

Making a meal of a myth

Nick Medic got a half-baked response from the PCC when he complained that *The Sun* had cooked-up a story about asylum seekers eating swans

'SWAN BAKE: Asylum seekers steal the Queen's birds for barbecues,' yelled *The Sun's* banner headline on Friday 4 July 2003. The opening paragraph claimed:

Callous asylum seekers are barbecuing the Queen's swans... East European poachers lure the protected Royal birds into baited traps, an official Metropolitan Police report says.

As a journalist who had been watching press reporting on asylum issues for a long time, I felt that this story merited investigation – I was immediately suspicious that it was, by and large, a work of fiction. Other members of the Refugees, Asylum Seekers and the Media (RAM) Project network were outraged by the story. Many of them had fled for their lives because their regimes did not take kindly to journalists digging up the truth; yet here in the UK journalists seemed to get away with fabrication, especially when they were looking for scapegoats.

The intro to a continuation story on page seven, under the headline 'Asylum gang had 2 swans for roasting', raised more doubts in my mind. It read:

Police swooped on a gang of East Europeans and caught them red-handed about to cook a pair of royal swans. The asylum seekers were barbecuing a duck in park in Beckton, East London. But two dead swans were also found concealed in bags and ready to be roasted. The discovery last weekend confirmed fears that immigrants are regularly scoffing the Queen's birds.

Information about arrests usually includes the names and ages of those involved, but the normal details were conspicuously absent. I called police officers across East London – in stations at West Ham, North Woolwich, Forest Gate and Beckton – but none of them could confirm that anyone had been arrested, charged or even cautioned over such an offence. I then called Steve Knight of the Surrey-based Swan Sanctuary, who had been quoted in *The Sun* as saying: 'To these people [Eastern Europeans] they are a perfectly acceptable delicacy.'

Knight said *The Sun* had not published a faithful transcript of his words. More importantly he could not confirm that an incident such as the one described had ever happened. He was able to tell me that a member of the public had phoned him some time previously and claimed that he could see someone pushing a swan in a shopping trolley. But he had no way of knowing whether even this was true.

No swoop and no arrests

I had quickly established that there had been no swoop and no arrests – and probably no roasting incident either. But it wasn't just the dubious headlines, intros, or the recipe for roast swan that I found distasteful. Implicit throughout the articles was the notion that someone from Eastern Europe would be happy to eat a swan. As an Eastern European who has sought asylum in the UK, I have to admit that my own feathers had been ruffled by

this. I understand that different cultures have different dietary preferences, yet here was a statement that was not only untrue but also implied a degree of barbarism and savagery.

Eastern Europe covers a vast tract of land from the Ural Mountains to the Mediterranean, with an estimated population of around 200 million people. Of course, I cannot say that in a landmass stretching some 4,000 miles, a swan has never been eaten. But I have never heard of anyone in Serbia or anywhere else in the Slavic world doing this. I have never been informed that swan is 'an acceptable delicacy' in our part of the world. As far as I know, eating a swan would be as alien to the Serbian way of thinking as eating a cat would be to a Briton.

Further research uncovered more factual gaps in *The Sun* story. The Metropolitan Police press office was unable to confirm the existence of an 'official report' upon which *Sun* journalist Mike Sullivan had based his claim that 'Eastern European poachers lure the protected Royal birds into baited traps'. What appeared to have been circulated was an internal memo from the Wildlife Protection Squad advising officers about the law should they come across people interfering with swans. I believe that document was never actually seen by anyone at *The Sun*, which is why it was erroneously cited as a 'report'.

All the while emails poured in, reiterating colleagues' indignation that *The Sun* could get away with creating an urban myth that was bound to infuriate the animal-loving subjects of the British monarch, and make life even tougher for anyone suspected of being an Eastern European or an asylum seeker. We felt that establishing that the story was spurious might stop it snowballing into one of those distorted and dangerous slanders that have circulated for generations against Gypsies or Jews. So together we expressed our concerns in an official complaint to the PCC on 10 July. The PCC replied, saying that it had already taken up a complaint from someone else and would let us have a further response in due course.

Four weeks later we had heard nothing, so we sent the PCC a reminder. They replied to our 12 August letter a week later, enclosing a copy of a letter from *The Sun's* Ombudsman William Newman, in response to the other complainant, dated 18 July. It offered a summary version of Wildlife Crime Unit 'report' and ended defiantly: 'In short, we stand by our story'.

On the day we received this we asked the PCC for a copy of the report. Already *The Independent* and *The Guardian* had queried the validity of this new urban myth. (In May 2003 while travelling by train from Exmouth I had found a copy of the local paper describing swan-baiting by youths. There had also been a piece in the *Press Gazette* commenting on a similar story that had appeared earlier in the year in a local paper.) But within days of its Swan Bake story, under the headline 'Now they're after our fish!' *The Sun* claimed that fish stocks in lakes and rivers are down because 'asylum seekers' were poaching them.

First swans, now donkeys

And on 31 August the *Daily Star* ran a front-page story that would be the subject of further complaints to the PCC. 'Asylum seekers eat our donkeys' ran the headline, 'Police hunt rustlers after 9 are snatched'. If it was not immediately clear whether this meant nine donkeys or nine rustlers, an observant reader might have entertained doubts about the story after careful textual analysis. The story claimed:

Asylum seekers have stolen nine donkeys – and police believe they’ve killed and eaten them... The pets – which gave kids rides at a Royal Park – are said to have been stolen by East Africans who see their meat as a delicacy... Officers investigating the rustling believe the donkeys... have been chopped up and eaten... "One of our main lines of inquiry is that they may have been taken by immigrants who like eating donkey meat as a delicacy.

The PCC dismissed a complaint from someone who said it was discriminatory for the *Star* to present such allegations as factual. The watchdog claimed that the allegation was clearly presented as comment (just read that opening sentence again: 'Asylum-seekers have stolen nine donkeys'). However, the PCC did agree to investigate another complaint about inaccuracy when it was pointed out that eating donkey meat is forbidden in Somalia under Islamic law.

It was not until 8 September that the PCC forwarded us another letter from *The Sun*. Curiously, it was dated 15 July – three days earlier than the one we had already been sent. It referred to a Metropolitan Police Wildlife Unit 'report' with a transcription of the reporter's shorthand notes about its content. Sullivan claimed to have spoken to 'various swan rescue organisations who have compiled reports from members of the public about swans being snatched for food by asylum seekers', and said that the Swan Sanctuary had told him of 'an incident the previous Sunday where two swans had been found in a mail bag next to a barbecue on which a duck was being cooked'.

This did not quite tally with the original report, but he did include a press office number, which I immediately rang to check his story. I was told to put my request in writing. On 17 September, Detective Chief Superintendent Tristram Hicks replied to my letter. He stated:

We never released a report on this subject to The Sun newspaper so we are not sure to what they were referring. We think that they may have meant an internal intelligence note that was sent to... police stations by our Wildlife Unit earlier this year... This one page note was prompted by numerous reports from the public that swans were being killed and eaten by people they believed to be Eastern Europeans... Nobody has been arrested or charged in relation to offences against swans by the Metropolitan Police recently... The Sun... referred to asylum seekers being responsible. We have no information at all that supports this contention and indeed when we spoke to... Mike Sullivan, he agreed that this was a mistake on The Sun's part.

When I sent this letter to the PCC, *The Sun* suddenly offered to publish a 'clarification'. It said:

A report in The Sun on the 4th July about the disappearance of swans in southern England stated that asylum seekers were responsible for poaching them. While numerous members of the public alleged that the swans were being killed and eaten by people they believed to be Eastern European, nobody has been arrested in relation to these offences and we accept that it is not therefore possible to conclude yet whether or not the suspects were indeed asylum seekers.

But this 'clarification' failed to make clear that there was absolutely no evidence that asylum seekers were responsible for the alleged disappearance of swans in South East England. So we compiled our own version of a correction and apology and asked *The Sun* to publish it as prominently as the original story. It read:

SWAN BAKE:
A CORRECTION AND APOLOGY

A report in The Sun of the 4th July, headlined on the front page SWAN BAKE, stated that gangs of Eastern European asylum seekers were responsible for the disappearance of swans from southern England. The story was based on unsubstantiated allegations made by unnamed members of the public who claimed to believe that swans were being killed and eaten by Eastern Europeans. The police have confirmed that nobody has been arrested for such offences, and they have no evidence that asylum seekers or Eastern Europeans are responsible for reported reductions in the swan population. The Sun accepts that it is not possible to conclude whether the offences described actually occurred. We would like to apologise for any false impression that may have been given.

However, *The Sun* refused, so we asked the PCC to adjudicate on the matter. On 23 October, the PCC issued guidance about reporting on refugee and asylum issues, highlighting 'the danger that inaccurate, misleading or distorted reporting may generate an atmosphere of fear and hostility that is not borne out by the facts'. So we were amazed when the PCC issued its judgement on 17 November, four and half months after *The Sun* article appeared. Its letter read:

In this instance the Commission noted that the newspaper was unable to provide any evidence for the story which, to its readers, would appear to be a factual account. Although the newspaper should have ensured that the article was presented as conjecture in the first instance the Commission noted that the publication had offered to print a clarification... to ensure that readers were aware that the statement was based on inconclusive material. The Commission noted that your proposed draft clarification was more comprehensive than that suggested by the newspaper, but considered that the original proposal constituted sufficient remedial action... [and] concluded that no further action was required on the part of the newspaper.

In other words, to correct a sensational and grossly inaccurate front page story which had entered the popular imagination and been quoted in public debate for almost five months, *The Sun* was simply obliged to run a disclaimer acknowledging that it confused conjecture with fact!

It takes time to distribute correspondence and gather replies from people living in different parts of the UK, and to agree a common position. Our patience had long been exhausted and some of us were furious about the affair – especially those who were aware that the Director of the PCC was a personal friend of the editor of *The Sun*.

On Thursday 4 December we emailed our response to the PCC. It read:

Apologies for the delay in replying to your letter from November 17... As you can imagine, in the light of the 4th paragraph of your letter, and the guidelines recently issued by the PCC, we fail to see why the Commission cannot support the wording we have proposed over that of The Sun. We are reluctant to accept that The Sun's 'clarification' will adequately inform the public that the original story, which has become an urban myth, was inaccurate and unfounded. However, since the Commission's adjudication suggests that there is no other option than to accept The Sun's wording, it would appear that we have no choice in the matter. We would like to know what prominence The Sun is expected to give to its 'clarification' and when it will appear.

On Saturday 6 December, with no forewarning, *The Sun* published its 'clarification'. Even though the original story was on its front page, the clarification appeared on page 41.

Like me and the many others who have taken an interest, few of those involved in this complaint would consider themselves satisfied either by the outcome or the way the matter was handled by the PCC. However, for all the PCC's shortcomings, we would have been hard-pressed to challenge the story without it. *The Sun* had resolutely fobbed-off complainants with a curt 'We stand by our story'. It took persistence and patience with the self-regulatory system to get as far as we did. We may not have got an honest clarification and apology, but we sent a powerful message to the press and the PCC that this kind of journalism is wholly unacceptable.

Nick Medic is a freelance journalist from Serbia. At the time he made the complaint he was Communications Officer with the RAM Project, which has worked closely with the PCC in trying to improve media coverage of these issues.