An eye to offensiveness: the discourse of offence and censure in Private Eye

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An Eye to Offensiveness:  
The Discourse of Offence and Censure in *Private Eye*  

By  
Sharon Lockyer  

A Doctoral Thesis  
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the award of  
Doctor of Philosophy of Loughborough University  

November 2001  

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Abstract

This thesis is an empirical examination of the articulation of comic offence and the practices of comic censure as conducted in media discourse. Making complaints about comic discourse is a risky endeavour. The joker can retort that it was 'just a joke' or can charge the complainer with lacking a sense of humour and libels can fail and be very costly. The main focus is on the discursive strategies and practices used when claiming that comedy has caused offence. This is an under-researched area in humour studies. The ambivalence involved in negotiations between ethical and comic discourse is a central tenet of the thesis. Two main avenues for expressing comic offence are used in the thesis: letters of complaint written to the editor of comic discourse and charges of offensive comedy made through the law of defamation. The thesis adopts an eclectic approach to data collection and analysis. The research draws on different data sources: letters pages and readers' letters printed in the satirical magazine Private Eye, newspaper articles reporting on libel cases brought against Private Eye and interviews with editors, journalists, cartoonists and libel lawyers working for Private Eye. Content analytic techniques are used when analysing the readers' letters to provide a clear overview of the general pattern of complaint involved and the common consequences of such complaint. Composition analysis is used to assess how the editor of Private Eye constructs the letters page. Here I explore the strategies employed by the editor when defending criticisms that offence has been caused and assess how the editor discursively treats the offended reader. To examine in closer detail the characteristic ways in which reader's structure their expression of grievance, I then employ more qualitative modes of analysis: linguistic discourse analysis and symbolic cultural analysis. Attention then shifts to the second main avenue for expressing comic offence: the law of defamation. I conduct a quantitative content analysis of Private Eye's libel litigation history to provide an overview of the types of individual who utilise the law of defamation and the bases on which reputations are damaged. Textual analysis is used to assess how newspapers report libel cases brought against Private Eye in order to explore the press's role in the debate of comic offence and comic censure. In my conclusion I discuss what the thesis suggests about the ethical considerations of humour and comedy and I highlight the importance of the thesis for humour studies. The thesis finishes with some recommendations for future research.
Chapter 1
Introduction

There's a fine line between the humorous and the offensive (Maureen Lipman, 2000: 216).

One man's joke may be another man's insult (La Fave et al, 1976: 84).

Sometimes what you think will cause offence doesn't. And sometimes what you think is a joke, causes great offence (Richard Ingrams, in Haines and Donnelly, 1986: 76).

This thesis is a systematic and detailed empirical exploration into how people articulate comic offence and attempt to censure humour in media discourse. The data upon which the thesis is based comprise a collection of letters pages and readers' letters published in the satirical magazine *Private Eye* that express that the reader has been offended by the *Private Eye* discourse, newspaper articles reporting on libel litigation brought against *Private Eye* and interviews with key personnel working on *Private Eye*. There are a number of academic influences upon which my research on comic offence and comic censure is based. These influences include humour research, constructionist approaches to the media and multi-method research design.

**Humour Research**

Many people, such as comedians and broadcasters, profess a professional interest in humour and comedy. Humour is a serious and important subject for many because it is a central feature of most human communication: 'listen to any conversation and it is full of jokes, puns, humorous allusions, word play for the sake of it' (Palmer, 1994: 1). Humour is found in all media and in a variety of genres: films, novels, plays, jokes, comic strips, cartoons, graffiti and stories. It has 'a more central place in British culture today than fifty, or even twenty, years ago' (Wagg, 1996: 322). The acceptance of humour as a 'genuine' topic of academic inquiry is a relatively recent phenomenon. It has only happened in the last 30-35 years. Since the 1970s there has been a considerable

---

1 Some researchers make a distinction between 'humour' and 'comedy' (Palmer, 1994; Wagg, 1996). Humour is sometimes regarded as unscripted humour that occurs spontaneously in everyday interaction whereas comedy is prepared humour, and is usually part of a more formalised performance. Given that this distinction is not steadfast (for example a joke in face-to-face interaction beginning 'Have you heard the one about ...?' uses a type of scripted cliché associated with comedians in their performance), throughout the thesis I use the terms humour and comedy interchangeably with no aesthetic judgement implied. The terms humour and comedy are used in the broadest sense to refer to stories with punch lines, humorous remarks, funny insults and so on.
expansion of serious research on humour (particularly into the psychological benefits of humour) (see Goldstein and McGhee, 1972). Humour has been placed on the academic map, partly helped by Annual International Humour conferences (run by the International Society for Humor Studies and the American Humor Studies Association), extensive biographical listings on humour studies and research (see Rutter [undated]; Nilsen, 1993) and humour-research discussion groups. Disciplines in both the social sciences and humanities are involved in the study of humour and comedy. There is a psychology of humour (Goldstein and McGhee, 1972; Suls, 1983), a linguistics of humour (Chiaro, 1992; Pepicello and Weisberg, 1983; Norrick, 1993; Raskin; 1985), a sociology of humour (Chapman, 1983; Coser, 1959; Fine, 1983; Foot and Chapman, 1976; Mulkay, 1988; Powell and Paton, 1988; Paton et al, 1996), anthropological studies of humour (Apte, 1985; Douglas, 1968; Sykes, 1966) and philosophical studies of humour (Morreall, 1983, 1987; Prado, 1995). In this thesis I conceive of 'humour research' in an inclusive manner, drawing on concerns and insights from a number of different disciplines.

Humour researchers have stressed the practical applications of humour and the significance of the positive effects of using humour in everyday life. We are frequently informed of the positive effects of using humour in the workplace, for example to relieve boredom and to cope with change (Paton and Filby, 1996; Ullian, 1976), to create positive effects in education, such as aiding retention of information (Bergen, 1992; Berk and Nanda, 1998; Zillman and Bryant, 1983), to facilitate social interaction (Chapman, 1983; Martineau, 1972), and to produce therapeutic effects in the interests of mental health (Brooks et al, 1999; Galloway and Copley, 1999; Robinson, 1983; Talbot and Lumden, 2000; Wootton, 1996). These studies illustrate the social, psychological and physiological benefits of humour and laughter. Humour and laughter can relieve anxiety, hostility, depression, burnout, loneliness and increase achievement, improve attitudes and well-being, whether we are at work, at school, in social interaction or dealing with illness. Equally, humour can have wider ideological benefits for oppressed groups as humour can act as a defence mechanism. Humour can function as a weapon against political repression and allow the morale of the oppressed to be bolstered (see Larsen, 1980; Obrdlik, 1942; Thorson, 1985). Many theories of humour, jokes and comedy frequently focus on the success of jokes (although there are exceptions see Douglas, 1968; Mulkay, 1988). For example Freud's Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1976), although recognising the possibility that a joke may fail, stresses the importance of the pleasure of telling jokes that is derived from the release of ideas that have been largely repressed. Equally, in
Chapter 1: Introduction

_Poetics_, Aristotle highlights the importance of superiority and pleasure in humour (see Palmer, 1994: 147-148).

Humour and comedy has a number of functions. Despite the plethora of books, journals, theories and studies devoted to advancing our knowledge and understanding of this complex phenomenon, there is very little discussion in the humour and comedy literature regarding the negative functions or effects of humour and comedy. Although humour and comedy can make us feel isolated, threatened and/or offended, a 'celebratory stance' (Billig, 2001: 269) is often adopted when researching humour and comedy. Some humour theorists have downplayed the 'more disturbing sides' of humour (Billig, 2001: 267). Although potential problems caused by humour in interaction have been discussed (for example friction can be caused by the use of humour in interaction, Martineau, 1972), this is not by any means in a comprehensive manner. Analysis of the internal workings and potential (negative) consequences of sexist jokes (see Meyer et al, 1980; Streicher, 1974), racist jokes (see for example, Davies, 1988; Husband, 1988) and Auschwitz jokes (Dundes and Hauschild, 1988) has highlighted the manner(s) in which jokes can perpetuate negative stereotypes. Humour can cause boundaries between groups (Fine, 1983; Davies, 1988). Davies (1988) observes that racist jokes are used to police social and moral boundaries between different groups, to express group power and to define perceptions of the in-group and out-group (thus stigmatising out-groups). He continues that through the telling of jokes about the stupidity 'of a group on the periphery of their society, people can place this despised and feared quality at a distance and gain reassurance that they and the members of their own group are not themselves stupid or irrational' (Davies, 1988: 3; see also Cooper, 1986; La Fave, 1972; Zillman and Cantor, 1976). Equally, disposition theories focus on the appropriateness of jokes (Wicker et al, 1980). Berkowitz (1970) has suggested links between humour, aggression and hostility, and more recently Billig (2001) has highlighted strong links between humour, hatred and prejudice. Despite these advances in our understanding of humour's 'more disturbing sides' (Billig, 2001: 267), these sides remain an under-researched area in humour studies. Comic offence and comic censure, generally, has not featured as a central (or even peripheral) research focus, although an interest in comic offence and comic censure fits (sometimes neatly) into the frames of reference of sexist and racist jokes. This may be because taking offence as a dynamic 'is difficult to resolve' (Wootten, 1996: 28).
Chapter 1: Introduction

The difficulties associated with taking offence from humorous discourse are the central concern of the thesis. The dynamic of taking offence is difficult to resolve due to three complex and interconnected factors: a) the ways in which humour equivocates between the serious and the funny, b) the ethics surrounding the giving and taking of offence through comic discourse and c) the paradoxes concerning the desirability of demonstrating that we have a sense of humour. Briefly taking each of these difficulties in turn we can see how taking offence from comic discourse is a difficult and contentious endeavour.

The dictum 'many a true word spoken in jest' highlights the way in which there can be an element of truth underlying any humorous attack. Humour ambiguously straddles serious and non-serious modes of address, thus blurring the normative boundaries between serious and funny discourse (Mulkay, 1988). The equivocal nature of humour can hide the exact meaning of comic discourse or make it seem ambiguous (see chapter 2). As I argue and illustrate in chapter 3, humorous discourse, and in particular satirical discourse, has reference to an underlying truth or reality in order to communicate its point. In order to make its statement, humour builds on, distorts or exaggerates an underlying fact or detail that has a vein of truth (Crisell, 1991; Kernan, 1965; Vulliamy, 1950). Humour evasively and ambiguously combines the serious and non-serious modes in order to make a serious statement through its humour. Given that the message of the humorous discourse is 'mediated by the clown's mask' (Pickering, 1994b: 319) it is difficult to simply and clearly identify the humorist's values and intentions. This serves to further complicate and blur the boundaries between the serious and non-serious discourse. By implication this makes it difficult to specifically and confidently argue that a humorous attack is simply that — a humorous attack — and does not contain an element of truth. Equally when someone finds a humorous attack offensive, the offender (or those supporting the attack) can argue that there is 'no smoke without fire' and therefore imply that the attack is truthful in essence, is warranted and justified. The blurring of the boundaries between serious and non-serious discourse and the ways in which humour builds on and exaggerates an existing truth is discussed and illustrated fully in chapter 2.

Ethical considerations surrounding the giving and taking of comic offence can cause a dilemma in our interpretation of, and response to an attempt at humour. Whether a joke is met with laughter or outrage is culturally and socially sanctioned and the context of the attempt at humour can determine whether it is met with laughter or tears (Cotterill, 1996; Jaret, 1999; Palmer, 1994). As the humorist is given a licence to say the unsayable and do the undoable in a non-serious mode (see chapter 2),
the audience is also given licence either to be amused or outraged by the humour. Whether we are amused or bemused by the attempt at humour is closely related to our identity. Our identity provides us with justification for failing to ascribe the attempt at humour the required joke status (see chapter 2). For example, as a woman, I may be perceived as justified in my objection to an attempt at humour that is sexist and undermines the position of women in society. To laugh at the joke would deny and devalue my own experience as a woman (Cotterill, 1996). Or I may justifiably and understandably object to a joke that attacks already marginalised and vulnerable groups or individuals, for example ethnic minorities. However, to say that some topics or targets should be off-limits for humour, or that the humour caused offence takes us into dangerous territory. To resist a joke or to say that the humour caused offence, provides the joker (and others) with the opportunity to charge the offended with lacking a sense of humour.

Someone who fails to laugh at an intended joke is usually charged with lacking a sense of humour and the joker does not doubt or question the content or context of his/her joke (Cotterill, 1996, Prado, 1995; see chapter 6 of thesis). As few people claim to have no sense of humour, being charged with lacking a sense of humour is a damning criticism (Allport, 1961; Mulkay, 1988; see chapter 6). Therefore a fundamental dilemma exists when criticising comic discourse for its offensive qualities. Although we may wish to say that humour has offended us or is ethically incorrect, we also wish to portray ourselves as having a (good) sense of humour. It is this dilemma that is central to this thesis. The discursive strategies and rhetorical devices used when expressing offence has been taken from comic discourse whilst simultaneously demonstrating the possession of a sense of humour forms the principal analytic focus of chapter 6 and is a recurring feature of the analysis in chapter 7.

Media discourses (talk and text), as the Reithian maxim proclaims, can inform, educate and entertain. They can make viewers/listeners/readers inspired, excited, enthused, overwhelmed, they can encourage a wry smile, a snigger, or can make them laugh heartily. Equally, media discourses can make us scream, shout, cry, make us frightened, annoyed or upset and they can be outright offensive (Thorson, 1985). Humorous discourse undoubtedly has the potential to offend. Whilst writing up this thesis over the summer 2001, for 2 or 3 weeks the news was dominated by the outrage and offence caused by Channel 4's Brass Eye spoof documentary on paedophilia 'which attracted over 500 complaints to the ITC and 2,000 to Channel 4' (Ward, 2001: 1). Given that 'nothing is funny to everyone and anything seems potentially funny to someone' (La Fave et al,
1976: 85), what one person regards as humorous, another may find offensive. To repeat the comment made by Richard Ingrams as used at the beginning of this chapter: 'sometimes what you think will cause offence doesn't. And sometimes what you think is a joke, causes great offence (quoted in Haines and Donnelly, 1986: 76). Comedians like Bernard Manning and Roy Chubby Brown thrive on being shocking and offensive and for some comedians causing comic offence is their raison d'être: 'We exist to be offensive, if we don't, what's the point? Offence is good' (Dominic, comedian, Attachments, Tuesday 21st November, 2000, BBC 2).

Humour's potential for causing offence is sometimes touched on in studies analysing humour. Radcliffe-Brown (1940) defined the joking relationship as 'a relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence ... The joking relationship is a peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism' (in Martineau, 1972: 105). More recently, in their analysis of the effect of humour on the impact of unpleasant events, Cann et al (2000) reported that humour was 'selected to appeal to college students, while avoiding potentially offensive content' (2000: 182) and the phrase "negative response to humour" has been used by experimenters studying humor to indicate that the subject was not amused by a "humorous" joke or cartoon (Russell, 2000: 221). Equally some humour researchers note that 'in some cases the contents of a joke can be so offensive that the listener is converted from a humor mood to a serious mood' (Russell, 2000: 230). Nevertheless, the offence caused by humour and comedy is yet to be regarded as a legitimate and substantive topic of inquiry. Comic failure is the least debated topic in humour and comedy studies (Palmer, 1994). When it is discussed, the offence caused by comic discourse is often dealt with flippantly and insufficiently. To take one example, in Patty Wootten's book, Compassionate Laughter: Jest For Your Health! (1996), only two pages are devoted to the possibility of comic offence. The neglect of academic inquiry into comic offence has been acknowledged and attempts have been made to redress this imbalance (see Pickering, 1994a; Palmer, 1994 and chapter 2 of this thesis). In his analysis of the limits to humorousness, Palmer observes 'humour is a very fragile thing, and every professional comedian knows about the fear of dead silence, the joke that has dismally failed ... comic failure is as important as understanding its success' (1994: 5).

2 I am not implying here that the failure or success of humour is determined by whether it raises a laugh. Not all humour researchers identify humour with laughter. Chapman and Foot (1976: 80) remind us that amusement is not a necessary condition of laughter. Laughter can occur with the absence of humour. They point to a number of non-amusement situations where a person may laugh: when 'tickled, embarrassed, afraid, releasing tension, or pretending to have grasped the point of a "joke" which oversailed his [sic] head' (see also Morreall, 1983: 1-2).
Highlighting the importance of context in humour and comedy situations, Palmer argues that there are many reasons for comic failure; the joke may have been repeated too often, the joke teller may have misjudged the occasion on which the joke is made or misinterpreted the nature of the audience. Comic failure is linked to principles of comprehensibility, performative adequacy and inoffensiveness (Palmer, 1994). Palmer asserts three main variables that can determine whether comic offence is taken from an attempt at humour. These are 1) the structure of the joke itself (seen as a representation of the world external to the joke), 2) the relationship between the joke-teller and others involved in the enunciation (the butt and the audience), 3) the nature of the occasion on which the attempt at humour is made. In his essays on censorship, Coetzee reports that taking and giving offence is inextricably linked to censorship: ‘the punitive gesture of censoring finds its origin in the reaction of being offended’ (1996: ix). Literature on comedy rarely mentions censorship (with exceptions such as Paton et al, 1996; Wagg, 1996), and censorship literature fleetingly mentions comedy (Travis, 2000). The lack of literature on the censorship of comedy does not mean that comedy is not censured. It means that it has been academically neglected.

For some, the potential that viewers/listeners/readers will find comic discourse offensive is its attractive quality. Some viewers/listeners/readers also gain their pleasure from ‘offensive’ discourse precisely because of an awareness that a potentially offended audience may experience discomfort. The comic offence that some viewers/listeners/readers will indeed experience from the comedic discourse is sometimes packaged as its unique-selling point. To take a couple of examples, in December 2000 an advertisement aired on Century FM (East Midlands independent radio station) for a Roy Chubby Brown show warned ‘If easily offended, please stay away’ and the disclaimer on the front cover of his Exposed video (1993) noted ‘Warning if easily offended please do not buy’. This explicit quality of the potential to cause offence - and implicit praise for those not offended - is evident in discourses of outrage across the media. In his discussion of punk rock, Laing (1985) observes that music of outrage depends on its fans being aware that the music will cause offence to some individuals and groups. Listeners of mainstream popular music will be traumatized by punk rock. Thus, audiences whose expectations are framed by mainstream comedy and its associated values will experience discomfort from other types of comedic attacks. Therefore, as La Fave et al note in the quote at the beginning of this introduction ‘[o]ne man’s joke may be another man’s insult’ (1976: 84). Comic discourse can be enjoyed by some members of the audience whilst simultaneously offending others.
Chapter 1: Introduction

To repeat another quote that opened this chapter, 'there's a fine line between the humorous and the offensive' (Maureen Lipman, 2000: 216). Equally comedian Graham Norton jokingly notes 'there is a fine line between comedy and horror' (So Graham Norton, 2000). Where this line lies and the negotiation of this line is the central interest of this thesis. The obvious centrality of humour in modern social life, the importance given to humour in lay and academic settings, and the lack of research on comic offence and comic censure, yields a ready-made rationale for studying it. The most significant problem facing the cultural analysis of humour is answering the question 'in what sense is it possible to be critical of comic discourse?' (Pickering, 1994b: 325). This thesis is an attempt to show how comic discourse can be criticised.

One way in which we might explore the articulation of comic offence and comic censure is through analysis of specific incidences where humour has caused offence and there have been obvious attempts to censure it. In order to investigate the articulation of comic offence and the strategies involved in comic censure, I decided to use one site of humour as case-study material. As humour and comedy is diverse and widespread (Allen, 1984), I regarded it as necessary to limit the investigation to one particular outstanding example of humour that has (always) offended. Throughout this thesis I am drawing on the comic offence and censuring practices surrounding this one particular location. This example is the satirical magazine, Private Eye.³ Private Eye offers a fertile field of research to the communications researcher. Private Eye is an interesting source of data for a number of reasons. Private Eye is the most popular and prominent satirical product and is the only survivor of the 'satire boom' that occurred in Britain in the early 1960s (see chapter 3).

Private Eye has a long history of causing offence to its readers, the Establishment, foreign governments, its own journalists and has frequently been sued for libel by the likes of media moguls such as Robert Maxwell and James Goldsmith. Even its own 40th birthday, celebrated only last month (October, 2001) was 'marred' by classic Eye offence. The front cover of the Eye, published after the terrorist attacks in America, resulted in many readers writing letters of complaint to the Eye editor, Ian Hislop. It caused outrage and offence. Simultaneously, Hislop was appearing in High Court as the defendant in a libel case brought against the Eye by an accountant, who the Eye accused of overcharging some of its clients (see Moir, 2001; Lister, 2001). Gibb (Legal Editor on The Times) notes that Private Eye 'holds the record for receiving more writs than any other litigant

³ Throughout the thesis I have not attempted to alter or exclude the Private Eye discourse that has caused offence or those discourses that may be deemed offensive. Where I have included Private Eye discourse, it is reproduced as it appears in Private Eye.
in legal history' (1999: 3). Further, *Private Eye* is a valuable site of analysis for this thesis because it fuses together comic discourse and investigative journalism. *Private Eye* deliberately plays with and blurs the boundaries between serious and non-serious discourse and therefore is a fruitful site of analysis for considering the negotiation of comic offence, un/acceptable topics for humour and the shifting boundaries between serious and non-serious discourse.

The Eye's consistency to offend warrants analysis. My choice of case study is strengthened further when considering the (lack of) academic work conducted on the magazine. Despite its 40-year history, prominent media attention and consistency to offend, *Private Eye* has surprisingly received little academic inquiry, with the sole exception of Seymour-Ure back in 1974 (see chapter 3). Whilst humour in conversation has received a wealth of attention (Alexander, 1996; Handelman and Kapferer, 1972; Jefferson, 1984; Mulkay, 1988; Norrick, 1993), humour in magazines (Sloane, 1988) has largely been overlooked. This is reflected in the number of entries in what I call the 'Humour Bible', a bibliography of humour literature called *Laughingly Referred To* by Jason Rutter. Whilst there are 29 entries included under 'Humour in Conversation', there are only 12 entries under 'News, Newspapers and Magazines'. Further, analysis and discussion of contemporary satirical discourse is generally under-researched in humour studies. Vulliamy cites that although satire has been exhibited in literature during all periods the 'great ages of modern satire were unquestionably the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' (1950: 10). This observation may explain why many satirical commentators including Griffin (1994), Highet (1962), Hodgart (1969), Kernan (1959, 1965), Paulson (1967), Pollard (1970), Rawson (1983) and Sutherland (1962) are pre-occupied with repeatedly presenting an historical overview of 'great' literary writers such as Donne, Dryden, Horace, Juvenal, Pope, Rebelais, Swift and Voltaire. This thesis therefore contributes to our knowledge and understanding of the great satirists by putting *Private Eye* on the academic map and helping to bring the academic study of satire a little more up to date. The above reasons render *Private Eye* an obvious and prolific avenue for exploring the topic of comic offence and comic censure.

**Constructionist Approaches to Media Discourse**

This thesis adopts a constructionist approach to media discourse. Approaches to the academic study of media discourse commonly fall into two distinct categories. There are those committed to a constructionist approach that analyse the rhetorical devices used in media discourse and those from
a positivist tradition for whom the question of rhetorical constructs and devices is irrelevant. Although Roeh and Feldman observe that 'most journalists tend to fall into the latter category' (1984: 348), defending their profession as a presentation of the facts, truth and reality, the manufactured and constructed notion of media discourse (especially the news) is a well-documented area (Fowler, 1991; Schudson, 1989; Tuchman, 1978). As Van Dijk observes, news discourse is 'not characterized as a picture of reality, which may be correct or biased, but as a frame through which the social world is routinely constructed' (1988b: 7-8). The constructionist approach is underpinned by the assumption that social reality is repeatedly (re)constructed via routinised social practices. Constructionist approaches to the media seek to establish how people make sense of their worlds. Based on the interpretive tradition, this approach to research on communications and media is concerned 'not with establishing relations of cause and effect but with exploring the ways that people make sense of their social worlds and how they express these understandings through language, sound, imagery, personal style and social rituals' (Deacon et al, 1999: 6; see also Gergen, 1985). The media help to construct social realities in which individuals, groups and societies are viewed and treated. The media structures debate, its terms of reference and the criteria by which we judge others. Constructionism regards 'reality' as a social construction, which is socially and historically created as 'real' rather than 'naturally' occurring (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Interpretive approaches to media discourse argue 'that these stories [news reports] actively define both what is deviant and what is normative ... By imposing such meanings, news is perpetually defining and redefining, constituting and reconstituting social phenomena' (Tuchman, 1978: 184).

In recent years there has been a growing awareness of the complexity of media texts in media communication research. The language used by the media has been a central focus of those adopting a constructionist approach (Bell, 1991; Fowler, 1991). To take one example, Eldridge (1995) analysed the language use and themes in the media coverage of the May 1975 Chrysler strike over pay, and the media representations of Greenham Common and the Women's Peace Movement in the early 1980s. The language of the news 'is prominent and pervasive in society, and it is worth understanding how that language works, how it affects our perceptions of others and ourselves, how it is produced, how it is shaped by values' (Bell, 1991: xiii). The media can determine and restrict the ways and means in which public and private issues are communicated and debated. They prioritise some 'voices' and subordinate others. In order 'to effect ideological

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4 Some lay readers of the press appear to maintain the view that newspapers print the truth through the phrase, "... must be true, I read it in the newspaper". Roeh and Feldman also observe that facts are taken by readers to 'be aspects of the world, not statements about the world' (1984: 348; emphasis in original).
closure, the event is put together with signs that indicate how it should be understood – what it “means” (Hartley, 1995: 63). More recently there has been shift, albeit a limited shift, towards analysing the visual composition of the whole pages of news discourse (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1998). Whilst recognising the importance of language for the construction of meaning, there is a growing consensus that the visual organisation of media discourse is equally as important in meaning construction and that analysis should focus on the reciprocal relations between both verbal and visual features of media discourse. By exploring both of these features of the media discourse used in this thesis, I endorse this shift and make a positive and significant contribution to understanding the relation(s) between the verbal and visual in the construction of meaning.

Multi-Method Research Design

My research is influenced by the recent shift towards combining (quantitative and qualitative) research methods (Bryman, 1988; Creswell, 1994; Deacon et al, 1999; Mason, 1996). Multi-method research is becoming increasingly popular (Bryman, 1992). Combining social science research methods is based on the presupposition that researchers should be flexible in their approach to research methods and select methods that are most appropriate to the research aims and questions (Brannen, 1992; Burgess, 1984). Although some researchers argue that as those adopting a constructionist approach to society and research focus on language and discourse, they often employ qualitative methods (Miller and Crabtree, 1999), I adopt the view held by Gergen, that within a constructionist framework ‘virtually any method can be employed so long as it enables the analyst to develop a more compelling case’ (1985: 273).

In chapter 4 I highlight how multi-method research encompasses multi-methods (within- and between-methods), multiple investigators, multiple data sets and multiple theories (Brannen, 1992). My research endorses a multi-method research approach through the use of multiple data sets (letters pages, readers’ letters, newspaper articles and interview data), multiple methods (quantitative content analysis, semiotic composition analysis, linguistic discourse analysis, symbolic cultural analysis and linguistic textual analysis) and multiple theories (from cultural analysis, humour theory and media studies). In this thesis I do not advocate a particular method, or groups of methods. I consider research methods as tools that can all be used in humour and media research. We can (and should) employ a diverse range of possible data collection and analysis methods that suit best our research aims and goals (Brannen, 1992). As a proponent of multi-method research I
adopt the stance taken by complementarists, whereby I use different research methods to understand different research problems (Brannen, 1992; Hammersley, 1996). As each method employed can contribute a different view on the topic of enquiry, a bigger picture of the research topic is produced (Allen and Barber, 1992; Deacon et al., 1999; Erzberger and Prein, 1997; McKendrick, 1999; Ussher, 1999). I employ the multi-method approach critically and reflexively. Researchers are influenced and constrained by their prior knowledge of the literature, knowledge and experience as cultural members and their political values (Brannen, 1992). I reflect on my own experiences of doing the research whilst simultaneously recognising and acknowledging the position of myself in the research process.

**Aims of the Thesis**

This thesis seeks to tackle a specific theme, not a general one. The overriding aim connecting the individual component parts of the thesis is a systematic and detailed empirical exploration into the way(s) in which comic offence is publicly registered and how attempts to censure comic discourse are publicly made. Through exploration of the ways in which comedy is censured and the practices adopted when attempting to censure it, suggestions are made about the difficulties involved in the negotiations between ethical and comic discourse. This aim of the thesis is addressed by looking at both letters written by those who have been offended by the humour in the satirical magazine, *Private Eye*, and press reports of legal charges made by individuals that they have been defamed and offended by the magazine.

My aim is not to prove or disprove specific theories. My intention is more modest. The thesis is exploratory in nature, opening up debate on an under-researched topic. My thesis brings sharply into focus a neglected area of humour research. It attempts to take up the challenge set by Michael Pickering. Observing that theoretically, much has been achieved in humour and comedy research, he argues that:

> What we need from this stage on is a series of intensive case-studies of particular comic forms, particular themes and issues concerning humour, and particular comic performances and joking relationships. It is only through such studies that our understanding of such categories of occasion, function, structure and limit in relation to comic discourse is now going to make any significant advance (1994a: 338).
Overview of Chapters

Using a multi-method approach to data sources, collection and analysis, the chapters in this thesis address the central issue of the articulation of comic offence and the recurring practices used when censuring comedy in media discourse.

In Chapter 2, Comedy, Conflict and Censure, I set the stage for the discussions and analysis that are conducted in later chapters. I highlight and examine some of the main principles of humour, such as its ambiguous nature, and consider the difficulties and dilemmas involved in the interpretation of humour. I also discuss the potential problems associated with criticising comedy for its offensive qualities and consider the attempts made to censure humour.

As this thesis uses the incidences of comic offence caused by Private Eye humour, Chapter 3, entitled Portrait of Private Eye: Satire, Investigative Journalism and Censure, outlines the origins, aims and development of this satirical magazine. This is a `background' chapter, serving to contextualise the analysis that is presented in chapters 5, 6, and 7. I examine the content of the Eye, assess its function and position in contemporary British society, give a flavour of the polarised responses to and comments made towards it and discuss the different attempts made to censure it.

In Chapter 4, Making a Case for Multi-Method Research, I describe the data sources used in the thesis, and outline and critically assess the methods of data collection and analysis used throughout the thesis. Following an overview of the traditional divide between quantitative and qualitative research methods in social research, I advocate the use of multi-method research and detail how my research incorporates this methodological eclecticism.

Chapter 5, Content and Composition Analysis of the Letters Page, is the first of three analytic chapters. This chapter reports the results of two studies, which explore the articulation of comic offence, and comic censure as conducted through readers' letters, or the non-legal avenue to express comic offence. The first study is a quantitative content analysis of the readers' letters sent to the editor of Private Eye and printed on the letters page stating that the reader has been offended by Private Eye discourse. Here I consider the manifest content of the letters moving towards an understanding of the type(s) of reader who are offended, the topics of the offence and the outcome of the offence caused. As this type of analysis cannot tell us anything about how the letters are
presented on the letters page or *how* they are managed or treated by the offender (the editor of *Private Eye*), I then shift in focus to a qualitative composition analysis of the letters pages. Here I explore the devices used by the editor to portray the offended in a particular (derogatory) manner, for example, suggesting they have 'missed the joke' or attempting to undermine the complaint by strategically placing the letter of complaint alongside a letter of praise. These strategies reflect the dilemmas associated with criticising comic discourse alluded to in chapter 2.

Remaining with the readers' letters and building on the analysis of chapter 5, Chapter 6, *Humour, Offence and the Articulation of Complaint*, reports my findings of the qualitative analysis (linguistic discourse analysis and symbolic cultural analysis) of the recurring textual practices used by readers when registering the offence. I examine how readers articulate the offence, for which redress is sought, through analysis of the language and rhetorical devices used by the offended readers. I extend this analysis to consider what this indicates about negotiations between ethical and comic discourse. Again, the practices of articulating comic offence and censuring comedy exhibit awareness and recognition of the potential difficulties associated with critiquing comedy that are referred to in chapter 2.

Chapter 7, *Humour, Offence and Censure in the Press*, considers the press's role in the comic offence and comic censure debate. I report my results of two studies on the legal avenue of expressing offence – the law of libel. The first study is a quantitative content analysis of *Private Eye*’s libel litigation history where I document the type(s) of individuals who sue for libel, examine why they sue and record the outcome(s) of the libel litigation. I then shift in emphasis from the content analysis to a textual analysis of newspaper reports of 5 libel cases brought against *Private Eye*. I examine how comic offence is portrayed in the press, how the offended and offender are treated by the press and consider what this says about the nature of comic offence and how these reports serve to censure *Private Eye* humour. Finally, I compare and contrast the ways in which comic offence and comic censure are registered in readers' letters with those used in press reports of libel litigation.

In my concluding chapter, Chapter 8, *Conclusions*, I summarise my findings across the thesis as a whole and outline the main contributions my research has for humour research, communication and media studies research and social science methodology. I critically reflect on the research through a
discussion of its limitations. I conclude this chapter by highlighting some possible questions for future research.
Chapter 2

Comedy, Conflict and Censure

Offensive: Unpleasant or disgusting, as to the senses. Causing anger or annoyance; insulting. For the purpose of attack rather than defence. An attitude or position of aggression. An assault, attack, esp. a strategic one (New Collins Dictionary and Thesaurus in One Volume, 1992: 687).

Sometimes humor is offensive to certain members of an audience who might well dispute whether it is actually humor (Chapman, 1983: 151).

Criticism of humour as offensive always runs the risk of being too serious, and as a result of exaggerating the element of plausibility that is always less than the element of implausibility in comic discourse (Pickering, 1994b: 328).

Introduction

This chapter does three things, all of which are intended to lay the necessary foundations for the rest of the thesis. First, I outline the ways in which humour theorists have discussed the complexities of humour appreciation and interpretation. Fundamental principles of humour, including its ambiguous nature (Mulkay, 1988), the bisociative principle (Koestler, 1964) and the fluidity of boundaries between serious and non-serious discourse (Mulkay, 1988) are discussed in order to illustrate why comic discourse may offend. I then return to the work of Jerry Palmer in Taking Humour Seriously (1994) that was introduced in chapter 1. Palmer’s observations on comic failure act as a useful point of departure in establishing a framework for discussing comic offence. The potential concerns and problems involved in stating that humour has offended are also highlighted. Those responsible for the attempt at humour can respond to protests by questioning ‘where’s your sense of humour’ or arguing ‘it’s just a joke’. This lays the foundations for the analysis in chapters 5, 6 and 7. Then I shift in emphasis to outline some of the major developments in the censorship of humour in an attempt to combat the incidence and existence of offensive comedy and the problems that this causes. In order to set the stage for the analysis in the later chapters, this chapter identifies the way in which the study of comic discourses and taking offence have rarely met on the same academic agenda.

1 Things can be offensive in different ways. ‘A smell can be offensive and so too can the display of an attractive naked body. But these are not offensive in the same way’. Referred to as ‘offensive nuisances’, smells and noises are attacks (offences) on the senses. Finding the display of the naked body offensive is
A general consensus exists in the humour literature that non-serious discourse is based on functional principles and practices that are directly opposite to those governing serious discourse (Fine, 1983; Koestler, 1964; Mulkay, 1988). Features that would be removed from, ignored or simply not seen in serious discourse, namely ambiguity, contradictions and interpretive diversity, are fundamental features in humour and comedy. Unlike the singularity of interpretation in serious discourse, 'humour depends on the discursive display of opposing interpretive possibilities' (Mulkay, 1988: 26). In the humorous mode everyday commonsense assumptions about the world are turned upside-down or 'inside-out' (Bakhtin, 1984: 11), the world becomes topsy-turvy, whilst remaining a kind of 'controlled nonsense' (Mulkay, 1988). When shifting from the serious to the humorous mode, we are allowed, or are given a licence for, greater freedom in what we can say and do as 'there is more you can get away with and people listen in a more open-minded way' (Putting off the Writs, 1996). In the humorous mode we witness the unexpected and implausible: elephants can breed with fish as in the joke, 'What do you get if you cross an elephant with a fish? Swimming trunks' (Mulkay, 1988: 17). Littlewood and Pickering state that humour and comedy work:

by disturbing, by turning inside out, popular notions and shibboleths. They do so by delivering some unexpected take on what we normally take for granted. Joking as a form of human interaction plays disrespectfully on our sense of what is socially respectable or ethically correct (1998: 292).

Implausible possibilities are possible because humour is operationally distinct from serious discourse, and because different forms and topics of expression are acceptable in different discursive modes (Mulkay, 1988). The process of 'bisociation' (Koestler, 1964; see also Douglas, 1968; Fry, 1963; Raskin, 1985) explains and accounts for these opposing interpretive possibilities in humorous discourse. The basic principle of the process of bisociation is that humour occurs when distinct interpretive frames are combined unexpectedly, or there is a sudden movement between different interpretive frames. Humour occurs when incongruous ways of viewing the world (be it people, situations or topics) are juxtaposed. Although serious discourse can be rather different. 'This is no more than to have a view about the display; it is to think it morally inappropriate in some way, whether because it is boorish to cast off one's clothes with no thought for the embarrassment it might cause guests at the vicar's tea party, or just because it is wrong in itself - shameful - to be naked in public' (Ellis, 1998: 172-173; emphasis in original). To censure something on the grounds of offensiveness is to censure because it is thought immoral.
unclear, humorous discourse requires duality of meaning and opposing meanings. Each word, ‘as it is read or heard, evokes a complex range of possible uses and implications’ (Mulkay, 1988: 40).

The central feature of ambiguity in humour, along with its attendant problems of interpretation, is best illustrated by controversies over the interpretation of comedic discourse. In 1993 ambiguity in non-serious discourse facilitated viewer outrage and a flow of complaints. As part of *Gimme Shelter* week, *Channel 4* employed irony to publicize the problem of homelessness. Homeless contestants competed for accommodation in a game show called *Come on Down and Out*. The programme caused outrage until *Channel 4* highlighted that the whole show had been a spoof (Wagg, 1996). To take another example, the ‘Ted Danson incident’ resulted in a combination of amusement, public outrage and intense media coverage (Jaret, 1999). This took place in October 1993 in America. At a Friars Club Roast for the comedian and actress Whoopi Goldberg, actor Ted Danson (Goldberg’s partner at the time) wore ‘blackface’ make-up and told sexist and racist jokes, particularly about black women. His behaviour caused public outrage. Danson argued that the humour was meant to satirise anti-black images, to make fun of racism itself and not to degrade blacks and cause offence. Also the ‘Consumer Guide to Religion’ on *That Was The Week That Was* (see chapter 3) caused outrage. It suggested there are ‘three basic tests’ that can be applied to each religion – ‘What do you have to put into it? What do you get out of it? How much does it cost?’ (Carpenter, 2000: 244). *The Daily Express* sternly asked ‘Do you believe a man’s religion should be mocked?’, although Peter Simple in *The Daily Telegraph* noted ‘As I understood it, the intention was not to mock at religion, but to mock at the idea that religion is a product’ (Carpenter, 2000: 245). Further, when Carl (1968) showed readers editorial cartoons, 70% misperceived the intended meaning of the humour. These examples illustrate how comedy cannot be reduced to a single message and that arguments around the ‘real’ meaning of humorous intent are rather futile (Davies, 1996).

Ambiguity in the meaning, motive and intent of humorous discourse has resulted in criticisms of comedy and subsequent attempts to silence joke tellers and producers of comedy programmes and to restrict the content of comedic discourse. Public expressions of outrage and concern (particularly from black members of the audience) were received in response to *BBC* TV’s situation comedy *Till Death Us Do Part* (1966), written by Johnny Speight and produced by Denis Main Wilson. The central character, Alf Garnett, ridiculed the stupidity and ignorance of bigots in its
attempt to attack bigotry, although this intended message was not reinforced (Husband, 1988). Instead of satirising bigoted xenophobic views, for example through Garnett’s denigration of ‘Coons’, prejudiced views and values were advocated.\(^2\) *Till Death Us Do Part*, and its American equivalent, *All in the Family*, received conflicting responses. Whilst some viewers enjoyed and appreciated the humour, others were offended by it (see Palmer, 1991; Vidmar and Rokeach, 1974). Alf Garnett was a target of the campaigns instigated by the late Mary Whitehouse. Whitehouse created the ‘Clean-up TV’ campaign which was launched in May 1964, which later in 1965 became the National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Association and more recently has been rebranded MediawatchUK. This campaign (or ‘morality watch-dog’) protected traditional Christian ethics (values of the family and chastity) from threats posed by the media and campaigned against the use and increase of violence and pornography in the media (Whitehouse, 1993). Whitehouse referred to *Till Death Us Do Part* as ‘dirty, blasphemous and full of bad language’ (1971: 77), continuing that ‘no series ever shown on British television made more compulsive viewing or caused more weekly controversy’ (1971: 80). Due to complaints about unsuitable material for children, it was moved from the early evening slot to a later slot in the television schedule. Although causing outrage among some viewers, the programme was extremely popular, with a peak of 20 million viewers (Davies, 1996). Despite attempts to specifically challenge racial prejudice, *Till Death Us Do Part* had a ‘boomerang effect’ where ‘well-intentioned propaganda reinforces the target audience’s prejudices’ (Husband, 1988: 158). Whitehouse argues that Speight’s philosophy - ‘if a word or an expression is used in real life, then that is sufficient justification to use it in a TV show’ - exacerbated the offence given by one man into millions of homes (1971: 79).

Sociological (Mulkay, 1988; Powell, 1988) and anthropological (Douglas, 1968) approaches to humour, comedy and jokes recognise that they are not inherently funny. Social negotiation is required in order for the joke to achieve joke status. The listener’s or viewer’s role is fundamental in the creation of humour. As phenomenologists would suggest, ‘humorous behaviour is behaviour that people so label’ (Powell, 1988: 103). In her anthropological study of the social control of cognition, Mary Douglas (1968, 1991) argues that whether a joke is perceived and permitted is closely tied to the social situation. Douglas observes that social:

\(^2\) Interestingly, the words ‘denigration’ and ‘nigger’ derive from the Latin *'niger'* meaning ‘black’.
requirements may judge a joke to be in bad taste, risky, too near the bone, improper, or irrelevant. Such controls are exerted either on behalf of hierarchy as such, or on behalf of values which are judged too precious and too precarious to be exposed to challenge (1968: 366).

To achieve joke status a joke has to be recognised and permitted. Equally Handelman and Kapferer argue that behaviour recognised as joking is 'dependent on the expressed agreement of the participants in the focused activity' (1972: 484). However, the joke does not have to be permitted by everyone, in some instances the listener's incomprehensibility may be part of the joke. Before interaction can be organised in the terms of joking, the individual attempting humour must 'receive a “licence to joke” from the person toward whom their activity is directed' (1972: 484). Joking frames signal that an attempt at humour is being made in an endeavour to achieve joke status (Goffman, 1974; Handelman and Kapferer, 1972). A joking frame is 'a fictional frame that asks us to discount what is contained within it as any kind of faithful or serious representation of states of affairs in the world' (Oring, 1995: 169). In verbal humour the departure from the serious mode is signalled by voice (adopting different dialects), body language (a raised eyebrow, a wink, a smile) or verbal cues ('Have you heard the one about ...?', which Douglas (1968) calls Joke Patterns). In stand-up performances, the way in which a racist or sexist joke is told may lessen its offensiveness. The use of gestures and non-verbal language may lessen the blow, which cannot be expressed in written text. Although joke frames can enable jokes to be made about contested topics, for others the joking frame can lead to offence, because the joke frame implies that what is contained in the frame should not be taken seriously, for some:

it may also connote that images and ideas within the frame are, in themselves, not serious. In such instances, the fictional frame of the joke exacerbates the problem. As the joke lacks any context for the moral evaluation of the images in question, there are those who will see in the playfulness and triviality of the joke frame the context for a moral evaluation of its contents (Oring, 1995: 169).

The play/joke frame for some people will facilitate separation from the serious mode and will permit the licence to joke, thus allowing and expecting manipulation of images or ideas. For others, it is the play frame 'itself that forces joke images and ideas into the arena of serious discussion and dispute' (Oring, 1995: 169). Despite employing the appropriate cues (whether linguistic, paralinguistic, musical and so on), attempts to frame the communication as humour may fail. Humour cues signal that we should 'switch from or suspend our engagement in everyday life'
Chapter 2: Comedy, Conflict and Censure

(Powell, 1988: 104) and what happens next should not be taken seriously. Failure to engage with or accept the required suspension may lead to the joke teller attributing different meanings to the joke than the audience. With humorous discourse recipients are continually faced with a choice of deciding how to respond. Humour, comedy and jokes always set the reader/viewer/listener a puzzle; meaning is never made fully explicit. Some members of the audience may see an attempt at humour, embedded in the humorous mode and joke frame, while others may interpret it as part of the serious mode. Wilson (1979) illustrates how satire and seriousness are often confused. Wilson notes how a recent ethnomethodological article entitled ‘Notes on the Art of Walking’ (1974) by Ryave and Schenkein, which describes ‘doing walking’ received divided reaction in academic circles. Some academics considered it a serious ethnomethodological study and others interpreted it as a satire on the discipline. As I show in chapters 5, 6, and 7, interpretive differences and difficulties are rife when negotiating the boundaries between satire and serious discourse. These observations illustrate the ‘uncertain meaning of the signals for humorous discourse and of the indefinite boundary between the two discursive modes’ (Mulkay, 1988: 67). We can watch or listen to a humorous programme and not laugh, claiming to find it unfunny. Equally we can be amused by situations or incidences that are not signaled as humorous, (such as the classic example of someone slipping on a banana skin). The humorous cues are not essential for entry into the humorous mode, although humour is likely to occur wherever the bisociation principle of humour discourse can be applied. Given the indefinite and unspecified boundary between serious and non-serious discourse, the positioning of the boundary is subject to social negotiation. Mulkay (1988) continues that humour can have serious consequences as audiences can attribute it serious intentions and motives, interpret serious meanings and react in a serious manner. It is clear therefore humour attempts can fail to cause amusement.

**Humour and Social Conflict**

Given the ambiguous boundary between serious and non-serious discourse and the equivocal nature of humour, some audiences may interpret humour as a veil or smokescreen to camouflage real serious intentions. Psychoanalysts have acknowledged that humour expresses thoughts, issues and ideas that cannot be expressed directly. Humour is a vehicle for dealing with threatening or difficult topics. Freud (1976) observes that enjoyment of disparagement humour is due to the camouflage of hostility contained in the joke. Where blunt hostilities are (socially) objectionable,
enjoyment of hostile comments is required to be suppressed because of potential social repercussions. Hostility couched in a joke frame is not fully recognised and is thus more acceptable and in some instances enjoyable. Humour of a hostile nature is, according to Freud a liberating force, as it is motivated by aggression and releases inner tension. Hostile humour may be perceived as serving serious functions and can be taken seriously.

Humour can serve as a form of social conflict (Martineau, 1972; Fine, 1983). Medhurst observes comedy ‘can never be inoffensive. Attack and hostility are built into its very structure and the skill in producing good, successful, political comedy lies in finding the right targets’ (quoted in Ross, 1996: 99). In his biography of comedian Bernard Manning (who thrives on being shocking and offensive), Margolis maintains that ‘humour must be offensive and dangerous, must make light of that which we are accustomed to taking seriously’ (Margolis, 1996: xii; emphasis in original). Equally Erickson argues that humorous discourse is a weapon used to attack and offend against dominant discourses and ‘is by nature rebellious and oppositional’ (1988: 201). The ambiguity function in humour is complexly related to how it is interpreted. When humour is viewed ‘positively it may control or solidify; when it is defined as an affront it can cause conflict or demoralization’ (Fine, 1983: 175). Conflict humour includes satire, sarcasm and irony. These types of humour involve ‘indirect aggression and serve to separate a group from an undesirable, deviant out-group and may even provoke hostility by that group, as in the case of satiric remarks designed to anger the opposing group’ (Fine, 1983: 174). Harold Hobson (theatre critic) argues that satirists can be separated from more conservative comedians because they indulge in collision with their audience, not collusion (Paton, 1988). Compared with stand-up comedians, satirists take more risks and are highly unpredictable in their performance (the defining characteristics of satire, and the consequences of taking risks are discussed fully in chapter 3).

Towards an Understanding of Comic Offence

In Taking Humour Seriously (1994), Jerry Palmer encourages examination of the serious side of comedy and the limits of humorousness, for an understanding of comic failure is as important as understanding its success. Palmer (1994: 147) claims that ‘humour is a fragile thing’ as jokes or humorous situations may overwhelmingly fail. Goffman (1974: 321-324) calls this failure ‘frame disputes’, while Fairclough (1992: 230) refers to them as ‘moments of crisis’. Although the
reasons for such failure have not been adequately researched, it may be attributed to boredom or repetition, or the failure to understand a joke and so accord it joke status. As noted and illustrated above, a central feature for a joke not being considered funny is that it offends the audience, ‘one person’s humour is another person’s offensiveness’ (Palmer, 1994: 167). Participants in a recognizably humorous situation will not necessarily be amused by the situation (Mulkay, 1988: 52). People differ greatly in what they find appropriate or offensive (Kuipers, 2000). What may ‘be perceived as a humorous joke to one person, however, could be considered inappropriate or offensive to another’ (Smeltzer and Leap, 1988: 295). To repeat from chapter 1, Palmer (1994) identifies three variables or processes which may influence or determine whether humorous discourse is considered offensive or not:

1. The structure of the joke, interpreted as a representation of the world external to the joke.
2. The relationship between the instigator of the joke and the audience - the butt and the audience.
3. The nature of the occasion on which the attempt at humour is made.

Structure of the Joke

Offence can occur due to uncertainty regarding whether an utterance is a joke or not (Palmer, 1994). Palmer illustrates his point with reference to jokes with sadistic qualities which, ethically, may be difficult to be accepted as jokes. One example refers to nursing staff psychically and psychologically torturing patients, which they regarded as a joke. Failure to interpret this example as a joke can be understood from a psychoanalytic account, that distinguishes between representation and reality (Esmein, 1991 in Palmer, 1994). A representation (or sign) is something that ‘stands for’ something else. Humour takes place in the realm of representation, as opposed to reality. A would-be joke in the realm of representation is likely to achieve joke status, whereas if the joke is located in the realm of reality (with real consequences) it may cause offence rather than amusement.

Relationship between Instigator of the Joke and the Audience

Psychological studies of humour appreciation have endeavoured to analyse the characteristics and qualities that determine the interpretation of hostile humour (La Fave, 1972; Wolf et al, 1934;
Zillman and Cantor, 1976). Wolf et al (1934) advanced a distinction between affiliated and disaffiliated objects (including persons). Individuals transpose attitudes held towards the self on to affiliated objects. Thus criticism and comment directed to an affiliated object, is interpreted as criticism of the person who connects with the affiliated entity. Humour that disparages an affiliated object, extends to disparagement of the person who is affiliated with the object or person, leading to annoyance rather than amusement. Disparagement of unaffiliated objects leads to amusement. Developing this disposition approach, La Fave advanced the view that a joke 'is humorous to the extent that it enhances an object of affection and/or disparages an object of repulsion; unhumorous to the extent that it does the opposite' (1972: 198). Objects later became positive/negative reference groups and positive/negative identification classes. Groups and classes to which the individual or audience belongs are determined subjectively by their sense of identity (not by objective demographic characteristics). Jokes deriding religious, political and national opponents are preferred over those deriding affiliated groups. According to La Fave derision of an opponent is enjoyable due to a sense of superiority and heightened self-esteem (see Wilson, 1979). Reference groups and identification classes are the underlying principles of Zillman and Cantor's (1972) Disposition Theory of Humor and Mirth. This theory includes both the disparaged and disparaging in determining the response to the attempt of disparaging humour. Interpretation is based on the intensity of affective (positive and negative) dispositions towards both the disparaged and disparaging. The theory proposes the following relationships:

1. The more intense the negative disposition toward the disparaged agent or entity, the greater the magnitude of mirth.
2. The more intense the positive disposition toward the disparaged agent or entity, the smaller the magnitude of mirth.
3. The more intense the negative disposition toward the disparaging agent or entity, the smaller the magnitude of mirth.
4. The more intense the positive disposition toward the disparaging agent or entity, the greater the magnitude of mirth (Zillman, 1983: 91-92).

Disparagement humour is that which 'disparages, belittles, debases, demeans, humiliates, or otherwise victimizes' (Zillman, 1983: 85). Therefore, when the audience dislikes the victim, the humour fosters euphoria, and when the victim is liked or is emotionally related to the audience, then the humour fosters dysphoria (Zillman, 1983). Ridicule of an enemy or disliked entity causes amusement because the ridicule provides a welcomed relief from resentment held toward the enemy/disliked entity. As we will see in chapter 6, when complaining about offensive humorous
discourse readers use a strategy that I call pronominal displacement. Complainants shift their own grievance onto an identified third party, implying that the offence felt is not personal and the complainant is sensitive to the potential offence that may be caused to others. What is particularly interesting is the manner in which the readers discursively distance themselves from the third party. As I illustrate in chapter 6, a woman complaining about a cartoon of a woman wearing a jumper brandishing the words ‘Women for Rape’, distances herself from those who would find the cartoon offensive, i.e. women who’ve been raped, through the use of the word ‘they’ rather than ‘we’. As I argue in chapter 6, such distancing increases the force of the complaint.

Disposition theory is based on survey evidence in experimental settings where sympathy and antipathy towards the disparagers and disparaged were manipulated (see Cantor and Zillman, 1973; Zillman and Cantor, 1972). Responses to humour vary by sex, race and experience. In her analysis of humour appreciation, using prepared jokes, Duchaj (1999) found that both men and women rated the same jokes as offensive. But, when asked to rate the offensiveness, women rated the jokes significantly higher (more offensive) than men. Smeltzer and Leap (1988) asked respondents to evaluate three prepared types (neutral, sexist and racist) of jokes given in a working environment. Responses varied by sex, race and experience. Whites and females considered racist and sexist jokes more offensive than blacks and males, and inexperienced employers considered any joking in the working environment as inappropriate. Explaining their ‘surprising’ finding that blacks were less offended by racist jokes than whites, Smeltzer and Leap draw on the characteristics of the joke teller as a critical factor in determining the offensiveness of jokes. Jokes that disparage a group appear to be more acceptable when told by a member of that group as ‘there seems to be a certain degree of delight in ridiculing ourselves’ (1988: 301; see also Berger, 1996). However, Herzog (1999) analysed responses to sexual cartoons and found that both males and females prefer sexual cartoons where the victim is male. Females were found to dislike female victimization (which is liked by males). Herzog attributed this finding to the development, prominence and continuation of the women’s movement. Others have argued that humour appreciation and perceptions of offensiveness are a matter of individual taste (Hassett and Houlihan, 1979).

La Fave (1972) and La Fave et al (1976) argue that people are not amused by self-disparaging jokes, people are never amused by their own failings. Freud (1976) on the other hand has suggested that people can laugh at their own misfortune and failings. Although we may prefer the
disparagement of others than self-disparagement, people can and do laugh at themselves (Wilson, 1979). La Fave (1972) accepts that people may laugh at themselves but insists that laughter at oneself is not 'genuine amusement'. Freud argued that the ability to laugh at oneself reflects healthy and stable emotional adjustment and development. Someone employing self-pity and denial when confronted with misfortune is symptomatic of an emotionally unstable individual. As I show in chapter 7 individuals sometimes cannot laugh at themselves and utilise defamation law to complain about jokes they regard have caused damage to their reputation. However, they complain strategically to prevent themselves being criticised as lacking a sense of humour (see also chapter 6) or lured by tax-free cash that may result from a successful defamation trial.

Occasion on which Attempts at Humour are Made

Occasions during which attempts to joke are successful are socially sanctioned and culturally bound (Cotterill, 1996). We may hear a joke that we think funny but may not laugh because we realize that it is inappropriate, or we may take offence at the joke precisely because of the context in which the joke occurs. In British culture it is considered inappropriate to joke during religious occasions, whereas in tribal societies clowning is part of religious practice (Palmer, 1994). Attempts at humour during inappropriate occasions that cause offence can be resolved by litigation (see below). Palmer (1994) cites one example. In 1934 in the former British colony of Tanganyika (now Tanzania) a woman from the Sukume tribe complained about a man from the Zaramu tribe who had pushed her to the floor and had roughly handled her. Although admitting the act, the man claimed that it was a joke, she was his joking partner and had treated her in this manner many times. The court found that the woman had been assaulted, but also that the two tribes had a joking relationship and the two individuals were acquainted. Therefore the joking relationship was a mitigating factor in the outcome of the trial. The 'joke' occurred in a social setting and the woman was concerned that other people were unaware of, or did not see the relevance of their joking relationship and thus she may appear 'non-respectable' (Palmer, 1994: 163). The context in which the 'joke' occurred seemed to account for the offence caused (see chapter 6). A joke may become offensive 'if something in the circumstances is held to make the behaviour in question inappropriate, even if it is clear that what was intended was a joke and the circumstances are in principle favourable to humour' (Palmer, 1994: 164). Jaret (1999) raises the importance of social context when interpreting potentially offensive jokes using concrete example of the 'Ted Danson
incident' (referred to above). Seventy four percent of Jaret's respondents (including whites and blacks) disagreed with the view that Danson's sexist and racist views were acceptable in a setting (Friars Club Roast) which has traditionally been home to 'gutter level' humour. White males were least offended by the performance and most likely to see it as acceptable in the context of a celebrity roast.

Additional evidence reinforces the view that the incidence of comic offence is context-specific. Smith and Saltzman (1995: 89) observe that in America, obscenity is often defined as 'material taken out of its proper context'. As we shall see in chapter 6, offensive discourse is referred to as 'dirt' or 'shit' and complainants employ other pollution terms to describe the offending discourse and the offender. Douglas (1968) illustrates how dirt is matter out of place. Equally, folklore literature argues that audiences are offended or shocked by topics, issues and expressions that would be unquestioned, inoffensive and acceptable in private (in-group) settings (Toelken, 1979). Every community or group has its own standards of taste and decency. Equally ethnographic literature acknowledges that we should talk about plurality of tastes or offences (rather than singular taste and offence) as each community is governed by distinct rules and values determining in/appropriate topics for discourse. Wm. Hugh Jansen advises us to 'recognize the difference between the folk's emic and our own etic definitions of offensive folklore and to record how obscene, racist, or sexist a particular expression is in its own milieu' (in Smith and Saltzman, 1995: 89). Particular themes of jokes can cause offence, even when the context permits and accepts humour. For example, Palmer cites how the British TV comedy Spitting Image was banned from American TV after numerous complaints about President Reagan being depicted as a 'doddering old buffoon' (1994: 167). Here the identity of the speaker may be important. Jokes told about Jews, by a Jew, may be an ironical statement on anti-Semitism, whereas if told by an anti-Semite it would have different meaning. A British TV programme joking about President Reagan may have a different meaning than when an American programme jokes about Reagan. Comic offence is more likely to occur when two different social systems combine. Thus, sexist jokes do not automatically offend women and racist jokes do not automatically offend particular ethnic groups, they can laugh at the jokes ridiculing their own group. The important issue is when they laugh at sexist and racist jokes. Women and ethnic groups will consider sexist and racist jokes inoffensive in instances when 'there is sufficient context to morally evaluate such images' (Oring, 1995: 170; see also Jacobs, 1981). For example, when jokes are told by friends there is enough context (they
know and trust each other) and questions regarding the significance of jokes do not occur. In contrast, the same joke appearing in a newspaper or magazine lacks such contextual cues — the joke is ‘not only between strangers but the communication is being observed by strangers. No agreement about the moral significance of the images and ideas can be assumed to exist’ (Oring, 1995: 170). Therefore due to limited contextual cues, joking in mass media discourse is less likely to be treated in a playful manner and may be more inclined to offend. Therefore the mass media, such as Private Eye magazine offer a fruitful site for the analysis of comic offence and comic censure. The theories and observations discussed above clearly show that humour has the potential to deeply offend. I now turn to the problems that may be encountered when we try to express that a joke has failed to amuse and has caused offence.

Criticising Comic Discourse

Joke tellers and humorous discourses can been attacked for being offensive, racist, sexist, obscene or tasteless. To repeat from chapter 1, the most significant problem facing the cultural analysis of humour is answering the question ‘in what sense is it possible to be critical of comic discourse?’ (Pickering, 1994b: 325). Although the analytical difficulties of offensive values in comic discourse ‘have not, surprisingly, been subject to much critical scrutiny’ (Pickering, 1994b: 311), in this section I draw together some of the (limited) discussions in the humour literature that consider the risks and problems associated with criticising the offensive qualities of comedic discourse. Some people (as discussed above) are more easily offended than others, but ‘offence is both more frequent as a problem and more difficult to deal with than the much rarer problem of obscenity’ (Wilson, 1996: 261).

In his analysis of The Kentucky Minstrels, Pickering raises fundamental analytical problems and issues related to comic offence. Pickering observes that it is difficult to be critical of comic discourse because the joke-teller’s motives and intentions are difficult to establish:

the minstrel show’s mobilization of racialized conceptions of black people was successful because it did not advance those conceptions in a serious and deliberate fashion, as in fascist propaganda; its notions and values were mediated by the clown’s mask, and inferred from the comic discourse, in such a way that they could not be easily pinned down simply as an insult to black humanity (1994b: 319).

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In answering the question 'in what sense is it possible to be critical of comic discourse?' Pickering highlights a number of features of comic discourse that potentially makes it difficult to criticise comic discourse. Noting that a joke is a joke is a joke, any criticism of it undoubtedly misses this, and therefore becomes a joke itself. This suggests that where comedy is understood or interpreted in ways usually adopted when reading or listening to serious discourse, this is a 'misapplication of values' (Pickering, 1994b: 325). This misapplication of values involves humour being understood in reality-oriented terms, which are often associated with serious discourse. Again we return to Mulkay's observations of the bisociation principle of comedy – comedy indulges in multiplicity of meaning, ambiguity of meaning and incongruity thus removing it from the serious mode.

'It's Just a Joke'

Those responsible for the attempt at humour, especially the type of humour that deliberately attacks and offends (such as satirical humour; see chapter 3) will, when confronted, have to defend their actions, intentions and motives. Conventional justification for defending a joke that is challenged or questioned is to reply 'it's just a joke' (Billig, 2001). Those engaged in humorously signalled discourse could deny any serious intent and meaning (Mulkay, 1988; Tannen, 1984). Tellers of racist or sexist jokes, or any joke that may sound like a complaint can defend themselves on the grounds that 'I was only joking' (Tannen, 1992: 51; see also Mulkay, 1988: 71). The plea that it was only a joke, or that one was only joking, is the most important strategy used to relieve responsibility. It 'appears in every context and must be one of the most widely employed dodges in the history of man' (Goffman, 1974: 331). For example, those who criticised the 'lad's mag' Loaded were met with the response that it wasn't supposed to be taken seriously and was a joke. This was 'an effective defence against those who sought to critique lad behaviour because any objectors could be characterised as literal and humourless' (Williams, 1998: 162). When expressed through humour the 'penalties for aggression are diminished' (Boskin, 1987: 255). The joker is not responsible for what is said and thus implies 'a free passage through any hostility to what he [or she] actually said, even when he [or she] didn't "actually" mean it' (Pickering, 1994b: 328). 'It's just a joke' renders any claim to serious intent or motive redundant. Husband (1988) criticises the 'just a joke' defence arguing that it reinforces and encourages acceptance of negative stereotyping (see also Billig, 2001). Some members of the audience may not accept the argument that the offending discourse is 'just a joke'. The 'just a joke' claim does not always prevent further
criticism or serious consequences of joking around. For example former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz was forced to resign after telling a racist joke that was 'so transparent that the public felt that his true attitudes were revealed' (Fine, 1983: 175). In this instance, Butz's claims that it was 'just a joke' were inadequate and unacceptable. Equally, Jaret (1999) found that whites and blacks differ in their attitudes towards ethnic humour (blacks are more likely than whites to be offended by jokes about blacks) and black listeners will interpret an ethnic joke considered 'just a joke', as racist and offensive. The claim that the offending discourse was 'just a joke' may not be acceptable in some contexts, particularly formal settings. It is not a defence in a libel suit to claim that you were 'only joking' or 'just trying to be funny' (Arnold, 1987). Other strategies may have to be employed when defending the charge of comic offence in court (in chapter 7 I assess how the offended and offender in libel trials are represented by the press and how they account for their actions).

The very nature of humour (including its ambiguity and incongruity) ensures that humorous intention cannot by easily overturned (Mulkay, 1988). These defining principles separating serious and non-serious discourse limit the possible retaliation that can be employed when offended by non-serious discourse. It is ineffectual to criticise the joker for his/her ambiguity and to seek clarity, as clarity is achieved by eradicating the very essence of humour - ambiguity (Davies, 1996). In the words of Mulkay:

in the serious mode, allusive remarks can properly lead to requests for clarification. Implicit meanings can often be made more explicit without the discourse thereby breaking down. Participants can, in principle, say "I'm sorry, I didn't understand. Could you say that again?" This is much more difficult, however, within the realm of humour. Genuine requests for clarification are serious by their very nature ... Attempts to explain the meaning of a joke spoil that joke because they seek to make it conform to the requirements of an alien mode of discourse; that is, they try to make it clear, explicit and unitary. As we all know, when you have to explain what a joke means, it has failed to work as a joke (1988: 29).

In the humorous mode the performer can avoid responsibility for what is said, or can deny that what he/she is accused of saying is inaccurate. Therefore, returning to the point made at the outset of this chapter, humorous discourse may be employed deliberately to make a serious point, criticism or argument, whilst simultaneously claiming that it was never said. The dictum 'many a true word spoken in jest' illustrates that humour can be used as a vehicle for serious meanings and serious intent. It is possible to convey both serious and humorous messages at the same time.
Walking Close to the Edge

As the person engaging in humorous discourse is not held responsible for what is said or written to the same extent as those engaging in serious discourse, humorous discourse provides an ideal opportunity to communicate taboo topics. Freud (1976) saw jokes as socially accepted vehicles for breaking (sexual and aggressive) taboos. In non-serious discourse we can say the unsayable, suggest the unsuggestable, do the undoable and express thoughts and desires that are normally suppressed in serious discourse (see Paton, 1988). Nothing is too sacred or taboo that it cannot be the subject of humour. It is 'precisely those topics culturally defined as sacred, taboo or disgusting which more often than not provide the principal grist for humorous mills' (Dundes and Hauschild, 1988: 56). As Pickering observes, comic discourse:

allows an exaggeration of, or exclusivity of focus upon, certain perceived features or notions of others where, in "normal" circumstances, these would not be condoned or permitted such unrestrained expression, unless of course that expression was meant deliberately to offend, malign or hurt another (1994b: 326).

Press reports on comedian Bernard Manning observe that 'He says things that people feel but have not got the guts to say themselves' (Margolis, 1996: 179). Manning fails to amuse everyone because jokes about tabooed topics are unlikely to amuse those who maintain the taboo (Mulkay, 1988). Disaster jokes (such as those following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, or the Challenger disaster jokes or more recently the terrorist attacks in America) are typical examples of taboo jokes. Oring explains the reasoning behind disaster jokes:

People who tell disaster jokes know that one is not supposed to talk about human suffering and disaster graphically or flippantly. Indeed, the joke tellers and their critics share the very same sensitivities, but the joke tellers are willing to ritually suspend these sensitivities when they are elevated to the level of moral imperatives (1992: 39).

Humorous discourse transgresses social norms and mores. Littlewood and Pickering aver that for some 'all instances of the comic are founded on the transgression of decorum, propriety, and gravity in human affairs, that this transgression is its very raison d'être' (1998: 292; see also Andrews, 1998). Joke tellers and producers are willing to 'walk a little closer to the edge, to engage in risk-taking that may be threatening to current social norms ... to go beyond accepted boundaries to engage in an assertive, show-off boldness. This just drives humorless people crazy'.
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(Thorson, 1993: 19). For example, one of Jeremy Hardy's successful self-deprecation jokes is 'As far as I'm concerned, a woman who's good in bed is one who goes to sleep quickly and doesn't take up too much room' (Palmer, 1994: 74). The humour of this joke is located in the convention of the traditional male norm. Enjoyment of this joke may be derived from either being interpreted as a satire upon the tradition of the male norm or as an 'inadequate' exception of this norm. To take a further example referring to masculinity, 'A blonde woman gives birth to a child with bright red hair. "Oh", says the doctor, "father a redhead is he?" - "No idea", says the blonde, "he didn't take his hat off"' (Palmer, 1994: 74). The notion of the 'quickie' implied in the joke relates to the idea of sex as a very brief (anonymous) encounter. The humour is derived from the transgression of sexual encounter norms. However, what norm is transgressed is difficult to determine - it could be a norm that sex should not be a brief encounter (but based on a developed stable relationship), or a norm that implies the 'quickies' are normal - and the joke transgresses this norm simply because of its extreme nature (Palmer, 1994). It is difficult to determine which norms are transgressed by looking at only the structure of the joke. However, it may be that those holding traditional moral values and feminist views are likely to be offended by this joke (Palmer, 1994). Joking about topics, issues and people that are 'off-limits' illustrates the transgressive qualities of humour and comedy. Transgression involves crossing a boundary. The transgressor is 'judged to have crossed some line that was not meant to have been crossed. The crossing of the line may or may not have been intended' (Cresswell, 1996: 23). Comic offence occurs when the position of this line differs between the joke teller and the audience. In contrast to the joke teller, the offended audience considers the joke to 'have gone too far', implying that the position of the line drawn by the joke teller is incorrect and inappropriate. To repeat from chapter 1, comedienne Maureen Lipman maintains 'there's a fine line between the humorous and the offensive' (2000: 216).

Rebuking the Offended

In addition to simply defending the offending discourse as 'just a joke', a common technique is to criticise those who question the attempt at humour and disagree with our view of the world as incompetent or mistaken (Heritage, 1984; Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984). Fine observes that retaliation to humour and comedy 'may leave the retaliator open to charges that he/she is paranoid, unable to be kidded, insecure or brutal' (1983: 175). The ultimate criticism is that the person(s) offended lacks a sense of humour (see chapter 6). If a joke does not receive the expected laughter
recognition the joke-teller will not doubt the joke, but will question the audience's sense of humour (Cotterill, 1996; Prado, 1995). A sense of humour is a desirable attribute we seek in ourselves and others (Goodwin and Tang, 1991; La Fave and Mannell, 1976; Mulkay, 1988; Palmer, 1994; Wickberg, 1998). Having a sense of humour is a fundamental value in most societies (Apte, 1987). According to Mulkay (1988) few people claim to have no sense of humour. The importance of having a sense of humour forms the basis of the analysis in chapter 6 where I analyse how the tension between portraying oneself as having a (good) sense of humour (thus appreciating humour) whilst simultaneously wishing to express that the humour has stepped over the mark or has attempted to push the boundaries too far and has caused offence is managed discursively. In her study of humour appreciation, Duchaj’s (1999) respondents prevented the charge that they lack a sense of humour, for example one participant thought that a joke about disabled children ‘was offensive but it made me laugh’ (1999: 6). Signaling that the humorous intention is appreciated indirectly deflects any claim of lacking a sense of humour, whilst simultaneously stating that the joke is offensive (see chapter 6). In her analysis of mother-in-law jokes, Cotterill (1996) observes that if the mother-in-law resists the son-in-law’s joke, then he responds in a defensive manner, implying that she is too sensitive and/or cannot take a joke. Observing that there are ‘powerful sanctions explicit in the accusation that one lacks a sense of humour’, women are in a ‘double bind’ as to whether they approve of the joke or not, since ‘refusal to respond positively marks them out as deviant’ (Cotterill, 1996: 198). Merrill (1988) highlights that in the past women have been compelled to laugh at jokes that insult them in order to be seen as having a sense of humour, and therefore belonging to the ‘in-group’ (in Cotterill, 1996: 211). As Younge observes it is ‘difficult to have a sense of humour and to be offended at the same time’ (1999: 100). In chapter 6 I explore in more detail how this ‘double-bind’ situation is managed discursively.

A defence when a joke is criticised is to counter the attack with humour or ridicule (Wilson, 1979). Humorists can and do use the butt’s criticism of humour as an opportunity for further ridicule (see chapters 5 and 7). Wilson (1979) cites the example of Philippon (19th century French caricaturist) who sketched the head of the monarch (King Louis Phillippe) as a pear. To exacerbate the insult, the French word ‘poire’ also means fat-head as well as pear. Sued for libel, Philippon retorted that it was not his fault if the King bore ‘such a fatal resemblance to the symbol of fatuity’ (Wilson, 1979: 192). Further, Emerson (1969) describes a situation where the butt of a joke attempted to hold the joker accountable for the abuse. A cartoon by Al Capp depicted a folksinger called
'Joanie Phoanie'. Joan Baez (a folksinger) felt that the cartoon character resembled herself and warned Al Capp that she would sue if the character was not removed from the cartoon strip. Al Capp was surprised that the singer related to the cartoon character and claimed that 'Joanie Phoanie' was repulsive and ego-maniacal. Baez’s complaint gave Al Capp ammunition for additional abuse in a humour manner. As Wilson observes 'Baez may have had a legal claim to damages and for the retirement of Joanie Phoanie, but by singing her plaintive song of protest she lost the informal battle of wits' (1969: 191). By questioning the norms of joking Baez was considered humourless and received public disdain. A more forceful defence would have been to counter the attack with humour ridiculing Al Capp.

Attempts to Rule Comedy when it is Unruly by Nature

George Orwell saw every joke as a 'tiny revolution ... you cannot be memorably funny without at some point raising topics which the rich, the powerful and the complacent would prefer to see left alone' (quoted in Benton 1988: 40). Reactions to offensive comedy 'generally extend beyond simply disagreements ... to include negative criticism and sometimes also outright attempts at censorship' (Smith and Saltzman, 1995: 86; see chapter 7). Arguments about offensive discourse are deeply embedded in the areas of censure and censorship (Cloonan, 1996). Censorship refers to the 'efforts directed towards the prevention either of disapproved expression or of their spread ... [and] occurs either before the disputed expression takes place at all or before it can be repeated' (Smith and Saltzman, 1995: 86). Censure on the other hand always occurs after the point of production and dissemination. It ranges from 'reprimands and the simply expression of disapproval, to actions designed to punish or alter the behaviour of the persons responsible for the disapproved expression' (Smith and Saltzman, 1995: 86). Thus censorship is 'aimed primarily at the disputed act or expression, while censure is directed mainly at the speaker or actor' (Smith and Saltzman, 1995: 86). I do not advocate a neat differentiation between censor and censure. Censure can occur without censorship and negative criticism can prevent future publication of the offensive discourse, therefore acting as censorship. Equally censorship often implies censure such as punishing the offender (Smith and Saltzman, 1995).

Burt (1998) advocates a censorship continuum, ranging from 'soft' forms of censorship (critical censure) to 'hard' censorship (for example imprisonment). It is clear that on many occasions elite
members and groups have regarded humour as threatening to established social values and institutions and have silenced joke-tellers. Powell argues that what is occurring in the censorship of humour is that 'the humour definition is quite simply no longer acceptable to the “censoring powers”. The phenomenon in question is “serious” to them – too “sacred” to be “profaned” in humour! The clown’s custard pies are experienced as bricks’ (1988: 102). Comedic discourses have been subject to censorship and have upset many censors. In his examination of the BBC's written archives, Davies observes that:

for much of its history script-writer and comedians were constrained by strict rules forbidding both vulgar, scatological and irreverent humour that would have offended the puritanical and also humour about disabilities or ethnic and racial groups that would offend against what is now termed political correctness (1996: 29).

In 1925 a set of instructions for radio broadcasters was issued restricting the vulgar humorous material broadcast on the radio (Davies, 1996). Censorship of humour up until World War II was uncontroversial because producers and administrators ‘adhered to the same implicit code of rules as to what could and could not be broadcast, and because there was anyway an increasingly rigid adherence to pre-agreed scripts’ (Davies, 1996: 32). During the war jokes about Britain's allies (Americans, Greeks, Maltese), and enemies (Italians, Germans) were tightly controlled in order to prevent causing offence (Davies, 1996). Complaints about vulgar humour during World War II (especially jokes told on programmes for the forces) lead to a tightening of control of humorous material (comedians such as Sydney Howard were suspended from broadcasting for using an unscripted unsavoury joke in a forces programme), leading to the production of policy rule-books (see Wagg, 1992). Censorship rule books (such as the Television Policy Censorship Code, January 1947) of the 1940s listed numerous jokes and humour banned on the grounds of vulgarity, attempts to mock morality or making fun of groups defined as under-dogs due to race, ethnicity or disability (which is now called political correctness). Under the heading ‘vulgarity’ the rule-book reads:

Programmes must at all costs be kept free of crudities. There can be no compromise with doubtful material. It must be cut. There is an absolute ban upon the following: jokes about lavatories, effeminacy in men, immorality of any kind, suggestive references to honeymooning couples, chambermaids, fig leaves, ladies' underwear (e.g. winter draws on), animal habits (e.g. rabbits), lodgers, commercial travelers. When in doubt -- cut it out (Thody, 1997: 245-246).
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The early 1960s saw a decline in tight control of humorous material (because of the competition from commercial television) and thus a subsequent rise in humorous programmes such as That Was The Week That Was that contributed to the 'satire boom' (see chapter 3). These 'new' programmes were able to include jokes previously banned (such as racist jokes) and caused 'great offence' to Mrs Whitehouse and supporters (Davies, 1996: 48).

A 'Comedy Revolution' occurred in Britain and American in the late 1970s. Alternative comedy rejected humour and comedy which was racist and sexist in content. By the late 1970s/early 1980s it was recognised that such content was offensive. This revolution redefined what was considered funny, pushed the boundaries of comedy and broke long-held comedic rules. Women, lesbian and black performers (such as Rita Rudner, Karen Williams and Marsha Warfield) challenged the traditional dominance of comedy by the white male by putting women's issues and gender politics prominently on the comedy landscape. This 'alternative comedy' (see Wagg, 1996), influenced by other new social movements (feminist and gay movements), allowed thoughts, ideas and feelings that had been previously suppressed to be acknowledged and discussed, dismantling prejudice. Accepting libertarian values, alternative comedians banned sexism and racism, topics that had been central to comedians such as Bernard Manning and Jim Davidson (see Littlewood and Pickering, 1998). Political correctness is fundamental to contemporary discussions on censorship. Political correctness conforms 'to a belief that language and practices which could offend political sensibilities (as in matter of sex or race) should be eliminated' (Smith and Saltzman, 1995: 87). Political correctness is concerned with the politics of representation, and 'articulates an alternative recognition of power as dispersed across a range of public and private spheres, and as constructed within different orders and practices of discourse' (Littlewood and Pickering, 1998: 305).

Humour can have important social and legal implications. Offensive 'jokes may result in litigation under civil or human rights laws' (Smeltzer and Leap, 1988: 296). Littlewood and Pickering observe that since the 1960s (partially due to the abolition of the theatrical censorship in 1968) official control of comedy has declined and 'institutional control over comic material and performance continues to be variably applied according to cultural medium and context' (1998: 295; see also Davies, 1996). In the early 1950s 'cheeky' seaside postcards were banned and burned and shopkeepers were branded criminals for selling postcards showing vulgar jokes and puns (Travis, 2000). Jokes told in face-to-face interaction cause offence and are subject to litigation. In
December 1994, a black barmaid was awarded £1,900 by an industrial tribunal for damages for unfair dismissal. The barmaid was sacked by her landlady who told the barmaid to 'Go and don't come back'. This was in response to the barmaid objecting to racist humour in a video by Jim Davidson that was being shown to those on the premises (Sharratt, 1994 in Paton et al, 1996: 1).

Equally, Suzanne Moore reports in The Guardian (1994: 5) that an Irishman was awarded £6,000 by an industrial tribunal for being called 'Thick Mick'. The employee was traumatized by a constant barrage of inhibiting Irish jokes from colleagues, and could no longer comfortably attend work. Moore continues that Irish, sexist or racist jokes are offensive because they 'are used to tell you that you are reducible to nothing more that a “thick Paddy”, “a daft bimbo” or another “crazy nigger”' (Moore, 1994: 5). To take another example, Smith (1995) cites that five women sued the Stroh Brewing Company for the offensive sexist comments and behaviour they received at work exacerbated by the company's Swedish Bikini Team advertisements. Further, in Hitler's Germany the Catholic priest Josef Müller was hanged for 'telling a political joke to an electrician working at his house' (Benton, 1988: 36-37).

Official control of comedic discourse causing offence takes the form of the legal limits imposed by definitions of libel (and obscenity). If 'you ridicule someone that can still amount to defamation' (Kevin Bays, interview, 2nd December, 1998). Humour is libellous 'if the audience that reads an allegedly humorous statement perceives it as a damaging fact' (Arnold, 1987: 10). The laws of defamation 'exist to protect persons against acts of communication which may offend or injure them, or their reputation in the community' (Watson and Hill, 2000: 37). In a defamation case instigated by a joke that suggested that anyone staying at a particular hotel ran the risk of catching a disease because of the low room-rate, the hotel's lawyers argued that '... just because something is said with humor does not make it any less damaging' (Nilsen and Nilsen, 2000: 189). Libel litigation has often been instigated by satirical publications (see Kropf, 1974 and chapters 3 and 7).

It is not surprising that satirical discourses have continually fallen victim to libel litigation, as a parallel exists between what the defamation law attempts to constrain and the motivational forces of satirical texts. Robertson and Nicol (1990: 35) observe that a potentially defamatory statement is one that may lower 'the plaintiff in the estimation of right-thinking people generally'; 'injuring the plaintiff's reputation by exposing him to hatred, contempt or ridicule' and 'tending to make the plaintiff be shunned and avoided' (see also Barendt et al, 1997; Bindman, 2000; Cram, 1998; Hooper, 1984, 2000; Hutchinson, 1999; Loveland, 2000; Morrish, 1996; Petley, 1999; Robertson
and Nicol, 1990; Shillito and Barendt, 1999). Compare this with the definition given by literary critics who define satire. As we shall see in chapter 3, Griffin maintains that satire ‘is designed to attack vice or folly. To this end it uses wit or ridicule’ (1994: 1). Consequently, serious things can be achieved by satirical texts and therefore the risk of libel is extremely high. In my interview with Christopher Booker he notes that negotiating the role of satire and the aims of the libel law is like walking a tightrope ‘between what is defensible ridicule and what is actually just going so far over the top and becoming offensive that it is actually libellous. When you are relying on facts, then you have to get those facts right because obviously if you prove, that is the defence, you can be as rude as you like about someone as long as you get the facts absolutely right’ (interview, 22nd April, 1999). Libel Lawyer, Kevin Bays referred to the difficulty of negotiating whether a particular humorous article is libellous. In my (SL) interview with him (KB), when I asked him about the supposed clash between the aim of satire and the restrictions imposed by the libel law which prevents and restricts what satire is trying to do, we had the following exchange:

KB: What, where do you draw the line?
SL: I mean the two seem to contradict each other but they do meet somewhere.
KB: Yeah, I mean, well you’re entitled to criticise freedom of speech.
SL: Mmm.
KB: You’re entitled to use strong language, you’re entitled to hold views, even the bigot is entitled to.
SL: Mmm.
KB: His views and that sort of thing which is supposedly covered by the defence of fair comment, it’s a very difficult line to draw.
SL: Yes.
KB: It really is, which side do you fall, but I think with, if you’ve got someone in the public eye and particularly if it’s done with humour, I think you can get away with much more than the simple normal prose and that sort of thing, than a serious article.
SL: Because it’s humorous?
KB: Because it’s humour and I think people can see that, I don’t know, I was going to say as you can see, because although it’s humorous, it’s very hurtful. Or it can be. But does it go beyond the legitimate bounds of criticism that’s really what is all about (interview, 2nd December, 1998).

Unlike the mainstream media, which may seek to avoid claims for libel, satirical discourses endeavour to criticise, ridicule, uphold and embarrass individuals, groups, collectives and society at large. Such aim is particularly evident in the ‘journals of opinion’ (Barendt et al, 1997) which may deliberately publish defamatory material. For example an ‘obscure satirical news-sheet’ (Webster, 1993: 1) called Scallywag that ‘seemed to pride itself on the publication of defamatory material’
(Hooper, 2000: 369) was silenced using defamation law. The magazine was found to have libelled John Major and Ms Latimer (a Downing Street Caterer) over rumours that they were engaged in an adulterous relationship. Due to the Conservative Central Office pressurizing the ‘magazine’s distributors, wholesalers and retail outlets to get them to stop handling it’ (New Statesman & Society, 1995: 5) the magazine is no longer published (although back copies are posted on the web). English libel law is particularly relevant to the satirical magazine Private Eye as it ‘stands out for its attitude towards and experience of libel’ (Barendt et al, 1997: 151). As I explained in chapter 1, the sheer amount of comic offence caused by Private Eye warrants further investigation. This is one of the main reasons why I have used the offence caused by Private Eye’s discourse as data for examining comic offence and comic censure. I examine Private Eye’s libel litigation history in chapter 7.

When criticised through official avenues, humorous discourses ‘tend to fall somewhat flat in the libel courts’ (Hooper, 2000: 6). For example, a restaurant-owner recovered damages for what was intended to be a humorous piece headed ‘Charlie’s pasties: look before you bite, it could be Rover from next door’ (Hooper, 2000: 6). Statements can be considered libellous on the basis that they have an ironical interpretation. Pullum (1985) observes that statements of praise and approbation have been held defamatory because they were published ironically. To take another example illustrating the problems associated with interpreting the ambiguity in humour, in July 1992 The Daily Sport had to pay ‘substantial damages’ to actress Sarah Lancashire of Coronation Street for publishing a mocked-up picture of her face on the body of a topless woman. It was reported that all ‘attempts by the paper to inform its readers that this was a spoof were inadequate and the actress won the case’ (Hooper, 2000: 9). Hard hitting ‘criticism and savage satire can generally be successfully defended as honest comment, so long as the exaggerations are not so extreme as to indicate malice’ (Robertson and Nicol, 1990: 64). Meaning is a mixed question in defamation law, and given that defamation can be achieved through ‘innuendo’ (Robertson and Nicol, 1990) negotiation of meaning is complex. In cases of innuendo the discourse is defamatory to those who know facts that are not included in the text. In this instance the plaintiff is required to prove the facts which make the seemingly innocent text defamatory. Libel by innuendo occurs when there are special details known to a particular group of people which render an innocuous statement libellous.
In a large number of libel cases the fundamental issue is what the words actually mean in the humorous discourse. The main problem faced by the courts is in deciding 'whether the words are arguably capable of bearing the meaning contended for by the plaintiff ... the judge's role is to rule on what meaning the words are capable of bearing, while the jury decides what meaning they in fact bear' (Hooper, 2000: 6-7; emphasis in original; see also Barendt et al, 1997; Shillito and Barendt, 1999). Ordinary or natural meaning of the words are determined by taking into account the context of the publication and 'any reasonable inferences which a normal reader, listener or viewer would draw' (Barendt et al, 1997: 4). Although careful wording may prevent a claim for libel, the court examines the reality of what has been written, the words that are used and potential reasons why the particular words were chosen and used. London has been called by some as 'the libel capital of the world' and 'a town named Sue' (Petley, 1999: 145), because British libel law is more plaintiff friendly than other countries. Therefore attempts to joke are particularly vulnerable in British courts. Not only do the courts attempt to clarify the ambiguous nature of the humour, before the trial has begun it is negatively predisposed against the defendant. Those found guilty of libel in the 16th century had their right hand removed and in the 17th century were mutilated and whipped (Hooper, 2000). In contemporary Britain, punitive measures are far less extreme, but a convicted libeller is still fined and expected to pay the plaintiff's damages and costs.

Robertson and Nicol (1990) describe a case brought by Derek Jameson against the writers of the BBC satirical programme Week Ending. Jameson argued that the programme was dishonest in portraying him as stupid and regarding his editorship of tabloid newspapers as 'all the nudes fit to print and all the news printed to fit'. Robertson and Nicol conclude that it 'would have been a sad day for British satire had Jameson won this presumptuous action' (1990: 64). Other satirical attacks have not been so successful. The News of the World attacked Charlotte Cornwell's performance in a television series, suggesting that she could not sing, was middle-aged and was ugly. Robertson and Nicol observe that the defendants knew that Cornwell was aged 34 and of 'normal' appearance — 'the article had heaped upon her the kind of reckless insults which could not have reflected an honest opinion' (1990: 64). Other libel defeats caused by the humorous discourse of Private Eye magazine are referred to and analysed later in the thesis (see chapter 7), particularly cases brought against the Eye by Randolph Churchill, Nora Beloff, James Goldsmith, Robert Maxwell and Sonia Sutcliffe.
Discussion

In this chapter I have highlighted numerous and varied difficulties, dilemmas and dangers associated with interpreting and negatively responding to humour and comedy. The humour theories and literature I have discussed, and the tensions between them, illustrate how responses to comedic discourses are highly contestable. Responses are influenced by the structure of the joke, the relationship between the joke teller, its target and its audience. Meanings negotiated from comedy are neither singular nor fixed, a joke that amuses one person can offend another. Smith (1995: 129) maintains that ‘the reason for the confusion over what is and is not a laughing matter lies in the subjective basis of the humorous response’. The subjective response to humour is illustrated in the disposition theory of humour appreciation (Zillman and Cantor, 1972). Claims that particular topics are ‘off-limits’ for humorous treatment and humorous discourse are rife. Although jokes are assumed to ‘be protected by a mantle of triviality’ (Smith and Saltzman, 1995: 85), culturally specific rules govern and place limits on acceptable topics for humour, the appropriate contexts for joking and acceptable responses to humour. Given its transgressive quality and its desire to ‘walk on the edge’, humour frequently breaks the rules and steps over the permitted line. In this chapter I have discussed some of the attempts used to control and restrict the content and distribution of potentially offensive comedic discourse. In particular I have considered the law of defamation.

Due to the fundamental features of humorous discourse (ambiguity, incongruity and bisociation) and the fluid boundaries between serious and non-serious discourse, interpretive disputes regarding the motive, intentions and meanings associated with humorous discourse are complex to resolve. Our consciousness of appropriate and inappropriate topics for media discourse disappears when all is working well. When we become conscious of the norms and expectations of appropriate and inappropriate topics and places for humour:

everyday, commonsense relationships between place and behaviour become obvious and underlined. In other words, transgressive acts prompt reactions that reveal that which was previously considered natural and commonsense. The moment of transgression marks the shift from the unspoken unquestioned power of place over taken-for-granted behaviour to an official orthodoxy concerning what is proper as opposed to what in not proper – ‘that which is in place to that which is out of place (Cresswell, 1996: 10).
Different individuals and groups have distinct ideas about what is and is not appropriate and acceptable and when these different ideologies come into conflict they are removed from the role of common sense and are translated as the right or orthodox way of doing things. Adopting a joking frame and the diminishing sense of responsibility because 'it's just a joke', enables the joker to say the unsayable and do the undoable, whilst simultaneously criticising and making a serious point. As comedic and humorous discourse involves breaking taboos and transgressing discursive boundaries, it can cause tension, hurt, outrage and it can deeply offend. So the important question in humour studies should be 'where rather than whether, to draw the line' (Cloonan, 1996: 23; emphasis in original). As discussed above, a favoured technique employed by humour researchers is to ask participants in an experimental setting which types of jokes they consider offensive in an attempt to produce criteria that can predict the types of people who will be offended by particular types and topics of jokes (Cantor and Zillman, 1973; Duchaj, 1999; Herzog, 1999; Smeltzer and Leap, 1988; Zillman and Cantor, 1972). However, such research does not examine how offence is expressed and what this implies about comic censure and humour and comedy in general. Additionally, it is recognised that complaints about and retaliation against offensive jokes are difficult to manage and are risky endeavours (because of the accusation that one lacks a sense of humour or that it was 'just a joke'). The strategies used by the offended when articulating their offence and by the offender when justifying or responding to the charge of causing offence largely remains located outside the academic gaze.

Primarily dealing with the issue of decontextualization and humour, Smith's (1995) analysis touches on the content of debates objecting to humorous discourse. Smith analyses the content of media discourses following the 'whip incident' in the 1992 NCAA basketball finals. A photograph of Bob Knight (Indiana University coach) was taken where he was whipping an African-American player. Supporters argued that this was a joke, whilst other argued that the photograph reflected images of slavery and was no laughing matter. Smith discovered that objections to the coach's joke were based on the belief that the joke revealed the motives and character of the coach and those who laughed at the joke shared the joker's prejudices. These objections confirm De Sousa's claim on the appreciation of humour. In his analysis of the malicious element in humour and comedy, De Sousa (1987) avers that sexist and racist jokes express and convey stereotypical opinions and assumptions. Those people who are amused by the sexist and racist jokes are acknowledging, accepting and sharing the stereotyped assumptions of the 'other' group. Smith (1995) also found
that objections to humour are based on the inappropriateness of the subject for humour. This inappropriateness is transferred into discussions on the immorality of the humour. Finally, objections opposed one of the defining characteristics of humour – that it does not count in the ‘real’ world. These objections were couched in discussions regarding the negative effects of the humour, such as undermining the university’s attempt to recruit more ethnic minority students. Objections to offensive comedy are fully discussed in chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Despite the examples just cited, analysis of the techniques used to complain about offensive comedy remains an underdeveloped area in the literature. Although censuring practices have been explored (see Smith and Saltzman, 1995), the articulation of comic offence is a neglected area in humour studies. This thesis attempts to make good this neglect. It examines practices of comedic censure and examines how, given the tensions and double-bind illustrated in the above discussion, comic offence is discursively managed. Its main focus is on the discursive strategies and practices used when asserting that comedy has offended, and it explores what these suggest about the ethical considerations of humour and comedy. In the thesis I utilise the incidences of offence caused by the humour of Private Eye magazine. Private Eye is a satirical magazine combining jokes, spoof articles, gossip and investigative journalism that has a long reputation for offending its readers and the targets of its satirical attacks. In the next chapter I discuss the origins of Private Eye magazine, describe its contents and assess the attempts made to censure Private Eye discourse. The next chapter serves to contextualise the data and analysis used in the thesis.
Chapter 3: Portrait of Private Eye: Satire, Investigative Journalism and Censure

Chapter 3

Portrait of Private Eye: Satire, Investigative Journalism and Censure

*Private Eye* is a unique and mysterious institution (McKay, 1986: 7).

It prints what other papers will not print. At a time when the British press is constantly tempted to risk less by publishing less, and is so heavily influenced by lobbies, public relations men and advertisers, *Private Eye* joins no lobby, rubbishes the PR industry and is completely independent of its advertising revenue. More important, the distorted world inhabited by its familiar cast of fictional characters makes people laugh (Marnham, 1982: 7).

It's simply gossip, innuendo and leaks. It's the diligent scraping of other people's wastepaper baskets and even more obscene receptacles (Dr David Starkey in Cunningham, 1995: 4).

Introduction

The previous chapter established the central problem to be addressed in the thesis. As an under-researched area in the current literature, there is a need for critical empirical investigation into the giving and taking of offence. Of particular importance is analysis of the strategies used to articulate that offence has been caused by comedic discourse, how the offender manages the charge of causing offence, and how humour is censured. The offence caused by a satirical magazine called *Private Eye* was chosen as case study material. *Private Eye* has a wealth of experiences of offending readers and public and private individuals that begs analysis and warrants further investigation. Some of these experiences are discussed in this chapter. *Private Eye* is occasionally used to illustrate academic discussions on humour (see Mulkay, 1988). However, *Private Eye* as an institution has received little academic attention, with the exception of Colin Seymour-Ure's analysis *'Private Eye: the politics of the Fool'* (1974) which illustrates similarities between *Private Eye* and the mediaeval court jester. Both *Private Eye* magazine and the court jester highlight the differences between 'formalities of government and the human frailty of the governors' (Wagg, 1992: 279). Comprehensive celebratory historical accounts of *Private Eye* are available elsewhere (see Bergan, 1989; Carpenter, 2000; Ingrams, 1971; Marnham, 1982; McKay, 1986; Seymour-Ure, 1974; Wagg, 1992) and biographical accounts of key members of the *Private Eye* team have also been written (see Cook, 1996; Douglas Thompson, 1997; Harry Thompson, 1994, 1997).
Therefore my intention here is not to rehearse these historical and biographical accounts, but to contextualize the data and analysis included in later chapters 5, 6 and 7. This chapter endeavours to highlight the salient features of Private Eye that are particularly relevant to the main focus of the thesis. The aims of this current chapter are threefold. Primarily it functions as a brief documentation of the origin and development of Private Eye whilst attempting to make sense of Private Eye's position in British culture and British journalism. Secondly, the chapter aims to analyse the contents of Private Eye through a consideration of the fundamental ingredients of the magazine. Finally the chapter introduces the critical responses to Private Eye and in particular the offence caused by Private Eye. Attempts made by readers and the Establishment to restrict the content and distribution of the magazine are discussed. To fulfill these aims the chapter has been split into three separate, though related sections:

1. Origins and Objectives of Private Eye
2. Contents of Private Eye and its Readers
3. A National Treasure or a National Outrage?

1. Origins and Objectives of Private Eye

Private Eye is a fortnightly magazine consisting of a complex mix of investigative journalism, spoof current affairs articles, cartoons and jokes. The first issue of Private Eye appeared on 25 October 1961. Since then, the magazine has grown from a 'scruffy yellow pamphlet' (Carpenter, 2000: 1) producing 300 copies per issue to an established institution selling 188,000 copies per issue with a readership of more than 600,000 (Bedell, 2001). In the early 1960s the Eye sold for 6 pence each and was distributed by Eye journalists to selected London coffee bars.\(^1\) Currently the Eye costs £1.20 per issue and is professionally distributed and sold at newsagents such as John Menzies and WHSmith.\(^2\) Private Eye's annual turnover in 1995 was reported to be nearly £3 million (Anthony, 1997). A group of upper and upper-middle-class young men founded Private Eye. Meeting at Shrewsbury private school in the early 1950s, where they worked on a school publication called The Salopian, the original Private Eye team included Richard Ingrams, Paul Foot, Christopher Booker and William Rushton. Ingrams and Foot continued to Oxford University where they designed and produced a university magazine called Parson's Pleasure, a prototype of

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\(^1\) The first edition of Private Eye can now fetch at least a thousand pounds a copy (Carpenter, 2000).

\(^2\) Taking advice from their legal advisers, WHSmith refused to distribute Private Eye until the mid-1980s. Unsurprisingly, WHSmug became a popular Eye target.
Private Eye. Joining other undergraduates Andrew Osmond, Peter Usborne and John Wells, Ingrams and Foot worked on another risqué university publication called Mesopotamia. On leaving Oxford they all went their separate ways, but Usborne, who was determined to start a magazine, got the team together once again. Osmond contributed £300 to the launch of the magazine and Private Eye was created. From 1964 John Wells and Barry Fantoni contributed to the magazine, as did the ‘King of Satire’, Peter Cook, who later became the magazine’s proprietor. Fantoni is the only ‘outsider’ to have penetrated the Eye, in his capacity of a Jewish-Italian born in south London. Over four decades it has had only three editors: Christopher Booker (1961-63), Richard Ingrams (1963-86) and Ian Hislop (1986-present). Other contributors to the Eye have included Craig Brown, Claud Cockburn, Nigel Dempster, Jane Ellison, Germaine Greer, Barry Humphries, John Kent, Candida Lycett-Green, Patrick Marnham, Peter McKay, Nick Newman, Gerald Scarfe, Ronald Searle, Sarah Shannon, Ralph Steadman, Bill Tidy, Auberon Waugh and Francis Wheen. Numerous members of the Private Eye team have now passed away: Peter Cook (January 1995), William Rushton (December 1996), John Wells (March 1998), Andrew Osmond (April 1999) and Auberon Waugh (January 2001). Shareholders and two directors (Ian Hislop and David Cash) own Private Eye. Lin Chong (Peter Cook’s widow) owns half of the shares, while Peter Cook’s sisters and people from the sixties, who were encouraged to support the Eye during financial difficulties (such as Jane Asher and Sir Dirk Bogarde), own the remaining shares. However shareholders are not paid dividends, any profits made by the Eye are paid to its staff.

Private Eye and the Satire Boom

The cultural origins of Private Eye have been comprehensively documented elsewhere (see Crisell, 1991; Wagg, 1992), so a summary is offered here. Private Eye was a fundamental player in what journalists have termed ‘the satire boom’, seen as a ‘short-lived phase which accustomed people to a greatly increased freedom of abusive expression’ (Marnham, 1982: 24). This explosive interest in satire was evident at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s in Britain. The satire boom included theatre performances, especially revues (Footlights, The Last Laugh and Beyond the Fringe), a satirical nightclub (The Establishment Club, opened by Peter Cook in Soho in October 1961), printed discourse (Private Eye magazine) and television programmes (That Was The Week That Was). This satire boom went on to spawn other TV shows such as Not So Much A Programme More A Way Of Life (1964), Not Only ... But Also (1965), Monty Python’s Flying
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In the early 1960s these satirical texts were innovative (Seymour-Ure, 1974). There were innovations in style: *Beyond the Fringe* moved away from the camp student revues that had gone before; *Private Eye* introduced new techniques, for example, the bubble caption used on a topical news photograph and *That Was The Week That Was* ridiculed politicians and other public figures in ways that 'had not existed in Britain within living memory' (Seymour-Ure, 1974: 240). Increased public awareness and knowledge of politics and society in general, which was fundamental to the 'satire boom', is seen as a direct consequence of specific social and economic policies and decisions made at the end of the Second World War. Changes included an increase in the standard of living with people having more leisure time, passing of the 1944 Education Act and the rise of youth culture (Crisell, 1991). The increase in leisure time facilitated an increase in 'media consumption' (especially television after the 1953 Coronation). People had greater opportunity to learn what was happening in politics, current affairs and attitudes, life-styles and tastes (in clothes and music for example). The 1944 Education Act produced critical minded people with 'an increasing skepticism, about politics and public affairs; a need to question or challenge traditional values or "the received wisdom"; a growing distrust of, even an impatience with, certain notions of authority; and a sharper awareness of social difference and divisions' (Crisell, 1991: 146).

Protégés of the Education Act were entering university in the late 1950s/early 1960s and became central figures in the revue societies at Oxford and Cambridge universities, for example the *Footlights Club*. Ex-service personnel also joined the universities in the late 1950s which 'made for a rather more worldly and cynical generation of students than had been admitted hitherto' (Crisell, 1991: 147). The critical mood and rebellion against authority and order was exacerbated in the late 1940s and early 1950s when affluent young people became a 'significant consumer group' called 'teenagers' (Crisell, 1991: 147). Teenagers were manifest in language, fashion and music - teenagers were 'hip' and 'cool', dressed as Teddy Boys and listened to rock 'n' roll. The first satirical *Footlights* revue was *The Last Laugh* (1959) including Peter Cook. *Beyond the Fringe* (1961), a show of sketches starred Cambridge undergraduates Alan Bennett, Peter Cook, Jonathan Miller and Dudley Moore. *Beyond the Fringe* ran in Edinburgh, Cambridge, Brighton, London and New York. *Beyond the Fringe* 'marked the entry of "satire" into popular...
consciousness’ (Wagg, 1992: 259). *That Was The Week That Was (TW3)* was a late night BBC TV show, presented by David Frost, that began in 1962 and ran until 1964. This was the first satirical TV programme that included sketches, songs, and monologues illustrating political events of the previous week and had 12 million viewers at its peak. *TW3* helped ‘turn satire – possibly for the first time in its history – into a genuinely popular art form’ (Crisell, 1991: 156). Together with the revues, the nightclub and the TV programme, *Private Eye* was the foundation of the ‘satire boom’.

*Private Eye* is the only vehicle for satire that has survived since the 1960s (Carpenter, 2000). *Beyond the Fringe* ran until September 1966. Towards the end of 1963 the original *Beyond the Fringe* cast had personal disagreements and Jonathan Miller resigned. Despite attempts to relaunch the show, the originality and radicalism that had been fundamental to its original success was lacking and its popularity declined. *The Establishment Club*, famous for its political cabaret with a membership of 11,000 within eight months of opening (Ingrams, 1971), went into voluntary liquidation on 23 September 1963 (due to dishonest employees, large legal fees for the Lenny Bruce controversy and bad management). *TW3* ran from 24 November 1962 to 27 April 1963, and from 28 September to 28 December 1963. Some of the *Private Eye* team worked on *TW3*. Booker was the chief scriptwriter and Rushton was one of the performers. Director General of the *BBC* at the time, Sir Hugh Greene decided to cut *TW3* from its programming in 1963. Conflicting accounts explain the demise of *TW3*. Some say it was because of the looming 1964 election and concerns about *TW3*’s ability to sustain its political content. Others say the show was axed because it challenged directly the *BBC*’s obligation to be fair and balanced, or that the cross-departmentalism (the fusion of politics and entertainment that characterised *TW3*) made it
difficult to determine who was responsible for the show. According to Grace Wyndham Goldie, *TW3* was an ‘unsuccessful and unconscious attempt to see if it was possible to work outside the conventional editorial control of the BBC yet still observe its statutory obligations’ (Crisell, 1991: 153).³ *Private Eye* has remained at the heart of Britain’s satire industry. Thompson argues that *Private Eye* has had more impact on post-war British journalism that anyone else (with the exception of press baron Rupert Murdoch) and that the magazine’s reportage:

influenced and educated the intelligent British middle class in a manner that had the rest of the quality press scurrying to catch up. More than that, it was the only humour magazine of consistent quality available in this country throughout the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties [and nineties] (1994: 284).

### Satirical Nature of *Private Eye*

Satire is one of the most original and challenging forms of humour (Higet, 1962). Deriving from the Latin word *satura*, satire means full or a mixture of different things (Higet, 1962). Satirical discourses (whether in literature, cinema, on television, in cartoons or in caricatures) have received a wealth of attention from a number of disciplines including literary criticism (Higet, 1962; Hodgart, 1969; Pollard, 1970), psychology (Gruner, 1987, 1988, 1992, 1996) and linguistics (Koch, 1967; Dane, 1980). Precise or strict definitions of satire in academic inquiries are sparse (Vulliamy, 1950; Pollard, 1970), although there is consensus regarding the basic aims and elements of satirical texts. Satire ‘aims to hurt’ (Pollard, 1970: 66) and ‘always has a victim, it always criticises’ (1970: 71). More recently Griffin maintains that satire ‘is designed to attack vice or folly. To this end it uses wit or ridicule’ (1994: 1). A common element in satirical discourse is the satirist’s abnormal sensitivity to the gap between what is and what might be:

Just as some people feel a sort of compulsion, when they see a picture hanging crooked, to walk up to it and straighten it, so the satirist feels driven to draw attention to any departure from what he believes to be the truth, or honesty, or justice. He wishes to restore balance, to correct the error; and often it must be admitted, to correct or punish the wrongdoer (Sutherland, 1962: 4).

Tony Rushton explains *Private Eye*’s satirical ambitions:

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³ For detailed documentation of the demise of *Beyond the Fringe* and *TW3* see Bergan (1989), Crisell (1991) and Thompson (1997).
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As far as satire is concerned, I've always thought that even with the Sermon on the Mount there should have been someone at the back, just putting his hand up and saying, "no I disagree". Even simply as a principle there should always be a question, someone who questions even the most perfect decisions or whatever. Even if something is completely right, or you think is right, there should always be someone who says, "Well hang on a moment, have you thought this one through?". So you have to take a very high moral stand (interview, 5th May, 1998).

Satirists cannot accept habitual assumptions, they attempt to look beneath the surface of things and are intolerant of human shortcomings. These shortcomings are exposed and are made to look ridiculous due to the satirists passionate concern for justice. Satirists are not concerned with the constitutive elements of issues themselves but people's attitudes to the issues. Satire is a socio-moral instrument involving sharp social and political observation and critical commentary. It gives meaning to facts and helps the construction of social reality. Given that aggression is the satirists prime motive (Crisell, 1987), the main aim of the satirist is to expose, deride or condemn, from which private satisfaction and pleasure is gained. Private Eye's aim is not to destroy the system, but to highlight its shortcomings by ridiculing it, so attempting to change it for the better. Although Booker maintains that Private Eye 'had no clear expectations about what they hoped to achieve' (Seymour-Ure, 1974: 247), influenced by Punch, The Spectator and The Week, Booker wanted a vehicle to express his liberalism whilst combining it with social satire. Similarly, Ingrams did not wish to destroy the system, he wanted to 'merely to laugh at it and if possible bring it into line with his own set of values' (Thompson, 1994: 48). Whatever was the accepted view or received wisdom, Private Eye was (and is still) against it. Hislop avers:

I think satirists have to know what they don't like. They have to have a view of what is being done wrong, have a view of what isn't desirable and therefore the positive comes out of that, so you have to be putting the boot into something in order to suggest that something else might be better (South Bank Show, 1991).

Paulson (1967) claims that satirical discourses judge the consequences rather than the motives or causes of issues and events, with punishment being the most extreme and the most common consequence. The satirist 'can show the consequences of folly in the punishment of the guilty, or he can show the guilty in the process of punishing, or persecuting, the innocent' (Paulson, 1967: 10-11). Private Eye is not a proactive magazine; it does not create or control events or situations.

4 Claud Cockburn, Editor of The Week, was a guest editor on Private Eye in 1963 and then became a regular columnist on the Eye.
It is a reflective and reactive magazine, responding to events that have already occurred, although via its reactive response it is attempting to establish a counter-hegemonic consciousness. Through its reactions, it is questioning and challenging the accepted view of society. *Private Eye*’s satirical attacks do not offer specific conclusions or solutions to the dimensions of society that are questioned and/or challenged. Kernan (1959) has consistently observed an absence of a ‘satiric plot’ or specific conclusions in satirical discourses. The position at the conclusion is often similar to that at the beginning of the satirical discourse. The ‘scenery and the faces may have changed out-wardly, but fundamentally we are looking at the same world, and the same fools, and the same satirist we met at the opening of the work’ (1959: 30), or the original condition has been intensified. For example a cartoon of Robert Maxwell and Neil Kinnock printed by the *Eye* (No. 616, 26.07.85) depicts Kinnock as a small dog, obeying the orders of Robert Maxwell (the ‘Master’) whose large face and voice emanates from a gramophone (see chapter 7 for analysis of the media coverage of this case, and Appendix B for background details of this libel case). Although the satirical cartoon draws attention to Maxwell’s influence on, and intervention in the activities of the Labour Party, it does not provide analysis or explanation of the situation or a conclusion to the situation. Viewers/listeners/readers have to think about the issue, topic or person referred to, because although satire will raise questions that the satirist considers fundamental, it will not provide answers (Fitzgerald, 1991). Griffin (1994) attributes this absence of conclusions or closure to the satirist’s anger. There ‘is always more for the satirist to say, further example to be supplied’ (1994: 112). The satirist’s instinct is to think of additional comments, examples or digressions of an issue, rather than providing closure or conclusions.

As we saw in chapter 2, satire and seriousness are often confused (Davies, 1996; Jaret, 1999; Mulkay, 1988; Wagg, 1996; Wilson, 1979). Therefore it is crucial that the satirist does not overestimate the interpretive abilities of the audience. Audience reactions to satirical discourse may be affected by a number of factors. These include the audiences’ political preference (Priest and Abrahams, 1970), recognition of the serious message underpinning the satirical discourse (Gruner, 1987), prior attitude (Gruner, 1988), and ratings of funniness and interestingness (Gruner, 1992, 1996). In his attempt to develop a humour formula, Russell (2000) observes that recognition of humour is related to perceptive and affective response patterns, including a relaxed mood. Dane (1980) argues that a message will be regarded as satirical if the reader constructs a world which can be directly compared to the fictitious world in the text. To recognize a text as satire the reader is
required to make a decision about the specific text and to classify it with other texts within his/her reading experience. The success of a satirical message (that it causes amusement) is dependent on the audience sharing the attitude of the satirist and attributing satirical qualities to the discourse (Dane, 1980). Other mediating forms permit variance in the audience's attitudes but such variance in a satirical setting will discredit the satirist and not the victim of satire. Satirists and satirical discourses have a unique relationship with their audience. Satire can appeal to those who are being satirised as 'audiences have always tended to come from the very section of society that is being satirised' (Carpenter, 2000: 136). If this is so, then we can presume that when the audience is positively affiliated (see Disposition Theory of Humour and Mirth referred to in chapter 2) to the target of the satirical humour, this will result in negative responses to the attempt at humour (as the analysis shows in chapter 6, this is precisely what happens through the use of pronominal displacements).

Two forms of satire exist. One form attacks stupidity and the other attacks malpractice and injustice (Carpenter, 2000). The Eye endorses both forms of satire. Both forms are concerned with the truth that underpins their attacks; 'even where the design is malicious there is always an exposure of some fact or detail or essence which is undeniably true' (Vulliamy, 1950: 12). Satire will 'distort a literal truth in order to allege a broader, moral truth against its victim, to make a general statement about his or her character or function' (Crisell, 1991: 154; emphasis in original; see Allen, 1984 for more on distortion). Satire exploits humour to make a serious point as the humour is the 'sugar coating of the moral pill' (Kernan, 1965: 9) and an emphasis on the moral mantle may be a ploy to encourage acceptance of the satirical message. Satire has escapist and cathartic functions as it attempts to laugh away the problems of society. Paulson (1967) has advanced conservative and revolutionary purposes of satire. Conservative satirists view the world in a simple manner. There is a stable social order where forces are working 'to undermine or overthrow a beautiful status quo - or perhaps the overthrow has already taken place and the satirist looks back with nostalgia to the time of order' (Paulson, 1967: 19). In contrast, a satirist employing revolutionary satire views society as over-ordered and convention-ridden. The conservative and revolutionary forms of satire both work as a corrective device or a healing mechanism for the problems of society. Regardless of the type of satire adopted (the satirist may view the world in a conservative manner in one instance and follow it by a bitter revolutionary view in the next) it remains in opposition to the values which are present, or are perceived to be present in the political and cultural process. However, O'Donoghue (1991) argues that all social
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satire has a tendency to be conservative. The success of a satirical message depends on both the author and sender understanding the norms of society. The creation of these norms is essentially a conservative exercise, which explains the Eye's close relationship to the Establishment.

**Private Eye and the Establishment**

Although the aim of *Private Eye* is to criticise the accepted and unquestioned version of events through satirical comment and investigative journalism, *Private Eye* may be regarded as part of the Establishment (or at least having an intimate relationship with the Establishment). *Private Eye* depends on the Establishment for its stories and readers whilst simultaneously targeting it through their satire and investigative journalism. Seymour-Ure argues that *Private Eye* simply 'pilloried Westminster politicians but not the Westminster system of politics. Indeed it was very much a product of the Establishment itself' (1974: 241). To criticise the Eye for its relationship with the Establishment fails to understand and appreciate the purpose of *Private Eye*:

Those who complain that it is run by a coterie of public schoolboys miss the point. You might as well take exception to the fact that the *Voice* is dominated by black people or that *Gay Times* employed homosexuals. The tradition of satire from which *Private Eye* stems is the voice of dissent from within the establishment. And when it is amusing, which is not infrequently, it is most successfully in a tone of knowing superiority (Anthony, 2000: 3).

The Eye's incestuous relationship with the Establishment is fundamental to its endeavours because it enables *Private Eye* to confidently criticise the status quo and the dominant view of the world. Knowledge of the events, issues and people that are being joked about is essential to comic success as 'an audience won't accept jokes about race, Jews, mothers-in-law from a young comedian who doesn't know what the hell he's talking about' (Manning, quoted in Margolis, 1996: 183). *Private Eye*’s lack of respect for the system is a consequence of their insider’s understanding of it (Thompson, 1994).

Explaining the importance of this relationship, Hislop notes:

Satire is usually done by people who understand what's going on, who have links to people who are doing things. That's the whole point of it. And from then on you have the information to point out what people are doing wrong (Hislop quoted in MacKenzie, 1996: 11).
Private Eye may be described as counter or subversive discourse (see Coren in Ezard, 2001: 3). Barendt et al (1997: 151) have referred to Private Eye as the ‘mature grandfather of “alternative” magazines’. In his analysis of nineteenth century artists and intellectuals contesting the dominant ideas at the time, Terdiman defines counter discourse as those ‘driven by a negative passion, to displace and annihilate a dominant depiction of the world’ (1985: 12). Counter-discourses ‘function in their form. Their object is to represent the world differently’ (1985: 149; emphasis in original). Humour is deeply counter-discursive. Private Eye is counter-discursive because it presupposes the hegemony of its other (Terdiman, 1985) and seeks to build a counter-hegemonic consciousness. Private Eye is a good example of the underground press which existed during its first decade of publication. Huxley (1998) observes that a main characteristic of the underground press evident in the 1960s was that it wrote, printed and distributed publications independently of established organizations. Offset litho machines and local distribution were fundamental features of the underground press. Private Eye was initially printed using offset litho printing and was distributed by Osmond and others driving around Chelsea and Kensington dropping them off at cafes and restaurants. However, Seymour-Ure (1974) argues that the Eye is not part of the underground press because it is not perceived as threatening by the Establishment. Seymour-Ure’s claim is challenged by the direct efforts made by the Establishment to restrict and control the content and publication of the Eye (see section 3 below).

Insiders’ attacks on the system are a unique characteristic of Private Eye, and are something which its competitors, such as Punch and Viz lack. Private Eye’s chief rival is Punch magazine, the favourite humorous magazine of the Establishment (Harry Thompson, 1997). Punch magazine may be favoured by the Establishment simply because it is not perceived as a threat. Journalists working on Punch may be perceived as ‘outsiders’, as they do not have close relationships with the Establishment. Viz magazine, established in 1979, with a current circulation of 226,869 (Benn’s Media, 2000), is a humour comic aimed at adults. Viz makes jokes at anyone’s expense and does not care who it offends and like Private Eye, is aimed at a specific audience ‘who will enjoy profanities partially because of the offence they might cause to others’ (Huxley, 1998: 283). Like Private Eye, Viz magazine is a joke about media and popular culture, including caustic parodies of the tabloid newspaper, The Sun. Unlike Private Eye, Viz magazine has managed to dodge censorship by the Establishment. Even though it prints vulgar words and cartoons, Viz is not
perceived as dangerous. Viz ‘can be seen as part of a tradition which stretches back though the Carry On films via seaside postcards to British music-hall comedians. It might gnaw at the edges of the perceptions of mainstream society but it does not try to destroy its fundamental tenets’ (Huxley, 1998: 282). This is where Private Eye and Viz differ. As is discussed in section three of this chapter, Private Eye has a wealth of experience whereby readers and the Establishment have attempted to censure Private Eye.

Other rivals to Private Eye have included Relax magazine. This was a tabloid style publication appearing at the end of 1962 using ‘bedroom type humour’—‘A PESSIMIST thinks every woman is immoral; an OPTIMIST hopes she is’ (quoted in Carpenter, 2000). Relax disappeared after a few issues. In 1967 another magazine appeared to rival Private Eye, called Oz magazine. At the time its editors argued ‘Private Eye is now an ageing sensation and too occupied with Fleet Street’ (Marnham, 1982: 116). Oz’s life was short-lived. During the longest obscenity trial, Richard Neville, the Editor of Oz, was imprisoned in the early 1970s for conspiracy to corrupt the morals of children and young people through its magazine. In June 1973 Oz went into liquidation with £20,000 outstanding debts (see Sutherland, 1982).

Other periodicals listed under the heading ‘Humour & Satire’ in Benn’s Media (2000) alongside Private Eye and Viz magazine include The Oldie and Spit comic. The Oldie and Spit comic are comparably recent publications, both were established in 1992, their circulations are 44,000 and 35,000 respectively. The Oldie includes humorous writing. However the style of writing differs from the polemical style found in Private Eye. The Oldie endorses a literary style. Former Private Eye editor, Richard Ingrams, edits the Oldie and Private Eye often includes flyers advertising the magazine offering Eye readers cheaper subscriptions to The Oldie. Thus these publications work in unison rather than in opposition. As an adult humour comic, Spit closely resembles Viz magazine rather than Private Eye. Other competitors include the Spectator. Established in 1828 this magazine provides reviews of politics, news and current affairs (with some cartoons) and is read by affluent individuals and politicians aged 55 and over (Benn’s Media, 2000). Private Eye is a unique publication as it is the only British periodical combining humour and investigative journalism. Other British publications are limited to humorous material or investigative journalism.
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2. Contents of Private Eye and its Readers

This section brings together some of the main features of the content of Private Eye and identifies 'typical' Eye readers. With a magazine as internally complex as Private Eye, description can merely give a flavour of its workings and content. Therefore this section aims to give the reader a sense of the types of target and writing found in Private Eye, capturing in essence the style of Eye discourse.

As mentioned above, when they first appeared during the satire boom, satirical texts were considered innovative. Like TW3 with cameras being seen on screen, Private Eye was (and is still) shabby in appearance. Early editions were produced on the floor of Willie Rushton's bedroom, using 'letrasets' for headlines and printed by cheap offset-lithography on low-cost yellow paper. Even today it is produced on dull off-white paper and maintains the cut and pasted persona (although since May 1998 the front cover has been printed in colour). The Eye has always been (and continues to be) published fortnightly. In the 1960s even this was unusual, as British magazines were published either weekly or monthly (Seymour-Ure, 1974).

The Eye is a topical magazine and given its satirical nature it provides representations and critical commentary on existing issues central to human experience, including politics, women and sex (Pollard, 1970; Vulliamy, 1950). Its content is based on contemporary issues, news stories and events that have occurred in the recent past.

A Magazine of Two Halves

Like its satirical counterparts (especially TW3) the content of Private Eye is a fusion of politics and entertainment. Its themes fall into 2 categories: the contemporary scene (politics, individual politicians, the church, education, royal family, class, welfare state) and media/popular culture (newspapers, magazines, advertisements, music and television programmes). These two themes are treated in two distinct manners. Private Eye may be considered as two separate magazines in one media product, or consisting of two halves. One 'is composed of what is supposed to be jokes, political satire, humour of one kind or another, and the other half of stories. It exposes gossip, reporting' (Ingrams, quoted in Haines and Donnelly, 1986: 66). Private Eye treats the
contemporary scene and media/popular culture in both a satirical manner and in an investigative/exposure way. Both satirical and investigative journalism attempts to get behind the facades and highlight the differences or deficiencies between appearance and reality. In my interview with Hislop, he explains 'they are both basically doing the same job which is questioning the official version. Either doing it with jokes or doing it with facts ... you can use both the satire and the journalism as a two-pronged attack' (7th September, 1998). This combination of satire and investigative journalism is another *Eye* innovation. There have been many magazines that have attempted jokes and lots of magazines including political coverage, but no other magazine has fused them together in the same package (Tony Rushton, interview, 5th May, 1998). Since its early issues, the numbers and types of targets have grown. Supermodels, pop stars, football celebrities and anyone involved in topical news stories have joined 'traditional' *Eye* targets (politicians and the royal family). There is a journalistic incest in the *Eye*. Much of its content is about hacks and their profession. There are spoofs and parodies of the whole genre of newspapers, magazines, journalism and television, with 'a skill often equal to the originals' (Seymour-Ure, 1974: 264).

Most of the magazine has remained the same since conception, although it has grown in size, from 6 pages in No. 1 (25.10.61) to 36 in No. 924 (16.04.99). The front cover of *Private Eye* has remained much the same since the first edition. Although there have been slight alterations to the masthead, the logo has remained constant. Appearing in the top left-hand corner, this is a mediaeval crusader taken from Lord Beaverbrook's *Daily Express*, although on the *Eye* his sword is bent. For the first Christmas edition, Peter Cook suggested the use of a comic-book word balloon or speech bubble on the front cover coming from the mouth of personalities, politicians or public figures involved in a topical news event. The content of the speech bubble is acerbic and the style has remained the same. But what is now the centre of the magazine (jokes, spoofs, cartoons and parodies) used to be the whole of the magazine. In 1966 the *Eye* began to adopt the shape of combining jokes and information which has been sustained ever since (Ingrams, 1971: 20).

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6 The logo was drawn by William Rushton and first appeared in *Mesopotamia*. The crusader resembled John Wells. To a *Mesopotamia* reader the crusader is Wells playing an innocent and naïve Oxford fresher (Marnham, 1982).
Private Eye journalists are diverse politically and the magazine has seldom ‘explicitly endorsed a political cause’ (Wagg, 1992: 263). Eye journalists are against the Establishment regardless of the political party they subscribe to. The Eye’s neutral political stance ‘validates its campaigning journalism, so that it is taken seriously in a way that the Socialist Worker could never be’ (Thompson, 1994: 212). Booker was associated with the Liberal Party in the early 1960s. Ingrams has always described himself as ‘lefty’ (Marnham, 1982) but voted Conservative in 1979, 1983 and 1987, abstained in 1992, and voted Liberal Democrat in 1997 (Carpenter, 2000). Hislop has only ever voted for the Liberal Democrats or the Green Party (Coles, 1995). Paul Foot is an extreme left-winger and a member of the Socialist Workers’ Party whereas Auberon Waugh was an extreme right-wing country gentleman, a ‘maverick of the far right’ (Wagg, 1992), while unnamed contributors have included Tory MPs. In addition to their common social backgrounds and friendship, these diverse political interests and characters are united in their ‘shared belief in the culpability of public figures … They divide into those who want to rebuild the world and those who want to laugh at it’ (Wagg, 1992: 264; emphasis in original; see also Marnham, 1982). Tony Rushton clearly explains the Eye’s relationship with politics:

we are beyond politics, we are not associated with any particular party. We tend to be in opposition to government in quote marks because no government will ever come up to our expectations. I mean the satirist has a view of a perfect world I suppose where there is high morality, however you would describe morality. I don’t think it necessarily has to be Christian, but there is a morality of right and wrong which no government seems to be able to fulfill really (interview, 5th May, 1998).

Private Eye may be called a ‘seriocomic’ as it runs fact, rumour and fantasy together. The combination of fact and fiction enables Private Eye to go further in what it says than the mainstream press. Jokes have always been essential Eye ingredients that bind the magazine. The importance of the jokes is observed by McKay: ‘few of its major attacks on public figures would ever have been supported, or succeeded, if they had not been accompanied by a barrage of witticisms, irony and farce’ (1986: 45). The royal family has, and continues to be, a popular Eye target. For example, a cartoon strip called Liz portrays the royal family as a rough working class northern family. Extracts from a spoof romantic novel called Prince of Sighs have been regular features in which royal family members are mimicked as the love-stricken characters. Mimicry is an essential satirical technique in which the satirist recognises the unconscious behaviour of the

7 This diversity in political opinion was also expressed by Christopher Booker in my interview with him (22nd April, 1999).

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victim. It is a vital satiric tool as it is an ‘invasion of privacy, in that it destroys every man’s private conviction that he is unique and inimitable’ (Hodgart, 1969: 121). The success of the mimicry is dependent on the satirist’s ability to create a likeness, so the audience recognises the target, while simultaneously distorting the likeness, in order to exaggerate the victim’s actions.

The *Eye* renders Prime Ministers pathetic and risible through comments made of their personal characteristics. In the column *St Albion Parish News*, Tony Blair is portrayed as synonymous with a vicar – for his self-righteous manner and attempts to ingratiate himself. John Major (when Prime Minister) was depicted in *The Secret Diary of John Major aged 47 ¾* as a train spotter unaware of the backstabbing and manipulation going on around him. During her time as Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher’s husband, Denis leaked government secrets in a series of letters called *Dear Bill*. Harold Wilson, Edward Heath, Harold Macmillan and Sir Alec Douglas Home have also been popular *Eye* targets. These examples reflect a favoured *Eye* technique. Accentuating the stupidity and incompetence of politicians and other prominent figures in British society intimates that they are no cleverer that the average person. In my (SL) interview with Barry Fantoni (BF) he explains why Prime Ministers are treated in this way:

BF: We don’t make jokes about Tony Blair, we create something. You have to recreate the form, that’s what satire does.
SL: Yes.
BF: It puts a new form on things. When you look historically at satire it isn’t saying “Cor, Tony Blair, what a cunt”.
SL: No.
BF: It’s finding a system, so Tony Blair becomes a vicar.
SL: Yes.
BF: You recreate the person in a sense that ridicules them. I mean as far as I know Ben Elton has never done that. Rory Bremner doesn’t do it, he simply imitates the voice. We have given Thatcher, Major and Blair new personas. Totally new personas. The mask, that’s what it means in Latin. The persona means a mask (interview, 4th July, 1998).

By distorting the image of the Prime Minister Tony Blair into a vicar, *Eye* journalists are employing a ‘legitimate technique’ (Crisell, 1991: 154; see also Nilsen, 1988). Distortion can include exaggerating the person’s physical features (as with caricatures) or their demeanour and the ‘test of the assertion is quite simply whether the audience finds the caricature amusing, because their amusement is a sign of recognition’ (Crisell, 1991: 154). Linked to distortion is another satirical technique, that of reduction which involves ‘degradation or devaluation of the victim by
reducing his stature and dignity’ (Hodgart, 1969: 115). Reduction may be achieved through ‘relative size’ or the removal of status, such as the removal of clothes. Attributes from the animal world are drawn upon especially in visual satire, such as caricature and cartoons, where human action and ambition is reduced to instinct qualities. Occasionally the object of satire is reduced even further to the vegetable or mineral. For example on the front of the Eye, No. 970 (19.02.99), a genetically modified Tony Blair, made from various vegetables (including mushrooms, onions, courgettes, chillies and aubergines) is displayed, saying ‘There is absolutely no danger at all’. This example illustrates how the satirist appeals to simple logic and common sense by reducing issues, concepts, events, individuals and groups to simple terms. Direct dangers of genetically modified food to health and appearance are referred to here, whereas wider and more complicated social, economic, ethical and philosophical issues related to the genetically modified food debate are not considered. Private Eye may be criticised as idealising people, events and society at large and holding a rather simplistic view of the world. Midgely, observes that publications like the Eye regard public figures as ‘black if they are not pure white, whereas we know very well that most people and most movements are parti-coloured, brownish or piebald. If we treat people who are leading a movement with respect, that does not have to mean that we are taken in and believe them to be perfect’ (1998: 42).

Through its jokes, parodies and spoofs, Private Eye criticises the mainstream press. Private Eye takes delight in misprints, Fleet Street journalese and sub-editor’s clichés. Again, in the words of Barry Fantoni:

Our function from the very beginning has actually been to attack newspapers. What most of us feel most resentment against is not only what Tony Blair does or what the Queen does or whatever, but it’s the way in which it is reported. And this is what we are on about. We are about style and projection of news through newspapers and through the news media. Because it has become the lingua franca of people’s life and the way in which people feel about being informed (interview, 4th July, 1998).

An example of such attacks can be seen in Eye No. 729 (24.11.89: 18). On the 20th Anniversary of the Sun newspaper, Private Eye’s poet, E.J. Thribb dedicated a poem to the Sun, which ended with the lines “There’s more fun in the Sun.” That is your catch phrase. Unfortunately, like everything

8 Although the Vietnamese government facilitates criticism of corruption through allowing publication of satirical magazines, Vietnamese satirical publications, such as Tuoi Tre Cui (Youth Laugh), are forbidden to liken any political leader to an animal (Keenan, 1997).
else in the Sun, this is not true’, which parodies the journalistic techniques of exaggerating and/or fabricating the truth. Other journalistic practices are parodied throughout Private Eye. For example stories often end ‘contd. on p. 94’. There never is page 94 and therefore the journalistic convention of ending stories in a particular manner is satirically attacked. Fictional characters that spout social and political comments scatter the Eye. Columnist Glenda Slagg has also been a prominent player in the magazine. Slagg is based on Jean Rook (a Fleet Street columnist) who had a reputation for naming celebrities and then praising or criticising them for an unidentifiable reason. Other parodies include the Gnome column. Lord Gnome is the proprietor of Private Eye who first appeared in Eye No. 4, and bears resemblance to Lord Beaverbrook (Lord Gnome has other business interests and has diversified into commercial radio and TV and insurance among other sectors). Always appearing at the front of the Eye, the Lord Gnome column offers comment and analysis on current prominent news stories which are expended upon in later articles and/or cartoons. It is a spoof of leader columns frequently found in tabloid and broadsheet newspapers. Leaders report on issues and events regarded disgraceful or appalling by the newspaper. This column is an excellent example of a favoured Eye technique, which highlights and attributes self-interest motives to its targets, often drawing on the hypocrisy of its targets. In its Media to Blame issue (No. 932, 05.09.97) published after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, the hypocrisy of the press was referred to in the Gnome column (entitled The Late Princess Diana: An Apology). Lord Gnome refers to the shift in the media’s perception and representation of Diana. Before her death Lord Gnome notes that newspapers conveyed her as neurotic and involved in ‘love-romps’ with Dodi Fayed. Immediately after her death she was named the Princess of Hearts, a saint and a charitable individual. The column ends: ‘We would like to express our sincere and deepest hypocrisy to all our readers on this tragic day and hope and pray they will carry on buying our paper notwithstanding’. Highlighting the hypocrisy of newspaper owners and editors implies that they are motivated by immoral causes and considerations.

Other prominent comments on the press include columns written by the fictional character Lunchtime O’Booze. This is the Eye’s chief reporter, who first appeared in Eye No. 7 and whose name changes according to the situation. For example Lunchtime O’Booze becomes Lunchtime O’Boulez when reporting on the musical world. The Guardian newspaper is referred to as The Grauniad because of its frequent misprints. The Eye also prints contradictions, double entendres and printing errors from newspapers and magazines. For example in No. 932 (05.09.97: 7) under
the title JUST FANCY THAT! are printed two headlines from different broadsheet newspapers both printed on 15th August 1997. One reads ‘Boys take the honours in record A-level passes’ (The Times) and the other reads ‘Girls top of the class at A-levels’ (The Daily Telegraph). The Colour Section, printed at the front of the Eye, was started when The Observer launched its own Colour magazine. The Eye’s Colour Section has never been printed in colour, it has remained black and white. True Stories (by Christopher Logue) retells stories published elsewhere in the press that are almost beyond belief. To take one example ‘After careful consideration the judge of a children's painting contest awarded the first prize to a canvas that showed “freshness and an uninhibited quality” the winner turned out to be a five-year-old Orangutan’ (No. 246, 21.05.71: 9). A similar column is now compiled by Victor Lewis-Smith called Funny Old World.

When the Eye prints that someone was/is involved with ‘Uganda discussions’, this implies sexual intercourse. This is taken from an incident where, when referring to a Ugandan official who was found in bed with a woman journalist, a spokesperson maintained that he was holding discussions about his home country (Carpenter, 2000). The Eye uses nicknames when referring to politicians and other prominent figures. For example, Sir Alec Douglas-Home was called Ballie Vass (due to a newspaper mixing his photograph with Vass, a Local Government official), Harold Wilson is always called Wislon, Larry Lamb (ex-editor of the Sun) was called Sir Tit and Bum and Dr Roger Scruton (Tory philopsher who wrote a book on sex) was called Dr Roger Scrotum.9 The last two examples, along with others (such as Lord Gnome referring to his ‘organ’) illustrate the dirty language and imagery used by the Eye. Through its use of words not normally heard in polite society, the Eye directly challenges moral and sexual taboos (see also chapter 6 for a discussion on Eye readers’ use of dirty language in letters written to the editor, when articulating offence has been taken by Private Eye discourse).

The Eye has established a reputation for hard-hitting investigative and campaign journalism, written by journalists such as Paul Foot (for example in his Footnotes section at the back of the magazine). The founders of Private Eye had always intended it to be publication of information as well as jokes (Ingrams, 1971). Once Private Eye has hold of a story, it will run with it issue after issue whereas the mainstream press have one attempt at a story and then drop it (McKay, 1986). As a result of its investigative journalism, Private Eye readers were kept informed of the biggest

9 See McKay (1986) for a glossary of Gnomespeak/Eyespeak.
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scandal of the 1960s – The Profumo Affair - during which circulation of the Eye reached 85,000 (Bergan, 1989). Private Eye readers were the first to read the names of the Kray Brothers in 1964, first to learn of Israeli links with the Mafia, and the first to hear about the Payola Scandal in 1971 where disk-jockeys were paid to play certain records. The Eye was the first publication to print stories about the safety negligence that led to the collapse of the Ronan Point tower block in East London, the first publication to print information about the Jeremy Thorpe affair (Liberal Leader) who was accused of conspiracy to kill his (alleged) lover Norman Scott, and Eye readers were the first to learn about the Poulson scandal involving widespread bribery in the Conservative party in the North of England (an Eye campaign led to the resignation of Home Secretary Reginald Maudling in 1970). Due to these big scoops, Liberal leader Jo Grimand reported that Private Eye was becoming more accurate than the Fleet Street papers (Thompson, 1994). Private Eye campaigns against injustice for both public and private individuals and groups. Readers’ letters are often printed praising and congratulating Private Eye on their successful campaigns. Taking one example, No. 312 (30.11.73: 9) includes a letter written by Stephen Murphy (father of Patrick Murphy) thanking the Eye for its campaign to reverse his son’s conviction of murder due to insufficient evidence. The campaign began in the Footnotes column in Eye No. 246 in an article titled Murder: Mathew’s Gospel. Support from Eye readers, many of whom signed a petition for Patrick Murphy that was sent to the Home Secretary, amplified the success of this campaign.

However, as investigative or campaign journalism exposes ‘alleged misconduct and rights reputed wrongs’ (Protess et al, 1991: 3), and often involves ‘uncovering something somebody wants to keep secret’ (Green, quoted in Protess et al, 1991: 5) it has frequently caused offence and provoked outrage. Like the aim of satire, the investigative journalism in the Eye upholds a reformist image of the press as it aims to improve society by highlighting its shortcomings. It also adheres to the social responsibility function of the press by ‘pursuing public enlightenment and to upholding standards of civic morality’ (Protess et al, 1991: 13). Investigative journalism can hurt and upset both its target and other readers. Targets of investigative journalism frequently strike back using the law of defamation in order to rebuild reputation and to suppress future stories (see section 3 below and chapter 7). Despite these legal threats of defamation, the Eye ‘behaves editorially in a way that seems to ignore or defy what most branches of the media see as the restrictive nature of the British libel regime’ (Barendt et al, 1997: 152).
Like the satirical columns, the investigative journalism columns in the *Eye* highlight discrepancies between appearance/performance and reality. *Eye* columns *HP Sauce* and *Rotten Boroughs* expose government corruption and inefficiency and the *Street of Shame* column uncovers the workings of what used to be Fleet Street. Corruption, negligence and incompetence in other professions are included in other columns such as *Doing the Rounds* (medical profession), *Media News* (media profession), *Down on the Farm* (agriculture) and *Signal Failures* (transport). These columns are designed to appeal to middle-class professions. *In the City* column written by *Slicker* enquires into the affairs of important companies. Michael Gillard left *The Express* to write the *Slicker* column because its proprietor at the time, Sir Max Aitken, ‘received complaints from powerful business friends that Gillard was actually daring to do his job’ (McKay, 1986: 122). Equally, from the early 1970s to mid-1980s Nigel Dempster wrote the gossip column *Grovel* (name is taken from Charles Greville's column in *The Daily Mail*) that printed information about the rich, famous and fashionable. Information was picked up first hand as he was part of the world he wrote about. He used to be a stockbroker and married to the nobility (Carpenter, 2000). Dempster provided *Private Eye* with information that his employees at *The Daily Express* and *The Daily Mail* would not print. These examples clearly define *Private Eye*’s role as an avenue for which journalists can print stories that, due to editorial control or commercial interest, are not suitable for print in the mainstream press. When considering mainstream journalists, Ingrams retorts that in ‘some cases these journalists are little better than PR men for the organizations they report. It follows that several stories are never fully reported. There are other pressures on journalists which spring from the fact that the press has become part of the Establishment’ (1971: 21). This is the main advantage of a publication like *Private Eye*, it is completely independent of proprietor power and control. In the words of Paul Foot:

The chief obstacle to investigative journalism in our newspapers and television has been the centralization of commercial power and editorial control. The proprietors have become more powerful and ruthless. Their editors, necks cricked from constantly glancing upwards, their judgement poisoned by years of what the *Eye* calls arslikham, have become far more constipated, far less trusting of their colleagues, far more reluctant to delegate editorial power. The unions have almost all gone. Increasingly, sources are betrayed and opinions flaunted in space that should be taken up with reports and facts (1999: 89).

For Paul Foot writing for the *Eye* is:
amazingly liberating. There isn’t any sense of responsibility and this means that you can write with extraordinary freedom. I still have that feeling when I write for it occasionally today. There is no one on your back. You aren’t out to impress the boss ... It is very good for a writer to know before he starts that nobody is going to bugger it around (quoted in Marnham, 1982: 131).

Advertisements and Readers

Ninety percent of the *Eye’s* income comes from trade sales and subscriptions and 10% from advertising (Marnham, 1982). This is an *Eye* tradition initiated by Ingrams. Other magazines generate up to 60% of their income through advertising, which consequently often influences the editorial policy (Thompson, 1994). From the *Eye’s* view ‘advertising revenue is merely the cream on the top. It also has obvious editorial advantages’ (Marnham, 1982: 177-178). Limiting the amount of advertising printed in the *Eye* maintains its independence and protects it from external influences as market forces do not dictate the content of the magazine. Genuine advertisements first appeared in the *Eye* in issue 4 and were distinguished from jokes by a heavy black border. *Private Eye* now carries both display and small-classified lineage advertisements. Display advertising is positioned on the first 2 or 3 pages, promoting products such as wine, whisky, banking services, credit cards, the Open University, books, films and datelines. Smaller boxed advertisements for companies selling holidays, gifts and entertainment are placed at the back of the magazine in the *SpecialEYES* sections. Classified lineage advertisements appear adjacent to these under the heading *Private Eye Smalls*. Readers usually place *Private Eye Smalls*. They are extremely varied and often entertaining, ranging from advertisements for pregnancy testing services to back numbers of *Private Eye*, and fart machines sales to personal advertisements.

As with other humour magazines, such as *Viz* comic, without knowledge and awareness of the target, readers of *Private Eye* cannot appreciate the humour underlying the cartoon, article, advertisement and so on. Jokes are only half-formed if the audience has limited knowledge of the target(s). *Benn’s Media* (2000) defines *Private Eye* readers as A and B professionals and the *Willings Press Guide* regards *Private Eye’s* target audience as ‘Men interested in news behind the scenes’ (1999: 832). These are however restricted classifications. Ingrams (1971) observes that after six months of the start of the magazine, subscribers ranged from Lady Violet Bonham Carter to inmates of H.M. Prisons. When I asked Ian Hislop who he regarded as an average *Eye* reader he responded:
I've no idea, I mean as far as I can see they range from about 13 to 83, they're men and women. They do on the whole tend to be well educated and have a healthy interest in what's going on in the world. It's not a paper for morons. It's not a Sun reader's second read (interview, 7th September, 1998).

A reasonable education is essential in order to understand the Eye and to follow the (sometimes) long Eye campaigns: 'I mean we expect readers to read between the lines. Reading between the lines is very important. And that's why I say the reader has to be equipped, he [sic] has to read the papers, has to follow comment in all the media to understand what's going on' (Tony Rushton, interview, 5th May, 1998).

Further, anecdotal evidence suggests that Private Eye has gained wide acceptance among different age and social groups. As McKay recalls 'cartoonist Michael Heath said he saw a group of young hooligans fighting over a copy, one saying: "Gimme back me comic!" [and] a book about the London police in 1986 recorded that members of a Special Patrol Group amused themselves by reading Private Eye' (McKay, 1986: 155). Eye columns (particularly the investigative columns) have become required reading for some professions. For example the Eye's Slicker column is required reading in the City (Wagg, 1992). The Police, people working for the Bank of England and the Security Exchange Commission in Washington read the Eye (Marnham, 1982). Despite this wide audience, it appears that the Eye is a publication that readers (especially those belonging to the Establishment) do not admit reading. This may be due to them not wishing to be associated with discourse that is critical of and attacks the Establishment. Marnham cites a National Westminster Bank spokesperson who reports 'Nobody here wants to admit they read the bloody thing, but of course they all do. We get several copies in the bank's name' (1982: 137). Equally a Bank of England official declares that the Eye 'is a sort of awkwardish subject around here, but yes, we do read it' (Marnham, 1982: 137). Some contributors to Private Eye use pseudonyms to protect their identity. When John Wells first began working on the Eye whilst still working at Eton, he used a pseudonym Campbell Murdoch (Campbell being his middle name).

Eye readers contribute to the fabric of the magazine in a number of important ways. In addition to placing advertisements in the Private Eye Smalls section at the back of the magazine (as mentioned above), the Letters Page is another section of the Eye allowing readers to dictate the content of the magazine, albeit limited control due to editorial manipulation (see chapter 5). Readers contribute
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to ongoing campaigns by proffering information and/or highlighting discrepancies in the Eye's reporting, letters are written praising the magazine (both it satirical and investigative articles), and letters are printed expressing that the reader has been mortally offended by the content of Private Eye. It is the latter type of letter that the thesis is particularly interested in (see chapters 5 and 6 for analysis of these letters). The Eye seems to have an extraordinary relationship with its readers. Although many readers are offended by its contents (see section 3 below and chapters 5, 6, and 7), the Eye has depended heavily on financial support and encouragement from its readers when faced with large libel costs and damages. These reader appeals are ploys 'which no conventional newspaper or magazine would have dared try on its readers' (McKay, 1986: 47). Reader appeals include the 'Ballsoff-Fund' (to help with legal costs for the Nora Beloff libel case in the early 1970s, raising £1282.75), the 'Goldenballs-Fund' (reader appeal to finance the libel case brought by James Goldsmith in the mid-1970s, raising £40,000), and the 'Ripper-balls Fund/Banana-balls Fund' (for financial assistance for Sonia Sutcliffe libel case in 1989, raising over £100,000). These emergency funds provide moral as well as financial support, because contributors to the appeals have their names printed in the Eye. Reader offers frequent the pages of Private Eye, for example a limited numbers of free tickets to see recordings of Have I Got News For You are regularly made available to readers. Reader competitions are run at regular intervals, such as Win a Weekend For Two In Paris for the best valentine message printed in the Eye. Reader competitions have not always been genuine. Seymour-Ure (1974) avers that in 1961 the competitions (and prizes) were bogus, although they became genuine in 1971.

3. A National Treasure or a National Outrage?¹⁰

The cultural influence of Private Eye has been phenomenal. Although not read in every household, it has become a household name (McKay, 1986). Private Eye has grown from simply a fortnightly publication to a mass media product. Although excoriating capitalism, the Eye is a 'shining example of successful private enterprise' (McKay, 1986: 10). Contributors to Private Eye have become media personalities, particularly Ian Hislop. Ian Hislop is a team captain on BBC TV's satirical quiz programme Have I Got News For You?, has presented the TV series Canterbury Tales (Channel 4, Autumn 1999), has appeared on Later 100 With Jools Holland (BBC 2, 24th April 1999).

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2000), and Open University (BBC 2, 3rd June 2000) and presented the Radio 2 programme called The Hislop Vote (Winter 2000). Together with Eye cartoonist Nick Newman, Hislop writes material for comedians Harry Enfield and Dawn French. Ian Hislop is also invited to speak at academic conferences such as the Language, the Media and International Communication Conference (Oxford, March 2001) and is seen as a credible news source. On the death of George Carman QC (January 2001), Ian Hislop gave an assessment of Carman’s work on libel and his personality (see Rumbelow 2001 in The Times and Dyer 2001 in The Guardian). The possible closure of the Eye after the death of its proprietor (Peter Cook), the celebration of the Eye’s 1000th issue, its recent 40th Birthday and the deaths of prominent Eye members are considered as newsworthy as natural disasters, wars, and political issues. Equally, Private Eye columns have been developed into stage performances. Mrs Wilson’s Diary was developed into a play performed at the Theatre Royal Stratford East in 1967 and Anyone For Denis appeared on the stage in 1981. The comic strip The Adventures of Barry McKenzie was made into a film and November 1998 saw the first Private Eye column St Albion Parish News, turned into a television series called Sermon From St Albion’s on ITV. This is in addition to Private Eye mugs, pens, badges, Christmas cards, books, cassettes and records that have been produced since its conception. The Eye now has its own web page (see www.private-eye.co.uk).

The Eye’s contribution to British journalism is formally recognized in the awards given to the magazine. In 1969 Granada Television awarded Private Eye a special award called ‘Irritant of the Year’. This was for its campaigning and exclusive stories that often formed the basis of newspaper stories. In 1973 Paul Foot was named ‘Journalist of the Year’ for his work on the Eye over the previous 6 years. In the early 1970s Christopher Booker and Candida Lycett Green jointly won ‘Campaigning Journalists of the Year’ and in the mid-1980s Private Eye was named ‘Magazine of the Year’. The Eye is viewed as a valuable contributor to political and social debate. It often prints what other newspapers cannot, or will not print, providing ‘a home for the more scurrilous stories Fleet Street journalists cannot get past their sub-editors’ (Hartley, 1995: 136). This is of fundamental importance in contemporary media, given its growing proprietor control and power. Seymour-Ure (1974) sees the Eye fulfilling a safety valve function. It is a venue through which journalists, politicians, whistleblowers are ensured fair representation as the Eye is independent and is not controlled by commercial or proprietor interests, thus making the limitations of a restrictive

11 Have I Got News For You? has been described as the ‘most successful current satire related show on British
system more tolerable. Tony Rushton explains that the Eye can diffuse other pressures in contemporary British journalism. Manipulation of media content by public relations and spin-doctors that characterizes much of contemporary journalism is challenged by the Eye:

I think with the growth of the public relations business and spin-doctoring it is very important that Private Eye is around because the spin-doctors are very effective at creating public opinion and atmosphere and it takes Private Eye to actually part the curtain they have drawn and to try and get to the truth of the situation (interview, 5th May, 1998).

Private Eye also prints stories that the mainstream press cannot print, because of limited resources (time and money). When working for mainstream newspapers, Francis Wheen (1999) found that the types of stories printed were limited in nature and content. For example, when attempting to print stories about the late Robert Maxwell, Wheen was met with hostility because of the potential threat that Maxwell may sue which would cost time and money. So the stories were not printed. Porter reflects the same restriction:

Editors have rarely been a courageous lot and it is probably true to say that in the nineties they have been even less willing to take on big libel cases or go against public opinion on matters of principle. Again, this is largely due to the commercial aims of newspaper managements, which feel uneasy when a campaign or a libel defence inconveniences the life of a paper (1999: 44).

As many members of the Private Eye team have, from early 1962, worked for the mainstream press, this exacerbates the contribution of the Eye to British journalism. Writing about satirists in the late 1700s, Wardroper observes ‘[t]he best proof of the importance of the satirist is that men in high places employed them’ (1973: 11). They guest-edited the ‘Atticus’ column in The Sunday Times and a page to Queen magazine (Carpenter, 2000). Also they have contributed to the Spectator. Booker now writes for The Sunday Telegraph, Wheen has written for many newspapers including The Independent, The Independent on Sunday, The Daily Mirror, The Observer and The Guardian, Ingrams has written for The Observer, Paul Foot has contributed to The Daily Mirror, The Guardian and The Socialist Worker, and Hislop has written for The Sunday Telegraph. Some commentators, such as former Scallywag editor Simon Reagan (2000), question the connection of Private Eye (an anti-Establishment organ) with newspapers such as The Sunday Telegraph and The Independent (Establishment organs). As noted earlier, such comments misconstrue the complex television’ (Wagg, 1996: 339).
internal operations of publications like *Private Eye* – they are so successful at highlighting corruption and scandal primarily because they have firsthand experience and are written by those with knowledge of the systems that they criticise. The mainstream press have also adopted some journalistic techniques and investigative stories pioneered by the *Eye* team. Booker complains about the relentless punning in newspaper headlines which was a feature introduced in the *Eye* (Carpenter, 2000). In 1972 *The Guardian* lifted (without acknowledgement) an article on the Rio Tinto Zinc Company, the 'plagiarism being proven by the inclusion of mistakes' (Marnham, 1982: 186).

Those who Love the *Eye*

As illustrated in chapter 2, the success of humour depends on the structure of the joke, the relationship between the instigator of the joke and the audience and the occasion on which attempts at humour are made (Palmer, 1994). Humour interpretation is highly subjective and what one person finds funny, another may find offensive (Duchaj, 1999; Kuipers, 2000; La Fave et al, 1976; Smeltzer and Leap, 1988; Zillman and Cantor, 1972). *Private Eye* as a publication, and the contributors to *Private Eye* have always received disparate and diverging responses. Given its critical and attacking nature, it is unsurprising that *Private Eye* has received varied acclaim and criticism. As Kernan reports, every 'major writer of satire has been praised by some critics for his fearless determination to tell the truth about his world and damned by others for a twisted, unstable, prurient liar' (1959: 4). Some observers make positive comments. For example Grove notes that life would be 'very boring without it' (1996: 17), and John Brown (owner of *Viz* comic) avers that 'nobody dishes the dirt better than the incumbent *Eye* crew' (Cunningham, 1995: 4). Robert Maxwell (a popular *Eye* target; see chapter 7) referred to the *Eye* as 'a phenomenon of our age' (1986: 14) while an anonymous reporter in *The Guardian* described the *Eye* as 'the nation's wittiest satire sheet with a campaigning anti-government sword always lose in its scabbard' (1995: 16). Cunningham argues the *Eye* has:

enriched our national stock of humour; it's revealing in the way it functions with the quasi-official support of what used to be called the Establishment, and celebrates sheer British zaniness; what's more, when its jowls start to quiver with rage, it gets up and roots out corruption (1995: 4).
Further Marnham (1982: 185) recounts that Tom Hopkinson regards the Eye ‘by far the most original and effective magazine launched in Britain since the war’. In the Beveridge Memorial lecture, Jo Grimond (then recently retired as leader of the Liberal party) said ‘One of the most curious features of the press today is that you have to see Private Eye. There you will find stories, sometimes of importance, mentioned nowhere else, and on the whole more accurately reported than in at least the so-called “popular” press’ (Marnham, 1982: 185). Thompson regards the Eye as ‘one of the most highly successful, massively influential cheaply-produced rags this country has ever seen’ (1994: 187). There are some Eye targets that regard an appearance in the magazine as positive. As McKay observes some targets ‘wear their scars with pride’ and to be attacked by the Eye is ‘to have finally arrived on the vaudeville stage that it has created out of British life’ (McKay, 1986: 131-132).\(^\text{12}\)

**Those who Hate and Censure the Eye**

Other commentators are rather more critical and derogatory of the Eye. Paula Yates famously referred to Ian Hislop as ‘the Sperm of the Devil’ (McFerran, 1998: 46) whilst The Guardian’s Polly Toynbee called Booker and Ingrams ‘crusty country-living upper-class eccentrics’ (2001: 23). Derek Jameson (former newspaper editor) referred to Private Eye as ‘the rubbish dump for those stories that Fleet Street can’t use for one reason or another’ (Thompson, 1994: 205). Even its own journalists criticise the Eye for its attacks on particular people. For example, Christopher Booker reflects on a case where a friend of his became an Eye target:

> There was a period in the seventies in particular when I did get terrifically worked up about the nastiness of Private Eye and its ability to print things that were totally untrue and very damaging about people ... I did actually leave the magazine for a while and that's when I wrote that article in 1976 saying that it was perhaps the nastiest thing in British journalism (South Bank Show, 1991).

Some readers enjoy reading the Eye because of the offence it may cause to others (Huxley, 1998). Judge Skinner has remarked, that the Eye is a ‘high-risk publication. That is why it exists. If it is no longer prepared to take risks, it cannot justifiably claim to be a serious publication’ (McKay, 1986: 71; see also Bezanson et al, 1987). These risks that are fundamental to a satirical magazine can have severe consequences. As Private Eye’s primary aim is to be abusive and to question the

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\(^\text{12}\) Equally politicians considered an appearance on the TV programme *Spitting Image* a career milestone.
official verdict through its satirical attacks and investigative journalism, it is understandable that it has been criticised and strategies have been adopted to control and prevent its circulation. According to McKay, 'people by and large do not read Private Eye because they see it as a last repository of truth; they read it because it strays over the border of what is permissible and tasteful in its attempts to peer beneath the public face of the rich and famous' (1986: 160-161). Varied attempts by both the Establishment and readers have been made to restrict and control the content and distribution of Private Eye. Strategies include self-censorship, market censorship (newsagents refusing to sell the Eye, specific issues being banned from sale), readers cancelling subscriptions or criticising the Eye through letters written to the editor of the Eye, and media law (law of defamation).

Self-censorship is evident in the Eye: 'occasionally, very occasionally you have to think should I do this sort of joke. Should you censor yourself' (Nick Newman, interview, 8th September 1998). Self-censorship occurred with The Adventures of Barry McKenzie comic-strip. In March 1974, Ingrams refused to publish the strip as it included explicit scenes of lesbianism. The last installment of the Australian living in London appeared in the Eye on 22nd February 1974 (No. 318). Private Eye has frequently experienced market censorship where there have been deliberate decisions to not stock Private Eye. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, WHSmith refused to sell Private Eye until the mid-1980s. Even when selling Private Eye, strategic attempts are made to restrict the type of customer who buys the magazine as WHSmith used to (and still do) insist that Private Eye should be placed on the top shelf, so children could not see it. This is a good example of the family being used as a censorial excuse. Cloonan observes that the family has also been used when censuring contentious popular music. To take one example, the NWA's album Just Don't Bite was banned by Woolworths because it was definitely 'not the kind of thing' they 'would dream of stocking' in their family stores (Cloonan, 1996: 68).

Private Eye was banned by the Australian government in the early 1960s as the comic strip The Adventures of Barry McKenzie (about an Australian living in Earl's Court) was seen as degrading to Australia's image (Harry Thompson, 1997). A further eight issues produced in 1966 up to March were banned by Australian customs. This was for 'undue emphasis on sex, violence, crime and horror' (Marnham, 1982: 173). In October of 1966, Issue 124 was banned in South Africa.

(Wagg, 1996).
The Cape Town Post reported that the main reason for the ban was the cover. This showed four African men in traditional dress jubilantly jumping into the air with a sarcastic caption. The Publications Control Board described it as ‘vicious and repulsive filth’ (Marnham, 1982: 173). Recent controversy was caused by Private Eye’s coverage of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales (No. 932, 05.09.97). Coverage of the death of Princess Diana was probably the most critical piece Hislop has written. WHSmith banned the sale of the issue from its outlets. As noted above, this issue referred to the hypocrisy of the press turning from describing Diana as silly and neurotic to the queen of hearts and the people’s princess. The front page and cartoons in this edition ridiculed the paparazzi and the high prices paid by the press for photographs. Hislop recounts ‘we had a huge supportive mailbag, which reminded me why we’re here – to question the official verdict, to tell the truth smilingly’ (McFerran, 1998: 46). In 1967 the play version of Mrs Wilson’s Diary was censured by Mrs Mary Wilson herself, the Foreign Secretary (George Brown), the Chancellor the Exchequer (James Callaghan), Mrs Callaghan and Colonel George Wigg (Wilson’s confidant). Eight passages of the play were cut (Travis, 2000), such as those ridiculing the royal family’s drinking habits.

Most complaints are sent in the first instance to editors, columnists and producers. One of the popular avenues through which the Eye is informed that it has caused offence is through the letters column (Wilson, 1996). Through the letters column incidences of comic offence ‘are generally resolved by the editor, which is exactly what should happen’ (Morrish, 1996: 226). Letters can be used to restrict the content and circulation of Private Eye. The topics referred to in the letters of complaint are often unpredictable: ‘I think we are constantly surprised at some of the letters we get. They are from people who say “How could you say that about Christ or something?”. And you think what are they doing reading the magazine’ (Tony Rushton, interview, 5th May, 1998). Readers’ letters expressing that offence has been taken from the Eye forms the basis of the analysis in chapters 5 and 6. As discussed in chapter 5, readers cancel their subscriptions, claim they will not read Private Eye again, or ask for an apology from Private Eye in order to seek redress from the offence caused. Readers letters are a rich source of information for the Eye journalists: ‘You are quite right in a way to pick on letters, it is interesting because you can actually see where the readers are coming from and you can see the extent to which the readers pick up’ (Christopher Booker, interview, 22nd April, 1999). Private Eye advertises and often celebrates complaints made against the magazine through readers’ letters. Recently in the Eye No. 970 (19.02.99: 15) a league
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table was printed under the heading ‘This issue’s cancelled subscriptions’. The table records the number of cancelled subscriptions resulting from causing offence to (ex)readers. Chapter 5 expands on the strategies employed by Private Eye when responding to written accusations that offence has been caused by their publication.

Although many readers acknowledge that they have taken offence from the Eye and seek redress for this offence through writing letters to the editor, some readers use formal legal processes to express their offence taken from the Eye. However, given the large expenses involved in libel litigation and the unavailability of legal aid for such cases, only the powerful and privileged can afford to sue the Eye for damages to their reputation (see chapter 7). Redress for the offence caused by Private Eye is sought through the courts, suing the magazine for defamation, which can (and often does) lead to large financial damages being awarded to the plaintiff (see chapter 7 for details of the Eye’s libel litigation history). In the early days Private Eye benefited from its reputation of running on a shoestring budget, incapable of paying out large libel damages. Even so, Ingrams (1971) reports that in the first 10 years of publication the Eye was sued 50 times and had paid out nearly £50,000. By 1982 the Eye had received over 2000 writs (Thompson, 1994). The chart compiled (see Appendix A) and used in chapter 7 of this thesis documents all libel cases brought against Private Eye as reported in the press between 1961-1999, which totals 90. Given the Eye’s extensive libel experience, its own libel lawyer notes that Ian Hislop is ‘probably the best non-qualified libel lawyer there is’ (Kevin Bays, interview, 2nd December, 1998). Analysis of the strategies used by the press to articulate the offence caused by Private Eye forms that basis of chapter 7. It is this long libel litigation record that probably keeps the Eye in private ownership. The Eye has had victories in addition to its many defeats. In the early 1970s Lord Goodman wrote to Richard
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Ingrams on behalf of Mr Arkell (retail credit manager of Granada TV) who had been accused of corruption. Lord Goodman wrote 'His attitude to damages will be governed by the nature of your reply'. Ingrams replied 'The nature of our reply is as follows: fuck off'. Mr Arkell was not heard from again (Thompson, 1994: 219). To take another example, three ex-policemen dropped their claim for libel in 1968, which the Eye regarded as a 'moral victory [that] was of considerable importance' (Marnham, 1982: 106). When the Eye is involved with a legal case for libel its popularity with readers grows. After Randolph Churchill had sued Private Eye for libel (see chapter 7 and Appendix B for details of this libel case), the print order was increased (McKay, 1986). Despite the wealth of litigation experience and the (often) large amounts paid in damages and costs Private Eye has survived (largely due to its supportive readers; see discussion above in section 2). The Eye celebrates its libel litigation experience. For example, on the front cover of its 10th anniversary issue (No. 257, 22.10.71), names of individuals who had sued the magazine between 1961 and 1971 were listed on a weathered memorial. The memorial was entitled THEY DID NOT SUE IN VAIN, and parodied war memorials. Other magazines and comics have not survived bad publicity and the imposing of media restraints. Oink, a humour comic ceased publication in 1988 due to declining sales and distribution problems (like Private Eye, Oink was banished to the top shelf by WHSmith). A mother took Oink to the Press Council arguing that the strip Janine and John and the Parachute 'mocked family values'. Oink was found to be in bad taste but not guilty of the charge (Huxley, 1998). Due to this bad publicity and failing sales Oink could not survive.

Summary

In this chapter I have explored the rise and development of Private Eye magazine and discussed its prominent features and contents. I have considered the contributions the Eye makes to British culture and British journalism and finished the chapter by discussing the diverse reactions given to the Eye by the Establishment, Eye readers and Eye targets. Although Private Eye has been in circulation since 1961, media analysts have largely ignored it. The thesis redresses this imbalance and firmly places Private Eye on the academic map. In section 1 of this chapter I illustrated how the origins of the magazine were personal, small scale and regional. The Eye was at the epicentre

13 Oink, began in 1986 and was produced in Manchester by Mark Rodgers, Tony Husband and Patrick Gallagher (Huxley, 1998). Further details see Huxley (1998).
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of the abusive and critical forms of expression that contributed to the ‘satire boom’ of the early 1960s. Changing social, political and economic climates facilitated this interest in subversive discourse. *Private Eye* is the only media product to have survived the satire boom. In the process it has become a national institution.

In section 2 I illustrated how the *Eye* campaigns for justice and a better world by targeting the contemporary scene (Prime Ministers, other politicians, the royal family, pop stars and sportspersons) and media culture (newspapers, magazines, music and television programmes). Through a combination of satire and investigative journalism, the *Eye* highlights inconsistencies between image and reality. To this end the *Eye* ridicules the pomposity and smugness of the rich, famous and powerful, (by emphasizing their stupidity, incompetence and hypocrisy). The *Eye* challenges moral and sexual taboos through dirty language and imagery.

Finally in section 3 of this chapter I have illustrated how the *Eye* receives varied reactions. Many journalists and readers find the *Eye* bold and exciting, and perceive it as having a crucial role to play in an age when Fleet Street (as it used to be called) has become ‘something of a sausage factory – owned by conglomerates, run by marketing men and producing a diet of safe and often uniform material, all too frequently about minor television personalities’ (McKay, 1986: 109). Some praise the *Eye*’s recklessness and power, whereas others are repelled by it and live in fear of being mentioned in one of its columns. Given its aim to be deliberately critical, it is unsurprising that the magazine has caused offence and controversy amongst newsagents, the Establishment, governments, *Eye* readers and *Eye* targets. They have attempted to silence the *Eye*, to restrict its circulation, to punish it and to seek redress for the offence caused.

These frequent incidences of offence caused by *Private Eye* are pertinent data for exploring discursive practices of comic offence and comic censure. Using readers’ letters that are printed in the magazine claiming that the magazine has caused offence, along with cases of defamation brought against the *Eye* (as reported in the press), we can explore how comic offence is publicly articulated, how *Private Eye* responds to the charge of causing offence, how the ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victims’ of the offence are constructed by the press and the discursive strategies employed when censuring humour. Focusing on the narrative and rhetorical strategies readers and journalists use to convey offence and censure comedy enables us to learn more about the ‘language games’ readers
and journalists play, and the discourse conventions or constitutive rules which provide an avenue for describing and interpreting the external world. Some of the expressions of offence in the readers' letters and libel cases analysed in chapter 5, 6 and 7 are instigated by what may be considered more serious discourses. However, these incidences of offence (supposedly caused by serious discourse) can contribute to our discussions of comic offence as all Private Eye discourse, whether satirical or investigative, is always embedded in satire and a satirical vantage. Humour scholar Don Nilsen observes that a discourse can be referred to as satire if it includes distortion, a negative tone and a posture of attack. Humour is not a necessary condition for satire. The more serious investigative pieces printed in the Eye can sometimes have an element of humour embedded in them. When describing the contents of the Eye, Barry Fantoni observes that it begins with:

eight, nine or ten pages of non-satirical material. It may contain the odd joke, it may even be within the very loosest confines bound up with what we call satire in that it is attacking people, attempting to make them feel small, belittling them, hurting them and wounding them in some kind of way, which after all is the point of satire (interview, 4th July, 1998).

Its combination of humour and investigative journalism is used as a 'discursive weapon' (Erickson, 1988: 199) or a 'two-pronged attack' to contest and rebel against unchallenged and unquestioned dominant views of society. The hybrid nature of Private Eye makes it particularly relevant to the topics of the thesis. The very conjunction of humour and investigative journalism confounds normative boundaries between 'serious' and 'comic' discourse and challenges the assumptions, values and attitudes which supports the orthodox division between them. It is this conjunction of conventionally opposed orders of discourse which makes Private Eye such an excellent site for focusing analytically on comedy, offensiveness and moral censure.

I will be returning to many of the issues I have covered above in later chapters. In the next chapter I introduce the methods and procedures used in this thesis. I consider the traditional dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative research methods that exists in the social sciences and I critically advocate multi-method research designs. In addition to examining the connections between methodological and epistemological issues, I consider the importance of appropriateness and viability in selecting research methods. I explain the data collection and analysis procedures used in the thesis and reflexively consider their strengths and weaknesses.
Chapter 4

Making a Case for Multi-Method Research

I have been struck both by the small amount of literature on combining methods and the relatively few studies which have adopted the strategy. (Even fewer researchers have written about it.) This seems to me a pity since, as far from inducing theoretical eclecticism, a multi-method strategy can have quite the opposite effect. Indeed it can serve as an exercise in clarification: in particular it can help to clarify the formulation of the research problem and the most appropriate ways in which problems or aspects of problems may be theorised and studied (Brannen, 1992: 32).

It is perhaps not surprising that those calling for multi-method approaches should find such low take-up at the level of research practice. The social sciences in effect remain stuck in a rut from which they appear largely unable to escape (McLaughlin, 1991: 295).

I am convinced that awareness of the advantages of integrating quantitative and qualitative research will be so overwhelming that the doctrinaire and restrictive views of writers who deprecate the virtues and accomplishments of combined research will be gradually eroded (Bryman, 1992: 75).

Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed the origins and development of the satirical magazine Private Eye. I assessed its reputation, illustrated the ways in which it causes offence and the ways in which authorities, the law and its readers have attempted to control or restrict the content of Private Eye. This chapter sets the context for the methods of data collection and analysis used in the thesis. In this chapter I do two things. First, I explain the traditional distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research methods used in social research which acts as a platform for addressing the issues surrounding mixed-method approaches. Secondly, I describe the material and procedures used in the thesis and the rationale for using such an eclectic range of data sources (readers' letters, letters pages, newspaper articles and interviews) and outline the modes of data analysis (quantitative content analysis, semiotic composition analysis, linguistic discourse analysis, symbolic cultural analysis and linguistic textual analysis). I do not provide an exhaustive overview of the research methods employed as this has been rehearsed elsewhere (for example, Deacon et al, 1999; Gilbert, 1994; Hakim, 1987), but I discuss their essential components to my research design. Given that it is ‘always good research practice to take a critical view of the analytical methodology’ (Deacon et al, 1999: 179), I address some of the strengths and weakness of the methods of data
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collection and data analysis employed. I have not included a separate section dealing with methodological issues; I address these throughout the chapter where appropriate. Instead of asking questions about whether specific data collection methods and analysis are ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, I consider the costs and benefits of gathering and analysing the data in the ways used in this thesis. The theme running throughout the chapter is that no research method is inferior or superior to another, but simply the choice of method depends on the nature of the questions asked and the issues under investigation (Deacon et al, 1999). The chapter falls into 3 main sections:

Part 1: The Quantitative/Qualitative Divide and Multi-Method Research
Part 2: Data Collection Procedures
Part 3: Data Analysis Procedures

Part 1: The Quantitative/Qualitative Divide and Multi-Method Research

Research methods used in media research conveniently fall into two categories: quantitative and qualitative methods.¹ Since the mid-19th century, research methodology literature has been dominated by a debate about quantitative and qualitative research in some shape or form (Hammersley, 1992a; Smith and Heshusius, 1986). Traditionally, a gap is perceived between quantitative and qualitative research as these differing approaches are characterised by different paradigms (Brannen, 1992; Creswell, 1994). These distinct paradigms differ in relation to the production of knowledge and the research process.² Quantitative research methods (such as social surveys, experimental design, secondary analysis, structured observation, content analysis, opinion polls and market research) are broadly based on a positivist paradigm (influenced by sociologists such as Comte, Durkheim, Spencer and Parsons, and more recently Stinchcombe). Assumptions underpinning quantitative methods include the view that the research must be objective, subjective biases should be eradicated via the principle of value neutrality, aspects of the social world are seen as objective phenomena, scientific knowledge consists of universal laws, quantitative measurement and statistical analysis may be applied to categories and explanations are considered in causal terms (Hammersley, 1995). Qualitative research methods (encompassing participant observation,

¹ Alternative terms for quantitative include positivist, experimental, functionalist, inquiry from the outside, objective or empiricist. Others terms for qualitative include constructionist, naturalistic, interpretative, inquiry from the inside, subjective, postpositivist or postmodern, ethnography.
² Paradigm assumptions include ontological assumptions (nature of reality), epistemological assumptions (relationship of the researcher to the researched), axiological assumptions (role of values), rhetorical assumptions (language of research) and methodological assumptions (process of research) (Creswell, 1994).
unstructured interviews, ethnomethodology, group discussions, life history and case studies) emphasise the social meanings, definitions and constructions which determine individual actions, and therefore incorporate an interpretive approach to analysis (favoured by sociologists such as Weber, Goffman and Garfinkel).

Paradigm differences relate to the way(s) in which quantitative and qualitative researchers treat data, the method(s) of data collection employed, the use of enumerative induction or analytic induction processes and the differences in generalisability and extrapolation (Brannen, 1992; see also Creswell, 1994; Firestone, 1987). One of the fundamental distinctions made between quantitative and qualitative approaches is the way in which they treat data. Based on a positivist philosophy (which assumes there are social facts with objective realities), quantitative researchers are occupied by isolating and defining variables and categories which are linked together to create hypotheses (usually created before the data collection and tested upon the data). Qualitative researchers, influenced by the phenomenological paradigm (which views reality as socially constructed) start with general concepts, which will often change as the research progresses in an attempt to understand the social world from participants’ perspectives. The ‘qualitative researcher is said to look through a wide lens, searching for patterns of inter-relationships between a previously unspecified set of concepts, while the quantitative researcher looks through a narrow lens at a specified set of variables’ (Brannen, 1992: 4). A further distinction between the two approaches is based on the methods employed when collecting data. Qualitative researchers ‘use themselves as the instrument’ and attend to both their own assumptions and to the data. Flexibility and reflexivity in the method is important. In contrast, the quantitative researcher uses a ‘predetermined instrument’ that is ‘finely tuned’, thus disallowing for flexibility and reflexivity (Brannen, 1992: 5). Quantitative research is usually based on the process of enumerative induction. Establishing the incidence and frequency of concepts and categories forms the basis of research, which facilitates the making of inferences regarding relationships between variables of a sample population and the parent population. The qualitative researcher prioritises concepts and categories due to a commitment to analytic induction.
Chapter 4: Making a Case for Multi-Method Research

Multi-Method Research

Traditionally, researchers have been loyal to one or other paradigm, with each approach holding the other in contempt and feeling unfairly criticised by the other (Reichardt and Rallis, 1994). However, there has been a shift towards combining methods which gained prominence during the 1970s (Mason, 1996) and continues today (see Bryman, 1988; Creswell, 1994; Deacon et al, 1999). Discontent with the dichotomous divide in methodological approaches, some researchers have challenged the simple divide (Hammersley, 1992a; McLaughlin, 1991), and have encouraged us to combine or integrate quantitative and qualitative methods, although Smith and Heshusius (1986) have challenged such advances. Combining or integrating research methods is referred to as ‘triangulation’ (a term coined by Webb et al 1966), ‘mixed-methods’ or ‘multi-methods’ (Brannen, 1992; Bryman, 1988; Creswell, 1994; Deacon et al, 1999; Erzberger and Prein, 1997; Firestone, 1987; Hammersley, 1992a; McLaughlin, 1991; McKendrick, 1999; Reichardt and Rallis, 1994). Multi-method research has replaced the older term ‘triangulation’. Multi-method research is that which uses a diverse range of methods of data collection and analysis in completing a research problem (Creswell, 1994). The ethos underpinning multi-method research is that researchers should be flexible and select a range of methods that are appropriate to the research questions (Burgess, 1984). Multi-method research can be achieved by incorporating multi-methods (both within- and between-methods), multiple investigators, multiple data sets and multiple theories (Brannen, 1992). This thesis employs multi-method research through the use of multiple data sets (readers’ letters, letters pages, newspaper articles and interviews), multiple methods of analysis (quantitative content analysis, semiotic composition analysis, linguistic discourse analysis, symbolic cultural analysis and linguistic textual analysis), and multiple theories (drawing on cultural analysis, humour theory and media theory). Multi-methods are possible because it is believed that quantitative and qualitative research methods are not rooted in their epistemological positions, ‘the two approaches to research can have and do have an independence for their epistemological beginnings’ (Bryman, 1992: 59). This destabilises the quantitative/qualitative dichotomy.

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3 Triangulation was originally based on the notion that the validity of research findings will be enhanced if more than one method of data collection is adopted — called ‘multiple operationism’ (Bryman, 1992: 63). Findings from quantitative and qualitative approaches can be checked against each other as they are susceptible to different types of threats to validity.
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Pioneers of the mixed-method approach include Campbell and Fisk, who in 1959 used more than one method when investigating psychological traits (see Creswell, 1994), although Erzberger and Prein (1997) cite that the sociologist, Le Play, used mixed methodological studies in 19th century France. The multi-method discussion was instigated by the idea that different research methodologies are characterised by specific strengths and weaknesses, and by combining quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis these weaknesses could be surmounted (Erzberger and Prein, 1997; see also Bryman, 1992; Deacon et al, 1999). In media research the two methods have been combined, for example, Scollon (1998) combined content analysis with ethnography and discourse analysis in his study of television and press news. Despite humour being too rich, too complex and too dynamic to be confined to one form of data collection or analysis, multi-method research in humour studies is a neglected area. Humour scholar Michael Mulkay suggests that humour is particularly suited to a multi-method design: ‘indeed, no single discipline can cope adequately with humour ... I assume that we have more to gain than lose by approaching this largely uncharted territory in a spirit of tolerant, yet rigorous, eclecticism’ (1988: 3). As Ussher observes ‘embracing intellectual eclecticism and methodological pluralism we can only increase our understanding’ (Ussher, 1999: 46) of the nature of humour, including comic offence, which is surely what humour studies is about.

A number of researchers (sociologists, feminists and social constructionists) have highlighted the importance of choosing the most appropriate method(s) to address the particular research problem in hand and to answer research questions (Allen and Barber, 1992; Brannen, 1992; Bryman, 1992; Hammersley, 1992a; Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992; Ussher, 1999), rather than being derived from commitment to specific methodological or philosophical traditions. Henwood and Pidgeon note that ‘methods are not so much valid in themselves, but rather will be more or less useful for particular research purposes’ (1992: 100). The research methods adopted therefore should suit the problem under investigation rather than altering the problem to accommodate a research method. Research methods should be seen as a tool serving the research rather than driving it. Each method employed provides a different view of the topic scrutinised (Allen and Barber, 1992), providing various views of the bigger picture in different ways (Deacon et al, 1998, 1999; Erzberger and Prein, 1997; McKendrick, 1999). As Ussher argues (via a jigsaw metaphor), ‘it is only when we put the different pieces of the jigsaw together that we see a broader picture and gain some insight into the complexity’ of the research topic (1999: 43; see also Bryman, 1988; Erzberger and Prien,
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1997). Multi-methods can encourage inventive usage of familiar research methods and lead to the uncovering of unexpected lines of discovery (Jankowski and Wester, 1991; see also Bryman, 1988; Brannen, 1992; Creswell, 1994; Deacon et al, 1999). More importantly, multi-method research can contribute to a 'more encompassing perspective on specific analyses' or provide 'thick description' (Jankowski and Wester, 1991: 63) and can 'flesh out reports providing quantitative data with illustrative examples and quotations on typical, minority or deviant cases' (Hakim, 1987: 28; see also Deacon et al, 1999). When quantitative and qualitative approaches are used in combination, 'the resulting analysis is invariably stronger' (Deacon et al, 1999: 134).

Controversy surrounds the conditions that determine the feasibility of the multi-method approach (Brannen, 1992). Proponents of multi-method research fall into 2 distinct camps: Integrationists and Complementarists. Complementary approaches to multi-method research view that 'each approach is used in relation to a different research problem or different aspect of a research problem' (Brannen, 1992: 12; emphases added; see also Hammersley, 1996). Those supporting the integration model combine different research methods to examine 'the same research problem and [to enhance] aims concerning the validity of the conclusions that could be reached about the data' (Brannen, 1992: 13; emphasis added; see also Denzin, 1970). For those proposing the complementary approach, different data sets produced by different methods are not regarded as consistent, but complementary - this is based on the assumption that no methodological tradition can perceive reality per se, only certain aspects of reality, which should (and have to be) put together. Acknowledging that data are constituted by the very methods used to generate them, I adopt this complementary approach in the thesis. Following Brannen's view I reject the criticism of multi-method research as being simply eclecticism:

In so far as data are treated as objective phenomena which unproblematically reflect the "real" world, researchers will tend to pile up research findings in an additive way. Triangulation when it is used according to this formation is simply eclecticism. If, on the other hand, data are considered in close relation to the questions and theories which generate them, researchers will adapt the method most appropriate to these. In this case data sets cannot simply be linked together unproblematically but need to be treated as complementary (1992: 14).

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4 McKendrick (1999) argues however that the view that some methods should not be combined (such as fieldwork, surveys and experiments) tightly restricts the range of multi-method design possibilities.
The call for multi-research methods has identified and described commonalities in the design and method(s) of the two approaches. Scholars have argued that the gap between the two different approaches has been exaggerated, that their differences have been amplified and that the methods are actually rather similar. Both approaches have been charged with being atheoretical and data-driven (Brannen, 1992; Hammersley, 1985, 1992a, 1996; Rock, 1973). The traditional distinctions between the two approaches may be over-estimated because quantitative research does not always test hypotheses, and sometimes its goal is description (Brannen, 1992). Further, Reichardt and Cook (1979) observe that quantitative researchers using opinion poll research methods often immerse themselves in the study (traditionally regarded as a feature of qualitative research). Yin (1994) draws a number of comparisons between qualitative and quantitative methods at the point of research dissemination; both approaches thoroughly investigate all relevant evidence in relation to the study, both approaches are aware of and test pre-existing (rival) hypotheses, and both consider the wider social and political implications of their research findings. Hammersley (1992a, 1996) directs us to a number of ways in which the quantitative and qualitative divide is rather blurred, highlighting that ethnographers often make use of quantitative claims (albeit in verbal form – ‘regularly’, ‘often’, ‘typically’), and that ‘all research involves both deduction and induction ... in all research we move from ideas to data as well as from data to idea’ (1992a: 48). Equally, Bryman (1992) observes that structured interviews (traditionally linked to quantitative research) often include open-ended questions that generate qualitative data. So, ‘there is no necessary link between choice of method and logic of enquiry, types of influence and sampling strategy’ (Brannen, 1992: 10). Therefore, the two methods may be more similar than traditionally thought.

The multi-method debate has led to a vigorous ‘paradigm war’ (Smith, 1994) which questions whether paradigms should be related (or linked) to research methods and whether or not the use of a particular method means that a specific epistemological position is held (Brannen, 1992; Bryman, 1988; Creswell, 1994). Discussion questions the intimate relationship between epistemology and method (Brannen, 1992; Bryman, 1988) - if a researcher adopts a deductive stance, should he/she always use quantitative data collection techniques such as surveys and experiments, or if an

5 Bryman (1992) however has observed that quasi-quantification does not provide an example of integration of the two approaches. The use of words such as ‘often’ or ‘most’ is simply a way of summarising qualitative data and should not be interpreted as the qualitative researcher analysing data in the manner adopted by quantitative researchers.
inductive stance is adopted, must qualitative methods be used such as observations and interviews? (Creswell, 1994).

Proponents of the incompatibility of the two paradigms include Guba and Lincoln (1989). Their incompatibility thesis is based on the view that paradigms differ in relation to the fallibility of knowledge, arguing that the qualitative paradigm regards knowledge as undergoing continual review and revision, whereas for the quantitative researcher knowledge is definitive. They distinguish between the two approaches based on their view of the nature of reality; unlike the quantitative paradigm, the qualitative paradigm regards reality as constructed by people. However, Reichardt and Rallis (1994) emphasise the compatibility of the two paradigms. They argue that both paradigms acknowledge that knowledge is subject to continual review and refinement (fallibility of knowledge). They argue that the nature of reality can be discussed at a number of levels. If it is taken to mean that there are no external referents to people's understanding of reality, then the paradigms are incompatible (as quantitative researchers maintain a realist assumption of reality). However, if the nature of reality is taken to mean that one's understanding of reality is constructed, Reichardt and Rallis (1994) claim that this is a view shared by both qualitative and quantitative researchers. Equally, if the construction of reality is taken to mean that people's actions can influence the world to shape in ways they wish, then both quantitative and qualitative researchers subscribe to this view (Reichardt and Rallis, 1994). Finally, interpretation of the nature of reality is sometimes taken to mean that people are in complete control of physical reality, that people can change lead to gold on a whim (Reichardt and Rallis, 1994). Most quantitative and qualitative researchers do not accept this view.

Linking paradigms to methods encourages researchers to adopt one approach or another, to the detriment of combining methods. As discussed above, usually in methodological literature quantitative methods are linked to positivist epistemology and qualitative methods to interpretative epistemology. Bryman (1988) argues that although this 'bracketing together' is good advice to researchers in theory, in practice research methods are selected on the basis of numerous technical considerations. The practice of social research is subject to constraints which are not simply directly related to theory (Bryman, 1988), but to the 'unavoidable social context' (Brannen, 1992: 17). Decisions to combine methods (or not) are made on a number of considerations including: the funding contexts and financial resources, the skills of the researcher(s), the social organisation and
the political perspectives of the researcher(s) (Bryman, 1984, 1988; see also Creswell, 1994; Hammersley, 1992a). Henwood and Pidgeon (1992) advise that we do not overestimate the significance of the epistemological divide.

McKendrick’s (1999) central thesis in his article on research methodology is that epistemological positions may determine how methods can be used, but they do not prohibit the use of particular methods. The potential for using different methods within different research traditions is much greater than often assumed. Although careful not to claim that all research methods are equal, he illustrates that for each research tradition, some methods may be more useful and are preferred more than others, but that any research tradition can use different methods of data collection and analysis. Therefore positivists can use surveys/questionnaires, interviews and fieldwork, but surveys/questionnaires will prove to be the most useful. Bryman (1984) observes that some researchers, such as Willer and Willer, have located participant observation in the same epistemological position as social surveys, which he attributes to personal preferences derived from training (see also Hendrick, 1994). The discussion above suggests that the paradigms are more inclusive when considering them on the basis of research design and methods. It is easier to conceive the combining of the two approaches when viewed on the basis of design and method than epistemological differences.

Problematising Multi-Method Research

I do not wish to propose that multi-method research is straightforward and that it can swiftly resolve long-standing disagreements in the methodological literature. The central dichotomy in research methods is obdurate and the shift to multi-method designs brings with it new concerns of a philosophical and practical nature.

Despite the potential of multi-methods for ‘reconstructing the way we think about methodological and theoretical dichotomies’ (McLaughlin, 1991: 292), some would argue that the dichotomy is so deeply entrenched in social research that reconstruction of research methodology will be difficult, if not impossible. This entrenchment is not related to the incompatible theories and methods but the features of academic discourse in general. McLaughlin (1991) argues that the mode of academic discourse structures and restrains the way(s) in which we can think about research methodology (see also Hammersley, 1992a). Despite the infinite number of ways of looking at the
world, we reduce most phenomena to binary oppositions, such as subjective:objective or inductive:deductive, and these become 'translated into a fundamental split within social sciences' (McLaughlin, 1991: 295), affecting how we perceive methodological issues. Therefore the nature of academic discourse provides a bigger barrier to dissolving the methodological divide than simply encouraging mixed-method studies. Further, Bryman (1988) concludes that the dichotomy in methodological literature reflects academic convention (established in the 1960s) more so than conflicting epistemological positions. Further, supporters of either the multi-method view or the paradigm view equally reinforce the perception that social science methods can be assigned to two categories (Hammersley, 1996). So entrenched is the dichotomy that even proponents of the multi-method approach (including myself) continue to refer to the 2 different approaches.

Hammersley provides a way of dealing with this persistent dichotomy, which warrants quoting at length:

> What is required, then, in my view, is a methodologically aware eclecticism in which the full range of options is kept in mind, in terms of both methods and philosophical assumptions. The practical character of research decisions should be recognized, but this must not lead us to ignore the methodological problems and debates that are involved. And while, for the moment at least, we cannot do without the distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches, we must remember that it is a poor methodological guide for doing research in the human sciences (1996: 174).

Referring to the calls for cooperation between quantitative and qualitative approaches as 'nasty and unjustified', Smith and Heshusius (1986: 4) argue that they close down the (important) debate about the nature of reality, how access can be gained to that reality and how we extend our knowledge. However, as Brannen (1992) argues in the quote used in the introduction to this chapter, when employing multi-method designs, the researcher considers (and clarifies) the most appropriate ways in which to approach the research problem, faces the tensions between different theoretical perspectives and establishes relationships between the data produced by the different methods employed (see House, 1994). Rather than closing down the debate about quantitative and qualitative positions, the multi-method approach extends, challenges and opens up the debate. Multi-method research takes us into new territory, whilst appreciating and respecting existing methodological debates, and thus relieving the fears of those who consider that the shift to multi-methods will lead to us forgetting unresolved methodological and theoretical problems in social science research (Hammersley, 1996; Smith and Heshusius, 1986).
Chapter 4: Making a Case for Multi-Method Research

Few guidelines exist for employing a multi-method approach. The body of methodology texts dealing with the existence of two conflicting paradigms is substantially larger than the literature that advises the multi-method researcher (Brannen, 1992; Sieber, 1973). As Bryman (1988: 155) observes, there are few ‘rules of thumb for dealing with research strategies that combine the two research traditions’, and when the methodological literature refers to multi-method designs, there is a tendency to refer to examples where different approaches have been incorporated into one research project, rather than explaining how these can be conducted. Given that the ‘practice of research is a messy and untidy business’ (Brannen, 1992: 3), and that multi-method designs are largely uncharted territory (Creswell, 1994), the multi-method researcher is disadvantaged in the sense that advice and guidance regarding how to go about multi-method research from the literature is limited. To finish on a practical note, some studies employing the multi-method approach can be both expensive (Bryman, 1988) and time-consuming (Creswell, 1994).

In the thesis I take up the challenge of conducting a multi-method study and therefore contribute an important, yet rarely adopted form of research design. A combination of data sources is used (readers’ letters, letters pages, newspaper articles and interviews) and a range of data analysis techniques are employed throughout the thesis (quantitative content analysis, semiotic composition analysis, linguistic discourse analysis, symbolic cultural analysis and linguistic textual analysis). I now discuss the different methods of data collection and analysis used in the thesis. I adopt the view that there are no superior research designs or methods. The most important issue for me is the appropriateness of the design and method for the research questions. In the following section I describe the range of data sources used in the thesis, and I outline the reasons for using them.

Part 2: Data Collection Procedures

The main sources of data used in the thesis are primary documents (Altheide, 1996). Documents have received increasing attention in social research and it is thought they should be given due weight and proper attention (Atkinson and Coffey, 1997; see also Altheide, 1996; Macdonald and Tipton, 1993). The documentary data used in the thesis include readers’ letters, letters pages and newspaper articles.
Letters

Chapters 5 and 6 are based on data derived from a longitudinal survey of the letters page of *Private Eye*. The data were collected from *Private Eye* editions January 29, 1971, number 238 to April 16, 1999, number 974 inclusive. As 'the bigger a content sample is, the better' (Deacon et al., 1999: 120), every issue between January 1971 and April 1999 was consulted. The letters derived from a population of 715 issues, spanning a 28-year period. The data set excludes *Private Eye* editions July 30 1971, number 251, January 12 1973, number 289, January 19 1979, number 446, January 31 1992, number 786 and December 29 1995, number 888. From the 715 issues consulted, 479 readers' letters were collected. The authors of the letters expressed that they had been offended by the *Private Eye* discourse. Letters included in the sample overtly show that the reader did not appreciate the serious and/or non-serious discourse or take issue with the content of *Private Eye*. I referred to the tone and content of the letter to determine inclusion and exclusion of letters. Letters complaining that *Private Eye* had misreported an event or that a story was incomplete or inaccurate were included in the sample if this had offended the reader in some way. I do not mean to imply that 'offence' only occurs when explicitly labelled as such or always expressed in written format (as I will show in chapter 6, explicitly stating 'I was offended by ...' rarely occurs). Therefore the tone of letters determined inclusion/exclusion in the data set rather than specifically using the word 'offence' or 'offended'. A number of letters received by the editor are not published and it may have been interesting to analyse the discursive features of such letters. Unfortunately access was denied to unpublished letters, so only letters publicly available in *Private Eye* were used in the analysis, which reflects the aims of the thesis as a whole: to explore the articulation of comic offence and the practices of comic censure in media discourse. The whole page on which the selected letter of complaint appeared was photocopied ready for analysis.

Newspaper Articles

Information regarding the *Eye*’s experience of libel litigation was sought from (the printed referring system) *The Times Index.*° Searches for press reports of libel cases brought against *Private Eye*

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were conducted under the headings 'Defamation', 'Libel', 'Press', 'Pressdram' (Private Eye's publishers), and 'Private Eye'. All years from 1961 (Private Eye's inception) to 1999 inclusive were included in the searches. Press reports informing readers of the outcome of libel trials where Private Eye was the defendant were recorded on a chart. Reports informing, predicting or suggesting that writs have been, or may be issued in the future against the Eye were excluded from the chart, as the purpose of the thesis is to explore actual complaints and criticisms of Private Eye discourse and not potential complaints. Further, reports on the potential of the issuing of libel writs are often rather short and simplistic, possibly because they are protected by Contempt of Court. In Britain prejudicial journalistic reporting before or during a trial acts as contempt of court. Punishments for contempt of court includes fines and imprisonment, although this criminal law has been 'slackly interpreted' (Hutchinson, 1999: 107). Contempt of court rules that as soon as matters come to trial 'the media can report provided it is a fair and accurate report of public legal proceedings published contemporaneously and in good faith' (Frost, 2000: 29), to ensure that all parties concerned have a fair trial (Morrish, 1996). Risk of contempt of court starts as soon as a case becomes 'active': at the point of arrest or when charges are made against someone (Morrish, 1996). Assuming that the press adhere to the contempt of court law, press reports before the outcome of the trial of defamation should be balanced and impartial. As the focus of the thesis is on how the plaintiff and defendant are discursively treated and how the media accounts for and manages the offence caused, news reports printed after the outcome of the trial had been decided were included in the data. Press reports published before the outcome of the trial (although very interesting themselves) were excluded from the analysis. Additionally, some libel actions were not reported in the press and some led to injunctions preventing Private Eye from mentioning the complainant in the future which did not receive press coverage. Such actions were excluded from the data set as the focus of the thesis is the negotiation of and perception of offensive comic discourse as presented publicly in media discourse.

A total of 90 libel cases were referenced in The Times Index during the 38-year period scrutinised. The relevant editions of The Times newspaper for all 90 cases were then consulted and the relevant articles were photocopied from microfilm in order to gather further details of each case. Given that original copies of the newspapers were not scrutinised, but copies on microfilm, the reliability of such data collection technique relies on the work of the skills of the copyist. Although omissions

7 Comparable analysis of the press coverage before and after the outcome of a trial for defamation would be a
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and transpositions are conceivable (Macdonald and Tipton, 1993), all of the articles referenced in *The Times Index* were identified on the microfilm. The photocopies facilitated recording of the name of the plaintiff, the plaintiff's (professional) position, the sources of the complaint as reported in the press, the date of publication of the offending article (where given), the date on which the decision of the litigation was made, the outcome of the litigation and any response made by *Private Eye* (where given). All of these details were systematically recorded in chart format (see Appendix A).

The chart was created in order to facilitate a move towards closer focussed analysis of the strategies employed when reporting complaints made against *Private Eye* discourse and the censuring practices and strategies favoured by the press. Based on the findings noted above, press reporting of five libel cases were chosen for closer scrutiny. The 5 libel cases involving *Private Eye* were chosen because they are sufficiently different in nature and illustrate the broad range of issues that have resulted in *Private Eye* being sued (chapter 7 explains the reasons for choosing the 5 libel cases). The 5 cases chosen were:

2) Nora Beloff v. *Private Eye* (1972)

Newspaper articles and cartoons based on the 5 libel cases were gathered (with help from Colindale Newspaper Library, London) from microfilm of both the broadsheet and tabloid press: *The Guardian, The Times, The Daily Telegraph, The Independent, The Daily Mail, The Daily Mirror, The Daily Express* and *The Sun*. News reports printed immediately after the decision (the two subsequent days after a decision was made) about each case was made were included in the data set. The data set includes a collection of 73 news articles based on the 5 libel trials. Four articles based on Churchill's case, 7 on Nora Beloff's case, 7 articles on Goldsmith's case, 14 on Robert Maxwell's case and 41 articles on Sonia Sutcliffe's case. Macdonald and Tipton (1993: 191)
argue that the researcher must be ‘on guard’ when using newspapers in analysis as they are often subject to errors and distortion caused by economic, editorial and professional considerations. Such distortion however is a fundamental aspect of the analysis, rather than a problem to be eradicated or considered.

Interviews

Interviews were employed with those working on or with Private Eye to explore the editor’s role, the editorial process, other contributor’s roles, the organisational structure and the aims, goals and defining qualities of Private Eye. Questioning people is the ‘only way to elicit self-reports of people’s opinions, attitudes, beliefs and values’ (Sproull, 1995: 167; emphasis is original). The validity of qualitative data is frequently cited as its main strength. Hakim (1987) claims that as individuals are interviewed in detail, the results can be taken as complete and believable reports of the individual’s views and experiences (see also Ferguson, 1983).

I conducted a total of seven informal interviews with past and present editors, journalists and cartoonists working on Private Eye and their libel lawyers. Table 4.1 details the date of the interview, the name and position of the interviewee and the approximate length of the interview. Interviewees were recruited using the technique of ‘snowballing sampling’ (May, 1993: 100) where I asked the first individual interviewed who he (all interviewees were male) thought might be willing to talk to me. Although this type of sampling may exclude data from people who are not recommended (May, 1993), it is an ideal method to gain access to a closed and tight-knit community such as Private Eye. Initial contact was made with Private Eye at a lecture given by Tony Rushton at the Victoria Art Gallery, in Bath on 18th March 1998. The lecture was given during the exhibition celebrating 35 years of Private Eye, called Private Eye Times 1961-1996. From this initial contact I was able to arrange (via letters and follow-up telephone calls) further interviews with other contributors working on the Eye. Participants agreed to take part on the basis that I wanted to ask them about their work on the Eye and their experiences of working on Private Telegraph, The Times, The Guardian, The Daily Express, The Daily Mail, The Daily Mirror, and The Sun. News articles on Goldsmith’s case came from The Daily Telegraph, The Times, The Guardian, The Daily Express, The Daily Mail, The Daily Mirror, and The Sun. Articles based on Robert Maxwell’s case came from The Daily Telegraph, The Times, The Guardian, The Independent, The Daily Express, The Daily Mail, The Daily Mirror and The Sun. Articles on Sonia Sutcliffe’s trial came from The Daily Telegraph, The Times, The Guardian, The Independent, The Daily Express, The Daily Mail, The Daily Mirror and The Sun.
Chapter 4: Making a Case for Multi-Method Research

Eye. Interviews were conducted face-to-face either at the interviewee’s place of work (either at the Private Eye offices, Davenports Lyons’ headquarters or cartoon studios) or their home. One of the interviews was conducted over the telephone. Although telephone interviews are cheap (as there are no transport costs), the interview was much shorter (25 minutes) than the other interviews. Given the lack of non-verbal clues and the lack of personal contact (Deacon et al, 1999; Hansen et al, 1998; Newell, 1993) that often helps smooth flow the face-to-face interviews, the questions asked during the telephone interview were short and precise and any signals for lack of understanding were carefully listened for. As very few people today feel inhibited by the presence of a tape-recorder (Deacon et al, 1999), each interview was tape-recorded (with the permission of the interviewee). Recording the interview facilitated the smooth flow of the interview (compared to interviews where note taking is employed), enhanced the accuracy of the interview and enabled direct quotations to be included throughout the thesis. All interviewees were thanked for their participation at the end of the interview and again a few days later by letter.

My research fully complies with the British Sociological Association’s ‘Statement of Ethical Practice’ (1998) and the American Sociological Association’s ‘Code of Ethics’ (1997). From the outset, all interviewees were informed of the methods, purposes and intended use of the interview data (Newell, 1993). All interviewees completed a consent form (see Figure 4.1) which highlighted that their participation was voluntary, they were free to refuse to answer any question(s) and are free to withdraw from the interview at any time. They were informed that the data would be used in the thesis and any publication arising from it, and that their name may be used when referring to abstracts used from the interview. If they wished to remain anonymous for all or parts of the interview this was (of course) permitted, but only one participant requested this for a short period during the interview when something was said ‘off the record’. These explanations were considered to enhance the interviewee-interviewer relationship and may increase societal trust and respect for social research (Diener and Crandall, 1978).

\[10\] In fact Christopher Booker called me an ‘honest researcher’ for using a tape-recorder (interview, 22nd April, 1999).
Chapter 4: Making a Case for Multi-Method Research

Table 4.1 Interviewee Details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Length of Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5th May 1998</td>
<td>Tony Rushton</td>
<td>Contributor/art director, Private Eye</td>
<td>1 hour 10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1962-present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23rd June 1998</td>
<td>David Cash</td>
<td>Managing Director, Private Eye</td>
<td>25 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1961-present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th July 1998</td>
<td>Barry Fantoni</td>
<td>Contributor/cartoonist, Private Eye</td>
<td>1 hour 20 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1963-present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th September 1998</td>
<td>Ian Hislop</td>
<td>Editor of Private Eye 1986-present</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Contributor 1981-present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th September 1998</td>
<td>Nick Newman</td>
<td>Contributor/cartoonist, Private Eye</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1980-present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd December 1998</td>
<td>Kevin Bays</td>
<td>Libel lawyer for Private Eye (Davenport Lyons) 1985-present</td>
<td>1 hour 25 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22nd April 1999</td>
<td>Christopher Booker</td>
<td>Editor of Private Eye 1961-1963, Contributor</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1961- present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, providing the interviewees with an outline of the research purpose(s) and technique(s) may have a detrimental effect on participation, as it may become less exciting and interesting (Diener and Crandall, 1978) and may lead to 'socially acceptable' responses. The interviewees used in the thesis did not appear to provide 'socially acceptable' responses, as some responses were openly critical or questioned often-held norms (although these types of answers may be expected from someone with a satirical outlook; see chapters 2 and 3). I consider my interviewees' critical stance and sense of humour used throughout the interviews as symptomatic of their world-view, which provides insight to the distinctive character, spirit and vision of Private Eye discourse. As my interviewees often joked and laughed during the interview, and have reputations for ridiculing almost anything, the seriousness of their views and the interview as a whole may be questioned. Although tape recording conveys the idea that their responses were taken seriously (Fielding, 1993a), my interviewees may have used the session to generate humour. However I do not think this was the case. My interviewees were all professional people and under immense time pressure. They would not have agreed to participate unless genuinely considering it worthwhile and being genuinely interested in my research. Problems of inaccurate data because interviewees may lie, omit information and selectively recall information (Sproull, 1995) are nevertheless beyond my control.
I am a postgraduate research student in the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University. My research is on comic offence, and it is funded by a University studentship. My supervisor is Dr Michael Pickering who may be contacted through the Department of Social Sciences on (01509) 223382 or by e-mail M.J.Pickering@lboro.ac.uk.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research. Before we begin I would like to emphasise that:

- Your participation is entirely voluntary
- You are free to refuse to answer any question
- You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time

The interview will be tape-recorded. Only my research supervisor and myself will hear the tape in its entirety. Other members of my research team may hear small segments of the data. Parts of the data may be used in my thesis and publications arising from it. Your name may be used when referring to abstracts of the data, if you wish to remain anonymous at any time please indicate this during the interview.

Please sign the form to show that you have read the contents of this form, and consent to take part in this research.

.............................................................. (signed)
.............................................................. (printed)
.............................................................. (date)

Thank you.

Sharon Lockyer
Postgraduate Research Student
Communication Research Centre
Department of Social Sciences
Loughborough University
Loughborough
Leicestershire
LE11 3TU
E-mail: S.P.Lockyer@lboro.ac.uk
Methodological literature often forewarns the interviewer of the numerous effects he/she may have on the interviewee's behaviour, although interviewer effects have frequently been overstated (Fielding, 1993a). The mere presence of me as the interviewer may distort my respondent's behaviour (as it can when conducting participant observation, experimental surveys and life histories). The interviewee may present his/her responses in a manner which prevents him/her 'being shown up' (Fielding, 1993a: 138), or responses may have been affected by 'the keenness to please the interviewer' (Root, 1986: 14) by providing socially acceptable responses (Fielding, 1993a). Equally, the context in which the interview is conducted may affect responses (see Thompson, 1978). Or, both the parties are affected by each other. The interviewer selects interviewees, determines the areas of interest, which may limit the type of material gathered, and the presence of an outsider may affect the atmosphere in which interviewees respond and express their attitudes, values and beliefs (Tosh, 1984). However, Trevor Lummis (1987) argues that although the personality of the interviewer may affect what and how it is said, he has never been able to 'produce' answers.

During the interviews a semi-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions was employed (Fielding, 1993a; Newell, 1993). Semi-structured interviews endeavour to produce an active and open-ended dialogue, whilst simultaneously allowing the interviewer to retain control over the issues to be covered (Deacon et al, 1999). The combination of the semi-structured interview and open-ended questions facilitated the gathering of information regarding perceptions, role definitions and attitudes towards Private Eye. They also enabled the interviewee to develop fuller answers in his own words, than would have been produced by a structured interview and closed questions (although of course, open questions require more thought and consideration by the interviewee and can lead to ambiguous and varied responses) and enabled the interviewer to probe beyond the answers given (May, 1993; Deacon et al, 1999). Probing is obviously something that cannot be conducted when relying on documentary evidence such as newspaper articles and readers' letters.

The quasi-structure interview requires the interviewer to remain attentive and allow flexibility regarding the way in which the interview progresses and how the interviewee discusses topics. Given the varied formal positions held by the 7 interviewees (from the editor of Private Eye to its libel lawyer), questions were designed to investigate individual areas of expertise. For example
whilst questions for the present editor were based around how he defined his role, what he considered the role of *Private Eye* to be and the economic, structural, and journalistic factors that define the magazine, the libel lawyer questions focused on the role of libel, its relations to satirical discourse, the perception of *Private Eye* by judges and juries and his relation to *Private Eye*. Effort was made to ensure the questions were of relevance to each participant which is a fundamental consideration when designing questionnaires (Moser and Kalton, 1971; Newell, 1993). Although questions were designed to focus interviewee thoughts, they simultaneously allowed freedom for revealing diversions. Such flexibility is an important advantage of the interview method (Newell, 1993). Attention was paid to the framing of the questions. Questions were phrased in a way to prevent directing the interviewee in intentional (or unintentional) ways; straightforward questions were asked initially to put the interviewee (and the interviewer!) at ease (Deacon et al, 1999; Newell, 1993); related questions were asked in a logical sequence, according to subject (Deacon et al, 1999; Newell, 1993) and the length of the questions was varied in order to change the pace of the interview and thus maintain the interviewee’s attention and interest (Hansen et al, 1998; Newell, 1993). Questions about behaviour (What does your work for *Private Eye* entail?), beliefs and attitudes (How do you think judges and juries view *Private Eye*) and attributes (When did you begin contributing to *Private Eye*) were asked in order to gather information about a variety of different things (Deacon et al, 1999). To prevent confusion and particular types of responses being encouraged and to preserve the accuracy of the responses, ambiguous, leading, double, hypothetical and jargon laden questions were avoided (see Deacon et al, 1999: 74-76 for a discussion of these question types). A pilot study was conducted successfully to ensure the questions were appropriate and comprehensible and the schedule was easy to use.11

In the next section I summarise the methods of analysis used on the data, and outline the main advantages and disadvantages of each method of analysis used.

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11 Tony Rushton participated in the pilot study, and due to the ‘richness’ of his responses, they are used throughout the thesis.
Part 3: Data Analysis Procedures

Letters

Analysis of the readers' letters took the form of a two-phase design, or sequential triangulation (Creswell, 1994), employing both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The quantitative analysis was conducted first using content analysis, which was followed by qualitative analysis using a range of techniques: semiotic composition analysis, linguistic discourse analysis and symbolic cultural analysis. As I am interested in exploring the meanings of the letters, both content analysis and textual analysis allowed me to do that. The first phase of the analysis provided a base for, and helped to plan the second phase (Bryman, 1992). The stages of the analysis are presented separately and therefore the two paradigms (quantitative and qualitative) are clearly separate, allowing me to illustrate the assumptions underpinning each paradigm, the strengths and weakness of the modes of analysis used, and thus their complementary features (Erzberger and Prein, 1997).

Quantitative Content Analysis

Content analysis is usually employed to examine the manifest and latent characteristics of meaning in large numbers of media texts (Deacon et al, 1999; Dines and Humez, 1995; Hansen et al, 1998; Henwood, 1996; Holsti, 1969; Palmer, 1991; Silverman, 1993; Van Zoonen, 1996). During content analysis the content of texts is turned into 'discrete, enumerable units' (Palmer, 1991: 21). This enables the researcher to say something about the messages and representations of the texts and their wider social significance (Hansen et al, 1998). The history of content analysis as a research tool began at the beginning of the 20th century (used in press and propaganda studies), although empirical studies into the content of communication were evident in theology studies as early as the late 1600s (Krippendorf, 1980). Krippendorf notes that in the 20th century there was an increase in the researchers employing this type of analysis, which he argues illustrates its growing maturity as a method (1980). Different media products have been examined using content analysis, including newspapers (Chrisler and Levy, 1990), magazines (Theberge, 1991),

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12 Some commentators, such as Berelson (1952) consider content analysis to be limited to exploring manifest content. Manifest coding identifies the visible (or surface content) in a text, whereas latent coding or semantic analysis identifies the implicit meaning in the content of a text (Neuman, 1991).
advertisements (Bretl and Cantor, 1988) and television humour programmes (Cantor, 1976). The content of books, speeches, diaries and conversations have also been examined through content analysis. Readers’ letters remain an under-utilised site for media analysis (see chapter 5) and have scarcely been analysed using content analysis (McCormack, 1982).

The aim of the content analysis was to provide a precise and reliable record of the selected features of epistolic expressions of offence that would not be apparent in casual examination, because of the mass and complexity of the communication. As content analysis aims to produce a ‘big picture’ of patterns across large data sets (Deacon et al, 1999: 127), it is ideally suited to large data sets. The content analysis was concerned with a number of related empirical questions. How much coverage do the incidences of offence, caused by the content of Private Eye, receive in the magazine? What are the characteristics of the individuals who are offended by media discourse? What topics are reported as causing offence? What are the defining characteristics of the offending discourse? How do the readers manage the offence - what is the outcome of the offence experienced? The objective of the inquiry is to identify the items that cause offence to readers as publicly reported in Private Eye. The present content analysis considers manifest content or the denotative order of significance, as the purpose of the investigation is to analyse the observable features of the mass of data collected.

All readily identifiable characteristics of communication can be used in content analysis as long as the units under analysis are readily identifiable. This particular method ‘analyses by objectively and systematically picking out characteristics in specified parts of those communications’ (Carney, 1972: xv). The final analysis, reported in this thesis, supersedes a pilot content analysis. During the pilot study the content of the readers’ letters was classified into fewer content variables and categories, based on themes perceived in the letters. The variables and categories used in the content analysis were developed from themes identified in the data (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) as a result of reading and re-reading all 479 letters. The variables consisted of the gender of the reader, the type of reader, the source of the offending item, the format of the offending item, the type of offending item and the response of the reader. A category named ‘other’ was used to record items not individually represented on the coding schedule. In order to maintain consistency, where letters included multiple topics of complaint, specified sections or outcomes, the topic, section or

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13 For detailed discussions of the history of Content Analysis see Berelson (1952) Content Analysis in
outcome mentioned first was coded. A 'quasi-random sample' (Hansen et al, 1998: 241) of letters in the data set (every 3rd letter) were then coded according to this coding schedule. To monitor the reliability of the variables and categories, a stability reliability test was administered via a test-retest approach. A selection of letters was coded twice, with a five-day interval between the coding sessions. Fundamental inconsistencies were established during the test-retest procedure. The procedure revealed subjective elements of the coding schedule which were rectified so there was specificity in category identification and construction. The test-retest procedure allowed the development of a deeper and more detailed appreciation of the categories of offence. The pilot coding schedule was therefore developed and improved. Following the pilot study and the modifications to the coding schedule, a test-retest procedure was again applied to a sample of the letters which produced a high comparability of results. Consistency was experienced when category coding the letters. After finalisation of the coding schedule, it was applied to the 479 readers' letters. The coding schedule used in the final study can be viewed in Figure 4.2. Coding involved reading through each letter and filling in coding boxes on the coding schedule with the appropriate numbers. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was then employed to analyse the data set. SPSS is a simple computer package which enables data, once inputted, to be described and manipulated via both simple and complex analyses (see Frude, 1993 and Hansen et al, 1998). Once the data had been input it was subjected to frequency examinations, the results of which are discussed in chapter 5. The advice given by Deacon et al was heeded: 'avoid the temptation of indiscriminately trawling for numbers (e.g. by cross-tabulating everything by everything), as this is a recipe for confusion' (1999: 130).

Van Zoonen (1996: 69) observes that 'focus on manifest content ensures that different investigators will reach a level of agreement about the message under study and that a repetition or replication of the same project will produce roughly similar results'. Likewise, Neuman (1991: 270) claims that manifest coding is 'highly reliable because the phrase or word either is or is not present'. Limiting my analysis to manifest content, although preventing 'reading through the lines' and considering the

Content Analysis Coding Schedule: Readers' Letters Printed in *Private Eye*

**DATE-MONTH-YEAR**

**ISSUE NUMBER**

**AUTHOR OF LETTER**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Reader</th>
<th>3. Officialdom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Spokesperson for group</td>
<td>4. Unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DETERMINATE GENDER**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Male</th>
<th>3. Both</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Female</td>
<td>4. Not determined</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SPECIFIED READER STATUS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Subscriber</th>
<th>4. First time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Regular reader</td>
<td>5. Not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Occasional reader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DETERMINED TOPIC OF COMPLAINT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Xenophobia/nationalism</th>
<th>10. Psychological problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Blasphemy/religious beliefs</td>
<td>11. Invasion of privacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Feminism/women's issues</td>
<td>12. Status as prominent persons/politicians/celebrities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Royal Family</td>
<td>13. Inaccuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. War</td>
<td>14. Disagreement with reader letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Sexuality/practices/orientation</td>
<td>15. Generally about the magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Personal appearance/reference/attack</td>
<td>17. Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Physical disability and illness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SPECIFIED SECTION OF MAGAZINE**

| 1. Advertisements/PE Smalls | 12. Letter From ...   |
| 3. Cartoon (individual)    | 14. Lookalike         |
| 4. Cartoon (strip)         | 15. Lunchtime O'Boulez|
| 5. Colour Section          | 16. Pseudo's Corner   |
| 6. Dave Spart              | 17. Rotten Boroughs   |
| 7. Front Cover             | 18. Street of Shame   |
| 10. Hackwatch              | 21. Other named column, item |
| 11. John Junor             |                     |

**OUTCOME**

| 1. Cancels subscription   | 5. Negative characterisation of PE |
| 2. May/will not buy/read/order PE again | 6. No action |
| 4. Expected/predicted actions on part of PE | 8. Other |

*Figure 4.2 Content Analysis Coding Schedule for Readers' Letters*
associative meanings, enhances the reliability of the analysis and claims to objectivity (Van Zoonen, 1996). Content analyses are most successful when items can be coded quickly and consistently (Deacon et al, 1999) and do not work when more interpretative work is necessary to discover latent meaning of the text (Van Zoonen, 1996). Also when high agreement exists on the definitions of categories validity is easily achieved. As it is clear from the content of the letter when a reader has been offended by the discourse, problems associated with validity were minimal when using the revised coding schedule. Although content analysis may not be very exciting 'it does ensure a degree of rigour, precision and trustworthiness with respect to the resulting data. These are qualities that would be lacking if you simply pasted together certain selective quotations and sensational images in order to prove the point from which, tendentiously, you began' (Deacon et al, 1999: 133).

This essential data-reduction process is a cardinal problem in content analysis. Weber observes that data reduction creates reliability problems because of the 'ambiguity of word meaning, category definitions, or other coding rules' (1990: 15). The importance of reliability is expressed in many textbook approaches to content analysis (Berelson, 1952; Carney, 1972; Krippendorff, 1980; Weber, 1990). A content analysis is reliable if the procedure produces the 'same results from the same set of phenomena regardless of the circumstances of application' (Krippendorff, 1980: 129) and thus is independent from measurement instruments. Priest comments that if 'there is only one person involved in coding the data, intercoder reliability is not a factor' (1996: 99). Therefore greater emphasis was placed on ensuring that the content variables and categories were reliable. The process of variable and category construction potentially has severe implications for the reliability of the study. Great care in the present study was taken to ensure the variables and categories were constructed after data consultation. This was done in order to limit the possibility of my own meanings being imposed on to the data. Despite this, the variables and categories may still reflect my own concerns and the meanings associated with them may not be universal.

Unlike other research techniques such as interviews, content analysis is an unobtrusive technique where neither the sender nor receiver of the message is aware of the analysis. Neuman (1991) refers to content analysis as 'nonreactive' as the content of communication is determined by the sender without influence from the researcher. The analysis is administered on 'naturally occurring data' as the data exists regardless of the analysis. Therefore the threat of the analysis confounding
the data is minimal. Quantitative content analysis can efficiently deal with large data sets covering a wide timeframe and therefore ‘is it possible to locate different debates and social actors in time dimension, and point out specially interesting moments or life-spans of interesting themes for further analysis’ (Valtonen, 2000: 160). As my data set of readers’ letters covers a 28-year period, content analysis as a method of analysis could satisfactorily cope with such time span.

One of the main criticisms of content analysis is that by focussing on individual units of text and their frequency, content analysis does not explore the way in which meaning is produced from the text (Hansen et al, 1998). As Burgelin reminds us:

above all there is no reason to assume that the item which recurs most frequently is the most important or the most significant, for a text is, clearly a structured whole, and the place occupied by different elements is more important than the number of times they recur (1972: 319).

Quantitative content analysis can tell us something about what a document is about (mapping its basic contents), but does not explore more implicit meanings or how meanings are organised (Deacon et al, 1999). The goals and values of the readers writing to Private Eye are not easily categorised or effortlessly quantified (Ferguson, 1983). Hansen et al (1998: 91) argue that although content analysis brings ‘methodological rigour, prescriptions for use, and systematicity’ rarely found in qualitative methods, content analysis should be ‘enriched’ by combining it with qualitative approaches (see also Deacon et al, 1999). Frequency counts are based on a simple notion as it is assumed that ‘higher relative counts (proportions, percentage, or ranks) reflect higher concern with the category’ (Weber, 1990: 56; see also Van Zoonen, 1996). If more complaints are made in relation to non-serious comment on sexual orientation than complaints made in relation to non-serious comments on death, then, logically, it is determined that jokes about sexual orientation offend more readers than jokes about death, or at least that is how the phenomena are reported. A quantitative investigation cannot reliably develop the analysis further.

All references to a particular category may not equally express the category. Qualitative analysis can by comparison examine the phrases or words used to express offence or analyse the resources used by readers when expressing offence has been caused and their endeavour to censure Private Eye. The focus of content analysis on the making of meaning across texts is at the detriment of meaning within texts (Deacon et al, 1999; Perry, 1996). This is a motivational force for combining
research methodologies, so the limitations of one approach will be supplemented by strengths inherent in the additional methods used. Bell asserts that content analyses are best used in conjunction with other methods 'or a researcher's own qualitative insights' (1991: 213; see also Holsti, 1969). Equally, Macdonald and Tipton advise that 'in documentary research everything must be checked from more than one angle' (1993: 199). As textual analysis starts where content analysis leaves off, some communication researchers have endeavoured to combine content analysis with textual analysis (Deacon et al, 1999), including Hartmann and Husband's (1974) study of racism in the media. In the thesis the content analysis functions as a 'basic' part of the study, on which the qualitative analysis builds. To explore the more latent cultural meanings, intentions, goals and values of the offended reader and the reaction to the offended reader by Private Eye, qualitative analyses were conducted on (a selection of) the letters used in the quantitative content analysis. The qualitative methods used were composition analysis, linguistic discourse analysis and symbolic cultural analysis. It is these qualitative methods that I now discuss.

Given the close detailed work that is necessary for textual analysis to produce thick descriptions of meaning (Deacon et al, 1999), I employed the composition analysis and the discourse analysis (see below) on a small number of letters pages and letters. However, the initial stage of qualitative analysis involved reading and re-reading all 479 individual readers letters used in the quantitative analysis and assessing the whole pages on which the letters appeared. Common themes and issues were sought, looking across the material for similarities and peculiarities (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). All relevant sections of the letters pages and readers' letters were highlighted which formed the basis of the more comprehensive analysis. This was a time-consuming process and involved many restarts. Letters pages and readers' letters were then divided into thematic areas, for example, letters where the reader prefaces the complaint with a compliment or complained on behalf of someone else. These rather crude thematic categories laid the foundations for closer composition and linguistic discourse analyses that were conducted using only the selected letters pages and letters, which later formed the analytic chapters.
Chapter 4: Making a Case for Multi-Method Research

Composition Analysis

The choices and decisions made by the editor are fundamental to the layout and content of the letters page (see chapter 5) and a close analysis of the construction of the letters page can suggest how the editor responds to criticism(s) of producing offensive humour. In chapter 2 I discussed how a common technique used by those who are responsible for humour that offends is to deflect responsibility by retorting 'it's just a joke' (Billig, 2001) or 'I was only joking' (Tannen, 1992; Mulkay, 1988). This section of the analysis turns to the practices and strategies used by the editor of Private Eye when discursively managing and responding to reader criticisms that the Eye caused offence. Readers of Private Eye are given little opportunity to engage in dialogue with the editor of Private Eye. When asked about his contact with readers, Ian Hislop claimed that 'I don't talk to people over the phone' (interview, 7th September, 1998). Letters (and increasingly e-mail) are the main (often the only) form of contact readers have with Private Eye. This therefore enhances the importance of the letters page as it is a site where individual differences are revealed and both reader and editor have a right to reply. The pages on which the letters used in the quantitative content analysis appeared were analysed using composition analysis.

The letters pages on which letters of complaint were printed were examined through textual analysis, borrowing from Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1998) framework for analysing newspaper front page layout. Although analysis of media discourse has often focussed on the press (see below) where the format and content of newspaper articles are analysed, few studies have focussed on the visual construction of the whole page. Sometimes different newspaper articles appearing in the same issue or on the same page are linked together through analysis of their intertextual features (see Deacon et al, 1999; Fairclough, 1992; Norrick, 1989). Kress and Van Leeuwen (1998) argue that although written text may remain the dominant channel for creating meaning, the visual organisation of texts is equally important and analysis of the interplay between the verbal and visual features of discourse in creation of meaning should be explored in critical studies of newspaper language. Their descriptive framework for analysing layout is a commitment to assessing this interplay. The framework broadly draws on the techniques of semiotic analysis (De Saussure, 1974). Semiotics is the science of signs and their role in the construction of (and reconstruction) of meaning. Semiotics first became a popular mode of textual analysis in the 1970s (Deacon et al, 1999). For the semiologist, language is conceived as a series of signs and
representations, arranged according to codes which are communicated through discourse. Signs have no fixed meaning and the interpretation of a sign depends on the social context of the participants and the interaction between the signs and the participants. Semiotics has been applied to various media texts and representations, and to the study of dance, food, fashion and sport (Deacon et al, 1999). Semiology focuses on the formal properties of discourse. Kress and Van Leeuwen, treat front pages as ‘complex signs, which invite and require an initial reading as one sign. The initial reading is then followed by a more detailed, specific reading, which draws its initial orientation from the first reading of the large sign’ (1998: 187-188). The framework used in the analysis involved 3 signifying systems: information value (information value is attached to specific zones and areas of the visual space, such as left and right of the page), salience (audience’s attention is attracted by strategic placing of articles in the back/foreground, the size of articles, differences in sharpness, colour and tone of the articles) and framing (framing devices, such as white space, determine how specific parts of the page are dis/connected with others and if the page should be read as a whole). Given that ‘all texts are multimodal’ (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1998: 186) a number of features of Private Eye letters page were explored in addition to the 3 signifying systems employed by Kress and Van Leeuwen. These included analysis of the character of the letters page through consideration of the lexical features of the straplines created by the editor and the editor’s attempts to ridicule the offended reader through name-calling. All of the features combine to produce a coherent structure of the letters page and illustrate how layout of the page is not random.

Linguistic Discourse Analysis and Symbolic Cultural Analysis

This section of the analysis draws on a wider linguistic and discourse analytic framework. Discourse analysis highlights the importance of media messages as specific types of text and talk. Work on media discourse draws on a number of distinct, albeit related approaches: linguistics and sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis, semiotic analysis, critical linguistics and the socio-cognitive model (see Fairclough, 1995 for an overview of these different approaches). The origins of discourse analysis can be traced back to the study of language and public speaking of more than 2000 years ago (Van Dijk, 1985b). Modern discourse analysis developed as a ‘transdisciplinary’ (Van Dijk, 1991b: 108; see also 1985b) field of study between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s in the disciplines of anthropology, ethnography, cognitive and social
psychology, rhetoric, linguistics and semiotics. Given that the historical development of discourse analysis has been widely documented elsewhere (see De Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981; Deacon et al, 1999; Fowler, 1991; Van Dijk, 1985b, 1991b), and that space prohibits me from doing otherwise, here I discuss the work that I found particularly useful for my analysis. Discourse analysts are interested in the ‘systematic study of the structures, functions, and processing of text and talk’ (Van Dijk, 1991b: 108). As discourse analysis is multi-disciplinary, the structural features of media text and talk are related to cognitive and sociocultural properties. Discourse analysts are primarily interested in meaning, what the text or talk is about, what it means, what its implications are. Discourse analysis is not simply concerned with language. It examines the context of communication, who is communicating with whom, and why, which medium is used and the kind of situation in which communication takes place. Moving away from text as words printed on paper, discourse analysis regards speech, music, sound effect and images as texts (Garrett and Bell, 1998). As Van Dijk neatly explains:

Discourse is no longer just an “intervening variable” between media institutions or journalists on the one hand and an audience on the other hand, but is also studied in its own right, and as a central and manifest cultural and social product in and through which meanings and ideologies are expressed or (re-)produced (1985a: 5).

Discourse analysis is now accepted as an alternative or supplement to quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980) and has been successfully used in studies on the press (Van Dijk, 1985a, 1988a, 1988b, 1991b). However, systematic discursive studies of mass media messages remain limited in number (Van Dijk, 1991b). Media discourse analysis has primarily been conducted on ‘factual’ discourses in news media examined by media discourse analysts with varying sociopolitical and discoursal concerns. Of the 8 chapters in Garrett and Bell’s (1998) edited collection Approaches to Media Discourse, all of them cover news discourse, including opinion pieces such as newspaper editorials (Van Dijk, 1998), ‘hard news’ press reports (Bell, 1998), television news openings (Allan, 1998), television news interviews (Greatbatch, 1998) and radio news interviews (Fairclough, 1998). Although other genres have been researched, such as dating advertisements (Coupland, 1996), media discourse analysis has focussed on news discourse. However, one area that has not received attention from discourse analysts is ‘soft news’, such as feature or human-interest stories and opinion pieces (Tuchman, 1978; see also Delin, 2000). Discourse analysts have not examined the discourse of readers’ letters that are fundamental to newspapers and magazines (see chapter 5).
Chapter 4: Making a Case for Multi-Method Research

Literary criticism has been an important influence on qualitative research about mass media (Jensen, 1991). Although linguistics is a specialised discipline (see Fillmore, 1985), it provides various analytical procedures that can be (and have been) employed by mass communication researchers. Those adopting a literary stance to the study of mass communication take the view that language used in cultural and everyday practices is not transparent and requires detailed analytical attention in order for it to be interpreted (Jensen, 1991). Linguistic choices have implications for the communicative function of texts, and it is the aim of linguistic approaches to the media to examine the function of linguistic forms, and how these linguistic forms are systematically affected by social circumstances (Fowler, 1991). Linguistic variation is caused by social, political and economical factors outside the speaker's control (Fowler, 1991).

Whereas semiology has tended to focus on monological and aesthetically complex texts, linguistic discourse analysis has examined a mass of everyday texts. Linguistic discourse analysis has identified 3 levels, or dimensions of analysis: speech acts, interactions and discourse (Jensen, 1991; see also Fowler, 1991). Utterances or statements are referred to as speech acts (Austin, 1962; see also Fowler, 1991: 88-89). Speech act theory defines utterances or statements as occasions of linguistic action. Language is not simply a descriptive representation, people perform a number of everyday acts through language, as proponents of the 'language as action' model observe:

Among the obvious examples are rituals (a marriage ceremony) and other institutionalised procedures (a sentence pronounced in a court of law), where the very pronouncement accomplishes a socially binding act. In addition, by uttering promises, questions and answers, and arguments, people also perform speech acts. Even statements which may appear purely descriptive will in most cases be performative in the sense that they are designed to produce a specific effect in the recipient(s) (Jensen, 1991: 34).

Secondly, proponents of linguistic discourse analysis regard language as a mode of interaction between communicators (Jensen, 1991). In any form of interaction (everyday conversation or interviews for example) both parties are involved in its creation, both parties introduce and expand on certain themes and close down other potential topics (see Antaki, 1988, 1994; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Finally, linguistic discourse analysis is conducted at the level of discourse. Different linguistic categories come together in discourse to create a coherent structure, 'a text with a message to be interpreted' (Jensen, 1991: 35). Formal textual features of the text, functional interrelations between speech acts and interactive patterns all contribute to the creation of
discursive coherence. The discursive coherence should be interpreted in relation to its context of use (see Van Dijk, 1991b). Media Studies began to develop an interest in linguistic approaches when linguists expanded into discourse analytical approaches in the 1980s (Deacon et al, 1999). The shift of linguistics to discourse analysis has enabled linguists to explore whole texts, rather than being confined to sentences and words, which had previously dominated the discipline (Deacon et al, 1999).

For the discourse analyst, the significance of discourse derives from the interaction between language structure and the context in which it is used. Therefore, the discourse analyst ‘must always be prepared to document the circumstances in which the communication takes place, and consider their relevance to the structure of the text’ (Fowler, 1991: 90). Awareness of the economic, political, social and institutional structure of the discourse examined is required in order to relate the language structure to its context. The contextualising part of the analysis is the most difficult as a procedure does not exist for guiding how the contextual knowledge should be employed, ‘the contextualising is a matter of knowledge, experience and intuition’ (Fowler, 1991: 90).

The linguistic discourse analysis was combined with what I have called symbolic cultural analysis, influenced by the work of Douglas (1966), Geertz (1973), Sontag (1979) and Stallybrass and White (1986). As cultural anthropologists (Harris, 1995), these analysts deal with the description and analysis of cultures and the socially learned features of culture. Embedded in the interpretive tradition of human enquiry, the central concern for many cultural anthropologists is ‘with exploring the ways that people make sense of their social worlds and how they express these understandings through the language, sound, imagery, personal style and social rituals’ (Deacon et al, 1999: 6). Emphasis is often located on systems of symbols. As Clifford Geertz notes, the term ‘symbol’ has a number of meanings:

In some hands it is used for anything which signifies something else to someone: dark clouds are the symbolic precursors of on-coming rain. In others it is used only for explicitly conventional signs of one sort or another: a red flag is a symbol of danger, a white of surrender. In others it is confined to something which expresses in a oblique and figurative manner that which cannot be stated in a direct and literal one ... In yet others, however, it is used for any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception-the conception is the symbol’s “meaning” (1973: 91).
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A number of different symbol systems have been identified (Douglas, 1966; Sontag, 1979; Geertz, 1973; Stallybrass and White, 1986). In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas (1966) argues that pollution beliefs symbolically relate to social life and social order. To take one of Douglas's examples, pollution beliefs and symbolic language are used when referring to sexual hierarchies and relationships in the sense that each sex is a danger to the other through contact with sexual fluids (although more often than not, males are placed in danger by 'dirty' females). Douglas observes that dirt is 'matter out of place' (1966: 35). Pollution terms are used in relative ways when acknowledging and recognising disorder and the concern of dirt is equated with the fear of disorder and attempts to re-establish social order (see chapter 6). Equally, concern for social order is also identified in Sontag's analysis of *Illness as Metaphor*. Sontag observes that when something is referred to as disease-like, the meaning is 'that it is disgusting or ugly' (1979: 58) and 'disease imagery is used to express concern for social order' (1979: 72). That which is symbolically referred to as disease is regarded as a 'sign of evil' and 'something to be punished' (1979: 82). Other symbolic expressions have also been identified in anthropological literature, notably Geertz's 'thick description' analysis of the Balinese cockfight. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz (1973) illustrates how the cockfights held in Bali are symbolic expressions and/or magnifications of the owner's self. Language is characterised by 'roosterish imagery'. The word 'cock' is used metaphorically to mean hero, warrior, champion and gallantry behaviour and 'court trials, wars, political contests, inheritance disputes, and street arguments are all compared to cockfights' and the cockfight functions as a Balinese reading of Balinese experience (Geertz, 1973: 418). Equally, Stallybrass and White (1986) describe how the degrees of high and low are often symbolically charged (see chapter 6). Symbolic extremities between high and low exist when referring to the human body, psychic forms, geographical space and social order (Stallybrass and White, 1986). Utilising the insights of cultural anthropology, the readers' letters were scrutinised for their use of symbolically charged language. The implications of the symbolic language used were considered.

Newspaper Articles

Quantitative Content Analysis

All of the newspapers articles covering the 90 libel cases referenced in *The Times Index* were used in a quantitative content analysis (see the quantitative content analysis of readers' letters section
above for a discussion of this analytic approach and its relative strengths and weakness). Given the
smaller data set (compared to that involving the readers' letters) and the simple and rudimentary
nature of this content analysis (as all of the details could easily be read from the chart recording all
of the details reported in the press about each case), it was conducted 'by hand' (Hansen et al,
1998: 121). The content analysis recorded the number of plaintiffs involved in the 90 libel cases,
their professions (such as journalists, government ministers, businessperson), their gender, the
causes of the libel (accusations corrupt/unethical behaviour, allegations of professional
incompetence, allegations of criminal behaviour, criticism of private life and cases where the cause
was unclear), the section of Private Eye in which the libel was printed, the outcome of the libel
case and any responses made by Private Eye. The content analysis provided an overview of the
features that are included by the press when reporting the outcome of libel litigation involving
Private Eye. The content analysis facilitated the focussing of the linguistic textual analysis of the
newspaper coverage.

Textual Analysis

To repeat from above, close detailed work is necessary for textual analysis to produce thick
descriptions of meaning (Deacon et al, 1999). The qualitative analysis of the readers' letters was
therefore conducted on fewer letters than those included in the quantitative content analysis.
Similarly, only a selection of the newspaper articles gathered on the 5 libel cases were included in
the qualitative textual analysis. As with the qualitative analysis of the readers' letters, the initial
stage of qualitative analysis of the newspaper articles involved reading and re-reading all 73
newspaper articles gathered on the 5 libel cases. Commonalities and differences in reporting were
sought. All relevant newspaper articles were highlighted, thus forming the foundations for closer
analysis. As with the qualitative analysis of the readers' letters, this was a lengthy process. From
the selected newspaper articles, thematic areas were later identified and formed the analysis of
chapter 7.

The stylistic and rhetorical features of the newspaper articles reporting on the 5 libel cases were
analysed using textual analysis. Textual analysis was employed on the press reports of libel
litigation involving Private Eye in order to assess the textual structure and organisation of the news
discourse. The approach to 'unpacking news' via linguistic analysis as set out by Deacon et al
Chapter 4: Making a Case for Multi-Method Research

(1999: 162-184) was adopted. This approach includes 5 main stages. Stage 1 examines the formal staging of a news text, which considers the position, composition, and intertextual relations of the discourse. Stages 2 and 3 focus on related features of the news report, its thematic structure and discourse schema. Thematic structure:

isolates for analysis the narrative conventions for combining, ordering and hierarchically assigning the different category units of the text into a structured whole [whereas the discourse schemata] distinguishes the central interpretive thread that makes all the rest relevant and “fixes” their value as evidence or comment (Deacon et al, 1999: 176).

Thematic structure is the key underlying conception or proposition which runs throughout the media discourse, informing the whole text and interlinking component parts of the story. This central theme gives coherence to the story and is linked to the discourse schemata. Discourse schemata present information sequentially and hierarchically from the headlines and leads to statements by key witnesses or figures in the story that are ranked in order of priority. The sequencing structure and framing procedures of the text are analysed in order to highlight the ranking of the journalist’s news sources and their respective quantitative and qualitative value. Stage 4 questions how lexical choices and their use support the thematic structure of the story, supporting the expertise or truth-value of particular sources and discourse. Finally, stage 5 considers the way(s) in which the intertextual relations of the news report link or reflect broader ideological issues and journalistic professional ideology.

Textual analysis allows close readings of a text to be produced and an appreciation of latent meanings of a text to be made, which more quantitative methods do not allow. The value of textual analysis generally is restricted by a number of potential weaknesses. I followed (some of) the stages suggested by Deacon et al (1999) in order to prevent, or at least diminish the possibility that some of the analysis may heavily depend on imaginative leaps, which is a criticism of some textual analyses (Deacon et al, 1999). Although imaginative engagement with texts can create high standards and interesting analysis (Deacon et al, 1999), to prevent inconclusive or speculative conclusions, I chose to adopt precise and clear methods of textual analysis.

14 The textual analysis I have employed is simply one approach to the textual analysis of media discourse and other linguistic tools and concepts could have been used (Deacon et al, 1999).
Further, links made by the analysts between the text and the use of language in social settings cannot safely be made. The intentions of the producer of the text, its meanings and its impact on readers are often speculative in textual analysis:

Much of the discourse of critical linguistics is replete with claims about what a text was “really about”, or how a number of detected associations in the text clearly reflect a given intention or an inevitable shaping of the readers’ views. You should be careful to assess your own analysis to ensure that you do not leap to such premature conclusions (Deacon et al, 1999: 182).

Therefore the textual analysis is used to produce suggestions about the articulation of comic offence and censuring practices through analysis of newspaper reports of libel litigation involving *Private Eye*.

**Interviews**

The data gathered from the interviews were used to illustrate, represent and support issues that I raise throughout the thesis. Therefore, there is not a separate chapter devoted to the interviews, rather extracts from the interviews are sprinkled throughout the thesis in relevant places. Selected extracts are included in the thesis because space precludes the reproduction of whole transcripts. Although not objective representations of what happened, transcriptions are (usually) detailed reconstructions that are produced for the purpose of analysis and this constructed reality is recognised (Sandelowski, 1994). The type of transcription used can impact on the nature of analysis (Sandelowski, 1994) and therefore decisions should be made carefully. The choice of transcription style should be based on theoretical and practical concerns and theoretical consistency between transcription and analysis should be maintained (Cook, 1990). In all of my interviews I used orthographic transcription, transcribing all words and laughter, but excluding strong emphasis, pauses, ‘uhms’ and ‘ers’. This style was adopted because, although very time-consuming, verbatim transcripts are easy to read and are adequate for analysis that looks for themes or trends that are illustrative of issues raised throughout the thesis. Equally, transcribing the complete interview prevents the loss of data that may become significant at later date and can reveal topics, matters or concepts not previously thought of (Fielding, 1993a).
Summary

In this chapter I have systematically introduced the materials and procedures used in the thesis. I have discussed the traditional dichotomy that exists in social research methodology and have examined debates surrounding the use of mixed-method approaches that have destabilised the quantitative/qualitative divide in research methodology. The approach introduced in this chapter, and continuing throughout the thesis, is that the method(s) of data collection and analysis chosen should be the most appropriate to the research questions. I maintain throughout the thesis that no approach is superior to others; I do not argue for the virtues of particular methodologies and do not engage in 'best method' debates (Jankowski and Wester, 1991: 60). In this chapter I have considered the strengths and weaknesses of both the data collection (readers' letters, letters pages, newspaper articles and interviews) and analysis methods (quantitative content analysis, semiotic composition analysis, linguistic discourse analysis, symbolic cultural analysis and linguistic textual analysis) used in the thesis. The chapter has shown that rather than a fragmented approach, which may lead to criticisms of eclecticism, multi-methods are attractive because of their open-mindedness and flexibility. Multi-method research 'implicitly accepts as legitimate all questions that researchers might set out to answer, rather than limiting the research questions because of epistemological or methodological constraints' (Ussher, 1999: 45).

In the next chapter I begin the analysis proper. Chapter 5 explores incidences where readers have taken offence from Private Eye discourse. It is split into 2 parts. Part 1 consists of a quantitative content analysis of readers' letters stating that the Eye has caused offence. The content analysis surveys the incidence of the experiences of offence, moving towards an understanding and appreciation of the topics and sections of the Eye that cause offence and the outcomes of being offended for the reader. Part 2 of chapter 5 is a qualitative composition analysis of the letters page. It explores the ways in which Private Eye manages the offence caused to readers, looking at how the editor treats letters written by offended readers. Remaining with readers' letters, Chapter 6 closely analyses how the reader's sense of offence is registered and how complainants articulate the offence for which they seek some form of redress. I combine two distinctive modes of analysis in this chapter: linguistic discourse analysis and symbolic cultural analysis.
Chapter 5: Content and Composition Analysis of the Letters Page

Chapter 5
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of the Letters Page

Apart from the reader participation aspect, letters columns have proved by in-house surveys to be among the most popular parts of both the national and the provincial press (Hodgson, 1993: 60).

So the things which seem to define the soul of a paper are the letters pages and the obituaries as much as anything (Brown, 1999: 180).

When others write to complain of an unfunny joke going on and on they, too, miss the point: jokes, stories, cartoons - even letters from readers - are not put in for the readers' benefit; they are put in largely to amuse those who compose the magazine. *Private Eye* is the only magazine with the gall to inform subscribers: Long boring letters will be cut (McKay, 1986: 8).

Introduction

In the previous chapter I described and critically evaluated the methods of data collection and analysis used in this thesis. This chapter is the first of three analytic chapters (see also chapters 6 and 7) reporting on the findings of the data collected and analysed. This chapter focuses on the results of two studies that explore the non-legal approach to articulating offence. Here I focus on the letters page of *Private Eye* and readers' letters, which is a pivotal section of any printed publication allowing reader participation. The first study is the quantitative content analysis (see chapter 4) of readers' letters articulating that the author has been offended by *Private Eye* discourse. It maps out the fundamental features and characteristics of the epistolary expression of offence. An appreciation of the precise manifest details of readers' letters is approached through quantitative content analysis in order to answer questions such as what type of individual writes letters expressing offence; what topics cause offence; what sections of *Private Eye* cause offence; and are there any particular outcomes of experiencing offence. The second study shifts in emphasis to explore the qualitative features of the construction and composition (see chapter 4) of the letters page. As the content and layout of the letters page is habitually manipulated by the editor, this study analyses how those readers who say they have been offended by *Private Eye* discourse are treated by the editor and highlights the function(s) that this treatment fulfils. This is addressed by analysing how the readers' letters are presented on the letters page and how the editor manipulates
the letters in order to encourage a preferred reading. This preferred reading is often a humorous reading where the offended reader is ridiculed. As the funniness of any stimulus or event is dependent on observer characteristics and situation features (Zillman and Cantor, 1976), a question such as 'which parts of the letters page are funny?' is a meaningless research question. Rather the question, 'which parts of the letters page seem to be designed to elicit a humour response in the audience?' is asked and answered in the second study. As readers' letters 'are the most entertaining part of any newspaper' (Jackson, 1971: 158), the qualitative composition study explores the tools and devices used by the editor of Private Eye to make the letters page entertaining. This study highlights three devices used by the editor when dealing with readers' letters and responding to the charge of causing offence: the use of straplines, letters as intertext and the strategic positioning of readers' letters. Before I report on the findings of the quantitative content analysis and qualitative composition analysis, I contextualise the analysis by considering the form and function of the letters page and the readers' letters and introducing the (limited) literature that exists around readers' letters. I also highlight how my thesis contributes to the existing literature.

Readers' Letters as an Under-Researched Site for Analysis

Readers' letters have received little academic scrutiny. Writing in the late 1970s Hall et al observed that letters to the editor 'have not been much studied as a journalistic form, nor their function much examined' (1978: 120). This observation equally applies to contemporary media research as studies have seldom been conducted using readers' letters. The limited literature on readers' letters focuses on the function of the letters (Hodgson, 1993; Morrish, 1996). In his advisory text for magazine editors, Morrish asserts that reader involvement devices are used to:

ensure that the reader's emotional commitment to the product (which, publishers will maintain, is special to the magazine industry) receives some sort of recognition or pay-off. They need to get something from you, a sense of belonging and a sense of being recognised (1996: 46).1

Readers' letters are a form of 'reader participation' as the reader expresses his/her views and opinions, albeit with a degree of editorial control (see below). Reader participation applies 'to a variety of activities which generally mean getting the reader to help produce the sort of newspaper he or she will want to buy' (Hodgson, 1993: 52). Other strategies used by newspapers and

1 John Morrish is a sub-editor working on Private Eye.
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magazines to maintain readers’ interest and loyalty include publicity (advertising, competitions, merchandising bargains and canvassing), editorial surveys used to assess readership tastes, and service columns where specialists advise readers on a variety of products. In his study, *Press and Public*, Bogart reports that editors ‘think that an attractive paper also creates reader interest. They associate reader interest with participation (through letters)’ (1989: 264).

Tunstall (1977) conducted the most comprehensive investigation into the form, function and structure of readers’ letters. Bromley (1998) has recently revisited the questions raised by Tunstall’s early study regarding the ‘watchdog’ function of readers’ letters, which is dealt with in a later section of this chapter. The few studies using ‘letters to the editor’ have used them as a vehicle for facilitating understanding of a variety of interesting phenomena including the marking and cueing of irony in interaction (Barbe, 1993), the construction of argumentative discourse (Richardson, 2001), the information structure of letters (Ghadessy, 1983), the analysis of media coverage of unemployment issues in Finnish media (Valtonen, 2000) and in the exploration of the pleasures of watching *Gardeners’ World* (Gabb, 1999). Further, explorations into the construction of a feminine gender and sexual identity have frequently analysed readers’ letters sent to problem pages found in girl’s and women’s magazines such as *Jackie, Women’s Weekly* and *Woman’s Own* (see Ferguson, 1983; Frazer, 1987; Winship, 1987 and McRobbie 1991). Anthologies, drawing on correspondence columns, have also been published (see Gregory’s, *The First Cuckoo*, 1978). In his analysis of the press’ role in censoring popular music Cloonan (1996) makes reference to the debates created by readers’ letters. Although recognising that readers have a role in censoring media discourses, Cloonan fails to use the letters productively to explore the recurring practices adopted by readers to censure discourse.

According to Hodgson most papers run a ‘letters to the editor’ column which comprises:

> a selection of the general letters addressed to the editor on an variety of subjects, some personal, some on topics of the day, some criticizing or blaming the paper, some offering what the writer believes is interesting information, others just pieces of chat from lonely people whose newspaper is their contact with the world beyond the end of the street (1993: 59).

In 1977 Tunstall estimated that letters to the editor exceed over 2 million a year and may be ‘the main form of citizen access to large audiences of fellow citizens’ (1977: 209). In the early eighteenth century letters to the editor played a central role in developing the sphere of journalism
and between 1760-80 there was a huge increase in the number of letters printed (Bromley, 1998). These letters developed and reinforced the pamphlet as the main vehicle for communicating political views and opinions. By the mid-nineteenth century letters to the editor 'were manifestations of a dialogue conducted between a paper and its readers' (Bromley, 1998: 148). Recognising the value of readers’ letters as a strategy for gaining readership loyalty, (which was increasingly important during the commercialization of the press) Northcliffe, then a young journalist, used readers’ letters on a national scale in Titbits, Sir George Newnes’s family magazine in the 1880s (Hodgson, 1993). Readers’ correspondence columns, typically called 'Letters to the Editor' or 'The Letter Bag', are particularly interesting as it is the only part of newspapers and magazines that is written by the readers, although of course this section of the magazine is still subject to editorial control (see below). Readers’ letters are one of the main vehicles for the expression of attitudes, opinions and grievances. Jackson observes that exasperation is the dominant tone of readers’ letters, and is 'the chief motive behind the often unfulfilled intention to “write to the paper about it”'. As a result, correspondence columns can be an ‘open platform for protest and debate’ (Jackson, 1971: 153-154). Equally, Hulteng observes that readers 'tend to be “against” rather than “for” whatever they are writing about’ (1973: 151). This chapter adopts and develops Jackson’s view that because argumentation predominates in readers’ letters, ‘it is appropriate that they should receive most consideration’ (1971: 158).

Guidelines and policies concerning how to deal with complaints received by readers, viewers or listeners do not exist in many newsrooms. Due to the lack of formal instruction, many reporters use instinct and common sense when responding to criticisms (Bezanson et al, 1987). How the editor (or other journalists) responds to readers’ letters can have severe consequences. In a number of incidents the manner in which the editor (or another offending journalist) deals with the complaint can determine whether the offended will sue (Bezanson et al, 1987). As James Squires (editor of Chicago Times) observes:

I have over the years become a firm believer that even a serious post-publication complaint could best be handled by the newspaper, through its policy, before it gets to the lawyers and the libel people. I think, in other words, that the best defense against libel in newspapers is the newspaper’s response after it’s done something wrong (quoted in Bezanson et al, 1987: 52-53).
Chapter 5: Content and Composition Analysis of the Letters Page

Popularity of Readers' Letters

The letters page and readers' letters are popular amongst both editors and readers. Smith (1975) notes that for Hugh Cudlipp (Mirror Group Chairman 1960s) readers' letters were the most popular part of the newspaper. Smith observes that an 'astonishing proportion of the paper in 1945 was given to readers' letters, and stories derived from readers' own experiences. Sixty-five per cent of the election coverage on July 4 was contributed by readers, 'and from June 13 to July 5 readers contributed on average thirty per cent of the paper's electoral material' (1975: 63).

Via a combination of interviews and mail questionnaires completed by editors and/or editorial assistants working on provincial and national dailies, Tunstall (1977) found that letters have 'strong reader appeal'. Tunstall (1977) reports that journalists working for the 18 publications included in his study attributed 'high' readership to letters. Bogart highlighted a similar pattern when analysing responses to a mail questionnaire sent to members of the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the Associated Press Managing Editors in 1977. When editors ranked the items that can reflect the quality of a newspaper, the number of letters to the editor per issue was placed fourth (the top ranking item was a high ratio of staff-written copy to wire service and feature service copy). When editors ranked the items from the reader's perspective the number of letters to the editor per issue was ranked equal third (with presence of a news summary and presence of an 'action line' ranked at the top). This 'high' readership is reflected in the actual behaviour of readers. When readers were asked to rank the parts of newspapers frequently read, The Royal Commission's survey Attitudes to the Press found that readers' letters were placed equal sixth (out of seventeen particular items) as the highly read items in regional morning newspapers, rising to the fourth most popular item for provincial evening newspapers and the third most popular section for readers of local weeklies (Tunstall, 1977). Bogart's 1987 analysis of reading patterns in America highlights that letters to the editor are usually read or looked at by 55% of newspaper readers, including both frequent and infrequent readers. Bogart's figures also suggest that readers would like to see more letters to the editor printed; although 1.7% of newspaper space is devoted to letters to the editor, the ideal would be 4% (1989). Although reading the letters page is a popular activity, actually writing letters is not. Despite readers' letters often being presented as 'manifestations of the genuine voice of the public' (Bromley, 1998: 150), letters that are included in the press in a year are from under 1% of the population (Tunstall, 1977). Bogart's analysis of American readers' contact with newspapers as...
institutions in 1982 found that only 13% of readers included in the sample had written a letter to the editor at some point (1989).

Editorial Control and Readers' Letters

Hall et al (1978) observe that readers' letters are fundamental to the democratic image of the press, and portray the press as a 'fourth estate'. Although readers' letters can be critical of newspapers that make errors and are tasteless, in contrast to Hall et al's observation, Tunstall (1977) found no evidence that readers' letters fulfil the watchdog function of the press. Critical letters frequently refer more to specific stories, items, articles, columns or journalists than the operations of the publication per se. Despite this disagreement, readers' letters can assist the press in its claim that the press has an open mind as it prints views and opinions that it does not necessarily support. Readers' letters are subject to manipulation and editorial discretion. The editor is responsible for selecting the readers' letters printed, which is often conducted in conjunction with the features editor or an experienced journalist (Tunstall, 1977). Letters from 'typical readers', that are sharp, short, critical and 'interesting' whilst avoiding repetition are favoured by most, but not all editors (Tunstall, 1977). The aim is 'to have a balanced selection with a variety of topics' (Hodgson, 1993: 59). When analysing the problem pages of teenage girl's magazines, McRobbie observes that 'what appears on the page itself, and what, as a result, constitutes a problem is wholly in the hands of the editors' (1991: 108).

Editors can cut parts of the readers' letters received. Reducing the letters selected to the main points to fit the limited space of the letters page is a fundamental feature of the production process and can lead to criticisms and complaints by the author of the letter. Hodgson (1993) observes that the Press Council and Press Complaints Commission have received many complaints about readers' letters. Although there is no right for anyone to have a letter published, a moral right to reply is given to someone who has been attacked in the press. Hodgson also observes that the Press Council 'ruled that editing should be done solely to qualify a letter for publication, and it should never be allowed to defeat or obscure the point or points which the correspondent wanted to make' (1993: 60). In August 1982, Private Eye was publicly criticised for editing a reader's letter in such a way that the opposite meaning was suggested to that implied by the author of the letter. The Press Council ruled the editing 'unfair' (Anon, The Times, 1982: 3).
Chapter 5: Content and Composition Analysis of the Letters Page

Tunstall (1977) observes that some readers welcome editing of their letters as it can often improve grammar and structure, particularly as the ‘sole criterion for inclusion has been a letter’s readability regardless of the opinions expressed’ (Gregory, 1978: 24). Goldgar (1994) maintains that questions of genuineness and authenticity of readers’ letters have always troubled both editors and readers. Goldgar has developed a spectrum encompassing the range and type of editing that readers’ letters may be subjected to, from the real to the fictional. The spectrum consists of five points: 1) letters from readers that are unchanged and unedited; 2) letters where the editor shapes the letter to conform to the editor’s style as much a possible; 3) letters by the editor posing as genuine but with ‘paraphernalia’ to authenticate the letter; 4) letters jokingly presented as real by the editor with the hope that the fictional aspects will be dismissed by the reader; 5) letters that are overtly fictional and constructed by the editor, with no attempt to present them as genuine.

Editors appear to set restrictions and basic criteria for letter selection. Tunstall (1977) found three main reasons for this tight editorial control:

- Editorial responsibility for the publication’s relationship with its readers.
- Letters are the main channel through which complaints are directed towards the publication.
- The legal ramifications of readers’ letters – concerns of libel and the authenticity of the letter.

The letters page requires immense effort and consideration to be productive as without cultivation it ‘will wither and die’ (Morrish, 1996: 47). Morrish highlights specific guidelines to ensure the letters page is successful:

- Provocative and interesting letters should be prominently positioned.
- Letters can be rewritten to make them clearer.
- If letters are to be rewritten this should be indicated on the letters page.
- Sophisticated publications should discuss changes with the letters’ author.
- Controversies should be fed, contributions to the controversy should be encouraged from relevant figures and comments on the controversy should be ended before they become boring.
- Letters should have headings.
- Letters making requests or complaints should be answered either on the letters page or privately.
Distinct Qualities of Readers' Letters to *Private Eye*

Readers' letters play a fundamental and special part in the life of *Private Eye*. The letters page is regarded positively by *Eye* personnel, for example, Tony Rushton notes ‘I always think it's very good when readers get involved with the magazine’ (*Private Eye* Lecture, 18th March, 1998). The letters page attracts ‘all kinds of nutters with an axe to grind’ (Foot, 1999: 81) or 'oddbities' and 'oddballs' (Tony Rushton, interview, 5th May, 1998). *Private Eye* did not have a regular readers' letters column until after 1966, and although not all were genuine to begin with ‘as the years passed the letters were apparently genuine’ (Seymour-Ure, 1974: 248).² The inclusion of readers' correspondence creates a sense of community or a *Private Eye* club. This community feeling is not unique to *Private Eye*. Tunstall observed how the letters page of *The Daily Mirror* adopted a 'kind of working-people's-club-by-correspondence atmosphere' with 'beery' anecdotes and competitions (Tunstall, 1977: 215), which used to be called 'Live Letters conducted by the Old Codgers' (Jackson, 1971: 158). In my (SL) interview with Ian Hislop (IH) (7th September, 1998), he explained how the letters page functions as a readers' club providing a venue for readers to 'chat':

SL: What function do you think the letters page has in *Private Eye*?
IH: Well it's a right to reply for a start.
SL: Right.
IH: So a lot of people can say 'you got it wrong'.
SL: Mmm mm.
IH: It's readers writing their own material i.e., you know some perfectly good jokes on the letters page.
SL: Yes.
IH: It's not something we do. They take stories on a bit, and if you put a story in someone will say well actually no, this is how it happened.
SL: Mmm mm.
IH: So they function as a sort of, I mean *Private Eye* in many ways is a bit like a club and the readers are-
SL: Yes.
IH: Members of a club of people who are interested in how Britain works, and they pass on information and stories to each other.
SL: OK.
IH: And chat.

The letters page in *Private Eye* usually spans two pages and is positioned towards the centre of the magazine. The readers' letters that are printed make for an interesting mix. Letters vary from those

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² Ian Hislop also asserted the genuineness of the readers' letters in my interview with him (7th September, 1998).
praising *Private Eye*’s endeavour to report the ‘truth’ to those providing further information in order to develop *Private Eye*’s investigative stories. Some letters attempt to ridicule different media discourses by attending to their mistakes and misreporting (to recall from chapter 3, ridiculing media culture is one of the main aims of *Private Eye*). These letters vary in tone and length and are fundamental features of the letters page. Other readers express offence at the content of *Private Eye*, and these are of central importance to this thesis. Letters claiming offence has been caused can be used to signal that a libel writ may be forthcoming. In July 1985, a letter written by Robert Maxwell was printed expressing his concern about *Private Eye*’s suggestion in its HP Sauce column that he was funding Neil Kinnock’s (then Leader of the Labour Party) trip to Africa in hope of gaining a peerage. Maxwell threatened to issue libel proceedings if *Private Eye* did not retract and apologise. *Private Eye* did not retract or apologise and the dispute was legally settled. The outcome and media portrayal of the libel case is examined further in chapter 7.

Some letters printed on the letters page include the reader contributing to the ‘Lookalike’ column that is printed on the letters page. Readers send in two photographs of prominent individuals. Their names are then interchanged to suggest that they look like each other. There is usually a derogatory tone to the Lookalike contribution, for example Kenneth Clarke is presented as a lookalike of Fred Flintstone. The reader who sent in the photographs writes ‘Have any readers noticed the similarity between Fred Flintstone and Kenneth Clarke? One is a bulky, boorish caveman with a funny accent, strange-looking wife and the financial skill of a diplodocus. The other is a Stone Age cartoon character. Are they possibly related?’ (No. 852, 12.08.94: 14). Other columns/items also appear on the letters page. Readers are given financial rewards if they contribute to the Colemanballs column. Readers receive £10 if they send in witty quotes or selections of interviews made by politicians, celebrities and sports commentators, for example, ‘“They’re still in the game and they’re trying to get back into it”, Jimmy Hill, BBC’ (No. 849, 01.07.94: 15). Readers will also receive £10 for contributions to the I SPY section. This section comprises photographs of funny signposts, placards, place names and business names, such as ‘WANK HI-TECH PUBLIC RELATIONS’ (No. 872, 27.08.93: 14). Similarly, contributions to the column O.B.N. (Order of Brown Nose) receive £10. This column involves readers sending in extracts from the press where the journalists or editor is particularly praiseworthy towards someone or something (brown-nosing), such as ‘But never mind the quibbles, what is Tina (Brown) like? “The best editor I ever worked for,” one person tells me. “Smart, tough, funny, sexy, brilliant,” says another. “Getting a job with Tina was like dying and waking up in hack heaven,” says a third’ (No. 761, 15.02.91: 13).
Readers’ letters have a fundamental role in the censuring of media discourses. In his analysis of the role of the press in popular music censorship, Cloonan (1996) makes reference to debates created through readers’ letters (although he fails to use the letters as data to explore the censuring practices as conducted by readers). Public negotiation of humour, comedy and offence is usually managed in media discourses, especially readers’ letters. In his discussion of the censorship of comedy by the BBC, Davies noted the importance of letters of complaint. In 1947, under pressure from letters of complaint from the public, Cecil McGivern (Television Programme Director) asked staff ‘I expect your support of the slogan No Dirt in Television (I mean no dirt at all!)’ (Davies, 1996: 35). When comparing readers’ letters to more formal rules of censorship, Davies observes that ‘almost as revealing are the letters of complaint from the public, particularly when they were read, discussed and responded to by the most senior officials’ (1996: 29). Although recognising the important role fulfilled by readers’/viewers’/listeners’ letters, disappointingly Davies does not use these letters as data to explore censuring practices. Equally, in her discussion of political correctness and comedy, Jessica Milner-Davis (1996) draws on reader letters published in newspapers, as does Smith (1995) in Whipping up a Storm referred to in chapter 2. Despite this acknowledgment that readers’ letters have a central role in the expression of comic offence and the censuring of comedy, the practices adopted by both the offended and offender have not been closely examined. This thesis redresses this imbalance.

Study 1: Content Analysis of Readers’ Letters

The Letters

Having outlined the functional value of readers’ letters, I now move onto the quantitative content analysis of epistolic expressions of offence. The focus of this section is on the questions of what kinds of topics offend readers and get reported in Private Eye and the characteristics of that reporting. The content analysis was concerned with a number of related empirical questions. How much coverage do the incidences of offence, caused by the content of Private Eye, receive in the magazine? What are the characteristics of the individuals who are offended by media discourse? What topics are reported as causing offence? What are the defining characteristics of the offending discourse? How do the readers manage the offence - what is the outcome of the offence experienced? The aim of the content analysis is to provide a precise and reliable record of the selected features of epistolic expressions of offence that would not be apparent in casual
examination, because of the mass and complexity of the letters pages. The objective of the inquiry is to identify the items that cause offence to readers as publicly reported in Private Eye. The present content analysis considers manifest content or the denotative order of significance, as the purpose of the investigation is to analyse the observable features of the mass of data collected. The data set used in the analysis consists of 479 readers’ letters to Private Eye that express that the author has been offended by the Private Eye discourse. Letters included in the sample overtly show that the reader did not appreciate the serious and/or non-serious discourse or take issue with the content of Private Eye. To determine the inclusion/exclusion of the readers’ letters I referred to the tone and content of the letters. Letters complaining that Private Eye had misreported an event or that a story was incomplete or inaccurate were included in the sample if this had offended the reader in some way (see chapter 4 for more details of how the letters were collected). A number of letters received by the editor are not published and it may have been interesting to analyse the discursive features of such letters. However, as I am particularly interested in the public negotiation of comic offence and comic censure, I focussed on only those letters of complaint published. The 479 letters of complaint were subjected to various descriptive statistical tests.

Content Analysis Findings

Four hundred and 79 letters of complaint were printed between January 1971 and April 1999. The total number of all letters printed over the 28 year period used was 7521. Letters of complaint make up 6% of all letters printed. The number of letters printed in Private Eye expressing that readers have been offended by Private Eye discourse is temporally inconsistent. Some years many letters are published. For example 39 letters of complaint were printed in 1985. In others years few letters are published. For example 3 letters of complaint were published in 1972 and 2 in 1996. Such inconsistency is closely related to how the inclusion and exclusion of letters of complaint is determined. In my (SL) interview with Ian Hislop (IH) (7th September, 1998) he explains that a letter of complaint will be included on the letters page if it is ‘interesting’ to him:

SL: OK. Do you make the decisions regarding which letters are included or excluded in each?
IH: I do yeah.

A number of cross-tabulations were also conducted on the variables and categories, the results of which were included in the discussion only if relevant.
Chapter 5: Content and Composition Analysis of the Letters Page

SL: Each edition. OK, so could you tell me the factors that determine whether a letter is included or excluded, how, on what basis do you make the decision?

IH: Is it interesting.

SL: Is it interesting to you or?

IH: To me.

SL: To you personally?

IH: Yeah.

Comparing the correspondence columns of newspapers in 1975 and 1997 Bromley (1998) found that current newspapers publish more readers' letters than newspapers published in 1975. For example The Times printed 60 letters in its main correspondence column in 1975, compared to 90 in 1997. The increase is less significant for the tabloid press as The Mirror printed 75 readers' letters in 1975 and 76 in 1997 (Bromley, 1998). Figures for Private Eye show a similar trend as in 1975, a total of 105 letters was printed on the letters page and in 1997, 412 letters were printed, showing an increase of 307 letters. In my (SL) interview with Ian Hislop (IH) (7th September, 1998) he reports that of the hundred letters received after each edition, a few will be letters of complaint:

SL: So how many letters on average do you think you receive between each edition. Say every fortnight?

IH: Uh I don't know a hundred.

SL: A hundred. And do you read all of them or?

IH: I read everything that comes in.

SL: Really, gosh, so how many of those letters are letters of complaint, complaining about the content of Private Eye?

IH: Of what complaining about it's bad taste or I'm going to cancel my subscription?

SL: That's the stuff I'm interested in.

IH: Um one tends to sort of get a few of those in every time.

SL: Mmm mm. OK.

IH: Usually from people who don't seem to understand the point of the magazine.

SL: Right. And are they, you decide to include those basically because they have missed the point and it's funny in itself.

IH: I mean you know I'm always interested in what people, which things people think are over the top.

SL: Mmm mm.

IH: Or I mean it's a good sort of conduit for debate. You always get letters afterwards saying yes they agreed or no they didn't. So it sort of keeps you informed as to what your readers think of the publication.

Readers of different statuses write letters of complaint to Private Eye. Hall et al observe that letters printed are 'chosen for the status of the letter writer. Very special people will tend to have their
letters printed: so will very un-special people — "grass-roots’ voices" … the "balance" is struck by editors for editorial effect, rather than for strict numerical equality' (1978: 121). Readers of *Private Eye* authored 372 (78% of letters) letters expressing comic offence (see Table 5.1).4 These figures reflect a similar trend discovered by Bromley (1998), who found that of the 150 letters published in *The Sun’s* and *The Mirror’s* correspondence columns, only two were written by authors not identified as an ‘ordinary’ reader. As I illustrate in the quantitative content analysis of *Private Eye*’s libel history in chapter 7, complaints of comic offence made through the law of defamation are frequently made by elites (rich and powerful people). This is a stark contrast to the majority of authors of letters of complaint written to the editor of *Private Eye* expressing comic offence. There appears to be a divide between the strategies used to express comic offence that we may refer to as ‘poor man’ (letters of complaint) and ‘rich man’ (defamation law) strategies. In the following chapters I consider the different discursive strategies adopted by the ‘poor man’ (chapter 6) and ‘rich man’ (chapter 7) in their articulation of comic offence. In 94 cases (20%) letters of complaint were authored by a spokesperson for a group, such as the *Tottenham Institute for Political Correctness*, or at least their position and company address was specifically mentioned and made relevant. In 11 cases (2%) authors were officials, for example solicitors, who were representing a client. The author’s status was not determined in only 2 instances.

### Table 5.1 Author of Letters of Complaint Printed in *Private Eye*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reader</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>77.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spokesperson for group</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>97.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officialdom</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>99.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>479</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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4 To aid readability, in my discussions the percentages have been rounded either up or down to a whole number, following the rule that 0.5 and above are rounded up and below 0.5 are rounded down (Bryman and Cramer, 1997).
Table 5.2 shows how males (273 letters, 57%) authored more letters than females (87 letters, 18%). Five letters were co-authored by a male and female. One hundred and fourteen letters (24%) did not mention the gender of the reader, or the gender was indeterminate. These figures reflect the readership target audience that is ‘men interested in news behind the scenes’ (Willings Press Guide, 1999: 832). Reporting on the Royal Commissions study Attitudes to the Press, Tunstall argues that ‘letter writers are more likely to be men than women; are fairly evenly spread by age; are more Conservative and Liberal (and less Labour) than the population at large’ (1977: 221).

Table 5.2 Gender of Correspondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>57.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>75.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>76.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not determined</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>479</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.3 displays the types of readers that are given a voice on the letters page. Subscribers were authors of 59 letters printed (12%) and regular readers were authors of 38 letters (8%). Although subscribers and regular readers should understand and appreciate the Eye’s endeavours, Ian Hislop explains that subscribers ‘might still feel that we’ve strayed across the line or whatever. That’s fair enough’ (interview, 7th September, 1998). These figures contrast strikingly with the number of letters written by occasional readers (4 letters) and first time readers (1 letter). Complaining about failing to find something humorous is a delicate task and therefore those regular readers who complain may appear more objective and rational than someone who has read the magazine only once and has complained about it. The delicacy of expressing that one has been offended by Private Eye discourse is explored further in chapters 6 and 7, when examining the discursive strategies employed by readers when articulating offence has been caused by the Eye discourse and the press reporting of libel cases brought against Private Eye.
Table 5.3 Specified Reader Status of Correspondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subscriber</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular Reader</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional Reader</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Time</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>78.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>479</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As illustrated in Table 5.4, topics that cause offence are diverse, ranging from items about war to items related to individuals or groups with psychological problems. The specific topic of offence appears to be an author’s concern as only 5 cases (1%) saw the author complaining generally about the magazine, and the topic of offence was not determined in only 21 letters (4%). These figures reflect Bromley’s (1998) findings of correspondence columns. He found that few letters criticise the overall operation of the newspapers (a trend noted by Tunstall in 1977). Letters analysed by Bromley criticised leading articles, news items, feature stories, columns, headlines and advertisements. The topic receiving most attention by authors of the letters written to *Private Eye*, or at least reported as causing offence more regularly was personal appearance/reference or attack. This was reported as the initiator of offence in 100 cases (21%). The next most popular topic that can cause offence is items about prominent persons/politicians/celebrities as 55 letters (12%) referred to this topic. The topic of death/murder was the source of offence in 50 cases (10%), with inaccuracy accounting for offence in 44 letters (9%). Items about sexuality/practices/orientation were the source of offence in 28 cases (6%). Similar numbers of authors were offended by the topics of xenophobia/nationalism (3%), blasphemy/religious beliefs (4%), feminism/women’s issues (4%), royal family (4%), war (4%) and disagreement with other reader’s letters (3%). Items about psychological problems were the source of offence in 7 cases (2%), invasion of privacy in 5 cases (1%) and physical disability and illness in 4 cases (1%). These findings reflect Ian Hislop’s (IH) comments made in my (SL) interview with him (7th September, 1998):
Chapter 5: Content and Composition Analysis of the Letters Page

SL: Are there certain topics that seem to offend people say, the war in Kosovo. If you did what may be a sick joke about that?
IH: Yes I mean a lot of people were offended by the Winstony Blair cover, but you know I mean in war time people do get very sort of confused about the role of oppositions in war and the right to criticise.
SL: Right OK, have you ever been surprised about something a reader has been offended about, or do you when you’re writing *Private Eye* you sort of you can pinpoint what people will probably?
IH: No I’m always surprised what people take to find offence about.
SL: Really.
IH: Almost anything I think.

Complaints written by officials are instigated by a limited number of topics, all of which relate to the individual. Topics include personal appearance (64% of letters written by officials), inaccuracy (18% of letters), invasion of privacy (9%). ‘Ordinary’ readers responded to topics relating to the individual and to wider social concerns (such as war and the royal family) and spokespersons referred to most sections (with the exception of the royal family, physical disability, invasion of privacy and generally about the magazine).
### Table 5.4 Determined Topic of Complaint Causing Offence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xenophobia/nationalism</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blasphemy/religious beliefs</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminism/women's issues</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Family</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality/practices/orientation</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death/murder</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>35.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal appearance/reference</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>56.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical disability and illness</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>57.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological problems</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>58.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invasion of Privacy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>59.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prominent person/politicians/celebrities</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>71.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inaccuracy</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>80.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreement with reader letters</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>83.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally about the magazine</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>84.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not determined</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>88.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>479</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In contrast to the findings of the topic of offence where only 21 letters did not specifically mention
the topic, 194 letters (41%) did not specify the section, column or item in *Private Eye* that was the
instigator of the offence experienced (see Table 5.5). Fifty-three letters (11%) referred to the front
cover of the magazine and 31 letters (7%) mentioned a cartoon. These items are both satirical in
nature, implying that non-serious discourse is responsible for causing offence more often than
serious discourse or sections, such as Rotten Boroughs (5 letters) or Street of Shame (2 letters).
Cartoons may instigate more comic offence than other sections of the magazine because 'they have
immediate impact because you can see them straight away, there's no beating around the bush and
you don't have to read it through and that's why they are so important' (Barry Fantoni, interview,
4th July, 1998). Interestingly, 17 letters (4%) reported that other reader letters included on the letters
page offended the author. This is a common feature of letters pages as Jackson (1971) found that
occasionally readers protest at the complaints made by other readers. The data supports Ian
Hislop's view that the letters page exists so that readers can 'chat' (see interview extract above).
Eighty eight percent of letters referring to the letters page as a source of offence mentioned their
disagreement with other reader letters — suggesting that a form of dialogue exists on the letters page.
Other popular sections, which cause offence, are the gossip column Grovel (21 letters),
advertisements (13 letters) and Auberon Waugh's Diaries (13 letters).

Further, letters written by officials respond to few sections of *Private Eye*; Grovel (27% of letters
written by officials), Rotten Boroughs (9%), not specific (55%) and 'other' sections (9%).
Therefore the specific section causing offence is not as relevant or important when epistolary-
expressed offence has been experienced. This is also the trend when consulting letters authored by
readers (38% of reader's letters refer to non-specific sections) and spokespersons (48% of
spokesperson's letters are non-specific). Therefore the topic of an offending item seems more
important to authors than its location in the magazine, and thus whether it is positioned in a serious
or less-serious column. Readers and spokespersons refer to both serious and less-serious sections,
including advertisements, cartoons, the front cover and Psueds Corner and Auberon Waugh's
diaries, the Colour Section, Dave Spart, Letter From... and the Letters Page.
### Table 5.5 Specified Section of *Private Eye* Causing Offence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advertisement</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auberon Waugh's Diaries</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartoon</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartoon Strip</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colour Section</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave Spart</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Front cover</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gnome</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grovel</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hackwatch</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>31.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Junor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter From ...</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>33.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters Page</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lookalike</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>37.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunchtime O'Boulez</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psueds Corner</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>39.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotten Boroughs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street of Shame</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>40.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wimmin</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>41.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Specific</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>81.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>479</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.6 displays the responses given by the authors of the letters as a result of being offended. In 146 cases (31%) the author negatively characterised *Private Eye* in some way through the use of criticism, ridicule or denigration. Thompson (1994) observes that criticism or denigration is a strategy frequently used by *Eye* targets when attempting to reconcile themselves to the persistence attacks received. It could be argued that such responses actively engage in the activity in which *Private Eye* specialises—criticism and ridicule (this is an interesting observation that is discussed in chapter 7 when assessing the legal side to censuring humour). As I noted in chapter 2 when discussing Joan Baez’s response to Al Capp’s ‘Joanie Phoanie’ cartoon, a forceful defence is for the offended to attack the offender with critical humour or ridicule.

Twenty five percent of letters (121 cases) expected actions to be taken by *Private Eye*. These actions included apologies, explanations or simply inclusion of the author’s letter in *Private Eye*. Eighty-three cases (17%) simply expressed their disgust or offence and did not feel compelled to elaborate or add to the issue. Thirty-two (7%) of complaints resulted in cancelled subscriptions and 37 cases (8%) expressed that *Private Eye* would not be bought, read or ordered again. Interestingly, 7 cases (2%) expressed that despite the offence caused, they would remain a reader or subscriber. Eleven letters (2%) were unfinished or edited by the editor of *Private Eye* (as I show in the 2nd study in this chapter the editor often uses more covert strategies to manipulate the readers’ letters). Eighty-three letters (17%) did not require or suggest any action as they just expressed their offence. Different types of authors favoured different outcomes. Given that expected actions on the part of *Private Eye* is one of the more popular responses, it is unsurprising that letters authored by officials favour this response. Actions included expecting *Private Eye* to apologise, or to promise that the client represented by the official will not appear in *Private Eye* again. Seventy three percent of letters authored by officials responded in this manner, compared to 22% of letters authored by readers and 33% authored by spokespersons, although interestingly this is also the mode of response for the latter group. The mode of response given by ordinary readers was to negatively characterise *Private Eye*, 33% of letters written by readers responded in this way, compared to only 24% of letters written by spokespersons and 9% of letters written by officials.
### Table 5.6 Outcome of the Offence Caused

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cancels Subscription</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May/will not read/buy/order</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Eye again</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remains a Regular Reader</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected actions on part of</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>41.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Eye</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Characterisation</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>71.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of Private Eye</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Action</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>88.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfinished/edited</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>91.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>479</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, letters in which the author cites that he/she will remain a regular reader while referring to a specific section of the magazine were instigated by humorous sections of the magazine: cartoons (14% of this outcome referred to this section) or the front cover (29% of this outcome refer to the front cover). Further, 19% of cancelled subscriptions were in response to the front cover and 13% in response to a cartoon. In 19% of cases where the reader would not buy/read or order the publication again this was a response to the contents of the front cover. This was the section most frequently referred to when responding in this manner, suggesting that non-serious discourse considered offensive can have serious consequences for *Private Eye*. Other traditionally 'non-serious' sections also have serious consequences. Fifty per cent of the letters referring to the Lookalike section negatively characterise *Private Eye*. Similarly, 50% of letters responding to the Wimmin section negatively characterised the publication, as did 43% of letters referring to Psueds Corner.
Chapter 5: Content and Composition Analysis of the Letters Page

Drawing together the various strands of the content analysis, the content analysis has revealed:

- Most letters appearing on the letters page are written by individual readers of *Private Eye*. Writing letters of complaint is a device predominantly used by the 'poor man'.
- A greater number of letters are represented as male authored than female authored.
- Most authors do not specify their reader status.
- The most frequently mentioned topic of offence is personal appearance/reference or attack.
- The topic of the offensive item is more often mentioned than the section of the magazine in which it appears.
- Where the section is specified those that have deliberate humorous intentions - the front cover and cartoons - are frequently mentioned.
- Officials are restricted in the topics that cause offence - they complain about topics that are based on individuals - whereas readers complain about these topics and those that are widely felt in society.
- Officials expect actions to be taken by *Private Eye* whilst readers prefer to negatively characterise *Private Eye*.

Study 2: Composition Analysis of the Letters Page

This study focuses on the structure and composition of the letters page. Developing the notion of editorial manipulation of readers' letters introduced above, this study analyses how those readers who claim they have been offended by *Private Eye* discourse are treated by the editor. The review of readers' correspondence above highlighted how readers' letters are communicatively important for both readers and editors of printed discourse, as it is an arena where readers and editors interact and it is in the letters' column that readers' opinions 'appear in the press in their least mediated public form' (Hall et al, 1978: 120). Readers' letters are dynamic material for the editor of *Private Eye*. They differ from jokes, spoofs and cartoons originally produced by the editor and contributors to *Private Eye*. The authors of the letters provide the format, content and spectrum of letters from which the editor selects those to be published and manipulated in particular ways. Readers' letters are a quasi-interaction in the sense that the letters function as dialogue between readers and producers of *Private Eye*, although there is a power imbalance because the editor has the ultimate control over which letters are given a voice, how they appear on the letters' page and how they will, if necessary, be edited. To recall from the interview extract included above, Ian Hislop reports that inclusion/exclusion of letters are determined by what he himself finds 'interesting'.

The letters page offers a site for readers to express values and opinions related to societal issues, but more importantly, the letters page provides an opportunity for the editor to control feelings or
Chapter 5: Content and Composition Analysis of the Letters Page

expressions of dissent directed at his/her publication as a whole or at particular parts of the publication. Given that 'newspapers have long realised that one of the best ways to deal with complaints and simultaneously to entertain other readers is to publish them' (Wilson, 1996: 246), the focus of this study is on how the editor treats offended readers when publishing their letters on the letters page. Although the results of the content analysis reported above highlighted that only 2% of readers' letters are overtly edited, for example through the use of dots (...) which suggests that part of the letter has been left out, there are a number of covert strategies employed by the editor when managing and responding to the charge of causing offence. The editorial strategies used when responding to the charge of causing comic offence were explored using a qualitative composition analysis. To recap from chapter 2, the composition analysis endorsed Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1998) framework for analysing page layout focussing on the framing systems, information values and salience of the letters page.

Overall Presentation of the Letters Page

The letters page has grown in size over the 28-year period included in the data set. In 1971 the total number of readers' letters printed was 79, in 1998 the total was 364. This is an increase of 285 letters printed. However, the proportion of the magazine devoted to the letters page may not have changed because the whole magazine has grown in size. In the early 1970s the number of pages printed was approximately 24, in the late 1990s the number of pages printed was 36. The letters page has also grown in complexity and has become one of the most intricate sections of Private Eye. In the early 1970s the letters page often consisted of only one letter (for example, No. 239, 12.02.71: 8), and was headed 'Letter' rather than 'Letters'. In more recent editions, many more letters written by readers appear on the letters page (for example, No. 968, 22.01.99: 14-15 has 12 readers' letters on the letters page). The cartoon strip HOM SAP by David Austin has always appeared on the letters page. This is the longest running strip in Private Eye (Private Eye, 1996). Although other items and cartoons surround the readers' letters in both editions (such as the crossword and columns of written text such as 'Brussels Sprouts'), the most recent edition has many

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5 E. P. Thompson's celebrated article, 'Sir, Writing by candlelight ...' (1973) illustrates how the media managed dissent in relation to public attitudes to the 1970 power workers' strike. Strikers were represented as irrational and the strike was portrayed as affecting the whole of the nation, particularly the vulnerable in society. Through the readers' letters printed, class conflict was packaged as the actions of a small group of men having profound detrimental effects on the poor in society.
more contributions by readers. These contributions are not only letters about the content of *Private Eye*, but also reader involvement in the Colemanballs section, the I-SPY section and the Lookalike section. As noted above, these sections involve readers because they require readers sending in funny photographs (of people, places, signpost and placards) or humorous excerpts from interviews or commentaries broadcast on radio or television, or printed in the press.

The letters page is usually positioned towards the middle pages of *Private Eye*. In the 1970s the letters appeared haphazardly on the page whereas in the 1980s and 1990s the letters usually start at the top of the left-hand page and often continue onto the facing right-hand page (although occasionally the letters begin on the right-hand page and then continue over the page on the next left-hand page). In the 1980s and 1990s rarely does the letters page start in the middle of the page, as the first letter usually begins in the top left-hand corner of the page.

The letters page is palpably constructed as a conventional 'letters' page found in more serious publications (such as the broadsheet press, and magazines such as the *Radio Times*) by the use of the leading 'letters' at the top of the page. Further, above the first letter on the page, is printed a hand-drawn envelope. This envelope has 'Private Eye' handwritten across the front of the letter which functions as the address, a black stamp in the top right-hand corner (with the Queen's head marked in white) and a black circle printed to the left of the stamp as a postmark. As the word 'Private Eye' is presented as handwritten this serves to illustrate that what follows has also been written by people sending their letters to *Private Eye*. This drawing pre-empts the content of the page – letters from readers. The text positioned below this envelope is strategically organised as a series of letters. Most letters start 'Sir' and end with 'Yours faithfully' and include the names of those who sent the letter in addition to their area of residence. Informality and intimacy is implied through the inclusion of names and areas of residence. Letters pages have become an expected and accepted part of media discourses. Part of what makes the page so rhetorically effective is our familiarity with it as a conventional letters page as it looks like any other letters page printed in British magazines and newspapers and thus is constructed according to convention that is part of the documentary reality (Atkinson and Coffey, 1997).

6 Although 1999 was included in the data set, this year was not used to illustrate the increase in letters printed because the collection for 1999 was incomplete as it included copies from Jan-April inclusive. All editions printed in 1998 were included in the data set.
Chapter 5: Content and Composition Analysis of the Letters Page

The font used in the text of the letters differs to that used in the remainder of the publication. Unlike other sections of *Private Eye*, the readers' letters are printed in a *font that seems to lean to the right as handwriting often does* (*Lucida Sans* font). This font suggests that although the letters appear in *Private Eye* as printed text, originally they were received as handwritten text. Other items printed in *Private Eye* that include letters from readers or contributions made by those not officially working for *Private Eye* are printed in the same font as the readers' letters. In number 952 (12.06.98) the St Albion Parish News column (a satirical column on Tony Blair and the Labour Party) included a 'Letter of the Week' which was printed in the same font as letters appearing on the letters page. The use of different fonts may function to highlight a distinction between items written by those working on *Private Eye* and those items written by readers or sent in by other contributors. The main text of the letters appears in lowercase, whereas the name of the author of the letter (when given) always appears in UPPERCASE. The ending of the letter (such as 'Yours faithfully') and the name of the author is always centred, which is a convention often adhered to in handwritten letters. Centring the name indicates to the reader that although the letter appears in a typed format in *Private Eye*, it was originally received in handwritten format.

As with all other pages of *Private Eye*, the letters page is split into three equal columns. Each single column is approximately 6cm in width and 27cm in length, which has remained constant since 1971 (the first year included in the sample). When placing a number of *Private Eye* letters pages side by side, a regular pattern is instantly revealed. Although the contents of the letters change from issue to issue, the structure, format, layout and presentation of the letters page does not. The editor recurrently adopts a number of rhetorical strategies in the design and construction of the letters page and it is these strategies that are of interest to me in this qualitative study. The items chosen for analysis are illustrative of the strategies employed by the editor of *Private Eye* when presenting readers' letters. Three main areas of interest are discussed:

(i) The Use of Straplines
(ii) Letters as Intertext
(iii) Strategic Positioning of Readers' Letters

It is to these identifiable strategies which I now turn.
Chapter 5: Content and Composition Analysis of the Letters Page

(i) The Use of Straplines

One of the most commonly employed strategies utilised by the editor of Private Eye when printing letters by offended readers is to preface the letter with a heading or strapline consisting of words, phrases and sayings, which creates the 'the illusion of oral mode' (Fowler, 1991: 63). For example 'Letter of the week' (No. 884, 03.11.95: 14), 'Piste Off' (No. 686, 01.04.88: 13).

Most letters have their own individual strapline which appears in bold lowercase and in a larger font than that used in the individual letters. Straplines are captions created by the editor that appear above the letter(s). The font is upright which may signal that the editor has constructed the strapline and was not included in the handwritten contribution made by the author of the letter, thus conveying authority and distancing the editor from the content of letter. Straplines are used by the editor as a resource in printed text-based media which is repeated edition by edition and built up in the readers' mind. These are performative, actively determining how the letter(s) should be interpreted, informing readers of the topic of the letter(s) and highlighting the most important feature of the letter(s) (Van Dijk, 1983). Straplines or headings:

are seen as having crucial importance in the language of newspaper reporting. They are one of the most important devices for summarising and drawing attention to a story and, so far as the press is concerned, are also one of the strongest visual indicators of style (Eldridge, 1995: 173).

Moon observes that straplines are 'important: the lexical choices involved are significant, establishing expectations cataphorically and initiating readers into the following texts with which they are cohesive' (1998: 291). Through the use of straplines the editor can encourage or guide the audience to a particular reading, often with interesting contrast and in an economical manner. Moon (1998) considers the headline and the story as 'single subdiscourses', which should be considered together, and not in isolation. So, even though the reader writes the letter (either wholly or partly) and the editor of Private Eye creates the strapline, they should be read together in order to facilitate understanding or appreciate the editor's intended meaning. Straplines or framelines:

can simultaneously both disconnect the elements of a layout from each other, signifying that they are to be read as, in some sense, separate and independent, perhaps even contrasting items of information, and at the same time, framing devices establish what elements, namely those within the frame, are to be read together (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1998: 188-189).
Chapter 5: Content and Composition Analysis of the Letters Page

Straplines are integral parts of the readers’ letters, facilitating interest in the letter and framing how it may be interpreted. The strapline’s relation to the letter can vary in kind and depth. Straplines are sometimes unrelated to the letter, can be lexically cohesive or semantically appropriate. Straplines also function as both opening and closing devices for interpreting the letters and signalling humour. Straplines demarcate one letter from another and provide the audience with crucial ‘clues’ to assist the decoding process, and when read in conjunction with the letter they create humour. This creation of humour is important given that ‘response to attacks do not necessarily make good reading’ (Morrish, 1996: 226). Although the straplines themselves are not particularly humorous, they can and do signal the intention to joke.

Straplines are created and constructed by the editor. These straplines are often abusive and derogatory to the author of the letter. To take a few examples, straplines have included ‘Dopey Letter’ (No. 666, 26.06.97: 14), ‘Poor lunatic’ (No. 945, 06.03.98: 14), ‘Loony’ (No. 556, 26.08.83: 11), ‘Claire – de Loony?’ (No. 624, 15.11.85: 15) and ‘Party poopers’ (No. 962, 30.10.98: 14) and a letter authored by Anne Payne is given the strapline ‘Real Payne’ (No. 594, 21.09.84: 12). Most straplines negatively characterise the author of the letter. Such negative characterisation may have serious emotional consequences for the author of the letter as the ‘bulk of the correspondence is serious as opposed to frivolous, and appears to result from genuine feelings or convictions’ (Jackson, 1971: 158). Through the use of derogatory straplines, the editor of the Eye is attacking offended readers and ridiculing the readers’ strong negative emotions. Such bias and negative straplines ‘can inhibit or fully distort the local comprehension of a text’ (Van Dijk, 1983: 35).

The editor gives noms de plume or pseudonyms to offended readers. Noms de plumes are common features of readers’ letters. Ian Jackson sampled correspondence columns of weekly newspapers in 1964 and found that 16 per cent of letters were signed with noms de plume, including ‘Angry Rochdalian’ and ‘Disgusted Guildford Resident’ (1971: 156). The majority of editors are clearly prepared to accept, and many correspondents continue to use, noms de plume. This convention will certainly continue; no evening newspaper editor would lightly risk the loss of as much as a third of his correspondence through its rejection (Jackson, 1971: 157).

Noms de plume are frequently used by the author him/herself in order to maintain anonymity. The use of noms de plume in the Eye’s correspondence column differs to other publications. In other publications, such as those studied by Jackson, the authors of the letters construct their own pen
names. However, in *Private Eye*, the editor gives the author a pseudonym. For example Sheila Miller is given the name "Intolerant of N19" (No. 525, 29.01.82: 10) and Harold Ingham is named ‘Disgusted, Tunbridge Wells’ (No. 584, 04.05.84: 12). Other examples include ‘‘Disgusted’’ of L.A’ (No. 539, 13.08.82: 10), ‘‘Disgusted’’ (No. 654, 09.01.87: 15), ‘One angry man’ (No. 945, 06.03.98: 14) and ‘Fucking Disgusted’ (No. 880, 08.09.95: 15). The straplines relate semantically to the author of the letter – either by reference to the author’s profession, place of residence or personal characteristics that are evident in the written text of the letter. Therefore little interpretive work is required.

Straplines are a central source of humour on the letters page. Through the use of straplines such as ‘Disgusted, Tunbridge Wells’ it is almost as if the editor is implying ‘Oh, here we go again, we’ve disgusted or upset another reader’. This predictability may undermine the complaint. These straplines seem to have a self-accolade or self-congratulatory function. *Private Eye* journalists, producing discourse with critical intent may predict that ‘Disgusted from Tunbridge Wells’ is bound to write in to complain on the grounds of comic offence. There is a smug self-congratulatory feeling that the *Eye* journalists have been successful or hit the right target because ‘Shocked from Tunbridge Wells’ writes to tell the *Eye* journalist how awful he/she is or how awful *Private Eye* is as a publication. From this vantage point, receiving letters of complaint due to comic offence can therefore be an indicator of the *Eye*’s success. As Bezanson et al observe:

> editors faced with a complaint sometimes will invite the complainant to express it in a letter to the editor. This may satisfy some complainants, but a published letter, with nothing more, properly can be regarded as a self-serving statement (1987: 43).

Straplines taking the form of noms de plume are akin to canned jokes that are prefaced with the standard ‘Did you hear the one about’ or ‘Let me tell you a story’ which signals to the hearer that a joke follows, or standardized jokes that often begin with a ‘routine three-part list that would not be acceptable as part of serious discourse’ (Mulkay, 1988: 52). The editor of *Private Eye* uses the phrase ‘Disgusted of …’ to signal to the reader that what follows is a joke or should be interpreted in a humorous manner. Letters written by offended readers are often presented in sets of three, which is simultaneously signalled by the strapline, such as ‘Pack of Three’ (No. 788, 28.02.92: 16).
(ii) Letters as Intertext

On closer inspection letters written by offended readers that are printed on the letters page are often related to or reflect the discourse of other columns printed in *Private Eye*, such as ‘A Doctor Writes’. All documents, whether letters, newspaper articles or advertisement do not stand-alone and are intertextually linked to other texts from the same genre, or other kinds of textual product (Atkinson and Coffey, 1997). Documents do not:

construct systems or domains of documentary reality as individual, separate activities. Documents refer to other realities and domains. They also refer to other documents ... the analysis of documentary reality must, therefore, look beyond separate texts, and ask how they are related (Atkinson and Coffey, 1997: 55-56; emphasis in original; see also Deacon et al, 1999).

Julia Kristeva coined the term intertextuality in the late 1960s (see Kristeva, 1986). Intertextuality was a significant feature in Foucault’s analyses of discourse highlighting that ‘there can be no statement that in one way or another does not reactualize others’ (1972: 98). Texts are constituted by other texts, although the other texts are not always overtly cued (Fairclough, 1992). Intertextuality ‘occurs any time one text suggests or requires reference to some other identifiable text or stretch of discourse, spoken or written’ (Norrick, 1989: 117). Although Norrick analyses humour in verbal interaction, many of the fundamental features of the interactional aspects of intertextuality can be applied to humour in written text. The concept of intertextuality highlights the interactional aspect of humour. Norrick (1989) observes that in order to work intertextual humour requires the performer and the audience to share knowledge and experience of the pre-existing text. Further, jokes can be small intelligence tests for the audience as the audience is required to display knowledge and understanding or lack of knowledge and understanding. Straplines constructed by the editor often refer to other satirical columns that are the staple diet of the *Eye*, such as ‘A Doctor Writes’. Letters strapped ‘A Doctor Writes’ therefore can only be successful for an audience familiar with the source text. Using straplines and letters in an intertextual manner can facilitate the feeling of community or the ‘*Private Eye* club’ which as noted above by Ian Hislop is one function of the letters page. Failure to recognise the intertextual

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7 John Fiske (1987) refers to two types of intertextuality: horizontal and vertical. Horizontal intertextuality refers to relations between texts linked by genre, character and content. Vertical intertextuality refers to relationships between a primary text (TV programme) and other secondary texts of a different type that refer to the primary text (programme publicity and journalistic comments) or tertiary texts referring to the primary text (readers’ letters and gossip based on the TV programme).
relations and ‘hence pass the test its teller poses, shows a lack of presumably general cultural knowledge and signals nonmembership in cultural groups more obviously than an intelligence deficiency’ (Norrick, 1989: 121). Using the letters to convey humour leads to solidarity in the non-offended Eye readers because by passing the test they illustrate their shared background knowledge and group membership – those who ‘get’ Private Eye humour.

By taking one example, of which many more could have been cited, we can see how the intertextuality functions on the letters page. In Private Eye number 541 (10.09.82) a letter printed on page 9 from Dr M. A. Malavashi (see below) is given the strapline ‘A Doctor Writes ...’. This is a popular strapline used in the Eye (see No. 373, 02.04.76: 6; No. 541, 10.09.82: 9; No. 621, 04.10.85: 12).

Sir,
Your paper however humorous and interesting it may appear at first sight is not to my liking I am sorry to say. It is badly organised, nihilistic and furthermore it is negative to the point that I must ask you with all due respect, to stop sending me the paper in question and ask furthermore for a reimbursement of the monies paid out by me to receive it.
I feel sure that it attracts a large following, a following that is based on the wrong reasons, if you may wish to know more do write to me and I shall be only too happy to tell you where you are going wrong. This not to say that you are going wrong. This is not to say that you and your contributors are not unclever far from it.
Yours faithfully,
DR M. A. MALAVASHI,
Twineham Grange, Twineham.

Dr Malavashi is complaining generally about the ‘badly organised’, ‘nihilistic’ and ‘negative’ features of the magazine, and is non-specific with regard to the section/column or item (see lines 5 and 6). The last paragraph reads ‘I feel sure that it attracts a large following, a following that is based on the wrong reasons, if you wish to know more do write to me and I shall be only too happy to tell you where you are going wrong. This is not to say that you and your contributors are not unclever far from it’ (lines 11-18). In the same edition, in the bottom left-hand corner of page 12 is printed a column called ‘A Doctor writes’ (see figure 5.1). In this issue the Doctor is talking about
the potential dangers of drinking soup. This is a column regularly printed in the Eye, which was created in the mid-1970s and is still included in recent editions. This column ridicules the medical profession, but in particular the vocabulary used by Doctors, the techniques used to talk about illnesses regarding which the Doctors have limited knowledge, and the ridiculous diagnoses that are often based on limited knowledge or simply state the obvious. For example, holes in pockets are called ‘trousierius interlinus maximus’ and ‘what normally happens is that the fabric of the patient’s pocket becomes worn until eventually a hole appears’ (No. 554, 11.03.83: 15). Blinking is called ‘oculocculusis temporalis’ and is diagnosed when the ‘patient’s eyelids momentarily cover the surface of the eyeball at regular intervals’ (No. 399, 01.04.77: 11). Short superficial answers are given to questions, which are then expanded upon in great detail. For example the column printed in number 488 (29.08.80: 16) begins ‘As a Doctor I am often asked, “Doctor, are legs a health hazard?” Well, the short answer is No’. A lengthy explanation is then offered. Equally in number 430 (09.06.78: 14) the column begins ‘More and more patients are asking me, “Doctor, will eating kippers damage my health?” The short answer is No’. The Doctor then expands on the topic giving justification for his answer. Whether the problem is serious or not, those who are ‘anxious’ or ‘worried’ should ‘seek medical advice’ (No. 554, 11.03.83: 15).

![SOUP](image)

**Figure 5.1 ‘A Doctor Writes’ column, Private Eye, No. 541, 10.09.82: 9**

Those readers familiar with this column may make connections between Dr Malavashi’s letter headed by the phrase ‘A Doctor Writes …’ and the ‘A Doctor writes’ column. Giving Dr
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Malavashi this strapline (although it is lexically related to the author’s title) encourages a particular reading. One interpretation could be that the Doctor complaining about the content of Private Eye reflects the qualities of the Doctors ridiculed in the regular column. The Doctor authoring the letter lacks reasonable understanding of the topic being discussed – he/she does not really understand what Private Eye’s aims and objectives are and is stating the obvious - that Private Eye is badly organised, nihilistic and negative. This raises doubts about the genuineness of the reader’s comic offence, given that he/she has misinterpreted Private Eye’s aims. The readers’ letter ends in a similar vein to the ‘A Doctor writes’ column. If the contributors to Private Eye are worried about these symptoms then they are to consult the Doctor who will be ‘only too happy to tell where you are going wrong’.

The intertextuality between the strapline and the letter works on the formulaic structure of the ‘A Doctor Writes’ column. The Doctor in both the letter and the column attempts to offer a detailed explanation for a seemingly simple condition or problem – trying to find complex explanations for mundane complaints or complaints that do not warrant extensive explanations or diagnosis. These two different texts (the letter and the whole column) have shared features. Readers familiar with the derisive nature of the ‘A Doctor Writes’ column who read the strapline ‘A Doctor Writes’ may interpret the author of the letter as being mocked by the editor of Private Eye.

Interpretation of letters straplined by ‘A Doctor Writes’ may also work on another level. The column is a fictional column in Private Eye, thought up and written by satirists working on the magazine. Therefore the Doctor included in the satirical column is not a ‘real’ doctor, in the sense that he/she does not have the necessary medical qualifications and experience to be awarded the title ‘Doctor’, but simply adopts the Doctor’s persona. Therefore, one may question the authenticity of letters straplined by ‘A Doctor Writes’. As readers, we may be expected to regard the author who refers to him/herself as a Doctor to be someone who has simply used this title in the letter, which undermined the credibility of the author. This view is strengthened by Private Eye giving a letter about the ‘Doing the Rounds’ column (based on the medical profession) the strapline ‘A Real Doctor Writes ...’ (No. 829, 24.09.93: 13). This letter provides Private Eye with additional information about consultant’s working hours reported on in the previous edition. If this time the author is regarded as a ‘real’ Doctor we may assume that all other Doctors writing to Private Eye are not real. Thus we may be sceptical with regards to whether the author referring to him/herself
as Doctor has actually been offended by the discourse, or if this is fictional. Further, we may interpret this as suggesting that a satirist working on *Private Eye* has written the letter.

The familiarity with *Private Eye* discourse that is necessary to appreciate the cross references and connections involved with the intertextuality helps to form the *Private Eye* club. Members of the 'club' are identified as those who recognise the intertextuality. Equally intertextuality encourages solidarity as it draws *Private Eye* and the audience together to amuse themselves at the expense of a third party – those offended readers. The humour is derived from the author of the source text (the Doctor) and the genre it represents – somebody who talks about mundane issues in a manner that attempts to elaborate them or those who promote their own profession.

Other columns in *Private Eye* adopt the structure of 'A Doctor Writes'. These columns include 'Alternative Voice: Dave Spart Writes' (No. 505, 24.04.81: 13) and 'A Taxi-driver writes' (No. 727, 27.10.89: 17). These columns are very negative in tone and both Dave Spart and the Taxi driver speak outspokenly and frankly on topical issues of the day. Readers’ letters that are written in negative and frank manner are often given similar straplines. For example 'PR Man Writes' (No. 626, 13.12.85: 14), 'A Vicar Writes' (No. 622, 18.10.85: 13), 'A Sicko Writes' (No. 715, 12.05.89: 12), 'A Loony Writes' (No. 640, 27.06.86: 13) and '1st Secretary Writes' (No. 595, 05.10.84: 12). Again we can see how a reader familiar with *Private Eye* discourse may recognise the derisory tone suggested by the strapline and may interpret this as signifying that the author of the letter has simply written a diatribe, rather than being interpreted as someone 'genuinely' offended by *Private Eye* discourse. Links to other *Eye* columns are also implied in the straplines of letters of complaint, such as 'O'Boulez on Boulez' (No. 962, 30.10.98, p.14) and 'Curse of Gnome' (No. 650, 14.11.86: 15).

(iii) Strategic Positioning of Readers’ Letters

The manner in which the letters expressing comic offence are positioned on the letters page can affect our interpretation and response to the offended readers. Layout and positioning provide ordering and coherence (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1998). Where things are positioned on the page 'endows them with specific information values in relation to each other' (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1998: 200). Letters authored by offended readers are presented on the letters page in a particular manner. Richardson observes how readers’ letters are ‘purposefully placed in relationship to and
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with other readers' letters' (2001: 148). Offended readers are treated in a humorous manner by strategically placing letters of complaint of comic offence alongside or above letters that show that the reader has appreciated and 'understood' the Private Eye discourse that offended the other reader(s). This can be conducted overtly (with more pro than anti letters) or covertly (less pro letters which are strategically positioned to facilitate a particular reading), which may effect the decoding conducted by the audience.

The editor of Private Eye undermines those readers who have been offended by Private Eye by overtly and quantifiably under-representing offended readers. After its 'Media to Blame' issue (No. 932, 05.09.97) which reported on the press reaction to the death of Princess Diana (see chapter 3), the subsequent edition included the varied reader responses to the coverage. Two whole pages of letters on the subject were printed in number 933, which were in addition to one other page devoted to readers' letters on other topics. A superficial reading of the letters page highlights a simple, but effective rhetorical device employed to counter criticisms of the scrutinised columns, items and cartoons. The ratio of letters received by Private Eye is reported in number 933 as 10:1 in favour of Private Eye. The ratio is strategically planned as Private Eye fails to mention that this consensus is exclusive to Private Eye readers. If non-readers were incorporated into the ratio the figures may be somewhat different. The favoured response is locally located in the textual organisation – 6 letters opposed to the Gnome article are assembled compared to 33 letters in favour. Simply publishing more pro letters than anti letters (disregarding whether more anti or pro letters were received) functions to place those against Private Eye as an insignificant minority. Here the editor is calling on the audience to consider whether they would wish to align themselves with the insignificant offended minority or the non-offended majority. Without overtly saying this, the readers of Private Eye are left to make their own conclusions about the undesirable nature of being offended by Private Eye, or at least if offended the risks involved when publicly expressing comic offence.

Alternatively, the editor can publish the same number of pro and anti letters, or more anti letters, but can position them in such a manner that the anti letters are perceived as humorous. Outrage was caused by the 'Heathrow Arrivals' cartoon on the Gulf War, by Nick Newman, and published in No. 759 (18.01.91: 5). In the two issues following publication of the cartoon (Nos. 760 and 761) the Eye published letters for and against the cartoon. In No. 761, 4 anti letters and 2 pro letters were printed (see figure 5.2) under the strapline 'Cartoon time...'. This headline refers to the instigator of the comic offence (a cartoon) whilst simultaneously suggesting that what follows is not to be
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Letters

Cartoon time...

Sir,

Firstly I am a serving officer in Saudi Arabia with the RAMC (Royal Army Medical Corps). My sister sent me your organ of which, until now, I have been a fan. I opened your organ to see your joke on page five and then on page seven (Numerous Unis) both in your 18 January edition. I am sitting here on the eve of battle wondering what may come next. I thought Private Eye might provide some humour to boost my morale: "I'll let my neighbour see it later, I'll cheer them up."

I thought I saw your cartoon of the undertakers awaiting at Heathrow with placards of soldiers' names on, I have a Corporal Jones and a Pie Smith; I don't think seeing their names makes them happy.

On the next page was Numero Uno's reference to body bags. There aren't any body bags in Saudi as the soldiers won't be flown home. Saudi law says they should be buried within 24 hours. Anyway, any more than that inside a body bag and it explodes. Also, if that ever-tadvertised and maligned man Saddam Hussein uses chemical agents against us, putting people into plastic bags will ruin the chemical agents and may kill the War Graves Commission personnel who come to register the bodies and place them in war graves. As for your four temple jokes, if you want to think about that and the Apocalypse and Armageddon, which side do you think we're on?

And as to Ged Smith on an ex-soldier, yes we do read Private Eye. But he doesn't speak for us. We're here to do a job, finish it and get home alive. As to his idea on oil, he should look at the industrialised West's oil supply in terms of years and then at the Arabian peninsula's supply. When we run out, where will we have to go for oil? Arabia.

If you didn't stop Hussein now he would have taken the Arabian peninsula, had all the oil, controlled OPEC and hence the world's economy. After all, you think that the only reason we're here is to start the fourth crusade? Wrong! Think on this. The only real area in the world that can cause dinosaurs to continue humans strife is the Middle East. If we can sort this area out, stop them killing each other, maybe, just maybe, there is a chance of world peace, who knows.

Anyway I'm just writing to say that if you joined up and you could think how funny your jokes are when you are sitting in the sand miles from nowhere. But don't just sit there and procrastinate and write with your holier than thou attitude. Consider the fact that some soldiers may not come back. We stopped some jokes about death when we stepped off the plane. We're here to do a job. Don't tell us off and make us feel like we've wasted our time. Just support us, we're your sons and daughters out here.

K.E. COMLEY, SGT.

Saudi Arabia.

Sir,

Yes. I read your cartoon in Issue 759 showing undertakers at Heathrow with placards of soldiers' names on, I have a Corporal Jones and a Pie Smith; I don't think seeing their names makes them happy.

On the next page was Numero Uno's reference to body bags. There aren't any body bags in Saudi as the soldiers won't be flown home. Saudi law says they should be buried within 24 hours. Anyway, any more than that inside a body bag and it explodes. Also, if that ever-tadvertised and maligned man Saddam Hussein uses chemical agents against us, putting people into plastic bags will ruin the chemical agents and may kill the War Graves Commission personnel who come to register the bodies and place them in war graves. As for your four temple jokes, if you want to think about that and the Apocalypse and Armageddon, which side do you think we're on?

And as to Ged Smith on an ex-soldier, yes we do read Private Eye. But he doesn't speak for us. We're here to do a job, finish it and get home alive. As to his idea on oil, he should look at the industrialised West's oil supply in terms of years and then at the Arabian peninsula's supply. When we run out, where will we have to go for oil? Arabia.

If you didn't stop Hussein now he would have taken the Arabian peninsula, had all the oil, controlled OPEC and hence the world's economy. After all, you think that the only reason we're here is to start the fourth crusade? Wrong! Think on this. The only real area in the world that can cause dinosaurs to continue humans strife is the Middle East. If we can sort this area out, stop them killing each other, maybe, just maybe, there is a chance of world peace, who knows.

Anyway I'm just writing to say that if you joined up and you could think how funny your jokes are when you are sitting in the sand miles from nowhere. But don't just sit there and procrastinate and write with your holier than thou attitude. Consider the fact that some soldiers may not come back. We stopped some jokes about death when we stepped off the plane. We're here to do a job. Don't tell us off and make us feel like we've wasted our time. Just support us, we're your sons and daughters out here.

K.E. COMLEY, SGT.

Saudi Arabia.

Sir,

For a magazine which manages to fill its pages with much indignation at all the immoralities of other publications, Newman's cartoon in Issue 759 provided confirmation of its own hypocrisy. I am not one of life's complainers but the cartoon touched on a matter of life and death and the bereavement that is likely to strike many families in coming months—and that, I assure you, is no laughing matter. Basic moral law dictates that you should apologise immediately. The question is—do you have the guts to do so?

Yours faithfully,

O.L. S. CONOLLY,

Paris.

Sir,

I thought your "Undertaker" cartoon was brilliant and I hope you will ignore the complaints of bad taste. War is not tasteful. It kills people. I suspect it will be years before we know the true total of those killed or otherwise smashed up in this wicked and unnecessary war. Meanwhile, the Eye's black humour is a welcome relief from the sanctimonious/bloodthirsty tone of other papers.

Yours faithfully,

M.WILLIAMS,

Wootton, Beds.

Sir,

Your recent cartoon showing undertakers waiting at an airport displaying placards with soldiers names on them must raise as one of the sickest things I have ever seen.

Yours faithfully,

KELVIN JORDON.

National Front Ex-Servicemen's Association,

London N17.

O.B.N.

NORMA MAJOR drew gasps of admiration yesterday when she turned up on Prime Minister husband John's arm in a glamorous, full-length evening gown for a night on the town.

Norma, who usually shuns the limelight, showed she is no slouch in the fashion stakes at the Conservative party's winter ball at London's Grosvenor House hotel.

The stunning outfit, neatly tucked in at the waist and with trendy long sleeves and a plunging neckline, was a tailor-made answer to claims she has few glamorous clothes in her wardrobe.

When her husband John became Premier, she was quickly dubbed shy, with no desire to away from the family home. But last night fashion experts were saying Norma might just be making a transformation — to Leading Lady and fashion queen.

Daily Express

But never mind the girly bits, what is Tina Brown like? "The best editor I ever worked for," one person tells me. "Smart, tough, funny, sexy, brilliant," says another. "Getting a job with Tina was like dying and waking up in hell back then," says a third.

MARTYN HARRIS

Telegraph Weekend Magazine

Submitted by Ena B. Pinman, E. Strugb, E. Davenpaper.

£10 paid for all entries put forward for the Order of the Brown Nose.

Figure 5.2 Letters Page, Private Eye, No. 761, 15.02.91: 13

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taken seriously and is a time for fun or the creation of humour. As all of the letters referring to the ‘Heathrow Arrivals’ cartoon are placed under this one strapline, this suggest that the letters should be read as belonging together in some sense (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1998). The first letter published under the strapline written by K.E. Comley, SGT is a long letter criticising Private Eye’s coverage of the Gulf War, the second letter by Charles Goodwin highlights how those who object to the cartoon are taking the joke in the wrong ‘vein’. A letter by G.J. Bruce who is ‘appalled’ by the cartoon and a letter by Oliver S. Conolly who considers death ‘no laughing matter’ then follow this letter. A letter by M. Williams appears below Oliver S. Conolly’s, who thought the cartoon was ‘brilliant ... a welcome relief from the sanctimonious/bloodthirsty tone of other papers’. Finally Kelvin Sanderson’s letter appears under M. William’s. Kelvin considers the cartoon ‘one of the sickest things I have ever seen’ (see chapter 6 for analysis of the vehement language used in the expression of comic offence).

The shifts in, and opposing responses to Private Eye discourse, may be a source of humour for some readers. Incongruity is often a source of humour. Raskin (1985) calls this incongruity an opposition between ‘semantic scripts’. We ‘rapidly transfer our mental attention from the initial frame of reference to the new, conflicting one and back; and this dual processing results in a simultaneous double association’ (Norrick, 1989: 119), or what Koestler (1964) refers to as ‘bisociation’ (see chapter 2). For Koestler (1964) humour depends on its surprise effect which he terms the ‘bisociative shock’:

to cause surprise the humorist must have a modicum of originality -- the ability to break away from the stereotyped routines of thought ... he must provide mental jolts, caused by collision of incompatible matrices. To any given situation or subject he must conjure up an appropriate-or appropriately inappropriate-intruder which will provide the jolt (Koestler, 1964: 91-92).

In the series of letters printed in response to the ‘Heathrow Arrivals’ cartoon the letters shift from readers that are anti to pro to anti to anti to pro to anti-Private Eye discourse. Shifting from anti to pro letters is a popular device used in the Eye (to take a few pages at random see No. 466, 26.10.79: 8; No. 706, 06.01.89: 12; No. 735, 16.02.90: 14; No. 750, 14.09.90: 13; No. 952, 12.06.98: 14; No. 974, 16.04.99: 14). The second letter in this sequence (written by Charles Goodwin) functions to undermine the first long letter. A serving soldier in Saudi Arabia who has first-hand knowledge and experience of the Gulf War authors the first letter that includes facts that the layperson would not know. For example on the topic of body bags K.E. Comley writes, ‘putting people into plastic bags
will retain the chemical agents and may kill the War Graves Commission persons who come to register the bodies and place them in war graves'. This author presents himself as having first hand experience of war as 'We stopped making jokes about death when we stepped off the plane'. This anti *Private Eye* letter is completely undermined by the second letter by Charles Goodwin, as he notes that the cartoon was printed before the war started and therefore 'the captions must presumably be taken as warnings about what would happen if there was a war ... the objectors are taking your “jokes” in the wrong vein'. Here this reader letter is used to criticise offended readers, which enables the editor of *Private Eye* to respond negatively to the offended reader without personally becoming overtly involved.

Printing a supportive letter near to a letter of complaint limits or reduces the credibility of the complaint and may encourage the reading that the offended reader is somehow deficient. And printing readers’ letters that comment on letters written by other readers portrays *Private Eye* as unbiased because they are willing to print letters that are in favour and in opposition to itself. As noted above, the aim of the letters page is 'to have a balanced selection with a variety of topics, though “runs” of letters may be used on a subject that may have taken the readers’ fancy or have stemmed from a letter in an earlier column' (Hodgson, 1993: 59). The function fulfilled by printing letters referring to other readers’ letters (rather than those that favour *Private Eye* discourse, but do not refer to other readers’ letters) is to create the illusion that the letters page facilitates dialogue between readers. Additionally, if readers are seen to be opposed to the views and opinions expressed by other readers who have been offended by *Private Eye*, this renders the magazine unaccountable for the offence caused. If some readers can appreciate *Private Eye* discourse, those who are offended by the discourse may be interpreted as dysfunctional or unable to interpret the complexities of satirical discourse.

The reader who praises the *Eye* could be assumed to have minimal knowledge of war and conflict (as he is not presented as a sergeant), yet he has appreciated the intended meaning of the cartoon and has noted the unfortunate timing of its publication. Nick Newman, the artist responsible for the ‘Heathrow Arrivals’ cartoon, reports that the offence caused by *Private Eye* is often related to timing. In my (SL) interview with Nick Newman (NN) (8\(^{th}\) September, 1998) he reports on the intended meaning of the offending cartoon (which Charles Goodwin has understood) and the problematic timing of publication:
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NN: The amount of offence that you give is to do with timing.
SL: Right.
NN: And there are some things you can do at certain times which you can’t do at others. I mean there’s the cartoon which I did that got most people upset and most letters in, was just before the start of the Gulf War.
SL: Right.
NN: And it was, I did it on the press day, on the Monday, and in the lead up to the Gulf War everybody was saying “Gung Ho” you know we’ve got the technology to kick Saddam’s ass.
SL: Yes.
NN: And you know all the media were just talking about it, the technology, the power, the military and everything. And I did a cartoon of Heathrow arrivals with a whole load of undertakers just holding up sort of boards saying.
SL: Right.
NN: Private Smith and, which just to point out that this is what is actually going to happen, is that people are going to get killed and nobody sort of seemed to think that anybody would ever get killed in this war.
SL: Right.
NN: And I did it before the start of hostilities.
SL: Um mm.
NN: And I thought this is a fair point to make if war breaks out.
SL: Yes.
NN: War broke out on the Wednesday so when the Eye hit the newsstands the cartoon was published.
SL: Oh no.
NN: People were saying “how can you do this?”. But even, I remember John Wells went and did an interview with someone. He went over to Ireland and somebody said, “How could you possibly do a cartoon like that” and Wells said, “I wouldn’t have put that cartoon in”.
SL: Umm.
NN: But you know at the time I thought I was a real victim of timing.

The third and fourth letters (by G. J. Bruce and Oliver S. Conolly) revert back to criticism of the cartoon which is portrayed as being in bad taste. As the letter written by Charles Goodwin has highlighted the intended meaning of the cartoon, Bruce and Conolly can be interpreted as missing the point of the cartoon and therefore lacking the sophistication required to appreciate Private Eye discourse. This shifting frame of reference is repeated in letters printed fifth and sixth on the letters page written by M. Williams (pro Private Eye) and Kelvin Sanderson (anti Private Eye). The letter written by Kelvin Sanderson has given the headline ‘NF-off’. This strapline is lexically related to the author as Sanderson is a member of the National Front Ex-Servicemen’s Association, but can also function as an informal request for Sanderson to withdraw his complaint/go away, or colloquially to ‘naff-off’ – there’s no place for such responses in Private Eye. Other offended readers are also indirectly requested to go away, for example a letter written by a R. Fox is given.
the strapline ‘Fox Off’ (No. 772, 19.07.91: 16). Given the ambiguous nature of the meaning of the headline, Private Eye can defend any charges that they are being abusive to offended readers by stating that the headline merely lexically links to the offended readers’ name and it is a coincidence that the headline may be interpreted as abusive.

In figure 5.2 and the other pages cited above that preface a letter of praise with a letter of complaint, the letter of complaint is usually the first letter printed on the letters page, under the heading ‘Letters’. The first letter of complaint in figure 5.2 polarises the top and bottom of the page. The upper parts of the page (or the letters written by Comley, Bruce and Conolly) are predominantly letters complaining about comic offence (with the exception of Sanderson’s letter of complaint that appears towards the middle of the page). Letters positioned lower on the page towards the bottom (Goodwin’s letter) are in favour of the Eye. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1998) in their analysis of page layout and composition note that different zones of the page accord specific values. Elements placed at the top of the page (and towards the left of the page) are more salient ('heavier') and are presented as the ‘ideal’ and those placed towards the bottom of the page as presented as the ‘real’ (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1998: 193). The real and ideal are in opposition to each other. The ideal is presented as idealised or generalised information, which is ideologically charged. The real is opposed to the ideal, presenting specific information and details and more practical information (such as practical consequences and recommendations for future action) (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1998).

The ideal is not necessarily a positive value, although in the case of the Eye’s letters page the ideal may be viewed in a positive manner. As I discussed in chapter 3, ‘satire aims to hurt’ (Pollard, 1970: 66), it aims to criticise and attack. Therefore offence caused by satirical discourse is expected and, by the Eye at least, is accepted. For example on the letters page of edition No. 970 (19.02.99), a league table was printed recording the stories that resulted in cancelled subscriptions and the number of cancellations received. Also in a more recent edition (No. 1037, 21.09.01: 18) the Eye included a ‘Special Cut-Out-and-Keep Subscription Cancellation Form’. This was in anticipation of the comic offence that was likely to be caused by the edition following the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in America on 11th September 2001. The front cover of this ‘Eye Special’ showed President George Bush being informed of the attacks by one of his advisers who is saying ‘It’s Armageddon, sir’. Bush is replying ‘Armageddon outahere!’ This edition caused great offence.
In the following issue (No. 1038), in a similar vein to the aftermath of the Diana issue (see chapter 3 and above), a whole page was devoted to 9 letters of complaint and 14 letters in favour of the coverage of the terrorist attacks. The positioning of the letters of complaint at the top of the page, in the ideal position, suggests that these letters are appreciated and what the Eye wants, because if offence has been caused then it is fulfilling its aim to hurt, which reflects the self-congratulatory tone of straplines such as ‘Disgusted from Tunbridge Wells’ as discussed above.

Placing the letters expressing offence above letters that show the reader has ‘understood’ the Private Eye discourse yields a double meaning. It is not that these readers have simply taken offence at Private Eye discourse, but have failed to understand or interpret the item/column/joke in the anticipated way. What Private Eye imply without saying it is that these people have really not understood the magazine’s humour. Kolek (1985) highlights this elliptical nature of jokes where much is unsaid and relies on background knowledge for the audience to understand the surprise effect necessary for bisociation. Sometimes the claim that the offended reader has failed to ‘get’ the joke is overtly signalled by the strapline, for example ‘Missed The Point’ (No. 605, 22.02.85: 13; No. 645, 05.09.86: 13), ‘Missing the Point’ (No. 572, 18.11.83: 11), ‘Missed Point’ (No. 594, 21.09.84: 12), ‘Only Kidding’ (No. 575, 30.12.83: 9) and ‘Game for a Luff’ (No. 554, 11.03.83: 9).

Presenting the author of the letter as misunderstanding the humour highlights the layers of humour interpretation or the different types of interpretation available to readers of Private Eye. This intellectually separates those who complain about the content of Private Eye and those who appreciate its humour, and thus disarms the opposition and shows that the complaint should not be taken seriously. Presenting the author as misinterpreting Private Eye discourse calls on the audience to join with the editor in interpreting those offended by the discourse as deficient or incomplete individuals who lack a sense of humour (see chapter 6 for a discussion on the importance of having a sense of humour). This is strengthened by the action taken by the editor to simply lay the letter on the page as the author of the letter sent – with no perceivable evidence of editing.

The above discussion illustrates how the editor of Private Eye attempts to facilitate a debate about the topic that has caused offence to some readers, as a number of letters expressing different beliefs and thoughts regarding the offending item/column/cartoon are printed. Analysing the correspondence columns in broadsheet and tabloid newspapers in 1997, Bromley observed how ‘no
Chapter 5: Content and Composition Analysis of the Letters Page

more than one or two letters were published on any single topic’ and there is little attempt to facilitate ‘genuine debate’ in the correspondence columns (1998: 155). Thus if one considers the number of letters printed on the topic of Nick Newman’s cartoon in number 761, (4 against and 2 in favour of *Private Eye*) *Private Eye* differs from broadsheet and tabloid newspapers in the sense that there is some attempt to develop a debate about the offending items. However, the manner in which the letters expressing offence are treated (with ridiculing straplines) suggests that *Private Eye* works to shut down rather than open up debate.

Showing both sides of the story (those pro and anti *Private Eye*) facilitates an illusion of balance. As noted above, Hodgson (1993) regards the establishment of a sense of balance on the letters page as a key ingredient to a successful letters page. Also the inclusion of both pro and anti letters prevents the *Eye* from being accused of bias. The editor is objectively presenting the letters received in his/her own words (which are akin to reported speech in news reports), thus conveying accuracy and facticity (Roeh and Feldman, 1984; Tuchman, 1978).

Summary

This chapter has illustrated how reader letters are a rich source of data for understanding comic offence and exploring how those charged with comic offence respond to such complaints. The focus of this chapter has been on the content, structure and presentation of the letters page of *Private Eye*. I began the chapter by highlighting the importance of reader participation, illustrating how letters pages are popular amongst both editors and readers and suggesting how the editor can manipulate the form and content of readers’ letters. The chapter reported on two separate studies. Study 1 focussed on what is represented as causing offence as reported on the letters page through a quantitative content analysis and study 2 explored how the editor treats those readers who have been offended by *Private Eye* discourse through a qualitative composition analysis of the letters page. The content analysis of readers' letters highlighted that this is an avenue of complaint particularly favoured by ‘ordinary’ readers, those I have termed the ‘poor man’. Although elites (the ‘rich man’) are sometimes included on the letters page, or at least are represented by their lawyers, the majority of the offended are ‘ordinary’ (male) readers (although very few indicate their readers status: whether they are subscribers, regular readers or occasional readers). The topic of the offence is more frequently mentioned than the section of *Private Eye* causing offence. The most frequently mentioned topic of offence is personal appearance/reference or attack, although
‘ordinary’ readers tend to refer to a wider spectrum of topics than officials who are representing the offended. The qualitative composition analysis explored the tools and techniques available to the editor of Private Eye in order to present those offended by Private Eye discourse in a particular manner and has highlighted some of the techniques used by the editor in order to create the ‘Private Eye club’ via the letters page. In this composition analysis I illustrated how the letters page is not simply written, but designed, and that the design serves specific functions and provides a structured dialogue. I have shown how the editor of Private Eye can actively manipulate the way we look at the whole letter by printing particular straplines above the letters, signalling that the authors share qualities with other humorous columns in the magazine, and strategically positioning the letters in such a manner that they are presented as humorous and without directly doing so, rendering Private Eye unaccountable for the offence caused. The straplines, intertextuality and positioning of the letters offer the audience clues to aid the decoding process. These rhetorical devices enable the editor to covertly respond to the charges of comic offence. Straplines act as a framing device signalling to the reader how the letter of complaint ‘should’ be read and are the written equivalent to canned jokes routinely used in verbal humour. Derogatory headlines attack the offended and noms de plume highlight the predictable nature of comic offence. Through the use of noms de plume the Eye is congratulating itself because, yet again, it has offended the typical ‘disgusted’ reader. Straplines and letters work intertextually to align the characteristics of the offended reader with other groups that are ridiculed in the Eye. Readers that recognise the intertextual relations are united and separated from (offended) readers who have missed the joke. Intertextuality is fundamental to the creation of the Private Eye club. Finally I have illustrated how by simply positioning the letters of complaint alongside (or above) letters praising the Eye humour is created. The incongruity we experience as we shift from the initial frame of reference (comic offence) to a new frame (praise for the Eye) encourages a humorous response.

In the next chapter I report on the results of the qualitative linguistic discourse analysis and symbolic cultural analysis of readers’ letters – the ‘poor man’s’ avenue for expressing comic offence. The aims of the next chapter are to explore how those offended by Private Eye discourse register their offence, how they articulate the offence caused, and how censure of humour is encompassed in their articulation of comic offence.
Chapter 6: Humour, Offence and the Articulation of Complaint

Chapter 6
Humour, Offence and the Articulation of Complaint

A peculiar interest always attaches to humour. There is no quality of the human mind about which its possessor is more sensitive than the sense of humour. A man will freely confess that he has no ear for music, or no taste for fiction, or even no interest in religion. But I have yet to see the man who announces that he has no sense of humour (Stephen Leacock, cited in Allport, 1937: 224).

To lack a sense of humour is to lack both personality and character (Wickberg, 1998: 87).

It is difficult to have a sense of humour and to be offended at the same time (Younge, 1999: 100).

Introduction

In the previous chapter I reported on the results of my content analysis of readers' letters printed in Private Eye and the results of my composition analysis of the letters page. The content analysis involved coding the variables of author type (reader, spokesperson, officialdom), gender of author, status of reader (subscriber, regular reader, occasional reader, first time reader), topic of complaint (such as war, death, royal family, blasphemy), specified section of Private Eye causing offence (such as the front cover, Street of Shame, Gnome column) and the outcome of the complaint (cancelled subscription, will not read Private Eye again or expect Private Eye to apologise). As a result of this content analysis I was able to classify readers' letters to the magazine in a number of different ways, and develop various forms of statistical analysis that helped me attain a clear overview of the general pattern of complaint involved, along with the general consequences of such complaint. A qualitative composition analysis of the letters page followed the content analysis. This highlighted how the editor of Private Eye treats the offended and responds to the charges of causing offence. My next step is to identify the recurring discursive practices and strategies employed by readers when articulating offence. This chapter deliberately shifts from analysing what causes offence and how the offender responds to the charge of comic offence, to how readers express offence. In chapter 2 I illustrated how complaining about comic offence is potentially a risky endeavour: the joker can claim that he/she was 'just joking'; the joker can rebuke the offended and can charge the offended with lacking a sense of humour. As Younge notes above, 'it is difficult to have a sense of humour and to be offended at the same time' (1999: 100). In this chapter I examine readers' letters in order to see in closer detail what is involved in the articulation of
complaint about comic offensiveness. This enables me to trace the characteristic ways in which readers structure their expression of grievance.

The chapter focuses on letters of complaint about instances of comic discourse where the humour is regarded as overstepping the mark and causing offence. I am interested particularly in how this sense of offence is registered and how complainants articulate the offence for which they seek some form of redress. In pursuing this interest, I seek to bring together two distinctive modes of analysis: linguistic discourse analysis and symbolic cultural analysis (see chapter 4). This is methodologically appropriate to the discourse involved because of the ways in which epistolary complaints use forms of linguistic framing for offsetting potential objections to what they want to say, and because of the highly figurative language which is employed in voicing the substantive complaint and the censure of the humour that is entailed in this. My focus overall is on the underlying ambivalence involved in negotiations between ethical and comic discourse. I illustrate how offended readers when articulating their offence use prolepsis, preface disagreements with agreements and use pronominal displacements as rhetorical strategies. These strategies are combined with symbolic and figurative language that metaphorically refers to dirt and filth, and disease, sickness and madness.

**Importance of Having a Sense of Humour**

Most people claim to have an above average or good sense of humour (Bippus, 2000; Omwake, 1939; Wickberg, 1998). Ninety four percent of people, when asked to estimate their sense of humour, reported that their own sense of humour was good or above average (Allport, 1961; see also Lefcourt and Martin, 1986). To announce that you have no sense of humour would be tantamount to declaring a profound deficiency in your personality. We are sensitive to the issue of possessing such a faculty not only because it is associated with who we are and what makes us distinctive, but also because it is commonly regarded as a required attribute in a mature and rounded personality. A sense of humour has been related to a high level of intelligence (Allport, 1937), knowledge of oneself (Allport, 1954), and sense of humour can vary according to sex, age and education (Vitulla and Barbin, 1991; see also Carroll, 1989).¹ The ability to perceive humour in

¹ Although Cunningham (1962) found no relation between sense of humour and intelligence.
Chapter 6: Humour, Offence and the Articulation of Complaint

situations is synonymous with a healthy body and mind.\(^2\) Humour is regarded as an indicator of mental health (Olson, 1976).\(^3\) Possessing a sense of humour is an effective mechanism for coping with stress (Martin and Lefcourt, 1983; Nezu et al, 1988), reducing anxiety (Cann et al, 1999), enhancing emotional stability (Deaner and McConatha, 1993), improving interpersonal competence (intimacy) (Hampes, 1992, 1994). A sense of humour is also associated with high self-esteem (Kuiper and Martin, 1993; Overholser, 1992), trust (Hampes, 1999), psychological well-being (Frecknall, 1994; Goldstein, 1982; Kuiper et al, 1995; Kuiper et al, 1998; Lefcourt and Martin, 1986; May, 1953), a more effective immune system and an ability to overcome illness (Stone et al, 1987; Wooten, 1996) and a higher pain threshold (Cann et al, 2000; Zillman et al, 1993). Other investigations however have found no positive effects of having a sense of humour (Safranek and Schill, 1982).

Having a sense of humour helps you identify yourself as someone worthy of being known. To be able to laugh with others and at yourself are, for this reason, taken as personality traits to which a positive value is assigned.\(^4\) Few people would not want this value attributed to them either in the way others assess them or in their own self-regard. This is why we feel vulnerable when we are accused of lacking a sense of humour. It is as if there is something vital missing in our individual make-up. A person without a sense of humour is ‘not simply unpleasant or bad company, but is literally an incomplete person’ (Wickberg, 1998: 85). It is because we commonly perceive this that we either hotly deny the accusation that we lack a sense of humour or swing rigorously into a posture of self-defence by saying something like ‘I didn’t mean it like that ...’ Likewise we view a sense of humour as a quality to be sought after and valued in friends, partners, team-members and colleagues (Bippus, 2000; Buss, 1988; Cann and Calhoun, 2001; Goodwin and Tang, 1991; Kroloff, 1991; Ziv and Gadish, 1989). For example, entries in personal columns often contain the abbreviation gsh (good sense of humour) as a way of enhancing a self-profile and attracting interest (Coupland, 1996; Thorne and Coupland, 1998). Personal advertisements placed in the Private Eye

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\(^2\) Instruments have been developed to measure sense of humour, including the Sense of Humour Questionnaire (Svebak, 1974), the Coping Humour Scale (Martin and Lefcourt, 1983), the Situational Humour Response Questionnaire (Martin and Lefcourt, 1984) and the Multidimensional Sense of Humour Scale (Hampes, 1994). These scales measure humour production and appreciation, personal liking of humour, the frequency with which humour is used to cope with stressful experiences, the frequency with which humour is displayed in a number of different life situations, or a combination of all three areas.

\(^3\) For a recent review of the literature linking a sense of humour to mental health see Galloway and Cropley (1999).

\(^4\) As I mentioned in a footnote in chapter 1, humour is not always accompanied by laughter. Thorson (1990) advises researchers against assuming that a measurement of laughter is a measurement of sense of humour.
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Small section of the magazine (see chapter 3) often attract attention by signalling that the advertiser has a sense of humour or is seeking someone with a sense of humour. To take one example, of which many more could have been cited:

Sick of cattle market discos and tired of smart-alec pub pick-ups. Intelligent, late twenties and not unattractive man with sense of humour but lousy at "chatting up" reckons there must be some not unattractive West Yorkshire women with similar aversions. Box 828. (No. 428, 12.05.78: 22; emphasis in original).

Further, if we read in a personal character reference that someone has a 'good sense of humour' we are presumably meant to interpret this as a desirable feature in a possible employee, an attribute that would make them more attractive to work with. Such examples underwrite what seems to be a consensual mark of agreement, valorising humour as an essential ingredient in gratifying relationships.

At least two immediate qualifications should be made in relation to this warm and benign assessment of the quality of a sense of humour in ourselves or in others. Firstly, when we use it as a reference-point in either a general or specific way, we overlook the broad distinctions that are otherwise understood as falling between different forms of humour. To give an example of these kinds of mundane distinctions and classifications, in her work on the complexities of a sense of humour in romantic relationships Amy Bippus (2000) found that her participants referred to four types of sense of humour: active (engaging in physical humour, poking fun and pranking), receptive (laughing or smiling and choosing sources of entertainment), bonding (using pet names, joking about bodily functions and relationship issues) and censuring (condemning sadistic humour or jokes inappropriate to a particular social context). Equally, Eysenck (1972) highlights that a sense of humour may be used in three different ways. The conformist meaning of the term will be used when referring to a person who laughs at the same things as we do, the quantitative meaning is used to describe someone who laughs frequently and is easily amused, and the productive meaning of sense of humour will be used to refer to someone who amuses other people or is 'life and soul of the party'. Secondly, the possession of a sense of humour is historically specific as a value. In other times, humour has been regarded as the basis of aggression or envy and associated with ignorance and foolishness. Plato equated humour with a lack of self-knowledge, while Aristotle argued that the origins of humour lay in deformity and shabbiness. For them, humour was perceived as a disruptive form of behaviour, corrupting morals, art and religion (Chapman and Foot, 1976: 1). Taking a sense of humour as a positive attribute is in fact a comparatively recent development.
While comedy more broadly has been valued as a social corrective and vehicle for criticising human folly from the Elizabethan era onwards, it is only since the mid-to-late nineteenth century that a sense of humour has been commonly used as a descriptive individualising term, valued as a desirable attribute of anyone's personality, and applied as an index of their subjective quality of mind and perception (Wickberg, 1998). This application may have its deep etiological roots in the medieval typology of the four cardinal humours (blood, phlegm, choler or bile, and melancholy or black bile), but what is now identified as someone's sense of humour, not to mention the whole conception of human psychology itself, is radically different. Rather than the individual being possessed by humour, as an objective physiological constitution, humour has become accepted as an integral possession of the individual, an interiorised quality representative of who they are – or who they take themselves to be and how they wish to project themselves. In this shift the core meanings of the term 'humour' have changed unutterably.

A sense of humour combines a generalised quality that is regarded as a necessary lubricant of social life with a subjective quality of identity and outlook that helps define us as specific individuals. It is this combination that has been central to the shift in the core meanings of the term 'humour' over the past two centuries. The combination is once potent and puzzling. It is potent in the way it brings together, in any individual's own sense of humour, what is apparently universal with what is apparently unique, and it is puzzling because it is always impossible, in any specific social situation or encounter, to point exactly to the place where what is shared begins and what is singular ends. Such a charged ambivalence may account for the exhilaration felt in collective laughter, but it can also turn humour into a hazardous social terrain suddenly full of uncertainty and insecurity. Awareness of this informs our negotiation of humour in everyday life, as for instance in the way we might pretend to get a joke when we haven't, simply in order to ward off the imputation that we are stupid or ignorant (Chapman and Foot, 1976). Failing to get a joke 'is equivalent to failing an intelligence test item' La Fave et al (1976: 84) and not being able to take a joke 'is the ultimate sin' (Moore, 1994: 5). This takes me to my central point of interest in this chapter, for what I find intriguing are the rhetorical defences which people use in order to protect themselves against being accused of lacking a sense of humour when, in fact, they wish to state that a particular joke or comic narrative is not funny and is offensive. What seems to me equally intriguing are the ways in which such defences interact with forms of expression used in attacking comic excess, as for

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5 Equally, if we are amused by something that our culture rejects as worthy of joke status, then we may be interpreted as psychotic (Chapman and Foot, 1976).
instance on those occasions when comic licence is seen as having gone beyond its bounds, or when
the comic impulse is regarded as trespassing in areas more commonly accepted as the preserve of
serious discourse.

These occasions are those which typically generate complaints about comic offensiveness. Such
complaints manifest a withdrawal of permission to engage in humorous discourse about a particular
topic or target, and are an attempt to define a limit. Both moves are a consequence of announcing
that offence has been taken, that the humour has failed. As I argued in chapter 2, few people have
considered what this involves. Jerry Palmer is one exception, and as he suggests, ‘any theory of
humour, jokes and comedy which does not have the principle of potential failure built into it, as one
of its fundamental axioms, is a defective theory’ (1994: 147). This is surely right, and the general
principle identified by Palmer needs to be taken forward. Palmer has himself offered some useful
observations on comic failure, and he draws out of them three underlying conditions of such failure:
lack of comprehension, performative inadequacy and offensiveness (see Palmer, 1994, especially
chapters 12 and 13). Here I concentrate on comic offensiveness, and I want to go beyond Palmer’s
concerns by considering how such offensiveness is registered, and what the discourse of complaint
entails, for these are equally neglected questions in humour studies. For the sorts of reason already
outlined, complaints about comic offensiveness are commonly articulated in ways which are
designed to offset the imputation of lacking a sense of humour. Rhetorically the devices used in
this respect seem to operate in diametrical contrast to the language of complaint in which comic
offensiveness is identified and condemned. This contrast is merely superficial. As I shall go on to
argue, while seemingly quite different to the symbolic and figurative expression used in the
castigation of comic offensiveness, the defensive rhetorical strategies with which such expression is
hedged about are directly functional for that expression. These two discursive features of the
language of complaint are mutually complementary.

In order to investigate the linguistic practices employed in the articulation of complaint I drew on
the same data set used in the quantitative content analysis of readers’ letters. As noted in chapter 5,
such letters have been a common feature of the magazine for many years, with a page regularly set
aside for their publication. In taking these letters as my basic body of data, I analyse their
articulation of complaint through various rhetorical devices. In particular, I focus on the strategies
of offsetting or deflating possible objections to the expression of complaint by the use of prolepsis,
prefacing disagreements with agreements, and pronominal displacements. These strategies form the
first-stage basis for establishing the credentials of the complainant (as for instance in having a sense of humour) as well as setting up certain shields against ensuing ridicule or rebuke. They prepare the ground for the second stage where the complaint is enacted in its full fury. Here my analysis switches in its approach to attend particularly to the symbolic and figurative uses of language. Such uses are concerned to re-establish certain conceptions of order, equilibrium and the proper assignment of forms of discourse. They are concerned with forms of boundary-maintenance as these apply to ethical notions of distinction between serious and comic discourses. In attending to such forms, I draw on work devoted to the dynamics of boundary reproduction and transgression developed in cultural anthropology and historical cultural analysis. My overriding interest in this chapter is the interactive combination of these two apparently opposed aspects of the articulation of complaint, moving from the opening steps of hesitancy, caution and accommodation, to the no-holds-barred heaping of execration and fulmination on the heads of the perpetrators of comic offence.

Preliminaries of Complaint

As I started to attend to the discursive practices adopted in readers' letters, what was immediately striking about them was that they edge around or hesitate in the face of the actual complaint. Readers rarely state, simply and straightforwardly, that offence has been experienced. While bold statements to this effect are regular, they are usually circumscribed by qualifications which reveal a great deal about how these statements should be read. Readers include additional information or preface their complaints with the declaration that they appreciate Private Eye and value it as a publication. Here are some examples: 'I have read it for years, not regularly but when a copy came into my hands, I've had lots of good laughs and been pleased that England is the sort of country where all sorts really do make a world' (No. 312, 30.11.73: 10); 'Usually I find the cover of Private Eye highly entertaining ...' (No. 535, 02.07.82: 9); 'I've read and enjoyed the Eye for the better part of 20 years' (No. 758, 04.01.91: 15); 'I am not much of a one for “writing letters”, nor do I consider myself easily shocked or offended (if I were I wouldn't read the EYE)' (No. 877, 28.07.95: 13); 'I am a subscriber to your magazine and have been for donkeys years' (No. 916, 24.01.97: 14); 'I have read and enjoyed your magazine for years. I would go so far as to call myself one of your most dedicated readers' (No. 737, 16.03.90: 13). These kinds of statement are erected as slipways for the entry of readers' letters into the hermeneutic circuit. They operate in two ways simultaneously. On the one hand, they offer in themselves a description of the reader as generally approving and
approbatory in their stance towards *Private Eye*, as regular and (for some) 'dedicated' in their consumption of the magazine, as certainly not quick to take offence but instead, as being tolerant, open-minded and happy to live in a pluralised society 'where all sorts make a world'. On the other hand, such statements move beyond themselves to perform a definite function in setting the stage for what is to come. They anticipate a sequel that is to follow and they pave the way for the required interpretation and effective reception of what is in train. In some cases this performative function is quite openly signalled by the use of a particular lexical item, as for instance in the use of the adverb 'usually' in the example above. If we take a whole letter (No. 830, 08.10.93: 17) we can see how these two modes of operation work hand-in-hand with each other.

1 Sir,
2 I usually find your Alternative Rocky Horror
3 Service Book column amusing and
4 thought-provoking as it often exposes a creeping
5 error in religious circles.
6 But you go too far in EYE 829. Your mockery of
7 the Communion Service is sacrilege, poking fun
8 as it does at the very heart of the Christian faith.
9 This is not a matter for cheap, tasteless humour. It
10 causes deep offence to believing Christians and
11 is unworthy even of a publication such as yours.
12 Yours faithfully ...

The condemnation of the magazine in this letter is facilitated by its opening commendation. This is an example of what Hewitt and Stokes (1975) refer to as a credentialing disclaimer where readers attempt to avoid anticipated undesirable typifications that may follow the complaint. By beginning the letter 'I usually find your Alternative Rocky Horror Service Book column amusing and thought-provoking as it often exposes a creeping error in religious circles' (lines 2-5), the reader positions him/herself as having special characteristics or credentials that prevent him or her being treated in a typical manner. The reader acknowledges that what he/she is about to write may be typified as a response given by someone lacking a sense of humour. The usual enjoyment of *Private Eye* puts him or her in a 'protected category' (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975: 4). Once secured within this category, readers will then — or so it is anticipated — be protected from typification in the usual manner as people woefully lacking a sense of humour. Further, credentialing shifts the blame of the offence onto *Private Eye*. The complainant, who usually enjoys *Private Eye* for reasons specified, is not at fault or responsible for the offence caused. On the contrary, *Private Eye* is the guilty party.
As well as looking at how the initial commendation operates in establishing credentials and positioning the complainant on the ethically correct side of the attribution of blame and guilt, I can also examine how it works as a rhetorical device for reinforcing the power of the complaint itself. The regular feature identified is ‘amusing’ and ‘thought-provoking’. It serves a valuable critical purpose in exposing fallacious thinking. The recognition of this acts as an accommodation; it is a way of subscribing to the general achievements and purpose of the magazine as these are identified in the values of humour, intellectual stimulation and the exposure of error. Yet at the same time this accommodation goes beyond an attempt at impression-management in that it also registers an anticipation of disruption and disqualification, and seeks to negotiate an inherent contradiction in the discourse of complaint. Billig has described this additional element as creating a situation where ‘the statement of a common ground serves as a brief exordium to a critical assault’ (1996: 269). The opening statements of description and evaluation then mark up an initial positive attitude on the part of the reader as a way of enabling the passage into a reversal of this position and the enunciation of censorious judgement. Again, the use of the adverb ‘usually’ anticipates what is to be identified as a disruption of the pattern; it prepares the ground for the harder emphasis which subsequently falls on the word ‘but’, used as the first word in the second sentence of the letter (line 6). This word acts quite crucially as the hinge between the initial positive stance and the succeeding movement into negative appraisal, for what it introduces is indeed the precise recognition of comic excess, of the Eye having in this instance gone ‘too far’. It then seems quite appropriate and acceptable to swing heavily into action with strong epithets of disapprobation – ‘mockery’, ‘sacrilege’, ‘unworthy’, ‘deep offence’ – and heavy accusations of ‘cheap, tasteless humour’. By operating in this manner, these two halves of the letter act in concert with each other. The opening sentence anticipates objections to the succeeding sentences in order to pre-empt them or render them less forceful in advance. As well as increasing the force of the complaint in the second half of the letter, the prefatory first sentence acts ahead of the game in order to protect the letter-writer from accusations of being humourless. It is a classic instance of prolepsis.

This device is commonly used in relation to prejudice. It operates as a way of articulating prejudice while also simultaneously denying such articulation. In cases of racial prejudice, for example, prolepsis functions as a way of preventing speakers from being perceived as ‘prejudiced’, as for instance in the use of the disclaimer ‘I’m not prejudiced but ...’ with the ‘but’ acting as the nodal point through which a passage into the expression of racial prejudice is effected and the anticipated accusation of prejudice is forestalled. This rhetorical figure is commonly used precisely because
the cultural norm against ‘prejudice’ is now so general that ‘the value of not being “prejudiced”’ is even shared by the fascist writer who is at pains to deny his own prejudice’ and who endeavours, in an act of critical displacement, ‘to pin the label upon liberal opponents’ (Billig, 1988: 94). A similar pattern exists when authors deny that they lack a sense of humour. After explaining how much they enjoy reading Private Eye, readers often use the word ‘but’, as for instance with the declarations ‘but you really slipped up last week’, and ‘but that can’t be said about the last Eye No. 535’ (No. 312, 30.11.73: 10; No. 536, 02.07.82: 9) following the usual prefatory statements. Other conjunctive items perform the same function, as with the following: ‘I’ve read and enjoyed the Eye for the better part of 20 years. However, with the inclusion of the advertisement (The Ultimate Legal High) on the Christmas edition, I have now joined the ranks of ex-readers’ (No. 758, 04.01.91: 15). These examples, of which many more could be cited, provide clear evidence of a cultural norm against admitting that one has failed to find humorous discourse funny. The frequent uses of the rhetorical device of prolepsis show not only that readers tacitly accept this norm, but that it has also become a component part of their self-identity which they have somehow to reconcile with their feeling that a given sample of comic discourse is offensive, if not to them then certainly to others on whose behalf they wish to speak. Having a sense of humour and avoiding offence, particularly to social and ethnic minorities or unjustly marginalised groups, are both held as desirable goals, but as such they can run against each other, producing a conflict between two opposed pressures for good. This conflict is integrally built into the discourse of readers’ letters.

To be prejudiced is to be irrational. To be without a sense of humour is to be incomplete as a person. No one wants to appear, to themselves or to others, as irrational or incomplete, so justifications are set up against the potential criticism that, in complaining about comic offensiveness, the complainant is either prejudiced, as for instance in appearing too politically correct, or humourless, as for instance in not being able to take a joke. In anticipating criticism, this self-defensive stance acts by suggesting an objection to what is to be said in the complaint in order to dispose of it in advance and so increase the force of the complaint. Complaining about offence caused by comic discourse nevertheless remains a fragile endeavour. In the case of Private Eye, readers who complain have discursively to negotiate and manage the social norm that lacking a sense of humour is self-detrimental, whilst also articulating opposition and hostility to a media product. A positive value conflicts with a negative experience. Readers’ letters reveal this conflict in their construction as discourse. This is why their analysis is important. Such letters transfer private thoughts, feelings and troubles into the public domain. The intention of readers ‘is not
simply to tell the editor what they think, but to shape policy, influence opinion, swing the course of events, defend interests, advance causes. They occupy a mid-way position between the “official statement” and the private communication; they are public communications’ (Hall et al, 1978: 121). In the present case the intention of complainants is to reconstruct the boundaries of legitimate satirical discourse, but the risk involved when complaining about a publication like Private Eye is that the initial response to the offence caused, especially by humorous sections of the magazine, could be ‘well you wouldn’t find it funny anyway, you’ve a poor sense of humour’ or ‘you’ve taken it the wrong way’. Even if only implicitly, this is to recognise a disparity between the intended purpose of a letter of complaint and the position of jeopardy in which it stands. The kind of readers’ letters I am discussing register the need to ride the rapids between social norms and individual cognition. Prefacing the expression of offence with proleptic words and phrases that suggest ‘I have a sense of humour, but …’ is one strategy used when managing the delicate task of complaining about humorous discourse.

Building on the work of Pomerantz (1984), dealing with strategies for agreeing and disagreeing with forms of assessment, Mulkay’s analysis of agreements and disagreements in letters written by biochemists found that almost two thirds of disagreements were ‘prefaced by some kind of agreement’, while ‘other kinds of preface, which prepare the way for disagreement, tend to displace the responsibility for its occurrence and to explain and justify its expression’. Mulkay’s reasoning for the variety and complexity of disagreements is that they ‘appear to be a response to the dispreferred character of disagreements and the preferred character of agreements’ (1985: 201). Prefacing acknowledges the preferred response in an instance where a dispreferred response is about to be given: ‘the agreement preface is a concession to the approved and expected response’ (1985: 207). If agreements are expected and perceived as the correct way to respond, and disagreements are deemed as improper or offensive, one way of organising the disagreement is to preface it with an agreement. ‘The consistent placing of the agreement first suggests that writers are preparing for, and are reducing in advance the offensive impact of, the dispreferred response which appears in second place’ (1985: 220). In relation to the material I am dealing with here, consistently prefacing a letter with some kind of agreement is not only an attempt to diminish the force of the dispreferred response. It also clearly allows the reader to indicate that he/she has a sense of humour, usually appreciates Private Eye’s social and political satire, and is a rational being.
Although the use of prolepsis is a powerful rhetorical device, as in the letter fully cited above, it can operate simultaneously as a rhetorical shield, serving to protect a potential weak spot in the complaint. As the reader is either a practising Christian or sympathetic to the Christian faith and the sanctity of its religious ceremonies, he/she may be dismissed by Private Eye as a ‘bible-basher’ or ‘religious nut’, thus undermining the credibility of the case against the offence allegedly committed by the magazine. While the rhetorical power of the second part of this letter derives from the reader complaining about the offence experienced on religious grounds, the potential weakness of this in its vulnerability to criticism of the reader being a ‘bible-basher’ is at least partly shielded by avoidance of the words ‘I’ or ‘we’, which would immediately identify the reader as indisputably ‘one of them’. The avoidance of such self-identifying words creates a more detached tone even though only those in the know, so to say, could be held to speak with any authority of what does or does not go to ‘the very heart of the Christian faith’. The appearance which the letter-writer attempts to create is that what is being expressed is not his/her own personal belief or any personal prejudice about Private Eye. The articulation of personal prejudices/feelings of offensiveness is masked. This masking strategy simultaneously anticipates and deflects the criticism that the reader has failed to appreciate the humour, and strengthens the force of the complaint by invoking in non-personal terms the weight and legitimacy of orthodox religious faith.

This is a common strategy in letters to Private Eye. I define it as pronominal displacement: the shifting of a first party grievance onto an identified third party. In a letter complaining about a cartoon depicting a woman wearing a ‘Women for Rape’ jumper, a reader wrote in such a way as to distance herself from the complaint she made by referring to women as ‘they’ rather than ‘we’ – ‘Women do not provoke rape. They do not ask for it’. She expressed the view that ‘this is not a joking matter for them’ and referred to the cartoon as ‘a degradation of 51 per cent of this country’s population’ (No. 576, 13.01.84: 12). Although she was clearly a member of this degraded section of the population, the use of ‘them’ to signify women who have suffered rape suggests that she was not a rape victim herself but is speaking on behalf of those who are. Smith and Saltzman (1995) have also found a similar trend in accounts people make when attempting to restrict and control media discourses. Reactions to discourses referred to as sexist, racist, violent and pornographic are employed on the basis that they may encourage similar behaviour in vulnerable viewers (especially children). In another letter (No. 859, 28.11.94: 14; see below) a Westminster Tory councillor complained that a particular article ‘caused needless hurt’ to the family and friends of someone who had died of cancer (line 12). In then going on to say that ‘we would greatly appreciate your not
commenting on this matter again’ (lines 13 and 14), she inferred that she was herself a family member or friend, but this inference was deflected by her expression of complaint being couched in terms of offence to ‘other’ people. This displacement of the feelings of offence onto a third party implies that such feelings are not merely subjective, and to the extent that they may have a subjective dimension, this is not that of the author, who is in any case otherwise ‘usually’ appreciative of the Eye’s ‘mischievous’ approach to politics (line 3). The effect is to suggest that the grievance is not personal, but that the letter-writer is sensitive to possible or actual offence on the part of others. This strategy acts as a way of burnishing one’s own moral credentials for oneself and for significant others.

Sir,

Whilst I appreciate that PRIVATE EYE would not be PRIVATE EYE without its mischievous, satirical approach to politics, I do believe cancer patients and their families should be exempt from this approach.

Reg Forrester died on Saturday, 5 November, after giving 35 years of public service. Clearly the care package he received was absolutely appropriate for a terminally ill man who wanted to spend his last days at home with his family. The article has caused needless hurt to his family and friends and we would greatly appreciate your not commenting on this matter again.

Otherwise, we’re all great fans of PRIVATE EYE and await your next disclosure with amusement and trepidation ...

Yours sincerely,

COUNCILLOR ...

The use of such strategies as prolepsis and pronominal displacement is rhetorically important in another very significant respect. This is the way in which they prepare the ground for the forceful use of symbolic and figurative language in readers’ letters. That is the importance of their prefatory status. Not all readers combine the use of these strategies with such language – some use them at the start of their letters but do not go on to use figurative language, others use figurative language without these strategies – but many letters to *Private Eye* use them in combination in order to strengthen their rhetorical power. It is this ensuing increase in rhetorical power that I am focusing on in this chapter precisely because it makes more effective the primary function of letters from readers of the magazine. This is the attempt to reconstruct and maintain the ethical boundaries
between serious and comic discourse as these are understood, following from those instances where readers perceive them to have been illegitimately transgressed, resulting in bad taste, wanton abuse, unjust defamation of character, profanity, dishonour or blasphemy. Or in other words, some form or other of comic offence. The purpose of the letters is to redress the imbalance between serious and non-serious discourse that is alleged to have been created. Redressing this imbalance is a difficult endeavour. In his sociological analysis of humour, Mulkay (1988) highlights the subtle and complex relationship between serious and comic modes of discourse (see chapter 2). Humorous forms of expression can have serious motives and intentions so the boundary between serious and comic discourse is sometimes unclear. It is not as if there is a simple or single line of division between them. Readers respond varyingly to potentially humorous discourse, have differing accounts of the relationship between jokes and serious talk and thus draw differing lines between the two discursive modes involved. In letters written by complaining readers to Private Eye, the differing and shifting boundaries between serious and comic discourse are discursively negotiated.

**Figurations of Censure**

In my extensive survey of readers' letters to Private Eye, the most prevalent form of figurative language used in attempting to redress such imbalances is a metaphorical reference to dirt. That which is deemed to be dirty sets up a classic binarism where dirt is placed in direct contradistinction to what is claimed to be clean and pure, or in other words unpolluted. The metaphorical reference is considered apt in these cases because the illegitimate transgression of the boundaries between serious and comic discourses has led to the pollution of the former by the latter. As 'matter out of place', in Mary Douglas's celebrated definition (1966: 35), dirt is an absolute term used in relative ways in the recognition of disorder. There is no absolute dirt as the exact cause and the observer, reader or hearer determines nature of dirt, but its power as a signifier is to override this distinction completely in its condemnation of what is 'out of place'. 'Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment' (Douglas, 1966: 2). But the dread of dirt equates with a fear of disorder. Building on Douglas's work, Cresswell has argued that dirt is something in the wrong place or in the wrong time. Dirt causes disgust because 'it appears where it shouldn't be - on the kitchen floor or under the bed ... [and because it appears where it should not] it lies at the bottom of the hierarchical scale of values; dirt is valued by very few people' (Cresswell, 1996: 38). If dirt is matter out of place and thus a figure of disorder, it
follows that a system pre-exists where matter is in place and an environment is ordered. In one particular application of this, language is in good order when talk or text uses words which are regarded as ‘clean’ because contextually they are not out of place. Such spatial principles are one way in which verbal hygiene is maintained. So-called dirty language is language out of place, language appearing where it shouldn’t be, in the wrong place, as for instance in a magazine that can be bought in any high-street newsagents. ‘There is a sad lack, today, of an amusing publication that isn’t offensively dirty’. Thus one vexed reader to *Private Eye* in 1992, complaining that its ‘filthy language’ means it ‘cannot be left around the house but must be hidden away in shame’. Needless to say, this reader begins the letter with ‘I have bought a *Private Eye* today but …’ (No 788, 28.02.92: 16).

This is a relatively mild reference to what is considered unclean. Over the years, *Private Eye* has been associated with various different, and more repellent kinds of dirt. *Private Eye* journalists are dirty, they write dirty material and garbage, they write in dirt and they are associated with lousy or foul animals – such as a ‘dirty dog’ – and ‘sewage pipes’ (No. 746, 20.07.90: 15; No. 617, 09.08.85: 11). They are even dirt themselves: ‘shit’, ‘crap’, ‘vulgar’, ‘vile’, foul’ and ‘stinking’ are the kinds of vituperative adjectives by which they are characterised (No. 488, 29.08.80: 12; No. 973, 02.04.99: 14; No. 515, 11.09.81: 9; No. 456, 06.06.79: 9; No. 617, 09.08.85: 11; No. 542, 24.09.82: 9). In an attempt at more inventive abuse, one reader reports that *Private Eye* ‘reeks of editorial halitosis’ (No. 706, 06.01.89: 12). Another begins her letter with ‘Dear Shit-Shovellers’ in what was presumably intended as an affectionate reference to their investigative journalism while also hinting at what is to come, though even then she is careful to begin with the usual observation that she has ‘greatly enjoyed’ the magazine ‘for many years’: ‘Never did I dream that I would actually write you a letter of complaint’. As with all the other cases considered, she then goes on to heap abuse on one particular *Private Eye* journalist, describing him as having ‘about as much appeal as a dog turd’ (No. 605, 22.02.85: 13). Other readers hurl at the magazine such condemnatory phrases as ‘vicious rubbish’ (No. 470, 21.12.79: 9), and analogies are made between *Private Eye*’s satirical discourse and that found on ‘lavatory walls’ (No. 400, 15.04.77: 7; No. 610, 03.05.85: 11). Such expressions reflect Marsh’s (1998) observations made when tracing the debate on offensive literature through Home Office papers of the 1880s. Letters of complaint written to members of Parliament included words such as ‘vulgar’, ‘vile’ and ‘pernicious rubbish’. Equally, in a complaint made in 1946 by Eastern Services Director, Donald Stephenson, about the Home Service comedy programme *Merrymart*, Stephenson said he found the humour ‘unfunny’ and ‘dirty’ (Davies, 1996: 171).
and Bernard Manning's material has often been described as 'vile and offensive' (Bishop of Manchester, quoted in Margolis, 1996: 190). These kinds of lexical items and comparative links derive their power of expression from symbolically contrasting standards of cleanliness and hygiene as a result of which we try to prevent, disguise or remove odours and dirt, an almost obsessive regard for which is indicated by the supermarket shelves replete with bath foam, bath salts, bath bombs, shower wash, shower gel, body scrub, body sprays, deodorants and talcum powder, not to mention the various kinds of polish, liquids, foams, detergents, bleach and air-fresheners which we use to scrub, dust, wipe away and spray. Identifying an item of comic offence with dirt or shit is thus part of a symbolic attempt to clean things up once again, to sanitise the environment. Metaphors of dirt are applicable because they emphatically signal the disruption felt when satirical discourse crosses over from the comic into areas considered serious, sensitive or hallowed. These are occasions when the magazine is felt to have gone 'too far', and thus become 'dirty'. Those who are involved in its production are then to be symbolically cast out, mired in the mess of their violation, and made to stand, rejected, in the odour of shame.

In making their moral and ethical objections to what they consider offensive in satirical humour, readers draw upon notions of standards and norms for what is 'correct'. As we have seen, they may negotiate around the cultural norm against 'prejudice' through various forms of qualification of what they want to say, and these increase the rhetorical force of the subsequent complaint. What follows in the complaint is usually delivered without qualification, though; there is a stark contrast between the initial qualification which attempts to pre-empt potential criticism and the ensuing protest against the violation of what is considered decent, appropriate and normal. The vocabulary chosen then matches the sense of violation felt by readers in order to assign the threat this poses to its place on the margins of normality and so reorder the hierarchy of discourse. Such choice of vocabulary is quite unusual. It is not commonly found in other letters of complaint, such as those sent by listeners to BBC Radio 4's Feedback programme or viewers to BBC TV's Points of View. In branding Private Eye humour as 'dirty' by using scatological language and metaphors of pollution themselves, it may be that complainants are engaged in strategic self-presentation through which they display not only the possession of a sense of humour but also the capability of using 'strong' language. They themselves may criticise such language, but their credentials for doing this rely on their knowledge of its legitimate use and the legitimate occasions for its use. Filth as a label necessarily refers to a boundary. It is a classic boundary-defining term. It is 'not a quality in itself', but rather an attribute which 'applies only to what relates to a boundary and, more particularly,
represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin' (Kristeva, 1982: 69; see also chapter 7 for further discussion on the function(s) of boundary markers). The strength of the pollution is then dependent on the 'potency of the prohibition that founds it' (1982: 69). It is for this reason that when social norms are seen to have been transgressed, the transgression is often 'transcoded into the “grotesque body” terms of excrement, pigs and arses'. The grotesque body functions as 'a primary, highly-charged intersection and mediation of social and political forces, a sort of intensifier and displacer in the making of identity' (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 24-5).

Filth and grotesquerie in this way become equivalent with marginality. What exists at the margins of normality does so because it is 'out of place' in its heartland – hence the characteristic association of the deviant Other with dirt, bad smell and pollution. To give just three typical examples of this, New York graffiti in the 1970s was referred to by the City Council President in the New York Times as polluting 'the eyes and mind' – 'one of the worst forms of pollution we have to combat' (Cresswell, 1996: 38). Others referred to graffiti as garbage, noise, dirt and mess. Secondly, police, press, farmers and members of parliament denounced travellers converging on Stonehenge – a major site of national heritage in Britain – as 'a convoy of pollution', 'vagabonds', 'spreading ringworm, tapeworms, and several viruses through their diseased dogs, cats, and goats'. The Sun (7th June 1986: 4) described the ‘hippy’ camps in this way:

The camp is squalid. Piles of litter are building up, scrap metal is being accumulated. Dogs and goats are eating off the same plates as people ... The insides of their cars and vans are filthy. Cooking rings are thick with grease, bits of carpet are matted with dirt, stinking bedding is scattered everywhere (Cresswell, 1996: 82).

My third example is the treatment meted out to women at the Greenham Common peace camps in the 1980s. These women received a wealth of media attention devoted to their ‘filth, smell and immorality’ (The Guardian, 2nd June 1983: 6, cited in Cresswell, 1996: 107). They were described as ‘smelling of fish paste and bad oysters’ (Stallybrass and White, 1980: 23). Along with this symbolic representation, ritually exorcistic strategies were employed where 'soldiers bared their backsides to the women, and in a sort of latter-day charivari, local vigiliaris threw buckets of excrement, maggots and pig's blood into the women's benders (their home-made shelters)' (Pickering, 2001: 20; and see Gellhorn, 1989: 378-385).

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6 Private Eye contributor, Auberon Waugh originally used this description to refer to the peace campaigners of Greenham Common.
Yet just as filth represents the 'objective frailty' of symbolic order (Cresswell, 1996: 39), so the state of normality remains 'clean' through its conflation of how things are and how they should be, of the otherwise differential orders of 'is' and 'ought'. Normality is in this way a moral and social construct mediating between what is considered typical and what is considered desirable; it seeks to close the gaps between them in the interests of an aspiration to be average. It is because the normal is 'not a concept of existence, in itself susceptible of objective measurement' (Canguilhem, 1989: 203), that its definitional frailty has to be protected. This requires not only constant attention to the boundaries between legitimacy and danger, but also the symbolic use of instances of infraction in the effort to define normality and provide a sound rationale for the existence of rules and sanctions governing what can and cannot be said or done – in this case within the realm of comic discourse. What is considered decent, appropriate and normal needs strong defence by any means because it is objectively frail, and the 'any means' in the case we are dealing with include its own inverted terms in order to express a sense of offence or outrage and re-establish the discursive environment. It is as if there is a tacit recognition of the risk involved in systems of regulation of naming the opposites of what 'is' or 'ought to be' normal. Containment always carries within itself a sense of the danger posed by what it excludes, what is defined by the containment as deviations expelled to the outside, beyond its boundaries. Recourse to the metaphors of the low, base, degraded and polluted makes the recognition of this danger visible even as it intends to suppress it, to cast it out from where it shouldn’t be.

The same is true of other terms of vituperation used in readers' letters to Private Eye. For the most part, these are associated with disease, sickness and madness. Offended readers associate the magazine with poor health or with suffering from disease. It is 'sick' and 'plain sick', 'the sickest piece of humour it has been my displeasure to read for a long time' and 'one of the sickest things I have ever seen' (No. 924, 16.05.97: 15; No. 972, 19.03.99: 14; No. 449, 02.03.79: 8-9; No. 761, 15.02.91: 13). Other readers are 'sickened by your sick humour' – it 'makes you puke' (No. 941, 09.01.98: 14; No. 495, 05.12.80: 11). These descriptions convey that the offended reader recognised that humour was intended, thus preventing the charge that they lack a sense of humour. It is not only in readers' letters that the illness metaphor is used when referring to the Eye. Sir James Goldsmith, who sued Private Eye for libel (see chapter 7) called it 'pus leaking from the wounds of a sick society' (McKay, 1986: 9). Private Eye is also recurrently described as mad. Private Eye journalists are referred to as ‘insane’ (No. 474, 15.02.80: 9), ‘positively possessed’ (No. 810, 0101.93: 12) or ‘requiring psychiatric treatment’ (No. 617, 09.08.85: 11). It is no
accident that the madness metaphor was similarly used when referring to the graffitists in New York in the 1970s, and the peace campaigners on Greenham Common, who were described as suffering from hysteria or mental ill-health. To take an earlier example, in press coverage of homosexuality in the late 1960s, headlines represented homosexuals as defective, sick or ill. One such headline referred to 'The Sick Men of Hampstead Heath' (The People, 24 March 1968). Homosexual men were regarded as being 'impelled towards homosexual acts through either physiological deficiency' or 'psychological immaturity'. Whether they were to be pitied or condemned, they were seen as 'defective males' (Pearce, 1973: 286). If not defective, homosexuals were diseased. A contemporary review of Radclyffe Hall's novel of lesbian love, The Well of Loneliness, included such words as 'plague', 'putrefaction' and 'contagion', and stressed the need to make the 'air clean and wholesome once more' (Pearce, 1973: 299). Sontag observes that the disease metaphor is based on the notion 'of the disease not as a punishment but as a sign or evil, something to be punished' (1979: 82). Uses of figurative language referring to disease, sickness and madness are evidence of attempts by readers to exert control over Private Eye (Sontag, 1979; see also Bolinger, 1980). The shock of such language speaks of the exertion involved in trying to gag particular types and targets of humour.

This is akin to the silencing strategies used by dominant groups to silence those who are socially marginalised (Jaworski, 1993; see also Butler, 1998). Rather than engaging in rational debate, the powerful attempt to suppress and render inaudible the voices of subaltern groups. This involves transforming their status and identity from a clear to an ambiguous category, as for example when Aristotle refers to women as 'deformed males' (Hill, 1986: 42), or to repeat from above, homosexuals have been referred to as 'defective males' (Pearce, 1973: 286). When readers refer to Private Eye as 'insane' or 'positively possessed' they are calling the legitimacy of its identity into question and thus attempting to place them in a way appropriate to the aberrant terms identified in the abuse of the complaint. To refer to someone or some category as disease-like or mad suggests the need for either expulsion or containment as cure or care for security. In Madness and Civilization (1967), Foucault observes how mad people have been portrayed as a disturbing others, causing concern and fear because of the disorder they represent. In The Wretched of the Earth (1963), Fanon illustrates how blackness and the Third World have been associated with madness. Such attributions identify a concern with order whose sanctity is disrupted by threats to good health, public safety, normalised common-sense thinking; these threats are then symbolically associated with the cause of comic offence. Responses to such threats ritualistically invoke states of health
and order through reference to their inverted terms, and the terms themselves lend vehemence to the responses of complaint. But the vehemence of the language once again betrays a sense of the fragility of that which it is designed to protect, to reconstitute and regularise. As I illustrate in chapter 7, libel plaintiffs are sometimes demonised by the press and referred to as mad or ill.

To give another example of such figurations of censure, one reader (No. 697, 02.09.88: 12) uses the metaphors of sickness and insanity, and suggests that the ‘poor twisted person’ guilty of the ‘offensive drivel’ uttered in a satirical poem about the death of Mark Boxer should be banished to a psychiatric clinic. Central to the disease/sickness metaphor is the notion of separation; the cause of the disease needs to be isolated or quarantined. The powerful word ‘banishment’ and the idea that the ‘poet’ is clinically certifiable operate as vehicles for expressing the felt need for expulsion and containment of the offender. Only by such ‘banishment’ can there be any redress of ‘the pitifully low depth’ to which Private Eye has ‘stooped in the name of humour’ (lines 21-24).

1 Sir,
2 Over the past few months I have come to
3 read your publication on a regular basis, and
4 have found myself becoming hardened to some
5 of your occasionally purile and distasteful
6 attempts at humour for the sake of other
7 regular features which are genuinely amusing.
8 However, I found your ‘poem’ on the death
9 of the late Mark Boxer (Eye 695) to be one of
10 the sickest and most offensive pieces of drivel
11 that I have had the misfortune to read in the
12 pages of even your juvenile businessman’s comic.
13 I can only feel pity for the poor, twisted
14 person who, in their own misguided opinion,
15 seriously believes that the trivialisations of the
16 death of a man who had been suffering from a
17 long and fatal illness is remotely funny.
18 In view of this, I think a printed
19 apology, if not for me, then for Anna Ford, is
20 the least that you could do to redeem yourself
21 a little from the pitifully low depth to which
22 you have stooped in the name of humour, al-
23 though the dismissal of the poem’s author and
24 his banishment to a psychiatric clinic would be
25 preferable.
26 Yours etc …
Discussion

Vehement language often involves the use of figurative expression as a way of enhancing its protective, boundary-marking purpose, but the force of this depends on the usage blurring the distinction between what is figurative and literal. Blurring this distinction increases the rhetorical power of the complaint, but in the case I am dealing with here, deploying strongly denunciatory words identified with that which is castigated may also reveal a recognition of the paradox of making serious observations about those occasions where humour is felt to have failed. The paradox which any such observation entails is the refusal of the comic impulse to be contained. Humour makes a mockery of seriousness, and that is its irresistible and glorious purpose. It challenges our closely held values and beliefs, subverts existing moral proprieties, and bares its backside to prim decency and serious demeanours. It diverges from routine ways of making sense and celebrates the ab-normal in order to defy the over-normal. To appreciate a joke or comic narrative means acceding to these conditions and consequences of their discourse. If one of the major purposes of satire is to dish the dirt, complaining about this is to miss the point, to surrender your sense of humour for a sanctimonious position on the moral high ground, to appear to be ‘clean’ and ‘correct’.

To say that certain topics or targets are not appropriate for satirical ridicule or attack is to invite such ridicule and attack. It is to invite the response of not being taken seriously as, in the face of the regularity of protests against it, the serial offensiveness of *Private Eye* abundantly attests – the discourse of complaint against it in readers’ letters is in itself a staple item in the magazine. This leads into tremendous difficulty any expectation on the part of readers for certain topics or targets to be off-limits for comedy, or for humour to be neutral when it never is – it depends on who you are laughing at and who you are laughing with. These kinds of issues came together to become the central dilemma confronting the politics of alternative comedy in the 1980s: how to reconcile opposition to the censorship of comedy and opposition to comic offensiveness (see chapter 2 and Littlewood and Pickering, 1998). Whether these can be reconciled, whether the comic impulse should be restrained or allowed free rein, is perhaps not amenable to lofty generalisation. This is why we’re often caught between contrary responses. As the black journalist Gary Younge recounts, he once went to see Gerry Sadowitz as a student:
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He ridiculed everyone from Mother Theresa to Nelson Mandela — ‘Mandela, what a cunt. Lend him a fiver and then you never see him again’. The profane disrespect had me both wincing and laughing. Holy cows were being slaughtered, and I admit, I wanted to watch (Younge, 1999: 100).

Yet, understandably, Younge objects to ‘Paki’ and ‘nigga’ jokes and again, this takes us to the nub of the problem, of reconciling the need to have a sense of humour with the sense of being offended, of applauding the comic slaughter of holy cows yet feeling repelled by the cruel or abusive comic treatment of specific ethnic groups, of balancing profane disrespect with a serious respect for other people, particularly those who are already marginalised or vulnerable. As noted in chapter 2, Cotterill observes that women find themselves in a ‘double-bind’ situation when responding to mother-in-law jokes — ‘to join in the laughter means denial and devaluation of their own experience; to resist the joke and refuse to be the object of ridicule appears to justify the charge that women cannot “take” a joke against themselves’ (1996: 214). To quote Younge again, it is ‘difficult to have a sense of humour and to be offended at the same time’ (1999: 100). Metaphors of dirt are a measure of this difficulty.

In trying to isolate certain unacceptable topics and targets of Private Eye’s satirical discourse, and delineate those areas or types of humour which are deemed appropriate for the magazine, readers draw on a conceptual hierarchy of discourses where Private Eye is ranked at its nadir, with the specific offence identified lowering the status of the magazine even further. This is either implicit in the terms used or openly referred to, as for instance when one ‘loyal but pissed-off reader’ stated: ‘If I had to choose between the respectful, dignified hypocrisy of The Sun, or the shallow, snide, pseudo-satire of the Eye, it would be with joy that I would fill Mr Murdoch’s coffers’ (No. 847, 03.06.94: 14). Letters referring to the rules implicit in these distinctions and classifications draw on the conflict between ethical discourse and humour, but they do so in symbolic high/low terms which are not in binary opposition — as is assumed in use of the metaphors of the low or debased — but mutually complementary, symbiotically feeding off each other. As Stallybrass and White say of these relations:

the ‘top’ attempts to reject and eliminate the ‘bottom’ for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover, not only that it is in some way frequently dependent upon that low-Other ... but also that the top includes that low symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life. The result is a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear and desire in the construction of subjectivity: a psychological dependence upon precisely those Others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level. It is for this reason
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that what is *socially* peripheral is so frequently *symbolically* central ... (1986: 5-6; emphases in original).

It is the mobile, conflictual interrelations of serious and comic discourse which are thus in play in readers' letters to *Private Eye*, and it is the continual pull and push set up between them which characterises the constitutive ambivalence of hierarchical judgement and censure in the identification of limits and centres, errors and infractions. That, rather than their binary evaluative categories, is in the end what is most significant. In stridently reasserting a sharp differentiation between ethics and social satire, the discourse of complaint ignores the creative transcodings of values and cannot easily come to terms with the ambivalence which continually re-emerges in the gap between an appreciation of humour and its censure, or rather in the problem of where precisely such a gap is to be identified. The problem is perhaps congenital to humour because, finally, humour honours nothing in the world but laughter, and laughter has no fixed target anywhere in the world. In negotiating the shifting sands between serious and comic discourse, we need to attend carefully to the symbolic distinctions and classifications set out as boundary-markers of normality and order, for it is through them that comic and serious matters are assigned to their right and proper place. This is what I have tried to do.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have examined readers' letters of complaint about occasions where comic discourse is perceived as stepping over the mark and has caused offence. I have illustrated that complaining about comic offence is a fragile endeavour. Using the techniques of linguistic discourse analysis and symbolic cultural analysis I have analysed how comic offence is registered and how the sense of offence is articulated. Epistolary complaints offset potential objections to the offence. This is conducted through the use of particular linguistic framing, including the use of prolepsis, prefacing disagreements with agreements and pronominal displacements. Recurringly, these rhetorical strategies are combined with symbolic and figurative language referring to dirt and filth, disease, sickness and madness, that simultaneously express the grievance and censure the humour. Although the devices used to offset the claim of lacking a sense of humour initially appear diametrically opposed to the symbolic and figurative language of complaint in which the comic offence is articulated, with closer scrutiny, these two discursive features are complementary. The strategies of prolepsis, prefacing disagreements with agreements and pronominal displacements...
prepare the ground for more forceful usage of figurative and symbolic language. The vehement language used reconstructs and maintains ethical boundaries between serious and comic discourse.

In the final analytic chapter I examine how comic offence and comic censure is publicly negotiated by analysing how the press report cases of comic offence that are legally resolved by the law of defamation. The chapter combines a quantitative content analysis of *Private Eye*’s libel litigation experience with close qualitative textual analysis of press reports of five libel cases involving *Private Eye*. 
Chapter 7

Humour, Offence and Censure in The Press

Debates, negotiations, official statements, submissions, court-room procedures and judgments are ... heavily reported in the Press (Fowler, 1991: 74-75).

Libel cases make good entertainment where they expose the failings of the rich and famous (Bindman, 2000: 71).

Power of the media lies in their ability not only to provide information but to formulate imagery and shape ideas (Theberge, 1991: 37).

Introduction

This chapter considers the media's contribution to the debate surrounding comic offence and comic censure. As highlighted in chapter 3, varied strategies exist for complaints and criticisms to be made against Private Eye. In the previous chapter I examined the discursive strategies used by offended readers when writing letters of complaint to the editor of Private Eye, which I have called the 'poor man's' censuring practice. This chapter develops analysis of the public negotiation and censuring of offensive humour by shifting from the censuring practices used in readers' letters to those used in press reporting of libel action brought against Private Eye. I call libel litigation the 'rich man's' censuring practice. There is a large gulf between these two censuring practices. The 'poor man' uses readers' letters to express offence and the 'rich man' sues Private Eye for defamation. However, occasionally 'poor man' litigants do cross to the use of libel in their attempts at comic censure.

The chapter offers an analysis of the debate surrounding comic offence and comic censure as conducted by and in the press when reporting libel litigation brought against the Eye. Reporting on libel litigation is 'part of journalism's daily fabric' (Gleason, 1993: 894). The press's role in the censuring of Private Eye discourse takes two forms. It can create scares and moral panics around the latest comedy outrage and it can conduct aesthetic critiques 'with which to stoke the censorial flames' (Cloonan, 1996: 259). The analysis seeks to uncover the recurring textual practices involved in the press's management of complaints against comic discourse and to explore how these

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1 Also readers' letters are often used to support or condemn the outcome of Private Eye's libel litigation (see No. 398, 18.03.77: 7; 717, 09.06.89: 13; 718, 23.06.89: 13; 719, 07.07.89: 12; 720, 21.08.89: 13; No. 721, 04.08.89: 12; 722, 18.08.89: 13; 723, 01.09.89: 12; 725, 29.09.89: 12).
textual practices function to censure *Private Eye*. This chapter analyses how the media portray the perpetrator(s) of the offending discourse, those offended by the discourse and how they account for the offence caused. Although since its early libel experience the courts have been ‘naturally predisposed to be unsympathetic to *Private Eye*’ (Harry Thompson, 1997: 171), press reports of *Private Eye*’s libel litigation are fundamental to how the wider public regard *Private Eye* and its comic discourse.

This chapter reports the results of two studies on press reporting of *Private Eye*’s libel litigation.\(^2\) The first study is a quantitative content analysis of *Private Eye*’s libel litigation experience and the second is a qualitative textual analysis of press reporting of libel cases brought against *Private Eye*. In the quantitative content analysis I explore the types of people who sue *Private Eye* for libel (such as journalists, government ministers, businesspersons), the gender of the plaintiffs, the causes of libel litigation (accusations of corrupt/unethical behaviour, allegations of professional incompetence, allegations of criminal behaviour, criticisms of private life), the section of *Private Eye* that instigated the libel (such as a cartoon, the colour section, street of shame and so on) and the outcome of the litigation (the *Eye* is to pay libel damages and/or libel costs, the libel action is dropped, apology is given by *Private Eye*). In the second part of the chapter I present the findings of the qualitative textual analysis of press reporting of five libel cases (brought against the *Eye* by Randolph Churchill, Nora Beloff, James Goldsmith, Robert Maxwell and Sonia Sutcliffe). Through analysis of micro- and macro-structural features of news text, the textual analysis unpacks the meanings carried by news discourses and examines how the text is constructed to make sense of criticisms of comic offence. The main focus of this analysis is on the boundary construction and maintenance conducted by the press in their coverage of libel litigation stories where the plaintiff has been offended by *Private Eye* discourse. Three types of boundary maintenance are identified: Establishing Professional Boundaries: the press v the law, Establishing Journalistic Boundaries: *Private Eye* v the rest of the press and Establishing Moral Behaviour Boundaries: plaintiff v defendant. These boundaries are analysed by attending to the structure of news discourse and the formal features of the text. Presentational structures of the news discourse are considered, including the page number the item appears on, the positioning and layout on the page, the size of the article.

\(^2\) I am not a legal theorist and I do not profess a deep understanding of the intricacies and complexities of the law of defamation. My interest in defamation is located in how the media, in particular the press, contribute to the debate surrounding comic offence through analysis of the representation and construction of the charges of defamation made against *Private Eye*, the outcome(s) of libel trials, and the character and behaviour of plaintiffs and defendants.
Chapter 7: Humour, Offence and Censure in The Press

and the presence of photos and cartoons. The construction and maintenance of boundaries and the specific presentational structures of the news reports help to censure Private Eye and enable the censuring practices to be presented as naturally facilitated by the discourse. Through analysis of press coverage of libel litigation and comic offence I illustrate how the ‘rich man’ registers offence and how the press use the libel cases to mark and maintain boundaries for in/appropriate topics for serious and non-serious discourse and highlight the consequences for humour that is seen as overstepping the mark and causing offence.

Libel Law Research

There are a number of legal discourses that have been identified as fruitful sites of sociological analysis (Maley, 1994). Analysis of the language of law is a growing research area (see for example Gibbons’ edited collection Language and the Law, 1994), although language of the courtroom is the most developed area of law research (Gibbons, 1994). This area includes analysis of the verbal organisation and verbal rituals in courtrooms (Atkinson, 1992; Atkinson and Drew, 1979), analysis of ideological communication in courtrooms (Harris, 1994) and analysis of interaction in courtrooms (Walsh, 1994). Legal document discourses, such as wills, have been scrutinised (Danet and Bogoch, 1994), as has judicial language and decisions made in reports and case law (Bhatia, 1994). To this heterogeneous collection of legal discourses we can (and should) add the systematic analysis of media discourse reporting on litigation and litigants.

Despite the law of defamation being ‘notoriously complex’ (Barendt et al, 1997: 1) this area of the law has received little academic scrutiny. Studies on libel law often analyse the ‘libel climate’ through an examination of the kinds of person(s) who sue, the type(s) of material that led them to sue and what plaintiffs hope to achieve through legal proceedings (see Franklin, 1981; Gleason, 1993). There are those who assess reforms to the libel law (Robertshaw, 1997) and those who analyse the perceived impact of defamatory statements on individuals (Cohen et al, 1988). Plaintiffs and defendants either praise or criticise the law. Others document the development and outcome of prominent libel cases, such as Box’s (1967) review of Marie Stopes v Sutherland in 1923, Gregory’s Dirty Tricks (1994) analysis of the British Airways v Virgin Atlantic case, Mitchell’s The Cost of a Reputation (1997) based on the Aldington v Tolstoy case and Vidal’s
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McLibel (1997) review of the McDonald's v Steel and Morris's libel case.³ And of course there are broadcast and newspaper reports of prominent libel cases. It is the latter that is of interest in this chapter. We have all heard of libel law and can probably name one or two famous individuals who have been involved in libel litigation. Jason Donovan won £200,000 from The Face magazine in 1992 for allegations of homosexuality and Gillian Taylforth (former EastEnders actress) paid £500,000 in her failed libel action against The Sun in 1994. Jeffrey Archer won £500,000 from The Daily Star in 1987 regarding allegations that he made payments to a prostitute, although recently (July 2001) he was put on trial, found guilty of committing perjury in the 1987 libel case and was imprisoned for 4 years (see Sengupta, 2001). However, critical analysis of the media coverage of prominent libel litigation is limited in the academic literature. One study that has explored media reporting of libel is Keith Soothill's study, 'Libel in the News' (1992). He analysed how the media, newspapers in particular, report libel. Utilising a limited sample (January-June 1992) of daily and Sunday newspapers, Soothill found that press reports of libel can be classified into 3 main stages: the posturing stage (threats to sue and issuing of writs), the settlement stage (reports on how the libel is to be resolved) and the aftermath (some libel cases become folk history and are quoted when referring to current libel cases). Close scrutiny of libel cases brought against a particular publication and the consequences these cases has for censure has not be conducted. This chapter aims to redress this imbalance. News reports of libel trials reflect and reinforce particular ideological positions whilst contributing to the debate on comic offence and therefore should not be excluded from academic analysis.

Popular understanding of critiques of media discourse is generally acquired through journalistic impressions and reports. As Van Dijk observes:

most of our social and political knowledge and beliefs about the world derive from the dozens of news reports we read or see every day. There is probably no other discursive

³ Marie Stopes (leader of the birth control movement), paid Sutherland over £1400 in damages and costs. Based on her work on birth control, Sutherland accused Stopes of taking advantage of the ignorance of the poor and subjecting them to harmful experiments. Lord King and British Airways paid Richard Branson and Virgin Atlantic £610,000 in libel damages, in 1993. In court British Airways admitted to 'disreputable business practices' including passenger poaching, and attempting to plant 'hostile' stories about Virgin Atlantic and Richard Branson in the press (Gregory, 1994). Lord Aldington was awarded £1.5 million in damages in November 1989 in a libel case brought against Nikolai Tolstoy (Mitchell, 1997). Tolstoy accused Aldington (former Chief of Staff of 5 Corps, Brigadier Low) of being a WWII war criminal and responsible for the deaths of 70,000 Cossacks and Jugoslavs. Steel and Morris won their libel case brought against them by multi-national company McDonald's. Steel and Morris had published and distributed a leaflet documenting problematic nutritional, health and employment practices at McDonald's.
practice, beside everyday conversation, that is engaged in so frequently and by so many people as news in the press and on television (1991b: 110).

As libel action is the only civil right for which legal aid is unavailable (see Bindman, 2000: 72; Hooper, 2000: 459, Morrish, 1996: 213) and the costs involved in libel litigation are unlimited, in general only the wealthy and elite can afford to sue for libel (see below). Few members of the lay public have firsthand experience of libel. ‘Ordinary’ readers seek redress for the offence caused by *Private Eye* by writing letters of complaint to the editor. To repeat from chapter 5, of the 479 letters of complaint printed in *Private Eye* between January 1971 and April 1999, 372 were written by ‘ordinary’ readers and only 11 were written by officials, such as solicitors complaining on behalf of a client. Popular knowledge of the legal system is often acquired through the media, especially broadcast and print news reports which have a major influence on our understanding of the legal system. Making offensive discourse and libel litigation comprehensible is significant because ‘the media are often presenting information about events which occur outside the direct experience of the majority of the society. The media thus represent the primary, and often the only, source of information about many important events and topics’ (Hall et al, 1978: 56). It is this press coverage that gives wider precedence to the charges of offence made against the *Eye*. The press are essential mediators between offended *Eye* readers and the wider public. As Kevin Bays (KB) noted in my (SL) interview with him:

KB: But of course the other thing is that once you get into court all the other newspapers report it on a daily basis, everything that’s said in court is covered.
SL: Yes, if you’re in *Private Eye* only those who read *Private Eye* would have known about the story.
KB: Yeah.
SL: Once you go to court it’s published in every paper.
KB: In every paper.
SL: So even those who hadn’t seen the magazine are aware of what’s going on.
(interview, 2nd December, 1998).

This chapter examines newspaper articles of libel litigation as meaning-producing texts, their organizational structures (how they construct notions of offence), and the assumptions employed to understand and make sense of libel litigation. Implications of these practices for public understanding and appreciation of discourses causing comic offence are discussed.
Journalistic Introspection

Despite being presented as objectively presenting the debate or problem to the public via the demands of objectivity and impartiality, the media play a fundamental role in the reproduction and consolidation of ruling ideologies and promote specific ways of interpreting events. The media do not simply report events that are newsworthy in themselves (Eldridge, 1995; Galtung and Ruge, 1973; Hall et al, 1978). Stories that are selected and reported on represent the end product of a complex process in which the journalist’s professional ideology or ‘news values’ are fundamental. News values provide the:

criteria in the routine practices of journalism which enable journalists ... to decide routinely and regularly which stories are “newsworthy” and which are not, which stories are major “lead” stories and which are relatively insignificant, which stories to run and which to drop (Hall et al, 1978: 54).

News values (see also Galtung and Ruge, 1973; Hartley, 1995) determine if a story will be reported in the news and how long it will remain in the media. As Hall et al observe the media do ‘not simply and transparently report events which are “naturally” newsworthy in themselves. “News” is the end-product of a complex process which begins with a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories’ (1978: 53; emphasis in original). News values can affect how the story is reported. For example if the media focus on the involvement of an elite person in a libel case the media may overlook the standard practices of the libel law. If the emphasis is on drama and sensation, attention may be directed towards the nature and seriousness of the consequences of legal action caused by the comic offence than providing a detailed and accurate account or analysis of the offending discourse.

Interestingly, all 3 of the libel cases mentioned above involved media discourse (The Daily Star, The Face and The Sun) engaging in defamatory behaviour, with the defendants being sued and paying out large sums of money in damages (with the exception of The Sun). Soothill argues that the law of libel:

has a curiously symbiotic relationship with newspapers. In part, it helps to control newspapers, but also, in spectacular cases, it helps to sell newspapers. Of course, in selling newspapers it often brings a much wider notice the focus of the original libel (1992: 1337).

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4 This rule, according to Vidal (1997) is to prevent the ‘clogging up’ of courts with minor claims.
When the press report on the outcome of such libel cases where the media have been found guilty of defamation, in a sense the press have to defend their profession and often publicly distance themselves from the type of journalist(s) or news discourse(s) that engage in libellous reporting. This is of fundamental importance in press reports of libel litigation involving *Private Eye*. As we will see, frequently, when the mainstream media report on the outcomes of libel litigation involving *Private Eye*, journalists and media organisations are reporting on complaints made, not only about *Private Eye*, but also the press in general, questioning or highlighting how journalists go about their work. In his analysis of press reporting after the death of Princess Diana, Bishop argues that journalistic reflection and self-examination is ‘fast becoming a journalistic routine’ (1999: 92). He illustrates how the view, held by those such as Berkowitz (1998 in Bishop, 1999), that journalists reflect on and analyse their profession only on Sunday morning talk shows and in published editorials is mistaken. Whereas in the past journalists may discuss their roles and responsibilities privately, Bishop’s work highlights how journalists discuss their profession publicly, using news coverage to understand their roles and to differentiate between the different spheres of journalism.

In the analysis that follows I am concerned with the way in which complaints made about *Private Eye* are constructed in the press. Although the press reports on the outcome of the trial and quotes key figures involved, some of the mainstream press may wish to disassociate themselves from *Private Eye*. As I will illustrate, this is done through establishing journalistic and ethical boundaries.

I noted in chapter 3 that the press’s relationship to *Private Eye* has continually been varied and often in flux. In the early 1960s Fleet Street favoured *Private Eye* as it was part of the trendy satire boom, but when the satire boom declined, the press largely ignored it. There was a resurgence of press attention when the *Eye* was sued for libel. Seymour-Ure (1974: 254) notes that in their first ten years of publication over a dozen libel cases were reported in *The Times*. Marnham refers to this as the ‘third phase of press reaction’ and observes that as the libel cases:

> frequently involved well-known names they could not be ignored, but they could be made the occasion for taunting. *The Evening News* could report the award of “substantial damages to Sir Cyril Black” under the heading “The Price of Trying to be Funny” (1982: 180).

Further, Ian Hislop perfectly understands why the press may not be so accommodating when reporting the libel suits brought against the *Eye*: ‘I mean given that we spend two pages an issue taking the piss out of Fleet Street and how useless they are, one can’t get too upset when they do it
back. I mean I think they enjoy the fact that we go down the tubes’ (interview, 7th September, 1998). Equally, Tony Rushton explains the potential negative press coverage of the Eye’s libel cases on the differences between the practices of the mainstream press and Private Eye: ‘...some of them are secretly quite sort of jealous, that they are inhibited, whereas we are not inhibited. The more sensitive ones are very conscious of the fact that we don’t work under the same sorts of pressures that they work under’ (interview, 5th May, 1998).

It is to these press reports that I now turn.

Study 1: Quantitative Content Analysis of Private Eye’s Libel Experience

Preceding the textual analysis of the press reports of libel litigation involving Private Eye, a record of all libel cases brought against Private Eye, as reported in the press, was produced (see chart in Appendix A). During a lecture given by Tony Rushton, he intimates that the Eye has extensive libel experience:

We haven’t a full time solicitor, no, no. I think over the years we’ve learnt a lot about what you can and can’t say and certainly yeah I think experience I think we are as experienced in libel as anybody else in the country (18th May, 1998). 5

This quantitative study provides an accurate record of the Eye’s libel experience as reported in the press. Individual libel cases brought against Private Eye have been reviewed (see Greenslade, 1992; Haines and Donnelly, 1986; Hooper, 1984, 2000; Ingrams, 1979; Marnham, 1982), but a comprehensive documentation of all libel cases involving the Eye is lacking in the literature and the creation of the chart redresses this absence. Information regarding the Eye’s experience of libel litigation was sought from (the printed referring system) The Times Index. 6 Searches for press reports of libel cases brought against Private Eye were conducted under the headings ‘Defamation’, ‘Libel’, ‘Press’, ‘Pressdram’ (Private Eye’s publishers), and ‘Private Eye’. All years from 1961 (Private Eye’s inception) to 1999 inclusive were included in the searches. Press reports informing readers of the outcome of libel trials where Private Eye was the plaintiff were recorded in the chart.


Reports informing, predicting or suggesting that writs have been, or may be issued in the future against the *Eye* (Soothill's, 1992 posturing stage) were excluded from the chart, as the purpose of the thesis is to explore actual complaints and criticisms of *Private Eye* discourse and not potential complaints. Further, reports on the potential of the issuing of libel writs are often rather short and simplistic (possibly because they are protected by Contempt of Court). Additionally, some libel actions were not reported in the press and some led to injunctions preventing *Private Eye* from mentioning the complainant in the future which did not receive press coverage. Although analysis of libel cases that are not reported in the press could be particularly interesting, this was considered beyond the boundaries of the thesis. The focus of the thesis is the negotiation of and perception of offensive comic discourse as presented *publicly* in media discourse.

A total of 90 libel cases were referenced in *The Times Index* during the 38-year period scrutinised. Thirteen libel cases (14% of cases) were reported between 1961-1969, 27 (30%) between 1970-1979, 43 (48%) between 1980-1989 and 7 (8%) during 1990-1999. The relevant editions of *The Times* newspaper for all 90 cases were then consulted and photocopied in order to gather further details of each case. The photocopies facilitated recording of the name of the plaintiff, the plaintiff's (professional) position, the sources of the complaint as reported in the press, the date of publication of the offending article (where given), the date on which the decision of the litigation was made, the outcome of the litigation and any response made by *Private Eye* (where given). As the chart in Appendix A illustrates, those defamed by *Private Eye* 'reads like a shortened version of *Who's Who*' (Maxwell, 1986: 16). Echoing a wider trend in press reports of libel litigation (see Gleason, 1993), news reports of libel litigation involving *Private Eye* varied in length and comprehensiveness. Whilst some were rather short and offered minimal details, others were longer and thorough. As a result, records of some cases are incomplete. This problem does not destroy, or detract from the usefulness of the material, as the purpose of this section of the thesis is to establish an overview of *Private Eye*’s libel climate. The use of newspaper reports is to identify trends and facilitate a broad understanding of the libel climate. For these purposes press reports provide a valuable database and in this instance incomplete news reports, or rather only certain details reported in the press, are a feature of the analysis, rather than a problem to be addressed and resolved.

On closer inspection a number of interesting themes emerged from these newspaper articles. Some cases had more than one plaintiff. One hundred and eight plaintiffs were reported as being involved in the 90 libel cases as some cases had multiple named plaintiffs. Four of the 108 plaintiffs were companies (although it is likely that the size of the four companies vary, they were recorded as single entities). Journalists have frequently acted as plaintiffs in libel litigation against *Private Eye*. Of the 108 plaintiffs, 37 plaintiffs (34%) were reported to be journalists (including editors, authors and publishers). Prominent libel lawyer, Carter-Ruck observes that 'before the advent of *Private Eye* it was unusual though not unique, to find journalists in the role of complaining parties instead of being, with their newspaper, the defendants' (1990: 190). Twenty-two (20%) of the 108 plaintiffs were reported as being government ministers (including all those linked to government, such as parliamentary advisors). Sixteen plaintiffs (15%) were reported as businesspersons (managing directors, chairpersons, secretaries of companies or organisations). Other plaintiffs have been police officers (6 plaintiffs, 6%), media personalities (5 plaintiffs, 5%), television and film producers and directors (4 plaintiffs, 4%). Sonia Sutcliffe (wife of Peter Sutcliffe, convicted of multiple murders) may be seen as the only plaintiff that may be considered as lacking the financial support and professional integrity that is usually required to successfully fight libel litigation (to reiterate from the introduction to this chapter, legal aid has never been available in libel cases). These findings reflect the comments made by Kevin Bays (libel lawyer for the *Eye*) 'I think over the years, the libel plaintiffs have tended to be the rich and famous. Or, at least the famous if not the rich' (interview, 2nd December, 1998).

Those who sue *Private Eye* for libel are given (or are of) a different status to those who articulate their offence through written letters. As I reported in chapter 5, 'ordinary' readers seek redress for the offence caused by *Private Eye* by writing letters of complaint to the editor. Of the 479 letters of complaint used in the quantitative content analysis, 'ordinary' readers wrote 372, officials (such as solicitors complaining on behalf of a client) wrote 11 and spokespersons for different groups wrote 94. Here we see a distinction between the mode of redress favoured and used by the 'rich man' and 'poor man'.

Of the 108 plaintiffs, 94 (87%) were reported as being male, 10 (9%) were reported as female and in 4 (4%) cases the gender of the plaintiff(s) was unknown because they consisted of whole companies. Given the status of the plaintiffs, the gender of the plaintiffs is unsurprising. These figures reflect a trend in the gender of plaintiffs involved in libel litigation as identified by Gleason.
(1993) in his analysis of the libel climate in the late 19th century, as reported in trade journals. Gleason found that based on 1,206 cases reported between 1884 and 1899, 85% of identified plaintiffs were male, 8% female and 6% were businesses and that the majority of plaintiffs were either journalists, government ministers or businessmen. These trends continue to exist in the 20th century (Gleason, 1993). This gender pattern of libel litigants reflects the gender pattern of reader complainants. To recap from chapter 5, males authored 57% of readers’ letters printed in the Eye and females authored 18%.

Causes of libel were classified according to accusations of corrupt/unethical behaviour, allegations of professional incompetence, allegations of criminal behaviour, criticisms of private life and cases where the cause was unclear. It was found that accusations of corrupt/unethical behaviour instigated libel suits in 44 (49%) of cases reported. Nine reports (10%) claimed that the libel was caused by allegations of professional incompetence, 9 reports (10%) noted that allegations of criminal behaviour instigated the libel suit and 9 (10%) articles reported that the libel litigation was caused by criticisms of individual’s private activities. In 19 reports (21%) the cause of action was unclear. These findings support Franklin’s (1981) analysis of the causes of libel litigation. In his study three types of charges were popular. These were accusations of incompetence, crime and moral failings. Given that the law of defamation aims to protect individual’s reputation, it is unsurprising that libel cases are instigated by criticisms or comments made on a person’s professional and/or private life. These topics reflect those that officials complain about when writing to Private Eye. As I found in chapter 5, 64% of letters written by officials refer to personal appearance and 9% refer to invasion of privacy. However, ‘ordinary’ readers seeking redress for the offence caused refer to topics related to the individual and those of a wider social concern (such as war).

Of the 90 news reports of libel cases, 75 (83%) did not specify the section of Private Eye in which the offending article was published. In 3 reports (3%) it was reported that a cartoon was responsible for the libel. Other sections of the magazine causing offence were the Colour Section (1% of reports), Auberon Waugh’s columns (2% of reports), Street of Shame (1% of reports) and Grovel (3% of reports). The remaining 6% of reports named a single article as the offending discourse. These figures are similar to the findings of the content analysis of readers’ letters. Offence that is articulated through readers’ letters is often expressed without reference to the section of Private Eye that caused the offence. In chapter 5 I reported that 41% of readers’ letters did not specify the
section causing the offence. Eleven percent of readers' letters referred to the front page, 7% to a cartoon, 3% to Auberon Waugh's Diaries, and 4% to the Grovel column.

In 42 news reports (47%) of libel cases it was noted that Private Eye was to pay the plaintiff libel damages and also in 42 other news reports (47%) it was noted that the Eye was to pay both libel damages and legal costs. Of these 84 reports, 33 (39%) referred to the damages as 'substantial'. Equally, Soothill (1992) found that in 60% of libel cases as reported by the press the amount of damages awarded were undisclosed, half of which were referred to as 'substantial' or 'very large'. As Hooper observes:

The vast majority of libel actions are settled. Damages are not normally disclosed, but the description "substantial" is a form of legal shorthand for £10,000 or over. It is difficult to obtain accurate statistics: more often than not, both parties have some interest in leaving the world at large guessing about the amount actually paid (2000: 483).

In one report (1%) it was noted that the plaintiff had dropped the libel action against Private Eye entirely and the Eye did not have to pay costs or damages. In five reports (6%) it was highlighted that the Eye organised a reader appeal and/or some other charity event (such as a benefit concert) in order to raise funds for the libel damages and legal costs that the Eye was ordered to pay. In 41 libel case news reports (46%) it was noted that Private Eye had apologised for the offending article and in 39 reports (43%) it was reported that Private Eye recognised the falsity of the allegations/that they were made without foundation. Apologies and corrections made by Private Eye may be deliberately used to reduce the damages awarded. As Robertson and Nicol (1990) observe, refusal to make an apology or to correct obvious mistakes will increase the damages awarded. Libel plaintiffs want more than an opportunity to respond, they want the publication to admit error through an apology, a retraction or correction (Bezanson et al, 1987). In contrast, in only 25% of readers' letters did the author expect actions on the part of Private Eye, such as an apology or an explanation for printing the offensive discourse. In my (SL) interview with Ian Hislop (IH), he explained how sometimes libel cases that are lost in the sense that the Eye has to pay the plaintiff libel damages, are later won:

IH: I mean some of the ones we've lost I don't think we deserved to lose. You know I'm bound to say that.
SL: Any in particular that you could pinpoint?
IH: Well I mean the Yorkshire Ripper's Wife for example.
SL: The Sonia Sutcliffe case.

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IH: Yeah. It later turned out that what we'd said about her in terms of taking money from newspapers was actually true. When she lost The News of the World case, so yeah some of them you win later.
SL; Could you have taken the Sonia Sutcliffe case further if you wanted to?
IH: Yeah, I could have done, but I mean attempting to bankrupt some woman living in a psycho house after all is hardly what the Eye is there for.
(interview, 7th September, 1998).

Drawing together the main strands of the content analysis of press reports of Private Eye's libel litigation, we can see that:

- Most libel litigants, as reported in the press are journalists, government ministers and businesspersons. Using the law of defamation to seek redress for comic offence is a device mainly used by the 'rich man'.
- The majority of Eye libel litigants are male.
- Almost half of all libel cases brought against the Eye, as reported in the press are instigated by accusation of corrupt/unethical behaviour.
- The cause or topic of the libel is mentioned more often than the section of the magazine in which the offending item appeared.
- Private Eye often pays the libel litigant his/her libel damages and legal costs.
- Private Eye are expected, and often do, apologise for the offence caused and recognise the falsity of their allegations.

Study 2: Qualitative Textual Analysis of Libel Press Reports

The chart was created in order to facilitate a move towards closer focussed analysis of the strategies employed when reporting complaints made against Private Eye discourse and the censuring practices favoured by the press. Based on the findings noted above, press reporting of five libel cases was chosen for closer scrutiny. The 5 libel cases involving Private Eye were chosen because they are sufficiently different in nature and illustrate the broad range of issues that have resulted in Private Eye being sued for damage to reputation. The 5 cases chosen were:

1) Randolph Churchill v Private Eye (1963)7
2) Nora Beloff v Private Eye (1972)
3) James Goldsmith v Private Eye (1977)
4) Robert Maxwell v Private Eye (1986)
5) Sonia Sutcliffe v Private Eye (1989)

7 When used in the title of a libel case, Private Eye is synonymous with journalists working on Private Eye, and publishers, printers and distributors. The word 'Private Eye' is used to represent all parties involved in the defence.
Contextual details regarding each of the above cases can be seen in Appendix B. The plaintiffs in the libel cases chosen for analysis are both male and female and reflect a diverse range of professions. Randolph Churchill, the son of MP Sir Winston Churchill was a journalist at the time of the litigation, Nora Beloff worked for The Observer, James Goldsmith was a prominent financier, Robert Maxwell owned The Daily Mirror and Sonia Sutcliffe was not a prominent person, but became known when her husband (Peter Sutcliffe) was convicted of mass murder. The libel cases chosen span the three Private Eye editorships. Randolph Churchill’s case occurred during Christopher Booker’s editorship. Nora Beloff and James Goldsmith were plaintiffs during Richard Ingrams’s editorship, Robert Maxwell and Sonia Sutcliffe went to court during Ian Hislop’s editorship (although the offending articles were published during Ingrams’s editorship). Further, the cases reflect the differing types of Eye material that can result in defamation. A cartoon entitled ‘Great Dying Englishmen’ instigated Randolph Churchill’s defamation, Nora Beloff was offended by a ‘humorous’ attack, James Goldsmith and Sonia Sutcliffe considered they were defamed in more ‘serious’ pieces and both investigative journalism and a cartoon instigated Robert Maxwell’s litigation. The Goldsmith case was particularly complex and lasted for 18 months. Goldsmith issued over 80 writs against Private Eye journalists, publishers, wholesalers and retailers. He also sued Richard Ingrams and Patrick Marnham (offending journalist) for criminal libel. Suing for libel based on humorous discourse is problematic for both the plaintiff and defendant. As Hooper observes:

actions brought on the grounds of ridicule or lampooning are fairly rare. Such cases have considerable perils for a plaintiff, win or lose. He [sic] may make himself appear more ridiculous even if he wins. If he loses, he may make the incredible appear credible. Nevertheless if such an action is brought, it may turn out to be difficult to defend. The only defence may be that the words were too far-fetched or absurd for people to think the worst of the plaintiff. If the lampooner intends to lower the plaintiff in the estimation of others, the jury may well conclude that the words do just that and find in favour of the plaintiff (1984: 49).

The outcomes of the libel cases chosen for analysis vary dramatically. The Randolph Churchill case ended with Private Eye paying his legal costs and paying for an advertisement in The Evening Standard, expressing the Eye’s apologies and withdrawing the allegations. Similarly, the case instigated by James Goldsmith ended when Goldsmith dropped the case, based on an agreement that the Eye would pay his legal costs and pay for an advertisement in The Evening Standard apologising to Goldsmith. Nora Beloff received £3,000 in libel damages, a modest amount when compared to the £55,000 libel damages awarded to Robert Maxwell and the £600,000 damages
initially awarded to Sonia Sutcliffe (which was reduced to £60,000 on appeal). Reader appeals to raise funds to assist payment of the libel damages and costs were established for the Beloff case (Ballsoff Fund), the Goldsmith case (Goldenballs Fund) and the Sutcliffe case (Ripper-balls/Banana-balls Fund). Funds to pay Maxwell's libel damages and costs were raised by the Eye producing a bumper Christmas issue that sold at £1 each (see Appendix B for further details of each libel case).

Newspaper articles and cartoons based on the 5 libel cases were gathered from both the broadsheet and tabloid press: The Guardian, The Times, The Daily Telegraph, The Independent, The Daily Mail, The Daily Mirror, The Daily Express and The Sun. News reports printed immediately after the decision (the two subsequent days after a decision was made) about each case was made were included in the data set. The data set includes a collection of 73 news articles based on the libel trials. Four articles based on Churchill's case, 7 on Nora Beloff's case, 7 articles on Goldsmith's case, 14 on Robert Maxwell's case and 41 articles on Sonia Sutcliffe's case. In his analysis of libel in the news, Soothill (1992) found that very few libel cases gain widespread coverage and sometimes a case is mentioned in only one or two newspapers. He maintains that if the defendant has celebrity status of some kind then more coverage will be given:

Those who figure in these major libel cases, a strong sense of personal outrage comes across in the reports which suggests that very deep wounds have been opened up. In these cases the potential monetary risks and rewards are, one suspects, a mere backdrop to the fundamental challenge made to their personal identity (1992: 1338).

Having outlined the basic defining characteristics of the five libel cases chosen on which the news reports are based, I now turn to the close analysis of the textual practices utilized in the news reports.

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The five libel cases prompted intensive media coverage. During cursory considerations the press reports of libel litigation 3 types of recurring textual practices and boundary maintenance behaviour began to emerge. These were:

(i) Establishing Professional Boundaries: The Press v The Law
(ii) Establishing Journalistic Boundaries: Private Eye v the Rest of the Press
(iii) Establishing Moral Behaviour Boundaries: Plaintiff v Defendant

(i) Establishing Professional Boundaries

One of the recurring practices adopted by the press following the court's decision of the libel suits brought against Private Eye, is to attack and criticise the law of libel and argue for reforms to the libel law. Particular emphasis is placed on the unjust large sums awarded as libel damages and the problematic use of juries.

In their analysis of the self-commentary conducted by the press after the death of Princess Diana, Macmillan and Edwards (1999) observed a number of requests for the reworking of privacy laws and for tighter controls of press activities when acquiring stories and photographs. Attacking the shortcomings of the legal system serves to deflect attention and debate away from the discreditable practices of Private Eye onto the defects of the justice system. The justice system is the sphere that is scrutinised, not the offensive practices of Private Eye. The following headlines, of which many more could have been quoted were printed after the outcome of the Sonia Sutcliffe trial: 'Eye ruling could bring libel reform' (The Times, 26 May 1989: 3), 'Libel case shake-up over Ripper storm' (The Daily Mail, May 26 1989: 2), 'I would welcome a law on privacy' (Charles Moore column, The Daily Express, May 26 1989: 9), 'Shake up for laws on libel: Record awards to Ripper's wife sparks reform moves' (The Daily Express, May 26 1989: 19), 'Award will spur libel reform call' (The Guardian, May 25 1989: 3), 'OUTRAGE OVER £600,000 FOR RIPPER'S WIFE' (The Daily Express, May 25 1989: 1), 'FURY AT RIPPER WIFE'S £600,000 Huge Private Eye payout' (The Sun, May 25 1989: 1). Tabloid newspapers criticise the large damages awarded in libel cases (see discussion below). The main focus of broadsheet newspapers is necessary improvements to the libel law. For example, the legal correspondent on The Independent, Robert Rice regards lawyers as the 'real winners' in libel litigation and asks that as it is an important 'function of the media to expose the fraudulent and the scandalous ... can it be right ... that critics of official conduct may be deterred from voicing their criticism, even though it is believed to be true and even though it is in
fact true, because of doubt whether it can be proved in court or fear of the expense of having to do so? (November 22 1986: 9). Few reports attempt to analyse why Sonia Sutcliffe was awarded such a large amount in damages. Charles Moore writing in The Daily Express (May 26 1989: 9) argues that rather than being sympathetic towards Sonia Sutcliffe, the jury was ‘expressing £600,000 worth of anger to the British Press’. The public has been angered by specific activities of the British press: that of invading privacy and the devious strategies journalists engage in order to get a story.

The headlines noted above used in the tabloid press report on the ‘outrage’ and ‘fury’ caused by the libel damages awarded to Sonia Sutcliffe. The function of the headline is to draw the reader’s attention to the story. To attract attention, the event or issue is often dramatised or sensationalised. The headline functions to highlight why the story is important or problematic and summarises the main event of the story (Bell, 1991; Van Dijk, 1988b). From the selected sample noted above, the consequences of the damages awarded underpin the theme of many news reports of criticisms of Private Eye. The newsworthiness of events is partly determined by the seriousness of their consequences. It is through discussion of ‘real or possible consequences, a news discourse may give causal coherence to news events’ (Van Dijk, 1988b: 54). Bell (1991) observes that non-elite individuals appear in the news if they have negative or unexpected experiences (see also Langer, 1998). Given the non-elite status of Sonia Sutcliffe, it is unsurprising that the press attended to the unexpected large damages awarded and her relationship with the Yorkshire Ripper. Sonia’s relationship with the Ripper became the fundamental feature around which the tabloid press reports centred their stories. The £600,000 damages awarded was the largest amount of libel damages awarded at the time, previous record libel damages were £500,000 awarded to Jeffrey Archer and £1 million paid to Elton John in an out of court settlement (The Daily Express, May 25 1989: 2; The Daily Mirror, May 25 1989: 2; The Times, May 23 1989: 1; The Independent, May 25 1989: 1; The Guardian, May 25 1989: 1; The Sun, May 25 1899: 1; The Daily Mail, May 25 1989: 1). This was a ‘newsworthy’ feature of the story. Discrepancies between the damages awarded to Sonia Sutcliffe and those awarded to the victims that survived attacks by the Yorkshire Ripper became the dominant theme of both the tabloid and broadsheet press (although was less prominent in the broadsheets). The large financial difference between awarding £600,000 to Sonia Sutcliffe and £7,000 to the Rippers’ victims became the press’s main attack on the legal system as the following headlines illustrate: ‘WHOSE JUSTICE IS THIS? £600,000 damages for Yorkshire Ripper’s wife NOT A PENNY for the mother of a Ripper victim’ (The Daily Mirror, May 25 1989: 1), ‘LEGACY
OF A MURDERER Relative of victims got nothing...but in 5 years killer’s wife will be a millionaire’ (The Daily Mirror, May 25 1989: 20-21).

As reported in most newspapers, Ian Hislop famously declared on the steps of the High Court ‘If this is justice, I am a banana’ (The Sun, May 25 1989: 1; see also The Daily Telegraph, May 25 1989: 23; The Daily Express, May 25 1989: 1; The Daily Mirror, May 25 1898: 2; The Guardian, May 25 1989: 1; The Independent, May 25 1989: 2; The Daily Mail, May 25 1989: 1). In The Sun he continued ‘Some victims of the Yorkshire Ripper got just £7,000 each for being attacked by a mass murderer. Yet Mrs Sutcliffe gets £600,000 for being libelled by Private Eye’ (May 25 1989: 1-2). In The Daily Express Hislop claimed ‘This award for being libelled by the Eye is 100 times more than for being murdered by the Ripper’ (May 25 1989: 1; see also The Daily Telegraph, May 25 1989: 23). This was particularly insulting given that the Rippers’ victims were yet to receive any payment towards their compensation (The Daily Mirror, May 26 1989: 1-2; The Sun, May 25 1989: 1). The Daily Telegraph gives the Sutcliffe case front-page prominence and the story continues on page 40. Further, there is an in-depth analysis of Sutcliffe’s award on page 23, which includes two photographs positioned in opposition. One photograph is a medium shot of Peter and Sonia Sutcliffe on their wedding day and the other is a close-up of Marcella Claxton, a victim of the Yorkshire Ripper. The words ‘Rough justice? Sutcliffe (left, with Sonia) battered Marcella Claxton (right) with a hammer and left her for dead. She received £3,000 seven years ago, and a total award of only £17,500’ anchored the photographs. The close-up photograph of Claxton’s face reflects terror and anxiety, a direct comparison to the Sutcliffe’s happy moment where they are fondly looking into each other’s eyes. This romantic emotion is quite distinct from the brutal reality of Peter Sutcliffe’s behaviour. The examples quoted highlight how contrasts are a popular journalistic tool used when reporting cases where Private Eye has been criticised. Employing contrasts creates particular images and allows expression of particular beliefs. Roeh and Feldman (1984: 365) observe that contrasts are used to ‘produce emotional response and excitement’.

The different amounts awarded to Sonia Sutcliffe and the victims of the Ripper are couched by the tabloid and broadsheet press in a wider debate surrounding the different awards received by victims of physical injury. For example, the front page of The Sun (May 25 1989) includes a small table listing the recommended amounts awarded for physical injuries (see figure 7.1). This table is lexically connected to Private Eye as it’s entitled ‘IF YOU LOST AN EYE...’ and included in the list is ‘Loss of sight in one eye ... £13,000’ (of the injuries listed, loss of sight in one eye will
receive the largest damages). This 'loss of sight in one eye' links with The Sun's thought of the day printed on the front page adjacent to the date of publication, price and circulation figures of the newspaper. The thought of the day is 'One in the Eye' which semantically and lexically links to the injury to the Eye caused by the legal system noted in the headline 'Huge Private Eye payout'. The concept of injury is sustained in the table listing recommended amounts awarded for physical injuries. Given that an injury consisting of 'loss of sight in one eye' will receive the most amount in damages, and that the Eye has received 'One in the Eye', this suggests that this is a costly injury for the Eye to sustain. Also, if the comic offence had resulted in physical injury, then the damages to the plaintiff would be much smaller.

Remaining with the front page of The Sun we can see how the damages awarded thematises the whole page. Excitement is aroused by the caption 'LIBEL SENSATION'. The headline 'FURY AT RIPPER WIFE'S £600,000 Huge Private Eye payout' is reinforced by the lead which reads 'YORKSHIRE Ripper's wife Sonia Sutcliffe won £600,000 libel damages yesterday - sparking fury at the staggering size of the payout'. The lead is the most important feature of news discourse, as it is 'a lens through which the point of a story is focused and its news value magnified' (Bell, 1991: 183) and provides the interpretive frame for the rest of the report. The article is littered with figures, primarily noughts, from 'An incredible 120 times the £5,000 guideline awards to rape victims' to 'the award could mean the end of the 200,000-circulation magazine' (May 25 1989: 1).
Figure 7.1 Front Page, The Sun, May 25, 1989
Scott-Bayfield and Swann refer to these large awards as 'telephone number damages awards' (1999: 104). When contrasted with awards for personal injury damages, which are often much lower than libel awards, this has led to concern amongst the general public (Scott-Bayfield and Swann, 1999). 'Telephone number' damages also dominate other press reports of the Sutcliffe case, including '£600,000 libel win for wife of Ripper (The Daily Mail, May 25 1989: 1), 'Rippers wife wins £600,000 libel from Eye' (The Daily Telegraph, May 25 1989: 1), '£600,000 libel damages for Sonia Sutcliffe' (The Independent, May 25 1989: 1).

They also featured heavily in the other libel cases analysed. Headlines reporting on the Nora Beloff case included 'Private Eye to pay £3,000' (The Daily Mail, October 25 1972: 9), 'LIBEL COURT AWARDS NORA BELOFF £3,000' (The Daily Mirror, October 25 1972: 11), 'Private Eye must pay £3,000 damages to Nora Beloff' (The Daily Telegraph, October 25 1972: 3; see also The Guardian, October 25 1972: 9; The Times, October 25 1972: 4; The Daily Express, October 25 1972: 4). Headlines printed after the James Goldsmith case includes 'Private Eye settlement may cost it £30,000' (The Times, May 11 1977: 2). Headlines printed after the trial of the Maxwell case included '£250,000 whack in the Eye for Lord Gnome' (The Daily Mirror, November 11 1986: 1), 'Eye plans Maxwell issue to meet £250,000 libel bill' (The Independent, November 22 1986: 1), 'Private Eye faces £250,000 bill for libel case' (The Guardian, November 22 1986: 1; see also The Daily Telegraph, November 22 1986: 1; The Times, November 22 1986: 1; The Daily Express, November 22 1986: 3). Although the law of defamation aims to protect reputations and damages are awarded to compensate the libelled for his/her damage to reputation, these headlines imply that Private Eye has been punished for the offence given, rather than the libelled being compensated.

The banner at the bottom of the front page of The Sun (May 25 1989: 1) reads '£66,000 LOTTO: Numbers-Page 9 £31,000 BINGO: Numbers-Page 20'. Whilst intensifying the importance of figures, the physical and visual proximity of the libel damages and the lottery winnings simultaneously draws similarities between the damages awarded in libel cases and the amounts won in lottery and bingo games. The theme of people receiving money is intertextually reinforced in the following day's issue (May 26 1989). On page 4, the Sutcliffe case is positioned by an article on The Sun's Lucky Seven lotto, headed '£68,000 LOTTO'. Libel trials and damages have frequently been referred to as a lottery (Hooper, 1984; Rusbridger, 2001; Kevin Bays, interview, 2nd December, 1998), gambling (McKay, 1986) and a casino (Ingrams in Thompson, 1994). McKay observes:
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There are certain imponderables that must be weighed up: the weight of the legal arguments for and against a case; the composition of the jury on the day; the attitude of the judge; and, if the litigants are famous, whether the climate of opinion is behind them at the time of the trial. A litigant and his or her lawyers will balance these considerations, work out the odds, and then decide whether to sue or not. The question as to whether a litigant’s career and financial prospects are really jeopardized by the original article hardly comes into it (1986: 70).

The outcome of both libel litigation and lottery/bingo is based on luck. Further the winner(s) cannot be predicted and therefore both libel litigation and lottery/bingo involves gambling and an element of risk. In The Independent (November 22 1986: 9), Ingrams argues that the outcome of a libel action is like ‘spinning a coin’. Both libel litigants and lottery/bingo participants are players in financial games, the outcomes of which are random, although the libel winner will receive substantially higher rewards. The banner encourages the reading that the news story is centred on winning large amounts of money, rather than the defamatory statements made by Private Eye. Gleason’s (1993) and Franklin’s (1981) analysis of the libel law and libel litigants conclude that most plaintiffs who sue for libel are not motivated by large damages. Plaintiffs are not money motivated as there is a ‘dismal lack of success in winning damages’ in libel litigation (Gleason, 1993: 902). The manner in which the outcome of libel litigation brought against Private Eye gets reported by news discourse suggests otherwise. The libel as a game metaphor is reflected in the reporting of other libel cases brought against other newspapers. For example in press reporting of the libel case Bruce Grobbelaar (former Liverpool goalkeeper) v The Sun newspaper a headline read ‘The Sun STRIKES A BLOW AGAINST THE LIBEL LOTTERY’ (The Sun, 19.01.01: 9).

The legal system is criticised for its unpredictable nature and lack of formal rules. After the outcome of the Robert Maxwell case was decided, The Independent published a report written by Richard Ingrams. Claiming that he’ll ‘never understand’ defamation law, Ingrams refers to the libel law as ‘like playing an Alice-in-Wonderland game, the rules of which are being made up as you go along. Just as you think that proceedings are moving ahead at a reasonable pace, they grind to a halt like a British rail train’ (22 November 1988: 9). Later in the same article an Eye supporter, judge Lord Denning, reinforces Ingrams’s view and recognises the Alice-in-Wonderland nature of the law: ‘There’s no certainty in it ...it’s complete Will-o-the-Wisp’. Referring to the law as uncertain allows the press to distance itself from the legal system. Drawing comparisons between

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9 The Sun accused Grobbelaar as being involved in match fixing and The Sun won the case (see Brown, 2001).

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the legal system and Alice-in-Wonderland and Will-o-the-Wisp presents the libel law as fictional, fantastical, elusive and misleading, and by implication distances the press from the law and suggests the press regards itself as presenting factual information, discouraging ambiguity and that reporting is characterised by certainty, thus strengthening the current report’s credibility and advancing *Private Eye*’s reputation.

In addition to the strategic use of headlines and sources to construct a particular interpretation of the complaints made about *Private Eye*, the press uses cartoons to help encourage specific interpretations of the story. Cartoons are valuable resources for the news media as they facilitate the closure of the meaning of a story and reinforce the preferred meaning of the event. Cartoons also comment on the importance of the topic and the salient features of the news item reported elsewhere in the news discourse. A cartoon by Franklin appears on page 6 of *The Sun* (May 26, 1989) entitled ‘The Ripper Strikes Again’ (see figure 7.2). This cartoon depicts Ian Hislop (Editor of *Private Eye*) stabbed on ‘Libel Alley’ by a judge (who is seen running away from the scene of the stabbing). This cartoon comments on the claim that due to the huge damages awarded to Sonia Sutcliffe, *Private Eye* may not survive financially and the possible closure of *Private Eye*. The analogous relationship between the crimes committed by the Yorkshire Ripper and the decisions of the judge in libel litigation is highlighted. The potential death of *Private Eye* is attributed to the activities and injustice of the legal system (as represented by the judge) through the caption ‘THE RIPPER STRIKES AGAIN’.

Scott-Bayfield and Swann (1999: 104) observe that as damages awarded in libel actions are made by a jury, ‘it is juries that are frequently singled out as the villain of the piece when criticisms of such damages are made’. This observation is reflected in the press reports. In addition to the press criticising the libel law due to the discrepancies between damages awarded for physical injury and injury to reputation, the jury is a favoured target for attack by the press. Noting that ‘juries are allergic to journalists and especially to me’ (*The Independent*, November 22 1986: 9), Ingrams refers to the 12 selected men and woman in the Maxwell case as:

Good and true they may be but that does not stop them from being immensely thick. Maxwell v Pressdram centred on the question of whether or not Mr Maxwell had sought to “bribe” Neil Kinnock in order to get a peerage. After three days of detailed debate, the jury sent a note to the judge asking him to tell them the meaning of the word “peer” (*The Independent*, November 22 1986: 9).
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Figure 7.2 ‘The Ripper Strikes Again’ cartoon, The Sun, May 26, 1989: 6

*The Daily Express’s Opinion* column entitled ‘Libel award is a scandal’ argued, with the use of figures and noughts (see above) that Sonia Sutcliffe’s award:

is preposterous, making a mockery not only of the libel law but of the system of justice itself... For it is impossible not to suspect that when libel juries come to awarding damages they now merely think of a figure stuffed with noughts — *and then double it.* (May 25 1989: 8; emphasis in original).

Equally in *The Daily Express* Ian Hislop retorts that the libel system ‘has gone crazy. Juries are just picking figures out of their heads. People are awarded thousands of pounds by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board when they get limbs cut off, yet for libel people are now being awarded hundreds of thousands’ (May 25 1989: 1; see also *The Times* May 25 1989: 1).

Top barrister, Ivor Stanbrook, supports the view that the juries are at fault in awarding such large damages. In *The Sun* (May 25 1989: 1) he calls for a change in the law to prevent juries ‘handing out’ such huge awards. Equally, Labour’s Home Affairs spokesman Robin Corbett criticises the jury – ‘Juries seem to think the sky is the limit when newspaper or magazines are involved’ (*The Daily Mirror*, May 25 1989: 2). *The Daily Mirror* ‘situates’ (Langer, 1998: 40) the reader as
regarding the damages awarded to Sutcliffe as ‘absurd’ and ‘obscene’ (May 25 1989: 2). The reader is invited and encouraged to read the story from the perspective that the jury is held responsible for the absurd damages. The readers’ telephone poll in The Daily Mirror is based on the question ‘Would you have voted to award £600,000 libel damages to Sonia Sutcliffe, the wife of the Yorkshire Ripper, if you had been sitting on the jury yesterday?’ (May 25 1989: 2). Unsurprisingly, the jury of Daily Mirror readers voted ‘overwhelmingly against the £600,000 award’ (The Daily Mirror, May 26 1989: 2). Brian James in The Times refers to the jury in the Maxwell case as ‘working their way through a sort of Idiot’s Guide to verdict-making provided by Mr Justice Brown (was the article defamatory? If No, proceed no further. If Yes, go to …)’ (November 22 1986: 24). Verbal reactions from Hislop, Stanbrook and Corbett allow journalists to formulate and communicate opinions that may not be their own but which ‘nevertheless are objective because they have actually been stated’ (Van Dijk, 1988b: 56). Quoting verbatim gives the impression that the reader is given access to first hand experience of the libel case as the text has not been altered by the journalist’s interpretation or reconstruction (although of course they are strategically selected and positioned on the page to encourage a particular meaning; see intertextuality below). Shifting blame onto the incompetent jury for the large amount of damages awarded to libel plaintiffs serves to deflect attention from the characteristics of the offending discourse in Private Eye towards flaws in the jury system. The ‘obscene’ libel damages awarded are attributed to the ‘immensely thick’ jury. The term ‘immensely thick’ functions rhetorically to raise doubts in the readers’ mind in relation to the justification of the damages awarded, raising the question – how can the jury make a reasonable decision regarding damage to reputation if they do not understand the concepts underlying the cause of action? Tony Rushton explains that sometimes the incompetence of the jury is related to their ‘in-built prejudice’ against Private Eye:

The chances of finding someone who reads Private Eye actually on a jury are few and far between so you are talking about people who read The Sun and The Express and the attitude to Private Eye would be like the one I described earlier from the advertising people who only know it by reputation. And who have never actually read it or thought about it. So there is an in-built prejudice against Private Eye from jury people (Tony Rushton, interview 5th May, 1998).

Deflecting attention towards the incompetence of the jury prevents discussion around the source of the libel and the discreditable journalism Private Eye engage in. Private Eye’s responsibility in the large ‘unjustified’ damages awarded to the libel plaintiff is downgraded and is shifted onto the juries.

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(ii) Establishing Journalistic Boundaries

A second theme that emerges from the news reports of the *Eye*'s libel litigation involves the mainstream press distancing itself from *Private Eye* discourse. When reporting the outcome of the Maxwell case, *The Daily Mirror* (owned by Maxwell) reports the verdict in a celebratory style. *The Daily Mirror* upgrades the libel printed in *Private Eye* to a 'wicked lie', 'a wicked and cruel lie' and a 'slur', and to sensationalise the story refers to the 'libel victory over the magazine *Private Eye*' (November 22 1986: 1-2). The Mirror's coverage of the libel case is derogatory of *Private Eye*, and of Richard Ingrams in particular. The MIRROR COMMENT section on page 2 criticises the journalistic practices used by *Private Eye* and blames the *Eye* themselves for the large damages awarded. *Private Eye* is regarded as 'destroying the reputation of others', although yesterday it 'paid the price'. In heavy bold type the justification for *Private Eye*'s defeat is that 'There was never any truth in it. Long before the case ended, the Eye admitted as much'. The Mirror Comment concludes '[I]f the action makes the Eye think twice before it attacks anyone else without checking its facts, then it will be worthwhile'. Admission to not checking the facts of stories is repeated in the article entitled 'PRICE OF FICTION' that is adjacent to the Mirror Comment column. Accompanying this article is a close-up photograph of a solemn looking Richard Ingrams, which is a contrast to the smiling face of Maxwell positioned in the top right-hand corner of the page. The photograph of Ingrams is anchored by 'INGRAMS: He didn't check facts'. This short article blames *Private Eye* for the 'smears' that 'have cost the magazine a fortune'. Justification for the libel damages awarded, and thus by implication the deserving nature of the damages awarded to Maxwell, is given through Ingrams's own admission that facts on which stories are based are not checked. Ingrams defends himself by claiming that he had never printed anything knowing that it was lie.

Press reports of offence caused and damages to reputation also refer metaphorically to categories of illness and disease. Robert Maxwell is quoted as referring to *Private Eye* as an 'infected organ' and 'liars, peddler of filth' (*The Daily Mail*, November 22 1986: 3; see also *The Daily Express*, November 22 1986: 3). In *The Daily Mirror* Robert Maxwell refers to *Private Eye* as 'peddlers of filth for profit' (November 22 1986: 2). Someone who 'peddles' consistently advocates a particular view aggressively or questionably. To 'peddle' suggests a dubious or illegal form of behaviour. In chapter 6, it was observed that symbolic cultural categories of cleanliness and dirt were used to articulate the offence caused and to criticise *Private Eye*. Just as symbolic categories of pollution...
are used to refer to matter out of place, so offensive discourse is often that which is perceived as inappropriate to both time and space. Inappropriateness may be caused by the topic of the discourse, the tone in which the topic/individual or group are treated or the consequences of the discourse.

In *The Independent* (November 22 1986: 1) Robert Maxwell was reported as referring to *Private Eye* as a ‘so-called periodical which would publish anything in order to get increased circulation and to increase its profits’. To call the magazine a ‘so-called periodical’ is a critique that again calls into question the Eye’s authenticity. To refer to something as ‘so-called’ is to suggest that it pretends to be something it is not, or that it is of dubious character and nature. The press often uses the term ‘so-called ...’ to distinguish between the genuine and the charlatans, to exclude the offending discourse from all other rule-abiding discourse, and to shame the offending discourse. To take another example, in his analysis of the press coverage of censorship of popular music, Cloonan (1996: 263) observes that The Sun called punk performers ‘so-called artists’.

When reporting the outcome of the Sutcliffe case, journalists on *The Daily Mail* attempt to disassociate themselves from *Private Eye* and to suggest that the outcome of Sutcliffe’s case is not particularly extraordinary. The *Daily Mail* gives less prominence to the story than the newspapers mentioned above. Although it makes the front page of the edition May 25 1989, it is not the lead story and there is not the emotive tone to the headline as in other newspapers. The headline reads ‘£600,000 libel win for wife of Ripper’. On page 2 of the same edition in an article entitled ‘Thriving on a Diet of Scandal’, *The Daily Mail* criticises the practices of *Private Eye* journalists by listing ‘notorious’ previous libel cases brought (successfully) against *Private Eye* and the large amounts paid by the *Eye* in libel damages. This article suggests this case is not particularly outstanding, as *Private Eye* has a wealth of libel litigation experience and *Eye* journalists have frequently been involved in ‘spectacular’ libel cases that have resulted in large damages awarded to the plaintiff. Under this article is another article headed ‘No truth in magazine claims’. This article notes the falsity of *Private Eye*’s story and that *Private Eye* had said under oath that the story was fabricated, ‘she denied in evidence making any deals to sell her story and the Eye’s publishers,

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10 The *Daily Mail*’s coverage of the Sutcliffe v *Private Eye* case is particularly interesting. After winning the *Private Eye* case, Sonia Sutcliffe sued the *News of the World* for making the same allegations as *Private Eye*. Sonia lost the case because a key journalist (who refused to assist in the Eye trial, Thompson, 1994) was able to establish that there had been an element of collusion between the Sutcliffe family and *The Daily Mail*.
Pressdram, admitted in the High Court that the allegations were totally false. Neither The Daily Mail nor The Mail on Sunday paid any money to the Ripper’s wife. In the following day’s issue of The Daily Mail another critical piece of Private Eye was printed (see figure 7.3). On page 7 (May 26 1989) under the headline ‘A final one in the Eye?’ the magazine is criticised because although the libel award against Private Eye was ridiculous the ‘magazine has been getting away with it for years’. Private Eye ‘was and still is a kind of bucket, into which Fleet Street would tip gossip. With papers going to other sites, the Fleet Street we knew, loved (and sometimes hated) is no more. Is it time for its unofficial house magazine to go too?’ This last sentence is a direct attempt to censure Private Eye by radically disposing of the magazine. ‘Getting away with’ something implies that individuals have been doing something wrong or illegal but have escaped blame and punishment. The important word in the lead paragraph is ‘but’ because it signals a shift in tone and emphasis between what is said before and after it (see chapter 6 for the rhetorical uses of but). Although The Daily Mail recognises the absurdity of the large libel damages awarded, the punishment is long overdue as the Eye ‘have been getting away with it for years’. Paragraphs 2 and 3 of this article suggest that Private Eye have deceived the reading public through attempting (successfully) to present itself as ‘impoverished’. Further, if the magazine pays the £600,000 libel damages then the magazine ‘is more profitable than they have led us to suppose’. Leading readers ‘to suppose’, suggests that Private Eye deliberately and strategically encouraged readers to falsely believe that the Eye was in financial difficulty. This calls into question the Eye’s integrity and through insinuation, The Daily Mail is directing the reader to the possibility that the Eye is deceitful and dishonest and thus deserves to be punished financially.

Involving the exchange of money. In its coverage of the Eye trial, The Daily Mail would presumably have recognised the injustice of the outcome of the Sutcliffe v Private Eye case.

11 Moving to other sites is a reference to media mogul Rupert Murdoch moving his newspaper production from Fleet Street to a new printing plant in Wapping, East London.
(iii) Establishing Moral Behaviour Boundaries

In contrast to the above boundary markers, the third theme identified individualises defamation. Establishing professional boundaries and journalistic boundaries involved a dichotomous relationship between two groups of people, albeit of varying sizes; journalists, editors, owners v lawyers, judges, juries and Private Eye journalists v mainstream journalists. The third theme, establishing moral behaviour boundaries, attends to and criticises the idiosyncrasies of the plaintiff and defendant as individuals.

To enhance the emotional contrast of the huge amount of damages awarded to Sonia Sutcliffe and the relatively small amounts of compensation given to the Yorkshire Ripper victims, some of the tabloid press demonise Sonia Sutcliffe, presenting her as socially deviant. Sutcliffe becomes a member of the ‘gallery of folk-devils’ (Bennett, 1982: 297). Pickering (2001) argues that the media play a fundamental role in sensationalising challenges to social order. Certain issues are framed as social problems and certain groups are stigmatised as folk devils in order to ‘preserve’ particular rules. In his analysis of the press coverage of censoring pop music, Cloonan’s (1996) illustrated
how the ‘offender’ is made to appear deviant by the ‘normal’ standards of society. In the Sutcliffe case it is the offended who is presented as deviant. Mary Riddell writing in *The Daily Mirror* (May 25 1989: 6) notes how Sonia was ‘reclusive’ and ‘distant’. In an article on page 9 of *The Daily Express* (May 25 1989) entitled ‘Sonia, the wife who wants to be alone’, Sonia is constructed as a strange woman, who has always been ‘different’ - ‘She is indeed an unusual woman. During her husband’s trial a psychiatrist called by the defence said she had a history of mental problems. At one point, the Old Bailey heard she actually believed she was the second Christ and had complained of ‘hearing voices’ – a continuation of her status as different. From ‘the start’ she was ‘out of the ordinary’ as she was born in the Ukraine but grew up in Bradford. Further this article amplifies the peculiarities of Sonia’s personality by highlighting how she supported her husband throughout his trial at a time:

> when most women who found themselves in her position would have wanted nothing more to do with a man who committed such ghastly crimes. They would feel that continuing to love such a creature in the face of such uncontrovertible evidence was neither possible or right ... That is why Sonia Sutcliffe is an outsider and will remain so (*The Daily Express*, May 25 1989: 9).

The article ends ‘Her new found riches will not change that [the fact that Sonia is virtually unemployable due to her connection with the Ripper], nor will it bring her the peace of mind she thinks she deserves’.

The author of the article, Philippa Kennedy, is given authority to speak on behalf of how ‘normal’ women would feel in Sonia’s position. In chapter 6 I illustrated how offended readers often articulate their offence by referring to *Private Eye* as ‘mad’, ‘insane’ or ‘possessed’. This language serves to silence the Eye by blurring and confusing the identity of the offended. I went on to discuss how the category of madness suggests the need of expulsion or containment to cure or care for the mad person or thing. By referring to Sonia Sutcliffe as having a ‘history of mental problems’ and ‘hearing voices’, the press are ‘othering’ her as someone who is threatening the established moral order. Through a chain of derogatory references and associations, Sonia Sutcliffe is discursively bound up as a figure of disturbing and unwelcome difference. We move from the notion of her being a loner by choice to being deemed ‘foreign’, ‘strange’, and ‘unusual’. These lexical choices play on the suspicion and disapproval attached to that which is considered alien. They are not used in neutral description, but intend to denote lack of belonging, familiarity, and normality. They facilitate the exclusion of their moral target, and so pave the way for the final
closing and locking of the gates: she is mentally disturbed, even deranged. The links slot into place, one by one, so that there seems no escape from the construction imposed on her errant action, and no alternative to the moral boundaries so attentively patrolled by the British press. In this way, Sonia Sutcliffe is posed as a bigger danger to established order than the offensive discourse printed in *Private Eye*.

Some newspapers portrayed Robert Maxwell as a kind-hearted and generous man. It was reported that Maxwell would possibly give the money he received from *Private Eye* as a result of the libel to AIDS research and children's charities (*The Daily Mail* 22.11.86: 3, *The Daily Mirror* 22.11.86: 2, *The Independent* 22.11.86: 1). Maxwell explains his altruistic behaviour: 'The money comes from an infected organ so it is appropriate it goes to help eradicate this terrible disease which is plaguing mankind' (*The Daily Mirror* 22.11.86: 2). This portrayal of Maxwell is in direct contrast to the actions of Sutcliffe who was reported in *The Sun* as refusing to give the Ripper victims any money. In an article entitled 'Offers of cash pour in to save the Eye' (*The Sun*, May 26 1989; 5) it is reported that Ian Hislop has received a number of offers of financial support. Alongside this article, is another entitled 'VICTIMS GET NO CASH OFF SONIA'. Juxtaposing these two distinct articles in this way produces a contrast — support for *Private Eye*, people giving *Private Eye* money who (according to the jury) are the wrong-doers in the libel case, but Sutcliffe who has won the libel and therefore is not in the wrong (according to the jury) is portrayed as heartless and immoral as she will not donate some of her libel payout to the victims of the Yorkshire Ripper. To the sense of ill-gotten gains is added the sense of someone being money-grasping and mean-spirited.

The Beloff v *Private Eye* case is based on a humorous piece suggesting that Nora Beloff had prostituted herself in order to obtain political information. Interestingly, all press reports in the broadsheet press highlighted and made relevant the observation that the story was not to be taken seriously. In the Beloff case *Private Eye* endorsed the conventional justification for defending a joke — 'it's just a joke' (Billig, 2001 and see chapter 2), thus denying serious intention and meaning (Mulkay, 1988; Tannen, 1984). The 'magazine has denied that the words complained of were defamatory and claimed they were published in jest and understood as such by Miss Beloff and readers' (*The Daily Telegraph* October 25 1972: 3; see also *The Daily Express* October 25 1972: 4; *The Guardian* October 25 1972: 9). However, as noted in chapter 2, audience members do not always accept the justification 'it's just a joke'. It may be believed that the joke reveals hidden opinions and attitudes that are regarded as offensive (see Fine, 1983; Jaret, 1999 and chapter 3
above when discussing satire as distorted truth). The interpretive difficulties involved when decoding non-serious discourse that were highlighted in chapter 2, such as ambiguity, bisociation and the fluidity between serious and non-serious discourse, are indirectly referred to in the manner in which the judge directed the jury in the Beloff case. As *The Times* (October 25 1972: 4) reports:

> Mr Justice O'Connor, in his summing-up warned the jury not to try to punish the magazine if they awarded damages against it. "The guideline is compensation, not punishment", he said. He told the jury they had to be satisfied that the words complained of lowered Miss Beloff in their estimation. "If you are satisfied that this amounted to a vicious attack by the magazine you must not allow your sentiments to run away with you", he added. "You are here not to punish the publishers of a libel by financial penalty, but to assess any possible injury to reputation" (see also *The Daily Express* October 25 1972: 4; *The Guardian* October 1972: 9; *The Daily Telegraph* October 1972: 3).

The judge quoted in this news report directs attention away from *Private Eye* towards the plaintiff. Criticism of the joker is not the aim of defamation law, rather compensation to the offended for the damaged reputation. Many articles reporting the Nora Beloff case reproduced the Judge's summing up. When referring to the function of *Private Eye*, the Judge is reported to have commented: 'Lampooning the Establishment is age old. It is a hallmark of a civilised society that there should be a good deal of satirical writing and taking the wind out of unnecessarily puffed sails. But it was the law that one who defamed another as a jest did so at his peril' (*The Daily Express*, October 25 1972: 4; see also *The Times* October 25 1972: 4; *The Guardian* October 25 1972: 9; *The Daily Telegraph* October 25 1972: 3).

The plaintiffs appear to recognise and accept the potential derogatory statements that they may receive when complaining about a publication like *Private Eye*, such as they lack a sense of humour (see chapters 2 and 6). When talking about suing for libel caused by humorous pieces, Nick Newman remarks: 'so far as jokes are concerned I think people look very very bad sports indeed if they sue for jokes' (interview, 8th September, 1998). In press reports, Maxwell comments 'I am delighted that I have been able, with the jury's help, to nail *Private Eye* and thereby help the thousands of people, their families and friends who have suffered over the years by being targeted and recklessly attacked'. He continues 'I had no alternative but to bring this case. I am glad that a jury of 12 men and women have upheld my case and supported my allegation' (*The Daily Telegraph* November 22 1986: 1; see also *The Times* November 22 1986: 24). Here Maxwell presents himself as criticising *Private Eye* on behalf of all *Eye* targets - 'the thousands of people, their families and friends' - who have been unable to sue for defamation (probably due to the lack
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of legal aid). Therefore the determining factor in his libel claim is not that he was offended by Private Eye discourse (and thus can be potentially seen as lacking a sense of humour), but was sensitive to the way in which other people had been ‘targeted and recklessly attacked’ by the Eye, so was complaining objectively, not subjectively. Thus the pronominal displacements used in readers’ letters when articulating that Private Eye has caused offence (see chapter 6) are also used in justifications for libel litigation. To recap, pronominal displacements involve shifting of a first party grievance onto an identified third party (in the above case thousands of people, their families and friends). Equally, Randolph Churchill intimates that he did not wish to receive financial gains for the damage to his reputation and has a sense of humour: ‘I’m fed up with lawyers and as I didn’t want any money myself, I decided to cut them out of the case. I was told I might get damages of £100,000, but I didn’t want to close the magazine down. I think it’s quite amusing as long as it leaves me alone’ (The Times, March 13 1963: 6).

Similarly, after the outcome of the libel case, Nora Beloff commented: ‘I am very relieved that I have won. If this article had been allowed to go unchallenged, it would have opened the door for anybody to print any lies they wished without fear of repercussions’ (The Daily Mail, October 25 1972: 9). Although defamation cases are instigated by those attacked by the offending discourse, both Maxwell and Beloff report how they sued Private Eye on behalf of other third parties and thus distancing themselves from the complaint. Using the law of libel as a censuring practice is underpinned by ideological principles. The rich and powerful litigants frequently resort to libel action in order to defend the rights of, and seek redress on behalf of ‘ordinary’ people. The jury who ‘upheld’ the case and ‘supported’ Maxwell’s charge of defamation reinforced his claim to have considered the offending discourse in an objective manner. The jury who were not targeted by the Eye discourse agreed that it had offensive qualities and that Maxwell had been defamed. Readers’ letters seem to rely more heavily on the rhetorical technique of pronominal displacement to articulate the offence possibly because the sole reader does not have official support from a jury who considers the claim of offensive discourse. These justifications for bringing the libel suit reflect Smith’s (1995) findings. During the dispute instigated by the publication of a photograph showing Bob Knight (Indiana University coach) whipping an African-American basketball player, some of the complaints printed in the press were framed around the belief that the photograph would hinder the university’s efforts to recruit more minority students.
There is a risk involved when criticising a publication like *Private Eye* in the sense that even when the complaint is made through legal avenues, the defendants may consider the whole trial humorous and will attempt to ridicule the complaint made. News articles reporting on the outcomes of the libel litigation provide space for *Private Eye* to criticise the plaintiff further. As noted earlier in chapter 2, a common defence used when a joke is criticised is to counter the attack with further humour (Emerson, 1969; Wilson, 1979). Wilson (1979) cites the example of Philippon (19th century French caricaturist) who sketched the head of the monarch (King Louis Phillipe) as a pear. To exacerbate the insult, the French word 'poire' also means fat-head as well as pear. Sued for libel, Philippon retorted that it was not his fault if the King bore 'such a fatal resemblance to the symbol of fatuity' (Wilson, 1979: 192). In *The Guardian*’s coverage of the Maxwell case, Ian Hislop predicts how the Eye will raise the £55,000 damages and £200,000 legal costs. To raise funds a bumper Maxwell issue of the Eye will be produced, selling at £1 a copy. Hislop explained that ‘It will be an extremely fat issue, considering its target' (November 22 1986: 1). To take another example, expressing his relief at the end of the Goldsmith case, Richard Ingrams ‘remained satirical. He claimed that he only decided to settle because “I could not bear the thought of listening to Lewis Hawser’s voice again.” Mr Hawser is Sir James’s Counsel …’ (*The Daily Express*, May 10 1977: 13).

In chapter 6 I analysed how readers manage their articulation of comic offence through the letters written to the editor of *Private Eye*. It was noted how readers sought to deflect the charge of not having a sense of humour (the ultimate insult; see chapters 2 and 6). Journalists reporting on libel cases brought against *Private Eye* similarly signal that they have a sense of humour, or at least can perceive and appreciate the humour is situations. For example, when Brian James reports on the Maxwell case in *The Times* (November 22 1986: 24), he delineates an analogy between the libel case and the theatre. Entitled ‘No heroes in the Theatre of the Snide’, James is careful not to side with either Maxwell or Ingrams referring to them as ‘Cap’n Bob’ and ‘Merciless Dick’ and the ‘School Braggart’ versus the ‘House Sneak’. James reported that, like any theatre performance there was drama, tears, insight and humour (both deliberate and unintentional). For example, James notes how Mr Justice Brown (for Maxwell) reacted to a comment by Ingrams that he was tired from being in the witness box, by humorously claiming, ‘Oh, but I looked him up in Who’s Who and there he gives his recreation as litigation’. Lacking in the ‘lurid production’ was an ‘authentic hero’ and James concludes that the jury ‘was fortunate in that it only had to make judgement in law – there would have been no conceivable way to judge between the two on likeability’ (November 22
1986: 24). Equally, William Hickey in The Daily Express humorously refers to Eye journalists as ‘denizens of the scandal magazine’ in the lead: ‘The long, fascinating public row between financier Sir James Goldsmith and the denizens of the scandal magazine Private Eye appears to be over’ (May 10 1977: 13). Also Martin Walker, reporting in The Guardian (May 10 1977: 24) noted how the Goldsmith case ‘had moments of humour’ when it was heard that ‘private detectives acting for Sir James had scavenged the dustbins outside Private Eye’s office looking for drafts of articles’.

Discussion

Newspaper reports on libel litigation brought against Private Eye function to shape a public definition of comic offence and comic censure. They can control how comic offence is registered, construct what it means to be offended and determine how the offender and offended is discursively treated. News reports transform libel into a public event and public concern, and so dramatise issues of public order.

Libel litigation brought against Private Eye has received intense press coverage from both the tabloid and broadsheet press. The news articles collected based on the five libel cases chosen for analysis appeared on the two days following the outcome of each individual libel case. A total of 73 news articles were collected. If news articles printed before the outcome of the case had been included in the sample, it is likely that the total number of news articles would have increased dramatically. Press coverage of libel litigation brought against Private Eye varied in tone, some reports are positively predisposed to the Eye, and others are overtly critical and negative towards the magazine. These tensions between positive and negative assessments of Private Eye reflect the contradictory position of Private Eye in society as a whole, as demonstrated in Chapter 3. The significance of the libel cases is also reflected in the positioning and composition of (some) of the news articles. Libel litigation involving Private Eye often makes front-page news and photographs and cartoons often accompany stories, all of which increase and convey the importance or newsworthiness of the libel cases. Damage to reputation caused by comic discourse in Private Eye is therefore a significant news event. As charges of comic offence are of interest to journalists (as signalled by the amount of coverage), by implication they are also of interest to the wider public. Newspapers are commercial businesses and have to compete to sell copies. Newspapers have to maintain existing readers and attract new ones, and one strategy employed is to print ‘interesting’ stories. The front-page can have severe financial consequences, as this is the first part of the newspaper that is seen by the (potential) reader (Deacon et al, 1999). An interesting and attractive
front-page story may encourage more readers. The press therefore play a fundamental role in disseminating information regarding the public negotiation of comic offence and comic censure when redress is sought through the courts.

The importance of comic offence and comic censure is not simply signalled in the amount of press coverage, but also in the ‘type’ of coverage. The press shape notions of the general characteristics of all libel cases. The press use cases of putative transgression to re-establish boundaries of various kinds. Many of the press reports included in the data set reported the libel litigation in such a way that it established and maintained boundaries between either the press and the law, *Private Eye* and the rest of the press or the libel plaintiff and defendant. In his edited collection of the expressions of distinctiveness within and among communities in the British Isles, Cohen (1986) observes that the use of boundaries symbolically demarcates people’s sense of similarity and difference to other people, groups and individuals. Boundaries ‘are most starkly manifest when those on either side of them explicitly attribute different or contrasting meanings to the same objects and symbols’ (Cohen, 1986: 9). Boundary markers are routinely used when contradictory meanings are attributed to the same ‘symbolic stimuli on opposing sides of a social boundary’ (Cohen, 1986: 10). The use of boundary markers in press reporting of libel litigation is used to register comic offence and reflects the opposing and often contradictory responses given to *Private Eye* discourse. As comic offence involves transgression or the stepping over a mark or line, those positioned on different sides of this mark or line use boundary markers to defend or attack the crossing of the line. As some individuals may laugh at the *Private Eye* discourse and others may be deeply offended by the very same discourse, boundary markers are rhetorical devices used to support or condemn the discourse that has offended.

Boundaries are often based on negative attribution – what something or somebody is not, rather than what they are for the purposes of exclusion. In her analysis of what it means to be an ‘adolescent’, Allison James (1986) observes that attempts made by teenagers (in the north-east of England) to determine what it means to be an adolescence draw boundaries ‘to contain and control adolescence as a group apart’ (186: 156). Boundaries between children, adolescents and adults are based on exclusion rather than inclusion, what adolescents are not rather than what they are. Adolescents are too old to be children and too young to be adults, and so belong to neither category.
Bishop’s (1999) textual analysis of how journalists built and defended professional boundaries after the ‘untimely’ death of Princess Diana is an important contribution to our understanding of the self-examination conducted by journalists and the significance of boundary markers. As Bishop observes, the death of Princess Diana ‘gave journalists from mainstream news organizations a prime opportunity to publicly distance themselves from the freelance photographers, or paparazzi, who allegedly chased Diana’s car into a Paris tunnel’ (1999: 90). Bishop highlights a number of ‘crucial ways’ in which mainstream journalists established and maintained boundaries between themselves and the paparazzi press. For example, mainstream journalists insisted that the paparazzi were responsible for the death of Princess Diana, and that the mainstream press do not engage in those activities adopted by the paparazzi and tabloid press. Boundary work conducted by professionals, such as journalists, usually takes the form of refinements ‘through contests and disputes’ (Winch, quoted in Bishop, 1999: 93). As part of a wider study to assess how the press provides self-commentary on its own failings and workings, Macmillan and Edwards (1999) examined newspaper coverage of Diana’s death in order to assess how the press ‘handled their own availability as agents in the events they were reporting’ (1999: 169). They found that the press employed a variety of rhetorical categories, such as regular press v paparazzi, tabloid v broadsheet and British v foreign photographers, in order to distance themselves from the type of photographers that were believed to have led to the death of Diana. To take one example, distinctions between paparazzi and regular photographers were made by referring to the former as ‘sick cameramen’ and ‘foreign celebrity-snappers’. This suggested that the paparazzi engage in activities that the mainstream press photographers do not (see Macmillan and Edwards, 1999: 156). Such distinctions served rhetorically as a protective boundary marker between mainstream press photographers and the infamous paparazzi.

In such ways, following serious moral and political damage to their reputation, newspapers re-establish a positive sense of themselves through contrasts with their alleged antithesis, and again, boundary-marking words of pejorative condemnation, such as ‘foreign’ and ‘sick’, are brought rhetorically to the fore. When Private Eye is charged with causing offence it is rendered a victim of the disorganised, biased and ‘fictional’ legal system. There is no discussion of the cause of the libel litigation. The focus of the debate surrounding Private Eye’s libel is the (unjustified) financial consequences. As boundary work is ‘inherently oppositional’ (Cohen, 1986: 17), setting up the legal system (and juries in particular) as incompetent places them on one side of the boundary, while on the other side the press sets itself up as objective, balanced, factual and competent.
Boundaries are marked 'because communities interact in some way or other with entities from which they are, or wish to be, distinguished' (Cohen, 1985: 12). The objective and trustworthy elements of the press are also signalled by its use of numbers (see Bell, 1991; Roeh and Feldman, 1984; Tuchman, 1978; Van Dijk, 1988b). Figures, when used in combination with other linguistic choices (Roeh and Feldman, 1984) are used rhetorically to convey objectivity and truthfulness through the exactness of the figures (Bell, 1991; Van Dijk, 1988b). Tuchman (1978: 82-103) observes that numbers contribute to the 'facticity' of news as they are presented as verifiable and undeniable facts. The figures function as neutral transparent information, and contribute to the 'journalism-as-information model' through their credibility and facticity (Roeh and Feldman, 1984).

By referring to libel litigation as a game (lottery) that is based on luck or synonymous Will-o-the-Wisp and Alice in Wonderland, the press are suggesting that the libel law is a bigger joke than Private Eye itself and should not be taken or treated seriously.

When libel plaintiffs (such as Robert Maxwell) or those somehow involved with the charge of comic offence (such as The Daily Mail in the Sutcliffe case) are in control of the media reporting of the case, unsurprisingly they register the offence caused by criticising Private Eye. Journalistic boundaries between Private Eye and the rest of the press are established. Robert Maxwell registered his offence by referring to the Eye as printing 'a wicked and cruel lie', a 'slur', a 'smear' and printing stories 'without checking its facts'. Here the offended party blames Private Eye for the offence caused, there is nothing 'wrong' with Maxwell (he does not publish wicked or cruel lies), he is not at fault (did not attempt to buy a peerage), rather Private Eye itself is rendered responsible for the offence and damage to reputation. Equally, The Daily Mail registers the offence caused by the Eye and experienced by Sonia Sutcliffe on similar grounds: 'thriving on a diet of scandal' there is 'no truth in magazine claims'. The Eye is referred to as an 'unofficial house magazine' that has a history of 'notorious' libel cases.

These are attempts to censure Private Eye as dishonest. They shift the blame of the damage to reputation to Private Eye. Establishing journalistic boundaries between Private Eye and the rest of the press, and thus blaming the Eye for causing offence, mirrors the use of credentialing disclaimers used by readers when articulating comic offence in letters written to the editor of Private Eye. As I illustrated in chapter 6, readers frequently use prolepsis when articulating comic offence. The use of proleptic phrases provides the reader with special characteristics (or credentials) that prevent him/her being treated as someone who lacks a sense of humour. Credentialing shifts the blame of
offence onto *Private Eye*. Disregarding the manner in which redress is sought, *Private Eye* is constructed as the offending party and blamed for the offence caused. The offence is deemed legitimate through the rhetorical labels attached to it. The use of words like ‘lie’, ‘slur’ and ‘smear’ invokes a hierarchical scale whereby *Private Eye* is placed, and condemned, as morally low, and so distinguished from the higher echelons of the press. As such it is identified with the offensive domain of dirt, defecation and filth - the ‘matter out of place’ which is the implied object of ‘smear’. Alternatively, the Eye is figured as an ‘infected organ’ to be cut out and removed by the surgical operation of libel litigation. Such litigation makes the public body of the press ‘clean’ and ‘pure’ once again.

Individuals offended by *Private Eye* discourse then prevent their reputation being damaged any further by highlighting their honourable and charitable behaviour. Robert Maxwell plans to give the libel damages awarded to charity and both Maxwell and Beloff sued *Private Eye* on behalf of the 'thousands' of people who have 'suffered over the years by being targeted and recklessly attacked'. The action is justified on the grounds of preventing journalists publishing 'any lies they wished without fear of repercussion'. Libel reporting is thus an 'intricate mix of outrage and a quest for respectability' (Soothill, 1992: 1345).

Although the press establish and maintain three different boundaries (professional, journalistic and moral) when reporting cases of comic offence where redress is sought through the courts, they all have primarily similar functions. The different boundary markers translate the debate around comic offence into a debate about un/deserving individuals and in/appropriate behaviour. As Soothill observes reporting of 'libel cases probes the boundaries of appropriate behaviour' (1992: 1390). Claims that comic offence has been experienced are appraised on the personal and professional characteristics of the offender and offended. Whether referring to professional, journalistic or moral behaviour, when boundary markers are employed in the press there is an evaluative judgement associated with the boundary. To take a few examples from the findings noted above, we can see how these evaluations work. Professional boundaries marked by *The Sun* when reporting the Sutcliffe case (May 25 1989) make a distinction between the (small) amounts awarded for physical injuries and the (large) amounts awarded as libel damages. The assumption underpinning this distinction is that damage to reputation, or emotional hurt (whether caused by humour or serious discourse) does not warrant larger awards than physical injury and anyone who
does receive large damages for emotional hurt is undeserving. This view is reflected in the comment made by Peter Cook:

To try and measure emotional hurt in cash seems daft, “How hurt are you Mr Cook?”, “Oh, I’m about one hundred thousand pounds hurt at the moment, but I could be two hundred thousand pounds hurt. With built-in inflation, I’ll probably be two million quid hurt”, I mean it’s daft (Peter Cook, South Bank Show, 1991).

The discrepancies between the amounts awarded for physical and emotional injuries are exacerbated in the Sutcliffe case as The Sun can also link brutal injuries experienced by the victims of the Yorkshire Ripper to the concept of compensation for physical injury. The undeserving nature of Sonia Sutcliffe’s libel damages is magnified by a comparison between the small amounts awarded to the victims of the Yorkshire Ripper and the large libel damages awarded to Sonia. As the damage caused by comic offence is emotional, and thus unseen, the amounts awarded should be relatively small, and certainly not the gargantuan sum of £600,000.

Whether comic offence is justified and deserved is established and maintained by journalistic boundaries. In the example used when reporting my findings I have illustrated how in the news coverage of his own case brought against the Eye, Robert Maxwell intimates that the magazine deserved to be sued for libel, and thus the offence he felt was justified and warranted. Maxwell referred to the offending discourse as a ‘wicked lie’. He retorts that ‘[t]here was never any truth in it. Long before the case ended, the Eye admitted as much’ (November 22 1986). Equally in The Daily Mail we see how the Eye is referred to as ‘[t]hriving on a diet of scandal’ (May 25 1989). As the Eye prints inappropriate information it is appropriate that it is sued, found guilty of defamation and punished (financially).

Finally, the marking of moral behaviour boundaries illustrate how comic offence is translated into a debate about those who deserve to be offended and those who should be protected from offensive discourse. In The Daily Mirror and The Daily Express (May 25 1989) Sonia Sutcliffe is demonised, she is portrayed as a strange woman who has a history of mental problems, and her abnormality was manifest in her support of her husband, the Yorkshire Ripper. Not only did she support Peter Sutcliffe, but also more disturbingly she was alleged by the Eye to have attempted to gain financially from his murders and conviction. Given this odd and immoral behaviour, the large amount of libel damages awarded is inappropriate. Equally undeserving is Nora Beloff, who is charged with the ultimate sin of lacking a sense of humour (see chapters 2 and 6). These examples

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illustrate that the context of the libel can sometimes be interpreted much more widely than the content of the offending discourse and can portray wider societal attitudes and values (Soothill, 1992).

The two distinct modes of redress (‘poor man’s’ and ‘rich man’s’) considered in this thesis are characterised by similarities and differences. In neither the readers’ letters nor the press reports of libel litigation does the offended individual overtly and clearly state that he/she has been offended by comic discourse. In few letters does the offended reader state ‘I was deeply offended by …’. In chapter 6 I illustrated how readers often employ prolepsis as a rhetorical strategy to prevent them being charged with lacking a sense of humour, preface their complaint of comic offence with praiseworthy comments towards the Eye and use pronominal displacements which masks personal feelings of offensiveness. Equally, when quoted in press reports, libel plaintiffs do not directly state that their reputation has been damaged by the offending discourse. The cause of the libel action is attributed to the dishonest and dubious journalistic practices (lies) engaged in by Eye journalists, the libel litigant is presented as instigating the litigation in order to punish the Eye. Libel plaintiffs also employ the rhetorical strategy of pronominal displacements arguing that the litigation will benefit ‘thousands of people, their families and friends who have suffered’ (Robert Maxwell, The Daily Telegraph November 22 1986) and will prevent future and further offence because ‘[i]f this article had been allowed to go unchallenged, it would have opened the door for anybody to print lies they wished without fear of repercussions’ (Nora Beloff, The Daily Mail, October 25 1972). The quantitative content analyses of the readers’ letters and the Eye’s libel experience highlighted a consistent pattern in that the section of Private Eye that caused the offence is only sometimes given. To recap from chapter 5, of the 479 letters of complaint used in the analysis, 194 (41%) did not mention the section in which the offending discourse appeared. Of the 90 news reports used in the content analysis of Private Eye’s libel litigation, 75 (83%) did not mention the section of Private Eye that caused the offence. This may be a deliberate tactic to prevent the charge that the offended lack a sense of humour, because it may be that the offence was caused by a more ‘serious’ piece in Private Eye, although Private Eye is synonymous with satirical humour.

Readers’ letters and the press use cases of putative transgression to re-establish boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate topics for satirical discourse. Boundaries to serious and non-serious discourse, are established through the use of comic offence as a mode of expression and it is through the concept of offensive discourse that the boundaries are defined, maintained and defended...
against unwarranted intrusion' (James, 1986: 169). Behaving in a way that radically departs from the 'normal' way of behaving re-asserts and maintains the normal way of behaving. Cohen (1985) observes a fishermen's protest in the Shetland Islands in 1975 where organised groups of fishing crews blocked the harbour, hindering its normal operations. The fishing crews rarely conduct demonstrative behaviour, they prefer to inconvenience themselves rather than others, and would perceive demonstrating as a waste of precious fishing time (Cohen, 1985). Behaving in this manner enabled the fishing crews to become more aware of the norm, enabling it to be 'celebrated, broadcast, re-asserted against subversion, and, therefore, be maintained' (Cohen, 1985: 69). The same can be said about humour that offends. When Private Eye is sued for damage to reputation, this signals a departure from the 'normal and acceptable' journalistic practices, which are highlighted and reaffirmed by this simple act of departure and assigned to their right place.

Summary

This chapter has analysed the critical intersection between the law and the media. I have analysed the recurring textual practices used by the press when reporting on libel litigation where Private Eye are the defendants, and have highlighted the press's contribution to the debate about comic offence. Using a quantitative content analysis I was able to provide an accurate record of Private Eye's libel experience as reported in the press, which I call the 'rich man's' mode of redress. I found that libel plaintiffs are often journalists, government ministers and businesspersons, the majority of whom are male. Accusations of corrupt/unethical behaviour, allegations of criminal behaviour, and criticisms of the individual's private life instigate libel litigation brought against Private Eye. News reports of the libel cases did not, on the whole, mention the specific section of Private Eye that caused the alleged damage to reputation. Private Eye often pays the plaintiff 'substantial' libel damages and/or legal costs, and frequently apologises for the offending article or recognises the falsity of the allegation(s).

Through qualitative analysis of press coverage of five libel cases brought against Private Eye, over a 30-year period, certain patterns of reporting emerged facilitating deeper understanding of the media definition of comic offence and comic censure. Various descriptive and rhetorical devices were used to avoid responsibility and to ascribe blame. What I have shown throughout this chapter is that the ways in which the press describe events have particular implications and serve certain functions. Press reports of libel litigation act as boundary-marking discourse. Although primarily
Chapter 7: Humour, Offence and Censure in The Press

reports about the outcomes of libel litigation, the press reports investigated included a broader narrative about the boundaries of serious and non-serious discourse and those deserving and undeserving of comic attack. The themes and basic structuring operations identified in the press reports were organised into three types of boundary marker: establishing professional boundaries, establishing journalistic boundaries and establishing moral behaviour boundaries. Press reports of libel litigation build and defend boundaries between the press and the law, through criticism of the legal system, in particular the use of juries. Boundaries between the mainstream press and Private Eye are built and maintained by classifying Private Eye journalism as satirical and non-serious and engaging in scandalous journalism. Finally the distinct dichotomous moral characteristics of the plaintiff and defendant are separated through the use of a number of moral oppositions. This chapter has illustrated the important censorial influence of the press and has highlighted the role of the press as an unofficial moral guardian (Cloonan, 1996).

The law of defamation is a controversial area related to strong and intense emotions. What gets reported and the way in which it is reported are equally sensitive and controversial. The media specialise in communicating information in a quick and easily interpreted format. Boundary discourse used by journalists oversimplifies defamation law through its use of false dichotomies and misleading metaphors. Manifest in the amounts of awards and damages received, press reports emphasise the outcome and consequences of engaging in libellous journalism. Establishing moral boundaries between the plaintiff and defendant offers a simplified framework of libel law, suggesting that there is simply a winner and a loser, rather than discrepancies, intricacies and defining characteristics that make each libel claim individual in nature. As Hooper observes: 'each case is quite different and the level of damages will depend on the impression formed by the jury, having taken into account the behaviour and reputation of the parties concerned' (2000: 463). Although I have proposed that the boundary work may be used to influence or alter an audience's perception and understanding of libel litigation, I have not examined the effectiveness of this boundary work on the audience. Studying the influence of media messages and content would include analysis of audience's perceptions and understandings, such as those studies conducted by the Glasgow Media Group (Philo, 1999).

In my final chapter I summarise and weave together the main findings of the thesis as a whole and consider the contributions and implications it has for our understanding of criticising comic discourse, communication and media studies and multi-method research designs. I identify and
discuss the limitations of the thesis and consider what the limitations, if made good, could add to our knowledge about comic offensiveness and comic censure. I then set out some questions for future research.
Chapter 8
Conclusions

From ancient times, humor has been the subject of a highly serious debate (Allen, 1984: 5).

[U]ntil a few years ago, the study of laughter was treated in academic circles as frivolous. Because laughter is not a serious activity, the unstated argument seemed to run, it is not possible to take a serious interest in it; and so anyone proclaiming an interest in studying laughter [and humour] probably just wants to goof off. This argument is invalid (Morreall, 1983: ix).

Everyone is being satirical; everything is a send-up ... Everyone is a satirist (Barry Humphries, in Carpenter, 2000: 329).

Introduction

This thesis provides a systematic empirical investigation into comic offence and comic censure as these are registered in popular media discourse. In the introduction, I suggested that the thesis would contribute to humour research, media studies and social science methodology. This concluding chapter serves three main functions. I draw together the main arguments developed in the thesis, reflect on the research process through consideration of the contributions made by the thesis, and discuss the limitations of the thesis whilst suggesting future lines of inquiry.

Summary of Thesis

The specific aim of this thesis has been to explore how comic offence is publicly registered and how attempts are made to censure comic discourse. In this section I briefly summarise the main lines of argument maintained throughout the thesis and outline its main findings.

In Chapter 2, Comedy, Conflict and Censure, I established the main problem that was to be addressed. I illustrated how humour and comedy work by turning things upside down or inside out, mocking what is respectable and ethically correct and saying the unsayable and doing the undoable. I used the existing humour literature to show that given humour's specific features (ambiguity, incongruity, bisociation and the fluidity of boundaries between serious and non-serious modes), reactions to potentially humorous remarks and challenges are often varied and what one person finds humorous, another may consider offensive. I also discussed Jerry Palmer's (1994) work on
the limits to humour and on comic failure and illustrated how the structure of the joke, the relationship between the joker and the audience and the occasion on which the attempt at humour is made can profoundly influence audience responses to humour. I highlighted a number of examples where the attempt at humour had failed to amuse and caused offence. Having established that humour can offend, I then went on to consider how comic offence can be communicated both informally (by simply criticising the offender) and formally (criticising the offender through the courts, via the law of libel) and how comedy may be censured. Potential problems and peculiarities exist when attempting to criticise comic discourse for its offensive qualities. Those charged with causing comic offence can retort that it was 'just a joke', or can use the criticism to generate more humour. The offended can be perceived as lacking a sense of humour. Despite these profound problems, dangers and peculiarities, how comic offence and comic censure is discursively registered has not been examined in humour studies. I finished the chapter by stating that my thesis would make good this neglect, using the incidence of comic offence caused by the satirical magazine *Private Eye* to explore the strategies used when asserting that humour has offended and attempting to censure humour.

Closely linked to Chapter 2, Chapter 3, Portrait of *Private Eye:* Satire, Investigative Journalism and Censure, served to justify selecting *Private Eye* as case study material for the thesis and to contextualise the data and analysis presented in later chapters. I drew attention to the absence of academic inquiry involving *Private Eye*, to the Eye’s long history of causing offence to the Establishment, to its readers, and to foreign governments. I argued that the sheer wealth of offence caused by the magazine warranted further inquiry. Further, *Private Eye* is ideally suited as a venue for exploring comedy, offensiveness and moral censure because the magazine fuses humour with more investigative articles, thus blurring the boundaries between ‘comic’ and ‘serious’ modes and destabilising the assumptions that uphold the division between these two modes of discourse. Split into 3 sections, this chapter provided a brief review of the Eye’s origins and aims, explored the contents of the magazine and introduced and illustrated the varied responses the Eye has received, from those praising the magazine’s endeavours, to those being deeply offended by it. Attempts made to restrict and control the publication, circulation and content of *Private Eye* and to seek redress for the comic offence caused were illustrated and discussed and the specific attempts chosen for analysis in the thesis were noted. In Chapter 4, Making a Case for Multi-Method Research, I endorsed methodological eclecticism in social research and described the different methods of
data collection and analysis utilised in the thesis. Throughout the chapter I critically reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of the collection and analysis methods used.

Chapter 5, Content and Composition Analysis of the Letters Page, was the first of three analytic chapters. In chapter 5 I noted, that despite the popularity of reading readers’ letters by both editors/journalists and readers, readers’ letters remain an under-researched area in communication and media studies. I discussed the importance of the letters page, as it is the main (if not the only) site where readers and editors interact, allowing the readers to express their views, which are primarily exasperated in tone, although of course the letters are subject to editorial manipulation.

Following this discussion, I reported the result of two studies of the letters page of Private Eye. The first was a quantitative content analysis of the letters printed on the letter page that state the reader has been offended by the magazine. From the 715 Private Eye issues consulted, 479 letters of complaint were gathered. Most of the letters of complaint printed in the Eye were written by (male) ‘ordinary readers’, although sometimes spokespersons and officials (such as solicitors) complained on behalf of others. I termed the practice of articulating comic offence and comic censure through readers’ letters the 'poor man’s' practice. I called the articulation of comic offence and comic censure through libel litigation the ‘rich man’s’ practice. The most frequently mentioned topic causing comic offence in the readers’ letters was personal appearance/reference or attack. In addition to this topic, ‘ordinary readers’ were also offended by topics that had wider societal relevance and importance (such as war and the royal family). The topic of offence is much more widely noted than the section of the Eye causing offence. When the section is mentioned, cartoons and the front cover are often referred to. Readers seeks redress for the offence caused by criticising and negatively referring to Private Eye, whereas officials expect corrective actions to be taken by the magazine.

Remaining with the readers’ letters I then shifted in focus to the second study which was a qualitative composition analysis of the letters page. Here I focussed on the way(s) in which the editor of the Eye manages and responds to the charges of comic offence. The content analysis highlighted that only 2% of readers’ letters of complaint are overtly edited (through the use of ... to imply that parts of the letter had been cut and edited), so the composition analysis explored in detail the more covert strategies used by the editor. It was found that the editor, when printing letters of complaint recurringly used specific rhetorical devices. These included printing disparaging straplines above the letters, such as ‘Dopey Letter’ and using noms de plume such as ‘Disgusted,
Tunbridge Wells’. The strapline and the letter should be read together as the strapline often relates semantically or lexically to the author of the letter. Straplines frame the letter and can encourage the reader of the letter to interpret it in a particular manner. Alternatively, the editor of the magazine covertly relates the letter of complaint to other humorous sections in the magazine, such as ‘A Doctor Writes’ column. Those readers that ‘get’ the intertextual relations are therefore distinguished from the offended reader who has failed to ‘get’ the joke. This distinction facilitates a community feeling amongst the ‘hardcore’ Eye readers. The analogous relationship between the readers’ letters and other satirical Eye columns suggests that the letter should be regarded as non-serious like the column it is related to. A third strategy noted was the strategic positioning of readers’ letters. For example, letters of complaint were positioned above letters that praise the Eye’s endeavours, or state the humorous qualities of the very same article that the offended reader refers to, so undermining the letter of complaint, signalling that the offender reader has ‘missed the point’ of the joke and suggesting that he or she is somehow deficient. Given that all of these devices depend on ambiguity and insinuation for their effect, if the Eye is criticised for rebuking the offender, this can, of course, be denied.

Remaining with the ‘poor man’s avenue of complaint, Chapter 6, Humour, Censure and the Articulation of Complaint, explored in detail the discursive strategies used by readers when articulating that comic offence has been experienced and attempting to censure the Eye. On the whole, offended readers do not register their comic offence clearly or overtly. Combining linguistic discourse analysis and symbolic cultural analysis, I showed how readers register their comic offence. Offence is registered through the use of prolepsis, through prefacing disagreements with agreements and through the use of pronominal displacements. All of these rhetorical strategies are used to countervail objections to, or criticisms of, the offence. Readers combine these rhetorical strategies with symbolic and figurative language metaphorically referring to dirt, filth, sickness, disease and madness. Although on initial inspection the rhetorical devices that hedge around the making of the complaint seem to be in direct opposition to the vehement symbolic and figurative language used in the letters, I showed how they actually function in concert and are complementary, making the complaint more forceful. Drawing on cultural anthropological studies and historical cultural analysis of transgression, I showed how the use of figurative and symbolic language, focusing particularly on lexical instances of repellence, such as ‘shit’, ‘crap’, ‘sick’, ‘puke’ and ‘insane’, constitutes an attempt to re-establish order and maintain boundaries between appropriate and acceptable topics for serious and non-serious discourse.
Taking a similar format to chapter 5, in the final analytic chapter, **Chapter 7, Humour, Offence and Censure in the Press**, I reported the results of two studies. This chapter examined the debate surrounding comic offence and comic censure as publicly negotiated in the press. The first study was a quantitative content analysis of *Private Eye* libel litigation and the second study involved a qualitative textual analysis of press reports of five libel cases brought against the *Eye*. The press reports used to explore the media’s role in the comic offence and comic censure debate are based on what I have called the ‘rich man’s’ avenue for articulation of comic offence – libel litigation. The content analysis highlighted 90 libel cases brought against *Private Eye* that were reported in the press between 1961 and 1999. Common *Eye* plaintiffs were (male) journalists, government ministers and businesspersons. Non-elite plaintiffs or 'ordinary’ members of the public acting as plaintiffs were few and far between, with the sole exception of Sonia Sutcliffe (who lacks professional integrity of journalists, government ministers and so on). Accusations of corrupt/unethical behaviour instigated nearly half of the libel cases reported and many of the press reports did not mention the section of *Private Eye* causing the libel. A popular outcome of libel litigation involved *Private Eye* paying libel damages and costs and apologising for the offending article.

This quantitative study facilitated the close textual analysis of press reporting of the *Eye’s* libel litigation. Press reports of the putative transgression can control how comic offence is registered, can determine and construct what it means to be offended and can dictate how the offended and offender should be treated. I identified 3 main boundaries that were established and maintained through this press reporting: Establishing Professional Boundaries: the press v the law; Establishing Journalistic Boundaries: *Private Eye* v the rest of the press and Establishing Moral Boundaries: plaintiff v defendant. Although each type of boundary marker has its own function, I illustrated how each serve to translate the debate about comic offence and comic censure into a debate about un/deserving individuals and in/appropriate behaviour. Finally, I compared and contrasted the strategies used by readers and the press when registering comic offence and attempts to censure *Private Eye*. In neither readers’ letters nor press reports of libel litigation does the offended clearly and overtly state that he/she has been offended and rarely is the specific item causing offence mentioned. Personal feelings of offence are masked in both readers’ letters and press reports of libel litigation by pronominal displacements. Libel plaintiffs protect their reputation from further damage by stating that the *Eye* is dishonest and engages in unethical journalistic practices that
warrant censure and punishment, adopting similarly vehement language to that used in readers’ letters. Incidents of putative transgression establish and maintain boundaries of in/appropriate topics for serious and non-serious discourse. Comic offence is therefore used as a mode of expression to establish and maintain discursive boundaries between serious and non-serious discourse.

Contributions of Thesis

In this section I look backward to consider the contributions this thesis has made to humour research, media studies and social science research.

Humour Research

I have analysed in detail issues and topics that have not been considered before in academic debates. The thesis makes a positive contribution to the development of humour studies. It has considerably developed previous (limited) work on comic offence and comic censure, taking the debate into unknown territory. The research has built on Jerry Palmer’s (1994) work on comic failure. Although Palmer and others have noted comic offence can be caused by the structure of the joke (Esmein, 1991 in Palmer, 1994), the relationship between the joker and the audience (La Fave, 1972; Smeltzer and Leap, 1988; Wolf et al, 1934; Zillman and Cantor, 1976) and the occasion on which the attempt at humour is made (Jaret, 1999; Oring, 1995), how comedy is criticised for its offensive qualities and how comedy is censured, has until now, failed to receive academic attention. I have contributed to the humour literature by exploring how comic offence and comic censure is publicly registered. I have shown how comic discourse can be criticised and censured, which I noted in chapter 1 is a major question for humour studies (Pickering, 1994b). I have explored the articulation of comic offence and comic censure in relation to the offence caused by the satirical magazine Private Eye given its long and strong reputation for causing offence. My research has facilitated understanding (and appreciation) of this complex media product that until now has been neglected in humour research and has brought contemporary satire into the academic arena.

Offended readers have limited space and opportunity to retaliate. In the public domain, debates about comic offence and comic censure are evident in 2 main locations – readers’ letters and press reports of libel litigation where reputation has been damaged. Readers’ letters and press reports can
be the ‘arbiters of a crisis’ (Watson and Hill, 2000: 99) indicating what is important and significant. They can define what caused the comic offence, decide what aspects of the instances of comic offence are important, what are not, what is normal and acceptable in humorous discourse, what is not, and can re/define consensus.

When articulating comic offence and comic censure through these popular rituals the offence and censure is registered in a covert manner. Complaints made of offensive comedy are couched in rhetorical devices and symbolic language. They are constructed in such manner as to offset the charge that the offended lacks a sense of humour. They camouflage the individuals’ involvement in the complaint and blame the offender for the actions of the offended, rendering Private Eye accountable. Public debate around comic offence and comic censure is primarily about boundaries between serious and non-serious discourse and the in/appropriate topics that can/should be included in the different types of discourse and those who are un/deserving of ridicule.

Registering comic offence is a risky endeavour. Offended readers are denied opportunity to express themselves objectively. I have shown that readers’ letters are edited (to varying degrees) and press reporting of libel litigation is constructed in a particular manner. Even with the use of rhetorical strategies such as prolepsis, prefacing the disagreement with agreement and pronominal displacement which can prevent the charge of lacking a sense of humour, the offender can use the letter to generate more humour. Letters of complaint can thus become a form of ‘metahumour’. The offender can deal with the complainant without directly engaging with the complaint. The offender uses particular strategies to suggest that the reader has ‘missed the point’ of the humour, is deficient in some way or can undermine the complaint by placing letters of praise alongside the letter of complaint. My analysis has illustrated that those charged with causing comic offence (through printed humour) effectively have ‘the last laugh’. As Bell observes: ‘although feedback is not absent from the mass communication process, in few cases is the audience member on equal terms with the communicators’ (1991: 87).

In my introduction to this thesis I noted how humour is a main facet of human interaction, and is found in all cultural narrative and genres. In the last 30-35 years serious study of humour has increased dramatically. Despite this, it remains intrinsically difficult to study humour academically. My experience of studying comic offence and comic censure has sometimes been a troubled, if not traumatic one. Although the majority of colleagues in the department, academics met at
conferences and research group meetings, and students who have come into contact with my work through lectures and seminars, have been supportive and very interested in the topic of my thesis, there have been times when, on explaining the topic of my thesis, I have been ridiculed and dismissed with disparaging remarks. I have received comments that seriously question the academic worthiness of the topic. The following are typical: 'You mean you got funding for that', or 'You're allowed to do a higher degree in humour, I better not tell my son that or he'll want to do that'. In addition to being dissuaded from research that includes humour because of the hazards of taking jokes apart (Randolph Quirk, 1985), I have been the recipient of remarks and judgements that appear to simplify humour and comedy as a phenomenon, such as 'Oh, you must have a good sense of humour', 'Tell us a good joke', or 'You must know a lot of jokes'. Other humour researchers report similar responses (Apte, 1988; Prado, 1995). Chapman and Foot (1976) note how an editor of a social science magazine received reader opposition after announcing that a forthcoming issue would be devoted to humour research. In his analysis of comic styles and techniques, Walter Nash (1985) reports similar findings of feeling isolated from people taking his work seriously. Equally, academics studying other areas considered 'non-traditional', such as popular music, often receive disparaging remarks (Mike Pickering, personal conversation), whereas those studying subjects perceived as worthy of academic study, such as politics, are not treated with such disregard and are not obliged to justify their chosen subject area.

On occasion these derisive comments have shattered my confidence, lowered my self-esteem and caused me to question whether I should really be studying humour at all. At other times I have compensated for these disparaging remarks by over-emphasising the importance of humour in contemporary society. I have reacted defensively, retorting that 'I've heard that one before', or 'What do you mean I got funding for that'. Otherwise I've reacted to the belittling comments by using laughter as a defence mechanism, and have even resorted to lying about my research or exaggerated its value in order to deliberately elicit negative reactions. Whilst I recognise that none of these responses are particularly productive and do not deal with why I have received such comments or challenge them, how humour and comedy can be seen as a legitimate topic of academic inquiry has vexed me throughout my research. Although I am still sometimes anxious about how strangers will respond to my answer to the simple question, 'what is your research about?', I now respond in a confident and proud manner. Simply because humour is based on a non-serious approach and attitude does not mean that a serious approach to analysis cannot be
adopted. Neither does this imply that these non-serious topics are irrelevant or unimportant in social life. Humour is perceived as a subordinate mode and given that our 'basic perspective on the world is couched in the unitary terms characteristic of ordinary, serious interaction' (Mulkay, 1988: 217), it is unsurprising that negative comments are made towards the serious study of humour.

However, the future of comedy as a legitimate topic of academic inquiry appears encouraging. Humour literature and courses are on the increase. In a recent study, Wycoff (1999) surveyed 106 academics running university humour modules and degrees. Humour courses are offered at Higher Education institutions in the United States of America, Israel, Great Britain (Leeds, Reading and North London), France, Scotland and Canada, some beginning as early as 1966 (Michigan State University). Wycoff reported that humour, 'as a serious topic of study in colleges and universities, is rapidly coming of age' (1999: 437). Seventy five percent of academics surveyed believe that humour modules/degrees will increase in the future and 67% reported that humour research is likely to increase (Wycoff, 1999). Apte (1985) is more radical in his approach. He argues that humour research, which he calls 'a stepchild of academe' (1985: 9), should be established as a distinct academic discipline. Apte suggests that this discipline should be called 'humorology' to reflect the interdisciplinary nature of humour research. Despite this, Wycoff concludes that 'the frivolity historically associated with humor still lingers with many academy colleagues sceptical about humor as a serious course in higher education' (1999: 437). My experiences reflect Wycoff’s conclusions, suggesting that humour studies continue to be excluded as a recognised and respected academic interest, although I am hopeful that acceptance will widen and increase. I hope my thesis challenges these ignorant responses to humour research and facilitates a move from scepticism to appreciation. This thesis has been a small step towards balancing the scales of academia. This is a challenge I will continue to take and I relish the opportunity to place humour research firmly on the academic map.

**Constructionist Approaches to the Media**

The thesis also makes a significant contribution to the constructionist approach to media analysis. Few studies have utilised the letters page and readers’ letters printed in newspaper and magazines as a fruitful site of analysis. I have shown how the letters page allows grievances to be presented and

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1 Prominent humour scholars have challenged the assumption that humour cannot be taken seriously through titles of their recent work, such as John Morreall’s (1983) *Taking Laughter Seriously* and Jerry Palmer’s (1994) *Taking Humour Seriously*. 

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debated, albeit with editorial manipulation. Using the readers' letters I have illustrated how the reader discursively constructs the letter in a particular manner through specific rhetorical devices and language use. Equally, the editor employs particular strategies to portray the offended reader in a derogatory manner and to undermine the charge of causing offence. Focusing on the content, structure and presentation of the letters page of *Private Eye* I have explored how the verbal and visual elements of the discourse work in concert to construct particular meanings. For example the exact positioning of a letter of complaint on the letters page and the strapline used can encourage a particular meaning. The importance of visual elements in the construction of meaning, and the relationship of these elements to the verbal feature of discourse, is a relatively recent shift (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1998). Showing how the letters page is not simply written, but designed, my research endorses this shift to analysing how both the verbal and visual dimensions of discourse construct meanings.

**Multi-Method Research Design**

Finally, in relation to method, I have shown the value of methodological eclecticism. Using a variety of data collection and analytic procedures, I have illustrated how constructionist research can successfully use statistics and highlighted the ways in which a multi-method approach is important for extending our understanding of the topic from a range of angles. As Deacon et al observe: 'what separates interpretive research from positivism is not *whether* figures are referred to but *how* they are used. Positivists look to statistics to answer research questions. Interpretive researchers see them as a source of questions, a springboard for further investigation and analysis' (1999: 9; emphasis in original). Although the division between quantitative and qualitative methods remains deep, I hope I have illustrated how the different methods of analysis can fruitfully be combined.

**Limitations of Thesis and Suggestions for Future Research**

In this section I look backward at some of the limitations of the thesis, but also optimistically look forward to how the research could be developed.

When embarking on this thesis I knew I was entering unknown territory and exploring an area that had received little academic attention and that was (and remains) immature in nature. Although this
thesis has come a long way since its conception, I feel I have simply examined a very small part of a continuing debate, and what I have contributed has (a number of) limitations. Although wary of using spent clichés, I think I have scratched the surface of a complex and intricate process of registering comic offence and comic censure. My thesis tells only the partial story. My empirical exploration into comic offence and comic censure has, through necessity, been undoubtedly selective. Although the research is rich in depth, it is limited in scope. I have considered the incidences of comic offence caused by one particular media product - a satirical magazine. My data excludes the comic offence caused by broadcast media, which as I acknowledged in chapter 2 has been the instigator of offence (for example, TV’s *Till Death Us Do Part*). Comic offence caused by broadcast comedy may be registered in a different manner given the different performance space of such comedy. Criticising broadcast comedy may have different consequences and the offender may retort in a different guise. Further, incidences of comic offence and comic censure that are instant and direct, such as in live stand-up performances and spontaneous face-to-face interaction, may require different rhetorical strategies. The manner in which comic offence is registered and the attempts to censure it may be determined by the very medium in which the humour appears, which is a possible site of future research. As Hartley observes, what is said or written ‘gains much of its “shape” from the characteristics of the medium in which it appears’ (1995: 5).

Further, media discourses that do not have such a strong reputation for offending its readers/viewers/listeners may be an interesting point of comparison. The prolific use of vehement language in readers’ letters and by libel litigants when criticising *Private Eye* may be a reflection of their annoyance at the *Eye’s persistence* in overstepping the mark and causing offence. Readers may charge a publication without a long history and well-established reputation for causing comic offence through the use of different rhetorical strategies. Equally, the editor of a publication that is not normally charged with causing comic offence may manage the charge differently when compared to the experienced *Eye* editor.

The research methods used may have limited what I can/have said about comic offence and comic censure. This thesis, although drawing on interview data, is principally based on written text. Text-centred analysis is simply one of a number of research possibilities that may be employed when investigating the articulation of comic offence and comic censure. As this thesis places an unfamiliar or under-researched topic on the academic map, the text-based approach serves as the
primary step for future non-textual analyses. Future research could extend analysis to cover other areas of the communication process. Audience responses to the letters and newspaper reports used in the thesis could facilitate understanding of how the texts are received and responded to. Media texts are not carriers of single meanings and their content is based on a combination of the mode of address and the active interpreting by the audience (Larsen, 1991; see also Garrett and Bell, 1998). The textual analysis could therefore be combined with an audience reception study. One of the few examples involving the combination of textual analysis and audience analysis is Kay Richardson’s (1998) study. She sought to relate textual analysis and reception analysis about news about the British economy by exploring how the textual form influenced the audiences’ comprehension of news information given in the text. I would also like to extend the textual analysis of the press reports of the *Eye’s* libel litigation. With the benefit of hindsight I am sensitive to a possible oversight in the analysis. On reflection, the analysis could have been extended if a specific comparison between how different newspapers report on the same libel case may have provided additional dimensions to the press’s role in the comic offence and comic censure debate. Although I did highlight some differences between newspaper reporting, for example how *The Daily Mail* reported the Sonia Sutcliffe case compared to other non-involved newspapers, this is an area of analysis that could be pursued. Equally, it may have provided a convenient stepping-stone from the quantitative content analysis to the qualitative textual analysis of the press reports. Future research can make good this neglect.

Equally, the interview data may have limited what I have said. In particular, the interview data was limited by what the *Eye* personnel said in the particular interview context. What they did say may bear little, or no resemblance to what they may say in another context. The interview data is primarily about their experiences of events and issues rather than being those events and issues themselves. However, as long as these limitations are recognised and acknowledged, interview data is useful for gaining insight about the experiences of satirists when creating and defending satire.

*Private Eye* is an internally complex and sophisticated publication. In order to ‘get’ the jokes the reader is required to be aware of contemporary society in all its spheres and to ‘understand a work as a satire, one must understand the time and place in which it was written’ (Kreuz and Roberts, 1993: 103). During my (SL) interview with Tony Rushton (TR) we shared the difficulties of interpreting *Eye* humour:

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TR: Some of Private Eye is so satirical and ephemeral that a month later you wonder what was about.
SL: I find that because I’ve copies of Private Eye back until the early nineteen seventies.
TR: Yeah.
SL: And because I wasn’t born then.
TR: What in God’s name are they on about.
SL: Even if it is funny, I sometimes can’t see why it is funny.
(5th May, 1998)

When consulting earlier editions of the Eye I may have missed or misinterpreted some of the satirical humour, thus confounding the analysis. This may have been exacerbated by humour’s reliance on ambiguity for its impact. When I was uncertain of topics and issues referred to in the Eye, I sought assistance from colleagues who have read the Eye for many years. They were willing and able to provide contextual details to the item mentioned in the Eye. However, rather than get too tied up with these interpretative difficulties, they should be celebrated as they illustrate the subjective and complex features of humorous discourse and the fundamental influence of contextual details when interpreting humour.

Looking forward to future lines of research, there are a number of interesting topics that I have not had the time, space or resources to develop in this thesis. I would like to develop my findings from this thesis so that they can contribute to and advance the literature on media ethics. Despite the recent explosive interest and literature surrounding media ethics, attention seems to be restricted to the ethics of media production and the role and responsibilities of the media, answering questions such as should journalists be impartial and objective, or how should the media be regulated? (see Kieran’s, 1998 edited collection on media ethics; Frost 2000). Such focus on the ethics of production is to the detriment of the ethics of media reception or the ethical meanings derived from media discourses.

I have focussed on a publication that deliberately fuses serious and non-serious discourse through its complex mix of jokes, spoof articles, parodies and more investigative pieces. The Eye has always combined these traditionally distinct types of discourse, although as I noted in chapter 3, all of the material published in the Eye is bound by a satirical context and frame of reference, the boundaries between serious and non-serious discourse are intrinsically blurred. The blurring of these boundaries and the negotiations between ethical, moral and comic discourse should be taken further in subsequent research. For example how comic offence and comic censure is registered when offended by humour that is evident in contexts or discourses that are traditionally serious in
aim and content could be explored. This is given particular resonance by contemporary media
debate surrounding the ‘dumbing down’ or ‘tabloidisation’ of the media (Allan, 1999; Franklin,
1997; McNair, 1998; Mosley, 2000), of which non-serious, trivial and ‘jolly-seeming nonsense’
(Mosley, 2000: 5) plays a central role. As noted by Barry Humphries at the beginning of this
chapter, satire is prevalent in contemporary society. There ‘seems to be even more satire around
these days in Britain than there was in the 1960s’ (Carpenter, 2000: 327), so much so that some
regard satire as an industry (Harry Thompson in Carpenter, 2000). Comic offence and comic
censure may become more prevalent as humour is used more and more in the mass media. As
Cantor observes:

In addition to serving as the central element of much “pure entertainment” fare, humor
seems to be becoming a more and more prevalent component of traditionally serious
offerings, particularly on television. Advertisements involving comic elements, for
example, seem to be the most talked-about, if not the most successful of the television
commercials. Many news programs have become more entertainment oriented: Announcers frequently joke among themselves and often add humorous news stories which
would not be selected on the basis of their “news value” alone. Fewer and fewer musicians
seem to perform without telling at least a joke or two between numbers. And many shows
attempting to educate or impart information have come to rely on humor as a standard
technique. A casual look at television gives the impression that humor at times plays a role
in almost all aspects of the medium’s output (1976: 501-502).

It is the negotiation of the shifting sands between serious and comic discourse, as situated in
traditionally serious media and media products that we can expand on the major contributions to
humour studies that this thesis has provided. This thesis has been a small step towards our
understanding of this perplexing topic, and given its ‘immaturity’, much remains to be done.
Appendices


Appendix B: Contextual Details to the Libel Cases
   Chosen for Analysis in Chapter 7
Appendix A: Libel Litigation Involving *Private Eye*

as Reported in the Press 1961-1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plaintiff</th>
<th>Source of Complaint</th>
<th>Date of publication in <em>Private Eye</em> (where given)</th>
<th>Date of libel decision made</th>
<th>Outcome of libel litigation</th>
<th>Response from <em>Private Eye</em> (where given)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr Randolph Churchill (Journalist, Son of Winston Churchill)</td>
<td>Cartoon suggesting that Randolph Churchill is a hack</td>
<td>February 8, 1963</td>
<td>March 1963</td>
<td><em>Private Eye</em> paid Churchill's legal costs</td>
<td><em>Private Eye</em> took out a full-page advertisement in <em>The Evening Standard</em>, withdrawing the false allegations and apologising</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Colin Watson (Journalist for <em>The Guardian</em>)</td>
<td>Parody of Mr Watson's Miscellany column in <em>The Guardian</em> implying that the Features Editor of <em>The Guardian</em> had allowed Watson to write the column as an act of charity to a destitute author whose recent published book had failed</td>
<td>November 30, 1962</td>
<td>December 1963</td>
<td><em>Private Eye</em> paid damages and legal costs</td>
<td><em>Private Eye</em> apologised and recognised that the stories were without foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Cyril Wolf Mankowitz (Novelist, Playwright, Journalist and Script-writer)</td>
<td>Cartoon detrimental to Mankowitz's reputation</td>
<td>May 31, 1963</td>
<td>December 1963</td>
<td><em>Private Eye</em> paid damages and legal costs</td>
<td><em>Private Eye</em> apologised to Mankowitz, acknowledged that the defamatory qualities of the cartoon were untrue and withdrew the libel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Meredith Philip Daubeny (Personnel Consultant and former Officer in the Royal Horse of Guards)</td>
<td>Article concerning a pimp was illustrated by a photograph of Mr Daubeny which allowed recognition of Daubeny even though the photograph was disguised</td>
<td>January 24, 1964</td>
<td>May 1964</td>
<td><em>Private Eye</em> paid damages and legal costs</td>
<td><em>Private Eye</em> gave their sincere apologies, regretted publication of the photograph and recognised the distress caused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Thomas Terry Hoar Stevens (aka Terry-Thomas, Actor and Comedian)</td>
<td>Cartoon depicting Terry Thomas as drunk and dissolute character</td>
<td>August 23, 1963</td>
<td>February 1965</td>
<td><em>Private Eye</em> paid libel damages and legal costs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lord Russell of Liverpool (Author)</td>
<td>Attacks on Lord Liverpool's books about war crimes which were seen by the Eye as degrading, and referring to</td>
<td>June 15, 1962</td>
<td>February 1966</td>
<td><em>Private Eye</em> paid damages of £5,000</td>
<td>Appeal for funds set up. Benefit concert 'Rustle of Spring' conducted. Appeal alone raised £1325</td>
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<td><strong>Liverpool as 'Lord Liver of Cesspool'</strong></td>
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<td>Right Hon. Quintin McGarel Hogg (MP)</td>
<td>Articles with offensive content and highly objectionable, and an accusation that the Conservative Party concocted a story which identified a Conservative member as an adulterer</td>
<td>Articles published between June 1963 and October 1964</td>
<td>March 1966</td>
<td><strong>Private Eye</strong> paid £1,000 damages and other legal costs.</td>
<td><strong>Private Eye</strong> readily apologised, accepted that the allegations were without foundation and argued that they never intended to engage in a vendetta against Mr Hogg. <strong>Private Eye</strong> agreed not to repeat the same or different libel in the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Elkan Allan (TV Producer)</td>
<td>Charged Allan with plagiarism</td>
<td>November 26, 1965</td>
<td>April 1966</td>
<td><strong>Private Eye</strong> paid damages and legal costs</td>
<td><strong>Private Eye</strong> accepted that the allegation was false, withdrew the allegations and printed a letter of apology in The Times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sir Cyril Black (MP and former Mayor of Merton)</td>
<td>Story suggesting that Sir Black would abuse his position as mayor or was the 'type' of person whose behaviour fell short of the high standards which he advocated, accused Black as being a hypocrite</td>
<td>October 28, 1966 'Seeds of disquiet'</td>
<td>June 1967</td>
<td><strong>Private Eye</strong> paid substantial damages and legal costs</td>
<td><strong>Private Eye</strong> recognised the falsity of the allegations, accepted that there was no justification for their attack on Sir Black, apologised for any embarrassment and annoyance caused and withdrew the allegations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Derek Marks (Editor of The Daily Express)</td>
<td>Story regarding the dispatch of a Daily Express reporter to Gibraltar which depicted Marks as incompetent in his profession and not aware of current events</td>
<td>May 27, 1966 Colour Section</td>
<td>November 1967</td>
<td>Out of court settlement.</td>
<td><strong>Private Eye</strong> apologised for any embarrassment and annoyance caused, apologised for any slur on his professional integrity and competence and will refrain from making defamatory remarks about Marks in the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees of The Scottish Daily Express - Mr Ian McColl (Editor) Mr Ian Brown (News Editor), Mr James Gordon (Crime Reporter), Mr John McCormack (Reporter) and Mr Ian Sharp (Reporter)</td>
<td>Article from which it might be inferred that three reporters had indirectly caused the death of Mr Bernard Duddy by plying him with whiskey, causing him to fall and fracture his skull</td>
<td>January 20, 1967 'Death on the Press?'</td>
<td>March 1968</td>
<td><strong>Private Eye</strong> paid legal costs and damages</td>
<td><strong>Private Eye</strong> acknowledged that the sources of the story were unreliable, expressed their apologies and withdrew the allegations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New Statesman</strong> and Mr Paul Johnson (Editor of The New Statesman)</td>
<td>Campaign against New Statesman between 1966-1968, including the suggestion that the New Statesman had abandoned its progressive principles</td>
<td>March 1968</td>
<td><strong>Private Eye</strong> paid damages and legal costs</td>
<td><strong>Private Eye</strong> apologised for writing the story, acknowledged the falsity of the allegations and that they portrayed Mr Johnson in an unfavourable light</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Allegation</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Defendant</td>
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<td>Mr Hugh Quinn Farmer and Mr Denis Edward Cassidy (Journalists)</td>
<td>Article alleging that Farmer and Cassidy had grovelled to the Prime Minister</td>
<td>November 1967</td>
<td>November 1967</td>
<td>Private Eye paid £1,000 libel damages and all legal costs at an estimated £6,000</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Anthony John Miles (Editor of The Daily Mirror)</td>
<td>Allegations that he was appointed Editor because he was willing to prepare a list of staff to be made redundant</td>
<td>March 1971</td>
<td>Private Eye paid damages</td>
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<td>Mr Winston Churchill (Conservative MP)</td>
<td>Article giving the impression that Churchill had been involved in an accident with another driver who was insured with the Vehicle and General Insurance Co. When the company collapsed it was simply for personal motives that he later introduced the Motor Vehicles (Passenger Insurance) Bill into the House of Commons</td>
<td>April 1972</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial damages</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lord Bethall (Government Whip in the House of Lords)</td>
<td>Allegation that Lord Bethall had collaborated with Russian secret service agents</td>
<td>September 1970</td>
<td>June 1972</td>
<td>Private Eye paid damages of £1,000 and all legal costs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alexander Dolberg (Translator in Russian working under the name of David Burg)</td>
<td>Allegation that Dolberg was a Russian secret agent</td>
<td>June 1972</td>
<td>Private Eye paid damages and legal costs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miss Nora Beloff (Political and Lobby Correspondent on The Observer)</td>
<td>Article suggesting Miss Beloff prostituted herself to obtain political information</td>
<td>March 12 1971</td>
<td>October 1972</td>
<td>Private Eye paid £3,000 libel damages and all legal costs</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Chapman Pincher (Journalist on The Daily)</td>
<td>Story suggesting that Mr Pincher had been telephoning stories to The Daily Mail rather</td>
<td>July 1973</td>
<td>Private Eye paid libel damages and legal costs</td>
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<th>Appendixes</th>
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<td><strong>Express)</strong> than his colleagues, followed by a later story that Mr Pincher often fabricated stories whilst under the influence of drink</td>
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<td>Mr Norman Lamont (Conservative MP)</td>
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<td>Lord Lambton (former Minister)</td>
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<td>Mr William Rees-Mogg (Editor of <em>The Times</em>)</td>
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<td>Mr Harold Evans (Editor of <em>The Sunday Times</em>)</td>
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<td>Lord Wigg (former Chairperson of the Horserace Betting Levy Board)</td>
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<td>Lord Kissin (Executive Chairperson of Guinness Peat Group)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Dr Bernard Donoughue (Senior Advisor on policy to the Prime Minister)</th>
<th>Allegation that Donoughue advised Lord Kissin on Channel Island tax evasion and that the date of the 1974 General Election was given to The Sunday Times, in return for them postponing publication of extracts that would embarrass the Labour Party</th>
<th>June 1976</th>
<th>Private Eye paid libel damages</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lord Cudlipp (The Daily Mirror) and Mr Ralph Champion (former chief of The Daily Mirror)</td>
<td>Reports about incidents that never happened and the suggestion that Mr Champion held a sinecure position</td>
<td>July 1976</td>
<td>Private Eye privately apologised to Cudlipp and Champion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr André Previn (Principal Conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra)</td>
<td>Article criticised a performance he had not given</td>
<td>December 1976</td>
<td>Private Eye paid damages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Maxwell (publisher and former MP)</td>
<td>Articles published in August and September 1975 which implied Maxwell made bids to take over The Observer when he did not have the funds to do so. In October 1975 it was claimed that Maxwell gave misleading circulation figures of the Scottish daily News</td>
<td>August 22, 1975, September 5 and October 3, 1975</td>
<td>December 1976</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lord Weidenfeld (Chairman Weidenfeld &amp; Nicolson Ltd - publishing house)</td>
<td>Article suggested that Lord Weidenfeld paid Harold Wilson £250,000 for the right to publish his memoirs to secure his peerage</td>
<td>January 9, 1976 ‘Grovel’ column</td>
<td>March 1977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Harold Soref (former MP)</td>
<td>Allegation that he broke trading sanctions against Rhodesia</td>
<td>April 1977</td>
<td>Private Eye paid undisclosed libel damages</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sir James Goldsmith (Financier)</td>
<td>A number of articles as part of Private Eye’s continued vendetta against</td>
<td>December 1975 and January 1976</td>
<td>May 1977, Criminal libel case</td>
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<td>Name</td>
<td>Allegation</td>
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<td>Goldsmith</td>
<td>In December 1975 it was alleged that Goldsmith joined a conspiracy to obstruct</td>
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<td>police inquiries into the death of the Nanny to Lord Lucan’s children.</td>
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<td>Goldsmith was attacked as a public figure in December 1975. His financial</td>
<td>settlement</td>
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<td>activities were attacked in late December 1975 and early January 1976</td>
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<td>Mr Bennie Gray (freelance</td>
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<td>June 1977</td>
<td>Private Eye</td>
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<td>journalist)</td>
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<td>Lord Foot</td>
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<td>Mr Blake Edwards (Film</td>
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<td>June 1978</td>
<td>Private Eye</td>
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<td>Mr Brian Smith (Musician)</td>
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<td>November</td>
<td>Private Eye</td>
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<td>Mr Harold Evans (Editor</td>
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<td>Private Eye</td>
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<td>of <em>The Sunday Times</em>)</td>
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<td>Sir Arnold Weinstock</td>
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<td>Private Eye</td>
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<td>(Managing Director of The</td>
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<td>General Electric Company)</td>
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<td>Name and Description</td>
<td>Allegation</td>
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<td>Private Eye Action</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miss Valerie Wade (Fashion Journalist and former Staff Writer on The Sunday Times Magazine)</td>
<td>Reference to Wade as a 'hookette'</td>
<td>July 1979</td>
<td>Private Eye withdrew all allegations and accepted they were made without foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Clive Jenkins (General Secretary for the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs)</td>
<td>Private Eye suggested that Jenkins had queue-jumped for hospital treatment</td>
<td>October 1979</td>
<td>Private Eye apologised and accepted that the allegations were false</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Roderick Llewellyn (Member of Monarchy)</td>
<td>Story implying Llewellyn was a hypocrite</td>
<td>March 2, 1979</td>
<td>Private Eye apologised and accepted that the allegations were false</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Frederick Mulley (MP and former Secretary of State for Defence)</td>
<td>Story alleging that someone resembling Mr Mulley had been seen in 'compromising circumstances'</td>
<td>February 2, 1979</td>
<td>Private Eye paid libel damages and legal costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Bernard Shrimley (former Editor of the News of the World)</td>
<td>Story attacking Shrimley as idle and illiterate and unable to write his own John Field column, claiming that he hired a hack to write it for him</td>
<td>December 1980</td>
<td>Private Eye paid libel damages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faber and Faber (Publishers) and Mr Charles Monteith (Chairperson)</td>
<td>Story referring to a dispute between Mr Robin Bryans (an author) and Faber and Faber which alleged that the company had committed perjury and got away with it</td>
<td>May 11, 1979</td>
<td>Private Eye paid libel damages and legal costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Edward Taylor (Conservative MP)</td>
<td>Story alleging that whilst Conservative MP for Glasgow, Taylor had sought to join the Scottish National Party, thus accusing him of 'desertion and disloyalty'</td>
<td>February 29, 1980</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial libel damages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lord Goodman (Solicitor)</td>
<td>Suggestion that he was a homosexual</td>
<td>October 1981</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial libel damages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Ian Coulter</td>
<td>Story implying that</td>
<td>November</td>
<td>Private Eye made a public apology</td>
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<tr>
<th>(Journalist and Public Relations Consultant)</th>
<th>when Coulter was the Director of the British Steel Corporation he engaged in discreditable behaviour</th>
<th>between 1978 and 1980</th>
<th>1981</th>
<th>paid substantial damages and legal costs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Penelope Keith (Actress) and Husband</td>
<td>Story implying they obtained a bracelet in a dishonest manner</td>
<td>October 24, 1980</td>
<td>November 1981</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial libel damages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Peter Blaker (Minister of State for the Armed Forces)</td>
<td>Allegation that Mr Blaker (then Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs) tried to obstruct further inquiries into the death of a Hong Kong police inspector and refused to answer questions</td>
<td>May 23, 1980</td>
<td>March 1982</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial libel damages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Desmond Wilcox (Television Producer and Husband of Esther Rantzen)</td>
<td>Allegation that he had used his position with the BBC to make money for himself, and that he was guilty of plagiarism and breach of copyright</td>
<td>Four articles published. One in 1975, two in 1980 and one in January 1982</td>
<td>May 1982</td>
<td>Private Eye paid £14,000 in libel damages (low figure as the allegations of plagiarism and breach of copyright were justified)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady Havers (Wife of the Attorney General)</td>
<td>Allegation of adultery</td>
<td>December 18 'Grovel' column</td>
<td>June 1983</td>
<td>Private Eye paid libel damages in excess of £25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther Rantzen (TV Presenter) and Husband Desmond Wilcox (Television Producer)</td>
<td>Story implying they had received a discount on a new Rover car under the agreement that British Leyland vehicles would not be criticised on the That's Life programme</td>
<td>February 2, 1979</td>
<td>June 1983</td>
<td>Private Eye paid undisclosed damages and costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken Livingstone, Ted Knight and Matthew</td>
<td>Allegation that their weekly newspaper the Labour Herald was financed by</td>
<td>September 11, 1981</td>
<td>November 1983</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial damages (as</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Allegation</td>
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<td>Warburton (Labour Politicians)</td>
<td>Libya's Colonel Gaddifi</td>
<td>May 1982</td>
<td>2 articles in May 1982</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clive Jenkins (General Secretary of the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs)</td>
<td>Accusation that Jenkins was a 'Strike-breaker' and ignored the official picket-line during a strike by airport workers</td>
<td>March 1984</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial undisclosed libel damages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Gordon Kirby (Secretary at the British Embassy in Belgrade)</td>
<td>Allegations that he was having an adulterous affair and was involved with a cover-up on the night of Helen Smith's death (a nurse who died in Saudi Arabia)</td>
<td>June 1979 and August 1981</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial libel damages and costs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Charles McLachlan (Chief Constable), Mr John McNaught (Head of CID), Mr James Smedley (Chief Superintendent)</td>
<td>Allegation of corruption – the suggestion that regular police procedures were ignored to cover up a shop theft</td>
<td>November 1981</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial libel damages and costs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Jocelyn Stevens (Express Newspapers)</td>
<td>Allegations that he was responsible for a reporter losing his job</td>
<td>October 8, 1982</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial damages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sir Larry Lamb (Editor of The Daily Express)</td>
<td>Allegation that he took 3 hour lunch-breaks and acquired a taste for expensive wine, all at his employer's expense</td>
<td>April 22, 1983</td>
<td>Accepted the allegations were untrue, apologised and agreed not to repeat the allegations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Moss Evans (General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union)</td>
<td>Allegations that Evans had arranged a flight from Gatwick to Miami to evade TGWU pickets at Heathrow in a workers' dispute – seen as a strike breaking 'scab'</td>
<td>July 1984</td>
<td>Private Eye accepted the reports were untrue</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sir Eldon Griffiths (Parliamentary Consultant to the Police Federation)</td>
<td>Allegation that Griffiths used his influence to prevent a friend being prosecuted for theft</td>
<td>July 1985</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial undisclosed libel damages</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>David Tudor Roberts (Solicitor)</td>
<td>Allegation that Roberts was involved in fraud of the Bob Hope British Classic</td>
<td>August 1985</td>
<td>Private Eye paid £20,000 libel damages</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Damages</td>
<td>Details</td>
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<tr>
<td>Claire Tomalin (Literary Editor of The Sunday Times)</td>
<td>Slur of professional integrity - sought to dictate and influence the content of literary reviews</td>
<td>November 4, 1983</td>
<td>Private Eye paid undisclosed libel damages</td>
<td>Private Eye accepted that the letter was a hoax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The London Symphony Orchestra and Mr Anthony Camden (Chairperson)</td>
<td>Allegation that orchestra members were drunk and unruly and that Camden was incompetent</td>
<td>Number of articles from September 1983-April 1985</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial 5-figure libel damages</td>
<td>Private Eye acknowledged that the allegations were untrue, and did not attempt to justify them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Vivian Walter Bendall (Conservative MP)</td>
<td>Accused of harassing tenants and being seen in a drunken state in a 'disreputable' club</td>
<td>January 1986</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial undisclosed libel damages</td>
<td>Private Eye apologised and acknowledged that the allegations were without foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonard Soper (Chief Constable)</td>
<td>Allegation that Soper was a Freemason and conspired with other Freemasons to pervert the course of justice</td>
<td>March 1984</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial undisclosed libel damages</td>
<td>Private Eye acknowledged there was no truth in the allegations and apologised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sir Frederic Bennett (Conservative MP)</td>
<td>Accused of defending genocide in Bengal and introducing gambling to the Cayman Islands in association with the Mafia</td>
<td>March 1986</td>
<td>Private Eye paid libel damages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Richard Somerset-Ward (former Head of Music and Arts at the BBC)</td>
<td>Article about Somerset-Ward selling Prom tickets to his secretary and exercising unspecified physical discipline</td>
<td>August 24, 1984, April 1986</td>
<td>Somerset-Ward dropped libel action</td>
<td>Private Eye said: 'Sod off Spankerl', April 18, 1986, No. 635, p. 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr John Casey (Cambridge University Lecturer) and Mr James Tregear (former Student)</td>
<td>Allegation that they had a homosexual affair</td>
<td>May 1986</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial libel damages</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mrs Ann Clwyd (Labour MP)</td>
<td>Allegation that she used her promiscuity to attain political ambitions</td>
<td>July 13, 1984</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial libel damages</td>
<td>Private Eye accepted the allegation was made without foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Allan Roberts (Labour MP)</td>
<td>Article implying he might be prosecuted for sex offences</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial libel damages and costs</td>
<td>Private Eye apologised and acknowledged the allegations were unfounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nord Anglia International</td>
<td>Articles referring to the school</td>
<td>May and June 1983</td>
<td>Private Eye paid</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Allegation</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Payment Details</td>
<td>Outcome</td>
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<td>Limited (Manchester-based language school) and its Director, Kevin McNearly</td>
<td>Allegations that Maxwell funded overseas travel for Mr Neil Kinnock in order to secure a peerage</td>
<td>Two articles in July 1985</td>
<td>November 1986</td>
<td>Private Eye produced a bumper issue, selling at £1 in order to raise funds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Nigel Dempster (Gossip Columnist)</td>
<td>Allegations he was bribed to write favourably about Mr Peter Cadbury</td>
<td>October 1987</td>
<td>Private Eye paid undisclosed libel damages</td>
<td>Private Eye accepted allegations were unfounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sir Anthony Jacobs (leading Official of the Social and Liberal Democrats)</td>
<td>Suggestion that Jacobs offered to make a donation to local Liberals if a named woman was chosen as a council candidate</td>
<td>April 1986</td>
<td>March 1988</td>
<td>Private Eye apologised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Maxwell (Publisher and former MP)</td>
<td>Allegation of fraud in Maxwell's car-dealing business</td>
<td>June 1987, article called 'Wheeler Dealer'</td>
<td>October 1988</td>
<td>Private Eye recognised the falsity of the allegations and apologised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pannone Napier (Solicitor)</td>
<td>Allegation of poor compensation for families of Herald of Free Enterprise victims</td>
<td>January 1989</td>
<td>Private Eye paid undisclosed libel damages</td>
<td>Private Eye acknowledged that the article was unfounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Lucretia Stewart (former Editor of Departures - an American Express magazine)</td>
<td>Remarks made about Miss Stewart</td>
<td>March 1989</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial libel damages</td>
<td>Private Eye accepted remarks made were untrue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Douglas Long (founder of The Independent)</td>
<td>Allegation that he had been dismissed after trying to stage a coup while the Editor was in Australia</td>
<td>July 1989</td>
<td>Private Eye paid libel damages</td>
<td>Private Eye accepted allegations were unfounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Leon Morelli (Company Chairman)</td>
<td>Accused of corruption</td>
<td>July 1989</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial libel damages</td>
<td>Private Eye accepted allegations were unfounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Bryan Gould (Labour Environment Spokesman)</td>
<td>Allegations of financial impropriety</td>
<td>October 1989</td>
<td>Private Eye paid substantial libel damages</td>
<td>Private Eye accepted allegations were unfounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Theresa Gorman</td>
<td>Private Eye claimed that Gorman made an</td>
<td>October 1989</td>
<td>Private Eye paid</td>
<td>Private Eye approved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative MP</td>
<td>Offensive remark about the Prime Minister</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Damages</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Sonia Sutcliffe (Wife of Yorkshire Ripper)</td>
<td>Allegations that Sutcliffe sold her story to <em>The Daily Mail</em> for £250,000</td>
<td>January 30, 1981</td>
<td><em>Private Eye</em> paid libel damages, originally set at £600,000, but reduced on appeal to £60,000. Legal costs of £100,000 paid by <em>Private Eye</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Edward Thomas (Police Constable)</td>
<td>Accused of breach of duty regarding a prosecution for assault</td>
<td>October 1987</td>
<td><em>Private Eye</em> paid substantial damages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Jones (Political Editor of <em>The Sunday Times</em>)</td>
<td>Article implying Jones abused his position to secure a work permit for a journalist</td>
<td>January 1990</td>
<td><em>Private Eye</em> paid substantial undisclosed damages</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Charles Golding (Features Editor for <em>Sunday Mirror</em>)</td>
<td>Article questioning Golding's qualifications for the job as Editor</td>
<td>February 1991</td>
<td><em>Private Eye</em> paid £1,500 damages and all legal costs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrian Nobel (Artistic Director for The Royal Shakespeare Company)</td>
<td>Allegation that Nobel tried to get his girlfriend cast in shows during the 1991 season</td>
<td>January 1992</td>
<td><em>Private Eye</em> paid substantial libel damages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank Johnson (Political Journalist on <em>The Sunday Telegraph</em>)</td>
<td>Allegation he was working on a smear story about John Major</td>
<td>January 1992</td>
<td><em>Private Eye</em> paid undisclosed damages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yusuf Islam (formerly singer Cat Stevens)</td>
<td>Suggestion that he used variety funds to buy weapons for Afghan rebels</td>
<td>March 1993</td>
<td><em>Private Eye</em> paid undisclosed libel damages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gordon Anglesea (Supt.)</td>
<td>Accused Anglesea of being a pervert and sexually abusing young boys</td>
<td>January 1993</td>
<td><em>Private Eye</em> paid £80,000 damages (a total of £375,000 damages was split between <em>The Independent on Sunday</em>, <em>Wales This Week</em>, <em>The Observer</em> and</td>
<td></td>
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<td>December 1994</td>
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appendices
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<th>Private Eye.</th>
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<td>Eye paid</td>
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<td>legal costs</td>
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Appendix B: Contextual Details to the Libel Cases

Chosen for Analysis in Chapter 7

1) Randolph Churchill

One of the first libel cases brought against *Private Eye* was by Randolph Churchill, son of Winston Churchill which "was quite large and created a great stir" (Christopher Booker, interview 22nd April, 1999). Carter-Ruck concedes that way in which the case was resolved terminated any suggestion that *Private Eye* "would not be in a position to meet any award of damages" (1990: 146). Although *Private Eye* was run on a limited budget, injured reputations could be repaired through other avenues than being awarded monetary damages. Also Churchill obtained an injunction and thus "remained well protected against *Private Eye* and no one was unwise enough to call him a hack again during his lifetime" (Hooper, 1984: 88).

In February 1963, *Private Eye* published a cartoon strip entitled 'Great Dying Englishmen' by William Rushton and Christopher Booker. This cartoon strip showed Randolph Churchill directing other authors to write a book on the life of his father Winston Churchill. The caption read: 'It's not me that's the hack, it's the people who are writing the book'. The strip was actually about Winston Churchill. The cartoon strip suggested that in his father's biography, Randolph would ignore or "gloss over" Winston's disreputable activities and amplify his glory during the war. According to Ingrams the "only slur on Randolph himself was the suggestion that his books were the work of a team of hacks" (1971: 9). In my interview with Christopher Booker, he recalls that the Churchill case was "about Winston Churchill basically. It was headed the "Greatest Dying Englishman" cos everyone used to talk about him as the "Greatest Living Englishman". He was in his very last years and it was an account of his life, but it was framed in the fact that Randolph Churchill, his son, was writing the official life of his great father and we were suggesting that there were certain episodes in Winston Churchill's life that would not be presented" (interview, 22nd April, 1999).

Randolph Churchill immediately wrote a letter expressing his anger. Churchill, represented by Peter Carter-Ruck (now Britain's best-known and most respected libel lawyer) then issued 12 writs against everyone involved with *Private Eye*, including the office workers. In response to the writs *Private Eye* exhibited 3 cartoons of a Suffolk boar in the front windows of the *Private Eye* offices. The boar, which was recognizably Randolph Churchill, was defecating. During 45 seconds of proceedings on 1st March 1963, an injunction was granted against Richard Ingrams, William
Rushton, Christopher Booker and Nicholas Luard, preventing the repetition of the libels in the original article and requesting ‘the removal forthwith from public view of three documents of which complaint was made and which were exhibited in the window of the defendants’ premises in Greek Street, Soho’ (Hooper, 1984: 87). A notice saying ‘Killjoy was here’ then replaced the 3 cartoons.

By 1963 Churchill had a wealth of libel litigation experience. Hooper acknowledges this wide experience observing that ‘[a]lthough Randolph Churchill’s political career lacked the essential ingredient of success at the polls, it was in some measure compensated for by success elsewhere – in the law courts’ (1984: 81). In 1953 *The People* alleged that Churchill was a paid hack employed to write biased accounts of election campaigns. Churchill issued a writ and was awarded £5,000 in damages in 1956. In 1958 Churchill was libelled again (or rather he had been slandered). During a speech by Sir Gerald Nabarro, MP for Kidderminster at the Conservative Club at Halesowen, Nabarro referred to Churchill’s attack on Sir Anthony Eden in his book *The Rise and Fall of Sir Anthony Eden*, as ‘... a pernicious, cowardly and uncalled-for attack in the present circumstances. This was the action of a coward’ (Hooper, 1984: 86). Nabarro meant that Churchill was attacking someone who could not answer back without revealing cabinet secrets. The jury found that Nabarro’s speech went beyond mere comment. Churchill was awarded £1,500 in damages. However, on two occasions Randolph Churchill found himself on the losing side of the libel law. In 1935 he wrote an article in the *Sunday Dispatch* suggesting that Sir Thomas White, one of the leading Conservatives in the city, had influenced the promotion of the socialist lord mayor. Sir Thomas White was awarded £1,000 in libel damages. Equally in 1961 Randolph Churchill had to pay ‘substantial damages’ to Douglas Clark, political editor of the *Daily Express*. In an article ‘Political Talking Point’, Churchill suggested that Clark ‘was a hack whose opinions were dictated by his employers’ (Hooper, 1984: 87).

Churchill’s choice of redress broke with the normal legal rules. At the time of the Randolph complaint, Nicolas Luard (*Private Eye*’s main shareholder) argued that anyone who complained about *Private Eye* would receive little or no redress. Pressdram Limited, the publishers of *Private Eye*, ‘were only a £100 company and that, if anyone sued them for libel, they would merely have to go into liquidation’ (Luard quoted in Carter-Ruck, 1990: 143). Randolph Churchill considered any apology published by *Private Eye* as ‘facetious and deliberately insincere’ (Carter-Ruck, 1990: 144). He felt that advertising an apology in a ‘responsible newspaper’ would resolve the matter. The case was settled by publishing Randolph Churchill’s original letter of complaint in a full-page
advertisement in The Evening Standard. Private Eye paid for the advertisement and Churchill's costs, a total of £3,000 (Hooper, 1984). Even though Private Eye paid Churchill's costs, Private Eye (unwittingly) seems to have the last laugh. A withdrawal signed by the defendants accompanied the advertisement — names such as Mrs ‘O’ Morgo’ Ingrams (Mrs Ingram’s nickname) and ‘Sir Charles’ Harness (knighthood conferred on John Harness) — these were the names Churchill had used in the writs issued — taken from the masthead of Private Eye. The Evening Standard had a larger circulation than the Eye and therefore knowledge of the libel case reached a much wider audience (Seymour-Ure, 1974). This was the first time that a libel action was settled by an advertisement of this sort (Hooper, 1984). Churchill had been advised that he may receive as much as £100,000 in damages, but Churchill did not want to close Private Eye, saying ‘I think it’s quite amusing so long as it leaves me alone’ (Hooper, 1984: 88).

2) Nora Beloff

In 1971 Nora Beloff, brought two cases against Private Eye. The first resulted in an eight-day action for breach of copyright where Beloff lost, and the second in a two-day libel action where she won £3,000 in damages. In Eye No. 241, 12.03.71 Auberon Waugh wrote a piece in his ‘HP Sauce’ column about ‘Miss Nora Bailiff’ and Paul Foot wrote an article in his ‘Footnotes’ column called ‘The Ballsoff Memorandum’. In the ‘HP Sauce’ column Nora Beloff was referred to as delicious 78-year-old Nora Ballsoff, who sometimes wrote under the non-de-plume Nora Bailiff ... Miss Bailiff, sister of the late Sir Alec Douglas-Home was frequently to be seen in bed with Mr Harold Wilson and senior members of the previous administration, though it is thought nothing improper occurred’. The article also suggested that Mr Maudling ‘is the only important politician left who will talk to her’ (No. 241, 12.03.71, p. 19).

The plaintiff’s counsel, Thomas Bingham QC, argued that ‘this was a vicious and despicable attack on her morals in revenge for what she had written about them in The Observer. His argument was that readers might think that many a true word is spoken in jest ... People are too ready to believe that there is no smoke without fire’ (Hooper, 1984: 54). Hooper continues that Beloff brought the libel action because with Private Eye’s:

mixture of fact and fiction, mud might stick and people might believe that there was some substance in what was written. For instance Auberon Waugh’s article did have an accurate
account of an incident about her and the parliamentary lobby. She wrote generally of Private Eye mixing its filth with genuine revelation (Hooper, 1984: 55).

Despite this belief that there is no smoke without fire, during the trial 'there was no hint of a suggestion ... that any of the other allegations were true' (Hooper, 1984: 54). Peter Carter-Ruck (representing Beloff) reflecting on the case recalls:

My only worry, but of small real concern, was that the defendants pleaded in their defence that the words were published in jest and were so understood by readers of Private Eye. This was close to a defence of 'mere vulgar abuse' which may be pleaded in a slander action but which is not applicable to the publication of libel (1990: 191).

Private Eye offered Beloff £250 in an out-of-court settlement, which Beloff rejected. Beloff did not call any witnesses to support her allegation that the article defamed her moral character. Private Eye did not call any evidence. Their defence was 'simply that the whole thing was in jest and so absurd and far-fetched that no one could possibly take the article seriously or think the worse of Nora Beloff' (Hooper, 1984: 54). The jury was satisfied that 'the article did indeed libel her and they were no doubt influenced by the nature of the attack on her' (Hooper, 1984: 54). The jury awarded Nora Beloff £3,000 damages and £2,000 costs. Private Eye launched an appeal to readers for financial assistance in meeting the costs of the liability called the 'Ballsoff Fund'. At the time they had a circulation of 100,000. The 'Ballsoff Fund' raised £1,200. Its 'main effect was to perpetuate the libel and to discourage other would-be litigants' (Hooper, 1984: 55).

The libel case instigated by Nora Beloff highlighted the potential dangers of libel litigation when the offending discourse is argued to have been published in jest. Hooper observes that despite winning the libel case Miss Beloff could be said to have come off worse in the litigation as an 'inconsequential article was given far greater importance and degree of permanence than it deserved. By launching an appeal to its readers accompanied by an unflattering photograph of a grim-faced Miss Beloff, Private Eye was able to extract the maximum capital from the case' (1984: 55-56). Hooper continues 'somewhat unfairly, Miss Beloff emerged as totally lacking a sense of humour' (1984: 56). Lacking a sense of humour was also seen as detrimental in Bernard Levin's article 'Eye for an Eye' in The Times which almost repeated the libel '... As for her libel action, it has made even the wildest fantasies and jokes dangerous, if they are made about somebody with a seemingly underdeveloped sense of humour' (Hooper, 1984: 55). When a humorous article has been read out in the courts it tends to lose its humorous appeal and some cases get laughed out of
court (see chapter 2 where I discuss the importance of context when interpreting humour). The Beloff v Private Eye case illustrates and amplifies how sometimes ‘a plaintiff does pay the penalty for a lack of sense of humour’ (Hooper, 1984: 56).

3) James Goldsmith

Hooper observes that before the Second World War ‘there were about thirteen [criminal libel] cases a year. By the early 1970s the figure was down to one or two’ (1984: 159). One of the most controversial and prominent criminal libel cases at that time involved Private Eye. Private Eye was seriously threatened with closure in 1976 when James Goldsmith, one of the ‘most determined libel litigants of all time’ (Hooper, 2000: 398) sued Richard Ingrams (editor) and Patrick Marnham (offending journalist) for criminal libel. At the end of 1975 Private Eye had printed a number of articles which aimed to link James Goldsmith with the murder of Lord Lucan’s children’s nanny. They wrote of an ‘alleged conspiracy to pervert the course of justice’ (Hooper, 1984: 159) by obstructing police investigations into the Lucan affair. On 12 December 1975 Marnham wrote an article in the Fifth column entitled ‘All’s well that ends Elwes’, attacking Goldsmith as a public figure. In the two succeeding ‘In the City’ articles, Goldsmith’s financial activities were attacked. In the 26th December 1975 issue, an article by Michael Gillard suggested that Goldsmith was unsuitable to be Chairman of Slater Walker. In the issue of Private Eye dated 9th January 1976 an article appeared suggesting an ‘intriguing link’ between Goldsmith and T Dan Smith who was serving a jail sentence for corruption in the Northeast (see Hooper, 1984). Between 15th January and 2nd February 1976 Goldsmith issued three writs in relation to the three articles. In addition, Goldsmith issued eighty writs against forty of Private Eye’s distributors, retailer and wholesalers (Marnham, 1982), including three which had never sold the magazine and one which Goldsmith owned himself (Thompson, 1997). Marnham (1982) reports that four of these actions were dropped, nineteen settled through apologies to Goldsmith and agreements never to distribute Private Eye again and 17 resisted Goldsmith. The result was a 12,000 drop in circulation to 101,000 (Hooper, 1984). As an individual who wanted to set up his own news magazine, he ‘decided not just to sue for damages in the conventional manner, but to crush Private Eye utterly with a massive legal salvo’ (Thompson, 1997: 342). The ‘Goldsmith affair’ (Marnham, 1982: 160) lasted for 18 months.
There were ten separate court hearings. There were injunction proceedings to prevent *Private Eye* mentioning Goldsmith. There were two separate attempts to have Richard Ingrams imprisoned for contempt of court and assets of *Private Eye* sequestrated. There was a protracted battle to get Goldsmith's actions against the distributors struck out on the basis that they were an abuse of the process of the court. The result was an expensive draw which cost James Goldsmith £250,000, and *Private Eye* not less that £85,000 (Hooper, 1984: 162).

During the libel case *Private Eye* privately admitted that the allegation that Goldsmith was the head of a conspiracy to pervert the course of justice was untrue and apologised for its publication. Hooper argues that Goldsmith chose to bring criminal prosecution because, due to his immense wealth he was uninterested in obtaining the large amounts in damages he could receive from civil actions. He regarded the damages he may recover as 'insignificant in the terms of the profit and loss account of the company he headed ... that civil libel actions were cheap advertising for *Private Eye*. Fighting a civil libel case against them was therefore a gift or a subsidy' (1984: 162-163).

Before the case was settled *Private Eye* set up a reader appeal called 'The Goldenballs Fund', raising over £40,000 (Hooper, 1984). 'Goldenballs' was Michael Gillard's (*Private Eye* journalist) nickname for James Goldsmith. Contributions to the appeal were received from Sir Alec Guinness, the Earl of Lichfield, Tiny Rowland and several local Liberal and Labour parties. In addition a fundraising concert was organized to pay off the remainder of the debt. The main feature of the settlement was an apology in a whole-page advertisement given by *Private Eye* published in *The Evening Standard*. *Private Eye* also contributed £30,000 towards Goldsmith's costs, payable over ten years and assured Goldsmith that they would not continue their vendetta against him in *Private Eye*. This case highlights the detrimental effects of libel litigation. The rather abrupt end to the long drawn out court case was possibly due to 'the continuing Eye litigation hampering Goldsmith's ambitions of becoming a press lord, and, now in addition, the prospect of having to sit in court for up to two weeks while the Criminal Libel case ground on, was, of course, very inconvenient' (Ingrams, 1979: 130). Further this libel case brought all spheres of Goldsmith's life into the public gaze. For example the launch of *Now!* magazine in 1979 by Goldsmith resulted in *Private Eye* ridiculing its circulation figures which *Private Eye* claimed were somewhat overestimated. Closing in 1981, Hooper observes that 'undoubtedly *Private Eye* was largely instrumental in its speedy demise' (1984: 173).
4) Robert Maxwell

Over a period of thirty years Robert Maxwell ‘developed a policy of using the law of libel to terrorise his opponents ... and to muzzle the press’ (Hooper, 2000: 41). Maxwell’s libel actions covered all aspects of his career: publishing, politics, newspapers and football (Hooper, 2000). Robert Maxwell issued what is referred to as ‘gagging writs’ where ‘as soon as someone says anything critical about him he used to issue the writ to prevent them repeating or to frighten people off that sort of thing’ (Kevin Bays, interview, 2nd December, 1998). In November 1986, after a three-week-long hearing, Robert Maxwell recovered £55,000 exemplary damages and costs of £200,000 from Private Eye (Greenslade, 1992). This was the final trial in which Ingrams played a part. Private Eye had questioned the relationship between the Labour-supporting newspaper and the Labour Party. Their first article (No. 615, 12.07.85) published in the ‘HP Sauce’ column raised the question of whether Neil Kinnock (then the Labour leader) would disclose whether Maxwell was acting as paymaster for his African trip and questioned ‘How many more Kinnock freebies Maxwell would have to provide before he was recommended for a peerage?’ The same allegation was repeated in the ‘Street of Shame’ column (written by an employee of Maxwell’s) in the following edition (No. 616, 26.07.85). Alongside the article was published a cartoon of Maxwell and Kinnock. Kinnock is depicted as His Master’s Voice dog, sat next to a large gramophone and obeying everything Maxwell says. Referring to the effect of the article and cartoon Robert Maxwell said

it was only accusing me of bribery of the Leader of the Opposition. But this is an allegation – if it is not instantly withdrawn – not only of gravely damaging to me and to the Leader of Her Majesty’s Opposition, but an allegation of bribery for purposes of buying a peerage ... that is destructive of the body politic of the government and the country, and it could not be left on record’ (quoted in Haines and Donnelly, 1986: 54).

Private Eye retorted that it would be able to prove the claim in order to defeat Maxwell’s application for an injunction. When Private Eye failed to prove their allegation, they were penalised with a larger award in damages that would otherwise have been made.

After the case Maxwell retaliated by publishing Not The Private Eye, ‘a heavy-handed lampoon of the lampooning magazine’ (Greenslade, 1992: 77) including pictures of Nazi leaders that were altered to depict Richard Ingrams speaking to Hitler. Also an account of the case was written by Maxwell called Malice in Wonderland. Malice in Wonderland was a comment made by Mr Hartley
Robert Maxwell had been one of *Private Eye*’s favourite targets for a number of years. References were made to him in the *Lookalike* column and he was the main character in the cartoon strip *Captain Bob*. Maxwell had other financial successes against *Private Eye*. These included Maxwell suing *Private Eye* in 1975 and obtaining damages for the suggestions that he had difficulty raising a £25,000 cash deposit for the *Scottish Daily News* and that he had borrowed £10,000 from journalist’s redundancy money to help finance *The Scottish Daily News* (see No. 355, 02.08.75 and No. 358, 05.09.75), and that Maxwell had lied about the circulation of the *The Scottish Daily News* (see No. 360, 03.10.75). In 1989 *Private Eye* was ordered not to repeat allegations about safety problems affecting his company British International Helicopters, and in June 1990 258,000 copies of *Private Eye* had to be withdrawn when the allegations were repeated.

5) Sonia Sutcliffe

In issue No. 499 30.01.81 *Private Eye* published an article in its Street of Shame section alleging that Sonia Sutcliffe, the wife of Peter Sutcliffe, (the mass murderer jailed in 1981) was trying to profit from her husband’s activities. *Private Eye* accused Sonia of being involved with chequebook journalism. The magazine alleged that she had negotiated a £250,000 deal with the Daily Mail to sell through an intermediary, Barbara Jones of the *Mail on Sunday*, the story of her life with her husband. The same statement was repeated in an article in the Business News section in 1983 (No. 552, 11.02.83) about the Press Council’s report on the press’s reaction and behaviour during the conviction of Peter Sutcliffe and the press’s treatment of the Sutcliffe family. Further in February 1989, three months before the libel trial for the first two articles *Private Eye* published two other articles (No. 03.02.89 and No. 709, 17.02.89). Sutcliffe argued that these two articles could be interpreted as meaning ‘she knew before her husband’s arrest that he was a murderer and had lied to the police to provide him with a false alibi and that she was defrauding the Department of Social Security’ (Rustin, 1990: 269). Sonia Sutcliffe won the libel case. In May 1989 Sutcliffe was awarded £600,000 against *Private Eye*. *Private Eye* appealed to the Court of Appeal. As The Court of Appeal accepted that the initial award was ‘unreasonable and excessive’ (Hooper, 2000: 318) the amount awarded to Sutcliffe was reduced from £600,000 to £60,000. Before the appeal was
accepted *Private Eye* established another reader appeal called 'Ripperballs' and 'Bananaballs'. The name 'Bananaballs' comes from Ian Hislop's quote made after the initial £600,000 award to Sutcliffe 'If this is justice, I am a banana' (*The Daily Telegraph*, May 25th 1989, p. 23). Sutcliffe also received £100,000 for *Private Eye*’s false suggestions, made in February 1989, that she defrauded the Social Security authorities. However, later the *News of the World* was able to prove that the *Eye* report had been largely correct in its allegation regarding chequebook journalism. Sutcliffe was later accused of committing perjury in the 1989 libel against *Private Eye*. In December 1990 Sutcliffe sued *News of the World* (Sutcliffe lost as she declined to accept £50,000 payment into court) over a story suggesting that Sutcliffe had deceived her new partner by not telling him who her husband was. During this libel trial Barbara Jones (*The Mail on Sunday*) produced receipts for £25,000 representing payment to Sutcliffe for cooperation with a book that Jones planned to write. Sutcliffe was accused of committing perjury because during the *Private Eye* trial, Sutcliffe said that a loan received was not recorded in writing (was word of mouth) and that the £25,000 was loaned by a friend (Hooper, 2000). However, 'not without a certain glee, the legal establishment refused the *Eye* leave to attempt to reverse the original decision' (Thompson, 1997: 428). In 1990 Sonia Sutcliffe was calculated to be receiving £50,000 a year tax-free due to her libel and copyright claims (Hooper, 2000). According to Hooper (2000) some of Sutcliffe's other libel awards include £5,000 from the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* (June 1983), £25,000 from the *Yorkshire Post* (November 1988) and £7,500 (May 1989), £35,000 from the *Star* (November and December 1989), £75,000 from the *Express* (December 1989) and £26,500 from *News Group* (September 1990).
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