



Irish Traveller Movement in Britain

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Briefing: Gypsies, Roma and Irish Travellers in the media

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Introduction

“Like most Gypsy and Traveller discrimination; it’s a vicious circle. Travellers don’t trust the media because how it portrays them. But the media has more power to break this circle than we do.”

Sophia Vale, English Gypsy

Negative media coverage of the UK’s Irish Travellers and Gypsies has been acknowledged by the United Nations Human Rights Committee¹, the UN Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination² and in a review by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI):

‘Gypsies and Travellers are regularly presented in a negative light in the mainstream media, and in particular in the tabloid press, where they are frequently portrayed, for example, as being by definition associated with....sponging of British society, making bogus claims for protection and being troublemakers. ECRI is concerned not only at the racist and xenophobic messages themselves that are thus propagated by the media, but also by the fact that civil society actors have in some cases observed direct links between minority groups targeted by the media and minority groups targeted in violent attacks.’³

This briefing will give examples of media coverage and online comments on Gypsies, Roma and Irish Travellers, the impact such coverage has on community members everyday lives, the urgent need for media outlets to fully acknowledge these groups ethnic identities and the role of regulatory bodies in addressing questionable coverage.

¹ See UN Human Rights Council Eight Session, 2008, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*, page 15, para 15.
http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session1/GB/A_HRC_8_25_United_Kingdom_E.pdf

² UN CERD, September 2011, *Concluding Observations, Seventy Ninth Session, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*, page 6, para 27, page 2, para 11
<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cerd/docs/CERD.C.GBR.CO.18-20.pdf>

³ ECRI, March 2010, *ECRI Report on the United Kingdom (fourth monitoring cycle)*, p. 39
http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/country-by-country/united_kingdom/GBR-CbC-IV-2010-004-ENG.pdf

1. Media coverage

Disproportionality

As highlighted by the UN and ECRI reports, media coverage of Gypsies, Roma and Irish Travellers often propagates negative stereotypes which are disproportionate to the issues these stories address. For instance, in May 2012, Traveller's on a site near Cardiff protested about a proposed coastal path that they said would overlook their caravans and compromise their privacy.

This story would not be out of place in a local newspaper or website, but there is not much chance of it moving on to the nationals. However, the story did reach the nationals and these were some of the headlines:

'NIMBY gypsies fight walkers'

The Sun 26/10/2011⁴

'Gipsies turn into Nimbys: Coastal path round Wales will invade OUR privacy, say travellers'

Daily Mail 26/10/2011⁵

This example, along with numerous others, reveals the disproportionality and disconnect between the factual details of many stories concerning Gypsies, Roma and Irish Travellers and the scale and context in which they are covered by the media.

Discrimination and offensive coverage

As the example above highlights, Gypsy is an emotive word and is utilised by the media. Nowhere is this more evident than in Channel 4's recent ***'Bigger, Fatter, Gypsier'*** advertising campaign for the new series of Big Fat Gypsy Weddings. However, mainstream media often step beyond playing on the word 'Gypsy' and the stereotypes this conjures up to use far more offensive and provocative terminology:

'Yes, I am a pikey, and it is important my Land Rover reflect that'

BBC Top Gear Magazine June 2012 Edition

⁴ <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/3894925/NIMBY-gypsies-fight-walkers.html>

⁵ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2053236/Gypsies-block-UKs-longest-coastal-path-claiming-ramblers-invasion-privacy.html?ito=feeds-newsxm>

'Stamp on the camps: War on Gypsy free for all'

The Sun, 28 July 2007⁶

'It's a pestcode...JUDGE has sparked fury by awarding a postcode to a gipsy camp.'

The Sun, 12 March 2010⁷

Comment threads and incitement to hatred

Research by the ITMB has found that comment threads after online news and opinion articles – including those in the online versions of national and local newspapers – often contain highly offensive and racist opinions, and in some cases incitement to hatred:

"I don't think people should be careful what they say about Fegg Gays and these **s. These jippos are scum and I've never heard of a single one of the filthy gits paying anything into society. Natural human parasites, the lot of them"***

'This is Staffordshire' newspaper by [Speccy9eyes](#) March 02 2012, 3:24PM

ITMB analysed one particular thread after a sympathetic Dale Farm opinion piece in The Observer⁸ and found that out of 500 comments posted 150 were found to be racist.⁹

Under libel law, editors and publishers are legally responsible for publishing defamatory allegations (see **Godfrey v Demon Internet Service (2001)**) of fact from on-line anonymous and/or named posters (see **Gina Ford v Mumsnet (2007)**).

Criminal law prohibits the use of threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour, or displaying any written material which is threatening, abusive or insulting with the intention of stirring up racial hatred or where racial hatred is likely to be stirred up.

In relation to the many posts about Gypsies, Roma and Irish Travellers on newspaper websites, it is unclear whether editors and comment-thread moderators are aware that many of these comments are likely to stir up racial hatred.

⁶ <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/104007/Stamp-on-the-camps.html>

⁷ <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/2888942/Its-a-pestcode-judge-orders-official-address-for-gipsy-eyesore.html>

⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/sep/02/dale-farm-early-ache-tightening-vice>

⁹ ITMB research methodology: if it was a negative comment about the Dale farm Travellers as a group – then it may have been offensive - or even libellous – but was not counted as racist. A hypothetical example makes this clear: “The Dale Farm residents don’t pay tax and live off benefits,” was counted as offensive and libellous. “Travellers don’t pay tax and live off benefits,” was counted as racist.

2. Impact and acknowledgement of ethnic identity

Impact

Thomas McCarthy, a traditional Irish Traveller singer and rights campaigner:

“It (prejudiced media coverage) has a devastating effect on the Travelling people. It eats at your self-confidence, self-image and self-esteem and causes bad health in your mind and your body. When I see the headlines it feels like a physical blow. It feels like we have been knocked backwards when we are trying to step forward.”

Brian Foster; Chairman of the Advisory Council for the Education of Romany and other Travellers and an experienced Traveller educationalist outlines the impact that prejudiced reporting has on children:

“Teachers working closely with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families, have reported upsurges of racist bullying at times of negative press publicity. During the Sun’s ‘Stamp on the Camps’ campaign, an Irish Traveller Welfare Assistant commented: “How do you think it feels going into school, with this all over the papers?” A housed Traveller student was excluded for kicking a door that had been slammed in his face by a “friend” with the words: “Get back to Dale Farm, pikey.”

Acknowledgement of ethnic identity

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, Gypsies are an ethnic minority, as are Irish Travellers. The courts have also established that Gypsies, Scottish Gypsies and Irish Travellers are ethnic groups for the purposes of the Race Relations Act 1976 (as amended by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000)¹⁰

However, a majority of newspapers and media continue to use lower case when referring to Gypsies and Irish Traveller when the majority of ethnic minorities in the UK are capped in the national media. Capitalisation in references to identified groups is symbolically very important as it is acknowledgement of the groups’ culture, heritage and ethnic identity. Non-capitalisation of Gypsy and Irish Traveller infers non-recognition of these groups culture, heritage and ethnic identity

There are examples of good practice, for instance the Guardian Style Guide:

“Gypsies:

¹⁰ Commission for Racial Equality v Dutton, 1989 and O’Leary and others v Punch Retail, 2000

uc, recognised as an ethnic group under the Race Relations Act, as are Irish Travellers.”

(uc = upper case)

3. Regulation

Press Complaints Commission

The Press Complaints Commission – a regulatory body established and operated by representatives of the press itself – have a **Code of Practice, clause 12 of which relates to discrimination.**

However, the PCC clause 12 only works if racism is targeted at a recognisable individual. This is not an effective defense against casual and intentional racism against Gypsies, Roma and Irish Travellers as ethnic groups. For instance the below comment in an opinion piece by Richard Littlejohn would not constitute a breach of the code:

‘It might be worth the money if the next time a member of the pikey community decides to liberate a tractor he is blasted to Kingdom Come’

Daily Mail 02/02/2010¹¹

This statement and many like it, affect the standing of all individual Gypsies and Irish Travellers, but complaints by individual Gypsies and Irish Travellers would not be considered by the PCC because an individual community member has not been identified.

OFCOM and the Advertising Standards Authority

Both OFCOM¹² and the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)¹³ have detailed codes of practice which, depending on how they are interpreted and the details of the complaint in question, have the power to challenge offensive and discriminatory coverage of Gypsies and Irish Travellers.

Currently the ASA are conducting a formal investigation into complaints lodged by the ITMB and other complainants regarding Channel 4’s *‘Bigger Fatter Gypsier’* billboard advertising campaign. However, ITMB and the complainants have had to go through a

¹¹<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1247814/RICHARD-LITTLEJOHN-Spy-planes-target-terrorists-tractor-thieves.html>

¹² <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/broadcasting/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code/>

¹³ <http://www.asa.org.uk/Advertising-Codes.aspx>

complex and costly appeals process with the ASA's Independent Reviewer to bring about a full investigation which was originally dismissed by the ASA Executive.

Conclusion

A recent progress report by the ministerial working group on tackling inequalities experienced by Gypsies and Travellers acknowledged that:

*'Studies have reported that Gypsy and Traveller communities are subjected to hostility and discrimination and experience problematic relations with settled communities.'*¹⁴

The Irish Traveller Movement in Britain hold that media coverage of Gypsies, Roma and Irish Travellers is a major driver of the hostility and discrimination these groups face. ITMB have made a submission to the Leveson highlighting these concerns and identifying the public interest case for effectively addressing this issue:

<http://irishtraveller.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/ITMB-Gypsy-and-Traveller-submission-to-Leveson-inquiry1.pdf>

The way forward

Considering the issues raised in this briefing, ITMB would like to make the following recommendations, enabling all parties to move forward with positive steps to effectively address these issues:

To include in the existing – or any new press code of conduct – a clause that recognises that prejudicial and racist reporting – whilst it ultimately affects the individual – is not necessarily targeted at an individual and may be targeted at a group (e.g. Irish Press Council code of practice, principle 8 on prejudice).

Society of Editors, NUJ and PCC promote as standard practice by editorials, the capitalisation and acknowledgment of Gypsies and Irish Travellers ethnic identity.

The Home Office, Department for Communities and Local Government and ACPO to introduce measures to counteract incidents of highly offensive, racist and incitement to hatred online comment threads.

Newspaper editorials, The Society of Editors, the PCC and other media watchdogs and outlets should seek cultural awareness raising workshops from Gypsies and Irish Travellers and develop detailed guidance on reporting these groups (e.g. NUJ guidance on Gypsies and Travellers is a good example of a starting point).

¹⁴ DCLG, April 2012, *Progress report by the ministerial working group on tackling inequalities experienced by Gypsies and Travellers*, p. 5

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/planningandbuilding/pdf/2124046.pdf>