

'Dear Editor': Race, Readers' Letters and the Local Press

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I wonder how many people realize that in 1951 we had 19 people known to have leprosy and in 1959 the total had jumped to 317 known sufferers in England. In five years' time, at the present rate immigrants are coming into this country, I suppose it will be 1,000 with leprosy. In 1939 there was no leprosy in England, and tuberculosis had been stamped out. Now our hospitals are full again.¹

The above letter was written by Donald Finney (the then chairman of the Birmingham Immigration Control Association) in 1961 as part of his campaign against 'coloured' immigration from the Commonwealth and the British colonies. Based on the familiar racist argumentative strategy that 'immigration brings/is disease', the example is taken from a particularly successful letter-writing campaign in the Smethwick ward of Birmingham during the late 1950s and early 1960s which, following the now infamously racist general election campaign, culminated in the election of Peter Griffiths in 1964. The letters columns of local newspapers during this period—particularly the *Smethwick Telephone*—laid themselves open for any amount of racist propaganda arguing that immigrants were unclean, malingering dole scroungers; that immigration was a communist plot; that intermarriage weakened the race; and so on. The campaign was so successful, the above-quoted Finney later bragged, that the *Birmingham Evening Dispatch* would print four out of five of his violently racist letters. With such wide dissemination of his arguments, and the legitimacy they gained from being printed in the local newspaper, Griffiths'

racist campaign received widespread popular support.

Local newspapers continue to publish readers' letters which express overtly racist sentiment. In that sense little has changed over the past forty years. What is perhaps new, and is undoubtedly noteworthy, is that currently editors are willing to exercise their editorial skills and talents to redraft readers' letters which race relations legislation would deem illegitimate in order to secure their publication in the local press.

Studies of the local and regional press have persistently revealed its significance in setting and articulating agendas for local debate. The close relationship between local newspapers and the communities which buy them becomes particularly evident on these newspapers' letters pages. Jackson, for example, states that the 'correspondence column is seen by editors as a means of promoting reader participation and of obtaining useful guidelines about local opinion', while Allan argues that letters to the editor represent nothing less than newspapers' differential perceptions of 'the ideological boundaries of *legitimate* or *fair* comment'.² Readers' letters, then, are a particularly rich source of data from which to establish the perceptions which local newspapers have of themselves and their audience(s), and also of those individuals and/or groups excluded from the position 'We'.

Letters are selected and edited in accordance with the political identity of the newspaper, the (often only perceived) values and preferences of their buying

readership, and other more technical and professional requirements of space and balance. In the selection and placement of letters, newspapers construct debates (or arguments) within and between letters, simultaneously signalling the pertinence of the included letters to the subject being debated and thereby acknowledging and (depending on how the letter is presented) legitimating their contents. The occurrence of prejudice, rejectionist strategies and 'everyday racism' in such letters, therefore, stands as an indication of the extent to which such racist practices have 'become part of what is seen as "normal" by the dominant group'.³

The structured and directed manner in which texts achieve their persuasive goal(s) is of central importance in evaluating the power of argumentative dialogue—all the more so when we acknowledge the *discursive* potential of texts to modify power relations in other fields. Our focus on the argumentative features of these readers' letters is therefore informed by the desire to analyse how argument is used to support the expression of delicate or controversial social opinions, the potential 'effect' of such argumentation in regulating the (ethnic) boundaries of the British public sphere, and how readers' letters achieve such pragmatic and rhetorical goals while simultaneously 'protecting the speaker against unwanted [negative] inferences about his or her ethnic attitudes'.⁴

This article analyses how issues of 'race', racism and ethnic minorities were written about in 'letters to the editor' printed in local and regional newspapers during recent UK general election campaigns. The letters analysed were taken from a longitudinal study of the reporting by such newspapers (including the *Yorkshire Post*, the *Dewsbury Reporter* and the *Bradford Target*) of the constituency campaigns in ten selected West Yorkshire constituencies during the UK general elections in 1987, 1992, 1997 and 2001.⁵

The media, racism and electioneering

Dummett has shown that 'up to 1964 there was not much reporting in national newspapers about "race" in an English context, and there was a general consensus that this was a matter which was outside politics and ought to remain so.' Indeed, when the Race Relations Board was set up in 1952 'it was not thought that Britain would be an area of study.'⁶ But this consensus collapsed in the late 1950s when 'race' and racialised reporting rose in prominence, particularly in certain local newspapers. Indeed, the racist propaganda used by the Conservative Party in the Smethwick constituency of Birmingham during the six years prior to the 1964 general election, faithfully reproduced in the pages of the *Smethwick Telephone* and (to a lesser extent) in the *Birmingham Evening Dispatch*, represents a watershed for the place and prominence of 'race' in electioneering.

In June 1961, for example, an editorial printed in the *Telephone* read: 'The *Telephone* has no colour problem but we recognize that Smethwick does have a colour problem, and that an all out effort must be made to solve it *now*.' Further, significant column centimetres were filled with stories containing 'the slightest hint of sexual malpractice by a coloured immigrant', while hardly a week passed 'without the familiar cluster of letters under headlines such as: "The Growing Colour Problem"; "Why should people integrate if they don't want to?"; [and] "The face of the Midlands is fast being known as the Black Hole of Calcutta".'⁷

In the run-up to the 1964 general election, there was a build-up in racism and in racist political campaigning. In Southall, west London, the Southall Residents' Association was formed to protest against the growing number of Indians settling in the area and against 'their' schools being 'swamped' by Indian children in particular. Similarly in Smethwick, Peter

Griffiths, the Conservative candidate in the forthcoming election, wrote:

Apparently the plight of English children held back by the presence of non-English speaking children in a class doesn't bother the immigrant leaders. Well, it bothers the Smethwick Tories and our kids are going to get a square deal in spite of the combined opposition of the Socialists and their immigrant friends.

Letter to the *Smethwick Telephone*, 17 Jan. 1964

During the Smethwick election, the same Peter Griffiths campaigned against the incumbent Labour MP Patrick Gordon-Walker, using the slogan: 'If you want a nigger neighbour, vote Labour.'

Although the campaign received a lot of publicity, very little of it was critical. When the Labour MP protested, even announcing that 'gangs of children had been organised to chant' the slogan, Griffiths told Brian Priestley (the able anti-racist Midlands correspondent from *The Times*): 'I would not condemn anyone who said that. I regard it as a manifestation of popular feeling.'⁸ Meanwhile, elsewhere in the country, Sir Alec Douglas Home was claiming that his Commonwealth Immigration Act had excluded nearly a million coloured immigrants.

Despite all the focus on immigration, no one was quite sure how the issue would affect electoral results—that is, until the result of Smethwick was announced: here the Tories had beaten Labour, achieving a 7.5 per cent swing against the national average of a 3.5 per cent swing to Labour. This was, in the words of Layton-Henry, 'a shattering result and a disaster for race relations as it appeared to show that racial prejudices could be effectively exploited for electoral advantage'.⁹ Dummett argues that, since this time, British political discourse has assumed two things: first, that 'the British masses are racist'; and second,

that in comparison with the masses all political leaders and 'Establishment' people are . . . liberal and must bend their efforts to restrain-

ing or quietening down any popular signs of racism, brushing it under the carpet where they don't succeed in cleaning it away, and that [while] any open opposition to racism will lose votes . . . any encouragement of racism is in bad taste, a rather cheap and unsportsmanlike way of winning votes which the more respectable type of politician will not stoop to since to do so is a breach of acceptable rules of the political game. These assumptions have . . . made it possible for newspapers to adopt positions defending racist measures while criticising certain people for acting in a more racist manner than them, or for using intemperate language.¹⁰

After this 1964 turning point, both press and politicians were to become obsessed with the importance of 'the race issue' without even beginning to face up to what the real issue was. Hence, race and racism have been all but erased from mainstream political campaigning, resulting in a proliferation of racism in minority and subaltern politics. As Brown has argued, the 'growth and development of public racism in Great Britain in the post-war period has been made possible by and been inexplicably guaranteed its political impact upon the electorate, because of a profound and deliberate official political erasure of the signifier of "race" from public political discourse'.¹¹ Consequently, race has not featured prominently as a topic of campaigning or debate during recent elections. Where 'race' does feature, politicians usually attempt to brush it under the carpet—and not just racism and prejudicial opinion, but any mention of issues which may be viewed as their 'playing the race card'.

One story which did generate a significant level of coverage and debate during the 1997 general election was the broadcasting of a British National Party election address. This was not the first time fascists had used the 'representation of the people' electoral legislation to further their own ends. In the run-up to the 1974 general election, for example, the

chairman of the National Front—which was then Britain’s leading racist party—argued that ‘every opportunity to cultivate the mass media, and particularly the press ought to be exploited.’¹² All of their resources were put into forwarding candidates and putting up deposits, and they were rewarded with a party election broadcast. In reaction, Martin Webster, the NF’s then National Activities Organiser, suggested that ‘it was money well spent for the publicity. “Where else could you buy five minutes on both television channels [the BBC and ITV] for thirteen and a half grand?”’¹³

In 1997 the BNP repeated this approach, being granted uncritical access to several minutes of peak-time viewing. The broadcast was clever in as much as it tapped into popular racist fears of non-white immigration and of Britain being under threat of foreign invasion, but did so (apparently) without breaching programming codes of decency. The BBC broadcast this racist propaganda as they received it. Channel 4, however, identified a problem with the piece: it showed identifiable black people whose permission had not been requested or given, and therefore did breach ITC guidelines. Channel 4 requested a re-edited version of the broadcast, but the BNP couldn’t deliver it on time, so it didn’t go out. ITV, however, made some edits ‘for legal reasons’ and broadcast it, and Channel 5 made necessary changes *on behalf of* the BNP and broadcast the finished piece. As Sarita Malik has argued, what the broadcast of the BNP’s address made clear was that ‘despite certain regulatory policies that command degrees of objectivity and cultural sensitivity in television news and current affairs, these do not necessarily eliminate racist material, and broadcasting channels do have a considerable degree of autonomy and can exercise their editorial control *when they see fit*.’¹⁴

‘Race’, immigration and readers’ letters

In the run-up to the 2001 general election, ‘race’ and issues of ‘racial difference’ were more visible than they had been since the 1970s. Among other stories, several politicians made prominent speeches on ‘race’ and ‘foreign-ness’ in the weeks before the election (John Townend’s claims that the English were becoming a ‘mongrel race’; William Hague’s ‘foreign land’ speech; Robin Cook’s ‘chicken tikka masala Britain’), and there were widespread reported claims of an ‘asylum crisis’ affecting/afflicting Britain. Finally, the disturbances in Bradford, Leeds and nearby Lancashire milltowns had put the poor ‘race relations’ between white and Muslim communities firmly back on the national news agenda, contributing to the seeming salience of ‘race’ and ‘race relations’. This is because in the part of Yorkshire studied—which includes Bradford, Batley, Dewsbury, Halifax and parts of Leeds—‘race’ is usually *recoded* as a primordial or invariant cultural difference, ensuring that the ‘Muslim culture’ of the region’s largest visible minority communities ‘acquires an immutable character, and hence becomes a homologue for race’.¹⁵

Despite this perceived importance, ‘race’ and racialised stories were not frequently reported during the 2001 election campaign. As in the previous general election, the largest three political parties attempted to ignore, or at least sideline, issues of ‘race’ and racism. The majority of politicians from the three main parties signed a Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) agreement not to ‘play the race card’, contributing to the erasure of ‘race’. What this did was effectively to paper over a range of issues, from the government’s racialised (racist?) policies of immigration and ‘dispersal’ of refugees to the clear and continuing inequalities of power, status and wealth in significant sections of Britain’s minority ethnic populations.

Whether news stories touching on these issues should be reported *at all* during this period was a matter of some debate in the papers sampled: editorial teams were acutely aware that during disturbances in Oldham, the local newspaper, the *Oldham Chronicle*—had been fire-bombed following criticisms that its reporting of Oldham's Muslim communities had been prejudicial. Journalists, while recognising the 'newsworthiness' of such stories, were unsure of how to cover them without inflaming passions and touching raw nerves in their readerships (both white and black). The opinion of one deputy editor on this subject characterised this hesitancy. She said:

What *is* inflammatory? Something might not be, but if it starts a riot in this town and somebody's killed, suddenly that *was* inflammatory. How do you know? . . . We have to be very careful.

It is in such a context that letters commenting on 'race', immigration and asylum (three issues often erroneously lumped together as if coreferential) were placed. Against this background of uncertainty (which of course suggests, albeit symbolically, that 'race issues are dangerous issues'), local newspapers used readers' letters simultaneously to acknowledge and distance themselves from opinions expressed on 'race', immigration and asylum, since such opinions were included in the arguments of their readers. The following letter, significantly signed by a Bradford Muslim man, is typical of the form and content of letters such as these:

In this country we take pride in giving everyone freedom of speech. However, we also give in to political correctness and try to stop MPs like John Townend from speaking their minds. If people feel that race is a major issue in this country, they should be allowed to speak their minds.

Mohammed Javaid (*Bradford Target*, 10 May 2001, p. 6)

'Asylum seekers' and 'what to do

about them' were other topics which letter writers felt were being swept under the carpet:

The public, I suggest, want to see: . . . An acknowledgement that there is a problem with asylum seekers which needs urgent attention. This is not a racial issue at all, but common sense. Dash it all, this country is full.

Concerned, *Mirfield Reporter*, 25 May 2001, p. 6

In both the letters just quoted, the writers draw on a form of *argumentum ad populum*, where the opinion of some number of people is used in arguing for the acceptance of the standpoint. In the first, the arguer repeatedly uses plural pronouns—we, they, people, this country (as a metonym for 'the people in this country')—to imply, not just that it is acceptable to talk about race, but that 'we' have a *right* to do so; in the second letter, the arguer uses a more direct use of the (fallacious) argument scheme, arguing that it is 'the public', and not him/herself, that wants to acknowledge 'a problem with asylum seekers'. Remarkably, in this second letter the *argumentum ad populum* is combined with another argumentative fallacy—the *argumentum ad consequentiam*, or the mistake of confusing facts with value judgements. This fallacy arises, not where the arguer concludes that these asylum seekers are a 'problem', but in the support offered for this conclusion. Here the arguer offers the belief that 'this country is full', a position which is, by the arguer's own admission, simply 'common sense' and as such rooted in ideology and belief rather than in any existent reality.

A journalist we interviewed suggested that occasionally, in order to include the opinions of a letter in a less prejudicial form, a process of construction akin to the customary 'forward-and-back' flow of the editorial process was adopted between editor and the letter writer:

We look at the letters and we actually write back to people and say 'if this was rephrased different it wouldn't be racist', because some

of them they write and say 'it's different for them, they can get houses, they can get this' and telling a very good tale. Then others it might be [here] would be better without them', and I know what they are saying. And they are right.

While we did not find evidence of this occurring in all newspapers, the realisation that some letters were edited and rewritten so that they were *not* overtly prejudiced leads us to question what on earth they argued originally! Take the following example: here the irrepressible Peter Broadley (who had five letters and a riposte to one of his earlier racist contributions printed in this five-week sample alone) starts by making a similar point to that aired in the letters just quoted, concerning the way 'the people' (in this case a racist politician) are restricted from 'talking about race'. Following this opening, he shifts the argument on to a wider topic: the apparent inattentiveness of politicians to anti-white racism.

So William Hague has forced two Tory MPs to withdraw their remarks on the so-called race issue. Yet it seems to me that what was being said was accurate . . . We have had the inquiry findings into the death of Stephen Lawrence rammed down our national throats over the last three years . . . I wonder if we will have the same public inquiry, costing millions, recommendations, politicians and plaques in Oldham at the site where the elderly D-Day veteran was attacked? Equality is all anyone wants—no more no less.

Peter Broadley, *Evening Courier*, 25 May 2001, p. 6

This argumentative reversal—'We're the real victims!'—ran through much of the press reporting of the Oldham riots, focused as it was on supposed 'white no-go areas' identified by Eric Hewitt, the chief superintendent of Oldham police. However, to draw an equivalence between the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence and the robbery of an elderly white man by a group of British Pakistani Muslims in Oldham—an incident which the victim, Walter Chamberlain, *repeat-*

edly maintained was *not* a racist attack—is extraordinarily perverse. In addition, undercutting Broadley's position is an assumption that 'racism is racism', regardless of whether the victim is white or black—an assumption which inaccurately simplifies racism into being solely about social *events* based on personal prejudice, rather than social *processes* based on structural inequality and domination.

The following excerpts from a single letter contain examples of all the textual and argumentative features identified in the previous letters:

[1] Most British taxpaying citizens of every age, gender, colour, country or origin or religious persuasion are increasingly worried by the inability of the Government to keep a check on the number of immigrants . . .

[2] Illegal immigrants should, as the Tory Party has suggested, be held in secure accommodation and sent back as soon as declared illegal . . .

[3] This is an important issue which must come under scrutiny and be openly discussed during this election campaign by politicians of all parties who have any claim to credibility because we, the British people, are being ignored and are deeply worried for the future.

A. Hill, *Evening Courier*, 26 May 2001, p. 12

The *argumentum ad populum* in paragraph 1 represents a particularly skilful introduction to the claims of the letter. First, it is not merely 'most citizens' in general who are taken to agree with the arguer's position, but the assumedly more respectable 'British *taxpaying* citizens'. By making his position appear as the preserve of the law-abiding, decent members of the public, the arguer attempts to suggest that its content is more reputable than it actually is. Second, because the citizens who are 'increasingly worried' by the number of immigrants are not just elderly white men (like him) but of 'every age, gender, colour, country of origin or religious persuasion', the

arguer implies two things: that this is 'not a racial issue at all' and (given that he labels these citizens 'British citizens') that he adopts an inclusive view of Britain and what it is to 'be British'.

As is usual in prejudiced talk, the argument is driven principally by fear. The arguer is, in paragraph 1, 'worried by the inability of the Government to keep a check on the number of immigrants' and in paragraph 3, like all 'British people', 'deeply worried for the future'. While the exact focus of this fear is never adequately identified (which is, after all, what makes it prejudicial) we can infer that it is based in part on a general fear of illegality and crime, in part on the archetypal 'numbers pathology' present in talk about immigrants, and in part on an assumed connection between crime and there being 'too many of 'em!' These preoccupations combine in paragraph 2 to form an extraordinary tautology: 'Illegal immigrants should . . . be held in secure accommodation and sent back as soon as declared illegal.'

Prospective parliamentary candidates and party officials also used the letters page to draw attention to themes and issues which they felt were not being accorded the emphasis they deserved. One such letter was written by the British National Party (BNP). Following its successful use of a party election broadcast, the BNP appears to have picked up the dominant thread of political marketing and localised its campaign:

Mr Alan Fletcher (Letters, 4 May) says that the agreement between the Labour, Conservative and Liberal parties to veto discussion on race and immigration is 'a denial of free speech.' Which of course it is. Not one of the major parties is willing to engage in a grown-up debate on these very important matters, why? . . . The British National Party will be standing in the Dewsbury constituency at the General Election and again the people of Dewsbury will be offered a very real alternative to the increasingly dishonest major parties. A vote for the BNP will be a far

more effective means of registering protest than will abstention.

Paul Buckden (Secretary Dewsbury BNP), *Dewsbury Reporter* and *Mirfield Reporter*, 18 May 2001, p. 6

Journalists' justification for publishing BNP campaigning correspondence was identical to the 'bystander logic' of the 1997 election campaign. A journalist working for the newspapers which printed this letter typified such an approach, arguing that when it came to the BNP, while the paper were 'looking to ensure that there's nothing racist or too inflammatory, they have a right to have their say as well . . . It's true what they say: if you let people say things, people know what they are voting for.'

Conclusion

In common with the dominant message of these and other letters on and about 'race', we also believe that 'race' and racialised identity need to be talked about. Central to this debate will inevitably be the concept of multiculturalism and what it means to live in a multicultural Britain. When, for example, the twelve-point 'race relations' plan of Bradford Council states that every section of the city has 'an equal right to maintain its own identity, culture, language, religion and customs,' why do we get surprised or indignant when white people want to preserve their (version of) English-ness? This is certainly not to argue that (white) 'British people's fears' of 'being swamped' by 'alien cultures,' to quote Margaret Thatcher, should be accommodated or strengthened via populist pandering; rather, they should be met head-on and confronted without equivocation.

However, this commitment to debate leaves editors of local papers confronting difficult decisions about which letters on issues of race, asylum and immigration might legitimately be included in the

public fora that their letters pages constitute. There are a number of sources of guidance which should assist their editorial decision-making. First, race relations legislation is unequivocal in identifying certain views which are racist and consequently illegitimate: any journalists worth their salt will be thoroughly acquainted with these legal restrictions. Even the journalist cited earlier, who was willing to help a reader to rewrite a letter, acknowledged that 'if this was rephrased different it wouldn't be racist [i.e. against the law]'. A second source of guidance is the NUJ Code of Conduct governing professional practice concerning the reporting of race and asylum issues. Again the guidance is unequivocal, though not statutory, with clause 10 stressing that journalists 'shall only mention a person's race, colour, creed, . . . if this information is strictly relevant'. More significantly, journalists 'shall neither originate nor process material which encourages discrimination, ridicule, prejudice or hatred on any of the above-mentioned grounds'.

But there is a tension between local journalists' desire to comply with the stipulations of the law and professional guidelines, and their further professional commitment to report comprehensively all voices and opinions from their community on race, immigration and asylum. This commitment stands even when journalists disagree strongly with the opinions expressed in certain letters. Newspaper editors are gatekeepers: they select letters for publication and thereby give form and shape to public debate within their letters pages. Their professional instincts steer them towards inclusion of the widest possible range of viewpoints. All of this is broadly desirable, as long as debate remains within the framework of legislation and regulation which outlaws offensive, harmful or injurious views. But we would argue that it is not the role of journalists to legitimise the illegitimate by redrafting letters ex-

pressing strongly racist views in order to render them publishable, even if the journalistic ambition is to explore the full range of debate in these contentious areas. As John Stuart Mill argued, ideas may have serious social effects, and therefore one exception to the full expression of opinions and views is that those who wish to express—and *reproduce*—opinionated argument must be responsible and mindful of the possibly detrimental consequences for members of communities in which they circulate: morality and decency must trump any quest for the broadest possible inclusion of views.

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Notes

- 1 Letter to the editor, *Smethwick Telephone*, 24 Feb. 1961, cited in P. Foot, *Immigration and Race in British Politics*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965, p. 34.
- 2 I. Jackson, *The Provincial Press and the Community*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1971, p. 152; S. Allan, *News Culture*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 1999, p. 93.
- 3 P. J. M. Essed, *Understanding Everyday Racism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, Newbury Park, CA, Sage, 1991, p. 288.
- 4 T. A. van Dijk, *Communicating Racism: Ethnic Prejudice in Thought and Talk*, Newbury Park, CA, Sage, 1987, p. 76.
- 5 The constituencies studied were: Batley & Spen; Bradford North; Bradford South; Colne Valley; Halifax; Leeds East; Leeds North; Leeds West; Pudsey; and Wakefield.
- 6 A. Dummett, *A Portrait of English Racism*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973, p. 242; R. Miles and A. Phizacklea, 'Some Introductory Observations on Race and Politics in Britain', in R. Miles and A. Phizacklea,

- eds, *Racism and Political Action in Britain*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 4.
- 7 Foot, *Immigration and Race in British Politics*, pp. 32, 38.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- 9 Z. Layton-Henry, *The Politics of Race in Britain*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1984, p. 57.
- 10 Dummett, *A Portrait of English Racism*, p. 244.
- 11 A. R. Brown, "'The other day I met a constituent of mine': A Theory of Anecdotal Racism", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1999, pp. 23–55, at 31–2.
- 12 Quoted in S. Malik, *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television*, London, Sage, 2002, p. 81.
- 13 M. Anwar, *Race and Politics: Ethnic Minorities and the British Political System*, London, Tavistock Publications, 1986, p. 137.
- 14 Malik, *Representing Black Britain*, p. 82.
- 15 K. Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1996, p. 150.