Media Panel Debate

What is the role of the media in promoting race, equality and community cohesion?

Chair: Clive Jones, CEO of ITV News and Runnymede Trustee
Panel Members:
- Deidre Forbes, Editor of the Voice
- Yasmin Alibhai-Brown: Columnist for the Independent, the Standard and others
- Chris Elliott: Managing Editor of the Guardian

Report by Vinay Menon, Visiting Hansard Scholar

In a country where over 96% of the workforce in the field of journalism is white, where issues concerning employment and promotions in newspapers are clad in antiquated traditions and conventions, and where stereotypes are perpetuated for lack of proper understanding of a particular race or community, it comes as little surprise that the role of the media in promoting race equality and community cohesion remains a contentious one.

That was the theme that underpinned the course of this panel debate, which focused squarely on the responsibilities of the media in building a discrimination-free society.

Chaired by Clive Jones, Chief Executive of ITV news, the panel discussion brought together Yasmin Alibhai-Brown of the Independent, Chris Elliott, Managing Editor of the Guardian, and Deidre Forbes, the young Editor of Britain’s foremost black newspaper, the Voice.

Described as a freewheeling session, with members of the audience invited to exchange views with the panel members, the debate was initiated by Clive Jones, who chose the lack of representation of minority groups within media organisations as his starting point.

‘British Journalism sadly is one of the last bastions of white supremacy’, Jones said, adding ‘While the rest of Britain has been enjoying a demographic revolution, the British media remains dreadfully unrepresentative and, in the phrase Greg Dyke once used of the BBC, it’s “hideously white”.

He went on to emphasise that despite the knowledge provided by the Journalism Forum (a combination of trades unions and employers) in their survey ‘Journalists at Work’ which had shown that across all forms of media in the UK 96% of journalists were white, figures have not improved since. ‘If it wasn’t for broadcasting … the figures would be even worse’, said Jones, as ‘in the regional press in particular the employment statistics are even more stark and minimal. In some of the cities of the UK where we have the most diverse mix of populations some of the local newspapers have all white staff, editorially and technically.’

Addressing Chris Elliott in the first instance, ‘Clive Jones raised the seminar’s first taking point; “why is the British press hideously white”? Chris Elliott agreed with the description. ‘For the past 10 to 12 years we at the Guardian have been saying we should have more diversity within the newsroom, with people from different ethnic backgrounds being represented,’ said Elliott. ‘The problem was that we talked a lot about it, but couldn’t see how to kick down doors.’

The big change for the Guardian newspaper, Elliott said, came around 3 years ago in the aftermath of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report, with the realisation that ‘we’ve just got to absolutely do something’. Without excusing the lack of action he pointed out that so much of journalism has been about contacts – about how you get to do ‘casual shifts’ through someone you already know on the paper. As a result, ‘you have a lot of well-meaning people, but there are a lot of iron-bound practices in place which have to be kicked out.’

The Guardian has subsequently tried to bridge the gap by encouraging students from the minority community to apply for jobs at the newspaper through events such as graduate fairs. ‘Some 6 to 7% of our editorial staff today come from diverse backgrounds, which is double the numbers of about 3 years ago.’

To supplement his point Elliott chose to highlight the findings of a survey conducted for the Society of Editors’ Training Committee – Diversity in the Newsroom by Professor Peter Cole of Sheffield University – which exposed the near-complete lack of BME representation in local newspapers, especially among those published from areas with a very high proportion of residents from ethnic minority backgrounds.

‘Some of the answers as to why the situation was so, really make you wince,’ said Elliott. ‘You have to go out there and shake preconceptions. It isn’t as simple as having a bunch of profoundly racially prejudiced people in newsrooms. In some cases they have not a clue as to what is leading to the block on recruitment.’

Deidre Forbes was equally frank. ‘There is a lot of nepotism in the industry, I am absolutely shocked that there aren’t more black journalists out there!’ From a personal point of view Deidre felt that the number of work...
placements who come through the Voice should be having some effect. I am inundated with young journalists; some of them have done their NCTJ courses already, some of them have even got Masters. I am absolutely shocked that there aren’t more black journalists out there.

Forbes dug out another significant dimension to this problem. ‘But as a black reporter, even if you do manage to cross that barrier, and do manage to get into the mainstream press, how much of that is going to change the nature of reporting on race is quite a different subject, she said.

Her rationale: some editors tend to use the token minority ethnic reporter to cover stories on BME issues, and be able to turn around and say ‘this is all right, after all it’s coming from a black person’. For Forbes, it’s important that more black journalists who are connected with their community can get a different experience out to the readers, to the market.

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown did not entirely agree. ‘I have never believed in representative journalism. I think it’s one of the most dangerous concepts. Nobody elects us [journalists] and we should not see ourselves as representing any constituency.’

Alibhai-Brown explained her point of view thus: ‘You cannot talk in simple terms about fair reporting or representing communities, because journalism is an audacious occupation. We are in the business to criticise, to point out what’s wrong and make things right. That can be quite hard to understand when you are a victim of discrimination.’

At this juncture the debate veered toward the use of language in the media, especially in the aftermath of 9/11. Observing that he was not aware of seeing the word ‘asylum-seeker’ used in the Voice, yet he read it daily in the Daily Mail in the Sun, Clive Jones asked Deidre Forbes if her newspaper used a stylebook with rules for how people and communities are described – rather a different set of rules perhaps than those of national newspapers. ‘We don’t have a style book to describe people,’ said Deidre, ‘but I think that the concept of freedom of speech can sometimes get very close to antagonising race relations. I think in terms of columnists and the letters from readers the editors choose to print in their paper; it’s important that journalists should be able to connect with the community. They should be sensitive. Especially in terms of asylum-seekers, in terms of race relations or in terms of Muslims, reporters need to have a sensitivity towards what they are talking about.

The Guardian newspaper, on the other hand, has a ‘Readers’ editor’ who acts as ombudsman to the newspaper; and much of that debate is filtered through those columns to modify the paper’s stylebook year on year, especially when it comes to reporting on issues such as race and religion. Not to mention the strictures of the NUJ’s code of conduct. But we still get it wrong as we are often reminded by our readers, and we are constantly held to account by them,’ admitted Elliott.

Firmly excluded from the Guardian stylebook is ‘bogus asylum-seeker’ – an oxymoron. While a recent addition is the phrase ‘Islamist Terrorist’ in place of ‘Islamic Terrorist’. Explained Elliott: ‘An Islamic terrorism suggests that it comes from the faith, whereas Islamist suggests a much more fundamentalist view of the world. But these are subtleties and newspapers do not do subtleties well and that’s one of the problems. We try, but we are not good at complexities.’

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown believes it’s not always true that broadsheets are more responsible, whereas tabloids with their quintessentially ‘hysterical tones’ are prone to loose language. ‘In the weeks immediately after 9/11, even publications like the Sun, for all its faults, behaved incredibly honourably.’

She does, however, warn that one gets to see the worst kind of language bandied around in the media when journalists and politicians collude in the use of certain expressions, especially on issues such as asylum-seekers.

So where does all this leave the Press Complaints Commission, the national watchdog that’s supposed to monitor and correct any discrepancies in the way the press conducts itself?

‘I think the PCC should be a bit tougher than it presently is,’ said Elliott.

Alibhai-Brown has a different problem. ‘I am amazed that nobody black sits on the PCC. How can that be?’ she asks. ‘If the PCC seems toothless, a sort of illusion that we have justice.’

Questions from the audience were initiated with a query as to why the PCC no longer allowed groups to raise third-party complaints on behalf of the victims of a misrepresentation in the press.

Elliott replied that a specific danger in doing so lay in opening the door for professional lobby groups to seize space ordinarily left vacant for a victimised individual, the most striking example being the kind of response stories the Israel–Palestine conflict attracts from professional lobby groups, representing both factions.

Another audience member was curious to get the panel’s view on the narrative of the Home Office on the issue of asylum-seekers. Alibhai-Brown responded saying the government loves to pander to the BME segment because they are the ones with votes. ‘But if you notice its narrative on asylum-seekers, you will find that it is negative and scapegoating. The deal is that this is the group we must exclude, demean, disenfranchise and starve under the new regulations.’

Deidre Forbes agreed: ‘I am alarmed at the negative portrayal of asylum-seekers across the board in terms of the national press. What was frightening was that when we ran an online poll on our website, we received a large percentage of [responses from] black and Asian readers who felt the same way. It wasn’t very long ago that there were signs saying: No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish.

Two other questions stood out. First a comment from a member of the audience who felt there was no need for media organisations to identify the religion of a terrorist captured by security forces. For instance, the use of the phrase ‘Islamic terrorist’ as opposed to merely calling the suspect a terrorist.

The second was the demand for a BME newspaper that would, perhaps, be more sensitive to the needs of the community. Something along the lines of the Al Jazeera news organisation in the Middle East.

The panel welcomed the suggestions, albeit with a few reservations. Elliott summed it up best when he said ‘It’s not easy. But I welcome such pluralism.’