

Guidelines for journalists on proper coverage of refugee-related topics

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Three years ago, the newspaper and periodical industry framed its own Code of Practice. This was ratified by the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), which is charged with enforcing it. All members of the press have a duty to maintain the highest professional, ethical, albeit traditional, editorial standards and the Code sets the benchmark for those standards. It both protects the rights of the individual and upholds the public's right to know.

The Code is the cornerstone of the system of self-regulation to which the industry has made a binding commitment. Editors and publishers must ensure that the Code is rigorously observed, not only by their staff, but also by anyone who contributes to their publication.

It is essential to the workings of an agreed code that it be honoured, not only to the letter, but also fully in its spirit. And it states unequivocally that the Code should not be interpreted so narrowly as to compromise its commitment to respect the rights of the individual, nor so broadly that it prevents publication in the public interest.

Commentators may feel that the Code, with its traditional editorial standards for reporting and handling stories on race relations, seem to have been suspended, submerged, or worse, intentionally flouted in the exciting rollercoaster hysteria of tabloids on heat. Objective reporting need not preclude differing treatments of race relations subjects or of issues on asylum seekers by different newspapers.

We must be aware that it is not always understood that there is merit in the way in that different newspapers look at the same facts from different angles. Properly done, that variety of coverage can contribute positively to public knowledge by enabling a searching and sceptical examination of fact and opinion. There is, however, a crucial difference between the portrayal of facts from differing viewpoints, so that people can make up their minds about them, and the distortion of them for purposes of political propaganda.

Reporting issues on asylum seekers, or on issues of race relations, is not pleading for special treatment, nor is it an attempt to stop newspapers from printing views that reflect their editorial policy. It should not require a newspaper to stop printing immigration or asylum statistics or to stop discussing calls for a reduction in future immigration in its editorial columns. But, what it does require, and this is by no means inconsistent with the traditional requirements of editorial standards, is that immigration statistics should be reported accurately, with adequate interpretation and in context; that speculation or views should be attributed as such and not presented as fact.

Discussion of future immigration should not be so angled as to cause or encourage hostility towards asylum seekers, black people, Muslims or other aliens already legitimately living in this country. The hostility that can result from misunderstanding and misinformation should not be underestimated. Racial hostility, prejudice and xenophobia are not a simple expression of dislike based on personal choice, but irrational fear, which can be fed and perverted from many unrelated sources.

There is no doubt, as experiences in this country and other countries have shown, that racial hostility can lead to considerable suffering and, in certain circumstance, to death. Racial hostility and xenophobia are also extremely wasteful of human resources, in that they lead to the expending of people's time and energy in misguided actions, whilst the real and basic problems of society or of the economy remain unchanged.

It is therefore important that editors should examine their editorial policy in order to ensure that the style and content of their reporting on asylum seekers and race relations issues does not encourage or reinforce racial hatred, hostility or xenophobia. Obviously, the menu for a

good story is what we all learned when we all sharpened our writing tools as trainee journalists.

Selectivity: Is the story really necessary? Selectivity does not necessarily imply distortion.

Objectivity: The "bandwagon effect" and hysteria should be avoided. Stories and allegations should be ascribed to their source and their authority evaluated. Statistics should be checked, interpreted and placed in context. Speculations and rumour have no place in news columns. Fears should not be exploited by irresponsible and exaggerated reporting. Particular care should be taken when reporting violence and events that cause racial tension. The agreed Code is definitive when it states "*newspapers and periodicals must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted material, including pictures.*"

Position of story: Is it given a place as front-page lead or in small print inside?

Timing of the story: The accuracy of a story should first be checked and placed in the context of the paper's policy. Traditional press standards of accuracy should be rigorously applied to stories involving racism, religion or asylum seekers.

Method of treatment: A balanced text cannot redress the damage caused by sensational headlines. Headlines should be moderate and emotive and 'gory' references should be avoided.

The text itself should further reflect:

- a policy on identifying racial origin or religion. The Industry's Code, in no uncertain terms, states "*the press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to a person's race, colour, religion, sex or sexual orientation or to any physical or mental illness or disability;*"
- avoidance of reporting "negative" qualities only;
- care taken over readers' letters, and editors should have responsibility for the 'tone and truth' of reader' letters printed;
- stories ascribed to their source and their authority evaluated.
- generalisations and stereotypes avoided;
- human fears not exploited;
- speaker's allegations checked for accuracy and balanced by opposing views.

Responsibility: The responsibility for a story's angle is often a circular one. Whilst editors take responsibility for the newspapers' line and may encourage or oblige reporters to produce material in accordance with this, reporters and journalists are not without influence and cannot avoid responsibility completely. Theirs may be the initial judgment of whether the story they are following is still newsworthy if the "colour" is taken out of it and it is unlikely that any news editor would adhere formally to a policy that news is only news if an asylum seeker, a black person or a Muslim is involved.

The opinions expressed by columnists/contributors often receive firm editorial backing with the essence of their arguments re-iterated separately in newspaper editorials, giving them legitimacy.

On many occasions, articles are supplemented with cartoons or poems in which racist and xenophobic messages are conveyed even more explicitly and where grotesque stereotypes are expressed visually or in verse. They borrow freely from the racist and xenophobic imagery that was popularised in the heyday of the British Empire to justify its subjugation and exploitation of "natives", and bring that imagery to bear on peoples' perceptions of the issues affecting black people in Britain today. This is exactly what is being done to the latest asylum seekers.

Verse and cartoons can be a powerful source of communication both because poems are easy to understand, easy to the ear and because graphic illustrations such as cartoons can bring a dry issue to life. Both are popular and supposedly harmless weapons of humour and ridicule against their targets. Editors always argue that using stereotypes or exaggerated images and words in poems to represent individuals or groups of people is in the nature of their work, and they are merely making jokes. But, behind every "joke", a serious point is being made. It is this serious point, not the jocular verses, jokes or humour in themselves, that is objectionable. Far from being light and harmless fun, these kinds of poems and cartoons, reinforce and perpetuate popular stereotypes of asylum seekers, whether as "illegal" asylum seekers or welfare scroungers. This identifies them as legitimate targets for hostility and its consequences.

Neutrality is not always adequate in reporting race relations or issues on asylum seekers. The Code enjoins newspapers, whilst "*they are free to be partisan, to distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact.*"

Objectivity should be sought and public hysteria should not determine news coverage. It is important that official information/statistics should be handled with more sophistication and in court reporting, the racial dimension of the case should be reported only if relevant. News is not news simply because a black person, asylum seeker, Muslim or immigrant is involved. But, more importantly, the message of a story should be "well-rounded" -- placed in context and accompanied by interpretation.

There must be many others, but here is a simple checklist based on stories about asylum seekers in some tabloids and regional papers that was used to assess balance, objectivity and moderation -- the elements of the industry's Code of Practice: The four Ws and How, which were incessantly drummed into us in our training to last all our journalistic life, can be used as our strengths in adhering to and extolling our traditional editorial standards and upholding and defending the Code and the NUJ's Codes of Conduct and Race Guidelines on Reporting.

WHERE: Is the story given as a front-page lead or as small print inside. Is the photo on the front page? How is it used? Is the story given several columns or a few inches?

WHEN: Is the story released before or after its accuracy is checked and the authority evaluated? Editors, according to their own Code, "*must ensure that those working for them comply with these requirements and must not publish material from other sources which does not meet these requirements.*"

HOW: Is it placed in the context of background facts or overall policy or is the story treated sensationally -- by headlines, positions or photographs? A reasonable text cannot balance the effect of sensational headlines or editorials. Has the point of view been expressed?

WHY/WHO: Is the story only newsworthy because an asylum seeker or a black person is involved? Is the story joining a "bandwagon" of immigration, crime, fraud stories or linking it with terrorism? Its Code stresses that "*publishing details of a person's race, colour, religion, sexual orientation, physical or mental illness or disability must be avoided unless these are directly relevant to the story.*"

The call for more interpretation, analysis and evaluation of the presence of asylum seekers is in no way contradictory to editors' or journalists' traditional responsibilities of full and balanced reporting. In many cases, it may be an extension of their present practices, but it is a constructive extension not a threatening one. Adhering to the Code of Practice, and its traditional editorial standards on balanced and accurate reporting, could ensure that, in future, these issues are treated in a less explosive and more responsible manner.