

Media and Minorities in the United Kingdom

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1. The Context

On September 2009, one of the professional dancers of the reality television dance competition, *Strictly Come Dancing* – Anton du Beke – called his celebrity partner, actor Laila Rouass a “Paki”. Rouass, born of mixed Asian and African parentage, was reported to have walked off the stage in disgust. Subsequently, du Beke apologised to her and a few days and some more twists later, Rouass accepted his apology, allowing the show to go on well into its seventh edition¹. However, the issue did not end with the apology, as several prominent media persons and celebrities pitched in with their opinion on racial stereotypes, thereby revisiting the ghosts of post-war immigration and its backlash in the United Kingdom.

The autumn of 2009 saw the re-emergence of issues of race and minority rights in the British media in more ways than one. The *Strictly Come Dancing* episode was perhaps a more genteel one in its capacity to polarise than the other event that happened in October 2009. In the days leading up to the October 22, 2009 television debate “Question Time”, hosted by David Dimbleby of the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), newspapers in London were replete with condemnations of the appearance of far-right politician Nick Griffin of the British National Party (BNP). Griffin symbolises a shade of political opinion that does not sit well within multi-cultural settings in the city of London. However, the BNP does have a share of votes in the United Kingdom (UK) and to that extent, its position as a far-right party, opposed to immigration and simultaneously seeking support from certain sections of non-white communities, is an interesting reminder of the politics of race and class in contemporary UK.

These two examples, which will be revisited later, serve as the context for a discussion on minority rights and the manner in which such debates appear in the mediated public sphere. This report is the outcome of a ten-day study tour to London, conducted between October 11 and 21, 2009. The data for the report has been culled from several individual interviews with media professionals, academics, students and activists based in London. I have also undertaken a review of secondary literature and analysed several print, online and television features as part of my study.

2. “Goodness, gracious me...” Expressions of difference in post-war United Kingdom

In the 1970s, Independent Television Authority (ITA) – a public service network of commercial television broadcasters – began to commission and broadcast comedy sitcoms such as “Love Thy Neighbour” and “Mind Your

Language". These sitcoms were supposed to reflect the political tensions surrounding post-war migration into the UK. During this period, most immigrants to the UK came from the Indian sub-continent and the Caribbean. Following political changes in east Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, there was also a sizable population of Asians who were forced to migrate to the UK. For a country emerging after the break-up of an empire that spanned across all the continents, the UK seemed curiously unprepared for accepting the inflow of ethnic groups from outside of the British Isles. This could be read as a contradiction, given the fact that over the previous two hundred years, people from the British Isles had been traversing the world as colonisers and had evolved a public sphere that borrowed from the experiences of life in the colonies.

The 1970s was also a time for great social reconstruction around the world. The events of 1968 – a year that saw the youth of the world take a distinctly political left turn – were seminal in the manner in which issues of race and class were debated in the public domain. It was a period when music and performing arts were beginning to express influences of different cultures in the mainstream popular culture in the UK. This period of openness and mingling also resulted in a political backlash from conservative quarters, leading to Enoch Powell's famous "rivers of blood" speech². This backlash had its origins both in racial notions of the other, as well as in mundane matters of social services. Interestingly, Powell's speech was pegged on the supposed pressure that was being put on an old white woman to move out from her home, despite being overrun by immigrants who had "driven out her neighbours".³ The point to be considered here is the fact that post war immigration was presented as a strain on the local population's ability to absorb people into the social security network. It created a sense of scarcity where there was to be immense competition over available resources for people from all parts of the world, who had gathered in the UK.

This environment also provided the basis for a new kind of public entertainment in the UK. *Love Thy Neighbour* (1972 to 1976) and *Mind Your Language* (1977), were television serials that took a somewhat acerbic look at race relations, sometimes by highlighting and caricaturising stereotypes prevalent in society during the 1960s and 1970s. Speaking about the impact of such material on race relations in the UK during that period, a senior journalist says:

"...(we) cannot say that they were subtle. In fact, they were playing on stereotypes and it seemed to be acceptable to many. Perhaps it is this kind of mocking attitude that struck a note with many people in the UK – regardless of race and ethnicity – and brought to light a new kind of political engagement with issues related to post-war migration. It also gave a public face to immigrants who had come in from different places, like South Asia, Africa and the West Indies..."⁴

Such expressions of difference, it may be pointed out, occurred at a time when the media in the UK was still largely defined by state control and regulation, at least in the case of television and radio. For a lot of people who had just moved to the UK (mainly) from the Africa, Caribbean and South Asia, these stereotypes also served to channel the growing disconnect between the presence of people of different races and ethnicities in the UK and their absence from the public sphere, especially in mainstream media.

This could lead one to believe that ethnic and racial minorities did not have access to their own media at a time when society and economy in the UK was going through radical changes. Even then, with introduction of minority issues and faces, the mainstream media played an important role in the definition of social reality and the formation of social norms for a society in transition (McQuail 2007: 19-35). In that sense, the mass media in the UK had been defining the presence of immigrants as an objective reality for society. This is true even at the time when this was undertaken.

3. Media as channel for opinion

As would be expected, mainstream print media in UK follows stories. Given the context and ongoing debates around race in October 2009, the print media carried several articles -- many which could be termed tendentious -- regarding the salient points of the debate. For instance, the October 19, 2009 edition of *Metro* carried two related stories (on immigration) on the same page (page 21). The top-left story with a by-line alluded to the growing numbers of immigrants in Britain, stating that according to a government commissioned report, there "are now about 6.6 million British residents who were born abroad, compared with 4.3 million in 2001" (Steele 2009). The same article quotes research material produced by a consultancy group (Oxford Economics) and an online website (www.migrationwatchuk.org), to assert its claim that immigration is a pressing issue that none of the political parties can afford to put on the electoral back-burner. The article ends with the statement of a researcher (from the Institute of Public Policy Research), who tries to assuage the alarm raised by other 'experts' quoted in the article by saying that immigrants were contributing to the economy and an expanding tax base because they were economically active. The article also carried a picture of alleged asylum seekers standing in a queue for food handouts in Calais (France) and waiting to get into the United Kingdom.

The same page carried another article with an attendant picture of the one of the most talked about politician of the week, Mr. Nick Griffin. This article referred to Griffin's party (BNP) soliciting support for its far-right, anti-immigration stance, from Sikhs and Hindus British citizens. According to the article, Griffin made the statement following a report by an equalities watchdog that pointed out that the BNP was risking court action because of its "whites only" policy. Griffin was providing information that seemed both improbable and possible at the same time. Though South Asian communities

like the Sikhs and Hindus would be unlikely partners in the BNP's strategy for political mobilisation, rights activists and feminists would argue that given a series of complicated reasons, conservative opinion among Sikh and Hindu communities in the UK would want to offer a 'nudge-wink' support for Griffin's policy, especially given their mutual antipathy for Islamic ideologies.⁵

This reference to a single page of a tabloid that is distributed mainly on the underground train system is to highlight the ability of the mass media in the UK to divert time and attention from other activities, and how it has become a channel for reaching more people with information. It has therefore induced the pressure to change in other social institutions. In many ways, journalists in the media emphasise how efforts by social scientists to explain how the world of surprises can be tamed, fall short by highlighting the seemingly improbable eventfulness of everyday life. The media in the UK (as in many other parts of the world with a relatively free press) offers political constituencies the strategic opportunity for free expression.

The first article reflects the manner in which research, public opinion and the media come together in (a) telling a story, (b) reinforcing a point of view and (c) alluding to alternate opinions and sources of information. Confronted with the classical dilemma for all story tellers: what to recall and what to reinvent, the author chooses statistics to bolster a line of argument that is in consonance with the story line. The author uses data produced by a consultancy and online think-tank that warn of severe consequences if the immigration process is not checked, while ending the article with an almost abstract statement from a policy researcher.⁶ In doing so, the article manages to press home the discourse of danger that immigration poses to the UK, while managing to underplay the merits of the debate posed by those arguing for a more humane approach to immigration.

According to a leading trade union activist, such positions are increasingly visible in so-called 'blue-collar' newspaper that working class people read:

"...(Working class) folk would be reading *The Daily Mirror*, or something like that. (You know) the papers that you read to know a little bit more about what is happening around the country and at the same time be able to follow the goings-on of the classes above you. These are the papers that are picking up on the immigration debate and on the issue of ethnic and religious minorities. The article you mention (refer to case above) is a classic example of the right kind of camouflage of research on migration. (The article) refers to research in a selective manner and leaves out a lot of work on immigration that is already in the public domain."⁷

This sentiment has its basis in the kind of knowledge and information that is being accessed in the public domain, with reference to issues of immigration of ethnic minorities to the UK. While there are legitimate concerns that research on working conditions of ethnic minorities are not made public, research institutions often circumvent the need to approach the media by making their research available online. In fact, it is the Internet along with radio (both online and transmitted) that has been the major contributors to greater visibility of minorities in the UK.

4. The legal context

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was set up in early twentieth century in order to make radio programmes. It was registered as a company and instituted as a monopoly. It typified Bertolt Brecht's notion that radio was a one sided, supply oriented affair, when in reality it ought to be a more listener-friendly medium. Today, the BBC is not the only institution that is allowed to broadcast programmes in the UK. There are several smaller, niche-oriented radio stations and broadcasters. This has been made possible by a series of legislative changes that have been put to effect in the UK.

From the first radio phone-in, in 1968, where editorial control remained with the station to the emergence of digital radio in the 1990s, the legal landscape for media in the UK has changed quite rapidly (Lax 2007: 109-121). In the post war period, the Independent Television Authority (ITA) remained the only institution that determined the operation and transmission of stations. This changed with the introduction of the Broadcasting Act in 1990, where radio and television stations were made the regulators of content. In television, this meant an extension of multi-channel satellite television and also stipulated that the BBC acquires a percentage of its outputs from independent production companies. It also allowed for the growth of FM and medium wave radio stations across the UK. In 2003, the Communications Act gave the Office of Communication (Ofcom) – the authority that replaced ITA – full powers, recognised community radio as a legal media entity and removed the bar over cross-media ownership, allowing non-nationals to acquire interests in the media.⁸

This growth of smaller broadcasters is commensurate with the overall transformation of mass media in most parts of the world. Towards the latter part of the twentieth century, media had transformed itself enough to be able to engage with both the state and the market. With the extension of technologies like the Internet and low powered radio, there was the creation of an alternative mediated public sphere. This is the context within which ethnic minorities in the UK began exploring means to communicate in different languages and for a different audience.

Radio stations like Sunrise Radio (www.sunriseradio.com) and Caribbean Eye (currently not online) are testimony to the fact that niche markets are there to be explored by media entrepreneurs. Sunrise Radio, an enterprise owned

by the Litt Corporation, caters to a South Asian audience and has a creative mix of Bollywood entertainment and local news meant for British South Asians. Such stations are also a reflection of the domestication of political issues for ethnic minorities in the UK. Trade union activists and researchers argue that this kind of sequestering of minority issues leads to an unenviable silence on the conditions of minorities within the larger group. This is especially true in the case of women and workers, who are marginalised on more than one count.

5. In conclusion

Ethnic minorities in the UK seem to have come a long way since their caricatured presentation in sitcoms in the 1970s. Yet, there is a sense that real issues remain outside the realm of the mainstream media. While media technologies and the Internet have contributed immensely to the growth and visibility of minorities within the UK, they have also led to the promotion of sectoral interests that sometimes feels like a "cocooned cacophony" (Dahlgren 2009). As the Internet becomes home to various domains, it might seem as though in bypassing the classical modes of journalism, the media in the UK has left the act of political communication to other actors. However, there is a need to revisit the notion that the growth of the media has led to the proliferation of public spheres for ethnic minorities in UK.

As the controversy over the "Paki" statement and Nick Griffin's appearance on national television in October 2009 show, the minority representation issue is far from being closed chapter in the public sphere in UK. If anything, it has assumed different proportions. In the current climate of fear of the other, due to threats to security and the so-called 'war-on-terror', it is easy to see how images of the ethnic minorities in the UK can be used unfairly. However, as a commentator put it:

"Britain is no stranger to communal strife and hostility, whether in the post-industrial north or in the heart of London. Racial and ethnic ghettos still exist here. But Britain's landscape of ethnic separation is not nearly as stark as that of France, for example. A yawning, poisonous chasm separates France's banlieues (and their often disproportionately immigrant populations) from its cities. People are far more interspersed in the UK. The mingling and collision of differences (both ethnic and socio-economic) is a natural and inextricable feature of urban British life.

... An unfortunate consequence of Nick Griffin's debut on Question Time was that it gave the impression that immigration and race are central preoccupations of British politics. They are not, no matter how much certain political figures and members of the media wish

them to be. More so than most peoples, Britons across many levels of society are familiar with ethnic difference, willing to navigate around its pitfalls.”⁹

One can sense that activists would be cautious about endorsing such a view without any qualifications. Advocacy groups argue that it is difficult to break through the mainstream media when it comes to highlighting the problems of minorities, both within the UK and in the world at large. While the UK media good at picking up on conflict reporting, it still has quite a distance to cover when it comes to realising the relevance of the minority dimension of different social and political conflict¹⁰. It is true that the media in the UK has combined three traditions, namely (a) political communication, where different actors including the media engage in debates; (b) public sphere theory, where institutional arrangements are critically examined and (c) culturalist theory, where subjective realities of citizenship are taken up; quite well. However, it is in the details of this combination that new challenges are likely to emerge both for the media and minorities in the UK, as the polarisation of political opinion following Nick Griffin’s appearance on *Question Time* in October 2009 has shown.

One such challenge that the author wishes to point out, by way of concluding this report, is that of the growth of faith-based education in the UK. This is a matter that has ramifications for the media as well. Activists argue that as long as state lends support to faith-based education, there is always the possibility that conservative and obscurantist forces may take control of issues pertaining to minorities. In doing so, they would be seconding the images of fear (of immigration and by that extension, of minorities as well) that prevail in the media. Critics of immigration will always point to the growth of faith-based education as an example of the state’s unwillingness to effectively police its borders and play host to ethnic immigrants. Faith-based education therefore will be seen as another example of opacity, where immigrants have an undue advantage.

Notes

¹ James Weatherup. “Anton ‘Paki’ Slur” in *News of the World* (October 4, 2009).

² On April 20, 1968 Conservative Member of Parliament, Enoch Powell, while speaking at a meeting in Birmingham ended by alluding to immigration (into the UK) as the possible trigger for race wars. The media picked up on the explosive content of Powell’s speech since he had circulated the text earlier. The Conservative Party immediately censured Powell, though he claimed that he had been misquoted (Heffer 1998).

³ The lady in question, Druscilla Cotterill, died in 2007. Though Powell refused to name her, he detailed the kind of abuse that she was being allegedly subjected to, by her West Indian neighbours who accused her of being a “racialist” since she did not allow them the use of her phone and otherwise ignored them. Powell’s speech hinged upon the Race Relations Bill – which he vehemently opposed – and how it would criminalise her intention to remain aloof from her neighbours.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-433497/Widow-Enoch-Powells-Rivers-Blood-speech-really-did-exist.html> (Accessed November 2, 2009).

⁴ R. Payne in an interview with the author (October 12, 2009, London).

⁵ S. Dhaliwal, in an interview with the author (October 15, 2009, London).

⁶ While the thrust of the article was to highlight the growing concerns brought about by the government's handling of the immigration issue, especially in relation to local government, the article concludes with a statement of a policy researcher who says that immigrants were contributing to the economy. It would seem that the text, bolstered on one side by references to research and think tanks, all of who are passionately concerned with matters of communities and local government are unfairly pitted against the wry observations about the economy.

⁷ W. Sullivan, in an interview with the author (October 20, 2009, London).

⁸ These legal changes have also had their share of controversies with many arguing that there has been a lowering of journalistic standards in the media. The 1990 act was also debated over in the parliament, with critics arguing that this was an unnecessary Americanisation of the British Media.

⁹ Kanishk Tharoor. "Britain is good at dealing with diversity" in *The Independent*, October 25, 2009.

¹⁰ F. Mihlar, in conversation with the author (October 17, 2009, London).

References

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