



is served by their inclusion? Have you, for example, ever seen them similarly cited in the headlines of news reports that could be usefully described as 'happy'? 'Immigrant rescues stranded child', perhaps, or 'Bulgarian saves the day'?

Maybe we could find one or two if we searched hard enough but nobody can dispute the fundamental imbalance here: foreignness only really matters when the foreigner does naughty things. When the foreigner does nice things he's not really a foreigner at all.

Consider a recent case in America where a student with no immigration documentation (a fairly reliable indicator of illegality) won a scholarship to a college. Fox News Latino, which caters for a largely Hispanic audience, reported the story under the headline 'In rare move, university grants \$22K scholarship to undocumented student.' Over at Fox News, which caters for a largely non-Hispanic and historically 'right-wing' audience, the exact same story, accompanied by the exact same photograph of the exact same young student, appeared under the headline: 'Money for illegals'. The two television stations, as the name suggests, are part of the same organisation.

This case highlights perfectly the way in which, with particular reference to feeding xenophobic tendencies which may often be unconscious, much of modern media has completely and deliberately blurred the line between report and comment, between the providing of facts and the prompting of emotional response which invariably involves pandering to prejudice. And, of course, for every reader, viewer or listener whose prejudices are being pandered to there will be another for whom the same prejudices will be forming afresh in her consciousness. The 'journalism', in other words, is deliberately designed to feed that feeling of the amorphous constituency of 'foreigners' or 'immigrants' being somehow up to no good.

Would you really care about the geographical origin of the doctor who gave you the all clear, or the shopkeeper who returned your lost purse or the teacher who helped your children achieve their potential? So why would you care about the country of origin of a doctor you were unhappy with, or a shopkeeper who short-changed you or a teacher who marked your children's homework badly?

We are all guilty here. I am certainly not adopting a holier-than-thou approach to feeling prickles of prejudice when confronted with someone whose 'otherness' might provide a convenient hook upon which to hang an anger-assuaging insult. If you get cut up by an overweight person while driving there follows an often irresistible impulse to shout at the 'fat bastard'. You might, of course, hold magnificently enlightened views on the issue of obesity and believe passionately that sufferers from it need help and understanding rather than abuse and name-calling but, in the heat of that moment in traffic, the other driver's fatness is the most obvious weapon to hand which might be employed to hurt him.

And that seems to me to be of huge importance. When we are enraged or annoyed or even just noticeably irritated by another person and want to lash out, to hurt, to cause them mental anguish, we reach for words we think will work regardless of whether we hold the views the words convey. Substitute the word 'fat' here for 'black' or 'Polish' and I think you'll see what I'm getting at. It would, of course, be a racist act to shout 'You black bastard!' at someone who had annoyed you (just, I suppose, as it would be to shout 'You white bitch!'), but it is by no means certain, or even likely, that the shouter is in fact a racist person.

Anything that marks your temporary enemy out as 'other' offers itself as an effective means with which to hurt them. Colour and weight, as we have seen, most obviously fit the bill but the list is almost endless: height, sexuality, ugliness, hair colour, clothing ... All speak of an ugly little impulse within us all (my apologies if you feel exempt from this observation, but you're probably kidding yourself) to use someone's minority status as a weapon. Once we are aware of this appetite within us we have a choice: to feed it and so increase the anger in our lives, or to resist the siren call of 'Money for illegals' and 'Romanian driver kills pedestrian' rhetoric and so hopefully quieten the ugly voice within.

More worryingly, though, that ugly little voice is not confined to situations in which the 'immigrant' has deliberately done us harm. Hospital and doctors' waiting rooms are probably the best place to recognise the grim truth of this. If you are obliged to wait for longer than you would like – and you invariably will be – it seems almost impossible not to question the rights of other people present to be seen before you. It is here that even ostensibly liberal people might find themselves unhappily clocking thick accents, or niqabs, or the colour of complexions (no matter that this no longer provides even the vaguest indication of non-nativeness). It is almost a reflex action. But not quite, because you can catch yourself doing it, you can recognise the reality of what I describe and you can make a choice: do I indulge the enraging but irrelevant detail of my fellow patients' ethnicity or do I afford it exactly the same importance as I do the ethnicity of my doctors and nurses?

'The boy who cried wolf' has shown us that the appeal of invitations to be frightened or angry or both depends largely on how much we have invested in that which is supposedly under threat from the 'wolf'. Nothing fits this bill more perfectly than our essential personal safety, our physical wellbeing, our very health. These, by definition, are the things we feel most protective of. So a columnist or pundit or phone-in host who feeds the fear that they are somehow under threat from 'foreigners' is guaranteed our attention regardless of how reasonable that fear may be – and regardless of how much damage to community cohesion, to society itself, feeding that fear may wreak.

So while it's no more relevant than his star sign or the football

team he supports, a criminal's foreignness is rendered headline news, an ineluctable fact that often seems to be afforded more weight and condemnation than the crime itself. At risk of being inappropriately brutal, do you really think a rape victim is even the tiniest bit bothered by the ethnicity of her attacker? Of course she isn't. So why does so much media coverage of crime these days suggest that we should be? And why on earth are we so easily persuaded that it matters? Because once the foundation stones of fear and anger have been laid, scaremongers and demagogues can build almost anything they like upon them. And they will.

It is only here where ugly prejudices are fed by 'professionals' grown fat on the fear and fury of their consumers that the nationality of the speeding car's driver somehow matters more than the nationality of the man who pushed you from its path.

Taken from *Loathe Thy Neighbour* by James O'Brien.