Words, wounds – and Wagner?

Gary Younge, Guardian Columnist

Gary Younge took the platform for the final session of the Runnymede Conference on Developing Community Cohesion. His theme was the power of the media – something he observes and experiences as a journalist, and occasionally encounters as an object of press attention in his own right as a prominent black opinion-former.

I was reading *Media Guardian* a few weeks ago, on a Monday morning, and Paul Dacre says:

The old *Daily Mail*, I will be the first to admit, was slightly racist, but we are not now, and Stephen Lawrence was a turning point on that. It was a pivotal moment and, not that we did it for those reasons, we now have a lot more Black and Asian readers, and by God, I would like more of them. Racism appals me, and I wish I could get more Black and Asian reporters working for us but they don’t come into journalism….

The same day Paul Dacre, who is the Head of both the *Mail* and the *Evening Standard*, fired three Black and Asian reporters from the *Evening Standard*. All of which is to say there is a lot of nonsense and hypocrisy, and obfuscation that surrounds discussions of race in the media, and I just want to unravel some of them within the context of the work of the Runnymede Trust.

So the first thing I think we have to accept, or understand, is that the media is not an island. It is rooted in our institutions, and to an extent, and only to an extent, it reflects the prejudice that we see and hear around us, to the same extent that it reflects prurience, occasionally positive images and everything else. Clearly, if a sufficient number of people found the *Sun* outrageously racist in the 1980s, then they wouldn’t have bought it – in the same way that, for example, people from Liverpool stopped buying the *Sun* after its coverage of the Hillsborough disaster. And the same is true, in different ways, of the *Mail* and other papers.

But we are choosing easy targets when we talk about the *Sun* and the *Mail*, and far more tricky targets when we start talking about the *Independent* or the *Guardian* or the *Times*, in terms of either acts of commission, or omission, when they present a view of society that might not be one many black and Asian readers recognise, or that many others of us would not accept as being either fair or reasonable.

**Power in and of the media**

But the media also reflects power relations to an extent, and there is a truth in the fact that minority ethnic communities are poorer, less well represented and less engaged with crucial networks and civil society than many of their white counterparts. So, in America, a boycott of a newspaper or a TV station carries with it very clear financial reprisals for that organisation, because of the size of
the African-American middle class, because of the number of African Americans, and the very crucial commercial difference their support, or lack of it, can mean.

Let me just compare for you the response to a journalist (I am not going to mention his name because it would be invidious)... a columnist on the Guardian, who also worked for the BBC, who had written about how white people shouldn’t feel guilty or really responsible about Africa; that the people who are widely believed to have killed Stephen Lawrence were innocent; and that England was too small [sic]. I raised this at a Guardian conference. Somebody said he was just being controversial. I said: ‘well you see the thing about racism, it’s not controversial; …trouble is that it’s very mainstrea’. But then this person wrote a piece about the Countryside Alliance, and suddenly all hell broke loose. The Telegraph wrote a leader about it and, before you knew it, he was forced to choose between writing for the Guardian or retaining his very prominent place in the BBC. And, interestingly, he chose the former.

Here the point is that black and minority ethnic people don’t have the power of a Telegraph leader writer, and the BBC, unfortunately, doesn’t fear us in the same way that it might fear the leader writer of the Telegraph. And I don’t talk about fear in any very dangerous sense; rather that to incur the wrath of the black community is regarded as quite often an occupational hazard of being in the media, rather than something that should be taken seriously.

All too often, the power of the media can be exaggerated. In a sense, one of the lessons this Government hasn’t learned in over 5 years is that sometimes you have to go with what you know, or what you want to do, rather than what the media says might or might not be right. I think the media can help or hinder progressive change and a whole lot of other things, but I don’t think it can arbitrate, and I don’t think it is the decisive factor; but it is a key and primary source of where many people get their views. Nonetheless, when those views run up against people’s experience in the real world, usually the real world wins; so the reflection to some extent does need to be either faithful or plausible.

Interestingly, the Mirror, after Peter Mandelson was outed, ran a big phone-line number at the bottom of its front page, encouraging a response to the following:

Do you think that Britain is being run by a gay mafia?
Are there are too many gays in the cabinet?
Vote this number if you think ‘yes’ and this number if you think ‘no’.

And alongside it was an article saying, basically, yes it is, and they called on the Great British Public to have their say. And the Great British Public said ‘no, no we don’t think that’, and interestingly enough that issue just faded into the distance, because a whole load of things had gone on around people – it may well have been personal relationships, but also gay characters in EastEnders – so there was a far greater familiarity with the issue of sexual orientation than the Mirror had given its readers credit for.

Chairman Gary and the plinth
Similarly, and briefly, I am going to describe my very bizarre experience at the hands of the Mail, because it is instructive in this context, and very much related to the Runnymede Trust’s treatment in the press when the Parekh Report was published.

I am the Chairman of the Commission that helps decide what is going to be exhibited on the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square. I thought this was a very innocent thing to be doing. I have an interest in it, and when someone asked for a volunteer to chair this committee, I said fine. Imagine my surprise when, about three months later, the Mail splashed ‘The thoughts of Chairman Gary’ over a double-
page spread. Someone (Simon Hughes, I think) had suggested that the Queen Mother should be put on the plinth and the *Mail* were wanting to make a feature out of that suggestion.

Now the fact that it’s an equestrian plinth and the Queen Mother didn’t ride a horse didn’t matter. The fact that she would either be minuscule, or that, unusually, her handbag would be the size of a human torso, didn’t matter either! The fact that the Mortimer Commission had already decided that this plinth should exhibit works of art in rotation, and we were really just dealing with how those artworks should be commissioned; none of that mattered. The fact was that the *Mail* took a look down the list of people who were on this Commission (in an advisory capacity to the Mayor), spotted that, lo and behold, it had a Black Chairman, and went crazy, really crazy. It was like seeing your head (and I think those members of the Runnymede Trust who were involved in bringing out the Report a couple of years ago can identify with this) grafted onto someone else’s naked body, and this image splashed all over London. It had nothing to do with me and yet I could recognise a likeness in it.

There was quite a funny moment, when, on the first day, they couldn’t find a picture of me, and so they had to quote the title of my book in full, because it said *No Place Like Home: A Black Briton’s Journey Through the Deep South*, and that was the only way they could get across – without being overtly discriminatory – that this person was someone you should be worried about. This was one of the many things that were bizarre about it; but another was that it was very intense for two days and then it died off. And the reason it died off was because they called on the good people of the *Mail* to write in and call in and call their MP and say: ‘we want the Queen Mother on the plinth’. But they didn’t, because they didn’t want the Queen Mother on the plinth! I had no idea how it would go on from there. And then it just kind of faded into the background.

But it also asked the question (again very relevant to the Runnymede report) about Britain. It said that the saga of the empty plinth is another example of the yawning gap between the metropolitan elite hijacking this country and the majority of ordinary people who simply want to reclaim Britain as their own…. Quite a sinister remark, I think, and heavily racially connoted.

**Asylum seekers**

One of the reasons why asylum seekers can be so easily targeted is because so few people know them, so few people ever meet them. Asylum seekers as a major problem in British society are, I strongly believe – not that there isn’t an issue about immigration which must be discussed – an entirely confected and constructed media phenomenon. I dug out some figures from the *Guardian*’s database about the number of times the words ‘asylum seeker’ were mentioned in stories and I got:

- 1994–5 = 135 times,
- 1995–6 = 456 times;
- 2001 = 3784.

Now, asylum seekers have been around for a very very long time, but they have been around in the media as a major force and a major issue only since the media decided that they would be a major issue.

When I was doing a story about asylum seekers, I called the hostels ‘Bantustans’, but really I was writing about a hostel they are trying to build for gathering together asylum seekers in a certain place in Nottingham. The local people were demonstrating against it. I asked them: ‘What do you know about asylum seekers?’ They replied: ‘Well we know about Sangatte… we know what we see on the television, and we don’t like what we see.’
Clearly the media can create an issue. And it doesn’t just reflect; it can also reinforce. The truth is that if we want to challenge racism in society then we must take it on where it exists, which is also in our workplaces, our homes, our schools, our streets, our pubs and clubs. If we do that successfully – and it’s difficult because we are challenging a racism that comes partly from the media, but not wholly from the media (if there were no media there would still be an issue of racism in Britain) – I believe then, hopefully, we will reach a point where there is an intolerance of that kind of propaganda. So while the power of the media shouldn’t be exaggerated, it shouldn’t be underplayed either; and just as it may reflect, it can also reinforce and challenge; as it misinforms, so can it inform; and as it describes, so can it distort.

What about the workplace?
I am just going to touch on some of the issues that I think are key here: one is employment. Now I have a job, so I’m not asking for more work for myself, but there are all too few black and Asian journalists, and they are usually misused or abused wherever they find themselves. Quite often what you discover in the media world is that they have twigged only two things that can be done with, or by, a black journalist – to write about race, or never to write about race. So, either you deny or you embrace; but what you can’t be is a multi-layered person for whom race is one issue that you are interested in among many others; and that is a genuine battle people in the media do face.

There is also an interesting (and particular) emphasis on what I would call ‘front-of-house’ staff, which is that when organisations do employ black people they like to promote them in certain ways. I’m not saying that they over-promote them, far from it; but you are more likely to see a picture by-line for a black journalist, than for someone who works in an editorial capacity, deciding what is going to go on which page, and who is massively involved in the internal dynamics. They like to show the world the handful of people they have (regardless of the amount of power they represent within that institution).

The most obvious place for that is television. When you watch the news you would think that black people are over-represented; but when you look at who is deciding what is going to make the news, and what kind of stories are going to be featured, very few black and Asian people will be there. An interesting comparison or way of looking at this is if you take the difference between the ‘Today’ programme on radio, and any of the news bulletins: there are no black presenters on the ‘Today’ programme, and I can only assume that is because they think nobody can see them, so it doesn’t matter! Not realising that there is an entire body of knowledge and experience that comes from black and Asian journalists. And they would never even think of trying to get away with that on a TV news programme.

Another incredibly peculiar and difficult development is the way race has become a touchstone for modernity itself. Probably the most obvious place to look at this just now is the Conservative Party, where currently there is an emphasis on ethnicity, that we need more black and Asian people. Now, there is no notion that black and Asian people are going to rush to actually vote Conservative, but what it does suggest is that somehow they are a modern party. Race is being used (and at other times different things have been used in this way as a tool to suggest that you are forward-looking as opposed to backward-looking). I think it’s not a good thing, because you think you’re talking about race, but actually you are talking about an entire baggage-load of preconceptions and prejudices that people hold.

The most blatant example of this in the media, as taken up by the Mail, was just a month after Sir John Stevens, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, conceded that he might have to look abroad for black and Asian recruits, because he couldn’t recruit them in Britain. A photo in the Mail said this is a picture that reflects changing times and attitudes within the Police Force:
The exclusive picture of Scotland Yard’s employees shows Forces are beginning to reflect the racial mix of the community they serve.

(and they had lots of people from many different races). Ethnic minorities make up 25 percent of the Capital’s population, but only 4.5 percent of the Met, and it was an example of how equal opportunities are really being shifted into photo opportunities.

A similar thing happened when Teresa May was appointed (as Conservative Party Chair). They had corralled a group of people behind her – Asian women, young people (some of whom were on work experience, many of whom hadn’t been there very long) – in order to suggest change where no change had actually taken place.

The most blatant example of this was in when George W. Bush was standing for President. At the Convention, Condoleeza Rice was doing one prime-time news slot, Colin Powell did another. A political analyst in Washington said what the Republicans were doing was aimed at white Americans. Moderates don’t want someone who is negative on race, so it says something significant about America as a whole. Really they were targeting women voters, and the message was: ‘if we can be good to black people we can be good to anyone!’ When race becomes a touchstone in that way, the media first of all can either run with it or they can question it, but secondly it becomes a tool within the media game. It’s a way of playing the media game and I think we’ve seen a lot of that recently.

The press and the report

Finally, I want to concentrate just for a while on the response to the Runnymede Trust’s Report just two years ago, because it was breathtaking… it really was staggering. And remember this happened in a completely different time to the one that we are in now – this is pre-September 11th, pre-uprisings in Bradford and Oldham and Burnley and elsewhere. It was actually at quite a hopeful time. And when you look at the common sense that was being suggested in the Report and then you gauge the response on the front page of the Telegraph saying: ‘This group have said that Britain is racist’. Also noteworthy was the blustering bafflement exhibited in other pieces (talking about your good selves, Lord Parekh) which say:

They would have schools, the police and all public authorities treating everyone differently, according to their ethnic origins.

As though this is something bad! And then:

Yet what is black British history? What is British history if not the story of a group of islands and the way in which the multifarious people who have lived on them through the ages have rubbed along with each other?

No mention of colony, of Empire, of Ireland, and a staggering, breathtaking lack of self-awareness that, all of a sudden, forced the authors of this report into some peculiar place where they were called upon to defend things they hadn’t said, and to support things that they didn’t believe.

And the notion which the media found particularly troublesome was that it was possible to discriminate between people without discriminating against people! The idea of difference floored them completely, and so rather than try to come to terms with their own ignorance, they lashed out, not just the Telegraph but the Mail as well.

I seem to remember the Mail carried mugshots of all of you (the Commissioners) as though in a police line-up, with a little bit of blurb about the crimes that each of you have committed on our
great nation. The Telegraph’s front-page headline read ‘Straw wants to re-write our history!’ – begging two questions: What do they mean by ‘our’? And precisely what version of history are they talking about?

I wrote a response which ended up being a response not so much to the Report, but to the media response to the Report. I said, if you really want to take the temperature, the racial temperature in Britain, you would be better off examining the reactions to the Report than the Report itself. Not that the Report wasn’t brilliant in all sorts of ways, but the reaction to it really showed us how much we’ve had to do; and what has happened since has shown how fragile some of the victories that we thought we had made have been!

**My country**

One of the responses that I got to my piece was from a man called Michael Henderson, who sent me a letter that had within it a piece by Paul Johnson from the Mail. I recognised this piece because someone else had already sent me the article; and the person who had sent it to me previously was a friend of the person who did the Brixton and the Brick Lane bombings, someone who has since been arrested for sending a number of prominent black people racist hate mail. It was the same piece!

And this is what Mr Henderson said: ‘You clearly know nothing about your country’ – well at least he thinks it’s my country, that’s a start. ‘This piece may set you on the road to partial knowledge,’ he says. He also advises me to buy a decent recording of the Meistersingers by Richard Wagner. Wagner, he acknowledged, wasn’t English, but he did know something of how the past informs the present, unlike some people I could mention!

The letter was on Telegraph headed notepaper. Michael Henderson is a cricket writer for that paper!

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*Lord Parekh thanked Gary for his presentation with the following tribute:*

I think what is very striking about Gary’s presentation today, as well as in all he offers in the pages of the Guardian, is this wonderful combination of a sense of humour with high moral seriousness. People can be too serious for their own good, or too flippant, either about themselves or about racism. Gary combines a wonderful sense of humour with irony, which shows a capacity for self-detachment, but at the same time this great moral seriousness, which shows a capacity for identification, and I think he has given us a wonderful display and I want to thank him for that.