/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://netpol.org/guide-to-kettles/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.college.police.uk/app/engagement-and-communication/media-relations>

<sup>26</sup> <https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/journalists-detained-london-met-police-black-lives-matter-protest/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/herts-police-journalist-arrests-review/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/journalist-photographer-arrested-napier-barracks-protest-kent-andy-aitchison/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/advice-information/how-do-i-make-a-complaint-against-the-police/>

## Other resources for journalists and media workers

There are other sources of guidance for journalists covering protests, which cover other aspects such as physical and digital safety. There are also many international sources for newsgatherers and media workers:

- Liberty: monitoring or reporting on protests  
[https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/advice\\_information/explainer-monitoring-reporting-on-protests/](https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/advice_information/explainer-monitoring-reporting-on-protests/)
- Committee to Protect Journalists: resources for journalists covering protests  
<https://cpj.org/resources-for-journalists-covering-protests/>
- NUJ: advice on covering protests  
<https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/nuj-advice-on-covering-protests.html>  
The NUJ has also done quite a lot of work on training for police forces on working with journalists.  
<https://www.nuj.org.uk/advice/journalists-safety-toolkit.html>  
Journalists' safety toolkit  
<https://www.journalists-safety.tools/>
- Media Defence: Reporting at protests factsheet  
<https://www.mediadefence.org/resource-hub/resources/reporting-at-protests-factsheet/>
- NCTJ: Safety and resilience for journalists  
[Safety and resilience for journalists - National Council for the Training of Journalists \(nctj.com\)](https://www.nctj.com/safety-and-resilience-for-journalists)
- Rory Peck Trust  
The Rory Peck Trust is dedicated to the support, safety and welfare of freelance newsgatherers around the world.  
<https://rorypecktrust.org/about-us/>
- BBC safety guidance on demonstrations, protests and crowds  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/safety/resources/aztopics/demonstrations-protests-crowds#legalbbcrequirements>
- Reporters without borders  
<https://safety.rsf.org/safety-tips-for-journalists-covering-protests/>
- The Lenfest Institute links a number of helpful resources here  
<https://www.lenfestinstitute.org/solutions-resources/a-journalists-guide-to-safely-and-responsibly-covering-protests/>