

Writing to the Press

by Francis Bennion

My first letter to a newspaper was published in 1949. Since then there have been many more. This article gives some hints based on my experience of that peculiarly English phenomenon the Letter to the Editor, which usually amounts to a Letter to the Letters Editors. The latter, sometimes known as readers' editors, form a breed of their own. Occasionally they gather together for discussions. Stephen Pritchard, described as readers' editor of *The Observer*, revealed that in 2011 readers' editors from all over the world gathered in Montreal 'to consider a fundamental question at the heart of all journalism: what is truth?'¹

Newspapers are full of opinions; but their readers have opinions too. Readers of *The Times*, unlike those of most other newspapers, tend to be leaders of opinion. If you aspire to be a leader of opinion you simply must take *The Times*: nothing else will do. Such reader-leaders have given *The Times* letters page its worldwide reputation. However *The Times* does not put on airs. It does not aim to be exclusive. It does not haughtily bar from its prestigious letters page the humble and lowly, if they have something to say. Ian Hollingshead, a letters editor for *The Daily Telegraph*, said in 2011 that *The Times* receives around 500 letters every day, *The Guardian* 300, *The Independent* 200 and *The Daily Telegraph* 700.² Ian Brunskill, Editor of Letters, Obituaries and Register at *The Times*, told me in the same year that in fact they receive some 700 letters a day and 'have space for about 20 at most'.³

On Letters to the Editor Hollingshead cited E. M. Forster's opinion that letters 'have to pass two tests before they can be classed as good: they must express the personality both of the writer and of the recipient'. The 'personality' of a newspaper is necessarily variegated, owing much to the proprietor and something to the editor. Rarely, as with C. P. Scott of the old *Manchester Guardian*, the editor predominates. A paper's 'personality' will also owe something to the readers. Hollingshead said *The Times* still publishes a significant number of the 'great and the good'.

My first published letter in *The Times* was written over half a century ago, when I was a Balliol undergraduate. It was then a very different newspaper, a broadsheet with a front page entirely taken up with classified advertisements. On 3 May 1966 it started printing news on the front page, like every other newspaper. Ros Taylor, editing *The Guardian's* insert *The Wrap*, wrote in 2004:

'Readers may have noticed that *The Wrap* still refers to *The Times*, *The Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Independent* as broadsheets - even though two of them have completely abandoned the format. That's because no one seems to have come up with a satisfactory alternative to describe the more serious-minded papers, except the rather snobbish "quality press"'.⁴

On 1 November 2004 *The Wrap* remarked:

'For the past year or so *The Times* has been published in two formats, according to taste, but today the paper goes wholly tabloid. The word tabloid, however, is studiously avoided; *The Times* is a "compact" newspaper, the masthead declares.'

I did not allow this change to pass unremarked, as *The Wrap* reported:

¹ *The Observer* 22 May 2011. I refrain from asking a question beginning 'Well, if they don't know the answer to that . . .'

² 'Green Ink and Gold', *The Author* Spring 2011 pp. 20-21.

³ Letter to the author, 23 December 2011.

⁴ *The Wrap*, 1 November 2004.

‘A Mr Francis Bennion writes to the letters page. “Sir, Never again will I feel a surge of pride at seeing my humble missive perched in the top left hand corner alongside some majestic editorial. As one who has been published over a hundred times on your letters page, I feel sad at a change which robs *The Times* of its civilised spaciousness.” In a sop to Mr Bennion, his letter has been placed next to the leader column.’⁵

When I wrote my first letter to *The Times*, the printed pages were produced not by computer typesetting, as they are today, but in the hot-metal composing room. The printers held the whip hand, and used it. A love-hate relationship traditionally existed between editorial staff and printers. For a whole year, from November 1978 to November 1979, *The Times* was off the street because of a printing dispute. The date of resumption, 13 November 1979, is notable in the annals of that august newspaper.

The Times was founded by publisher John Walter on 1 January 1785 as *The Daily Universal Register*, with John Walter in the role of editor. After 940 issues he changed the title on 1 January 1788 to *The Times*. Under Thomas Barnes and his successor John Thadeus Delane the influence of *The Times* rose to great heights, especially in politics.

In 1966 *The Times* was acquired by Lord Thomson of Fleet, owner also of *The Sunday Times*. In 1974 it moved from its historic London site in Printing House Square, Blackfriars, to join the latter newspaper in Gray’s Inn Road. After what was a logistical nightmare, issue no. 59,122 of *The Times* was produced from Gray’s Inn Road on 24 June 1974. The next big change, to computer typesetting and photocomposition, followed the purchase of the paper by Rupert Murdoch’s *News International* in 1981.

It is widely regarded as difficult to get a letter into *The Times*. In Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* Lady Bruton found it impossible even to compose such a letter unaided. The author writes:

‘One composition cost her more than to organise an expedition to South Africa, which she had done in [the Boer War]. After a morning’s battle beginning, tearing up, beginning again, she used to feel the futility of her own womanhood as she felt it on no other occasion, and would turn gratefully to the thought of Hugh Whitbread who possessed - no one could doubt it - the art of writing letters to *The Times*’.

It helps if you can give the impression that you are an authority on the subject under discussion. This however may have the drawback of making you appear conceited. That little problem is insoluble.

However accomplished you are as a writer, the letters editor will not allow you to appear in the paper’s columns very often. Ian Hollingshead said:

‘Letter-writing does attract its obsessives. Some of our readers write - often very well - three or four times a day (even though we try to limit them, out of a sense of fairness, to appearing on the page no more than once a month).’

This points to a problem. Once a month is an inadequate ration for a well-informed, even expert, reader who has useful things to say on many topics. Is it right that a letter which would otherwise merit publication, perhaps might even demand it, should be barred by an editor simply because its author has had another letter published in the paper within the past month?

One day I had a telephone call from a man who asked how I had managed to have such a high proportion of letters published. He hinted that many people who write to newspapers (not necessarily *The Times*) would find it helpful if I revealed the secret.

Of course there is no secret, just common sense. If you want to get a letter published in your chosen newspaper, there are rules to observe. You must concentrate thought to a remarkable

⁵ Ibid. How humiliating to have been accorded a mere indefinite article!

degree, expelling extraneous matter. The good newspaper letter is spare, if not skeletal. It must distil the essence of the subject, with no surplus wordage. In that respect it resembles the best journalism. *The Times*, when it had decided on publication, would telephone to tell you, usually (but not always) with suggested ways of abbreviating your already condensed letter still further. The courtesy of a preliminary telephone call was not granted by other newspapers, and today it is not granted by *The Times* either. In former years *The Times* was not so insistent on brevity.

Iain Hollingshead says that readers often ask what makes a good letter and how they can increase their chances of being published. He says:

‘The answer, happily, is that there is no magic formula. Originality, humour, informed personal experience and, if we’re honest, brevity - they certainly all help. A letter that arrives just before morning conference at 11 am probably stands more chance of publication than one sent late on a Sunday afternoon. But often it’s a question of how they fit with the rest of the day’s selection, or simply pot luck depending on the taste of the letters editor that day.’

On the surface, newspaper letters are expressions of opinion on current issues. Deeper down, they may uncover the self. One obvious way they do that is by proclaiming that their author is the sort of person who writes to newspapers. It is generally agreed, especially by journalists, that such people are of a certain type. Sir Sigmund Sternberg humbly thanked *The Times* for its ‘unfailing courtesy’ in publishing his letters over the years, unlike some other papers. To this the journalist Quentin Letts riposted in *The Daily Telegraph*: ‘It may simply have been, of course, that other newspapermen thought him a bore’. Letts described Sternberg as ‘that comic, self-reverential ancient’.⁶ One correspondent revealed that when he asked a staff member at *The Times* why so large a proportion of letters were sent in by the clergy the reply was ‘vanity and an excess of spare time’.⁷ Lord Berners recalls of his mother:

‘There was one friend of hers whom my father particularly disliked, a certain Colonel Stokes, a foolish old fellow who seemed to live in a perpetual state of righteous indignation. He used to write letters to the papers and he had a red, military face that looked as if it might go off bang at any moment.’⁸

On the other hand the writing of letters to the press may sometimes be seen as a high literary art. It was said of Ernest Mehew, the Robert Louis Stevenson expert, that his medium of literary production was the letters column of the *TLS*.⁹

Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells¹⁰, having quickly fired his paper bullet, may suffer pangs of regret. Letters editors are experienced at spotting the hot epistle its author will wish to recall in a cooler moment. Obeying one of the many ethical principles that surround this area, they usually manage to suppress them. Another ethical principle (often disregarded nowadays) is not to allow pseudonyms or *noms de guerre*. Quite properly you must reveal yourself, and that includes your full address (which will normally be shortened in print).

To obtain publication in any newspaper, you must compress in a way not required even of the professional journalist. Even so the precious letter is likely to be cut about ruthlessly by sub-editors. Sometimes this gets beyond a joke. Here is an example from my own correspondence.

On 15 May 2011 I sent a letter to *The Observer* running to 183 words. For publication on the following Sunday, without consulting me or seeking permission, the paper slashed it to 106 words. I need to give the respective texts for a judgment on this to be made.

⁶ *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 May 2005.

⁷ *The Times*, 18 January 2000.

⁸ Lord Berners, *First Childhood* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), pp. 50-51.

⁹ *The Times Literary Supplement* 11 November 2011, p. 32.

¹⁰ Regarded as the *doyen* of complaining letter-writers. Richard Cobb placed at the front of his memoir of early life in that salubrious town a poem by J. C. Hall ending ‘Dear Tunbridge Wells, *I sign this poem Yours/faithfully, Very truly* – and not *Disgusted*.

Unabridged version

Will Hutton (15 May 2011) believes that the open-door immigration policy for Europe is 'purist' and opposition to it 'noxious'. He applies the latter unpleasant description to the Danish People's Party, the True Finns, the Hungarian Jobbik Party, the Dutch Party for Freedom, the Italian Northern League, the Austrian Freedom Party, the Sweden Democrats, the French National Front, and the British National Party. Hutton approves an EU commissioner's description of the Schengen Agreement for frontier abolition as 'a beautiful achievement'.

He laments what he calls 'the ever-onward march of Europe's populist, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, nativist right', which he says is triggered by fear of another wave of Muslim immigrants from North Africa. He favours globalisation and rightly describes what is going on as 'a battle for the soul of Europe'.

Let us imagine what Europe will be like in a hundred years time if Hutton has his way. The old Judeo-Christian culture which distinguished Europe for two millennia will have long departed. In its place a faceless, confused multiculturalism will flourish. Is that really what we should bequeath to our descendants? I think not.

Edited version

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Let us imagine what Europe will be like in a hundred years time if Hutton has his way. The old Judeo-Christian culture which distinguished Europe for two millennia [altered to 'millenniums'] will have long departed. A confused multiculturalism will flourish. Is that really what we should bequeath to our descendants? I think not.

The edited version, on which readers will judge the author and his message, is but a shadow of the original. Is that ethical? *The Times*, which makes only slight alterations, would not think so but few other newspapers trouble themselves. They figure the author of a Letter to the Editor is too anxious to get published to lodge any objection, and usually they are right. Why so anxious? That is a puzzle. Readers seldom notice the name of the correspondent, unless they know it already. You don't gain fame by writing letters to the editor. Obloquy is more likely.

Even *The Times* is less punctilious than it was. I can date the change to 9 February 2004. On that day Ivan Barnes, the letters editor, telephoned me to say they were minded to publish the letter that later appeared on 13 February in that year. Instead of agreeing with me (as always hitherto) exactly which passages might be cut if they found they needed the space, and in precisely what way, Mr Barnes airily asked for *carte blanche* (which of course was given).

Having run the cut-down letter from *Disgusted*, some letters editors then delight in publishing replies criticising the (enforced) inadequacy of *Disgusted's* published letter. Professional controversialists know very well how to strike back in this way. Aware that readers will have forgotten, or missed seeing, the letter they attack, these accuse the target of carelessness, or crudity of presentation, or sheer ignorance, or other shortcomings.

Published responses to letters rarely address what one has actually said. Occasionally the original writers may be able to console themselves with the thought that at least they have managed to start a correspondence on a topic they think important. However this correspondence, if it does develop, is unlikely to concentrate on the main point the original writer wished to make. For example my 2011 letter containing substantial criticism of important propositions of law put forward by the former Lord Chancellor Lord Mackay of Clashfern attracted only two published responses, both concerned with whether it was right for some barristers to charge high fees.

Another drawback which must be accepted by letter writers is that the newspaper's columnist or reporter whose ill-considered item they attack with cool logic and impressive authority will simply ignore the criticism. Most likely they won't even read the letter even if it is published. Part of the journo's creed is never to read the letters page. Indeed most regard it as unprofessional to read anything at all in the paper except their own contributions.

Some unregenerate journalists, just a few, have the cheek to contribute to the letters page themselves. This breaches the unwritten code. The letters page is (or should be) exclusively reserved for readers. Journos can strike back in their own column: that is what it is for. Even editors sometimes break this unwritten rule.

The famous editor C P Scott wrote in his *Manchester Guardian*¹¹ words that should be displayed in every newspaper office:

‘A newspaper is of necessity something of a monopoly, and its first duty is to shun the temptations of monopoly. Its primary office is the gathering of news. At the peril of its soul it must see that the supply is not tainted. Neither in what it gives, nor in what it does not give, nor in the mode of its presentation must the unclouded face of truth suffer wrong. Comment is free but facts are sacred.’

This was brought up to date in 2011 by Senator Hugh Segal of the Canadian Parliament:

‘I subscribe to the view that everyone, including a working journalist, has the right to their own opinion, but no one has the right to their own facts.’¹²

A problem lies in the difficulty of drawing a line between opinion and fact. Sometimes my fact is your opinion. Certainly it is a matter of fact whether you hold or do not hold a particular opinion.

One precept of the code says that if a reader writes in to pinpoint an error of fact made in the paper's columns the editor must publish a correction. Facts remain sacred in our irreligious age, and must be got right. Especially in a newspaper which, like *The Times*, prides itself on being a journal of record.

An obstacle to publication of a reader's letter lies in the selectivity necessarily practised by every editor. While railing constantly against various forms of government censorship, letters editors operate a suppressive system which is entirely their own. They are often reluctant to publish a letter that goes against the policy of the paper, or advances an idea to which they are personally opposed. The media collectively have strong prejudices, which vary with time. Here the term *Zeitgeist* is employed. A letter which runs contrary to what is thought to be the *Zeitgeist* is unlikely even to be seen by the editor: it will be discreetly screened out at an earlier stage. Nor is personal acquaintance with the editor likely to help a would-be correspondent to get a letter published. Gone are the days depicted in *Mrs Dalloway*: ‘Hugh could not guarantee that the editor would put it in; but he would be meeting someone at luncheon . . .’

Another way of describing the effect of the *Zeitgeist* is by calling it by the uncomfortable name of ‘the congenial truth’ (as though there were different varieties of truth). This term was used by Andie Tucher, a former associate editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, and by the veteran Canadian journalist Bill Fox. Stephen Pritchard says that the latter applied the term congenial truth ‘to a range of serious issues where the “spin” of the congenial truth was allowed to overtake the facts and even obscure them from any open and frank analysis’¹³.

An example is that in the eyes of anarchists no government can do any good. Hence the highly selective leaking of government documents by the internet site Wikileaks. Pritchard comments: ‘constructive documents praising governments or officials are unlikely to feature

¹¹ 5 May 1921.

¹² Cited in *The Observer*, 22 May 2011.

¹³ Ibid.

in such a process'.¹⁴ At the 2011 Montreal conference of readers' editors mentioned above, Senator Hugh Segal asked if the surprise about the so-called Arab spring was 'the result of solid news reporting and clear understanding of facts or the congenial truths circulated about [Arab] nations'. Pritchard ends his article by wondering 'how many of the complaints that cross my desk every day are caused by this type of "go with the flow journalism" that . . . embraces the congenial truth over what is substantiated and perhaps unpleasant and not congenial at all'.¹⁵

One skill letters editors need to possess is the ability to select topics which will run and run. Iain Hollingshead gives an example:

'Over the course of a couple of weeks in May 2009, readers tracked the mass migration of a rabble of painted lady butterflies from the Isle of Wight to the north of Scotland. The correspondence was eventually put to rest by Damian Whitehead, writing from Gosport in Hampshire:

"During my naval career, I saw painted ladies in Bugis Street, Singapore. However, they were not butterflies and some of them were certainly not ladies."

Hollingshead gives a choice example concerning schooldays.

'One of the most enjoyable - and longest-running correspondences last year concerned our readers' recollections of their school reports. It started from nowhere and went on for several weeks, including such gems as: "When the workers of the world unite it would be presumptuous of Dewhurst to include himself among their number"; "Unlike the poor, Graham is seldom with us"; and "The improvement in his handwriting has revealed his inability to spell"'.¹⁶

As part of worldwide adherence to freedom of the press, the cult of Letters to the Editor flourishes in other countries apart from Britain. It is, for example, encouraged by Alex Beam of the United States newspaper *The Boston Globe*. With permission I presume to quote the following from an article of his titled 'Keep those cards, letters coming'.¹⁶

'There is a character in Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* named Hugh Whitbread. Mrs. D detests Whitbread, the "prefect specimen of the public [meaning private in England] school type." He is a snob, a prig, "a first-rate valet"; but he possesses a gift that his acquaintances admire: the art of writing letters to *The Times*. I prize the subculture of newspaper letter-writers, the men and women who beg to differ, or to amplify, often in prose superior to the work they are criticizing. And publishing readers' letters, as we do every day, is vital to the life of a newspaper. It reinforces the useful fiction that someone is reading the paper and actually paying attention. There happens to be a real-life Hugh Whitbread alive and well in the United Kingdom, a lawyer and author named Francis Bennion. On his website, www.francisbennion.com, you can read dozens of letters addressed to the London Times ("Is Pornography Therapeutic?"), the Daily Telegraph ("Should Bestiality Be a Crime?"), the Guardian ("The Nonsense of Child-Centred Education") and other papers. Bennion told me that he has never written to an American publication, although he was published in *The Toronto Globe and Mail*, in 1975, bemoaning a teachers' strike.'

The doctrine of freedom of the press implies that if one paper rejects your deserving letter another will print it. Things seldom work out that way. On some social or political topics the broadsheets are monolithic, and the new fad of political correctness has added to this constraint. Even if the policy of the paper inclines against stifling all criticism of a particular principle, however moderately expressed, the editorial staff may exert their own private censorship. No newspaper, however extreme in its own (usually its proprietor's) opinions, can

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *The Boston Globe*, 20 November 2006.

do without editorial staff. These are often merely passing through, and tend to stick to the general media line that is current at the time. Current is the correct adjective here, because even though cosmetically the editorial approach appears faithful to the paper's *mores* a contrary undertow will often be detectable. Even *The Times* is not exempt from its tug.

The ethical code applies to the letter writers too. One rule is that you mustn't send the same letter to more than one paper. Another is that you must get your facts right. Also obey the following suggestions if you really want to get published.

- Avoid propounding an utterly outrageous view.
- Condense like a milk factory.
- Make your letter self-contained, so it can be grasped by a reader who missed the item you are responding to.
- Never use a screamer (exclamation mark)!
- Write better than the hacks (though this will not win you an invitation to join the staff).
- Subtly suggest you know what you are talking about, and are probably, if the truth were known, the leading expert on the topic.
- Don't however try to puff your own book, play or film: this ploy will be seen through and censored.
- Make it interesting.
- Better still, make it compelling.

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References:

None