

Professor Bernie Choudhury—written evidence (FOJ0110)

House of Lords Select Committee on Communications and Digital inquiry “Future of Journalism” – a BAME perspective

Section 1: About Bernie Choudhury

1. My name is Bernie Choudhury and I am a professor of professional practice in communications at the University of Buckingham. This means the University has recognised my contribution to journalism, media, PR, communication and marketing over the past 40 years, rather than confer upon me the title based on academic work.
2. My life in summary is this. Born in Bangladesh but of Indian citizenship. Arrived in the UK in 1969. Father worked in a factory. UK citizen in 1983. Brought up as working class and went to a “bog standard comprehensive” which, in my year alone, produced a Hollywood A-star actor and a commander in the UK navy. Hospital radio at 16; commercial radio at 17; the first in my family to go to higher education through clearing; graduated with a 2:1 in combined sciences (chemistry with chemical engineering and fuel technology); turned down a place at Sandhurst in favour of a BBC reporter traineeship in 1986 – one of four BAMEs that year, two of whom left days after the scheme ended because of racism; climbed through the ranks facing structural, systemic and institutional racism; started my academic career in 1999; left the BBC as an award-winning network news correspondent in 2010; joined academia fulltime alongside a global consultancy business; headhunted to join the University of East London as director of communications in 2014; asked to apply for and joined the Commonwealth secretariat as director of media and PR for Baroness Patricia Scotland; cutback on PR commitments in 2019 to work as a freelance consultant; currently working with various clients on crisis management; and contributing editor for *Eastern Eye*, the UK’s number one Asian newspaper.
3. As part of a series of articles during the pandemic, *Eastern Eye* was mentioned for its work in parliament by MPs during a debate on the government’s handling of COVID three times. We did our job by holding power to account, and it shows the importance of specialist BAME publications, on which I will expand later in this submission.
4. Most importantly in this submission, I competed, took part in, and completed two different BBC failed diversity schemes intended to recognise “highflyers and potential senior leaders”. I had to leave the BBC to gain my leadership experience from others who recognised that I had the potential, skill, and determination to lead people effectively. I write from a perspective as someone who has been a journalist, recruiter, academic and senior leader with his hand on the levers of power.

Section 2: The arguments for racial diversity and inclusion

5. We must acknowledge that things have improved for black, Asian, minority ethnic people in journalism since I joined the profession 40 years ago. That is my submission’s starting point. But the question remains, after two generations, why are we still having to have a national conversation which asks about diversity, equality and inclusion in journalism?

6. For years we have been speaking about the “business case” for racial diversity. How every industry and profession make more money, hence business, from having “a diversity of creative minds”. While that is absolutely true, if this pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement have shown one thing, it is that this is an argument which everyone with the levers of power acknowledges to be axiomatic, yet true progress has been far too slow.
7. Instead I am suggesting we look at it from another perspective. Would we be making the case for white people? Do we ever ask white journalists to justify their existence or expect them to prove themselves continually and hold themselves to a higher standard? In short: why do we have to continually justify the need for diversity? Should it not be accepted practice?
8. Structural, systemic and institutional racism exist in journalism. We can prove this by one simple exercise and one simple analogy. If we take a group of white and non-white journalists with the same potential, same qualifications, same opportunities and monitor their progress over a 10 to 12 year period, we will see that inevitably, the white cohort will progress faster and further than their non- white colleagues. I did this for a research project looking at BBC News and used the Freedom of Information Act to quantify this phenomenon. My research found that during 2000 and 2010, the number of BAME senior leaders in BBC News peaked in 2006 at six, but the median was two during this decade. If I had continued my research, I am in little doubt that I would have found, despite the spin from BBC News, a similar and static number of senior leaders in tiers where they are just below the necessary lever of power. I will explain what I mean by “levers of power” later in this submission.
9. How can we describe structural, systemic and institutional racism in an immediately understandable and pictorial way? The Labour MP, Dawn Butler, described it aptly during an *Eastern Eye* virtual roundtable during the pandemic. Take two people, one BAME and one non-BAME and ask them to run 100 metres. What you do not tell the BAME athlete is that they will be running 100 metres with *hurdles*, while their white competitor will be racing towards the finish line in the 100 metres *sprint*. These “hurdles” are what rules out equality of fair play, equality of endeavour and eventually equality of progress. No matter how hard the BAME athlete tries, they will never be able to compete fairly with their white colleague.
10. It is this idea of “fairness”, a quintessentially British concept, that this committee should, I humbly suggest, focus some of its attention. It is fairness, rather than diversity, which may prick the consciousness of those with their hands on the levers of power, those who can effect real change. As naive as this may sound, are we being fair to all, is the real question.
11. We use the term “unconscious bias”. But that really is a cop out. It is allowing racism to be palatable and acceptable. It is an excuse. The way we are moulded, our experiences of others and how we choose to let these affect our decision- making process, is in our control, not in anyone else’s. [Tate & Page (2018) *Whiteness and institutional racism: hiding behind (un)conscious bias*]
12. Unconscious bias also does not explain why BAME recruiters are more likely to choose white candidates over people of colour. It also does not explain why so few BAMEs end up in CEO roles either in the NHS or FTSE 100. [Kline, R. (2014) *The “snowy white peaks” of the NHS: a survey of discrimination in governance and leadership and the potential impact on patient care in London and England*. Parker J. (2020) *Ethnic Diversity Enriching Business Leadership*

An update report from The Parker Review.]

13. I humbly suggest that the committee calls it as we, people of colour, see it – racism embedded in our very structure, system and institution. To abrogate responsibility for fear of upsetting journalists would, in my view, be a wasted opportunity. The police went through this painful recognition 20-plus years ago, and it is still learning, as journalism must. This is your moment to do the right thing, and your moment to give a voice to those who are afraid to speak out.
14. It may interest the committee to know that I am, at this moment, in a tussle with BBC News over how it describes the racial identity of Senator Kamala Harris, running for the vice presidency of the United States of America. Her mother was Indian, and her father is a British Jamaican. Can we really describe her as solely black, which is what BBC News has been doing, or should we respect the fact she embraces and espouses her Indian roots, as she did in her acceptance speech?

Diversity is necessary for nuanced conversations, but it goes wider than that.

15. This may be a small example, but if it were taken in context with the U-turn on the use of the “N” word and reprimanding the presenter Naga Munchetty, and you begin to grasp the lack of understanding by white editors to the sensitivity of language. We desperately need journalism to be “future-proofed” to avoid the same errors over and over again.
16. How does this affect the future of journalism? I have sent previously to the committee three chapters I have written which shows the impact of the lack of racial diversity in newsrooms, and I ask the committee reads these as part of my submission. I precis these below.

Section 3: Lack of racial diversity and the impact on the current and future journalism

17. In big set events, such as the past two general elections, the main UK broadcasters admitted that they, on the whole, did not cater for black or Asian audiences in their flagship programmes. If we take the 2011 Census, which is almost a decade out of date, 14 per cent of people in the UK described themselves as non-white.
18. If we use that 14 per cent as the modest benchmark of the time which should be allocated to “ethnic issues”, then we have quantifiably shown the lack of racial or ethnic diversity in the coverage or thinking behind the news agenda in 21st century Britain.
19. Indeed, we do not need to concentrate solely on “big events”. Content analysis on any given month of flagship programmes, the records of the day if you will, will show lack of real engagement and reporting of ethnic minority or disadvantaged Britain.
20. A content analysis of our national newspapers too would show a worse situation. We need to understand that in our main titles, in the history of journalism in the newspaper industry in the UK, we have had one BAME national newspaper editor. Amol Rajan, now BBC’s media editor, was in charge of the printed *Independent* newspaper between 2013-2016. It would be a useful academic study to show whether this made one iota of difference

in the coverage of racially diverse stories. This truly horrific statistic explains why there is no true depth of coverage, no true depth of analysis and no true depth of understanding of BAME communities on issues which affect them, apart from terrorism or racism. The coverage in our newspapers is monochromatic.

21. This is important because news shapes our views, fake news especially. And when we have no-one or lone voices, shaped to fit an editor's white perspective, it means we suffer from a real lack of racial diverse challenge in our thinking. We accept. We follow. We sleepwalk to conformity, comfortable and non-confrontational meaningless views seen through a purely white lens.
22. We saw this during the pandemic when it took the mainstream broadcasters and newspapers six weeks to realise that BAME doctors, nurses, care workers and patients were dying in disproportionately higher numbers than white people. This is important because, with the exception of *Eastern Eye*, no-one held power accountable in this sphere for six weeks, during which thousands of BAME people either contracted the virus or died from it.
23. The lack of BAMEs in senior leadership positions, where they are at the helm of true levers of power, is why during the examination of the current furore of stop-and-search of black people by the police, newspapers are able to pit one black commentator against the other. It is why black and Asian ministers are used by editors to conform to a white narrative of a non-racist Britain.
24. Research [Morley, L. (2012) *The rules of the game: women and the leadership turn in higher education*] has shown people who succeed understand the "rules of the game". For BAME people, one fundamental rule of the game is that "you have to act white to succeed". The second rule is "keep below the parapet and don't make mistakes". A third is "one-in-one-out", something the comedian, Sir Lenny Henry, often jokes about, remain a reality.
25. A content analysis of newspapers and broadcasters would also show the lack of prominence given to BAME stories, unless they are of a particular genre – usually negative, such as terrorism, criminal organised gangs and anti-immigration stories. Once again these marginalise BAME communities or create an impression of BAME people bad, white people good.
26. BAME MPs and peers I have spoken to also tell me that while white political correspondents will foster relationships with white MPs, they are virtually ignored, grateful for any coverage in mainstream outlets. The increasing racial make-up of parliament requires consideration so their views are fairly and adequately represented, and not just on ethnic issues. Further, they are often mistakenly identified in publications for another ethnic minority parliamentarian. For example, in February 2020, Marsha de Cordova was named wrongly by *BBC Parliament* as Dawn Butler. The *Evening Standard* newspaper made matters worse by running a picture of Bell Ribeiro-Addy in an online article about the BBC's original blunder.
27. The reason for my evidence is simple. Unless we challenge inequality now, unless we point these unpalatable and uncomfortable truths now, we face a sclerotic media and press with a vanilla and mono-cultural viewpoint, shaping the next generation of influencers and thinkers.
28. Further we risk the next generation getting their news from social media and anyone who wishes to peddle propaganda and fake news. How does this help democracy?

Section 4: Levers of true power

29. Who holds power in an institution or organisation? Who are the most powerful day- to-day people in a news organisation? Without a doubt it is the editor. With him (and sadly, it is usually a man) on your side anything is possible. With the exception of Rupert Murdoch, who is truly the "King of News", the most famous to date was Paul Dacre of the *Daily Mail*. His paper singlehandedly brought two of the killers of Stephen Lawrence to justice.
30. The back story is important and shapes the inquiry into the future of journalism from a racial perspective. Dacre sent a black reporter to do a hatchet job on the Lawrences, to prove Stephen was in a gang, and this was gang related. Instead, Neville Lawrence told the reporter, Hal Austin, to tell Dacre that it was "Neville, his decorator" [Davies, N (2008) *Flat Earth News*]. Suddenly, the agenda shifted. Dacre put the power of the *Daily Mail* into tracking down Stephen's killers, leading to that seminal headline on 27 July 2006: "Murders The Daily Mail accuses these men of killing. If we are wrong, let them sue us". It unquestionably changed the face of race relations in the UK. This is a true lever of power. The courage. The influence. And most importantly, the budget and resources.¹
31. This triumvirate is what is needed for BAME people. And sadly, we have no BAME person in journalism at this level. Indeed, if we were to draw a Venn diagram, they may not fit in any of the subsets, because they are mutually inclusive. Money begets influence which begets courage and confidence which begets real soft power.
32. BAMEs have not reached that in our profession's evolution. At *Eastern Eye* we have the courage, and we break stories of impact which make a difference to people's lives every week because fairness, integrity and independence were the ethos of its founder, Ramniklal Solanki. But we have found that government misses a trick by failing to understand our potential or impact. It did so to the detriment of south Asian communities during the pandemic, and it continues to do so.
33. Government did not engage with us in a fashion which would have better communicated its messages to our communities – potentially saving lives. It is the very thing it has realised in the past few days, yet it still has not learnt its lesson. We are geared to reach south Asian communities in different languages. We, rather than the mainstream, have skin in the game. We can reach those parts the mainstream cannot. Instead it repeatedly thinks about our usefulness post-event when it is too late.
34. We have reached out several times to government. For a short period, relationships bear fruit. But once an individual leaves, along with the exit is any relationship we have worked hard to build, so we have to start yet again.
35. Government, via its civil service, has not got a systemic framework which is woven into its DNA to cater for BAME citizens. Again, an examination of the ethnic data about who controls the levers of power in the civil service would reveal and explain why.
36. *Eastern Eye* has new evidence, which I am unfortunately not at liberty to share with you, but this committee can demand. I would urge this committee

¹ Updated 06/12/21: Mr Austin has contacted the Committee to put on the record that these claims are incorrect.

to ask the civil service for its "Top 200 Group" ethnic data and map the implications on representation and effect on policy, especially in media, culture, sport and digital.

Section 5: Doing the same things over and over again, expecting different results

37. The debate over what to do has been raging since I entered journalism two generations ago. Yet we are no nearer to finding solutions which propel us to a panacea of best practice, inclusivity and equality. This section deals with what has happened and why things have not truly progressed significantly. The next section will make recommendations for the committee to consider.
38. What our profession does, intermittently, is to realise it has a problem. Its starting point is that it thinks it needs to recruit more BAMEs in the industry. This is a false positive because it fails to grasp there are plenty of BAMEs already in journalism, only that we are not being nurtured properly or retained, and we are certainly not being promoted, in sufficient numbers.
39. Retention and promotion are more important at this stage in our evolution than recruitment. With retention and promotion, recruitment of the very best talent will happen.
40. Unless the industry grasps this fundamental truth, we will be forever going around in circles failing to understand why we are not progressing. Further, we need to understand how to create pipelines to progression and a critical mass for promotion to senior leadership positions.
41. The industry will tell you forcefully that it has "diversity schemes" and "things are improving" that "newsrooms are more diverse". I concede the last two points, but when you start with little, any increase is an improvement. A man in a desert will drink sand thinking it water. It is a mirage. Having been on several diversity schemes, I know from bitter experience their short comings. When I sent in a FOI request to the BBC in 2010, I discovered that in its past 15 years (1995-2010) it had created 29 diversity schemes. There have been dozens more in the past decade. The fact it still has a problem with racial representation at senior leadership levels suggests something is not working. From experience through academic research, I concluded that while senior managers, from the director-general to the 100 top leaders, were invested, the problem was with the job and budget holders. These gatekeepers simply did not understand the need for diversity and were those who kept their hands firmly on their powerful lever in the shut position.
42. When it comes to recruiting, the industry needs to be smarter, less defensive and more emotionally intelligent. The question it raises is this: why, if you want diverse talent, do you then mould it in your male, pale and stale image?
43. The industry must acknowledge that not only does it recruit in its own image, but that senior leaders surround themselves with loyal teams, which are often mono-racial and mono-gender. This means that when the senior leader moves on s/he takes his or her team with them and/or one of the team is promoted to replace that senior leader, the victorious replacement has already been groomed for success by his or her predecessor. The circle of white exclusivity will continue unless it is confronted, acknowledged and rectified.
44. The industry also needs to be truthful and ask itself: are we recruiting and/or either setting BAMEs up to fail and/or merely window dressing? On the former point, what have we in place which ensures longevity in our profession? On the latter, by putting "talent" on air or on the front page, what steps are we

taking to ensure we have a robust racially diverse team of leaders, from where real power emanates?

45. The industry must examine its ethnic makeup when posts are made redundant or people leave the organisation. A FOI request in 2010 for BBC suggested that BAMEs were twice as likely to be made redundant or on short term contracts than white people. The latest set of redundancies at the BBC is of concern and it will probably have a greater effect on BAMEs than non-BAMEs.
46. I have learnt that BBC Local Radio is think about slashing its programming on Sunday evenings between 6pm and 10pm in half. This is significant because this is the "ethnic programming slot". That means an already non-existent service for BAMEs may be halved. Why are we paying our TV licence if we are being marginalised? Local radio is the pipeline to promotion. If you take away this opportunity what happens down the line?

Section 6: Education, education, education

47. We must acknowledge that education plays a vital role in creating the right cohorts for journalism. My experiences in 1979 with the Coventry Evening Telegraph, my home city's local newspaper, at a careers event, was one of being actively discouraged by the journalist who came. It was further made clear by my teachers that Asians did not do three things – excel in sport, music or writing. When I recounted my experience with one of his journalists, 12 months later during work experience, the paper's deputy editor was, to his credit, embarrassed. But the school never changed its mind until I became a BBC trainee journalist. Having been to schools, just before the lock down, little seems to have changed. Asians are encouraged to do STEM subjects rather than the arts. It is no longer parental pressure. Parents want their children to earn money, be fulfilled and be comfortable. They will fund unpaid internships, as long as there is a career at the end of it. The days of medicine, pharmacy and the law are eroding more quickly than schools imagine. Unfortunately, schools have yet to catch up.
48. Sadly, the same is true for universities. I have taught at several and the lack of BAME representation among staff and students is astonishing. What universities are failing to do is tap into a growing market of creative talent and engaging BAME communities.
49. Further, anecdotal evidence suggests BAME journalists graduate with lower grades because their tutors are mainly white.
50. The accrediting bodies, such as the NCTJ and BJTC, are also lazy in their approach to ensuring racial diversity on courses.

Section 7: Whither the future of BAME journalism?

51. This section suggests short, medium, and long-term recommendations to creating successful pathways and engagement with people and communities of colour.
52. Short: Broadcasters and newspapers need to investigate their diversity schemes and audit why they did work and why they did not work? They need to stop doing the same things over and over and expecting different results.

They also need to question whether gatekeepers are stopping real progress.

53. Short: Broadcasters and newspapers need to look internally at their departments to see which have proportionately high numbers of BAMEs and those who have succeeded in recruiting, retaining and promoting people of colour, especially to successful positions of real power. They need to investigate why and how this has happened. They then need to create a best practice toolkit.
54. Short: Broadcasters and newspapers should carry out an audit of its staff. It should examine its ethnic and gender make-up. It should dig deeper and, among other things, ask:
 - when the employee joined the company.
 - how long s/he has been in her/his current position.
 - his or her route to promotion.
 - his or her training and developmental opportunities.
 - his or her frustrations and challenges.

Only by this deep dive will there be a proper and thorough comparable like-for-like recognition of whether there is structural, systemic and institutional gender or racial bias.

55. Short: Broadcasters and newspapers should invest in a mapping exercise where it looks at their 10, 20, 100 (depending on size) most senior leaders and examine their career paths. From their schooling, their higher education to their trajectory in the profession, how did they get to where they are today, and what challenges and help did they receive? The aim is to create a "best practice toolkit".
56. For BBC News, for example, this will mean 4,000 separate interviews. But it will be a great investment because it will realise once and for all the hurdles, pinch points and, most importantly, why white people succeed and how those BAMEs ,who may be at that layer, have, like chameleons hiding in plain sight, had to adapt their identities to succeed.
57. Short: The industry needs to look for specialist media and publications which are BAME-rich and work in partnership with them to create opportunities. For example, broadcasters can work in partnership with *Eastern Eye* on joint investigations. Newspapers like *The Telegraph* and *The Times* should be reading *Eastern Eye* and asking why they are giving prominence to a story and not following the mainstream agenda. They should be learning from *Eastern Eye*, rather than arrogantly assuming they know best. The Society of Editors should be leading the charge to ask *Eastern Eye* to create courses on how to engage south Asian communities, including a diversity newsgathering framework.
58. Short: Broadcasters and newspapers must introduce specialist political correspondents whose function it is to foster, engage and create agendas for BAME issues. BAME MPs represent disadvantaged and minority communities. By ignoring them, our industry is marginalising swathes of the UK. Peers have a plethora of experience in various fields. They are entrepreneurs, expert in

third sector and community engagement, and they are often freer to speak their minds. By not engaging BAME peers, we are doing a disservice to our communities.

59. Short: When reporting figures or statistics e.g. number of dead during the pandemic or train crash or unemployment figures, broadcasters and newspapers should automatically ask organisations for ethnic breakdown on data. This forensic mining of data will lead to stories which is the currency of any good publisher or journalist.
60. Short: Schools must stop saying that journalism is not a career for BAME students. Universities must engage and actively seek BAME students and examine whether they are disproportionately disadvantaged. Accrediting bodies must insist on all journalism courses having a compulsory module on reporting diversity and BAME communities.
61. Medium: The profession needs to champion BAME people, as well as coach or mentor. They need to give them the recognition and applaud literally and metaphorically for the entire organisation to see. They need to support. They need to be dragged up to and over the line and given opportunities to shine in time-sensitive- challenging projects which matter, where they are not set up to fail. Mentoring is important, but three key traits ensure success in an organisation [Coleman, H.J. (2010) *Empowering Yourself: The Organizational Game Revealed*], performance, impression and exposure. Surprisingly to many, working hard and excelling in your targets 100 per cent of the time only accounts for 10 per cent of your success. Being nice to others, making yourself indispensable and creating a wonderful impression account for 30 per cent of success. It is "exposure" which contributes a whopping 60 per cent to a person's success. By exposure Coleman means "championing".
62. Medium: Broadcasters and newspapers must produce pragmatic strategies which create "pipelines to progress". This means examining developmental initiatives which are not seen as rewarding people but the norm in enhancing existing talent. They should be copying an idea used in the armed forces 40 years ago. At Sandhurst there was a pre-Royal Commission Board, where potential officers who may face difficulties are trained to pass the RCB. Similarly, our industry should have courses set aside to prepare talent for promotion, getting them over the line, and ensuring they have the necessary tools to succeed.
63. Medium: Broadcasters and newspapers should go back to those who have left their organisation and ask why? How could they have made things better? What would it take to bring them and their knowledge back to the organisation to make it better and more racially diverse?
64. Medium: Broadcasters and newspapers must enable BAME people to have the confidence to be true to their identity and recruit in *their* image. They must encourage BAME people to create networks who see journalism as a go-to-equitable profession. They should be told that it is OK to recruit actively seasoned BAME journalists and champion them. These measures would stop BAME leaders from thinking they are being judged, representing an entire racial group and, in choosing people of colour, wrongly showing favouritism and halt their progress. The "old boys' network" or "the school tie" are legend for a reason. They are a reality from which people of colour are excluded.
65. Medium: Broadcasters and newspapers should celebrate racial diversity once a year at a conference of learning and best practice. *Eastern Eye* hosts the GG2 diversity conference and awards which encompass all professions. This

would be one specifically for journalism.

66. Long: Broadcasters and newspapers must produce winning strategies to get more BAMEs into positions where they have control of levers of power and are budget holders. Some organisations have introduced blind recruitment where the names are redacted. This does not work. Instead, I would suggest that broadcasters and newspapers headhunt specifically racially diverse talent. This is done for white leaders, and it is only right that it should be the case for people of colour.
67. Long: At the moment some organisations use the US-style Rooney Rule, where at least one candidate must be of colour. I would suggest aiming for the reverse-Rooney- rule where rather than having at least one BAME on the shortlist, four of the five candidates would be BAME. This "critical mass" is essential if we are to rebalance the injustices caused by decades of structural, systemic and institutional racism. But it would also eviscerate any idea that this lone BAME candidate is there to make up numbers, the token candidate to ensure the box is ticked, as is often the case today.
68. Long: Broadcasters and newspapers must make public the racial and gender diversity of their newsrooms on an annual basis. These would involve sharing retention and promotion figures, not just recruitment at every level so we can see where glass ceilings exist. The data should be transparent without breaking data protection rules.
69. Long: The organisations should share best practice if figures go up and must explain why numbers have fallen. If figures continue to fall, they should seek help, external if necessary, and create ways to up numbers at all levels.
70. Long: Best practice suggests that organisations should carry out exit interviews and act on comments without being defensive. In every organisation for which I have worked, I have never been offered an exit interview. I could have helped so much.

I have tried to be as objective as I can be on something about which I am passionate and spent a lifetime enduring and researching, trying to understand why unfairness still exists. I commend my evidence to this committee and hope it can be used in some way to make the profession I love and deeply care about better.

21 August 2020