THIS HAS BEEN A WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITY so when I thank Nuffield College, The Guardian newspaper and the trustees of the Scott Trust for giving me this chance to fulfill my dream, I do so sincerely and deeply. I would also like to thank my former boss at the BBC, Liz Mardall, for giving me help and encouragement and for releasing me for a year (it sounds like I’d been in prison but the BBC’s not like that…..really !) and thanks too to Professor Anthony Heath for keeping me focused. – My original synopsis for the book that will come out of this research, was THIRTY-THREE chapters. Anthony pointed out, ever so gently, that maybe it was just a little too long. On reflection I think that writing three books at the same time was probably just a bit too ambitious ! Finally I would like to thank my husband, Jumbe, my children and my parents for their never-ending support, their unfailing interest in what I was doing and their fantastic encouragement: my six-year old daughter, Malika, was a particularly hard task-master,
checking regularly on my progress and sighing with exasperation when I sheepishly admitted that yes, I was still on the same chapter. (I think I still am).

When I was first told about the Guardian Research Fellowship, I knew immediately that I HAD to have it. I hope that doesn’t sound arrogant but I believe that when a person has a burning desire, when that desire almost becomes a need, then anything is possible. And I had a burning desire to address years of suffering the media distortions, myths and lies about ME. I had a book inside my head. I knew this was a chance to write it. Let me explain.

I was on the tube the other day – South Kensington station I think it was – when there was a commotion on the platform. Someone was shouting and calling out. Drunk probably. The whole carriage turned in the direction of the noise. It came from behind a post. I, like everyone else, paused anxiously. They were probably thinking what I was thinking: “Oh God! A drunk. I hope he doesn’t come in here.” Except my thoughts went one stage further: “Oh God! A drunk. I hope he doesn’t come in here….Please don’t let him be black!”

Some of you here will know EXACTLY what I mean but what was it that drove my particular fear? Was it that I knew that a lot of black drunks roamed the tube? No. In fact I don’t think I’ve ever come across one. Was it that I feared that he would single me out when he spotted me in the carriage? No, it wasn’t that either. What I feared was that some of those people in the carriage would use the incident to confirm long-held
assumptions which were based on WRONG and DISTORTED information. So often we are defined, categorised, by who we APPEAR to be but the mirror that’s held up is old, cracked and bent.

The same knee-jerk fear always rises when I read a crime story in a newspaper. God, please don’t let the suspect be black! It’s not because I’m in denial. I believe that criminals come in all shapes, sizes, colours and religions. But for many years, newspapers promoted the “All muggers are black” message. Now messages are like Chinese whispers. The more you repeat them, the more confused they get. So “All muggers are black” soon becomes “All blacks are muggers.”

It reminds me of a story my nephew told me once. He’s an excellent mathematician who now owns and runs a very successful computer consultancy business. Well, one evening he was walking down Ealing Broadway. Maybe he was meeting a friend. He noticed a woman walking ahead of him. She turned and saw him and kept on walking. She turned again and quickened her pace. Then quicker still. At first he was bemused then it dawned on him. “She thinks I’m a mugger!”

How we all laughed when he told us the story.....but really it’s not very funny. The woman had probably never spoken to a black man before but so deep was her fear, so ingrained was her belief about what she thought she saw, that she felt she had to run when faced with my very sweet, kind – black -- nephew. Later, the incident depressed me as I realised that the world had moved on but the story remained the same.
You see, when I was growing up I felt invisible. I would open the newspapers and wonder why there was nothing about US except singing and dancing....and rioting, and mugging....and raping. I wanted to scream out, “That’s not true, that’s not true. That’s not me. That’s not us.”

It always irritated as a child when my father would excitedly call out to my mother, urging her away from the kitchen, “Come quick! There’s a coloured man on TV.” Even now, forty-something years later, he still gives out a mild exclamation at a black face on screen. And even now I raise my eyebrows with mild annoyance. And then I remember what it was like for me, growing up in the sixties and seventies in a Britain in which I, and everyone like me, were invisible. Where were we on screen, in the newspapers, on radio? Where were our voices, our achievements, our struggles? If it weren’t to condemn, we weren’t there at all. We didn’t exist as ordinary people, part of a changing society. Accepted.

And so we would focus on great names to make us whole: Martin Luther King, Diana Ross, Cassius Clay. My brother, Wayne, and I, we would wake up anxiously the night after Cassius had fought and race downstairs. The question would have been asked, shouted breathlessly even before we reached the bottom of the stairs. “Did he win? Did he win?” My Dad’s smile would say it all. Then we could breathe again. He’d won for us, all of us. So what if a chisel-faced, baggy-eyed man named Powell had condemned us without knowing us, so what if we had to be twice as good to get anywhere, so what, so
what? Cassius Clay was a champion and that mean we were ALL champions.

Much later I read Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man”*. Written in 1950s America, Ellison told the story of a nameless black man whose existence is not acknowledged by society.

Let me read a short extract:

“I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me.”

I’ll read that last line again: “…When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me.”

I used to describe it as like being in one of those old B-movies. You know, the one about the man who’s in a coma. He can’t speak or move so they think he’s dead. He’s going to be buried alive. He’s screaming, “I’m alive. I’m real.” But the words are frozen. No one can hear. In fact, the truth is, nobody is listening.
In January, 1981 thirteen young West Indians were burnt to death in an arson attack and the press and the authorities didn’t seem to care. And so I found myself, in my final year of university marching down Fleet Street, watching those journalists peering out of their windows in fear and disbelief as I and thousands of other black people shouted up at them:

“THIRTEEN DEAD, NOTHING SAID ! THIRTEEN DEAD. NOTHING SAID !”

More than fifteen years later, a young black man called Stephen Lawrence was murdered by racists, also in south London. The bungled police investigation into his death was a potent symbol of the racism which had reduced black people in Britain to a dreadful stereotype. If police racism had prevented Stephen’s killers from being brought to justice, how had that climate been allowed to flourish? For this was not the first death by any means. Black people had been dying for decades at the hands of racists and in full view of a disinterested society but by a quirk of fate that lifted his cloak of invisibility, the story was propelled into the national media and marked a watershed in British society. Ironically, the newspaper that had probably done most to perpetuate the negative stereotype of black people over the years (and that’s to put it mildly) – the Daily Mail – was the one that lifted the lid off the whole issue. Without the Daily Mail there would have been no public inquiry, no Macpherson Report, no Race Relations Amendment Act – no backlash! It’s not what they intended but that’s what happened.
As journalists we like to parade our ‘freedom’ but with freedom comes responsibility. For many black people the old joke: “Don’t let the facts get in the way of a good story” was their reality. They were the good story as long as it was one of crime, conflict, dangerousness. But the harsh facts of many of their lives in Britain were rarely, if ever, exposed.

The worst thing is how WE can start to believe that which is not true, even when we know it not to be true. Like my father, as I grew up, I too began to listen out for any mention of black people in news reports. There would be some, usually petty crime committed and I would automatically pray that it wasn’t a black man they were looking for. Or I’d quickly scan the column to see if they’d mentioned the suspect’s race. And even though my intellectual side knew that the newspapers were guilty of distortion, that even if the suspects were black, it didn’t mean that ALL West Indians were criminal, I still feared that people would think they were. And I’m ashamed to admit that there have been times, not very often thankfully, when I’ve seen a group of black boys and wondered what they are up to. It’s then that I have to remind myself that I mustn’t be brainwashed by the stereotypes that have assaulted my psyche since the day I was born.

And I force myself to remember and laugh at how as a child I believed that black men couldn’t play football. In those days it was just Clyde Best. He played for West Ham. They weren’t picked, the managers used to say, because they had ‘no heart’ and there were question marks about their ‘temperament’. I didn’t really understand what they
meant but since the reporters never challenged those statements, neither did I and so I grew up believing that black men were simply physically incapable of playing in the top leagues. Look at them now.

Then I realised that if black people begin to believe what they know to be untrue, what about the white British, especially those who don’t come into daily contact with their black British neighbours. What must they believe?

I began this research partly out of sense of indignation because one of the biggest crimes a journalist can commit is to miss the story. I believe that many journalists have consistently ‘missed the story’ and indeed have grossly misrepresented the story. But what started as something of a personal crusade has matured into a realisation that whether by accident or design, I had chosen a subject that has become a defining and critical issue for British society. Race.

When I first put in my submission for this fellowship two years ago, I’d detected the first signs of a backlash against the conclusions and recommendations of the Macpherson report. There seemed to be more stories about ‘black crime’ in the tabloids and the first mutterings about asylum seekers were taking shape on the news pages of our popular newspapers. Instinct had told me that this was an important issue but the feedback from some people I spoke to wasn’t always encouraging. It was as if they were saying, why do you have to stir up this now? Why don’t you just let things lie?
But I began asking myself, ‘why do we accept these myths, these distortions?’ It’s as if we treat the popular press like an indulgent grandparent would an errant child. Pat the child on the head. Tell him “Don’t do it again but run off and play now”. He can’t help it after all. Well, some of the stories we read may be infantile in their simplicity but the impact goes far beyond the innocent world of children. It spills out from the pages and infects people’s minds. It changes the boundaries of acceptability. It justifies hatred.

Newsrooms reverberate with unspoken thoughts: “It’s ok to write that. They’re only blacks…asylum seekers…..gypsies…..Muslims.”

In the last six months alone my instincts about the importance of this issue have been shown to be right. We’ve seen race riots in our northern cities, we’ve watched as politicians made blatantly racist statements in the run up to the General Election, we’ve witnessed the demonisation of asylum seekers, and now Muslims are struggling against the stereotypes promoted by some sections of the media in the midst of this current world crisis.

My research has largely focussed on the press treatment of black people, West Indians mainly, but the implications and the lessons learnt are by no means confined to that group. I wanted to find out whether the press had really moved on in the same way that society appeared to have moved on in the last twenty years or whether one group of demons had simply been replaced by another. So, you’re probably all wondering.....what
The starting point for my research was the New Cross fire of January 1981 in which thirteen young West Indians died. The police immediately concluded that it had been an arson attack. Many West Indians feared that it was a racist attack. Although rarely covered in the press, there had been 31 murders of black and Asian people between 1976 and 1981 and a string of arson attacks on ethnic minority homes and businesses, including the burning down of a West Indian community centre close to the house where the thirteen young people died. Despite long running investigations by the police, the New Cross fire case was never solved. In fact it was announced this year that there would be a new inquest on the deaths. My task, however, was not to investigate the causes but to look at how the fire was reported and the messages that those reports were giving out.

In raw journalistic terms, the tragedy had all the elements of a good story: murder, young people struck down in their prime, bereaved parents and friends, tales of heroism, drama, claims that it was a racist attack. It was simply the kind of tragedy that’s the stuff of newspapers – except for one thing. THOSE WHO DIED DIDN’T FIT THE TABLOID VICTIM PROFILE. NO BLONDS HERE! That fact alone meant that the tragedy was seen in a completely different light. In the days and weeks following the fire there were no interviews with bereaved parents; no profiles of the children who died; no tales of heroism; no stories charting the progress of the many injured; no investigation of the
claims that there had been other similar attacks; no interviews with headmasters, school friends, representatives of the local council.

Instead, it seems that the main preoccupation of the national press was with reinforcing the stereotype of the ‘noisy’, ‘inconsiderate’ West Indian:

“I complained about the noise,” said one neighbour quoted in the Sun.

“The music was terribly loud” wrote the Daily Mail.

“It was so loud the crockery in my house was shaking. At one stage I had to put ear plugs in,” quoted the Daily Mirror.

The message from the Sun was that if it were not for the mesmerising beat of the reggae music, they would have had a chance to escape:

“Teenagers were still dancing to pounding reggae music in the three-storey house in Deptford, south London as the flames swept relentlessly upward.”

(In fact the party was winding up and the DJ had begun packing away.)

The Daily Mail was less subtle in the message given to readers in an opinion piece by the legal correspondent, Fenton Bresler. It was clear to him where the blame lay – with the
victims themselves. After all, he suggested, if there hadn’t been a party, there wouldn’t have been a fire:

“I am surely not alone in wondering why on earth the tragic reggae party in Deptford, South London, that ended in ten people (His figure) dying in a fire was allowed to go on all night by the local police. They were twice called out by angry neighbours unable to sleep because of the blaring noise yet did not insist on the music being turned down for good. According to neighbours, as soon as the police left, the music was turned up again and there was no third visit – until the house was a burning shambles.”

In the days immediately following the fire, not one newspaper reported the fears of the West Indian community that it may have been a racist attack yet a public meeting had been swiftly arranged at which the concerns of the black community were expressed; a fact-finding committee had been organised and a fund set up to help the families of the victims. Rather than choosing the follow up on these developments, there was a noticeable absence of stories about the fire in the tabloids.

In the book “Windrush”* by Trevor and Mike Philips, they quote a St John’s ambulance worker who was called out to tend to the injured in the fire. She recalled sitting in a pub that evening, exhausted, after spending hours at the scene and hearing with disbelief the words of one of the drinkers:
“...as we sat down...I heard someone say, “Well, don’t really matter, does it?
They’re only black.”

Somehow I had forgotten all this. I remember being very angry and upset at the time, so angry that I decided that – for the first time in my life – I would go on a demonstration. Twenty years on I still remember the passion and the anger as we marched into Fleet Street shouting up at the journalists peering in disbelief from their windows high up:

“THIRTEEN DEAD, NOTHING SAID. THIRTEEN DEAD, NOTHING SAID”

But it was only when I looked back on the newspaper coverage that I discovered WHY I and so many other West Indians felt so deeply about this issue.

I wanted to find out why many of the newspapers and by extension, the public and the authorities appeared to be so unsympathetic to the victims. So I decided to scour the popular press to see what had been written about West Indians in the months and years before the fire.

What I found shocked me – although it shouldn’t have really. In that month, January 1981 there was only one major news story involving West Indians and – guess what? -- it was about a ‘noisy party’ which, according to the newspapers, had ended in a riot.

“TEN DAY PARTY ENDS IN A RIOT” (Daily Mirror)
The story was that a group of West Indians had set up a shebeen – which is like an illegal club -- at a house in the Ladywell district of Birmingham over the Christmas holiday period. The party went on for between eight and eleven days -- depending on which newspaper one read – and ended in a ten-minute disturbance when some of the partygoers attacked a police car.

Yes, the disturbance – according to the police – lasted TEN MINUTES – but the adjectives used by most newspapers suggested a full-scale war. Words like ‘rampage’, ‘riot’, ‘battle’.

What struck me when I began scouring the newspapers for references to West Indians was how often words like ‘rampage’ and ‘riot’ occurred. Back in the sixties the academics, Paul Hartmann and Charles Husband* had carried out an analysis of race-related newspaper headlines and found that a significant proportion contained words like ‘murder’, ‘kill’, hate’, ‘crisis’, ‘threat’ and ‘ban’. Looking at those stories at the beginning of the 1980s, it seemed that nothing much had changed. Take the Daily Telegraph. In the two weeks prior to the fire, it carried five pieces – mainly minor stories
– that referred to West Indians. All of them were negative, referring to young blacks
looting, burning, rioting, swearing, creating mayhem and ‘pandemonium’. The starting
point for all of these stories were that West Indians were ‘trouble’, an aberration, a
‘problem’.

When I looked at other newspapers I found that even in non-crime, non-news stories, the
idea of the ‘menacing’ and ‘threatening’ character of the black man was reinforced. (I say
men because the portrayal was usually of men. Black women were usually ignored.) One
obsession that I found was with the SIZE of the black man, as if his character could only
be measured in physical terms.

In January 1981, for instance, ITV were running a new groundbreaking drama series,
“Woolcot” – television’s first black detective who, in the plot, was working in one of
London’s “multi-racial troublespots” DID YOU SPOT THE STEREOTYPE THERE ?
The Sun newspaper began its preview of the series with the following immortal words:

“He’s BIG. He’s BLACK and he’s BEAUTIFUL...”

It then oozes:

“...No man could be better BUILT for the role than 34-year old Harris. He
is 6FT 3INS hasn’t a spare ounce of FLESH and looks as if he’s been
modelled out of TEAK.
The media preoccupation with the size of the black man was seen in particular on the sports pages – an arena where black people were just beginning to make inroads. Apart from the Birmingham 10-day party story and the Deptford Fire, the only major running story in January 1981 featuring West Indians concerned the English cricket team’s impending tour of the Caribbean.

In its preview of the tour the Daily Mail wrote of the ‘huge physical strength’ and the ‘menacing attack’ of the West Indies team; it referred to the West Indies captain, Clive Lloyd as an ‘amiable giant’ but made no reference to the size of Bob Willis or Ian Botham for that matter, both of whom are very large men. The Daily Mail’s cricket correspondent, Peter Smith, predicted that the cricket would be ‘brutal...possibly even bloody.’

The Daily Mirror, meanwhile, previewed the forthcoming Test in terms of a war. It spoke of flashpoints and potential riots – all without a ball being bowled.

As well as size, another favourite reference was about the black man’s ‘temperament’. From the days of slavery, one of the most popular myths was of the Negro as the ‘child of nature’, not able to control his base emotions, hence his tendency to riot rather than to reason. That stereotype was accepted to such an extent that newspapers failed to even give explanations in stories involving black people and their ‘temperament’. The Times
of January 6th 1981 is a good example. It carried a court story about a woman dancer with the African stage show Ipi Tombi, who, in the words of the reporter ‘went on the RAMPAGE’ after a PARTY. (THERE ARE THOSE WORDS AGAIN!)

“...She damaged two doors at her theatrical lodgings by beating on them with her fists and when she was arrested she bit a police sergeant on the thigh and twisted a policewoman’s finger.”

The story gives no explanation as to what caused the dancer’s actions, leaving the overriding impression that the woman had simply gone mad, out of control for no reason. Compare that with another story on the same day in the same newspaper about a Master of Foxhounds who was fined for assaulting a hunt saboteur. However, in this report, we’re given the defendants side of the story:

“Mr. Bell said that one saboteur had sprayed him in the face “so I backhanded him across the head.”

The failure to give any background to the story involving the African dancer may have just been an oversight but when taken as part of a general trend, it has worrying implications. When extended to more serious stories, such as riots, the lack of explanation or background to put the events into context, not only distorted those stories but gave the reporter or news editor the freedom to throw in whatever red herrings they wanted, to draw the reader away from the real issues. You have to remember too that
these stories were written – and read – against a blank canvas. Black people simply
didn’t figure in newspaper or television advertising, they were hardly seen on TV, not
even sport at that time, so these stories had an even more powerful impact.

The 1981 Brixton riots came “out of the blue” as far as the national press were concerned.
(Just like the northern riots this year, that featured another hitherto ‘invisible’ minority).
This, despite the publication at the beginning of 1981 of a report by Lambeth Council
accusing the police of routinely harassing young black men on the streets and warning
that the situation had reached boiling point. That report was conveniently ignored or
dismissed by most nationals as the ravings of “Red Ted Knight” as they liked to call him,
the left-wing leader of Lambeth Council at the time.

Instead, when the riots happened, several national newspapers, notably the Daily Mail and
the Daily Express promoted two ‘diversionary’ theories to explain the riots. The first was
that these black youths were simply ‘lawless’. Given the now-firmly entrenched
association between blacks and crime and dangerousness, it was an explanation that was
easy for readers to believe and understand. This theory also meant that the underlying
reasons for the riot could be ignored. The second theory was based on the “Negro child
of nature open to manipulation” stereotype. Here we saw newspapers suggesting that the
riots were not a spontaneous outburst against oppressive policing, discrimination, bad
housing etc but that the rioters had been manipulated by shadowy extreme left-wing
outside forces. The two stereotypes are, of course, contradictory. How could the West
Indian be both a lawless criminal and a manipulated victim? But the discrepancy didn’t
seem to worry most newspapers.

The Daily Express went so far as to suggest a Soviet connection in a story that alleged that a Soviet diplomat named Victor Lazine was behind the ‘organisation’ of the riots. Not one newspaper decided to launch a full-scale investigation into the widespread allegations from the black community that the police systematically harrassed young black men on the streets. Even the Guardian, which HAD run a number of stories on individual cases of harassment, appeared unwilling to give these very serious allegations against the police the kind of treatment that it did on other controversial subjects.

Part of the problem, even for the liberal end of the market, was – and is -- that they were always approaching the story on race from the outside looking in. With few, if any, black writers on their staff, reporters consistently failed to get at the heart of the real issues. With no contact with black communities, it meant that newspapers chose to rely on self-styled ‘specialists’, people like the mysterious Roy Kerridge, a so-called “expert on West Indian affairs” who seemed to pop up in several right-wing publications whenever there was a negative story to be written on West Indians in Britain. He provided Daily Mail readers with insights about the “immoral” and “criminal nature” of West Indians. His specialism, it seems, was Rastafarianism, wrongly suggesting that most West Indians are Rastafarians and that most Rastafarians are pimps. Here’s a sample:

“…Another feature of the Rasta way of life is that women have to be meek and humble to men. Sincere girlfriends of the Rasta are often beaten and forced to go
on the streets for their menfolk. A well-known leader of a Reggae group popular among such CULTISTS still lives upon immoral earnings as a sideline. Such people have to be investigated by the police and resent this very much.”

When Lord Scarman published his report into the Brixton riots, his perspective was quite different. He spoke of two issues which, until then had been ignored in most national newspapers despite a series of government and independent reports which had been published about discrimination in housing and employment. The first was ‘racial disadvantage’, the second was a call for ‘sensitive policing’. The reaction in some sections of the press, was swift:

First, a number of newspapers chose to distort Scarman’s words, implying that his report was suggesting that black people should be ABOVE the law, that police should turn a blind eye to ‘black crime’. Secondly the number of crime stories involving black people increased dramatically and became ever-more graphic, amid predictions that Scarman’s recommendations would lead to a steep increase in crime.

By March 1982, three months after the Scarman report was published, the Metropolitan Police’s response to its criticisms was to publish so-called ‘black crime’ statistics which allegedly showed the disproportionate involvement of black people in ‘muggings’ – A crime which doesn’t actually exist in law. The media unquestioningly accepted those statistics and it became a regular feature in the tabloid journalistic calendar. Now no-one is saying that stories about black criminals should NOT be reported. But the reality that
was never conveyed, either by the police or the press, was that ‘mugging’ only ever constituted a tiny percentage – less than ONE PER CENT – of all reported ‘serious crime’ and that a number of academic and Home Office studies had failed to establish the particular involvement of black people in violent crime. Did that mean that the 99 per cent of other ‘serious crime’, which presumably black people were NOT disproportionately involved in, was simply ignored.

But it wasn’t just a question of the press passively allowing themselves to be manipulated by the police. News editors actively PROMOTED the idea that black people were intrinsically criminal through their story selection and treatment. Throughout the 1980s – and despite NUJ advice to the contrary – newspapers consistently racially identified a criminal suspect if he were black but omit the suspect’s race if he were white. Since blacks only usually featured in news stories when it was related to crime, the picture created in the minds of the readers was not only that CRIME EQUALS BLACK, but that BLACK EQUALS CRIME. i.e. blacks were intrinsically criminal. On Friday April 10th 1981, for instance, the Sun newspaper carried a story that featured in all of the nationals, headlined:

“SEX MONSTER KILLS CAROLINE”

The story was about a student nurse who was sexually assaulted and murdered by a man while her flatmate was forced to listen to her screams in the next room. He’s described in the story as ‘plump, 5ft 6in tall’ but no mention is made of his race. The story featured
again on the front page the next day and again the race of the suspect is not mentioned.

Yet on the same day, The Sun ran a story about a ‘baby-faced rapist’ who attacked girl number 11.

“The girl told police the fiend was a West Indian aged between 18 and 20. He had a boyish face, a London accent and wore a blue anorak.

Now, it could be argued that race was not mentioned in the first story because it was unknown but in fact the victim’s friend had let the suspect into the flat, believing he was a friend so she was in a position to give a good description to the police. One can only assume than that The Sun – and most other national newspapers – did not mention the suspect’s race because he was white and that meant it was not relevant to the story. But if the fact that the suspect was white was not relevant to the story, why was the fact that the rapist was thought to be West Indian relevant to the second story? Could it be because race and crime – according to the news editors, WAS the story?

So after Scarman, the message coming out of the popular press was that black people were intrinsically criminal but that police powers to deal with them had been curbed because of the criticisms of the police in the report. There was also a third spin-off. After Scarman wrote about ‘racial disadvantage’, stories began to appear that forshadowed the virulent anti-ANTI racism which characterised the popular press in the 1980s and which reached a peak in the middle of that decade with now mythical stories of Labour councils banning black bin liners and children being forced to sing ‘baa baa white sheep’ in their
nurseries. None of the stories were true.

But all that was twenty years ago. These days we have black MPs, black footballers, lawyers – even journalists. We have more black actors; ground-breaking TV dramas like the BBC’s ‘Baby father’, Black History month; Black people even seem to have broken through the last taboo – advertising: The Febreeze mother and child; Lilt’s two fat ladies, BT’s black family, an all-singling, all-dancing bank manager. In fact black is hip. The latest must-have fashion statement.

Yet underneath it all, an ominous pattern seems to repeat itself: Compare the press fall-out of Scarman with that of Macpherson. The backlash was strikingly similar: First a number of newspapers chose to distort Macpherson’s words, suggesting wrongly that the report had called for an end to stop and search; Secondly the number of crime stories involving black people increased amid claims that crime HAD risen because of Macpherson; Thirdly, stories began appearing that implied that the REAL racists were black people themselves. We had a new phenomenon, ‘black on black violence’, West Indians on Africans apparently. As a West Indian married to an African, I can assure you, none of it is true.

What about the coverage of Brixton and this year’s northern riots? Like Brixton, the riots in the north came ‘out of the blue’, yet it’s clear now that there had been problems for years. Like Brixton, the alienated, dispossessed, young men who rioted on the streets had been invisible to the national population. Like Brixton a section of the press preferred
to label them criminals rather than deal with the real issues. In both cases the press consistently missed or ignored the real story until they couldn’t avoid it.

And now Muslims. For so many years they’ve been demonised in the popular press. In the same way that the word ‘black’ or ‘coloured’ went alongside words like ‘violence’, ‘conflict’, ‘riot’, we have seen the word ‘Muslim’ acquire its own suffixes and pre-fixes: ‘Muslim fundamentalist’, ‘Muslim extremist’, ‘Muslim fanatic’, or simply ‘mad-mullah’. Now, The Sun has had a bit of a revelation since the attacks on the World Trade Centre and has uncharacteristically called on its readers NOT to brand ALL Muslims as terrorists. This is great but the problem here is that messages lose meaning out of context. For years ALL Muslims were demonised by newspapers focusing on the miniscule minority of extremists. It’s hard then to suddenly introduce a new perspective and expect your readers to follow suit.

And then, of course, there are the asylum-seekers: When West Indians began arriving in Britain from the Caribbean after the Second World War, newspapers – helped by the likes of Enoch Powell – wrote about the ‘flood’, the ‘tide’, the ‘deluge’ of coloured people who had come to these shores. Many had been enticed over by officials from London Transport and the Health Service – under the auspices of the same Enoch Powell – yet the claim was often made by politicians and then repeated in newspapers that they had come to drain what was then called ‘National Assistance’. But in fact West Indians never actually constituted more than one per cent of the overall national population. It that sounds a little familiar.....it should.
I’ll read part of that paragraph again but this time I think I’ll replace ‘West Indians’ with....’asylum-seekers’: When asylum-seekers began arriving in Britain from war-torn parts of the world like Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia, newspapers, backed by politicians like Jack Straw, wrote about the ‘flood’, the ‘tide’, the ‘deluge’ of funny-coloured people who had come to these shores. The claim was often made that they had come to drain what is now called ‘Social Security’. But in fact, asylum-seekers only ever constituted a miniscule proportion of the overall national population.

Let’s look at some headlines:

“BLACK CRIME: THE ALARMING FIGURES” (Daily Mail, 11th March 1982)

This headline followed the release by the Metropolitan Police in March 1982 of ‘black crime’ statistics, three months after Scarman had published his report that called for ‘more sensitive’ policing of black areas. Compare that with this headline:

“BRUTAL CRIMES OF THE ASYLUM SEEKERS” (Daily Mail, 30th November 1998)

More than sixteen years separate these two headlines but the message appears to be the same. Here, based on a ‘dossier’ of just 44 cases, the Daily Mail claimed that asylum-seekers were having what it described as a ‘devastating impact’ on crime in London. They
persisted with that line despite the denials by the police that there was any correlation between asylum-seekers and crime.

Here are some more headlines:

“SCANDAL OF £600-A-WEEK IMMIGRANTS” (The Sun, May 4th 1976)

This 1976 story was about two homeless Asian families who, according to The Sun were ‘living in style’ at a four-star hotel at a cost of £600 a week from rates and taxes. The story, which was picked up by virtually every tabloid, failed to mention that the two families who had fled Malawi because of the political turmoil there, were British passport holders. They, like other homeless people in the area at the time, were being temporarily housed in a hotel because the council had nowhere for them to stay.

Exactly twenty years later, the Daily Mail took great delight in this story:

“THE GOOD LIFE ON ASYLUM ALLEY” (Daily Mail, October 6th 1998)

This story ‘exposed’ how ‘the majority’ of Gypsy migrants were, in their words, ‘playing the asylum appeals process’ as a tactic to milk state benefits.

It’s a message that has persisted in most popular newspapers for the last four years. Take the Afghan hijack in February 2000. This was the reaction of the popular press:
Again, no background to the story, just the assumption that these Afghans had come to milk state benefits. But that was just the beginning. This summer, the capture of forty asylum seekers who tried to illegally enter Britain prompted a rash of stories about ‘soft touch’ Britain, the innocent prey of ‘wicked’ asylum seekers who threaten to overrun the country.

But it’s not the ‘tide’, the ‘flood’ the ‘deluge’ we should most worry about. It’s the drip, drip, drip of misinformation and lies that leads to prejudice, discrimination and violence. Every time there’s been an ‘immigrant’/asylum-seeker ‘crisis’ on the pages of our newspapers, there’s been a sharp increase of racially-motivated violence on the streets. It’s the myths which feed the anger. It’s the ignorance which breeds the fear.

Since September 11th, a new dimension has been added to asylum seeker mythology: now they are potential terrorists:
“ASYLUM SEEKER WHO HELPED THE HITMEN” (Daily Mail September 19th 2001)

A point I need to make is that some of the quality newspapers did and have made a stand against the general stereotype. Back in the 1980s, the Guardian ran a number of stories spotlighting racial disadvantage and discrimination as well as individual cases of police harassment of young black men. Later it ran a campaign on the widely-ignored issue of black deaths in police custody. The Financial Times, perhaps surprisingly, has often given more balanced coverage of race issues and the Independent has even incurred the wrath of the Sun in highlighting the case of the two black Telford men who were found hanged in mysterious circumstances. The problem, however, is that only a minority of people actually read these newspapers. The most popular are the Sun, The Mirror and the Daily Mail, which have many hundreds of thousands more readers than at the other end of the market. It’s these newspapers that set the agenda, not only for the rest of the media but for the politicians too. Recent government policy on asylum-seekers, for instance, has been driven more by the popular press than it has by ministers! Even the quality papers, like the broadcasters, are prone to follow the agenda: When the controversy broke over the Runnymede report on Multi-racial Britain, only the Independent resisted following the line of the Telegraph which had whipped up a controversy by misrepresenting what the authors had said about the ‘racial’, NOT RACIST, connotations of the word ‘British’.

I’d like to end on a story. The story behind the story of Stephen Lawrence. Many of you
will have heard this but may not have realised the implications:

When Stephen Lawrence was murdered, his death like many racist deaths at the time, was virtually ignored by the national media. It wasn’t until the Daily Mail, of all newspapers, published its now-famous front page plastered with the word MURDERERS above pictures of the five white suspects that his death hit the headlines.

As I said earlier, if it were not for that front page, Stephen Lawrence would have remained as invisible in death as many others who went before him. If it were not for that front page there would be no public inquiry, no Macpherson report, no Race Relations Amendment Act, no nation in angst. THAT, is the power of the press!

The critical question here, is WHY. Why did a newspaper that had happily created for itself a reputation for being racist, why did THIS newspaper instigate a social revolution against which it would be a natural enemy? The answer, as some of you know, is that Stephen’s father, Neville, who is a painter and decorator, was doing some work for a Daily Mail executive. He told the executive about the murder of his son and the failure of the police to bring a case against the five suspects. The Daily Mail man was so horrified that he ordered the newspaper to investigate. That story changed Britain.

In other words, when the newspaper was forced to ABANDON the stereotype of the mad, bad, dangerous black man and treat the story as it would any other, it was a COMPLETELY DIFFERENT story and a COMPLETELY DIFFERENT message.
Race has become the KEY, DEFINING ISSUE in British society. As we face probably the biggest international crisis since the Second World War, which WILL lead to more refugees, which WILL turn the spotlight on the Brown-British, I don’t think we can AFFORD to dismiss and trivialise the distortions and lies any more.

Thank You.